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July 28, 2014

I have written separately to support two of the orders on tonight's agenda, both related to preserving imperiled open spaces on the Alewife flood plain – PO #2 on the Whittemore Ave Community Garden and PO #4 on the Silver Maple Forest. Both are threatened by development, and both are spaces of great value to the community. I hope you will make it a priority to find funding to help preserve these spaces.

But I want to use the remainder of my 180 seconds to comment on policy order #17 (on the Planning Board and the special permit process) and policy order #19 (on retail and public space near the Alewife T station). For each, I would like to say "Yes, but..."

Regarding #17, I have an observation: ^{start} The planning board does not *plan* and special permits are not *special*, so the fundamental problem is not that the public is challenged to understand the process, but that the entire process has been subverted.

Last week, I and members of my group (the Fresh Pond Residents Alliance) met with two of the sponsors of this order (the Vice Mayor and Councilor McGovern). We discussed the frustrations residents have with the planning board, so I appreciate the Councillors seeking a way to respond to the problems we discussed. In May, I and other FPRA officers were among a large group of neighborhood leaders who met with the City Manager to present a long list of suggestions for ways to improve the planning board and its process.

So in terms of forming a citizens advisory committee, I would say that one already exists and that the problems have been very well documented and are quite well understood by all parties. One has only to read the transcripts of planning board hearings to see that there is much room for improvement, not only with regard to communication and procedural transparency, but with their narrow interpretation of their role. As I see it, the real problem is that the Board has been instructed not to exercise its own statutory power to do more than rubber stamp projects in a piecemeal fashion that ignores broader impacts like traffic, flooding and the environment – all of which cry out for a bigger picture view. Compounding the situation are favorable project reviews by CDD staff that suffer from a severe case of grade inflation.

So, yes, absolutely let's form a committee, but its goal should be to reform the entire planning and special permitting process. I would be glad to serve on such a committee. BUT, I have to ask: what happens in the meantime? Sending a problem of this magnitude to a committee to make recommendations that many months from now would have to be approved – or not – by the Council and the Manager ignores the clear and pressing need for improvements. There are currently three large projects before the Board that are crying out for the big picture view that, time and again, our planning board has declined to take. In the short term, Councilor Carlone's zoning amendment, which will come before you all when you meet as the Ordinance Committee on Wednesday, would add another layer of review to very large projects like these while the committee being proposed here does its work. So my "yes, but" here is form a committee, but don't let it be a substitute for the Carlone amendment.

And, briefly, with regard to order #19 (sponsored by the Mayor) which asks CDD staff to meet with the principals of Vecna to discuss how to add retail and open space at the site of the company's newly acquired building across from the Alewife T, I support the idea. In fact, the FPRA has been vigorously championing the need for more retail to serve the influx of new residents on Cambridge Park Drive. So, in light of one of the stated goals in policy order #17 above – to bring the public into the planning process earlier – I have to ask why the order has overlooked the obvious opportunity to include members of the public (both residents and those who work at Alewife) in the conversation? So, again, yes BUT let's make it a planning priority to solicit ideas and input at the outset from the people these new retail and public spaces are designed to serve.

Jan Devereux
Fresh Pond Residents Alliance
255 Lakeview Ave.

Emailed

July 28, 2014

Dear Councillors,

I would like to express my support for **policy orders #2 and #4** on tonight's agenda, both related to preserving imperiled open space on the Alewife flood plain (the Whittemore Ave Community Garden and the Silver Maple Forest).

I have pasted below the concluding paragraph from a post on the Fresh Pond Residents Alliance blog in support of these two policy orders, as preserving open space, especially in flood-prone areas, should be a high priority component of our citywide master plan.

Open space, whether left wild or intensely cultivated, is an asset the City must make every effort to preserve, as opportunities for creating new open spaces are certain to be scarce in the future. We must note that protecting natural resources and open spaces are two of the nine elements of the citywide master plan every city is required to produce under Chapter 41 Section 81-D of state law. Cambridge does not have a citywide plan, having relied on a piecemeal planning (and permitting) process that has repeatedly let us down. Last spring the Council initiated the process of developing a new master plan (now renamed a "citywide plan" out of respect for the formerly oppressed), and we strongly urge all Councillors to press forward with the process when they reconvene this fall. The wording of planning consultant's preliminary report (see the second paragraph of the report's introduction) injects a disquieting note of doubt that we hope is not an indication the City has lost sight of the urgent need to plan comprehensively.

Jan Devereux
Fresh Pond Residents Alliance
255 Lakeview Ave