Concord-Alewife Planning Study

Meeting Notes: March 12, 2003 Committee Meeting

Committee Members Present: Patricia Amoroso, Joseph Barrell, Doug Brugge, Pat Goddard, Mitchell Goldstein, C J Mabardy, Hom Sack, Ann Tennis, Linsday (Peter) White, Albert Wilson, Jr.
City of Cambridge Staff: Susan Glazer, Stuart Dash, Iram Farooq, Susanne Rasmussen, Catherine Woodbury
Consultants: David Dixon, Ron Mallis, Herb Nolan, Liz Langley, David Black, Pam McKinney

Review of Major Issues

Major issues discussed at the February Committee meeting were as follows:

- overcoming barriers
- creating true destinations
- increased sense of place
- appropriately-scaled, appropriately placed development
- Concord Avenue as a "great" avenue
- traffic and transportation
- enhancing access to open space and environmental assets
- preserving and enhancing residential quality of life.

During the ensuing discussion, several Committee members raised additional points:

- There is concern about the quality of life vis-à-vis development/uses in the Quadrangle. The notion of using a connection to Blair Pond to buffer the neighborhood from the immediately abutting uses was brought up.
- The issue of traffic speed and volume on Blanchard Avenue, mentioned at the last meeting, remains of concern. The hope, therefore, was that traffic calming would be included as part of the overall transportation/traffic discussion.

Presentation of Existing Conditions

The discussion was organized around the area's *physical profile*, its *transportation profile*, and its *market profile*.

Physical Profile

Items presented included:

- *Current zoning* determines the permitted uses, building heights, and FAR in each district of the study area. FAR, or Floor-Area Ratio, is the amount of development allowed on a particular site. If a site contains 100,000 square feet, and if the FAR is .5, the amount of permitted developable space would be 100,000 x .5, or 50,000 square feet.
- *Open space resources*, and the value of those resources for the study area.
- *Degree of accessibility* – vehicular or pedestrian -- to key destinations within the study area.
- *Areas of high visibility, edges, and barriers* (David Black pointed out that the minimum clearance for rail lines is 22 feet).
- *Internal block patterns*.

Additional Discussion

- Much of the study area is, in fact, not walkable because of intervening barriers of one kind or another.
- There was acknowledgement of recent improvements in the last several years, including an asphalt sidewalk on the Fresh Pond side, a more pronounced entrance into the reservation

across from Burger King, and improvements to the entrance by the rotary -- evidence of an overall relationship with the Fresh Pond Reservation that is working rather well.

- In discussing the fence along the Fresh Pond side of Concord Avenue, committee members recognized its necessity, while suggesting that the walk along the Avenue could still be made more pleasant than it is.

Transportation

Items discussed included:

- *The regional context*. Many of the traffic issues in and around the Study Area are related to this regional network and the junction of two major travel axes. The scope of the planning study as well as jurisdiction issues make it difficult to make recommendations regarding the regional transportation network. Capacity improvements in the regional network are unlikely to yield major impact on traffic in the Study Area.
  Regional traffic does impact the area in the sense that people often take Blanchard to avoid Route 2. This is a safety concern. While proposals for the Study Area can't influence the bigger picture dynamics, there are some things we may be able do at the local level to impact the character of Blanchard Road and to make it a more pleasant and safer pedestrian environment.
- *Transit.* The red line is a tremendous resource for the area, but currently accessible within a 10 minute walk only to a small section. Feeder bus services to Alewife station are more similar to commuter bus schedules than to local bus schedules. The two services on Concord Avenue connect to Harvard Square but not to the Red Line at Alewife.
  One committee member noted the greater convenience of the bus service (as opposed to the Red Line) in accessing Harvard Square. He also mentioned inbound scheduling oddities for the 74 and 78 buses that mean they travel together with headways at 15 minutes.
  Another member asked if it wouldn't make sense to have one of those routes connect to Alewife station, possibly reducing some of the traffic on Concord Avenue. However, others noted that if one of the routes went to Alewife, it would likely sit in traffic on Route 16.
- *Transit accessibility,* and its implications for the mode split differential between the Quadrangle and the Triangle. A greater percentage of people drive to and from the Quadrangle than the Triangle. While data is limited, the difference is about 10%.
- *The local road network* shows both the Triangle and the Quadrangle as front-loaded with points of concentrated traffic at the connections between the local and regional networks. The Highlands have a somewhat similar type of connection to the regional network.
- *Barriers*, which are derived from both physical constraints and traffic and safety constraints.
- *Opportunities for connections,* which looked at links over the railroad tracks as well as to surrounding open space areas.
  Regarding the former, it is important to recognize the significant difficulties attached to a rail crossing: there are safety issues at play with an at-grade crossing, which in some ways dictates that a crossing needs to be above-grade. This also needs to be carefully though, particularly the extent to which a vehicular connection might attract through-traffic. An above-grade crossing requires a 22 foot clearance for the trains. With a pedestrian/bicycle above-grade crossing, there are problems with getting people to go up over a bridge. Urban design could play a role by incorporating the crossing into a building or plaza. Ruggles Station, which offers pedestrian connections to the Northeastern University campus, is one such model.
- *Addressing limitations* through either change in the mix of uses, with a focus on land uses, including different kinds of retail, that would generate different levels of auto use.
  A question was raised regarding the amount of regional traffic in the area, as well as the "quality" (e.g., speed) of the traffic. We will be taking a more detailed looks at that as we proceed.

