

Minutes of the Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee

February 14, 2018 – 1414 Massachusetts Ave., Bank of America conference room - 9:15 A.M.

Appointed Members present: Christopher Angelakis, William Barry, Christopher Mackin, Jessica Sculley, Kyle Sheffield

Appointed Members absent: Joseph Ferrara, Jerry Murphy

Additional committee participants: Jen Deaderick, John DiGiovanni, Gary Hammer, Frank Kramer

City staff present: Charles Sullivan, CHC; Sarah Burks, CHC; Suzannah Bigolin, CDD

Public present: Liana Ascolese, Marilee Meyer, John Hawkinson

Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC), called the meeting to order at 9:20 A.M. Introductions were made around the room of all the committee, staff, and additional interested members of the public.

Mr. Sullivan explained what materials were distributed for discussion. He noted that in 2000, the Harvard Square Overlay District goal statement in the zoning code had been amended to match that of the new Harvard Square Conservation District. Not all of the individual goals could be accomplished through the neighborhood conservation district regulation, but could be better used by those implementing the zoning code.

Jen Deaderick asked if including goal statements that could not be regulated by the HSCD was problematic.

Mr. Sullivan said he thought it was alright as long as everyone recognized that the Historical Commission could not regulate use and zoning would not address the same kinds of qualitative design issues that the Historical Commission would. Mr. Sullivan began to describe the edits made to the primary goal. The primary goal was big picture and aspirational, while the secondary goals were more specific.

John DiGiovanni commented that there was no accepted definition of a “locally-owned” business. He remarked that Apple store was not located in the Read Block due to the dimensional issues of the building, with low ceiling heights. It would be a slippery slope to try to regulate what happens inside a store. He noted that he had brought Dunkin Donuts into the Square at Eliot and JFK streets. There were some that didn’t want the chain but a lot of people that did. He said there was privilege at work by some who wanted to control the types of businesses and the ownership of the businesses. If the exterior environment is controlled, the rest would work out on its own.

Frank Kramer said land use largely generated the character of an area. The community was at a crossroads with big money being invested in buying Harvard Square real estate. Those corporate buyers had to maximize income for their stock holders and could not give a break to small businesses.

Chris Mackin concurred with Mr. Kramer.

Christopher Angelakis said it was problematic to include language about building uses when it was the physical qualities of the buildings that were being regulated. He said the character of the Square

was also impacted by the road layout, adjacent institutions, transportation hub, all of which worked together. The goals should not address use but should focus on the definable character of the physical streetscape.

Suzannah Bigolin supported having a common goal for the overlay and conservation districts.

Gary Hammer said use could be acknowledged at the high level but the document should be clear about the limitations of the Historical Commission and the conservation district.

Mr. Sullivan continued to describe the proposed edits made to the secondary goals. The committee discussed them and offered further edits. He said he did not favor the San Francisco model in which buildings were ranked in their level of significance. Our understanding of history and opinions about architecture change over time. A low ranked building could later be revealed to have a high level of historic significance or a newly-appreciated architectural rationale.

Mr. Mackin asked if Mr. Sullivan had previously been more supportive of that model. Mr. Sullivan indicated he had not. It was aimed at predictability in a large city like San Francisco, but the rankings became outdated and applicants were asked to update it with a new study of a property's history and significance, which was time consuming. Mr. Mackin said he would like further discussion of the San Francisco model and Mr. Sullivan said he could circulate the materials about it.

Ms. Sculley commented that when pedestrians are mentioned in goal #10, cyclists should be added. She added that sustainable development must be encouraged.

Mr. Sullivan described the new goals statements drafted by Peter Kroon.

Mr. Hammer explained his proposed edits to make better use of the subdistrict descriptions published in the district report. They describe important buildings and provide the historical context for how those areas developed.

Mr. Sullivan asked if there were additional general comments.

Marilee Meyer stated that interior aspects of a building could impact the exterior appearance. She gave the removal of a floor at the Abbot building as an example of that. She also noted that interior posters and signs inside the glass of a storefront affected the storefront design.

Mr. Angelakis said paper thin facades were sad and detrimental to the character of a building.

Ms. Deaderick commented that the encouragement of pathways was good because it reinforced the relationship between pedestrians and buildings.

Mr. DiGiovanni said he preferred to focus on highest use, human scale, and texture when considering changes to the Square. He noted that the Square was once jam packed with signs and that he did not support overly critical, taste-based design commentary.

Ms. Sculley asked to discuss enforcement practices. Mr. Sullivan said that was largely done by the Inspectional Services Department and said he had recently seen a sign violation and reported it to Inspectional.

It was noted that the next meeting would be on March 21, 2018 at 9:15 A.M. at 1414 Mass. Ave.
The meeting adjourned at 10:50 A.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah L. Burks
Preservation Planner