

Retail Strategy Notes

Four attendees of 9 RSVPs

Present were Larisa Ortiz, Principal, Patricia Voltolini, Associate, Larisa Ortiz Associates, Larisa Ortiz Associates, Lisa Hemmerle, Economic Development Director, Christina DiLisio, Community Development Department (CDD), Cathie Zusy Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association, Marge Amster, Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association, Phoebe Sinclair (P): Agassiz - Neighborhood 8 and 9, and a couple others and Sam Seidel, A Better Cambridge.

Ms. Ortiz stated that the retail environment is changing and this study is an opportunity to have a holistic view of what Cambridge looks like currently and in the future. Ms. Ortiz gave a brief summary of her 25 years of experience working in Economic Development in commercial corridors years. She stated that she caught the Economic Development bug early and dug deep into the retail environment. She noted that her firm has worked in over 100 communities nationwide.

Ms. Ortiz stated that most of the conversation will be for her firm to receive feedback from the public. She gave a summary of a PowerPoint presentation. She noted that the goal of the work is to develop best practice policies and programs that will support and enhance the ground level active use land and retail environment in Cambridge. She explained that this goal will be accomplished in four ways: Public Policies/Investments, Marketability/Visibility, Tenant Mix and Administration Capacity. She stated that she has worked in communities with many resources as well as communities with limited resources. She stated Larisa Ortiz Associates is excited to work with business associations as well. Ms. Ortiz explained that LOA plans to make recommendations for the right mix for each district. She stated that the idea is that each district has its own DNA, each district wants to be something. She stated that LOA approaches this by trying to understand who are the people who are going to these places currently. She stated that the main goal is to categorize all of the districts and improve what is there. She stated that they will look at who has the responsibility to take this work on. She stated that it takes time and effort to build relationships in the commercial real estate industry and they want to make sure the recommendations are a reflection of who can get this work done. She stated that it is the mission of LOA is that communities reap significant rewards when they take the time to accurately understand their stakeholders and local market dynamics before leaping into action. She noted that this will allow the prioritization of a set of solutions that temper market realities with the interests of diverse voices in the community. She explained that LOA will return to Cambridge at the end of February or beginning of March to have many more interviews with key stakeholders. She noted that her current visit to Cambridge was to visit all of the districts and explained that inclement weather made that very difficult. She stated that LOA will use the information from this hearing to do a deep dive into market data.

Ms. Ortiz stated that there are four areas that make retail work: Physical Environment, Business Environment, Administrative Capacity, and Market Data & Demographics. She stated that shoppers are often agnostic about whether they purchase something from a mall or a district. She stated that we live in environment where people have options so it is imperative that commercial districts are competitive. She stated that the physical environment is important and explained that data doesn't talk about unique cultural institutions that bring people to a particular district. She said that data can only tell so much and LOA looks to communities to give flavor and texture to the data. Alexandra Lee stated that they

Ms. Ortiz asked the question: What do you see happening Citywide?

Ms. Ortiz asked the question: What's happening in the Districts?

Ms. Amster stated large vacancies on Mass Ave for a while (former Blockbuster filled with Out of the Blue gallery popup, the Indian Restaurant on Mass Ave, the Banks on Mass Ave), like 7+ years. Vacancies seem like land banking

Ms. Ortiz asked "So speculative?"

Ms. Amster stated she has a sense of the market being strong

Ms. Zusy Lots of new restaurants in Central Square; Flour came to Cambridgeport which is super exciting because it creates a real sense of community that we have lost (it is cozy and spacious, there is a fire place, interviews, folks on laptops); we really miss community spaces to meet and gather; Flour is nicely integrated into the neighborhood and something right smack in the middle of the neighborhood is exciting and surprising that is dynamic

Mr. Seidel stated How many "small box" restaurants can we really support, they seem to be the only ones surviving. University Stationary will eventually close and how many of those kinds of stores can hang on? Seems to be either food establishments or the "make your own pottery places"

Ms. Zusy stated it would be nice to have a fabric store, some kind of maker space, something that encouraged making.

Ms. Sinclair stated Agassiz has seen a lot of turn over and we had grocery stores and a health food store that are gone now, a lot of things on the strip come and go. Things on the strip in between the squares really struggle. Ward Maps opened which is totally niche and the Irish Import store has held on even though it is very specialized which is surprising. The small biz talking to each other who offer special events (like midnight sales) makes it possible for them to hold on or make it.

Ms. Amster stated in Central the biz making it are the ones you don't always know are there, are almost hidden. There is not super good visibility.

Ms. Zusy stated NacoTaco seems to offer food young people like at a low price and in a fun environment so the whole thing adds up to a good experience.

Ms. Amster stated that Coast Cafe on River Street, basically take out, stood and waited for 10-15 min in Cambridgeport and saw many African Americans that I don't see in the other establishments in that neighborhood so maybe they aren't being served by the other offerings in neighborhood.

Ms. Sinclair stated Banks in Harvard Square seem to have stayed around. I hear everyone complain about Banks and Starbucks but then everyone shops online so who would open a store in that environment?

Ms. Amster stated folks seem excited about the Target and I think they will do many sales where people buy online but pick up in the store and the products they sell seem to be a good fit for the neighborhood (post docs and students and starting households). Housewares for students will be important.

Ms. Zusy stated Felipe's in Harvard Square you can get dinner for \$7 which my son loves. Fast turnover must be how they make their rent – just pumping out cheap burritos. Central Square as an artist center is such a great asset and the Out of the Blue Gallery is just not cutting it: bad art, bad poetry. We were

just in Paris and there are honey places everywhere and the Follow the Honey Store in Harvard is doing great. They have a honey bar which feels participatory.

