Lopez, Donna

From: Saul Tannenbaum [saul@tannenbaum.org]
Sent: Friday, December 07, 2012 10:19 AM
To: City Manager; Rossi, Rich; Murphy, Brian; Davis, Henrietta; City Council; Lopez, Donna
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Subject: A letter from the Central Square Advisory Committee
Attachments: C2CommitteeRecommendations.pdf

To: Robert Healy, Manager, City of Cambridge
Richard Rossi, Manager-designate, City of Cambridge
Brian Murphy, Assistant City Manager for Community Development
Henrietta Davis, Mayor, City of Cambridge
The Cambridge City Council
Donna Lopez, Interim City Clerk

On behalf of my fellow members of the Central Square Advisory Committee, I'm sending you a letter, signed by all 20 active members of the Committee, in which we describe our vision for Central Square.

We would like to thank City Manager Robert Healy for appointing us to this Committee, giving us the privilege to learn from one another, City staff, residents, and others in order to help the City define the future of the Square. You have created a group of people who, rather than being fatigued by a lengthy Committee process, have enjoyed working with each other and emerged even more passionate about Central Square. You can be certain that many of us will continue to stay involved, as our recommendations move through the Planning Board and the City Council.

Sincerely,

The Central Square Advisory Committee

Note: A copy is being sent to the City Clerk's office for inclusion in the City Council record.

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Saul Tannenbaum saul@tannenbaum.org blog:saultannenbaum.org

MEMORANDUM

TO: **The Community of the City of Cambridge**
Henrietta Davis, Mayor
Members of the Cambridge City Council
Robert Healy, City Manager
Members of the Cambridge Planning Board
Members of the Staff, Cambridge Community Development Department

FROM: The Central Square Advisory Committee

DATE: November 28, 2012

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2010, the Cambridge City Council requested that the City Manager engage a consultant to commence a comprehensive study of the development of Kendall and Central Squares. After selecting Goody Clancy as consultants, the City Manager appointed the Central Square Advisory Committee, consisting of twenty-one individuals, to advise the City and the Community Development Department in this process. The Committee was formed among residents, property owners, business owners, institutions, nonprofits and individuals who care greatly about the future of Central Square. We each volunteered to be part of this Committee because we believe Central Square is a special place and want to do our part to help it continue to thrive.

Over the past year we have conducted an in-depth study of Central Square to form recommendations designed to keep the Square a special place for the coming decades. Our role was not to recommend or oppose any specific project, but rather to develop a set of incentives, recommendations and design guidelines intended to keep future development in Central Square consistent with its civic identity, support sustainability and provide for appropriate density, while being transparent to the community. This framework is meant to shape market forces to support the housing, transportation, retail, non-profit organizations, historic preservation and open space desired by the community.

Our effort was made possible by our partners in this endeavor: the City of Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD) and the planning firm Goody Clancy. We thank the staff of both organizations for their countless hours of dedicated service, their guidance and insights, their expertise and knowledge. We appreciate the members of the public who chose to take time out of their busy lives to attend committee meetings. Your dedication, passion, concerns, and perspectives were invaluable to our understanding of Central Square that form the foundation of our recommendations.

As in any committee of this kind, our thinking about Central Square represented a variety of different perspectives. Over the course of the past year we have learned a lot from each other by discussing, debating, and listening. We have participated in monthly (and often more frequent) meetings, charrettes, workshops and seminars, learning from experts in various fields including urban planning, retail, housing, development, open space and transportation, and hearing from our friends and neighbors in the community at each step along the way. While we recognize that this list of topics falls far short of encompassing all that comprises Central Square, we feel that it reflects some of the most important components that help to make Central Square what it is today.

In organizing the Advisory Committee and facilitating a process that included public feedback at all meetings, open forums, and charettes, the City cultivated a wide range of opinions, and ensured that the work of the Committee has remained open to the public throughout. We applaud the transparency with which the City has approached this project. We feel well informed by Committee conversations, our own research, experts in the field, and the public's commentary.

The intent of this document is to serve as the voice of the Committee and to summarize our findings, recommendations, and aspirations. We feel that this document complements the report produced by CDD and Goody Clancy, which gives more specific recommendations. In this overview we will speak thematically to share our perspective and offer recommendations where we feel they are appropriate. We are happy to report that we, the members of the Committee, share a similar perspective about the Square's strengths, opportunities and challenges. Below, we provide an overview of the guiding principles that served as the underlying framework for our discussions, followed by a brief summary of each of the main topics we've covered as a Committee.

II. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Throughout the Committee's discussion of specific planning issues, a number of principles emerged regarding civic identity, market realities, sustainability, density and built form, and transparency.

A. Civic Identity

In addition to being the civic heart, the government center, of the City of Cambridge, Central Square embodies many of the positive aspects of a vibrant, active downtown. Recently designated a Cultural District by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Square combines spaces for the arts and culture, music, technology, dining and entertainment, as well as a wide range of creative businesses. It is a major transit hub that is surrounded by four residential neighborhoods: Cambridgeport, Area IV, Riverside and Mid-Cambridge. Central Square and its adjacent side streets bustle with activity of residents, workers, and visitors - in different manners at different times of day or night.

Central Square's civic identity stems from its rich and diverse cultural heritage, and one that encompasses both longtime residents and recent arrivals. Greater Central Square's residents represent a broad diversity. They include a mix of income levels, race, family size, and immigrant backgrounds. Some residents are short term or temporary, such as students from adjacent colleges, and some have lived in the neighborhood for generations. The Committee expressed a strong commitment to Central Square's special civic character, and support for Central Square as a place that contains a range of programming and public spaces that serve all residents and users of the Square.

B. Market Realities

In recent years, national demographic shifts and other factors have magnified Cambridge's market advantages. Climate change, wage stagnation, and longer commutes, among other factors, have propelled more and more people to want to live in cities adjacent to public transit and in walkable communities. Unlike the previous urban flight, many cities nationally are facing immense pressure to provide housing to a generation of young adults, families and empty nesters looking to live in vibrant, diverse, active communities. This is particularly true in Cambridge, where despite the recent economic recession, prices have continued to escalate and there is increasing pressure on the existing housing stock. At the same time, Cambridge has developed into one of the most innovative economies and sought-after real estate locations in the country for a blend of institutional and private users.

Simultaneously, the Committee confronted a seeming paradox in today's market conditions in Central Square: despite the commercial development pressures, especially around Kendall Square, and the strong residential market in Cambridge, Central Square contains many underutilized storefronts and parcels and few development proposals have been put forward. Certain types of retail and restaurants flourish, but others have disappeared. These market realities have led the Committee to recommend a shift in zoning to create greater incentives for desired development types, especially in the areas of retail and housing, and specifically in support of the city-wide objective of maintaining economic diversity. Based on what we have learned during the past year, we also agree that providing incentive for the development of new housing in the core of Central Square will require greater density than what is currently allowed, and mixed-income housing will require even greater density.

C. Sustainability

Preservation and sustainability are two additional threads that ran through the Committee's discussions about Central Square. In drafting our recommendations, we seek to encourage sustainable development through environmental standards and historic preservation, with a focus on 'smart growth' – e.g. a density driven, walkable, mixed-use downtown and transit center where diverse people can live, work, and play. Central Square's existing smart growth characteristics are among its greatest competitive advantages. The Committee supports measures that enhance this advantage by pushing the envelope on green-building and transportation innovations. More broadly, the Committee supports

development patterns that are socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable, in order to secure Central Square's future for the next century.

D. Density and Built Form

The topics of density and what kinds of built form are appropriate for Central Square also represent an important underlying context of our Committee. Informed by design and development expertise offered by City staff, Goody Clancy and outside experts, and by participation of members of the community, we came to better understand the potential benefits of focused density, though we also remain concerned about protecting access to light and air, and diversity in the size and height of the built form that defines the streets and open spaces of Central Square. We support the idea of allowing additional height and density by special permit in a limited number of locations as an incentive tool to encourage development of more housing and the creation of more public open space, as well as the recommendations for Transferable Development Rights. We agree that the character of the Osborn Triangle, located to the east of Lafayette Square along Mass Ave and Main Street, is different than the character of the Heart of Central Square district that runs between City Hall and Lafayette Square, and we agree that the Osborn Triangle district can support somewhat greater height than can the Heart of Central Square. However, we want to emphasize that it is always important to protect the Neighborhood Edges that abut existing residential neighborhoods in both districts with more limited cornice heights and bulk plane requirements.

