

VAIL COURT COMMUNITY MEETING

Thursday, March 23, 2017

Cambridge City Hall

Summarized meeting minutes

The community meeting was attended by over forty (40) people, as well as staff from the City Manager's Office, the Department of Public Works (DPW), Inspectional Services Department (ISD), the Community Development Department (CDD), and several members of the City Council.

Staff present: Lisa Peterson, Deputy City Manager; Iram Farooq, Assistant City Manager for Community Development; Ranjit Singanayagam, Commissioner, ISD; Chris Cotter, Director of Housing, CDD; Taha Jennings, Assistant to the City Manager; Dan Riviello, Community Relations Manager, DPW; Michael Black, Construction Program Manager; Brandon Roy, Construction Project Manager; John Loguidice, Assistant Construction Project Manager.

City Councilors present: Mayor Denise Simmons, Vice Mayor Marc McGovern, Councilor Mazen, Councilor Deveraux, and Councilor Toomey

BACKGROUND

Lisa Peterson, Deputy City Manager, welcomed attendees and explained that the purpose of the meeting is to share information on the status and future of Vail Court, and hear from the public.

There was a brief presentation on how the City came to acquire the Vail Court property, at 139 Bishop Allen Drive, through Eminent Domain. It was noted that despite attempts to redevelop the property, it remained vacant for several years, and in addition to being an eyesore, represented a missed opportunity to serve an important public purpose in helping to address affordable housing needs in the City.

It was further explained that on September 26, 2016, the City Council approved an Order of Taking for the property which stated that the Taking is to provide for: *"municipal purposes, including but not limited inter alia, to a place for the creation of affordable, senior, and/or transitional housing and municipal purposes and for all purposes and uses accessory thereto..."* It was also specifically recommended at the time of the Order that the property be acquired for the purpose of creating much needed affordable housing.

The attendees were also informed that since the site has been in the City's possession, it has been further secured and inspected. However, it has also been determined that the structures are physically unsound, and will need to be demolished. The demolition process will also include the abatement of any hazardous materials.

Michael Black, Construction Project Manager for the City of Cambridge provided an update on the abatement and demolition process, timeline, and next steps. The meeting was then opened for public comment.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

- Eva, who represents the YWCA, commented that the original intent of the Order of Taking was for affordable housing {additional letters were also submitted in support of using the site for affordable housing}.
- Jesse noted that the community process will be important, especially during the design. Healthy building materials are also important. Multiple uses should be considered to help make the site interactive.
- Kurt, an Austin Park resident, noted that a survey of neighbors was conducted, and a majority of immediate abutters want to see green space or a community garden at the site. Also, that some neighbors do not want the site developed into affordable or transitional housing. He stated that this is a unique opportunity to meet the area's need for green space and that dialogue with neighbors should continue.
- Charles, an Austin park resident, felt the site should take into account the needs of immediate neighbors. He commented on the need for green space and to enhance family friendliness. He also stated that any development on the site should be maintain the same footprint and height.
- Michael, an Austin Park resident, wants to see green space on the site and shared his concerns about density in the area. He noted that Cambridge is a livable City. If the site is developed, he did not want to be in the shadow of a new building. Any structures should be the same height and dimensions as what currently exists.
- Sonya, a member of the Alliance of Cambridge Tenants supports using the site for affordable housing, and noted the amount of people already on waiting lists.
- Margaret, of the Cambridge Housing Authority, mentioned the need for affordable housing, especially in a transit rich area such as this. It was also noted that the Housing Authority received thousands of applications in just the past several weeks.
- Elaine, of the CEOC, stated that she was very happy with the City's \$3.7M investment, and felt that open space was not an appropriate use of the funding.
- Karen, of Austin Park, stated her hope for a return of a neighborhood, and that she had concerns about the parking lot on the corner.
- Justin, of Austin Park, stated that there is not much green space in Central Square, especially to serve as a community gathering space. He commented that there should be a diversity of uses, possibly mixed use housing with green space abutting.
- Pauline, of Austin Park, advocated for mixed use at the site.
- Paul, of St. Paul Street, remarked that the parking lot will be developed eventually, and that there shouldn't be tall buildings next to neighborhood homes. If there is housing on the site, it should reflect the neighborhood and be a maximum of 3-4 stories. People should also forgo automobiles and off street parking. If necessary, underground parking should be provided for support staff.
- Judy, of St. Paul Street, hoped that this doesn't become an either/or situation between housing and open space. She was ok with affordable housing if kept at the same scale. She also had concerns about potential structural damage to abutting properties during construction.

