



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff

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Re: **Pre-Application Community Engagement Requirement**

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Overview

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Planning Board has voted to suspend some provisions of Section 5.1 of its rules, which require applicants for special permits to undergo a pre-application community engagement process that includes a minimum of one community meeting. Applicants can and are encouraged to use as many different tools as possible to conduct outreach and to get feedback from community members, but there's a minimum requirement of having at least one community meeting held someplace in a location that's convenient to the project site.

- In June 2020, the Planning Board voted to temporarily suspend some of the sections of its rules to align with City and state policies that limited the size of in-person public gatherings. As a result, such applicants were no longer required to hold an in-person community meeting but were expected to hold virtual meetings.
- In June 2021, Governor Baker lifted the state of emergency, which removed the restrictions on the size of public gatherings. The Planning Board decided not to continue to suspend portions of Section 5.1 of the Planning Board Rules. This meant that applicants were once again required to hold an in-person community meeting. Board members encouraged applicants to continue to use virtual outreach tools but felt that maintaining opportunities for in-person engagement were important.
- In January and February 2022, the City of Cambridge temporarily required all City-held public meetings to be held remotely. CDD staff recommended that the Board consider another temporary suspension of its rules to not require in-person community meetings, which the Board voted to approve.
- In March 2022, when the City's policy on Remote Public Meetings had expired, staff once again asked the Board to consider whether or not to continue to allow developers to meet the minimum community engagement requirement with a remote meeting and not require any in-person meetings. Temporary changes to the state's Open Meeting Law allowed the Planning Board to continue to meet remotely. Based on the Board's continued meeting format and uncertainty about ongoing COVID risks, the Board continued to suspend its rules to allow community meetings to be held remotely.

- At the July 26, 2022 meeting, the Board voted to continue the suspension of its rules until October 31, 2022. Rather than continue to approve temporary suspensions, the Board asked CDD staff to draft a revision to Section 5.1 of the Planning Board rules and the accompanying Guidelines for Early Community Engagement so that the required pre-application community meeting would allow for both in-person and virtual participation.

Draft Revision

The attached draft would revise both the rules and the guidelines to reflect the Planning Board's preferred approach of allowing the required pre-application community meeting to be held both in-person and virtually. This could be done either as two separate meetings or as a single hybrid meeting.

The proposed changes are limited in scope to the issue of whether meetings should be in-person, virtual, or hybrid in order to meet the minimum requirement. However, staff considered best practices identified through CDD's recent work to improve community engagement. This work includes the development of a community engagement handbook, which will be made available to applicants when it is completed.

Future Discussions

The Planning Board Rules were last comprehensively updated in 2016, when the community engagement requirements were included. Since that time, CDD has taken on a department-wide initiative focused on equitable and inclusive community engagement. This initiative included creating a new position of Community Engagement Manager and forming a Community Engagement Team of part-time outreach workers with ties to various Cambridge communities.

Over the coming year, we will make a more focused effort to evaluate the community engagement requirement more holistically. This effort may lead to a future discussion with the Planning Board on a broader set of updates to the pre-application community engagement rules and guidelines.

Planning Board Rules – Early Community Engagement

Section 5 Pre-Application Early Community Engagement

- 5.1 For any project seeking a Special Permit from the Planning Board, the Applicant is responsible for planning, conducting, and documenting an Early Community Engagement process prior to submitting a Special Permit Application. At a minimum, the Applicant must host a community meeting with a time, [format](#), and location that is convenient [for community members to attend to residents in proximity to the project site](#). [The Applicant must provide options for people to attend the meeting in-person and virtually. The meeting can be conducted as a single hybrid meeting that allows community members to attend in person or remotely, or as separate in-person and online meetings. Other outreach is encouraged to engage with a diverse range of community members, especially communities that have been historically excluded and underheard.](#) Community Development Department staff must be notified of all planned meetings and [engagement](#) activities in advance and should be consulted for advice on outreach [strategies](#). See CDD Guidelines for pre-application Early Community Engagement for general recommendations about conducting community meeting(s) and additional engagement options. CDD staff will notify the Board of upcoming Early Community Engagement meetings.
- 5.2 The Special Permit Application must include an Early Community Engagement Summary that includes details of the dates, times, locations and attendance of all meetings and other events that were held, a list of all outreach activities (mailings, postings, etc.) with a distribution map where applicable, and references to web sites and other outreach tools that were used. The summary must also include a brief description of the information presented by the Applicant during the pre-application Early Community Engagement phase, a list of questions and issues raised by community members, and efforts the Applicant has made to respond to those issues in the submitted proposal. A Special Permit Application will not be deemed complete and scheduled for a public hearing if it does not include an Early Community Engagement Summary.
- 5.3 The information to be presented by the Applicant during the pre-application Early Community Engagement phase should generally include, but not be limited to, an initial site analysis, a summary of existing site conditions and its surroundings, photographs of the site and abutting properties to clearly describe the surrounding context, a summary of the Applicant’s objectives with regards to the future development, and preliminary massing studies, plans, and renderings.

