2021 Cambridge City Council Questionnaire – Patty Nolan

responses August 20, 2021

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**1. Housing is an important issue for the City of Cambridge**

**a. How would you describe our housing challenges?**

i. Our housing challenges are in some ways specific to Cambridge and in

some ways very similar to those faced by urban areas across the country

where the economy is doing well and jobs are being added. Our housing

challenge is across the board - but more acute for middle income and low

income residents. The challenges are regional and we cannot solve the

affordability crisis on our own. Cambridge is home to major companies

and universities who do not provide appropriate housing for their students

and employees, so the burden falls on the city to do so. Cambridge is

pouring a huge amount of resources into affordable housing, ($50 million

this year) and the number of units in Cambridge is increasing every year,

but without a regional approach, we will not be able to meet the demand

for housing (and affordable housing). The last decade we added over

6,000 units of housing - and yet the housing crisis continues unabated. We

must do our part and ensure the appropriate resources are going towards

housing, including allowing density next to transit and along transit

corridors, but the challenge remains a regional one that Cambridge alone

is unable to solve. Our challenge is increasingly that the middle income -

which in our area are those making $80-120K a year - cannot find an

affordable place to live. Which means those making the median income

(teachers are in this category) don’t find a place.

**b. What do you think are the major factors causing our housing challenges?**

i. The demand for living near jobs and having access to opportunity is

extremely high, even post-covid. Without a proper regional transportation

system, it is difficult to easily live outside of the metro area and access job

opportunities, so the onus falls on Cambridge and a few other cities to

provide the most housing. If we were able to provide a reliable, efficient,

and inexpensive regional transit system, and ensure that housing was

being built outside of the urban core, it would relieve demand and provide

greater access to people who need to access opportunities but are currently

unable to get that outside of the core. And the presence of so many

colleges and universities increases the draw to the area, and the need for

housing - of both undergraduate and graduate students.

**c. Describe concerns you might have about existing and needed infrastructure to**

**serve our present and future housing stock, for example: aging sewer lines,**

**electrical grid and most importantly water.**

i. Green space and trees - Cambridge already has among the lowest amount

of green space per capita in the country, and unless we are able to preserve

(and grow) the amount of green space we have as our population rises,

Cambridge will become a far less livable and resilient city.

ii. I am less worried about water in the short and medium term since our area

of the country has a good source of water and projections are that this area

will be wetter, not drier. IN addition, there is an option for water supply

should our city owned reservoir fail - the MWRA. and I believe that

Cambridge, in the long-run, would be better served if we received water

from the MWRA system. However, I am very concerned about the aging

pipes we use to transport water - there have been several disruptive pipe

breaks in the last couple of years due to infrastructure age and condition.

We need to be replacing pipes - without using the Cured In Place Plastic

replacement pipes that would jeopardize public health.

iii. While currently the electrical grid is serving our needs, there are two

major issues that require immediate attention: the need to greatly expand

the capacity of the grid as all buildings move to electrification in order to

stop using fossil fuels, and the need to make the grid 100% renewable.

iv. Another key part of infrastructure that needs to be considered is schools

and community centers. With the addition of thousands more residents,

there will be more public school students (or independent schools) and we

need to build community spaces - notably in the Alewife area, which

already has fewer public school spots than children. I am concerned - and

have set up meetings to address this need.

**2. Climate Change is real. What changes would you like to see the city undertake to address**

**these concerns locally? How do your views address environmental equity? How do you**

**reconcile the issue of tree conservation and the environment when discussing**

**development?**

a. We must face the reality that Cambridge is far behind the emissions reduction

goals that we set for ourselves. In fact, we are at risk of not even meeting the

statewide emissions reduction target for 2030. This is unacceptable and should be

a top priority for city staff. This will be the main focus of the Climate Crisis

Working Group that I am chairing this fall. I worked to create the group based on

my deep commitment to sustainability and my understanding of the need for

action on the climate crisis.

b. Equity must be at the center of all policy and the environment is no exception. It

is the most oppressed communities that will be hit hardest by climate change, so

we must prioritize emissions reductions and resiliency while ensuring that these

communities are centered. For example - all of our affordable housing moving

forward must look like the Finch Building; sustainable buildings are higher

quality, cheaper to run, and will last longer.

c. Fund ground-source heat pumps: when a house is built or renovated, the city

should be the first one to provide resources to help residents switch. That will be

great for emissions reductions and save residents money in the long run.

d. Provide renters and low-income residents with access to community solar - the

city should fund solar projects on suitable roofs (Universities, malls, maybe

parking lots (though surface lots should have buildings). and provide an

opportunity for non-home owners to access the benefits of solar.

e. Trees must be considered essential infrastructure - we can build affordable

housing without destroying the diminishing canopy and we must start doing so. It

will take additional resources and we should provide those. It is not a zero-sum

game between trees and housing - we need to counter that misinformation.

f. Development can occur without covering more open space and cutting down trees

- but the city needs to be intentional about supporting both trees and development

AND monitor the implementation of programs that protect trees.

