

City of Cambridge Net Zero Transportation Plan Advisory Group

Meeting #5 notes – Wednesday, June 28, 2023 (part 1) & Wednesday, July 12, 2023 (part 2)

The Advisory Group held its fifth meeting on Wednesday, June 28, 2023, at the Cambridge City Hall Annex and via Zoom. Advisory Group members also met on Wednesday, July 12, 2023, to finish up discussions on the agenda items. The objectives of the meetings were to –

- Review important issues about transportation and emissions;
- Discuss strategies and tools to reduce emissions; and
- Look at how transportation strategies intersect with land use planning.

Below are important points and action items, followed by a summary of discussions.

Important points and action items

- Advisory Group members reviewed City policies related to transportation and explored the relationship between land use and transportation planning. Key points were:
 - Policies like the Parking and Transportation Demand Management (PTDM) ordinance aim to reduce traffic and greenhouse gas emissions by requiring and incentivizing sustainable modes, though it is important to ensure that the benefits and burdens from these policies are distributed equitably. The City is examining this policy with an equity lens and considering ways to update it. The City welcomes the Advisory Group's thinking on this topic.
 - Land use density affects what transportation options are workable. More dense and mixed land use can allow for shorter trips and lower-emissions mode choices, but denser land use without adequate options can lead to negative and inequitable outcomes like traffic congestion. On the other hand, less dense land use cannot support as many mode options and relies more on cars.
 - Equity is an important part of land use and transportation planning, and planning with an anti-racist focus can reverse harms from racist policies like redlining and lead to more mobility justice.
- Questions for future discussion include:
 - Are there examples of how other cities have resolved issues similar to the ones Cambridge faces?
 - How should we structure community engagement for this plan? How will community members be involved? How will institutional players be involved?

June 28, 2023

Welcome and introductions

Stephanie Groll (Community Development Department) welcomed Advisory Group members. Participants introduced themselves and shared recent experiences with transportation.

Reviewing how transportation planning and emissions work

Advisory Group members reviewed a presentation on transportation planning and measuring emissions in Cambridge:

- Almost all (94%) of Cambridge's transportation emissions come from gas-powered cars, which account for only 35% of trips.
- Most trips in and around Cambridge are short (55% of trips are 3 miles or less). This suggests that it might be possible to shift some trips to more sustainable modes.
- The modes that people use affect how many people can use the public roadway space.
- Some modes create more emissions per person. Walking, biking, electric vehicles, and public transit produce the fewest emissions *per person*.
- Emissions produced is a result of distance travelled (e.g., miles), fuel efficiency of the mode (e.g., gallons per mile), and the emissions rate of the fuel (e.g., pounds of greenhouse gases per gallon).
- Transportation emissions are affected by planning and other factors at multiple levels. There are some strategies the City can undertake to reduce emissions, such as the Parking and Transportation Demand Management (PTDM) Ordinance, creating bike lanes and bus lanes, and installing public electric vehicle chargers. Others, the City can guide or indirectly influence, such as public transit routes. Finally, issues such as vehicle fuel economy are outside the City's influence.

Advisory Group members made the following points in discussion:

- It is important to strike a balance between *strategies that encourage* people to undertake more sustainable activities and *strategies that discourage* people from undertaking less sustainable activities, especially when disincentives to undertake less sustainable activities can further burden already marginalized and underserved groups.
 - For example, there are equity considerations around using parking fees as a tool to encourage sustainability. The City has an ongoing [Parking Study](#) which involves understanding how residents from various communities in Cambridge interact with parking, to ensure that decisions around parking regulations are made in a thoughtful way. One of the recommendations of that study is to evaluate parking policies with an equity lens, considering how parking restrictions and fees can affect different communities in different ways.
- There are some public transit options that are operated in Cambridge independent of the MBTA. For example, the City has control over the Blue Bikes system in Cambridge. Additionally, there are several shuttle services, including a door-to-door service run by the Senior Center and services run by Harvard, MIT, and the Charles River Transportation Management Association's EZRide. Advisory Group members were interested in exploring ways for the public to be able to access these services and/or use the funding for these services to improve the MBTA. Members also noted that MBTA services become limited at nights and during weekend. They were interested in exploring options for night-time and weekend micro-transit.

Policies in Cambridge that reduce transportation emissions

Afterward, Stephanie shared an overview of transportation policies and plans aimed at reducing transportation emissions, beginning with the parking freeze under the federal Clean Air Act in 1972 continuing to the 2020 Bicycle Plan Update. Alongside fighting climate change, these policies have the goal of reducing traffic congestion.

As an example of one policy, Stephanie provided a more detailed overview of Cambridge's Parking and Transportation Demand Management Ordinance (PTDM). The PTDM Ordinance was adopted in 1998 and was designed to reduce traffic and greenhouse gas emissions by promoting walking, cycling, public transportation, carpooling, and other sustainable modes. The ordinance requires some non-residential properties to:

- Limit the percentage of drive-alone trips coming to their site;
- Provide programs to make it easier and cheaper to take a sustainable mode (like giving employees free T passes); and
- Complete an annual survey to update the City on how they are doing.

