

Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Study Update Summary, Recommendations and Action Plan

Community meetings for the Mid- Cambridge Neighborhood Study Update were held in February and May, 2011. At those meetings, CDD discussed planning initiatives and neighborhood concerns with community members, and worked to develop a set of recommendations to help inform long-term future planning in the neighborhood.

A set of recommendations was developed as an outcome of these discussions. In addition, CDD staff worked within the department and with other city departments to provide information on how each recommendation is addressed through ongoing programs or possible future actions.

These are some of the major topics addressed in the study update recommendations:

- Maintaining the current scale, density, walkability and mixed-use character of the neighborhood
- The future use of the former Longfellow School building
- Managing institutional expansion into the neighborhood
- Improvements to make walking and bicycling more attractive and pleasant
- Working with the MBTA to improve public transportation
- Providing affordable housing options for a range of incomes (including middle income) and age groups (including seniors)
- Filling vacant storefronts in existing retail clusters
- Supporting small-scale, local, independent, unique retail establishments
- Supporting greater availability of fresh food (including a winter farmers' market)
- Providing open space amenities such as landscaped areas, quiet places to sit, community gardens (not only playgrounds for children)

Since the discussions were held, many of the recommendations have been addressed through specific actions of the City or others within the community. For instance, a bicycle sharing service (Hubway) was started in 2012, as was a winter farmers' market in the nearby Riverside neighborhood. Other issues continue to be addressed by CDD and other departments.

This full set of recommendations (with active links), along with presentations, maps and other documents from the 2011 Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Study Update process, can be downloaded from the web at:

www.cambridgema.gov/midcamb

Land Use and Zoning Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Actions
<p>LU1 Residents appreciate the current scale, density, walkability, and mixed-use character of the neighborhood. Future planning and development should support this prevailing urban character, and new development that is of a substantially different character from surrounding areas should be discouraged.</p>	<p>As described at the study update meetings, the zoning in Mid-Cambridge is tailored to allow development of a scale and density similar to what currently exists in the neighborhood. In addition, some areas along major roads and in commercial squares are zoned to encourage mixed-use development.</p> <p>STUDY UNDERWAY: CDD is currently leading a planning study to look at possible future development in Central Square.</p>
<p>LU2 Consider possible zoning regulations to discourage the development of “infill” housing units into existing residential backyards.</p>	<p>The zoning in most residential areas of Mid-Cambridge requires that house lots have at least 30% open space and no more than one housing unit for every 1,500 square feet of land area. These restrictions discourage the addition of new housing units into existing yards. Additional regulations could be considered; however, according to analysis conducted by CDD for the study update, not many existing house lots in the neighborhood would have the potential to add infill units under current regulations.</p>
<p>LU3 Consider the potential uses of the Longfellow School if it is discontinued as a school building in the future. It currently serves as an important community resource, as a center for neighborhood programs and events as well as a playspace for families. Neighbors should be involved in discussions around the future use of the building.</p>	<p>LONG RANGE: The Longfellow School building is currently being used by the School Department, and there are no plans for a change in future use at this time. Any such change would involve public discussion and outreach to neighbors.</p>
<p>LU4 The acquisition of properties by Harvard along Kirkland Street is of concern to neighbors. Expansion of institutional facilities should be limited to the existing campus and areas that have been agreed upon by neighbors and the City.</p>	<p>Zoning regulations prohibit the conversion of residential properties to institutional use in low-density residential neighborhoods, except where they are located within an Institutional Overlay District. Most of Kirkland Street is not within an Institutional Overlay, although some portions west of Francis Ave and Sumner Road are within an Institutional Overlay. Refer to the Zoning Overlay map.</p>

