

Communication from Kavish Gandhi, Representative from CHJC

Comments in Advance of First Social Housing Task Force Meeting - Kavish Gandhi

I am thrilled to see the Social Housing Task Force convene. I am a member of the Cambridge Housing Justice Coalition, which has championed social housing in Cambridge for the last few years, advancing the concept through a City Council policy order, a Housing Committee hearing, and, in collaboration with councilors following that hearing, helping to propose and establish the task force now being launched.

I am so eager to see this work move forward. I unfortunately am unable to make much of the first meeting, due to a preexisting conflict, so hoped to contribute to the conversation by writing this up asynchronously. Given that the first meeting will largely be around expectations and setting out the agenda for the rest of our time working together, I thought I would share in advance the following core priorities that I have for my own time on the task force and what I hope to see the task force achieve.

At a high level, I hope that this task force can articulate a strong model for social housing that can be used to help realize social housing in Cambridge quickly and in a manner that can scale fast to address the urgent housing challenges we face. There are three aspects of achieving this goal that I am thinking about at the outset:

1. Quickly narrow to one focus: multifamily, mixed-income rental housing developed by a publicly controlled entity

While social housing has a broad definition, I hope the task force rapidly restricts to focus on multifamily, mixed-income rental housing developed by a public or quasi-public entity. This is the model that was pioneered in Montgomery County and has been replicated in Seattle, Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Chicago. While the details of the additional financing this mixed-income housing might need here in Cambridge may differ (e.g. may not be the revolving loan fund for construction financing as in Montgomery County), the model of mixed-income rental housing, supported by low-cost financing addressing a core capital stack bottleneck and complementing traditional 100% affordable LIHTC development, is the niche that other cities have pushed into and that I think we should continue. More than novel financing filling a particular niche, this fits with a vision of social housing where public entities can be more creative, nimble, and flexible in producing and acquiring housing at scale to serve the public good.

2. Keep in mind the goal of an actionable plan for already set-aside city-owned sites

Recommendations should translate into an actionable plan, because the Manager and Council have already suggested a site on Larch Road for a first social housing project and there are state pilot funds available for such a project. This will allow the City to quickly take our recommendations, pursue state funding, test the model, and iterate, extending to a future, growing portfolio which should also be shaped by our recommendations. It is all well and good to develop many concepts, but let's make sure our ideas are able to quickly move from the page to reality.

3. Do not leave tenant governance and enough housing for lower-income (VLI, ELI) households to the side

While I am eager to see social housing rapidly move forward, it is crucial we focus on aspects of government-supported housing that have fallen short in the past, and ensure that social housing meets the immediate needs of this crisis in addition to having a long-term vision. This is important in two contexts:

Strong tenant governance and accountability. Too often, tenants of affordable and subsidized housing (as well as market-rate housing) have been left without a real voice over the place they call home. I am excited to engage in discussion about concrete ways this can be achieved. At the outset, I believe that it will be important for the Task Force to articulate how tenants can be empowered at the building, management, and agency levels. At the building level, this might look like an elected tenant council with real authority, supported by training opportunities and a paid tenant organizer across the portfolio. At the management level, this might look like a role in selecting and supervising the property manager. At the agency level, this might look like more resident seats overseeing the use of city funds and/or on the board of the development entity, with Seattle, Chicago, and other cities offering possible templates.

Include enough deep affordability to meet the need. While pursuing mixed-income housing without LIHTC in the capital stack will necessarily involve some tradeoffs, I think it is important that the mix of market-rate, LI, VLI, and ELI units balance the need to scale rapidly with the particular crisis facing ELI and VLI households, and a minimum requirement for these should be considered.

I am so excited to work as part of this task force and its working groups. On social housing, like on many things, Cambridge will lead the way, and this task force is an integral part of making that happen!