

To: City Council

From: Richard C. Rossi, City Manager

Date: January 9, 2015

Re: Report from focus groups regarding ways to improve the Planning Board process

In response to Council Order O-17 the Community Development Department (CDD) held a series of focus group discussions with various stakeholders involved in the Planning Board process. The focus group sessions, which followed an evening of public comment held at the Planning Board, enabled people to come together in an informal environment and cooperatively work together to discuss ways to improve the Planning Board process.

Initially, five focus groups were convened. Each group represented different interest groups involved in the special permit process:

- two residents and neighbors groups (six and seven participants per group)
- one developers and lawyers group (seven participants)
- one architects and other consultants group (four participants)
- one previous Planning Board members and previous staff group (four participants)

Given the range of stakeholders involved, the sessions resulted in the collection of a diverse range of ideas for improvement. Following the five focus group sessions noted above, the range of suggestions from the focus group sessions along with suggestions made at the Planning Board and in written comment afterwards was presented to a joint session held on December 18, 2014. The purpose of this session was to process the initial broad-based ideas and bring together participants from all groups for more critical discussion and prioritization. This meeting resulted in general agreement on many of the key issues affecting the Planning Board process, as well as a very detailed list of ideas and possible changes to the process. Further written comments from focus group participants were also received and considered. The Planning Board at its January 6, 2015 hearing considered the focus group suggestions and provided further feedback to CDD staff on many of the ideas presented.

Recommendations and improvements

The attached document represents a compilation of the suggestions and feedback heard from: 1) the five initial focus group discussions (November 13 to December 1, 2014) and the joint focus group; 2) spoken comments from the October 28, 2014 and January 6, 2015 Planning Board hearings; and 3) written comments submitted to CDD and the City Manager's office through January 7, 2015.

CDD has considered all of the suggestions and synthesized this information into common themes, which resulted in the identification of six broad goals that were broadly agreed to by all focus group participants. The six broad goals are:

1. Improve website design, including:
 - Subscribe-able web pages and agendas
 - Storage and display of project information
2. Improve meeting logistics, including:
 - Public comments and proponent presentations
 - Equipment improvement and room layout
 - Planning Board operations
3. Improve public notification and access to information, including:
 - Notification methods for Planning Board meetings
 - Content of Planning Board agendas
 - Access to supporting materials
4. Improve understanding at all phases of the process, including:
 - Public records of Planning Board meetings
 - Process clarification
 - Monitoring once a project has been approved
5. Strengthen CDD role
6. Establish an early community engagement process

A staff response to all suggestions is provided with a discussion and recommendation in every case. Each suggestion has also been given a priority and an expected timeframe for implementation. Many of the suggestions are considered a high priority and can be implemented within current work programs and resource allocations. However, several suggestions require further evaluation, legal review, consideration of resource impacts and budget allocations, and ongoing work with the Planning Board and City Departments prior to being acted upon. Furthermore, in some instances, suggestions are considered a low priority and no further action is recommended. A number of improvements are already in progress and have been identified as such in the attached document.

High priority

The following tables summarize those actions that have been identified as high priority items for the City.

Short-term actions (0-6 months)

1. Establish an early engagement process for Special Permits through a Planning Board rule change
 2. Explore options for early engagement on zoning petitions (Short to long-term)
 3. Work with the Planning Board on rule changes to improve meeting processes (e.g., allow neighborhood groups to do a presentation or to pool their comments)
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Short to medium term actions (0-18 months)

4. Improve website (Short to medium
 5. Live video streaming of Planning Board Hearings
 6. Develop Planning Board Handbook
 7. City staff will work with the Planning Board to schedule additional training and working sessions with the Planning Board
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Medium-term action (6 – 18 months)

8. CDD to work with the Planning Board and the public to identify opportunities for hosting additional informational and discussion sessions separate from PB meetings
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Medium to long-term action (6 months – 3 years)

9. City staff to work with the Planning Board and the public to revisit the Special Permit criteria for City Council consideration
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Early community engagement

It will come as no surprise to the City Council that the need for early community engagement has been identified as the highest priority. In fact, all stakeholders strongly agreed on the need for some form of early community engagement as part of the Special Permit process. In response to this key issue, within the next four weeks, CDD staff proposes to work with the Planning Board to propose a rule change that will require at least one public meeting prior to the submission of a Special Permit application. The details of this short-term recommendation are outlined on page 15 in the attached document, including sample language to be included in proposed new Planning Board Rules, and matters that need to be addressed in supporting guidelines that will seek to clarify the process for all stakeholders. It is intended that this requirement will be mandatory and that proponents will be required to submit a summary of the meeting(s) as part of their application. The Planning Board endorsed this short-term approach at its January 6, 2015 meeting.

In the longer term, the CDD will evaluate the success of the short-term Planning Board rule change approach and undertake further research to consider alternative forms of community engagement, if needed. This research will examine the pros and cons of different types of community representation and engagement activities. Staff will continue to examine best practices from other communities within the region and across the country, including larger cities such as Boston and Seattle, and cities of a comparable character and size to Cambridge. The matrix on page 16 summarizes some of the possible permutations available in terms of the type of community representation, who organizes and attends meetings, and who is responsible for providing a summary of meeting outcomes. Additionally, the Planning Board itself expressed a desire to be involved in earlier engagement, so that they have an opportunity to provide feedback on projects at a more preliminary stage. The details and format of this type of interaction are considered best addressed as part of the long-term investigation process.

It is also important to note that many focus group participants suggested that there is a need to establish an early engagement process for zoning petitions. There are a number of issues associated with this suggestion, including whether such a requirement would create additional hurdles for citizen petitions, which require further consideration and advice from the Law

Department. However, this is a valid matter for the Council to consider given the increased level of public interest in major projects and zoning proposals across the city.

Planning Board handbook

Another key high priority recommendation is the preparation of a Planning Board handbook. It is proposed that the CDD will work with the Planning Board to develop such a book, which will:

- Describe the entire Planning Board process in an understandable manner
- Explain the role and mandate of the Planning Board, and their discretionary jurisdiction – especially concerning the Special Permit criteria and how they are applied
- Describe the relationship between the Planning Board and CDD and their interaction, as well as the role of other City Departments involved in the planning and development process

Revisiting the Special Permit Criteria

The need to reexamine the Special Permit Criteria also arose through the focus group discussions. There is concern amongst some stakeholder groups that the current criteria are ambiguous, do not adequately respond to community values and are too permissive for developers. In response, CDD staff has proposed to work with the Planning Board and the community to revisit the criteria and suggest changes for the City Council’s consideration. Such work could also run in parallel to the city-wide planning process.

City Council Actions

While much discussion has focused on Planning Board procedures and early community engagement, some of the proposed improvements fall within the purview of the City Council and City Departments, including CDD and ISD. The following lists those specifically related to the City Council’s responsibilities.

High Priority
1. Explore options for early engagement on zoning petitions (Short to long-term)
Medium Priority
2. Change the Planned Unit Development (PUD) amendment process, which currently requires two public hearings to require one public hearing for minor amendments
3. Allow absent Planning Board members to read transcripts and participate on a case

I trust that the attached document provides an appropriate response to the City Council’s Order and sets out a series of actions that will assist all stakeholders to work together to improve the Planning Board process.