King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School & Community Complex

Meeting the Needs of Our Younger Residents
Valente Branch Library
Recreation Amenities & Open Space Were Project Priorities
Transportation & Mobility Features

A Historical Pictorial of 850 Cambridge Street
King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School & Community Complex Site Map

Project Overview

The 273,000 square foot facility at 850 Cambridge St. opened in September 2019 and houses the King Open School (JK-5), Cambridge Street Upper School (6-8), Cambridge Public Schools Administration, King Open Preschool, King Open Extended Day (KOED), Community Schools, and Valente Library.

The $159 million school and community complex is a net zero-ready project that consumes no fossil fuels onsite, has a highly efficient design to minimize energy demand, and incorporates the City’s largest solar array to renewably produce much of the energy needed. Remaining energy will come from the electrical grid, and when Cambridge secures 100% renewable electricity supply, the complex will achieve net zero emissions.

Site amenities and open spaces include Gold Star Pool, two gyms, two basketball courts, Charles G. Rossi Bocce Court, five playgrounds, outdoor splash pad, Cambridge Street Plaza, Valente Reading Garden, a Learning Courtyard/Outdoor Classroom, and a 380-seat auditorium.

“One of the important considerations throughout this entire process was to make sure we successfully met the needs of the students, staff, the school administration, the neighborhood, and users of Cambridge Street,” said Lisa Peterson, Deputy City Manager and King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School & Community Complex Project Manager, adding that an extensive community process was conducted. “Buildings are not just about infrastructure, but about the people who are using them. Increasing open space in this densely populated neighborhood and constructing a highly sustainable facility were also of the upmost importance.”
City Manager’s Message

If you have driven down Cambridge Street, you can see the fantastic, recently completed King Open and Cambridge Street Upper School and Community Complex. This new $159 million educational and community facility is not only the City’s first significant net zero-ready building but is the second of three new school complexes we are constructing. In fact, the planning for the third school, the Tobin Montessori and Vassal Lane Upper School in West Cambridge, is well underway. In total, the City is investing over $500 million in three new school facilities.

In this edition of The Cambridge Life, we are focusing exclusively on the new complex. This project serves as an excellent backdrop for highlighting how City priorities connect.

I am proud of the collaboration and partnership between the City Council, the City administration and departments, the School Department, and the School Committee in making sure we are supporting all our students. The complex, in addition to the lower and upper schools, includes a new Valente Branch Library, Gold Star Pool, pre-school and community school facilities, and space for the school administration. I believe that the new community amenities will significantly benefit the neighborhood and reflects the public input we received during the planning process.

I want to personally thank the residents of the adjacent neighborhoods and the local businesses that endured the years of construction. I know how challenging and disruptive this project has been at times. Your patience, cooperation, and partnership with the City during this entire process has been remarkable. I believe the completed project will live up to your expectations.

Please join us for the Grand Opening Celebration on Saturday, Oct. 26, 2019 from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

As always, you are welcome to send me your feedback or ideas by calling my office at 617-349-4300 or emailing me at citymanager@cambridgema.gov.

City Manager Louis A. DePasquale

City Manager’s Message

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King Open/Cambridge Street Upper Schools & Community Complex Project

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Returning to East Cambridge has been a much anticipated homecoming for Cambridge Street Upper School and King Open School.
The block of 850 Cambridge Street has been home to a public school for many decades, beginning with the Harrington School, which merged with the King Open School in the early 2000’s. In 2012, the building underwent renovations to make way for Cambridge Street Upper School and King Open School as part of the equity-driven restructuring of Cambridge Public Schools known as the Innovation Agenda. After over three years in temporary space, the schools now return to an entirely transformed physical environment on their home campus. The two schools have been carefully tailored to meet the specific needs of their students and programs, thanks to extensive involvement of educators throughout the design process.

King Open Principal Darrell Williams (pictured above), explains, “Our school has a long commitment to project-based learning, and the school contains many features that support hands-on, integrated and deep learning.” He continues, “The building is filled with natural light, and offers engaging outdoor learning spaces – which connects our students with the outdoors.”

As a net zero-ready building, “the setting allows us to really live out our values and responsibility to the environment and our community.”

A key priority in the design process was meeting the social-emotional needs of students. According to Williams, special care was taken to provide welcoming and appropriate spaces for students with autism. “We refer to their classrooms as our small learning communities,” he says. “It’s a social justice issue to make sure that all of our students are integrated into the community – so that we can be a true community.”

