

City of Cambridge

Department of Public Works
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Housing Task Force Minutes March 30, 2021

The City of Cambridge Division of Planning and Zoning, Historic Preservation, and Housing held a Housing Task Force meeting for the City of Cambridge at 5:30pm on Tuesday, March 30, 2021 via video conference. **Pat Escher**, Division Manager; **Carol Richardson**, Director of Economic Development; and **Jeannie Bellina**, Housing Specialist, were the only full-time City staff present at this virtual Zoom meeting held in Cambridge, Maryland. Others in attendance are noted below:

Housing Task Force members:

Ward 1: Jim Sicks

Ward 2: Nancy Jackson

Ward 3: Gary Gordy

Ward 4: Dormaim Greene

Ward 5: Jason Bierley

Mayoral Selection: Davion Batson and Linda Henry

Members of public:

Greg Meekins

Carol Richardson – Director of Economic Development, City of Cambridge - acting as a 3rd Ward Resident

Housing Task Force members who were absent:

Ward 1: Candy Callaway

Ward 2: Portia Johnson-Ennels

Ward 3: Duane Farrow

Ward 4: Mike Edgar

Ward 5: Don Parks

Housing Specialist Jeannie Bellina started the Housing Task Force Meeting at 5:40pm.

Business

Welcome and Introductions

- Informal Meet and Greet with Housing Task Force members

Charge to the Task Force

- List of housing improvement recommendations by December 2021 with report presentation to Cambridge City Council Commissioners in January 2022
- Ad hoc committee appointed by Cambridge City Council with specific goal of looking at complex issue of housing and blight in the City
- Sky is the limit
- Creativity

Key Issues

- Make communities within City more beautiful and livable
- Citywide problem with quality housing, particularly rental housing
- Large amount of blighted and vacant homes throughout City, with most in Ward 3
- Building code violations due to low or no property maintenance, e.g. windows not closing, wires showing, no covers on electrical panels, leaky roofs, etc.
- Safety concerns in blighted neighborhoods
- Large % of residents living in rentals
- Need for more affordable housing
- Homeownership (vs. renting) would improve aesthetics, home maintenance, and safety
- Building Habitat homes in Pine Street neighborhood, but rest of neighborhood is deteriorating so may discourage potential residents from moving into that neighborhood
- Due to large scale of blighted housing in City, what has been done with grant funding hasn't been noticeable

Key Deliverables

What documents have been previously created that can help with this process?

- Final Memo to Council on Neighborhood Efforts (February 2021)
- Public Hearing Meeting Minutes on Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) (February 2021)
- Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Plan (Pine Street neighborhood – July 2019)
- Cambridge Housing Market Analysis and Needs Assessment (February 2019)
 - Possibility of getting a revised 5-year housing study in 2021
- Previous Housing Task Force Information (2004-2010)
- Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Plan presentation (Pine Street neighborhood)

What are the critical documents or outputs that the Housing Task Force must create or revise to meet its charge?

- City Code of Laws – Ordinance 995 revision
- List of all blighted homes
- Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis*?
- Any others?

Proposed Work Progress

What are the key activities that must be done to address the issues, create deliverables, and meet the charge?

- Seek funding to finance affordable housing, e.g. CDBG, HOME, LIHTC, etc.
- Accessible funding/grants to homeowners for home revitalization projects
- Stronger code enforcement so landlords are held better accountable for home maintenance
- Taxes or fines on blighted and vacant properties and poorly maintained homes
- Community cohesion in addressing socioeconomic concerns
- Home inspections and rental licensing requirements before tenant rentals
- Increased housing activities, e.g. acquisitions, demolitions, new construction, and home rehabilitations
- More attractive homes, and thus more marketable for future home sales
- Residents to have habitable and safe housing conditions
- Reinstated mandatory rental inspections
- Sustainable property upkeep with fair property taxes
- Shortage of staff in Building Safety Services Department
- Collective forum to share ideas and to be heard

A proposed list of steps is presented below to use as a starting point for the task force.

- Identify vision, goals, and objectives of task force
- *Develop SWOT Analysis (some ideas mentioned below – needs further development)
 - In past 10 years, made great strides in revitalization in some areas of City, e.g. historic downtown, waterfront development, etc., which is causing property values to increase
 - Very diverse ethnic, housing, and income levels throughout City
 - Homeowners of blighted homes may have passed away
 - Concern about impending evictions and homelessness, once rental moratorium ends June 30
 - High proportion of low-income workers need employment
 - Wildlife concerns in areas with blighted homes
 - Cornish Park revitalization
 - Sidewalk repairs
 - Limited City staff and resources
 - One employee in Building Safety Services Dept. (formerly 3 staff)

- Two employees in Planning Division, one of whom the focus is mainly on neighborhood revitalization in Ward 3 (formerly 3 staff)
- Revision of City Code of Laws – Ordinance 995
- Anything else?

Communications Plan

To whom should we provide updates on our status as we are going through the work process? How often should we communicate? What form should the communication take? Consider City policies too.

What should our policy be concerning task force members communicating with others outside the task force, including the press, concerning our status? Consider City policies too.

Operating Logistics

- **Virtual meetings will be held monthly until COVID pandemic is over**
 - Possible monthly meeting dates will be presented by Housing Task Force Leader, in which members will select dates that work best, and then go with majority vote
- **Meeting format**
 - Similar to other Board meetings
 - Working group, therefore public participation will be limited
 - Housing Task Force members to determine limited public involvement
 - Beginning or end of meeting
- **State mandated open meetings regulations**
 - Sub-committees permissible, but formal group leadership is not as Housing Task Force will disband at some point in the future
 - Housing Task Force members are limited in communications amongst themselves due to limit in how many can gather together without this it being considered a public meeting (e.g. in person, via e-mail, or telephone)
 - Public meetings are advertised and are open to the public
 - Example: With Council, it is no more than 2 members; with Planning Commission, it is no more than 3 members
 - Pat Escher will inquire with City attorney re: number of members for Housing Task Force meeting
 - E-mails cannot be conversational in style
 - If e-mail sent for comment, can respond directly to sender, but not comment on each other's responses
 - If any questions, please contact Pat Escher at (410) 228-1955 or pescher@choosecambridge.com

What will be our mode of decision-making? Voting? Consensus? Consider City policies too.

What information will be documented about each meeting? How? Consider City policies too.

How will information about each meeting be distributed, internally and externally? Social media? Consider City policies too.

What to do about issues of absence and/or lack of participation of Housing Task Force members?

Any other questions or tasks we should address?

Next Steps

What are the tasks that need to happen between now and next meeting?

- **Everyone** – Read City Code of Laws – Ordinance 995 – consider possible revisions - <http://www.choosecambridge.com/Search?searchPhrase=995>
- **Jeannie** – Next meeting is **Wednesday, April 14th from 5:30-7pm** with minimum of following individuals in attendance:
 - Kyle Kirby, attorney – code enforcement litigation for the City of Cambridge
 - Patrick Thomas, City attorney – revisions to Ordinance 995
 - Pat Escher, Division Manager of Planning
- **Jeannie** – There is no list of blighted homes with specific addresses provided; only dot points on a GIS map from 2016

Meeting adjourned at 6:50pm.

NOTE: Task Force format source: [Facilitating the First Meeting of a Task Force | Leadership Strategies \(leadstrat.com\)](#)