**3. “Development” is a commonly used term of public policy. Notions of economic**

**development evolve over time. In the current moment, ideas about development must**

**address concerns about climate change, global capital flows and rapidly growing**

**economic inequality.**

a. The City for decades developed commercial property to increase taxable income

that allows residential tax rates to remain low compared to many other cities. Has

that strategy reached its limit? If so, what should replace it?

i. This strategy, relying on new commercial development to fund city

services, is entirely unsustainable. We must not rely on developers

maximizing profit to be able to fund city services, or we will end up with a

no-win trade-off: an over-developed city or being unable to afford the

services we expect. Instead, we should begin to slightly raise residential

taxes so that they are more in line with surrounding cities instead of being

one of the lowest in the state. And we should look to get governmental

spending in line with other cities as well. Our Police Department budget

was about 4 times that of Somerville’s in FY21 - while our population is

only 50% higher. We are extremely well-resourced and should continue

running world-class programming, but I do not believe we need a

developer-inflated budget to do so. In summary - higher taxes and more

efficient budget spending, not a windfall from over-development.

**b. What is your view on economic development for the City of Cambridge in 2021?**

**What kind of economic development do we need or not need?**

i. We need to invest in workforce development and ensure that Cambridge

youth (and older residents) are properly trained to take advantage of the

opportunities that exist in Cambridge. The programs we have in place now

have varying degrees of success, and we need to double down on the ones

that are working and expand them immediately. What we do not need is

for Cambridge to be seen as a city of business; what we do need is for our

residents to be able to work in the industries that exist here already.

ii. Furthemore, all of our economic development must tie into climate

resiliency. We should be investing in and bringing green jobs to

Cambridge.

iii. We also need to bring back small scale manufacturing to the city - from

dozens of candy companies decades ago, there is one remaining. The

small manufacturers that used to be found across the city have left, taking

jobs and innovation with them. Our strategy must shift from attracting

large biotech or tech firms to smaller firms.

**4. In recent months the Cambridge Historical Commission, Conservation Districts and**

**Neighborhood Organizations have been criticized as obstacles to more affordable housing**

**as well as to racial and economic diversity. Do you agree with this criticism? Please**

**explain why.**

a. These are important city institutions, and we in Cambridge must walk and chew

gum at the same time. We can and should support neighborhood groups and

preserve historical development, and allow thoughtful development

b. We should honor those who have spent years of their life trying to build

neighborhood groups in a volunteer capacity. It is hard and difficult work, and I

have found that all neighborhood group leaders work hard, and do good work. I

believe the criticism is unwarranted, and serves to divide people instead of

bringing them together. That is why I countered an attempt to criticize groups

into an opportunity for sharing and learning and improvement. I stood up for

groups and will continue to do so. We need to be more attentive to the value

brought by those groups to the city and respectful in our dealing with each other.

**5. In recent months there has been an upsurge in citizen petitions (including the Donovan**

**petition supported by the CCC and the Missing Middle Housing (MMH) petition**

**supported by ABC) that attempt to formulate zoning, housing and related public policy.**

**Developer upzoning - also known as contract zoning - has also been in regular use. Please**

**describe your opinion about governing through the use of citizen petitions and contract**

**zoning. Are there changes to the petition process that should be introduced?**

a. The Council should be using the Envision Plan to direct CDD’s approach to

developing zoning, and if citizens are unimpressed and want to try their hand,

they can and should retain a right to propose zoning petitions (though I believe

there should be a higher bar before submission, more on that below). However,

there is a reason that neither of the zoning brought to the Council by citizens (as

well as one major one brought to the Council by CC&F) are now in place.

Without a proper analysis that fits into the short- and long-term plans for

Cambridge, adopting new zoning would be irresponsible. We must give CDD the

resources necessary to respond to Council priorities. We have to engage in a

comprehensive look at our zoning so that we do not rely on this pop-up type style

planning.

**6. Members of the Cambridge Planning Board have expressed frustration with existing**

**constraints on their ability to plan. As volunteers meeting several times a month to**

**process individual cases, members have little time and resources to engage in planning.**

The absence of planning guidance from this committee is likely related to the increased

use of citizen petitions. How should this problem be addressed?

a. As I mentioned above, I believe there should be a higher number of signatures

required to submit a citizens petition - 10 is simply too low. But I also think that

there should be more of an obligation on the petitioners to engage the public. It

should not fall on the Council and CDD to immediately take on that work. I am

not sure exactly what this would look like, but the petitioners should be required

to hold two public forums discussing the petition and allowing members of the

public to ask questions and give feedback.

b. And in general, as I said in my previous answer, we should not be relying on

spot-zoning to dictate our long-term planning.