Energy and Environment Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Actions
<p>EE1 Develop better ways to inform homeowners and landlords about what they can do to improve the energy-efficiency and environmental sustainability of their properties. Provide clear information about what types of improvements can have the most impact (e.g., insulation, green roofs, white roofs, solar energy), and what resources and financial incentives are available to make those improvements.</p>	<p>The Home Improvement Programs, part of the City’s affordable housing services, can provide resources and technical assistance for energy efficiency improvements to income-eligible homeowners.</p> <p>The Cambridge Energy Alliance website provides comprehensive information about the energy efficiency and renewable energy services and incentives available to Cambridge residents and businesses through City of Cambridge programs, state programs and NSTAR’s utility programs.</p> <p>Cambridge Energy Alliance worked with the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association to canvass the neighborhood and speak to residents directly about energy efficiency options in 2010.</p>
<p>EE2 Explore tools to reduce hardscape and increase plantings and pervious surfaces on public and private property in the neighborhood. Consider installing rain gardens (as being proposed on Western Avenue) in flood-sensitive areas to help manage stormwater and increase vegetation.</p>	<p>Zoning regulations in residential areas of Cambridge require a percentage of residential lots to remain open space (30% in most areas), and require half of that open space to be permeable. However, zoning regulations apply only when a lot is being developed or altered, so most existing lots are not affected.</p> <p>The City’s Department of Public Works (DPW) manages stormwater from public streets and public property, and works with property owners to better manage stormwater from private property. During street and sidewalk reconstruction projects, DPW will evaluate infiltration tools, such as rain gardens, to manage and treat stormwater. DPW also maintains a Stormwater Management website that offers information on water quality and flooding concerns and provides resources useful to property owners on ways to manage stormwater runoff from their property, including information on how to build a rain garden.</p>
<p>EE3 Improve energy-efficiency in all city buildings, infrastructure and programs.</p>	<p>ONGOING: Each year, the City invests in energy efficiency upgrades to municipal facilities. As part of the state Green Communities program, Cambridge has committed to a goal of reducing energy consumption from municipal buildings and fleet vehicles by 20% (from 2008 levels) over a 5-year period.</p>

Transportation Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Actions
T1 Improve the walking environment in the neighborhood to encourage people of all ages and levels of ability to walk outside. Consider the aesthetic and environmental benefits of features such as street trees, plantings and brick sidewalks, while balancing these benefits with the need to ensure accessible sidewalks of an appropriate width for seniors and people with disabilities.	<p>The City, primarily through the Department of Public Works (DPW), manages improvements to the sidewalk realm. Community involvement is vital to supporting these initiatives that enhance the public realm.</p> <p>The Street and Sidewalk Plan prioritizes sidewalk reconstruction based on condition and location, with priority given to major streets and areas near parks, libraries, schools, and senior housing. The City’s policy when sidewalks are rebuilt is to replace sidewalks with the same material (concrete with concrete, brick with wire cut brick). During construction, property owners are given the opportunity to change the sidewalk material adjacent to their property.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brick to concrete – no charge.• Concrete to brick – property owner is responsible for the additional cost. <p>While some residents prefer the look of brick, concrete is the material most frequently used in the city and provides a relatively inexpensive, durable and easy to maintain accessible sidewalk. Brick sidewalks tend to be more uneven, which can be a challenge for pedestrians of all abilities.</p> <p>DPW also fixes small areas of sidewalk that are in disrepair. Sidewalk defects can be reported by phone, e-mail, online or via mobile device through the new iReport system.</p> <p>DPW manages the City’s Urban Forestry Program, which is responsible for Cambridge’s street trees. Along with asking that empty tree wells be re-planted, residents can request that new street trees be planted on the sidewalk. With the permission of the property owner, DPW can also plant street trees next to the sidewalk on private property. Wheelchair accessibility standards now require a 4-foot clear sidewalk; this can impact where street trees can be planted.</p> <p>Finally, DPW’s Parks Division oversees a “Cambridge in Bloom” program, which provides opportunities for public-private partnerships to enhance planted areas in many public spaces – including parks, sidewalks, traffic islands and commercial squares – through improved stewardship.</p>

