

**River Street Reconstruction
Working Group Meeting #9**

Wednesday July 22, 2020

5:30 – 7:30 PM

Zoom Virtual meeting

ATTENDEES

Working Group	City Staff	Consultants
Patrick Barrett	Patrick Baxter – TP&T	Christi Apicella, McMahon
Daniel Beaulieu	Bill Deignan - CDD	Cynthia Smith, Halvorson
Valerie Bonds	Jerry Friedman - DPW	Rich Houghton, Halvorson
Matthew Ciborowski	Lillian Hsu - CAC	Rosie Jaswal, HDR
Gabriel Cira	Khalil Mogassabi - CDD	Rick Plenge, HDR
Sam Gebru	Susanne Rasmussen - CDD	Artie Bonney, HDR
Kai Long	Andy Reker - CDD	
Andrew Tarsy	Rachel Tanenhaus - CCPD	Public
Saul Tannenbaum	Kathy Watkins - DPW	
Randy Stern	Greg Hanafin - IT	Allison Crump
Christopher Tassone	Juan Avendano - CDD	Ana Hurka Robies
Annie Tuan	Craig Uram - Arts	Ann Cowan
		Cindy Marsh
Absent		David Sears
Sienna Berry		Emmet Sheehan
Sai Boddupalli		Gavin Lund
Abby Duker		Jackie Jones
Melissa Greene		James Williamson
Olivia Turner		Joan Karp
		John Morrissey
		Judith Nathans
		Kavita Mogassabi
		Ritsuko Tahoe

Key:

CCPD = Cambridge Commission for Persons with Disabilities

CPD = Cambridge Police Department

CDD = Community Development Department

DPW = Public Works

TP&T = Traffic Parking & Transportation

MEETING SUMMARY

The following is a meeting summary of the Working Group Meeting #9 for the City of Cambridge's River Street Reconstruction. For more information see Cambridgema.gov/riverstreet.

Welcome and Overview

The meeting was initiated by Andy Reker, Community Development Department. Andy reviewed the Zoom protocols with Working Group members, took attendance, and asked each member to check their audio connection.

Bill Deignan, Transportation Program Manager, City of Cambridge started the meeting at 5:35 p.m. He reviewed the agenda and explained how the question and answer process will work for Working Group members (raise hand feature) and public (submit in Q&A feature). Bill reviewed the agenda and noted that the next Working Group meeting will be held Tuesday, August 11th (Later updated to August 18th), and a public meeting in late September.

Bill reviewed the project timeline and noted that Eversource is currently working on the gas line in the project area. The River Street project is expected to be bid in early 2021 with construction to commence in the Spring of 2021.

Project Updates

Bill provided general updates for the project area including the status of Magazine Street as a "shared street"; rerouting of MBTA Bus Route 64 to River Street; neighborhood street design through a separate community process; and ongoing work with Eversource replacing the primary gas distribution line in advance of the River Street Reconstruction process. Bill indicated that the City will work with the Contractor on construction phasing when the project goes out for construction bids.

Corridor Design Updates

Bill reviewed the Shared Design goals for the project and how those goals and the input from the Working Group has helped develop the preferred concept design of:

- One general travel lane plus bus lane
- Right side sidewalk level separated bicycle lane
- Left side flex zone parking, loading, landscaping and amenities

Bill reviewed the bus lane. A question was asked about the date of the bus volumes shown on Slide 13. Bill indicated the volumes capture ridership prior to COVID-19 impacts.

Bill reviewed the park connections, proposed Blue Bikes locations, and urban design elements. Saul asked about lighting, which is currently under design. Annie asked about Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodations for those crossing the street and how spaces will be made accessible. Bill responded that designs will be ADA compliant. It was noted that Rachel Tanenhaus, CCPD, has been actively involved in the project. Kai asked about mulch in the tree areas, and who is responsible for maintenance. Bill noted that the City is responsible for maintenance but appreciates assistance from abutters. Kai mentioned that mulch is a fire hazard. Bill will follow up with the Fire Department regarding that concern. Andy noted concerns about trash and dog waste. Kai requested when the project goes to construction that the City encourage contractors through requirements of the public bidding process to provide a diverse workforce to support equitable investments in the community. Bill indicated he would follow up on specific maintenance concerns and contracting practices separately.

Jerry Friedman reviewed the existing and proposed street trees on River Street and Blackstone Street. He also reviewed tree preservation and restoration treatments, demonstrating how street trees were planted for similar projects in Kendall Square and Western Avenue.

Flex Zone

Patrick Baxter provided an overview of the flex zone and curb uses for both existing and proposed conditions. He specified that “unregulated” parking is generally undefined spaces, as opposed to regulations for street cleaning, no stopping, etc. These unregulated spaces can be used by anyone for any period of time. Randy asked for clarification on how the mobility aspects of uses differ between the left and right sides of the road. Patrick indicated that space for bus boarding/disembark results in a shift in the travel lanes road on the north side to accommodate the bus use on south side. Sal suggested that zero based parking should be used as a starting point, then justify parking as needed for the project. Patrick replied that the curb needs to accommodate a number of different uses.

