

8

To: The Cambridge City Council and the Planning Board
cc: Richard Rossi, Lisa Peterson, Brian Murphy, Liza Paden

October 27, 2014

I wanted to share my thoughts on Mr. Murphy's memo to Mr. Rossi about a framework to solicit public input on improvements to the Planning Board's process and procedures. I am one of the residents who met with City Manager Rossi, Asst. City Manager Murphy, and other city staff back in May to request changes in the Planning Board process.

Council Order 17 from July 28, 2014 asked the Manager to "form an advisory committee comprised of residents, business leaders and planning professionals to advise the City Manager and staff on ways to improve the Planning Board process". Among other things, it also asked the Manager to "look for opportunities to require neighborhood engagement prior to projects coming before the Planning Board".

I am concerned that the memo from Mr. Murphy does not directly respond to these requests in a timely way. For example, I had hoped that by now the city staff would have developed proposals about how to require developers to engage with a neighborhood. Because significant development proposals keep coming before the Planning Board, I feel requiring developers to increase their engagement with the neighborhoods now is an urgent need.

I had expected that the city would convene the Advisory Committee early in the fall, so that its recommendations on changes in the Planning Board process would be coming to the Council now.

Given the delay, the proposed timeline for holding the focus groups does not seem achievable or realistic. Mr. Murphy's memo does not say who will choose the participants of the focus groups, nor what the selection criteria will be; both are very important to inspire residents' confidence. Residents should not be outnumbered in the final joint session. I am doubtful that one joint session of all participants will be able to finalize recommendations.

I think focus group participants should be able to approve or disapprove of the final report before it goes to the Council. Importantly, I think the final report should be available before the Council and Planning Board meet for a Roundtable on Dec. 1, so perhaps the Roundtable should be rescheduled to take place after the report is ready. I do think the list of topics to cover in the focus groups and the questions asked are good.

I also appreciate the coordinated staff review of development projects, but timeliness of response is still a significant issue. Unfortunately, no timeline is provided for the possible future improvements under consideration by CDD, despite four months having elapsed since the Council Order was approved. It would be good to add such a timeline.

I am glad that outside consultants will be available to CDD and the Planning Board as needed.

Lastly, Mr. Rossi said new Planning Board members would be chosen by the end of October, which is in a few days. It would have been great if we had already heard who they are going to be.

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