Transportation Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Actions
<p>T2 Support the growing trend toward bicycling in the neighborhood by providing more bicycle parking and amenities such as bike-repair stations in places where there is high demand. Consider installing temporary on-street bike parking in the summer when there is less of a strain on vehicular on-street parking. Also consider implementing a bike-sharing system that allows all residents to use bicycles on a short-term basis.</p>	<p>UNDERWAY: Over the past two years, CDD installed about 70 bicycle racks in the Mid-Cambridge area, including on Mass Ave and Prospect Street. Additional installations are planned for coming years. Cambridge’s seasonal “cycle stall” program will be launched in spring 2012. Each stall fits in one vehicle parking spot and provides parking for 14 bicycles. Locations with high-demand will be targeted first.</p> <p>UNDERWAY: The Hubway regional bicycle sharing program is expected to come to about 20 Cambridge locations in 2012. This program is managed by CDD.</p> <p>SHORT RANGE: In the current year, CDD will study expanding the bicycle parking requirements for new development in the city.</p>
<p>T3 Work with the MBTA to improve public transportation, particularly bus service, in the neighborhood.</p>	<p>The Mid-Cambridge neighborhood is served by several bus routes. Cambridge currently works closely through the regional planning process to advocate for more funds to be provided to the MBTA to improve service. Also, CDD holds bi-monthly meetings with the T to address transit-related issues. However, because of the MBTA’s current financial constraints, expansion of bus service is not possible at this time. [you could say here that]</p>
<p>T4 Improve enforcement of rules such as sidewalk snow clearance, traffic laws for drivers and cyclists, and truck restrictions on residential streets.</p>	<p>Enforcement is most effective when community members are aware of the rules and willing to report violations when they witness them.</p> <p>DPW has a web page with information on snow clearance, including a description of DPW’s and property owners’ responsibilities, guidelines for sidewalk clearance, and ways to report unshoveled sidewalks by phone, e-mail, online, and via mobile device with the new iReport system.</p> <p>Traffic violations, including cycling violations and truck violations, should be reported to the Cambridge Police Traffic Enforcement Unit by calling 617-349-4365. Tips can also be submitted using the Cambridge Police mobile device app. Providing detailed information about where violations occur will help direct enforcement to those areas.</p>

Housing Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Action
H1 Provide more affordable housing options to people at all income levels – including low, moderate, and particularly middle-income.	<p>Many of the City’s affordable homeownership programs serve moderate and middle-income households (earning up to 120% of the area-wide median income). Applications are taken on an ongoing basis.</p> <p>Affordable housing projects in Mid-Cambridge include the revitalization of 45 low-income units at Jackson Gardens (a Cambridge Housing Authority property) and 42 affordable rental units planned to begin construction in 2012 at the YWCA site on Temple Street.</p>
H2 Provide affordable housing scattered throughout the neighborhood instead of concentrated in large developments.	<p>Most affordable units in Mid-Cambridge are located in existing housing stock, and have been made affordable through acquisition by non-profit groups or the Cambridge Housing Authority. Also, many scattered-site affordable homeownership opportunities are made available through the City’s homebuyer assistance programs when assistance is provided to households purchasing housing on the open market.</p>
H3 Encourage housing that supports “aging in place” for seniors in the neighborhood community.	<p>STUDY UNDERWAY: The City’s Silver Ribbon Commission has studied possibilities for assisting in meeting the housing needs of seniors in Cambridge, and is expected to release recommendations in spring 2012.</p> <p>Recent City efforts have helped to preserve the affordability of a total of 263 existing rental units at three sites in Harvard Square, Inman Square, and Franklin Street. Many of these units house senior and disabled residents. Preservation of existing affordable units, including senior housing, with expiring affordability status remains a top priority of the City’s Affordable Housing Trust.</p>