Head of Upper School Manuel Fernandez (pictured left) likewise lauds the building’s responsiveness to the needs of 6th-8th graders at CSUS. In particular, the school’s robust theater arts and music programs now has a first-class performance space, and the Upper School gymnasium respects the developmental differences between middle schoolers and younger children. “I am particularly excited about our new Makerspace,” he says. “Having a space like this facilitates interdisciplinary STEAM projects that tap into our scholars’ creative potential.”

Fernandez is an outspoken leader in national conversations about the impact of racism on student learning. He remarks, “for Cambridge to invest in a beautiful and innovative public school for such a racially and economically diverse community of scholars is heartening.” He continues, “the work of education is not just about kids. It’s about all of us, and our responsibility for creating change.”

The return to Cambridge Street marks a new chapter in the history of King Open and CSUS. Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kenneth Salim reflects, “all students deserve the opportunity to experience the excitement that comes with intellectual discovery and this new facility offers many new avenues for that type of exploration.” Through student-centered design and innovative thinking, “these schools exemplify our vision of rigorous, joyful and culturally responsive learning + personalized support for every student in Cambridge Public Schools.”
Meeting the Needs of Our Younger Residents

King Open Preschool

The King Open Preschool has doubled in size, adding a second classroom at the new site with 17 additional spots. This will enable more children to participate in the Preschool’s excellent curriculum and learning environment.

Operating a full day, year-round program, the King Open Preschool offers a high-quality curriculum that engages children in fun activities to assist them in their social and emotional development. Activities include field trips, visits to art galleries and libraries, science explorations, and musical performances. Additionally, parents are consistently engaged across a child’s time at the Preschool, so they remain deeply involved in their child’s development.

“Our daughter loves school and all of her teachers are beyond wonderful! They are creative, affirming, and child-centered.” – King Open Preschool Parent.

The Preschool maintains a ratio of 3 teachers for 17 children with additional classroom support from the Director and Teacher Coordinator, meaning that each child gets extensive face-to-face engagement and care. All City preschools are licensed by the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and meet state requirements. Additionally, the King Open Preschool has achieved the highest quality rating in the EEC’s Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) and exceeds national standards for quality childcare by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Learn more at CambridgeMA.gov/preschool.
King Open Extended Day

For 20 years, the King Open Extended Day (KOED) has dedicated itself to creating a holistic, child-centered experience for King Open students, partnering with families and the King Open faculty to support a child’s journey through school. The after-school program combines both academic guidance and cultivation of emotional and social development by devoting focus to a wide variety of enrichment activities that both relate to and differ from students’ education in King Open School classes.

As a School Department program funded and managed by the City’s Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP), yet fully integrated into the King Open School, KOED is a unique model for after-school care nationally.

Approximately 130 students, ranging from Junior Kindergarten through 5th grade, are enrolled in the program which is organized into 7 classrooms, creating a mixed-grade experience.

KOED teachers are comprehensively prepared to support and work with students; using the Nurtured Heart Approach (NHA), a nationally acclaimed method of engaging with children, positive behaviors are encouraged as students’ self-esteem is also developed. KOED is also a fully integrated program in which children of various abilities and needs are supported and thrive; KOED participates in the DHSP Inclusion Initiative and receives staffing, coaching, and on-site support from Initiative staff.

Like the King Open Preschool, KOED is embedded into the unique fabric of the community housed by the new school and community complex. Learn more at CambridgeMA.gov/kingopenextendedday.

Community Schools for All Ages

Community Schools will also have two dedicated classrooms at the new complex that will serve 80 students in grades JK-5 during the academic school year. Under the leadership of a full- time director, Community Schools offers a variety of out of school time enrichment classes in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Math), visual and performing arts, physical education, chess and other organized games. In the summer months, the program offers a seven-week, state-licensed camp program with a focus on thematic and project-based curriculum.

“I love the diversity of classes and the attention given to my child to be creative and express herself. The teachers are very welcoming and make us feel like a part of the family.” – Community Schools Parent

Community Schools provides a network of neighborhood-based services throughout the year that include educational, cultural, social, and recreational opportunities for all age groups, including seniors. The program also engages in outreach initiatives that target the underrepresented population. Scholarships are also provided to families in need to ensure their access and ability to participate in all aspects of the program.

“We work closely with residents and local institutions to provide services and activities that enhance learning, creative expression, and health, while also fostering a sense of community,” said Roslyn Shoy, DHSP Division Head, Cambridge Community Schools.

