

Trolley Square Committee Meeting #5
Thursday, June 6, 2002, 6:30-8:30 PM
North Cambridge Senior Center
2050 Massachusetts Avenue

Attendees

Members

Tom Buffett (TB)
Cara Cheyette (CC)
Eric Grunebaum (EG)
Bill Hubner (BH)
Martha Older (MO)
Ruthann Rudel (RR)

Staff

Susan Glazer
Stuart Dash
Chris Cotter
Iram Farooq
Rebecca Sozanski
Taha Jennings

Architect/ Urban Design Consultant
Dennis Carlone

Discussion of Goals and Considerations:

Stuart Dash opened the meeting by presenting a matrix developed by City staff that summarizes some of the considerations associated with various goals that have been discussed thus far by the committee. These goals include public open space, affordable housing, retail/ community uses, and design quality. The goals were evaluated on the basis of the following considerations: consistency with neighborhood character, cost, public open space, number of units, and below-grade parking. The entire matrix can be viewed on the Trolley Square website:

<http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us/~CDD/commplan/neighplan/trolley/index.html>.

During this presentation, committee members asked questions and began discussion (summarized below):

Public Open Space

Committee members mentioned the Community Preservation Act (CPA) as a way to fund an open space component of the project. It has not yet been determined how the 10% of CPA funds for open space will be allocated. It was noted that the City will try to make the most cost effective-decisions possible with this funding, trying to leverage other funds wherever possible.

Affordable Housing

Chris Cotter explained that dollar per unit caps are a factor in being competitive for state and federal funding. While this cap can be exceeded when the City puts money into a project, applications that exceed these limits are less competitive for state and federal funds. Rental projects are generally eligible for more state and federal funding than ownership projects.

In Cambridge, market-rate units in a mixed-income project generally do not reduce the per-unit funding required of state, federal, and City sources to develop affordable units. Although in theory, the market-rate units should subsidize the cost of the affordable units,

in practice they do not because of the high cost to develop in Cambridge and because non-profit sponsored affordable housing development projects are generally more expensive than market rate residential developments due to the complex nature of these projects, which involve a variety of public and private funding sources.

Retail/ Community Uses

While the Fleet Bank on north Mass Ave. was cited as an example of a situation where retail and affordable housing work together, Mr. Dash explained that the deal that created this housing was contingent on the bank remaining as a tenant.

A preference was stated for certain restrictions on any business that occupies this site: that it does not compete with local businesses, is not a chain, and serves local residents. (MO)

Certain types of retail were seen by committee members as naturally complementary to affordable housing. A desire for the City to look into a program to support retail on the site was expressed. Mr. Dash noted that if the desire is to select a retail tenant and subsidize that tenant, this creates a set of managerial and financial challenges. He described his experience trying to find a model for an affordable supermarket, and the challenges municipalities face in creating these types of establishments. Dennis Caralone said that there might be other examples available nationally. He also spoke of the need to work with developers skilled at both retail and housing in order to make these projects successful.

Design Quality

Bill Hubner clarified that his scheme should have parking on-grade, screened by a row of retail (not below-grade). This point is clarified in an amended version of the meeting notes from May 2 (available on the website).

Potential Design Alternatives:

Dennis Caralone then went on to present three alternative design scenarios. The first scheme is a variation of what was shown at the previous meeting: 35-40 units of housing at 3-4 stories, with on-grade parking behind the building, and the corner dedicated to open space. While this scenario helps to define Mass Ave., creates a small open space, and screens parking, it does split the building into two sections connected by a bridge, and the width of the building may be too thin at the south site. In this scheme, 50% of units face the parking area and trolley yard, and 25% of those on the first floor face Mass. Ave. The parking will be visible from Linear Park. There is poor service access and minimal retail potential with this design.

The second scheme shows 35-40 units of housing with parking below grade, resulting in increased levels of open space. This scheme helps to screen the trolley yard from Mass Ave. It also places greater importance on Cameron Ave. There are some aspects to this scenario that deserve careful consideration. The open space that will be created will be almost a replica of what is across the street on Cameron Ave. While it is a bigger space, how well it is designed and used will determine its success. Fifty percent of the units will overlook the trolley yard. Retail

would be located in a challenging location (because it is setback from the street-edge), and it will be challenging to provide service unless a service lane is created.

The third scheme shows 45-55 units with parking below-grade and expanded open space. This scheme shows a larger building that is more visible from Cameron Ave. This scheme defines and improves the Mass Ave. edge, screening the trolley yard from that street. It has more open space than the first scheme, and provides two distinct types of open space (including a courtyard area and a link to Linear Park). Seventy-five percent of units overlook open space.

Some committee members stated that they would like an opportunity to further discuss the scenarios presented. They also discussed the need to get public input before finalizing any recommendations. The committee decided to meet again as a group on June 20, then to host a community meeting June 26.

Public Comment:

Amin Ahmad, who works as an architect on affordable housing projects, said that the affordable housing created now is not sub-standard to market rate housing. He stated a preference for scheme three because it provides more flexibility to an architect than the other two schemes.