E. Transparency

Underlying the Committee's discussions concerning development was the desire to be certain that when any development rights are enhanced in exchange for a community benefit, this exchange is done in an open, transparent setting. Often, part of the trade off for new development includes community benefits, which may take a number of forms, including affordable and middle income housing, ground floor retail, open, public spaces as well as other improvements to Central Square. The Committee feels strongly that the City needs to be completely transparent about community benefits negotiated for any new development project. This transparency could take the form of a simple, easy to access web site that documents, for each project, commitments made by the developers and the City, together with a mechanism ensuring long term accountability for such commitments.

III. HOUSING

Central Square, and its surrounding neighborhoods, collectively offer a wonderfully dynamic and amenity-rich place to call home. The Square is home to a wide range of household types including young and old, low/middle/high income households, singles and families, all of many ethnic and racial backgrounds. This diversity is one of the true strengths of the Square that we believe should be preserved. Demand on housing from people who want to live in Central Square has continued to grow despite the economic downturn of the past five years. In contrast, there has been little new

supply added to the area. This combination of increased demand and minimal new supply has resulted in escalating housing prices. While the City has actively tried to keep property taxes low and to retain some of its low and moderate income residents through policies that include the Community Preservation Act, inclusionary zoning, and the Affordable Housing Trust, the policies have not been enough to maintain affordability to middle income residents, especially families. Cambridge is currently facing a true crisis in maintaining diversity as it continues to lose middle income families to more affordable adjacent communities.

Through our many discussions on housing over the course of the Committee's study, it became clear to us that the most important thing that can be done to preserve the diversity of the Square is to increase the supply of housing. The Committee feels strongly that incentives should be created so that property owners choose to create more housing options including market rate, low to middle income, and family housing.

Based on our desire to increase the overall housing stock in Central Square, we have the following four recommendations: 1) zoning modifications should be made to increase allowable height and density for residential uses, 2) additional height should be tied to the creation of middle income and family housing, but with a mix of units including market rate, middle, and low income so that in aggregate, property owners are sufficiently incentivized to develop the additional housing units, 3) a Transfer of Development Rights mechanism as outlined in the recommendations should be created within the Square so that the extra density is created in distributed locations, not throughout the Square, and 4) the City should explore possible opportunities for housing development and other public uses on City-owned properties.

IV. PARKING AND TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

Central Square is a major transportation hub, serving Cambridge as well as other communities in the north metro area. Our vision of Central Square is one that promotes sustainable transportation, placing housing near transportation hubs, decreasing the reliance on cars. We recommend reducing zoning-required parking minimums, allowing developers and the Planning Board to create projects unburdened by the costs of unnecessary parking. Beyond discouraging automobile use, particularly of single occupancy vehicles, we urge a focus on creating a bicycle and pedestrian friendly Square.

To these ends, the Committee would like the City to focus its efforts and funding resources on emphasizing a stronger biking and pedestrian safety program and continue to promote Cambridge as a biking and pedestrian friendly community. Improvements to the bicycling infrastructure and movement towards an environment where bicycles and vehicles are on equal footing are priorities. We urge Cambridge to exert its influence to increase funding to mass transit, in order to increase capacity. We ask the City to work with the MBTA to explore the extension of bus lines that currently terminate in Central Square, to reconsider locations of current bus stops to improve pedestrian flow, and to install new bus signage that includes real time transit information. While we envision a Square far less reliant

on cars, we are sensitive to neighborhood and retailer concerns about providing necessary parking. We urge the City to remove any impediment to the efficient use of private parking lots and act creatively in meeting parking needs. We would suggest, as well, that the City investigate the construction of a new central parking facility to absorb parking demand should the City-owned lots be developed, as discussed below.

V. RETAIL AND NONPROFIT USES

Central Square is a unique and highly valued retail and cultural environment. Our community has long understood and valued its special character, which was recently affirmed by the Commonwealth through its designation as the Central Square Cultural District, one of only fourteen Cultural Districts in the Commonwealth. The Committee recognizes that one of the greatest challenges we face as a community is the need to protect, promote and encourage a diverse mixture of retail throughout Central Square and its environs. It is incumbent on the City and the community to work with property owners to ensure that the Central Square Cultural District achieve a diverse and eclectic mix while at the same time providing incentives and encouragement for additional retailers who complement the historic urban fabric of the Square.