Learn more at CambridgeMA.gov/communityschools.

Frisoli Youth Center, located at 61 Willow St., adjacent to the new complex, also offers afterschool programming for Cambridge youth ages 9-19. This includes homework assistance, healthy snacks, leadership development opportunities, sports leagues, arts, community service, enrichment activities, and unique experiences.
A Historical Look at 850 Cambridge Street

Binney Estate and Cambridge Field

Amos Binney (1778-1833), a wealthy Boston merchant and agent of the U.S. Navy, invested heavily in East Cambridge: he was cofounder of the New England Glass Co. and a director of the Lechmere Point Corporation. In the 1820s, he purchased the parcel at 850 Cambridge Street from the failing corporation. He did not develop the lot except to lease land at the intersection of Cambridge (green line) and Portland (blue line) streets to the Boston Bolt & Machine Co., which made metal hardware in its new factory (red box); later tenants produced sodium bicarbonate and lard oil. When Binney died in 1833, his estate included this property, nearby building lots, and 41 workers’ cottages.

By the 1890s, thousands of immigrants were crowded into East Cambridge, working unskilled, low-paying jobs in factories and slaughterhouses and living in tin shanties and tenements. In 1893, the City, recognizing the importance of fresh air and open spaces for all, claimed the neglected tract for a municipal park. The City demolished the brick factory (shown here, from Cambridge Street, ca. 1894) and extended Willow and Berkshire streets to Cambridge Street. Andrews, Jaques & Rantoul designed the brick and stone field house, and the Olmsted firm transformed the landscape with curving pathways and tasteful plantings. The park opened in 1896 and was called Cambridge Field in honor of the 50th anniversary of the town’s incorporation as a city.

From H.F. Walling Map of Cambridge, 1854

Historic New England collection, Cambridge Historical Commission. The field house (or shelter) was demolished in 1959 to make way for the Harrington School.
Cambridge Field, bounded north and south by Cambridge and Plymouth streets and east and west by Berkshire and Willow, comprised both parkland and playing fields. In winter, the fields were flooded for skating, as pictured here on Christmas Day 1897. The distant stacks vent smoke from East Cambridge factories; the tallest belonged to Amos Binney’s New England Glass Co.

The Municipal Swimming Pool and the Harrington School

The Municipal Swimming Pool (right and blue circle) opened in 1948 and was instantly popular with neighborhood kids.

In 1959, the Harrington Elementary School was built at the north end of the site. Designed for 1,150 students, it brought together pupils from three neighborhood schools. The 1960 Dedication pamphlet estimated that “construction and equipment cost will approximate $2,500,000.” An auditorium seated 575; a cafeteria, which boasted a “functionally designed kitchen [with] modern equipment,” served 300. The Valente Branch Library (red circle) replaced the Cambridge Field Branch Library that was in the field house.

The school was named for Charles G. Harrington, a former Assistant Superintendent of Schools. The playing fields to the south became Donnelly Field, after John Donnelly, a longtime superintendent of parks.
People wanted the Valente Branch to remain a beautiful learning space in our community.
Cambridge Public Library (CPL) is celebrating an exciting new space with the opening of the Valente Branch Library in November 2019. The 10,000 square foot branch, which will also serve as a polling location, is twice the size of its predecessor, includes a multipurpose community room that will enable Valente Branch to offer more programming, including author talks, public lectures, and children’s story times. The community room will also be available for use by community organizations and nonprofits. Continuing the curved gesture of the terracotta-clad school building, Valente Branch serves as a transparent and welcoming beacon that activates a new civic plaza along Cambridge Street. Its soaring interior volume is infused with daylight from three sides to provide a balanced, glare free environment and a place people want to be.

One of the more beloved areas of the original Valente Branch, built in 1961, was the Reading Garden, a space for individuals and families to reflect and play. Located next to the Children’s Area, the reimagined Reading Garden maintains its prominence at the new Valente Branch and is a refreshing outdoor space that complements the immersive and exciting experience of the library. The popular Alley Cats by Judy Kensley McKie (pictured below) have been restored and are also a familiar feature in the new Reading Garden.

“People wanted the Valente Branch to remain a beautiful space in our community,” said Maria McCauley, Director of Libraries, referring to comments received from patrons during outreach efforts for the Library’s strategic planning process. “Cantabrigians are proud of the space, size, accessibility, and welcoming nature of our public libraries, and this new space is another example of the City’s commitment to enhancing the experience of Cambridge residents when visiting our libraries.”