Bill provided an overview of the River Street corridor roll plan, which presents the conceptual design for lane configurations, landscaping, bus stops, bicycle facility, proposed curb uses, urban design, and Tubman Square design options. He noted we won't review every aspect of design at this meeting but encouraged working group members to review and reach out to the City with any questions or comments. The Roll Plan will be posted publicly for comment. Call outs are provided to explain what is happening on each block. Traffic operations will be discussed at the next Working Group meeting. Bill highlighted that pedestrian crossings are shorter at the intersection with Pleasant Street and River Street, as depicted by the existing and proposed curb lines. He also noted how space is used for other purposes, such as Montague Street for connection to parkland, raised side-street crossings and other features.

Sam asked a question about street trees along the block nearest to Memorial Drive. Jerry noted that sidewalk space will include landscaping, but discussions and coordination with private property owners is needed. It was also noted that there are two general travel lanes on this block of River Street, as well as a bus stop, so planting opportunities are somewhat more limited than areas with narrower curb-to-curb widths.

Matt asked about plans for Tubman Square. Bill indicated it would be discussed later in the agenda.

Randy noted that the placement and design of bus stops create some curvature of the road, and asked if it was intentional as a traffic calming element. Bill agreed that there is some benefit to slow traffic as well as narrowing the roadway with one general purpose travel lane, sidewalk level bicycle lane, and visual narrowing with vertical element of trees and curb extensions.

A Zoom polling question was posed “On a scale of 1-5, do you think the proposed design is on track to achieve the shared design goals?” Results:

- 1 (does not achieve) – 0%
- 2 – 6%
- 3 - (Neutral) – 18%
- 4 – 47%
- 5 (greatly achieves)– 29%

Public Art

Lillian Hsu provided an overview of the public art process, building upon the Ritsuko Tahoe dream sequence in Carl Barron Plaza. She described that the public art will be integrated in areas to take a rest as well as view at a distance. The art includes a Cherry tree component with each public art installation, viewable from benches, as a symbol of hope and inspiration. The terra cotta tile is ceramic to create design and patterns. Stainless steel structures will have seats made of wood as a sustainable resource that is durable.

Bill noted that the roll plan has call outs for potential public art locations. There are current five locations highlighted. Locations will be finalized as design advances and the budget for the art elements becomes defined.

Sam expressed appreciation for the art and historical context. He indicated he would love to see (1) more collaboration with residents in area (sidewalk project with Arts Council – sidewalk art. Sidewalk poetry) and (2) public art. He mentioned the Kendall Square temporary or permanent art installations as examples. He acknowledges that art installations have a cost, but suggested there could be a fun opportunity in addition to what is presented. Lillian indicated the Arts Council is always interested in more opportunities - programming as well as installations. She noted the Flow Port infrastructure project and Art Center as examples.

Tubman Square

Cynthia Smith provided an overview of the Tubman Square design process presented at prior meetings. The result of input provided during that process was to close Kinnaird Street to vehicular traffic in order to improve open space connections to building frontages. Two options were presented. Design elements common to both options include:

- Improved pedestrian crossings
- Bus stop improved to be more central to park area
- Accommodate convenient, safe, continuous movement for all modes
- Flexible park and plaza option with seating.
- Art piece
- Small scale play areas

Option A

This is an “L shaped” plaza, containing 10 new trees and landscaping throughout. A diagonal path is provided to connect to Pleasant Street. Example features for bench styles and seating were provided as well as a perspective view sketch.

Option B

This option provides a greater buffer between bicyclists and pedestrian sidewalk, as the sidewalk curves into plaza itself. As a result, some of the seating areas are shifted. Sample image boards showing bright colors with curved seating were discussed. There are areas with seating islands and boulder stepping stones for play and seating. A perspective view sketch was provided highlighting the wider buffer and pedestrian path curving into the plaza with more open, flexible area in the center of the space.

Bill acknowledged that the meeting is running behind schedule. He noted that there are some additional polling questions to answer, and this conversation will continue through the public process as design progresses.

Several Working Group members had questions and comments. Andy commented on disability concerns for benches. Bill responded that Rachel is reviewing designs and she is included in the process.

Randy asked for clarification on differences between the two options. He noted the crosswalk locations and asked about desire lines to Pleasant Street. Bill indicated intersections are tightened up and more direct.

Valerie expressed support for the play area but raised safety concerns about climbing stones and lack of safety cushion.

Patrick Barrett wondered if there are other options beyond climbing stones and a large rock. He also questioned the safety of the Pleasant Street/River Street intersection.

