



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

BRIAN MURPHY
Assistant
City Manager for
Community Development

To: Richard C. Rossi, City Manager

From: Brian P. Murphy, Assistant City Manager for Community Development

IRAM FAROOQ
Chief of Policy & Planning
Deputy Director for
Community Development

Date: October 22, 2014

Re: Council Order O-17 dated July 28, 2014 regarding ways to improve the Planning Board process

Three key efforts are underway in order to improve Planning Board processes:

1. We are **convening residents, business leaders and planning professionals** to solicit their suggestions to the City Manager, the Planning Board and staff on ways to improve the Planning Board processes with respect to the Planning Board's role as special permit granting authority pursuant to the state Zoning Act, the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance and the Cambridge Municipal Code. Details on the approach are provided below in the section '*Convening Residents, Business Leaders and Planning Professionals*'.
2. The **Planning Board** is interested in **revisiting its rules** in order to improve public engagement. A discussion is scheduled for 7:00 PM at the October 28 Planning Board meeting. The public will have an opportunity to comment and it is anticipated that this will be a continuing topic of discussion among Community Development Department (CDD) staff, the Planning Board, and the public.
3. The **Planning Board and CDD staff has initiated changes** to start testing strategies **to improve communication, transparency, and involvement of the public** in the Planning Board's special permit review process. These are summarized in the section '*Actions Underway or Being Investigated*' and are described in the attached letter.

CONVENING DISCUSSIONS WITH RESIDENTS, BUSINESS LEADERS AND PLANNING PROFESSIONALS

In order to determine ways to improve the Planning Board's processes and make them more understandable and transparent to the public, we will convene discussions over the next four to six weeks to provide the City Manager, the Planning Board and CDD with recommendations for improving any and all aspects of the Planning Board's processes, including:

- Notification (e.g. on-site notification panels, abutter notification, Planning Board agenda notification)
- Pre-meeting (e.g. communication to affected neighbors, material availability – online or in person, agenda)
- Meeting (e.g. conduct of meeting, and meeting logistics such as meeting space issues – sound, visuals, public comment)
- Between Meetings (e.g. clarity of issues, expectations for all parties, communication to public)
- Post-decision – expectations, communication, follow-up

Approach

This will be a two phase process, with a series of focus groups followed by a joint session of all participants. This two-phase format will allow participants the freedom to propose creative ideas in a small focus group environment with ample time for discussion and without pressure to finalize a recommendation. The joint session at a later date will allow an avenue to process initial broad-based ideas and bring together diverse viewpoints for more critical discussion and prioritization.

Focus Groups: The purpose of the focus groups is to collect a range of data in the form of a carefully planned small-group discussion. The intent is to gain a diverse range of ideas and perceptions of the Planning Board's processes and identify possible improvements in a relaxed and open environment so that individuals can express their opinions and different points of view without the need for consensus. The following groups will be included, with 6 – 15 people in each group:

- Residents
- Developers and Owners Representatives
- Architects, Planners, Attorneys and Other Consultants
- Previous Planning Board members and staff

Preliminary focus group questions, intended to spur discussion, are provided as an appendix to this report. These questions will also be made available online at www.cambridgema.gov/CDD. Written comments are welcome and may be forwarded to Liza Paden at lpaden@cambridgema.gov.

Meeting notes from the focus groups will be compiled and issues and approaches identified. Information from written comments received by the City Manager, CDD, and the Planning Board will be included, as will ideas generated by the Planning Board and staff. Staff will then analyze and synthesize data to identify common themes, new questions and potential conclusions. This information will be shared with focus group participants.

Joint Session: The purpose of the joint session is to bring together participants from all the focus groups to work collaboratively and identify strategies that resonate with a diverse group. The priority recommendations will be compiled along with the findings from the focus groups to create a report of the process.

Follow-Up: The report of this process will be forwarded to the City Manager and Planning Board for consideration and action.