The City will not issue permits to properties that are not in compliance. While the PTDM has not been the only factor in this trend, the percentage of people driving alone to these properties decreased from 54% in 2004 to 35% in 2019. It is also worth noting that the PTDM only covers around 40% of Cambridge's workforce.

Advisory Group members shared the following points on transportation policy in Cambridge:

- **Reducing pressure on office work** – As COVID pandemic restrictions have eased, employers have been pushing employees to return to work in the office, which means that trips to workplaces have increased. One member suggested that the City could help pay for unused office space in order to reduce the pressure on bringing workers back into offices.
- **Fare-free public transit** – Members were interested in exploring what it would take for the City to give residents free CharlieCards to promote use of the MBTA. One member whose organization has a free CharlieCard program noted that the lack of a MBTA program for low-income people is a barrier to access. The City of Boston is also running a pilot involving [fare-free bus routes](#). CDD is also exploring a similar pilot program for Cambridge.
- **Understanding parking costs and options** – There is some interest among the Advisory Group in exploring the advantages and disadvantages of using parking costs as a tool to promote sustainable modes, given that many families rely on cars for transportation. One idea was to convert commuter parking to free public parking. This relates to disparities in the use of cars, which some people (especially people with families) see as a necessity while others do not. One member also suggested that parking at places like hospitals and courthouses should be free.
- **Focusing policies on large employers** – There is a sense that focusing policies on wealthy institutions (like large universities and companies) is effective because they will always “take care of” their employees and students. However, smaller businesses like retail stores and restaurants operate differently from large employers, and policy

options need to be tailored for their realities. Several large employers (like Harvard and MIT) are also heavily involved in the real estate and development sectors. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to combine transportation policy interventions with other land use interventions. The City requires new real estate development projects to include investments in mitigation for the surrounding communities. Group members noted that while this system leverages investment tied to development, those investments are often focused on higher-income neighborhoods.

Land use planning and transportation

Afterward, Michael Bangert-Drowns (Arup) led a discussion with Advisory Group members on the relationship between land use planning and transportation. He emphasized that land use and transportation planning have a history of inequity. Conversely, planning with an anti-racist and equitable focus will lead to more options that work for more people.

In general, as people live more closely together, more transportation options become possible. In some rural areas, cars are the only option to get around. On the other hand, cities like Cambridge have more options like subways, buses, bikes, and walking. Cambridge's land use patterns support many people being able to live close together, which makes public transportation systems work better. If Cambridge had lower density, transit options would be less effective as fewer people would live near infrastructure like MBTA stations.

Advisory Group members shared their experiences of things that become easier when people live closer together, like building community, accessibility, and embracing diversity. They also shared how living closer together brings challenges like getting into conflict, gentrification, and pressure on service providers to meet the needs of many. Gentrification in historic communities of color can also lead longtime residents to experience racist behaviors from newer residents.

The racist practice of redlining has also influenced transportation and planning decisions in Cambridge and neighboring cities. One example of this influence is that in the 1900s, a highway route was proposed in such a way that it would cut through the redlined neighborhoods of the Coast and the Port. Cambridge residents were able to push back on this proposal, but similar projects disconnected communities in Boston's West End and in Somerville.

Members reflected on this background and noted the importance of community education and learning from history in city planning. Members noted that many community members do not have trust in government because of a history of inequitable decision-making, and there is a need to rebuild trust if policies are to be effective. It is also important to note that people in power made inequitable decisions in the past in service of what was perceived to be the "greater good," such as highway expansion in the 1960s. Now as Cambridge is fighting the challenge of climate change, it is important to ensure that decisions that Cambridge makes today are focused on equity and anti-racism.

Closing thoughts

Members closed the meeting by sharing reflections and questions about how transportation affects equity, including:

- While people with lower incomes rely more on public transit, how can we get buy-in from people with higher incomes who see cars as a symbol of wealth? How can we get

more people to see public transit as a viable option, rather than something that is “beneath them”?

- How can we balance community needs with opportunities to make transportation more sustainable?
- We should be mindful that the decisions we make exist in the context of a history of inequitable decisions. It is important to understand the causes and motivations behind past inequitable decisions and how we can address them.

Members agreed to meet a couple of weeks later to complete the discussion on land use and transportation planning.

Conversations in between meetings

Members who were unable to join on June 28 met to review the presentation and share reflections. Important points from that conversation are as follows:

- The private shuttle services in areas like Kendall Square seem to be undermining the MBTA and make it seem like the T is not worth it.
- When people live closer together, reaching places on foot becomes easier. However, planning for parking and transit infrastructure like T stations and bus stops becomes harder (though this infrastructure is more needed). In addition, towns with single-family zoning often have higher and increasing housing costs.
- Recently, several public service facilities have been relocated away from public transportation routes. Services that have moved include Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance’s office and the Middlesex Probate and Family Court. These changes often take place in a way that favors drivers and create barriers to access for those who do not own cars.
- An additional equity consideration is that the public transit system seems to be focused on people with 9-5 jobs, which makes it harder for people with other schedules to get to and from work.

