

Trolley Square Committee Meeting #7
July 25, 2002, 6:30- 9 PM
North Cambridge Senior Center
2050 Massachusetts Avenue

Attendance

Members

Cara Cheyette (CC)
John Danehy (JD)
Eric Grunebaum (EG)
Helen Kukuk (HK)
George McCray (GM)
Martha Older (MO)
Ruthann Rudel (RR)

CDD Staff

Susan Glazer
Stuart Dash
Iram Farooq
Chris Cotter
Rebecca Sozanski

Architect/ Urban Design Consultant

Dennis Carlone

The meeting began with discussion of the June 26 public meeting where three design concepts were presented for comment. Committee members then discussed some of their own thoughts about the site. Comments included the following:

Open Space

- There is a preference for open space.
- Putting a park on the site and putting housing in an existing building would permit some openness/ greenness on this stretch along Mass Ave.
- Consider an all park scenario and a 25% built-out.
- This portion of Mass Ave feels stressed and not cohesive.
- A park could increase private investment in the neighborhood.
- While having only a park on the site might not be preferable, having some component of open space could be a good idea.
- In the third design scenario, the green space is cut off from the neighborhood by a building, making the courtyard feel private.
- The open space seems unlikely to work without retail.

Housing

- There is a preference for fewer units on the site.
- In the past, the City has created affordable units in renovated buildings.
- If there is to be housing, it should be located on the “thin” portion along Mass Ave.
- This is a good opportunity to create affordable housing to help people who have been displaced from neighborhood.
- People are against dense, low-income housing, but could support affordable (not low-income), not overly dense housing.
- This is one of the rare opportunities for homeownership in North Cambridge.
- The idea of lower-income housing seems important since the loss of rent control has made staying in the neighborhood difficult.
- A greater number of units should ensure that the housing is mixed-income.

- Handicapped-accessible and elderly units are preferable.
- The City could sell some of the units at market value and use money from the sale to buy affordable condos throughout the city.
- Parking is a big issue.

Retail

- Business owners are interested in retail on the site.
- Educational institutions could research the possibility for retail, and large corporations and developers could help to support.
- The committee should look into the Community Reinvestment Act, and the potential for North Cambridge Cooperative Bank to help support this effort.

Urban Design

- It is important to create a focal point for the neighborhood and a destination.
- Any project should adhere to the North Mass Ave Guidelines.
- Perhaps the committee should identify buildings that do look good and take photographs.
- The committee could release an RFP, so that the different architects in the community can create a variety of designs and make more than one proposal to the City.
- A good example of a recent development is in Arlington Heights.

Community Center

- A small community center could act as a central attraction.

Other

- The committee should have access to the full environmental study in order to evaluate the impacts environmental conditions could have on the final use.
- There is concern about basement flooding.
- While consideration should be given to environmental issues, it is important to build on the momentum that has been created by this process and not to let anything slow it down.
- Perhaps it would make sense to tour Mass Ave, to get a better feel for the context of the site.

The committee then discussed the “Draft Frameworks for Recommendations” compiled by Community Development staff based on previous committee discussion. Comments included:

- The urban design section of the Draft Framework seems slanted toward buildings. It should talk more about open space quality (such as surface materials, topography, water, pavers, edges, maybe a small play element). (EG—also gave written comments to those present)
- There are some things in the Draft Framework that the committee does not want. The committee might need more than one report. (MO)
- The committee should work to develop a more solid proposal. (JD)

Public Comment:

Nancy Bjornson stated that she did not see affordable housing as a public benefit, because it only directly benefits the residents of the housing. A parking and traffic study should be completed before any redevelopment takes place. The current seasonal uses of the site, such the annual Boy Scout fundraiser, are good for the neighborhood.

Nina Schwartzchild is interested in retail. She does not think that having a park on the full site would be very interesting, but she would like to see some sample drawings of such a design (especially highlighting the connection to Linear Park). Ten to twenty units seems to make sense on the site. She does not see developing mixed-income housing as requiring an increase in the number of units.

Cliff Boehmer sees the need to look at the broader neighborhood to create a context for the site. In his experience, other successful groups, such as the Davis Square Task Force, have learned a valuable lesson—these type of processes take a long time. He wonders if there could be a land swap to change the configuration of the site. Mass Ave seems to be a collection of one-of-a-kind buildings, rather than a cohesive streetscape.

Susan Boehmer stated that she thought we might get more creative results if we did not place so many restrictions on the architect who will do the project.

Joe Joseph stated that he did not feel there was an anti-housing sentiment at the public meeting, but that local residents want to see something new and imaginative on the site. The idea of a tour seems like a good one. It seems like the committee should think about the context of any housing, and how they can work to reduce transience. The idea of linking to Linear Park seems like a good one. An archeological dig might be necessary on the site before any development takes place.

Michael Brandon stated that the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee has concerns about high-density on the site, but is not entirely opposed to affordable housing. They would like to see more public meetings, with new options explored. They would like more information about the environmental assessment to know the limitations of the site.