

City of Cambridge Committee on Public Planting

Meeting Minutes – December 8, 2021 - 5:30-7pm

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Attendance

CPP Members: Vinita Bhaskar, Ruth Loetterle, Cindy Carpenter, Ahron Lerman, Maria Hottelet, Sandra Fairbank, Tracy Orr, Magie Booz, Cynthia Smith, Joan Krizack, Chantal Eide, Paula Cortes, Sophia Emperador

DPW/City of Cambridge: Andrew Putnam, David Lefcourt, Abby Bentley, Kevin Beuttell, Ellen Coppinger, Kate Riley, Erik Thorkildsen (CDD)

Guests & members of the public: Laura Tenny (MIT Campus Planning), Sam Partington (OJB), Todd Robinson (MIT Campus Planning), Melissa Stipa (MIT-Project Manager), Kristen Brown, Nick Dunn, Sarah Gallop (MIT), Todd Robinson (MIT), Joan Alvarez, GMF

Meeting notes submitted by: Sophia Emperador

Agenda Items:

1. Review minutes from November meeting
 2. Presentation - Project Update: MIT Graduate Dorm on Vassar St
 3. Updates from City Arborists, including year-end summary
 4. Updates from CDD Rep Erik Thorkildsen
 5. Other items:
 6. Public comments
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1) Review minutes from November meeting

Correction: Ruth Loetterle's name is missing from the attendance list.

Meeting minutes were approved with the correction noted, motion initiated by Joan Krizack and seconded by Maggie Booz.

2) Presentation - Project update: Vassar St, MIT Grad Student Dorm by Laura Tenny (MIT Campus Planning)

Presentation discussed the significant tree mortality and removal of trees on Vassar St

-In 2008 Vassar St underwent streetscape improvement, including a separated bike lane, new trees and site improvements.

-Problems experienced: Canopy die-back, stunted growth, small canopy relative to trunk size, overall poor tree health (even with structural soils & irrigation) - 23 new tree replacements

-CE - Why are the elms in decline? | LT - This has been happening for a while, failed irrigation over time, soil profile - many factors. Some didn't grow. From Main to Mass Ave 5/40 elms have been replaced (multi-factor - soil, irrigation)

-Irrigation has been improved, however it still has not been installed properly in some of the planting beds

Design Approach for Vassar St by Sam Partington - OJB

-Design presented was an enhanced streetscape, central plaza with urban grove, multimodal pathway connecting to other public parks and paths with peninsula gardens and seating. A diversity of street trees were presented for a total of 24 trees (increase of 5 trees) and increased tree pit size per the city standard.

-Lessons learned, permeable bike lane and sand base structural soil was great for the surrounding trees and used on the River St project.

-Species selection was developed with help from the City.

-Two locations have continuous planting beds and trees, these are fully integrated and maintained by MIT

-19 trees are in poor conditions (salt and irrigation issues to blame), 16 elms - low vigor, health new ones with better streetscape will be introduced. Expand species selection with a more diverse group.

CPP Comments:

MB-we would like to hear more reasoning behind the tree failure. Any opportunity for contiguous planting beds/wells vs standard tree pits? Are structural soils working? It didn't seem to work for the elms. | LT- Structural soils are successful, and they will run under the paving structure for greater rooting volume, they are higher in sand and in nutrients; root feeding could also be an option. The tree pits will be expanded to meet city requirements.

AL-has anything changed from MIT's maintenance and planting protocols? Was the irrigation turned off? Trees planted too deep? Trunk injuries or wounds? Elms are usually hardy | LT Yes, new dedicated campus irrigation now, better practices.

AL-Were they planted by MIT or a contractor? | LT - Typically by contractor, elms have been more aggressive around campus, also strange that they have done so poorly here.

MH - who determined that they were had irreversible damage? Does MIT use compost tea, etc.? | LT - An independent arborist and the city arborist confirmed. Now they have learned from this we have the unique opportunity to do it right this time.

RL - elms are good with salt, could they have been overtaxed with salt? Could this be a maintenance issues? | LT- they use sand-based ice melt and can flush the salt but they need to be hardy trees.

RL- Can we break out root zones for trees with space to spread behind sidewalks? | Sam- not too many opportunities for this approach here, maybe near the west building it is something we can take a look at.

RL- there are native species that would handle these conditions and they should encourage the use of native species in the design.

SF - are natives and pollinator friendly species reflected in the other plantings? | Sam- yes, grasses and perennial variety, in multilayers

SF- process question, it would be good to see these designs before it is being permitted not a problem here, but overall we see things too late in the process

SE- the top five most planted tree species in the City are being proposed, maybe avoid these and plant a wider diversity of specimens.

SF - the the green roof ordinance being met on this project? | Jan (director of campus planning) Yes, project is 100% fully compliant

MB- What is the plaza floor material? | Sam-unit pavers with structural soil underneath, a continuous bed with plantings behind trees suspended in the tree grate system & integrated irrigation.

SC - For the structural soil, did the base follow pine and swallow recommendations? | LT- yes

Ellen C- 30 ft tree spacing, could these be closer? | Sam- planting grid inspired the alignment of the components

Maria - when will the elms come down? | LT - January 2022

AL- tree trunk damage, can be avoided, will there be bike racks to avoid people locking their bikes on trees? | Sam- yes, at each entry and in the center plaza

AL- will there be evergreen species? | Sam- as shrubs or mid-story lower level and end of the site (North)

3) Updates from City Arborist - Abby Bentley

-Planting is still going because of the weather. They have about 60 bare root trees to be planted in-house

CPP Comments:

Back of sidewalk tree program

-MB - can you share the back of sidewalk numbers for this year | AB - 46 trees total: 1/2 in 2021, 1/4 in 2020 and 1/4 in 2019

-CC- how long does a request take for a back of sidewalk tree? | AB- depends on the time of year, typically next planting season

David - maintenance is up to the property owner, Municipal funds can be used to install tree & a tree hearing would be required to remove it

-Jan is a good time to promote back of tree plantings - the earlier the better

-MB - B&B vs bare root - how have these been behaving; did the format contribute to tree health- what is the effect? | DL - correct installation and watering - were key for success (western ave as an example) | EC- structural soil is also good start

RL - do we ever use silva cells? | DL- not used in the City yet, hesitancy to use when there are underground utilities | EC- its a lot of plastic and they are easy to collapse if anything changes

CPP Member- Any data on the opening of new street tree wells | Abby - not on hand, can get this for next time

Action item: Abby will provide data on the number of new street tree wells opened around the City.

4) Updates from CDD - Gary Chan Erik Thorkildsen

Summaries were provided on the following City-wide efforts:

Dec 14 Planning Board - MXD proposal - Sasaki & Cambridge Redevelopment Authority

-master plan phase at a conceptual level

-central plaza design with conceptual massing and a vault substation and parking below

-design showed improved pedestrian connectivity

-CPP Recommendations: consider inserting trees where possible and more native species, reconsider the vast amount of paved areas, even when not within the deck portions of the design

5) Others items

- CPP Goals for 2022 (SE)
 - Joint meetings with Cambridge Bike Committee, Pedestrian Committee and Green Cambridge - Report on current initiatives they are pursuing that overlap with our interest and work.
 - Develop meeting note taking protocols

6) Public Comments

No public comments were made.