CDD Guidelines for Pre-Application Early Community Engagement

The Planning Board requires, in Section 5 of the Planning Board’s Rules, that projects seeking a Special Permit conduct a pre-application early community engagement process including at least one community meeting hosted by the Applicant. These guidelines provide additional suggestions and ideas for making the community meeting(s) as inclusive, meaningful, and productive as possible.

Early community engagement is an important part of project review that provides opportunities for community members to learn about a potential development project prior to any formal public hearings, allows interested parties to have a dialogue about the major concerns and issues that may be associated with a project, and provides useful feedback to the Planning Board to inform the Board’s future review, when required.

[The extent of outreach and engagement may vary depending on the location, scale and impact of the project, as well as the communities that are being engaged.](#) Early

Community Engagement options may include:

- Meetings with established neighborhood groups (where applicable)
- Open houses
- Informative and/or interactive websites
- Distributing information through e-mail, mailings, flyers and on-site postings
- Informal conversations with interested parties. ~~[The extent of outreach and engagement may vary depending on the location, scale and impact of the project.](#)~~

[Applicants should center equity and inclusion in their engagement by following the approach suggested in CDD’s Community Engagement Handbook. The “Public Meetings” chapter in the Handbook has detailed recommendations on how to host community meetings.](#)

1. Applicants are encouraged to schedule a meeting with CDD staff before initiating a pre-application Early Community Engagement process to identify [historically excluded and underheard communities](#), [create](#) an appropriate list of contacts, and ~~to~~ decide on an appropriate combination of notification methods.
2. Community meeting(s) [should be accessible to all who want to attend. They should be held at a ~~time and~~ location that \[community members frequently go to and at a time that\]\(#\) is convenient for most community members to attend, \[with both in-person and virtual options to participate\]\(#\).](#) Additionally, Applicants should schedule community meeting(s) in coordination with existing neighborhood

- groups and community ~~based organizations~~ groups to avoid any conflicts.
3. Community meeting(s) should be advertised by mail or e-mail no less than two weeks prior to the meeting date and should be located on-site or in close proximity to the site of a proposed project.
 4. An appropriate list of community members who should be directly notified should include:
 - a) Abutters;
 - b) Nearby residents; ~~and~~
 - c) Community groups in the project's neighborhood and adjoining neighborhoods. (A running list of existing neighborhood and community groups is available on the CDD website: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/planud/neighborhoodorganizations.asp> ~~x~~);
 - d) Community-based organizations; and
 - ~~d~~e) Leaders and stakeholders from historically excluded and underheard communities.
 5. In addition to targeted notification, outreach methods could be expanded to inform and engage a wider range of community members who might be interested in a project. Possible methods of notification may include:
 - a) Informative and/or interactive websites;
 - b) Neighborhood and other e-mail lists;
 - c) Social media; and
 - d) Posters or signs posted on-site or at other ~~convenient~~ locations frequented by community members such as places of worship, hair salons and barber shops, playgrounds, convenience stores, check-cashing sites, and laundromats.
 6. Community meeting(s) can take many different formats. A typical format of community meeting(s) includes a short presentation about the proposal followed by a Q&A session and discussion session. Community meeting(s) could also include an "open house" format allowing community members to come in and out at different times to review the proposal and ask questions. Community meeting(s) are meant to provide opportunities for community members to receive information, ask questions, and provide comments in real time. The community meeting(s) can be conducted in a hybrid format that allows community members to attend in person or remotely, or as separate in-person and online meetings. When planning a virtual meeting, refer to the section "Examine Technology Access and Privilege" in the Community Engagement Handbook for recommendations on an inclusive approach.

7. Throughout the pre-application community engagement process, the following information should be presented along with other information that might be relevant to the specific project. If the community engagement process has multiple phases, more general information might be presented for discussion at an earlier phase, with more detailed plans presented at a later phase.
 - a) An initial site analysis addressing site opportunities and constraints, the uses of all adjacent buildings, traffic conditions and major environmental considerations, and the zoning of the site and adjacent properties;
 - b) A drawing of existing site context indicating topography of the site and the location of structures and prominent landscape elements on or abutting the site;
 - c) Photos showing the facades of adjacent buildings, trees on the site, general streetscape character;
 - d) A three-dimensional zoning envelope study that illustrates the maximum allowable floor area and building bulk under current zoning;
 - e) A description of the Applicant's objectives with regard to the site development including tentative program mix; and
 - f) Preliminary massing studies, plan(s) and rendering(s).
 - ~~f~~g) [Information about how to attend any relevant Planning Board hearings and provide comments to the Planning Board.](#)

8. It is strongly recommended that presentation materials be [developed using the "Plain Language Checklist" in the Handbook and](#) made available online for community members who were unable to attend.