

North Massachusetts Avenue Improvement Study
Public Meeting #4 10/27/10
Summarized Meeting Notes

Background

The fourth public meeting of the North Massachusetts Avenue Improvement Study was held on Wednesday, October 27th in the Peabody Elementary School Cafeteria. The meeting began with a recap of the study process since February 2010 when the first public meeting was held. City of Cambridge staff reiterated that based on discussions with neighborhood residents, business owners and property owners there seemed to be general agreement that:

- Supporting retail on the stretch is important to the overall improvement,
- There should be appropriate scale and density,
- There is a desire to enhance the pedestrian and bicycle environment and also address traffic flow issues where appropriate,
- There should be additional street trees and landscaping,
- It would be beneficial to promote and support an identity for Trolley Square,
- The historic character of certain properties and features on the Avenue should be protected,

City staff briefly reviewed the draft non zoning recommendations for the study and then began more detailed discussions about the draft zoning recommendations and possible approaches to implementing them.

Zoning to encourage ground floor retail

The first zoning recommendation discussed was to consider zoning changes to encourage ground floor retail.

- There was a question on whether or not retail includes restaurants. There was a question regarding possible strategies to discourage banks and national chains. It was pointed out that retail excludes banks and offices.
- There were some questions about how the inclusionary zoning bonus for housing affects the sizes of buildings and if the bonus applied to retail space. Someone mentioned that it would be nice to have the actual numbers for comparison.
- Another meeting attendee wanted to know how zoning on North Mass Avenue compares to what exists on other parts of the avenue.
- Someone asked if the City's vision for the area is multi-family/multiuse buildings and pointed out that there are currently mostly single family houses and single story retail buildings.

- A comment was made that *Approach 1* doesn't seem to remove the disincentive for retail because of the inclusionary bonus. Another attendee thought that excluding retail from FAR calculations was enough of an incentive for developers.
- Someone stated that there are a large number of existing commercial sites that are empty, and that perhaps more should be done to fill those sites.
- Another person commented that the City should be innovative on what's considered beneficial to the city for example, community space in addition to retail.
- A meeting attendee asked if there was any provision in the approaches that would address existing buildings. Another person claimed that building owners are not willing to lower rents or shorten leases.
- A meeting attendee speaking on behalf of *Main Street North Cambridge* submitted a petition with 200 signatures in support of a requirement for first floor retail, and stated that there is a need to attract those kinds of developers. It was also clarified that the petitioners were looking especially to keep what retail currently exists. Someone added that there is strong desire for requiring retail and that only providing incentives would actually deteriorate current conditions.
- It was pointed out that the City had identified different nodes along the Avenue and perhaps there could be incentives or requirements for certain areas. Also that there should be a new approach considered that combines strategies of some of the other approaches and requires retail where it already exists.
- Someone commented that if there is retail activity on the street there needs to be residential density to support it. While another person stated that there is already density in North Cambridge and that everything built north of Trolley Square is residential.
- There was suggestion for inclusionary affordable retail similar to the provision for housing.
- Another attendee said that the concept of buy local shouldn't be ignored and that there are other ideas that aren't just about zoning.
- There was a comment that there should be more help for businesses during difficult economic times.
- A meeting attendee asked what currently attracts people and businesses to North Mass Ave. Someone said the City should provide information and examples from other neighborhoods. Another person noted that Inman and Union Squares seem to work without an MBTA station.

Zoning to discourage auto uses

The next zoning recommendation discussed was to consider zoning options to facilitate the redevelopment of automobile focused uses that are inconsistent with promoting a safe active pedestrian friendly environment.

City staff explained that a possible approach was to create a zoning overlay that includes the Residence C1 zoning provisions for automobile focused uses in the Residence B district. This would allow for a moderate increase in units and density which may better facilitate redevelopment of those uses. The approach focused on only the properties in the Residence B district rather than the entire corridor because there are already certain zoning incentives included in the Business A2 district.

- Someone asked if the City had talked with the owners of the parcels and what the probability of change was.
- Another person wanted to know why the rest of the corridor was ruled out if it was going to be rezoned anyway.
- A meeting attendee wondered if a business actually operates at the site on the corner of Magoun Street and Massachusetts Avenue.
- It was stated that the people living in the area should be polled before moving forward.
- There was a comment that more density on the sites in question would mean more traffic.
- Another attendee stated that they would like the sites to remain zoned Residence B. Someone also pointed out that there is already a process to get a variance if a developer chooses to do so.

Conclusion

City staff briefly reviewed what was heard at the meeting, and explained that there would be an additional meeting in a few weeks to continue the zoning discussion.