- Lisa, of Inman Street, was happy with the City's purchase of the site. She suggested that any housing be kept low and that new, needed, trees are planted.
- Cheryl Ann, of Cambridge Street, stated support for using 100% of the site for affordable housing, which is the most pressing need.
- Quinton, of Cardinal Medeiros Avenue, supports affordable housing at the site and doesn't think it should have to be traded for green space. It was also noted that the City is committed to Net Zero goals, and that the City should be thinking about refugee housing.
- Bill, of Just-a-Start, supports affordable housing at the site, mixing affordable and market rate units, which can look nice and fit well into the neighborhood, possibly allowing increased density.
- Risa, of Transition House, noted appreciation for the City taking the site, and didn't see any reason to not use the site to help meet the affordable housing need in the City. It was noted that there is a particular need for transitional and elderly housing.
- Rebecca, of HRI, stated that developing the site is important to help meet the need for affordable housing.
- Michael, of Inman Street commented that he understood the need for affordable housing, but that dimensional considerations are important, as well as the inclusion of green space.
- Salim, of Bishop Allen Drive, was thankful that the City Council acquired the property. He further stated that while not opposed to affordable housing, it might not be a good idea to have so many developments in proximity to one another. He noted that the neighborhood would rather see green space on the site. If it is affordable housing, it should be made attractive, and the buildings should be located on the east side of the site, parking should be underground, and the remainder of the site should be green. Concern was also raised about rodent issues during construction.
- Victor, stated support for affordable housing, and noted that children who grew up here cannot afford to live in Cambridge.
- Sherri, of Massachusetts Avenue, identified as a housing advocate, and commented that there is ample nearby green space in front of City Hall. It was also stated that the abutter's point of view is understandable, especially regarding height concerns.
- Adam, of Bishop Allen Drive, stated that there is plenty of room for compromise and that it isn't necessary to build as many units as possible.
- Natasha, of St. Paul Street, questioned if affordable housing alone could provide more of a community feeling, and that there should be compromise and some form of green space on the site in addition to any affordable housing.
- Craig, of Just-a-Start, noted that once people get into affordable units, they don't often leave, which increases the need for the next generation. There is also more flexibility than just very low income housing, including moderately priced units with the flexibility to own.
- Margaret, of Inman Street, commented that green space needs to be part of the discussion.
- Tracey, of St. Paul Street, commented that if there is housing on the site, it should be at the same height and footprint as what exists, and include moderate income units and green space. It was

also suggested to think about an opportunity to provide housing specifically for teachers and public safety workers.

- Sam, of A Better Cambridge, stated that there is a housing demand crisis and an immediate need to create more affordable housing. The public money used for the taking has to be for a public purpose for the entire city, not just the immediate neighborhood. Bishop Allen Drive should be part of a larger planning exercise.
- Tina, of CEOC, stated that it's important to challenge ourselves out of the NIMBY (not in my backyard) way of thinking.
- Susan noted that it is a great privilege to live in the vicinity of Central Square, and that kind of opportunity should be provided for everyone. There will need to be a very good design for the housing.
- Abra, of Broadway, noted that people live in Cambridge for many reasons especially for jobs, and supports the using the site for affordable housing.
- Leonard, a self-identified housing activist, spoke about the 8,000 applicants in need of housing.
- City Councilor Mazen noted the incredible need for affordable housing, and hoped that green space could be built into the development, possibly through a roof garden. He also noted the value in ground floor space for retail or a related use.
- Vice Mayor McGovern stated that the abutters will have an important role in the design phase, and that tradeoffs will likely be necessary. However, the property wasn't taken for the purposes of building a community garden. It is hard to justify not taking advantage of an opportunity like this to help address what has been identified as a top priority in the City.
- City Councilor Toomey supported using the site for affordable housing and stated that this was an opportunity to create a win-win situation for all stakeholders involved.
- City Councilor Deveraux supported affordable housing on the site and commented that it will be a huge improvement over what currently exists on the site. There should be some thought on ways to make the site porous, encourage underground parking and TOD, and keeping the parking ratios low.

CLOSING AND NEXT STEPS

Lisa Peterson thanked the attendees and stated that there will be additional community meetings and opportunities to provide input throughout the process. She asked that attendees sign in in order to continue to receive updates and relevant information. Information is also available on the project webpage: www.cambridgema.gov/vailcourt If there are additional questions or comments, people should contact Dan Riviello at the Department of Public Works at driviello@cambridgema.gov or by phone at 617.349.4825

