

Harvard Allston Task Force
Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, April 25, 2007
St. Anthony Elementary School
6:30 p.m.

I. Attendance:

Harvard Allston Task Force

Paul Berkeley
Mary-Helen Black
Cathi Campbell
John Cusack
Rita DiGesse
Mike Hanlon
Millie Hollum McCloughlin
Bruce Houghton
Harry Mattison
Ray Mellone, Chair
Brent Whelan

Harvard University

Harris Band
Will Donham
Chris Gordon
Peggy Hayes
Kevin McCluskey
Dan Rabinovitz
Dave Raszmann
Kathy Spiegelman
Maile Takahashi

City of Boston

Gerald Autler, Boston Redevelopment Authority

Allston Task Force chair Ray Mellone welcomed all to the meeting.

BRA official Gerald Autler identified questions he had been asked about the filing date of Harvard's Draft Project Impact Report (DPIR) (answer: TBD), and why the community would not be reviewing the new roadways proposed by Harvard (answer: the community will have input, but roadways are not part of the Article 80 review process.) Autler said that he would be looking for feedback on how the community would like to provide input into the review of the roads in relation to Harvard projects. Autler noted that the next community meeting could cover discussion of parking and transportation issues that would be part of the DPIR, if the community would find that helpful.

Kathy Spiegelman, chief planner for Harvard's Allston Development Group, spoke next, noting that the presentation given by architect Stefan Behnisch, designer of the Harvard Allston Science Complex, at the Task Force meeting on April 9, 2007 contained inaccurate information on building heights. Spiegelman apologized for the error and noted that correct information and representatives of the design team would be brought back to the community at a future meeting for further discussion and opportunity for questions.

Spiegelman also noted that Harvard's next step would be a Draft Project Impact Report (DPIR) for the science complex, anticipated to be filed by Harvard by the end of May.

Mellone shifted the focus to community benefits – the discussion topic for the meeting. Mellone noted that two prior community meetings had focused on community benefits – November 29, 2006 and December 11, 2006 and now the Task Force, working in Executive Committee, met to organize a draft community benefits master plan for discussion and review. He described the draft Community Benefits Matrix, which was distributed to the audience.

Audience member raised a question about process – how do these benefits get negotiated. Autler of the BRA stated that the “cooperation agreement is a legal document between Harvard and the BRA, which we enforce.” Autler stated that he and other city officials want to hear the community's concerns and ideas. Autler also noted that at the same time, the city has its own goals for its relationship with Harvard. He continued that there are many areas of agreement between city and community priorities, namely education and jobs. He urged the community to remember that ultimately certain city agencies have purview over certain functions (such as Boston Public Schools over education) and will have final say on programming in their areas of responsibility that result from community benefits from Harvard.

Audience member Joyce Radnor asked the difference between construction mitigation and community benefits. Autler responded that construction mitigation is not and should not be in the community benefits document. Construction mitigation covers a separate set of responsibilities and that information needs to go into a construction management plan that then gets reviewed and signed off by the Boston Transportation Department (BTD) with input from the Boston Environment Department. In response to additional questions about process, Autler further explained that usually a cooperation agreement is not usually completed at the time that a project is approved by the BRA board, but rather soon after. The BRA must issue a “Certification of Consistency,” (certification that all key documents, including the cooperation agreement, have been signed) before the Inspectional Services Department issues building permits.

In response to a question about timetable, Autler responded that he hopes to have short-term and mid-term community benefits clarified and agreed upon before the end of August.

Task Force member Brent Whelan raised the issue of community review of the new roads proposed by Harvard and stated, “It is unacceptable that there's no public process for review of road proposals.” Autler responded that if there are clear concerns about the proposed roadways, there's nothing preventing anyone from voicing that input. Autler also noted that Bill Conroy of BTD is here to listen to community concerns.

An audience member, commenting on proposed community benefits for the Gardner School, suggested that anything being offered to children attending Gardner should also be made available to all Allston children. She noted that Gardner is not a neighborhood school.

An audience member who identified herself as a Gardner parent, commented that she is glad to see that support of Gardner is a priority and noted that approximately two thirds of Gardner students are from zip codes 02134 and 02135. She also noted that a petition signed by many Gardner parents had been sent to the Task Force voicing the need for support of Gardner in Harvard community benefits.

An audience member raised the issue of two traffic deaths on Lincoln Street and her sense of urgency to bring this issue to the forefront. She asked, “Is this mitigation or community benefits?”

Audience member Vincent Dixon, formerly of Holton Street, now a Cambridge resident, suggested that the task force look at Harvard’s plans in terms of density and intermixing of campus and community and suggested that zoning changes may need to be considered to address this. He suggested following the example of Cambridge in establishing neighborhood standards. Dixon also noted that “the job commitments in this document [Community Benefits Matrix] look weak.”