The Committee affirms the recommendations of the City that are designed to protect, promote and encourage a diverse retail mix with a strong focus on small, independent retailers and nonprofit uses in the Central Square Cultural District. We support the proposal for GFA exemptions for ground floor retail spaces that meet certain size and frontage restrictions, and agree with the recommendation for encouraging retail on side streets where feasible. The Committee believes that the City's current signage regulations are at odds with our goals of fostering the expansion of small, creative, independent retailers, and we suggest that these regulations should be modified so that they allow for a case by case review enabling creative signage opportunities that embrace the uniqueness of the Central Square Cultural District.

VI. PUBLIC SPACES

The Committee recognizes the continuing need to enhance, activate, preserve, and create public places in the Square that are accessible and enjoyable by all members of our community. The Committee affirms the City recommendations designed to amplify Central Square's public realm by further activating and enhancing current public places, identifying opportunity areas for new sites, establishing interactive play and the presence of public art to be enjoyed by people of all ages and backgrounds, and augmenting signage and making use of real-time transit information to improve convenience. In addition, we recognize that various organizations, community partners, and the City have fostered regular programming in existing public places, and we encourage the continuation of these efforts. The Committee also recommends a holistic approach to identifying Central Square as a district through continued streetscape improvements by the City, and supports the reflection of the Central Square Cultural District designation on infrastructure throughout the Square. In recognizing the

need for more public spaces, the Committee supports incentivizing new public spaces in potential developments, as well as looking at opportunities for indoor and outdoor gathering spaces by redeveloping City parking lots, as discussed below.

VII. SOCIAL SERVICES

One of the unique aspects about Central Square is the concentration of social service organizations. These organizations help play an important role in serving challenged segments of our population by providing instrumental services - they are an important asset to the local community and serve as a reflection of our community's core value system. However, despite the work of these organizations, there remains a significant population on the streets of Central Square that engage in undesirable behavior including public alcohol consumption and intoxication, drug dealing and use, and panhandling - behaviors that detract from our goal of creating a safe and dynamic urban neighborhood.

While we realize that these are hard issues to solve and applaud the work that is already being done by the City, the various social service organizations, and the local residents and business community, we believe the following three recommendations would contribute to helping to tackle the challenges that remain: 1) Prohibit the sale of single consumption alcohol containers in the Square, 2) explore the opportunity for daytime social services as there appears to be an imbalance between daytime and night services, which results in more problematic behavior during daytime hours, and 3) explore the opportunity for a roving social worker to help reach the needy street population.

VIII. POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT OF CITY OWNED PROPERTY

By virtue of its ownership of the land, municipal parking lots represent one of the City's greatest opportunities for realizing a vision we have for Central Square. We urge the City to use that leverage and explore alternate uses for the parking lots. The Committee has voiced, and has heard from residents, ideas for many possible uses, all of which add more to the Square than surface parking. These include the construction of mixed use buildings that would include housing and ground floor retail, the creation of a public market, and creation of more public open space. We believe that the City should explore these possibilities and aggressively consider the public-private partnerships required to bring development of the selected alternatives to fruition.

While outside the area which was formally our purview, the Committee notes that the Green Street Garage and the Central Square Branch Library represent opportunities, as well. We urge that the City rethink the Branch Library as a public cultural, media and technology center and consider the redesign and reconstruction of the Green Street Garage.

IX. CONCLUSION

There is a general consensus in the City that Central Square exhibits and embodies many of the complex cross currents that are unique to Cambridge. Representative of many of these same cross currents, the Advisory Committee has worked together, despite divergent interests among its members, to establish and articulate qualities and aspirations for the Square on which its members can and do agree. Having understood some of the qualities of the Square that must be preserved, and having recognized some of the opportunities and challenges the City and Central Square face - whether it be nurturing and reviving vibrant retail or the urgent need for diverse and affordable housing - the Committee has sought recommendations which are bold enough to engender the positive changes that are sorely needed, while protecting against outcomes that would destroy cherished qualities that are part of the Square's identity. With this memorandum and the comprehensive report prepared by CDD and Goody Clancy, it is our hope that as the process unfolds, the work we have done together to imagine, discuss and agree can be very useful in helping positive change move forward in the Central Square of the future.

Very truly yours,

Central Square Advisory Committee

(Signatures follow on the next page)

MEMBERS OF THE CENTRAL SQUARE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Patrick W. Barrett III

Anya Alexandra Bear

Mark Boyes-Watson

Kathryn Lachelt Brown

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