

Harvard Square Kiosk and Plaza Working Group Meeting – Notes

Thursday, November 29th, 2018

- Attendees
 - Working Group: Frank Kramer, Bertil Jean-Chronberg, Daniel Andrew Schofield-Bodt, John DiGiovanni, Abra Berkowitz, Tom Lucey, Ken Taylor
 - Staff: Iram Farooq, Daniel Wolf, Kathy Watkins
- Kiosk and Plaza Design
 - Updates (Kathy Watkins)
 - Design team continues to work on design details such as lighting, materials, utilities, etc.
 - Targeting a January design open house, around the 4-6pm timeframe – date to be confirmed soon. We will have updated design visuals for that meeting, including a video walking the viewer through a rendering of the Plaza.
 - The team has been meeting with the MBTA to discuss a license agreement and coordination.
 - Regarding utilities: heat can be accommodated in the Kiosk; still looking at possibility of air conditioning (would likely require bulky equipment in Plaza, posing significant tradeoffs in the Plaza design); water can be provided in the Kiosk, but trying to figure out the extent (a full sink would interfere with flexibility of the space, whereas something like a spigot may be more appropriate).
 - Discussion:
 - One member of the public asked to meet privately with the architect before January and encouraged the design team to try to include air conditioning for the sake of accommodating sensitive technological equipment and/or historical artifacts. Kathy replied that it makes sense to have the design open house in January to discuss the design; there will still be significant design work to do after that and opportunity to respond to feedback.
 - Another member of the public asked to clarify which entities will be involved in making decisions about the project in addition to the Historical Commission (which has jurisdiction over the Kiosk exterior). Kathy replied that the chosen Kiosk Operator would have input on the final fit-out of the Kiosk interior, in addition to the Working Group and general public weighing in along the way on various aspects of the project. A Working Group member remarked that the group has been working on the project for 18 months and that there has been deep public involvement in decision making.
 - A member of the public said that there should be an offsite location for tourism information. Kathy replied that she has had preliminary conversations with the Cambridge Office for Tourism about a temporary location for visitor information during construction.
- Draft Request for Information (RFI)
 - Daniel Wolf responded to written feedback received from two members of the public and one Working Group member on the Draft RFI:

- Concerns were expressed about the notion of advertising on/around the Kiosk as a source of revenue for the project. The City will be in a better position to evaluate whether this is needed as a source of revenue after receiving responses to the RFI.
 - Some comments expressed skepticism that the finances of the project will work out for the Operator. If that's the case, the City expects to receive that kind of feedback from potential Operators in the RFI responses, at which point we can make an assessment of how to best proceed.
 - Many comments had to do with building design. There will be opportunity to more fully discuss design ideas at the design open house in January.
 - [Comments about utilities were addressed previously in the design updates period of the meeting.]
 - We expect that the City will assist the Cambridge Office for Tourism with additional capacity to provide tourism staffing in the Kiosk. The Cambridge Office for Tourism would not be paying rent, and neither would the Operator. The “payment” would be in the form of the services they provide to the City.
- Discussion:
 - One Working Group member asked if we should soften the requirements listed in the Draft RFI, noting that respondents may provide feedback in RFI responses that certain requirements are not feasible. Another Working Group member said she liked the set of requirements as listed and that they lay out the basic expectations of an Operator. Kathy Watkins said the Information Solicited section asks respondents what challenges there would be in implementing the Working Group’s Recommendations. Iram Farooq said the RFI could include a clearer statement toward the beginning explaining that the City is looking for feedback from a diverse set of potential Operators on its objectives and expectations.
 - A member of the public recommended emphasizing in the Purpose section three themes – history, news, and information – as paramount for the project. Iram replied that she wasn’t sure the Working Group had reached consensus that those three specific elements were deemed the three paramount themes in that particular framing, despite all three being important themes for the project.
 - A Working Group member noted that we should not require an Operator to operate City programs for the City and that if the program fails as a result it would be a bad outcome.
 - Another Working Group member asked if there was a specific duration expected for a contract with an Operator. Daniel Wolf replied that this has not been decided yet.
 - A Working Group member expressed concern about the existing MBTA advertising on the headhouse and suggested developing clear parameters for the placement of any advertising. Iram Farooq replied that the question of advertising has been a recurring point of conversation and that it is possible that financial feasibility of the project could hinge on advertising. She shared that

she had spoken with Charlie Sullivan of the Historical Commission about what is likely to be deemed acceptable from the commission's point of view. Two options emerged as most acceptable from that viewpoint: placing displays on either of the shorter ends of the Kiosk or using rooftop displays. Iram also cited that there is some historical precedent for the latter. Kathy Watkins added that the commission shared similar thoughts at the July Historical Commission meeting. A Working Group member said that the Draft RFI text works well, in that it provides some general guidance that any advertising be appropriately scaled and that operations draw from a range of revenue sources. Another Working Group member noted that there is expected to be a significant reduction in advertising in the immediate area, with the elevator and Information Booth ads going away, adding that the Kiosk is currently effectively wrapped with ads and expressing hope that revenues can support the operation in making Harvard Square a better place, not merely maximizing value for the sake of doing so.