Valente Branch Library is designed for all ages from pre-readers, to youth and adults, with places for activities, quiet study, tutoring, and group study. The low shelving allows for site lines across the library and to the outside. The building features warm materials of wood and stone. By putting all the shelving on casters, Valente Branch can adjust to meet patrons’ changing needs over time. Additionally, Valente Branch will be the only library other than the Main Library and Central Square Branch with Saturday hours. In 2020, as part of a pilot project, it will be open on Sundays during the summer when the Main Library is closed.

With enhanced programming capabilities and inviting indoor and outdoor spaces, the new Valente Branch will undoubtedly become a thriving nexus of community experience and engagement.
Recreation Amenities & Open Space

In researching the history of 850 Cambridge Street (featured on pg. 6-7), the architects were struck by the continuous open spaces that had once existed from Cambridge Street to what is now Donnelly Field (along with the many activities that took place on Cambridge Field – including seasonal ice skating) and they made every effort to maximize new open space on all sides of the King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School and Community Complex.

An extensive community process prior to the start of the project made clear that preserving open space was very important for this densely populated neighborhood. Given the large number of programs planned for the project, making this open space goal a priority from the outset was absolutely critical.

Some of the open spaces at and around the parcel of 850 Cambridge Street include the Cambridge Street Plaza, Valente Reading Garden, five playgrounds, Learning Courtyard with Outdoor Classroom and City Sprouts, the two Gold Star Pools, outdoor splash pad, two basketball courts, the Charles G. Rossi Bocce Court, and Donnelly Field. Recreational amenities also include two gyms. The variety of open spaces ensures that the Community Complex has a space for everyone.

Gold Star Mothers Pool

The Gold Star Mothers Pool (opening spring 2020) was redesigned to include two, separate new pools that will be open seasonally, 7 days per week. The site includes a larger lap pool and smaller instructional pool with a 3 foot maximum depth. Recreational programming will include AM swimming lessons for children enrolled in more than 30 local summer camps, and PM open swim for adults, children, and families. Both pools are fully ADA compliant with lifts and accessible ramps that offer a gentle slope in and out of the water.

“We’ve enhanced the environment for learning and leisure by using space to serve first or early swimmers and those who are more comfortable in deeper water independently,” said Adam Corbeil, the City’s Recreation Director. “This will provide more options for our patrons, regardless of age or ability. We’ve made the pools more universally accessible by adding features such as zero depth entry ramps. Our staff has also been trained on serving persons with cognitive and physical disabilities.”

Donnelly Field Open Year Round

Donnelly Field, located at York Street, between Willow and Berkshire streets, immediately adjacent to the new complex, provides another area of precious open space in the neighborhood. The field is open year-round and is home to Girls Youth Softball and East Cambridge Little League.

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Underground Parking Preserves Open Space

City and School leaders made the strategic decision to house the parking in an underground garage. This decision, in conjunction with efforts by the architects to preserve open space as much as possible on the project site, resulted in close to an acre increase of green space and almost two acres of open space overall.
Transportation Safety Features & Public Art at New Complex

The King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School & Community Complex (KOCSUS) includes a number of new and innovative transportation features aimed specifically at making access to and through the complex as safe as possible. This is consistent with the City’s overall Vision Zero program, CambridgeMA.gov/visionzero, which commits to eliminating transportation-related fatalities and serious injuries.

Separated Bike Lane and Dedicated School Bus Stops

Along the front of the school complex, the City installed a raised, separated bike lane that provides people biking with a safe space to travel on Cambridge Street. The bike lane design was complicated by the need to safely accommodate student pick-up and drop-off. There is now a general travel lane, a separated bike lane, and dedicated school bus stop adjacent to the sidewalk. By raising the bike lane three inches, and the sidewalk another six, the City was able to provide physical separation between people walking, biking, or driving, while ensuring that school bus drivers can access the dedicated stops. Buses can cross over the bike lane and stop directly next to the sidewalk, eliminating conflicts between people biking and students getting on and off the buses. This special design balances the safety needs of all users.

Multi-Modal Transit for Students and the Community

A new Bluebikes station with 19 docks was installed on Berkshire Street just east of Inman Square. The site also has ample exterior and interior bike parking. The relocated MBTA bus stop on the corner of Berkshire St. and Cambridge St. further connects the community complex to the city. A below grade garage provides 105 parking spaces – giving preferential parking to carpools and green vehicles.