Market Analysis

- *Current Character*
  - *The Highlands residential neighborhood* is a mature, stable neighborhood that is built-out and has a consistent, coherent, and clear identity.
  - *Concord Avenue*: eclectic mix of uses. The fact that it is a one-sided street helps explain why retail has not succeeded there, and why the retail that exists is auto-related. At the same time, the other side is gorgeous and should be visually permeable is value-enhancing for what occurs on the other side of the street.
  - *Quadrangle*: very different from the frontage along Concord Avenue -- industrial, the City's business incubator – with somewhat eclectic uses, though all evolving from industrial beginnings. Development lacks the identity that comes from a street structure.
  - *Triangle*: shows evidence of what it means to be next to transit, that the market sees opportunity and value here for residential and higher density commercial. Development in the Triangle, while more coherent than that in the Quad, has not necessarily been pedestrian friendly, a goal for this planning study.
  - *Shopping Center*: An older strip commercial mall, reliant on autos. While there has been improvement and change in the stores, with Bread & Circus and TJMaxx, this area has the potential to be a much more vibrant mixed-use area close to transit.
- *Current development* in the Study Area is opportunistic, in response to the availability of parcels, market timing, patterns of ownership and occupancy.
- *The ambient outlook,* showed areas with higher potential for change under existing zoning. Factors that affect development include parcelization, changes in infrastructure such as streets, changes in access to transit, and changes in zoning. The recommendations of this planning process, therefore can have a significant influence in directing future change in the Study Area.

Additional Discussion

- In response to a concern regarding some current uses within the Quadrangle -- non-conforming uses are likely to be grandfathered in. They may change in the future when the market for alternative uses on those sites becomes more attractive. While they remain, the question is the affect on future uses in the surrounding area.
- A question was raised regarding so-called "Back Streets" uses within the Quadrangle, a result of low property values. Is one of the goals to keep those uses, or to move them? The Committee should keep this question in mind as a consideration during the planning process.

Preliminary Planning Goals

The following ideas were discussed as we start to frame the goals for the study:

Barriers & Connections

- Break down barriers and provide enhanced connections. 'How' this can happen is an important challenge for the Committee to discuss.
- Provide a "better" connection between the Highlands and the T. Make the connection along the rail line connecting Blanchard Road to the T station explicit. This is already planned by the MDC.
- Resolve the various perspectives on the (potential) links between the Highlands and points East.

Open Space

- What is the area's major "capability" or asset? (Think green?)
- Better access to and use of green space.

- Take into account who will be affected if/when the green spaces are newly linked, for example while a connection to the golf course is desired by some, the use poses limitations. In such cases, visual connections are still important.

Traffic & Transportation

- Don't make traffic situation worse – specially as it impacts safety. The project will require Qualitative and quantitative look at traffic and circulation
- Make the Blanchard-Concord/Rotary walk something to be desired rather than put up with.

Land Use

- Think of the perimeter of the Quadrangle as suitable for housing, with light industrial in the middle.
- Are there any state listed brownfields sites within the Study Area?
- Infrastructural improvements (e.g., roadways, streets) in the Quad and Triangle are key.
- Providing an easily accessible link between the Quad and the Triangle would create a stronger sense of a coherent business community.
- Where is/are the point(s) at which all interests intersect?

Next Steps:

- A public meeting for the project will be held on March 27.
- Comments after or between the meetings should be sent to Iram Farooq.