- A Working Group member suggested that the RFI be issued so that the project can continue and that the team can learn from potential Operators what is necessary, noting that an RFI obliges the City to nothing and discouraging adding in requirements at this stage. Another Working Group member expressed interest in seeing who responds, saying that the fewer additional requirements there are, the better for the time being.
- A Working Group member asked if Charlie Sullivan addressed the Historical Commission's role in the process. Kathy Watkins said that the use of the Kiosk is not in the commissions purview while the physical exterior is in their purview. Iram Farooq said we could add some emphasis on the historic status of the building in the RFI.
- A Working Group member asked how much space the tourism component will require in the Kiosk. Iram Farooq replied that we will need to think through what physical elements are desirable – possibly modular elements, although the team is not quite at that level of detail. Some aspects of this would be resolved as part of a discussion with the chosen Operator about the interior fit-out. The Working Group member asked if staff/greeters in the Kiosk are expected to be Cambridge Office for Tourism employees. Another Working Group member responded that we shouldn't be too prescriptive in cordoning off the roles of the Office for Tourism staff and Operator staff. Iram said that the space needs to be staffed. Daniel Wolf said that flexibility and collaboration between the two entities would be desirable.
- A Working Group member said that the purpose of the Kiosk is to be the most flexible and open space possible with few obligations and recommended that the City find a separate space in the square for providing visitor information. Iram Farooq replied that we will see if potential Operators believe that sharing space with the Office for Tourism is too burdensome, adding that the Working Group has talked about visitor information being a central function in the Plaza.

Another Working Group member suggested adding a question about balancing the temporary and recurring programming responsibilities.

- A member of the public recommended including volunteers in the tourism staffing to bridge to community.
- A Working Group member asked how the public restrooms in the Smith Center are functioning and whether they sufficiently serving the need. Another Working Group member said they are working well and that only during periods of very heavy crowds are there significant waits.
- A Working Group member commented that the RFI overview paragraph and framing works well.
- A member of the public agreed that there should be a certain degree of flexibility in the Kiosk, and that we should be flexible with commerce as well, saying that we should allow respondents to the RFI to propose appropriate and compelling kinds of things that could be sold in/around the Kiosk. This would help the finances work out.
- Another member of the public remarked that many people have opposed advertising of a large scale, cautioning the City from considering this as a possible revenue source. She said that while there is historical precedent for rooftop signage, that is a slippery slope – for instance, Central Square used to have laundry draped out of the windows of many buildings, indicating a preference against that sort of aesthetic. What kinds of historical precedent are considered appropriate or not? She cautioned the group against using following the historical precedent of something that may not have been desirable in the first place.
- A Working Group member pointed out the the Draft RFI included mention of ATMs as a possible revenue source while the Recommendations had removed that mention. Daniel Wolf said that was a mistake and would be corrected.
- A member of the public recommended considering other governance models, such as a trustee model. He asked about the relative roles of the Advisory Committee vs. the City Manager in overseeing the Operator. He asked how disputes between the Operator and the Office for Tourism over sharing the space would be handled. He suggested that we don't write off the idea of some public subsidy for the Kiosk operation, saying that perhaps it shouldn't have to be entirely self-sufficient. He said that the Draft RFI doesn't sufficiently capture the goal of making the place iconic.
- A Working Group member suggested adding into the Draft RFI a mention of providing social services. Daniel Wolf replied that the Draft RFI only presents a high-level summary of the Working Group's Recommendations, and respondents are directed to refer to the Final Report for the recommendations.
- A member of the public recommended that the RFI reiterate that we're inviting creative solutions and input in RFI responses. He also said the Advisory Committee is not defined in the RFI.
- A Working Group member said that the theme of history is not adequately prioritized in the Recommendations.

- A Working Group member asked if they will see responses to the RFI. Iram Farooq replied that they will be available and will inform discussion moving forward.