

Study Committee Member Creamer's Feedback on CHC's ECNCD Study Committee Preliminary Report Tuesday, July 20, 2021

Dear Cambridge Historic Committee and fellow East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Study members,

I recently received the PDFs and the printouts of the four parts of the preliminary report prepared by CHC. Thank you.

As there was a lot of material to cover, and you asked for our feedback 24 hours in advance of Wednesday's meeting, I was only able to review Parts I, II & III in detail.

Below are my thoughts and concerns regarding these three.

Part I "Historic and Architectural Significance of the East Cambridge Neighborhood"

This a very well written, informative and entertaining account of the development of East Cambridge from its early days to the present. Along with other Study Committee Members, I share your affection and respect for the history of our special neighborhood.

Part II "Preservation and Development Measures in East Cambridge"

As I sat down to read Part II, it struck me how it was filled with subjective opinion and commentary, none of which came from Study Committee members or even the original petitioners. In fact, it became starkly clear that these documents were created and written by the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC) alone.

Within the first paragraph, it is clear that the CHC is building a case for an ECNCD. First the report establishes a need or deficit, specifically: that current conditions can't "adequately protect the broad range of character-defining elements that comprise East Cambridge." In other words, East Cambridge is in danger. The report goes on to describe that certain projects can proceed "without public discussion of design, materials or appearance", as if this is an unspeakable oversight. Finally you portray the current zoning laws as inadequate and outdated.

It is important for all to realize that none of this came from the Study Committee.

In Part B, the report touts the virtues of "Historic Preservation", the tools available to us, and uses language seemingly chosen to justify the implementation of these tools to save East Cambridge. Several quotes including "Once again, the public benefit is held superior to a reasonable degree of private sacrifice". The report acknowledges and accepts at face value that in the process "Standing is granted to the applicant, an owner of adjoining property, and owner of property within the same historic district within 100 feet.."

Again, none of this came from or was vetted by the Study Committee.

Glaring in their omission are the well-known costs and unintended consequences brought upon by the establishment of Historic Districts and Neighborhood Conservation Districts. Much to the contrary, the report spends a lot of time downplaying the power of Historic Districts and Neighborhood Conservation Districts on page eleven and goes on to claim that establishment of such districts has no effect on costs or pricing of housing. Principal in their reasoning was a questionable study that depended upon internet scraping Craigslist ads, which, according to the person who conducted the study, was full of holes and biases, including an outdated methodology. Nowhere were these admissions mentioned in the report.

This Study Committee member is particularly sensitive to the omission of potential problems with Historic Districts. I have been trying for many months to share with the ECNCD SC my own relevant experiences. At first I was told I had to limit it to 5 minutes. I was later told by the CHC that “No, there is not enough time”, and “we will allocate 15 minutes for you in June or July”. This never materialized, which, along with the one-sided nature of the preliminary report, makes me question my role as Study Committee member. It is clear, for whatever reason, the CHC does not want my experiences known or shared.

Part III “Deliberations of the East Cambridge NCD Study Committee”

As a Study Committee member, I found this narrative to be particularly misleading and distressing. While the author does an adequate job describing the nascence of the current ECNCD under consideration, including the CHC’s coaching and guidance given to the petitioners and ECNPT, it falls far short of truly representing the events surrounding the two year effort.

Specifically, it seems to want to substitute effort for community support. Page three outlines the 600 flyers and the 1300 notices mailed out, then touts the 32 that showed up, a mere 1.7% of those contacted, as “well attended”. Effort to create interest by the CHC and petitioners does not constitute interest itself.

As in Part II, the glaring omission of the strong community opposition is particularly troubling. No legitimate report should be considered complete without a detailed account for the consistent, strong and contentious opposition to the ECNCD we have all experienced.

Page four describes how a few votes were taken but leaves out the very important context of how they were broached and influenced by the composition of the Study Committee itself. Study Committee members were not allowed to debate or share their experiences relevant to the votes taken, but rather we were forced to vote in a rush with but a few minutes remaining in the meeting. Even if there had been sufficient time to discuss the issues before voting, suffice it to say that, due to the selection and composition of the Study Committee, no vote against any Historic Preservation tool or power will ever pass this Committee. One need only look at CHC’s own narrative of how they recruited and selected members (via their recommendations to the City Manager). Among the Study Committee members chosen include an original petitioner, a local architect and three other Historical Commission members. I was told by the CHC that I was specifically and purposely selected for “balance”.

It is important for all to know this background when one weighs the legitimacy of a report stemming from the ECNCD Study Committee.

Pages five and six gloss over and is very dismissive of the very real controversy and unintended consequences that can result from the conflicting and sometimes contradictory goal statements. Essentially, it asks the reader to "Trust us".

Closing

My apologies for only going through the first three parts. I hope to go through part IV before tomorrow night's meeting.

I want to say that I personally identify with and share many of the values and goals of both the petitioners and fellow members of the Study Committee, and the CHC. Some important architecture could be at risk. I don't share the opinion of those who believe proponents somehow wish to drive up home prices. I think their intentions are genuine. You are all good people with a clear respect for the fabric and history of a neighborhood we all hold dear.

However, overall, I am disappointed that my relevant experiences with Historic Districts have not been allowed to be shared with the group. More importantly, my experience is that this entire process is deeply flawed, biased and misleading to the public. All the initiatives and work have emanated from the CHC. More often than not, we members of the Study Committee appear to be little more than props chosen to rubber stamp the CHC's wishes. This is no way to conduct such an important decision and it is fundamentally dishonest to continue down this path.

I'd still like to share my experiences with the Study Committee as long as I am accorded the respect of being given a 7-10 day window to prepare.

However the fundamental dishonesty is that we have put the cart before the horse. We are tasked with carrying out the complex details of a NCD without having a clear charter, authority or support to do so. We were promised early on by Charlie that the movement would go nowhere without a clear neighborhood consensus. Yet, we have had nothing remotely close to one. In fact, we have experienced strong and broad opposition and somehow failed to acknowledge this in our report. That is a formula for discord and failure. We can and must do better.

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East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Study Member