Raised Intersection on Cambridge Street

To reduce delays and make it safer for pedestrians crossing Cambridge Street, the City’s Traffic, Parking, and Transportation Department removed the traffic signal at Hunting Street and replaced it with a raised intersection. This is one of the first times that the City has installed a raised intersection on a major street like Cambridge Street. The layout is specifically designed to accommodate the emergency vehicles and buses that travel down Cambridge Street.

Public Art at New Site

The KOCSUS complex is enlivened by public art: Same Boat Now a new work by Nova Jiang near the cafeteria, plus and a new outdoor art wall, The Reflecting Pool, by Randal Thurston at the Goldstar Pool. Judy McKie’s Alley Cats at the Valente reading garden and Jay Coogan’s cats and dogs at the Frisoli playground have been cleaned and reinstalled (the lost dog replaced!). The bronze valve plate cover is back in the sidewalk in front of the building (one of 15 plates at school locations and part of Drawn Water, by Mags Harries and Lajos Heder, at the Fresh Pond Water Treatment Facility). In addition, a poem by Jeffrey Walker has been installed in the sidewalk as part of the City’s Sidewalk Poetry program.

Martin Luther King, Jr. quote that inspired artist Nova Jiang was, “We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”
Architectural Concept & Building Features

When designing the King Open/CSUS and Community Complex, the City and its architects, William Rawn Associates and Arrowstreet, embraced two ideas: the importance of open space and Cambridge’s commitment to inclusion, community, and lifelong learning.

Field, recalling the late 19th century condition where a continuous green space connected Cambridge Street to what was then called Cambridge Field.

A range of gathering, recreational, and reflective spaces, including a Learning Courtyard, define the green spine.

“Our goal was to design the building to support the City’s Innovation Agenda for 21st century learning while maintaining the unique culture and heritage of both schools,” said Laurence Spang, Arrowstreet.

The Learning Commons is an example of a flexible and adaptable learning environment, incorporating group spaces, reading nooks, recording studio, maker space, and a multipurpose room. Learning extends beyond the building into the Learning Courtyard and civic plaza.

“We were inspired by the incredible history and neighborhood importance over time of Cambridge Field. We created a civic plaza along Cambridge Street with views through to Donnelly Field as well as gave great prominence to the new Valente Library,” said Clifford Gayley and Samuel Lasky, Principals at William Rawn Associates, Architects, Inc.

The building is organized into two halves—flanking a “green spine” at the center of the site. This “green spine” creates a direct visual and physical connection between a new crescent shaped civic plaza along Cambridge Street and Donnelly.

The complex reflects a new type of school building—one that doubles as a standalone community facility. During the school week, the two halves form a single building for the King Open and the Cambridge Street Upper School—the classroom building on one side of the “green spine,” the community complex with shared spaces (gyms, cafeteria, auditorium, etc.) on the other. The community building can remain open for public programming while the classroom building is closed. The Valente Library and the Gold Star Mothers Pool bookend the community complex with complementary resources that are open to all.
In June 2015, the Cambridge City Council adopted the Net Zero Action Plan, which provides a roadmap for the city to reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from buildings and become carbon neutral by mid-century. The Net Zero Action Plan aims to cut energy demand significantly and replace fossil fuels with renewable energy sources. In Cambridge, buildings are responsible for over 80% of GHG emissions, and the Net Zero Action Plan provides actionable steps for reducing carbon emissions from buildings, including efficient design and retrofits, improved operations, and renewable energy supply.

The King Open/Cambridge Street Upper Schools and Community Complex is among the first municipal buildings constructed under this plan.

Energy Efficiency

Reducing the energy needed to power a building is the first step to lowering its emissions. A network of 190 geothermal wells (each 500 feet deep) around the site will reduce energy demand by 54%. Additional design features, including highly insulated walls and roof, further reduce consumption so that the building will use 70% less energy than a conventional K-8 school.

Renewable Energy

By reducing the building’s energy usage 70%, it is possible for all the needed energy to come from non-fossil fuel sources. 74,000 square feet of photovoltaic panels, covering the entire roof as well as parts of the exterior walls and the sun shades over windows, will generate 60% of the energy needed. The remaining energy will come from the electrical grid, and when Cambridge secures 100% renewable electricity supply, the complex will achieve net zero emissions.

Learn more about the Net Zero Action Plan at CambridgeMA.gov/NetZero.
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