**7. Cambridge has long been celebrated as a city that promotes racial and economic**

**diversity. Do you believe this reputation is currently well deserved? If not, what measures**

**would you take to promote genuine racial and economic diversity? How would you**

**address recent issues of youth gun violence?**

a. Cambridge is often deserving of the reputations it has, but that does not mean we

are perfect. Far from it. There is a whole lot more that we could be doing to

promote racial and economic diversity and I believe we should. I will note that

when we survey residents, there have been a number of times when BIPOC

residents express satisfaction with city services. For example, a comprehensive

effort to reach out to the community to understand views of education included

focus groups and interviews with a range of residents was conducted by the

school department a few years ago. The findings were that our families of color

felt very highly supported and satisfied - higher than we expected. Which means

it is important to do a comprehensive and representative effort whenever possible.

We should not assume anything - and make sure we are talking directly to the

community. There is nuance in the community - there is not one view of Black

residents, or Hispanic/Latinx or Asian American - or white for that matter. There

is historic systemic and institutional racism that has permeated all elements of our

city - which we must acknowledge. The Cambridge Digs Deep on Racism

initiative was quite good as starting some difficult conversations and promoting

learning. Building on that initiative would be a positive step. We do have a long

way to go - and many BIPOC residents have been dismissed or worse, and

experienced long time and long term trauma of racism and discrimination - here

in Cambridge. ONe way to promote genuine diversity is to acknowledge the

wrongs and take action to correct them. That is precisely why I was a cosponsor

on two pieces of legislation last month that would give us leader status if executed

- one on reparations and one on reparative justice related to incarceration and

cannabis.

b. To address the youth violence - we need direct support - jobs, educational

opportunities and mentors. And we need to establish new programs run by

community members with real accountability. No young person at risk should go

more than a week without a check in from their village of supporters. We have

the people willing to help - we need to change the culture to one of support and

accountability and yes love.

**8. How would you increase transparency both by the City Manager and departments that**

**report to her/him? How would you increase transparency by City Councilors?**

a. A major tenet of the work I do on council is through the lens of transparency. The

work that I have done on charter reform over the last year and a half (that will

now be appearing on the ballot this November) is centered around transparency. It

is just a start, but giving the Council power to approve appointments helps to hold

the manager accountable, and accountability is a large part of transparency.

Additionally, one of the charter reforms would call for a full charter review,

something that has not happened in 80+ years. I believe that a review would

expose some of the ways that Cambridge is run as an undemocratic and

untransparent city, and would present the opportunity to reform as residents see

fit. I have been thrilled to lead that effort and look forward to continuing to push it

forward.

b. Transparency by city councillors might be more challenging. For me - I am

transparent and will be upfront about controversial issues. In my weekly

newsletter I try to address any policy orders or issues that arise - without hiding

my stance on them. Often I am surprised - and disappointed - that some

councillors do not communicate their position.

**9. Cambridge is about to hire a new City Manager. Describe your ideal City Manager for**

**this time in Cambridge history. What qualities will you look for?**

a. Forward thinking - a visionary

b. Experience outside of Cambridge, and Massachusetts - so we can build on best

practices and not fall into thinking we already are the best we can be and not have

a continuation of the current culture, which will not meet the challenges we face

adequately.

c. A leader that holds departments accountable and admits shortcomings

d. Responsive to the Council

e. A passion for racial and environmental justice - and a desire for Cambridge to be

a nationwide leader in these areas

**10. Recent estimates declare that over 60% of Cambridge residents are renters. How should**

**Cambridge government address the needs of renters?**

a. All city outreach must target renters to ensure they are included and aware of city

programming. An aggressive outreach approach is important for this, since

homeowners who have lived in the city for decades are likely the easiest to reach.

Furthermore, the city should be looking at the annual city survey results broken

down by renters to understand what the needs and wants of renters are. If we are

only looking at the data in the aggregate, the differences could get lost.

**11. There is always room for improvement however senior citizens in public housing receive**

**reasonable public support. What is your plan to enable and support seniors living**

**independent of public senior housing settings?**

a. We need to ensure that seniors are supported and that the loneliness that was so

prevalent among seniors this year is addressed through programming coming out

of the pandemic. We should be supporting - and replicating - programs like the

Living Well network which the Agassiz Baldwin neighborhood supports - the

network of programs brings a range of services and connections to residents 55

and older and the city’s information offerings need to be more widely distributed,

and provided in multiple languages.. The programs that are helpful to seniors is

extensive - from health care to transportation to services to financial planning to

caregiving - and the city has many partners across the city which serve seniors.

Making sure residents know about the services is a constant need. Seniors in and

not in senior housing settings should have access to community - and some

non-intrusive way that can monitor connections. We should be looking to other

cities for additional programming that is successful at serving seniors.

**12. What question do you wish we had asked you but did not? How would you answer it?**

**Question” Is there a point at which Cambridge should stop trying to grow - to build - to develop?**

I would answer it by saying: yes, there is a point and we should think carefully about when it is

that the city should focus on improving life and operating as well as it can instead of relying on

growth and assuming growth.

And for another question: How do you see the future of transportation in the city?

Answer: The transportation of residents has to rely on public transit, walking and cycling to a far

greater degree than today, and our squares should all have several blocks of pedestrian zones.