Bill noted that there is a less direct connection of one side of Pleasant Street to the other, north and south of River Street. The slight jog in the street alignment will slow traffic. Patrick Baxter commented that a single vehicular travel lane improves sight distance, and the dedicated bus lane will have less traffic. The overall width reduction in roadway improves safety. He described the vehicular travel traveling east on Pleasant Street will be a right turn onto River Street, then a left to continue on Pleasant Street. The proposed curb extension helps to slow turning vehicles, further improving safety. Patrick Barrett noted the curb extension is in front of his home and asked for more details for landscaping plans. Bill noted ADA compliant ramps will be provided on the curb extension, but some green space is desirable. Bill noted that more design details will be developed and encouraged Working Group members to review the roll plan to see additional details for specific locations.

Kai indicated that she does not like the appearance of the climbing rocks. However, she is supportive of a play element that all ages can use. She supports multi-age use, not just play for little kids.

The Zoom poll questions consisted of the following:

Which types of amenities are most important for Tubman Square

- A Seating – 53%
- B Landscape – 74%
- C Play 16%
- D Art 26%
- E All of the above

On a Scale of 1-5, do you think Option A/Option B for Tubman Square is on track to achieve the shared design goals?

Option A

- 1 (not at all) -
- 2
- 3 (neutral) – 36%
- 4 36%
- 5 (greatly achieves)- 27%

Option B

- 1 (not at all) -
- 2 21%
- 3 (neutral)14%
- 4 36%
- 5 (greatly achieves) 29%

Bill indicated the Working Group will talk more about the design of Tubman Square, and design will be shown at the public meeting. The design will be refined based on comments.

Valerie expressed a need to have a meeting specifically for children. She is interested in hearing from children about what they are most interested in for play features. Maybe they would like rocks or maybe not. Suggests getting input ranging from little kids through teenagers. Bill agreed this is desirable to incorporate into the public meeting. The City wants to encourage “play” in general. Not just for kids – all ages and abilities considered. Play areas do not have to be part of an official park or playground.

Saul mentioned the temporary variable message sign east of Memorial Drive on River Street indicating Crime Watch community is where a logical “welcome sign” should be. He noted River Street is a grand gateway.

Gabriel mentioned it is challenging to weigh comparisons of design options in a virtual meeting format. Hard copies would be helpful in weighing significant designs. Future presentations should have a quick succession of drawings/concepts for comparison purposes. He found it challenging to evaluate design options for Tubman in this format. Saul suggested receiving design concepts in advance would be helpful for personal learning styles.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Several questions were submitted via the “Q&A” feature of zoom. Due to time constraints, Andy Reker summarized the questions and staff replied via the Q&A and/or audibly during the meeting.

Can Jay Street be included in study area (Joan Karp)

- Jerry - Jay Street and some other streets on the other side of River (Kinnaird, Soden) are tied to other utility work for 2023 time period.

Brick is hard for wheelchairs. Maybe less brick is better (Jackie Jones)

Last I knew, a couple of meetings ago, the bike lane was not going to be on the side where the buses are, for safety reasons mostly, I believe. If put on the other side of the street, it would also help keep trucks further from people on sidewalks and in houses (Joan Karp)

- Bill noted that during Working Group Meeting 6, there was discussion about the placement of the bicycle lane. The right side of the street has fewer conflict points. It also transitions better to Central Square. The right side is the more traditional side – vehicles expect to see bikes there. The bike lane is vertically separated from buses.

My main concern, as a River St resident, is the massive number of trucks that regularly use River St. The trucks are the single biggest factor affecting what River St is like for

most of the length of the street, both in terms of noise and pollution, for those walking, biking, and living on the street. Could the trucks also be allowed to use the bus lane? I rarely see busses, but always see trucks. I see many advantages to that, while still enabling the busses to move more quickly (Joan Karp)

- Bill noted that trucks will not be permitted in the bus lane because we don't want trucks to speed down the bus lane. Trucks in the bus lane would be next to bikes. The bus lane provides a buffer between bikes and trucks and there are fewer buses than trucks on River Street. There is a specific process for truck exclusions, but River Street is a designated truck route.

In one of the meetings last summer, I asked someone from the city about the Western Avenue construction and who found it most challenging. The answer I received was that people who work from home were the ones who struggled the most with it. And now, of course, we're all working from home, for who knows how long. I'm wondering how - or even whether - the River Street construction plan is taking this new reality into account (Kavita Pillay)

- Jerry – Construction will be disruptive. Hope in 2021-23 of construction there is less work from home. There will be less utility and drain work compared to Western Avenue (no outfall). Utility construction can be improved on River Street without big trenches.

Please update on how we keep all Cambridge Residents including homeless input included in this plan such as canvassing or announcing to those who cannot attend virtual meetings. (Jackie)

- Bill – email follow up will be provided tomorrow. Please help spread the word about meetings.

Bill encouraged Working Group members to reach out to City staff with additional questions and comments. The meeting ended at 7:37 pm.