

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

IRAM FAROOQ
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

SANDRA CLARKE
Deputy Director
Chief of Administration

KHALIL MOGASSABI
Deputy Director
Chief of Planning

To: City of Cambridge Planning Board
City of Cambridge Board of Zoning Appeals
From: Central Square Advisory Committee
Date: 2/2/2021
Re:

The Central Square Advisory Committee (the "Committee") met on Tuesday, January 26, 2020 to discuss recent studies by the Community Planning Division of CDD on public space analysis and use in Central Square among other squares. Following this there was a committee discussion on the potential uses of surface parking lots in Central Square for alternative short-term uses.

This meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.300 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance. The Committee is appointed by the City Manager to undertake all large project reviews of variances and special permits for activities within the Central Square Overlay District (the "District"), and to monitor the progress of the Central Square Non-Zoning Recommendations of the 2013 K2C2 Study (the "Study").

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The meeting minutes from the Committee meeting are summarized below. Public comment was taken after each topic was discussed by committee members.

Topic 1: Cambridge Public Space/Public Life Study (Central Square study area) – Presented by: Daniel Wolf, Neighborhood Planner, CDD Community Planning Division

In 2019, CDD staff and interns studied pedestrian behavior and conditions of the built environment in Central, Harvard, Kendall, and Porter squares, in an effort to learn how various spaces are used and to uncover patterns of activity and what conditions may contribute to a vibrant and active pedestrian realm. CDD staff presented findings from Central Square and facilitated a discussion of their possible implications for Central Square.

[Summary of findings \(presentation can be found on CSAC webpage for January 2021 meeting\)](#)

General Comments:

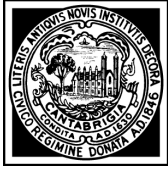
Robert Winters (RW):

- The congregate settings, so to speak, are sometimes driven by folks gathering in Carl Baron Plaza
- Helpful exercise to look at Steve Carr plans from the 90s. Had previously recommended seating which is similar to where Daniel was recommending seating. These weren't implemented because of nefarious activity.
- Conversations should be had with business owners about activity on street.

Michael Monestime (MM):

- Unhoused members of the community do make for challenging places and making them welcome to a broad population of visitors.
- Women often don't feel safe in the square.
- Spring opening will keep the square lively in COVID
- Some blocks do need activation along the sidewalks - Dance complex and Cheapo Records do a good job.

344 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02139
Voice: 617 349-4600
Fax: 617 349-4669
TTY: 617 349-4621
www.cambridgema.gov



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- Central's wide sidewalks are an advantage that most squares do not have. Spontaneity is good.

Esther Hanig (EH):

- C2 committee did a good job with this issue that has never been implemented
- Jill Rhone has the right style of activity. Could be a good model.

RW:

- Original C2 plans had pedestrian level lighting for intimate seating that face each other.

Chris Sol Gully (CSG):

- Appreciates tying formal analysis that reinforces our assumptions about the square.
- Having businesses adjacent to Carl Barron Plaza causes loitering. Not the right kind of activity to make the square energetic and fun.
- Plans for an active storefront at Red Line Sports (RLS) location on Prospect St.
- Maybe plastic moveable chairs along Prospect St in front of RLS as long as they can remain safely in place.

Daniel Wolf (DW):

- You can experiment with cheap items to see if outdoor storefront activation works in Central
- City is working through this concept during COVID

RW:

- Seating facing Cardullo's in Harvard Square to watch soccer was such a pleasant experience. Can Central duplicate that? Would be easy to do in Central Square
- Interest in defensive space from RW and CSG. How do you make spaces inviting, but still try to curb unwanted behavior?

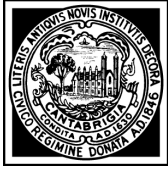
Public Comment

James Williamson (JW):

- Technical solutions don't help with socioeconomic issues. Putting benches back in won't help with current situation.
- What about a plain clothes police taskforce to help monitor the nefarious activity in the square?
- The data confirms what people who spend time in CBP already understand. The plaza is fairly barren at night, but the qualitative aspect of this is of concern during the day. It's different that what the data shows.
- Behavior of people in the square is somewhat menacing. This should be the first order of business prior to looking at seating.
- You should be able to move around in Central Square safely.

Committee Consensus

All member of the committee were interested in the public life/public space study and appreciated that the study took a more scientific look as people's general intuitions. They felt that some things were not considered, such as some of the unwanted behavior in Central Square.



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Members of the public would like to see increased security in Central Square to curb unwanted and unwelcoming behavior.

Topic 2: Central Square Parking Lots - In 2020, amidst public health and economic crises, the Central Square BID created Starlight Square, a community destination for art and performance, healing, learning, dining, and commerce on Lot 5 in Central Square. Converting a place for cars into a place for people is not a new idea. It has been considered and proposed in City of Cambridge planning documents, including K2C2 and the Red Ribbon Commission. We believe it is the time to act on these recommendations and invest in transforming underutilized space to serve community and ensure the future of our cultural and commercial district.

The committee discussed the potential use of other surface parking lots in Central Square particularly those one block north and south of Mass Ave, which might have the effect of directing some pedestrian traffic and energy to side streets, a way to activate more than just Mass Ave in Central Square, the current pedestrian and active spine.

The committee would like to find ways to draw residents of the adjacent neighborhoods to the square, particularly making an environment that is friendly to families and kids, as well. Right now, there is no destination for kids in Central Square, such as playgrounds or family-centered activities. Activating some of the surface lots for play spaces, markets or play streets, for instance, could create that energy. There should also be ways to make the Square more appealing to seniors. Right now there is no inviting space for senior residents in Central Square.

There was mention of some efforts historically in Central Square to create pedestrian streets and shared spaces, but they never succeeded because of the location or adjacent uses, such as Blanche Street. During the COVID period a number of restaurants were able to claim some space generally used for parking for outdoor dining. This occurred on the street, as well as in surface parking lots, such as behind the Little Donkey restaurant. This could be set up again in better weather.

Starlight Square has done an excellent job of programming during all seasons. Right now there is Wintermission and CLRS outdoor learning. What are other activities that could be set up in the square, such as cheap food?

Committee Summary: The CSAC would like to focus on activation of Central Square parking lots as an initiative. City staff will work with the committee to develop strategies and ideas for the lots and, hopefully, find ways to move these concepts forward.

Committee Members Present

- Robert Winters
- Joel Altstein
- Esther Hanig
- Michael Monestime
- Chris Sol Gully

Submitted on behalf of the Committee,

Drew Kane, Senior Land Use Planner

Community Development Department