Autler responded that zoning in the city of Boston and the city of Cambridge are two very different processes. There’s project approval but no re-zoning is under consideration for the campus areas except through the IMP process, which does grant zoning rights.

Audience member Tim McHale commented that this [Community Benefits Matrix] is a great working document and then asked, how community members could provide additional ideas. Answer: email Harvardallstontaskforce@googlegroups.com

McHale continued, commenting that the greatest potential community benefit is permeability, opportunities to seek synergy between Harvard and the community on community needs/uses for housing, retail, open space, creating a place where student, staff, faculty and community issues will mingle. McHale asked, “wouldn’t it be great to develop the Holton St. corridor for community housing with the new Charlesview as the anchor?” McHale also stated his view that a master plan needs to be developed for the western section of Western Avenue. He stated his support for an urban planning process funded by Harvard for this purpose.

Audience member Catalina Malves, principal of the Gardner School, spoke in favor of support for the school, noting that two thirds of the students are from Allston or Brighton and that the school has just gained greater independence, allowing greater flexibility in planning and programming. She noted, “we have brought back the neighborhood school. You are bringing the most important thing you can to kids – a good education.”

A resident of Eatonia Street asked several questions: “What about helping out the church and St. Anthony’s School?” “Who’s paying the rent tonight? Answer: Harvard is renting the space for the meeting. He also asked about about free scholarships to Harvard.

Mellone responded that Harvard “will not go for a direct donation to the church.” He continued that he and other members of the task force are looking to Harvard to develop educational programs in North Allston that will prepare the kids for college, even for Harvard.

Audience member Liz Brown identified herself as staff at the Joseph Smith Community Health Center. She asked what the next steps are and suggested a small group meeting on community benefits to come to some agreements. She also asked how much money is available.

Mellone responded that the Task Force was not setting a budget and instead was establishing goals.

Paul Alford raised an objection to “secret meetings of the task force, the BRA and the developer.” He asked, “What role did the developer play in the meeting held last night? (In reference to the April 24th executive committee meeting)

Mellone responded: “They ordered the food.” In further response to Alford’s stated concerns about objectivity and the activities of the task force, Mellone responded. “I am a volunteer. Sometimes we need to meet as a task force in order to get our work done.”

Alford responded, “The community is concerned that the task force is not on the up and up.”

Task Force member Millie Hollum McLaughlin stated “Aren’t we also members of the community? Don’t you think we care about the community’s interests? We’re trying to do our best for our community.”

Alford responded with his concerns that “the developer has unlimited staff and money, the perception that the developer is driving the process and that the task force needs more oversight.”

Audience member, Patrick of Arden Street asked, “What legally-binding guarantees does the neighborhood have that Harvard will follow through on these commitments?” “Is the public going to be able to look at the document?”

Mellone responded that the neighborhood is not a signatory to the agreement. The BRA and Harvard sign it, but yes, the community will see a draft.

Autler noted that the community benefits agreement will be enforced, there’s a compliance officer, and it is enforced like any other contract. He also added that he expects the community will also be vigilant about the commitments made in the document.

Patrick responded, “this looks like a PR stunt, like the strategic framework”

Autler responded that these are two very different documents. “The strategic framework was a vision. This is a legally-binding contract.”

Task Force member Harry Mattison expressed interest in “real, on the ground improvements” in terms of community benefits not just programs that can expire or be terminated. He stated that desirable projects are parks and transportation improvements.

Audience member Chris Weller, a Cambridge resident, suggested that Harvard should be asked to provide funds to the community and task force to hire their own consultants and attorneys in order to evaluate proposed community benefits and negotiate with Harvard.

Mellone noted that meeting time was nearing an end and recommended the meeting come to a close with discussion of next steps.

Autler identified the issue of understanding how the Article 80 process dovetails with the roadways planning process and suggested this could be an agenda item for a future meeting.

Mattison indicated the need for more information on community benefits the city has negotiated with other institutions, e.g. Boston University, Northeastern and Suffolk University. He asked that details of those agreements be brought to the next meeting.

Whelan encouraged all in attendance to let their views be known by attending the neighborhood coffee event being held by Mayor Menino on May 10th at McKinney playground.

An audience member requested a response from the task force at the next meeting on the suggestion for Harvard to fund consultants and attorneys for the community.

Audience member Lana asked a question about how best to stay up to date on what is happening in the meetings if she cannot attend. Autler responded that meeting minutes are posted on the BRA website.

Autler reaffirmed the meeting schedule of the second Monday and fourth Wednesday of each month.

Task Force member John Cusack asked if all meetings can be advertised in the newspaper. Autler responded that not all meetings are currently being advertised in the newspaper but perhaps once the schedule is set for the next two to three months a comprehensive ad can list all scheduled meetings.

Mellone closed the meeting at 8:30 p.m.