It is important to note that the Planning Board's processes with respect to its role as special permit granting authority and many of its procedures are governed by various state and local laws: G.L. c. 41, §§ 70-72 (the Planning Board's enabling legislation), G.L. c. 40A (the Massachusetts Zoning Act), the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance and Chapter 2.68 of the Cambridge Municipal Code. Some changes to the Planning Board's processes are within the purview of the Planning Board through its rules, while other changes may require changes to the Zoning Ordinance or the Municipal Code. Proposed changes to state law would require action by the state Legislature. Proposed changes to the Planning Board's rules, the Zoning Ordinance or Municipal Code, or state law would be prepared in consultation with and reviewed by the City Solicitor

Schedule:

Focus group meetings	Early to mid November
Combined session	Mid November
Recommendations Report	Early December

ACTIONS UNDERWAY OR BEING INVESTIGATED

Over recent months, CDD staff and the Planning Board have focused much attention on considering and implementing improvements to the Planning Board's special permit review processes. Staff and the Planning Board have initiated the following:

- Coordinated staff review so that written comments from appropriate City departments are sent to the Planning Board and made available on the Community Development Department (CDD) web site for community members to review prior to public hearings.
- Providing greater explanation of the Planning Board's role in the special permit review process.
- Making materials available online in a timely manner to allow for public review of materials ahead of the hearing, with a goal of having plans and

application materials available to the public in a timely fashion.

- Increasing time available for discussion and deliberation by scheduling additional Planning Board meetings.

In addition, the following improvements are being actively investigated for future implementation:

- Improvements to the web site to make information easier to find and more user-friendly.
- Clearer and more detailed application requirements for developers.
- Clearer and more specific guidance to developers to improve their engagement with community members early in the review process, before appearing at the Planning Board.
- Research into other community/City planning board processes and alternative public participation models.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

A list of potential questions is below. This list will be used as a guide, rather than a precise script for focus group discussions. Questions will be tailored to each of the different groups. However, the “bigger issue” questions will remain consistent between groups.

Notification

- How do you find out when a development is being proposed in your neighborhood?
- How can we improve the public notification process? When and in what format do you wish to be notified about an upcoming development project?
- How do you find out about the Planning Board meetings and their agendas?
- When and in what format would you like Planning Board meetings to be publicized?
- What should be done to make the current and upcoming Planning Board agendas more widely-known?
- How should we make the information and supporting materials of a proposed project more accessible to the public?

Pre-Meeting

- Please tell us about the most and least successful community outreach efforts that have been conducted by developers. What works and what doesn't work?
- Have you ever participated in a community meeting conducted by developers? How was it organized? How would you like for community meetings to be organized?
- How can neighborhood organizations be mobilized to facilitate the communication between members of the community and project proponents?
- What are the downsides of mobilizing neighborhood organization and how can we overcome such drawbacks?

Meeting

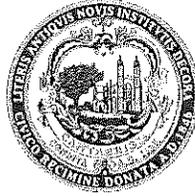
- What are some of the ways in which the logistics of the Planning Board meetings can be improved? (e.g., scheduling, timing, sound, visual, table and seating layout, temperature, presentation methods)

Between Meetings

- How can members of the community become more involved in the process of developing and refining a project?
- How can the current and future steps of each project application be made clearer to members of the community?
- When and how should community members be notified of project updates?
- How can we make explicit the processes a project goes through in between the Planning Board meetings?

Post Decision

- What would you like to see as next steps after a project gets approved by the Planning Board?
- What are some of the ways in which we can monitor how a project gets built and used pursuant to the approved conditions and terms?



September 25, 2014

Nancy Ryan
Ashburton Place
Cambridge, MA 02139

Re: Planning Board Issues

Dear Nancy:

I am writing to further follow up on the issues you and others have raised regarding the Cambridge Planning Board. I am pleased to hear that you continue to encounter an improved process and atmosphere at Planning Board meetings; I can assure you that City staff and Planning Board members are working hard to be responsive to expressed concerns.

As you know, I have embarked upon the process of appointing new members to the Board, including the appointment of new members who will fill vacancies or replace members whose terms have expired. I advertised the availability of these positions, and I am interviewing each of the over 20 applicants, as well as current members seeking reappointment. I will be completing interviews shortly. I expect to make the new appointments by the end of October. With these appointments, there will be a full complement of Planning Board members, both new and reappointments. One or more training sessions will be provided for the Board after the new appointments have been made.