Ms. Sinclair stated they are interconnected with a lot of things. I thought I would have to buy as much as I can because they would close soon but they offer a bike tour for honey and they have a big realtor market who wants to buy gifts.

Ms. Ortiz asked where outside of Cambridge do you shop?

Ms. Sinclair stated Legacy place, Assembly

Ms. Amster stated Dedham mall

Ms. Zusy stated Natick

Ms. Sinclair stated not South Bay. There is a weird vibe there. Not downtown Boston (everyone else agrees). Not Union Square either (everyone else agrees) because too hard to get to. There is just food. Davis Square (no not really) (Everyone agreed they do not go there) Or to Kendall.

Ms. Amster stated her sense is that Davis is not a destination shopping district but more for folks nearby.

Ms. Sinclair stated Assembly Row, but the mix is curious. Mostly on weekends I go and I go as a destination because even with train access it is a effort.

Ms. Zusy stated she goes to Jamaica Plain for pet food, and in Cambridge there isn't any place to get gluten free

Ms. Amster stated if we had a real bakery that would be great.

Ms. Sinclair stated we lost Lindell's

Ms. Amster stated Life Alive is veg, vegan

Ms. Sinclair stated not just food there is culture there (at Life Alive)

Mr. Seidel stated Life Alive just nailed the experience and the marketing – it really caters to exactly who you think would be there

Ms. Zusy stated she heard life alive is trying to scale up and become a chain-let or a franchise.

Ms. Zusy stated she likes trying to go to the movies. Sometimes Brattle but Kendall is good. Occasionally downtown for the movies.

Ms. Sinclair stated I don't know anyone that goes to Seaport. The Greenway is fantastic – people go there.

Ms. Amster stated the Boston Harbor hotel for free events is great. Ms. Amster stated Events and free things are a great enticement to come out and then I sometimes shop afterward

Ms. Zusy stated she goes to arboretum and walk around and then we have breakfast at Fiore (Jamaica Plain)

Ms. Sinclair stated sometimes the event is the things that takes up all the time and then I don't have any interest in doing much more (shopping or going out). Also just the things I want to go to are so spread out.

Ms. Zusy stated she thinks we have a million events: lectures every night, many music venues, Magazine Park programming sometimes seemed drowned out by all the noise.

Ms. Amster stated it seems that sometimes there are still a lot of people in town even in summer (maybe tourists who replace any folks going out of town).

Mr. Seidel stated Shopping isn't a leisure activity anymore. Not really a reason to make shopping an event any more. Disappearance of bookstores is really sad – good place to take a break. Even just the motivation to go to a bookstore doesn't seem there. There is also real neighborhood push to keep specialty places (like the luggage store) but when you go in they don't have what you need.

Ms. Amster stated she sees bookstores offering speaking talks that are very well attended.

Ms. Amster stated sometimes when you go to an event you have a great experience and don't shop then but go back.

Ms. Zusy stated there is a real challenge: we want local stores but local stores are small and don't offer as far a range of products and then. Its like diff between ready made and tailor made. The price difference is hard.

Ms. Sinclair stated parking is so tough: often competing interests (want to keep parking but also want bike-ability)

Ms. Zusy stated there are some big stores that are very popular and beloved: MicroCenter and Trader Joes. That spot seems to be successful because of the parking ease

Ms. Sinclair stated people talk about Alewife a lot right now

Ms. Amster stated the change of Kendall Square in the last 20 years is unbelievable. I think Kendall Square was first developed for commercial but now they are trying to put a neighborhood into it.

Ms. Zusy stated that Kendall is soulless – it is an office park. It doesn't have anything that illustrates that humans live there: a grocery stores, church, school, or a pharmacy.

Ms. Amster stated there is a lot of good, small retail around Kendall and the part around the riverfront is really growing.

Ms. Zusy stated that Air BNB has been super successful in CambridgePort and we have people coming from all over. And more and more "Chinese" residents as investors, and students.

Ms. Amster stated she looked at where Air BNB is in Cambridge and I didn't see a lot in CambridgePort but DC is really concentrated. I didn't look at Harvard or Kendall Square though.

Ms. Sinclair stated she sees a lot of traditional tourists in Harvard Square that pull up and take photos of the buildings. And they go to Clover and they go to the other shops.

Mr. Seidel stated Inman is a great square. I don't live there now and it seems like the food is being promoted. Cambridge Street is the only street left in Cambridge where you have the continuous storefront street.

Ms. Zusy stated the S&S deli is an institution and doubles as an event space

Ms. Sinclair stated there is a lot of neat stuff in Inman (architect firms not elsewhere, Christina's and the spice shop, Gather Here)

Ms. Zusy stated she used to go all the time to Galleria

Ms. Amster stated Galleria is unattractive

Ms. Sinclair stated she sees lots of young folks there.

Ms. Amster stated she thinks the Galleria is a lunch destination

Ms. Zusy stated she thinks there are a lot of new immigrants there. I see many Latino families in Sears.

Ms. Zusy stated she's seen the gentrification of Cambridge in a real way and the vibrancy seems gone. All the artists are gone.

Ms. Amster stated coming from Brookline though, Cambridge seems very edgy.

Ms. Zusy stated she wished there was a bowling alley. The Flatbread Bowling alley is fantastic.

Ms. Amster stated Roxy's has it and it is amazing.

Ms. Zusy stated the land banking issue is real and even the colleges do it (MIT)

Ms. Hemmerle thanked everyone for their participation.

The meeting adjourned at 7:30pm.