July 12, 2023

Welcome and introductions

Stephanie welcomed Advisory Group members and appreciated that members were willing to be vulnerable at the previous meeting. Members shared about how recent weather events affected their transportation decisions.

Reflections and questions from the previous meeting

Members reviewed the following themes from conversations during the previous meeting, and added the following questions and reflections on how transportation affects equity in and around Cambridge:

- **Discussion on avoiding inequitable decision-making in this process** – The topic of the next meeting will be developing a method for evaluating the Plan and its recommendations based on equity.¹
- **Transit in West Cambridge** – West Cambridge is not served by light rail (the Red Line or Green Line). However, major roadways (like Mount Auburn Street, Concord Avenue, and Huron Street) are served by high-frequency bus lines (see [this map](#) for more info).
- **Designing public transit beyond 9-5 jobs** – The MBTA has undertaken a [Bus Network Redesign](#) project which has a goal of expanding service beyond standard commuting hours. However, the T’s labor and financing challenges have forced the T to cut services, and there is less overall service now compared to before the pandemic.
- **MBTA service in Cambridge** – Cambridge has more resources than other communities, which means that several elements of MBTA service in Cambridge are better than elsewhere in the MBTA network. Cambridge has more protected bus lanes, along with more newer buses which produce less emissions.

Land use and transportation planning

Michael continued the conversation from the previous meeting. Density is one aspect of land use that affects transportation emissions. When people live closer to the places they need to get to, they are able to take shorter trips overall. Shorter trips allow for more travel mode options and produce fewer emissions. Another aspect of land use is the type (for example, whether an area contains only workplaces or whether the area contains many different services and uses). Mixed land use types allow people to be able to fulfill many of their needs within a short distance and promote community resilience. Density without transportation options can lead to negative outcomes like traffic congestion. These negative outcomes often have inequitable impacts. For example, research has shown that there are disparities based on race in the lengths of commutes in the Boston area. Therefore, it is important to have a range of options that can support people living close together.

Advisory Group members shared reflections on what makes Cambridge feel easy and difficult to live in:

- **Ease and difficulty of getting around** – Cambridge’s dense land use makes it easy to get around using modes such as walking and biking. It is generally easy to access nature, parks, and grocery stores within an urban setting. However, driving is often difficult due to traffic congestion, especially during rush hour. Transportation time can also make it difficult for caregivers to be able to access kids’ programs across the city.
- **Difficulties around buses** – Buses can be a difficult transportation mode. It may be harder for older people and people (often women) with families to board and use buses. Drivers can also be inconsiderate around waiting for passengers to get settled before moving, or waiting for passengers who are rushing to catch the bus. In terms of equity, it might be worth considering whether bus drivers are more heavily “monitored” in Cambridge than other communities like Dorchester and Roxbury. In addition, drivers

¹ The [Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program](#) is an example of a program at the federal level designed to address past planning decisions that harmed communities.

might wait different amounts of time for white passengers who are rushing to catch the bus, compared to BIPOC passengers. Also, Harvard Square's busway can be a difficult to navigate for people who are new to Cambridge because they might not realize that the busway is underground. It might be worthwhile to improve the signage to make this clearer.

- **Diverse communities** – Cambridge's dense land use makes it easier for communities to be diverse, which can help people who immigrate to Cambridge feel like they are part of the larger community. This dynamic also inspires a spirit of volunteerism and giving back.

Michael shared that cities use zoning and policy to align transportation and land use with broader goals. Historically, these policies have been tools of oppression. However, new strategies and policies that are anti-racist and center equity can start to reverse harms.

Advisory Group members raised the following questions for further conversation at a later time:

- How can Cambridge learn from other cities? Are there examples of how other cities have resolved issues similar to the ones Cambridge faces?
- In addition to community engagement, how can the City create accountability for larger institutions to help implement this plan?

Closing thoughts

Participants thanked each other for contributing to the discussions. The next meeting will take place on Wednesday, August 9 at 9 AM at the City Hall Annex.

Attendance list

Advisory Group members

Members present on both days:

- James Pierre (Adius Arts Initiative)
- Ali Sorrels (Cambridge Women's Center)
- Rachel Tannenhaus (Cambridge Commission for Persons with Disabilities)
- Omriqui Thomas (Cambridge Public Schools student)

Members present only on June 28:

- Pastor Farris Blount (Western Avenue Baptist Church / Cambridge Black Pastors Alliance)
- Yao Wu (Chinese American Association of Cambridge)

Members present only on July 12:

- Elizabeth Brusie (De Novo Center for Justice and Healing)
- Karim Elrazzaz (Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center)
- Ibrahim Omar (Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center)

Community Development Department staff

- Stephanie Groll (Mobility Strategy Manager)
- Susanne Rasmussen (Director of Environmental and Transportation Planning)

Consultant team

- Michael Bangert-Drowns (Arup)
- Matt Ciborowski (Arup)
- Brandon Chambers (Consensus Building Institute)
- Elizabeth Cooper (Consensus Building Institute)