Economic Development Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Action
ED1 Encourage vibrant retail districts and work to fill vacant storefronts in existing retail districts such as Central Square, Massachusetts Avenue, Inman Square, and other small retail clusters within the neighborhood.	The Economic Development Division (EDD) of CDD maintains a network of property owners with available commercial space, and works with them to find suitable businesses to fill retail vacancies. EDD also provides a SiteFinder service to business owners seeking available space.
ED2 Encourage more small-scale, local, independent retail and fewer banks, chains or “mall-like” stores. Support the neighborhood as a place to attract unique types of businesses, such as the “do-it-yourself” stores that have occupied spaces along Broadway.	EDD works primarily with small, independent, locally owned businesses, and offers technical support to assist and encourage these types of businesses to grow and improve. See more about the range of services offered through EDD.
ED3 Preserve existing clusters of retail in the neighborhood, with particular attention to the future of non-conforming business clusters in residential zoning districts (such as the Skendarian Apothecary block).	<p>PAST STUDY: CDD staff held a series of public meetings in 2007 to discuss possible zoning changes to protect non-conforming business activity in Mid-Cambridge. This did not result in recommended zoning changes.</p> <p>FUTURE STUDY: CDD plans to conduct a citywide analysis of its land use regulations, which may result in more flexible standards for small business uses.</p>
ED4 Encourage more options for neighborhood residents to purchase affordable fresh food, convenience goods, clothing and other necessities.	<p>EDD has surveyed small “corner stores” to explore possibilities for providing more fresh food in walkable, neighborhood-serving areas, and continues to pursue opportunities to encourage stores to supply fresh food. The City also supports several seasonal outdoor farmers’ markets throughout Cambridge, and a new indoor winter farmers’ market (see below).</p> <p>Otherwise, EDD continues to communicate with property owners and prospective businesses about the types of businesses that are desired by neighborhood residents.</p>
ED5 Consider the creation of a winter farmers’ market to serve the neighborhood.	<p>UNDERWAY: CDD recently helped to establish a Winter Farmers’ Market at the Cambridge Community Center in the Riverside neighborhood, which is operating January-April in 2012. See information at www.cambridgewinterfarmersmarket.com.</p>

Open Space Recommendations	Current Status and Potential Action
<p>OS1 While it will be difficult to create large new parks in the neighborhood, consider ways to improve the open space feel of the neighborhood with improvements such as more attractive streetscapes, street trees and other greenery, attractive outdoor seating (including outdoor dining space near restaurants) and public art. Consider closing roads on a temporary basis to provide more space for residents to enjoy.</p>	<p>CDD, working with other city departments, works to make the entire public realm as inviting as possible, to encourage pedestrian travel and community engagement. Where opportunities arise, the City works to create “pocket parks” where there are opportunities to improve small spaces within the public realm for public use, such as at Quincy Square (corner of Mass Ave and Harvard Street). CDD will explore further opportunities, and welcomes suggestions from community members.</p> <p>Road closures are also possible with support from the community. Neighbors or event organizers can ask the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department for information about requesting a temporary road closure for a special event.</p>
<p>OS2 Create more open space amenities that can be enjoyed by adults without children, such as quiet outdoor spaces to sit, read, or people-watch. An example would be a long wooden bench to provide more seating near Holyoke Center in Harvard Square.</p>	<p>A major goal of open space improvements throughout Cambridge is to provide passive-use open spaces, like attractive benches, tables and walking paths, along with active-use spaces like playgrounds and athletic fields. Joan Lorentz Park in Mid-Cambridge is an example of a park that is primarily for passive use. The City can explore opportunities for creating or improving passive-use “pocket parks,” as described above.</p>
<p>OS3 Provide community gardening opportunities in the neighborhood.</p>	<p>MEDIUM TO LONG RANGE: The City is exploring possibilities for expanding community gardening opportunities in Cambridge. Mid-Cambridge will be considered as part of this overall planning.</p>
<p>OS4 Improve Wilder-Lee Playground to address safety and security issues.</p>	<p>MEDIUM TO LONG RANGE: While many of the parks in Mid-Cambridge have been renovated, there are no current plans for improvements to Wilder-Lee Park. However, the City will consider adding this to the list of future improvement projects on Cambridge’s Open Space Plan.</p>