Over the summer, staff and I conducted a training session with the Planning Board and discussed methods to improve communications and processes for the Board and the public. I also shared the issues you and others have raised with the Board and staff. We found the membership to be genuinely interested and open to suggestions as to how to improve its processes.

Considerable attention is being paid to improve communication, transparency, and involvement of the public in Planning Board special permit review. Staff and Planning Board have made the following efforts:

Improve transparency and communication:

- Coordinated staff review so that written comments from appropriate City departments are sent to the Planning Board and made available on the Community Development Department (CDD) web site for community members to review prior to public hearings. Staff review and comment covers past planning efforts for the area, zoning requirements, urban design, traffic and transportation, environmental issues and infrastructure where applicable. At Planning Board meetings, staff members are available to participate in discussing these topics and address questions during the course of the public hearing and deliberation. Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner at CDD, has been coordinating this review.

- Staff and the Planning Board are working on providing greater explanation of the special permit review process and the Planning Board's role. In addition, Director of Community Planning Stuart Dash is available to meet with residents and other interested parties to answer questions about particular projects and applications, or to direct the requestor to another appropriate City staff member who can assist in answering such questions or explain the process.

Make materials available online in a timely manner to allow for public review of materials ahead of the hearing, with a goal of having plans and application materials – including revised application materials submitted after the first public hearing – posted on the CDD web site two weeks before a public hearing, and to have written staff comments posted one week before a public hearing. Scheduling procedures are being adjusted to accomplish this.

Increase time available for discussion and deliberation: Scheduled additional Planning Board meetings, with one meeting per month reserved for consideration of continued cases rather than new cases.

In addition, the following process improvements are being actively explored for future implementation:

- Improvements to the web site to make information easier to find and more user-friendly.
- Clearer and more detailed application requirements for developers.
- Clearer and more specific guidance to developers to improve their engagement with community members early in the review process, before appearing at the Planning Board.

I will make available the services of outside consultants to work with CDD and advise the Planning Board on particular specialized topics such as traffic impact analysis and urban design. In addition, there are already contract consultants available through the Department of Public Works for services related to soil examination and stormwater management. DPW Commissioner Owen O'Riordan, City Engineer Kathy Watkins, Traffic, Parking & Transportation Director Susan Clippinger, CDD and other City staff will continue to provide assistance to the Planning Board as needed during their decision making process.

Planning Board members have also expressed an interest in revisiting their own policies and practices in order to improve public engagement. A preliminary discussion is scheduled for the October 7 Planning Board. The public will have an opportunity to comment as this will be a continuing topic of discussion among staff, and the Planning Board at public meetings. I have asked the Planning Board to consider re-instituting a rotating Chair, and requiring developers to conduct community outreach prior to a request for a Special Permit.

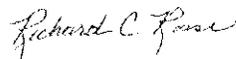
In addition over the next few months, staff and I will solicit advice from a number of stakeholder groups who have an interest in the Planning Board process, including neighbors and other citizens, developers and/or their representatives, architects and planners, attorneys who appear before the Board and/or have experience appearing before other planning boards, and prior

Cambridge Planning Board members. My current thinking is to use an approach similar to focus groups. My goal is to elicit ideas for how to continue to improve the Planning Board hearing process, how to improve communication with the public as well as improving access to CDD staff and to special permit application materials and other materials relating to projects before the Board. We will then consider any additional process improvements that will best serve the interests of the community and all of the various stakeholders.

Finally, with regard to tracking of board and commission terms: staff has reviewed the process by which we track appointments and term expiration dates for members of all boards and commissions in the City, and we are in the process of developing a better method of tracking these appointments so we can ensure that new appointments are timely made when vacancies or expired terms occur. When the tracking system is complete for all boards and commissions, we will put this information on our website. In the short term, we will put the information on the CDD website when the new appointments are made.

My staff and I are committed to working to improve the Planning Board process, the means and manner in which public input is solicited and received, to making staff available to assist interested parties in following the course of special permit applications and other items before the Board, and to improving communication and transparency about the Planning Board process generally.

Very truly yours,



Richard C. Rossi
City Manager

Cc: Brian Murphy
Lisa Peterson
Hugh Russell
Cambridge City Council