

4

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

October 27, 2014

I am writing in response to Assistant City Manager for Community Development Brian Murphy's October 22<sup>nd</sup> memo to City Manager Richard Rossi, which lays out a framework to solicit public input on improvements to the Planning Board's process and procedures.

Mr. Murphy's proposed framework comes in response to Council Policy Order 17, adopted on July 28<sup>th</sup>. The policy order, which was prompted by a great deal of public criticism of the Planning Board's procedures, asked for the creation this fall of a committee comprised of residents, business leaders and planning professionals to advise the City Manager. By the time the policy order was issued, the City Manager already had in hand a long list of concerns with the Planning Board and suggestions for changes. In fact, I was one of a group of 13 residents from across the city that met with Mr. Rossi in mid-May to share our concerns about the Planning Board. (Both Mr. Murphy and Ms. Peterson were present). At the meeting, we presented Mr. Rossi with a long list of suggestions for improvements, and the group's leader, Nancy Ryan, and Mr. Rossi have continued to correspond on the topic since.

Now, six months later, Mr. Murphy proposes hastily convening four focus groups consisting of residents, developers and owners' representatives, those who work for developers (architects, planners, attorneys and consultants), and former planning board members and staff. The focus groups would be quickly followed by a single joint session, and a report authored by CDD staff, not the participants. This four-week start-to-finish timetable is highly unrealistic. How would the participants be selected and the meetings scheduled within such a short period, one that includes the Thanksgiving holiday?

Of even greater concern, residents - the group that brought the need for "planning board reform" to the forefront and who feel the least empowered in the planning and permitting process - are outnumbered 3 to 1 by parties who have not publicly expressed dissatisfaction with the current procedures. A single joint session prior to the production of a report is unlikely to produce recommendations that reflect a true consensus born of sustained and substantive dialogue among diverse parties. The final report is targeted for early December, meaning the Planning Board and the Council would not have had a chance to review it before they hold their first Roundtable on December 1<sup>st</sup>. This timing is most unfortunate.

In short, I am disappointed that the proposed framework seems designed to give the appearance of meaningful public input without creating the conditions to foster it. In this respect, I believe it mirrors the shortcomings of the very process it seeks to improve.

On a more hopeful note, I would add that over the past month, members of the original residents group, along with others, have collaborated to draft of an amendment to Article 19 formalizing a required community engagement process for developments requiring special permits and large project review. Our proposed framework addresses many of the already well-aired concerns about timely notice and advance neighborhood input on high-impact projects. We intend to present our draft amendment to the City Manager, Mr. Murphy and CDD staff as soon as a meeting can be scheduled. We believe a required community engagement process will give all parties greater confidence that the Planning Board's special permitting procedures are fair and transparent.

Jan Devereux  
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