

ANC Monthly Meeting Minutes
June 16, 2010, 7:30 PM
Baldwin School Cafeteria, 28 Sacramento Street

Meeting Agenda

- Sacramento Field Usage with Cambridge Police Deputy Albert and Paul Ryder of Cambridge Parks and Recreation
- Trees, Sidewalks, and Safety: Improvements to Mass. Ave. Corridor between Cambridge Common and Porter Square
- Public Access to Norton's Woods/American Academy of Arts and Sciences

Incident at Sacramento Field Sparks Concern

“This is not the message I want in my neighborhood park. It should be inclusive,” stated a Sacramento Street resident and witness to an incident between a group using the field and Cambridge Police that followed a complaint from an abutter.

The resident described the situation as:

. . . a fantastic field soccer game going on and a leashed dog that was barking. I think the neighbor called the police because of the dog, but I felt there was a lot of physical hostility in the officers’ approach to the Hispanic students.

Deputy Superintendent Jack Albert, accompanied by Sergeant Paul Oppedisano, agreed with the neighbor’s account. “The officer who responded wasn’t familiar with the park regulations,” he explained. “We’ve issued a policy on how to respond to these types of calls. We apologize and hope it won’t happen again.”

Paul Ryder, Cambridge’s Director of Recreation, detailed the rules for field usage:

- The Recreation Department grants permits to Maria L. Baldwin School, Agassiz Baldwin Children’s Programs, and athletic groups (youth).
- Because of Sacramento Field’s small size, the Recreation Department does not issue permits for formal adult athletic use.

- Casual groups must yield the field to groups with permits.
- Park rules are enforced with the help of the Cambridge Police Department. Regulations include hours of usage, leash requirements for dogs, and restrictions on alcoholic beverages and loud music.

Condition of the Park

Residents reported Sacramento Field to be neglected and in need of repairs. There are plans to renovate the park in the future. The Department of Public Works is responsible for general maintenance.

Off-leash Hours for Dogs?

Mr. Ryder stated that the city's policy is not to allow dogs off leash in parks associated with schools. Amending this decision requires a neighborhood process.

Council Letter

ANC voted to write and send a letter to Lisa Peterson, Commissioner of Public Works, to request that Sacramento Field be renovated as soon as possible, particularly in light of the fact that the Agassiz neighborhood has few public open spaces. Mr. Ryder agreed to support the recommendation and suggested that neighbors note what needs fixing and include these items in the letter.

Trees, Sidewalks, & Safety: Improvements to Mass. Ave. Corridor

"Mass. Ave. is our public space, but it doesn't look like public space in any way," stated Dennis Carlone, Neighborhood Nine resident and owner of Carlone & Associates, an architecture and urban design firm.

Mr. Carlone is one participant in a small group of residents* from Agassiz, Neighborhood Nine, and Porter Square who have been working to improve Mass. Ave. between the Cambridge Common and Porter Square. Over the past months, the group compiled a list of improvements they wish to see on the Ave. They've met and found support with various city departments, as well as the Mayor's office.

Changes they believe will help give a flavor and standard character to Mass. Ave. include improving the condition of sidewalks, improving safety and crossings as they relate to pedestrian and vehicle traffic, and planting trees. They expect to use funds already committed by Harvard and Lesley Universities to split the cost of a consultant to perform a study and come up with a comprehensive plan. They anticipate that projects will then be completed in stages over a number of years.

Residents of the area were invited to review a report and bring their questions and suggestions to the June 16 ANC meeting. The report can be found online at www.agassiz.org (click on the Neighborhood Council tab and download the file “Mass. Ave. Report Updated 5-27-10.”)

Trees

The group has met with the city arborist and is considering how trees can be planned for sustainability. They discovered:

- A century back, Mass. Ave. hosted many large trees that were cut down when the sidewalks were narrowed to widen the vehicular roadway.
- The cost of planting trees is \$100-300 per tree.
- The current average life span of a city tree is just eight to fifteen years.
- Using more pervious paving materials or longer tree pits would allow more water to reach tree roots and help trees grow to maturity.

Sidewalks

Over the years, Mass. Ave. between the Cambridge Common and Porter Sq. has been trimmed of sidewalk space. Pedestrian access and safety must be improved:

- Agassiz’s side of the Ave. offers thirteen feet of walking space.
- Neighborhood Nine’s side has just eleven.
- The sidewalk in front of Commonwealth Lock is unusually narrow, with the bus stop shelter and a public telephone jutting out.
- A more consistent, easier to repair method of concrete paving is suggested.

- The group proposes that the city install pedestrian crossings at more intersecting streets to reduce jaywalking and also benefit local retail.
- The group proposes “bump outs” at the crossings to improve pedestrian safety.

Public Interest

The group is considering installing plaques emphasizing the area’s interesting and important history.

In the discussion, Council members made the following comments:

- It’s important to improve sidewalk safety for older people, people with limited mobility, parents with strollers, and everyone else.
- The Porter Square T station “open space” is an eyesore. Also, the commuter rail side of the MBTA at Porter Square needs a redesign.
- This is a good plan, but can it be more ambitious?
- We need a U-turn-around permission for cars to change directions.
- The median strip is high and difficult for people to step up to.
- Bikes should be banned from all sidewalks.
- The concurrent pedestrian crossing with traffic is a problem.
- Sidewalk dining should be reviewed and better defined as accessing “no more than half the sidewalk.”
- The curb cuts at the gas station on Garfield should be reduced.

“Kudos to the committee!” stated Cambridge City Councillor Sam Seidel, who serves on the city’s Neighborhood Long-term Planning Committee. “We need to build these ideas into the city’s overall discussion. Keep it up!”

Please speak up! Send your suggestions, comments, and concerns to Ron Axelrod at ronaldaxelrod@aol.com and/or Councillor Seidel at sseidel@cambridgema.gov.

*Agassiz Neighborhood: Stephen Diamond, Fred Meyer, Carole Weinhaus,
Neighborhood Nine: Ron Axelrod, Dennis Carlone

Businesses: Charles Christopher of Cambridge Common Restaurant and Christopher's

Public Access to Norton's Woods

Recent heavy rains have brought to surface tensions among some neighbors who frequent and walk their dogs in Norton's Woods, a forested area between Irving and Beacon Streets owned by Harvard University and managed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. At the council meeting, residents expressed dismay and concern following closure of the woods due to, as indicated by the Academy, damage from flooding caused by the severe rains in March.

Norton's Woods (home to the original ANC Outback Summer Program) was leased by Harvard University to the Academy in 1978, following many years of neighborhood opposition to Harvard's plans for developing the site. The Academy received a variance to build with the condition that it provide "reasonable community access" to the grounds. Some neighbors present claimed that communication problems have been long-standing.

"We shouldn't have to do this every five years," one resident told the council.

Another resident said, "A sign went up, but nothing else was done. Next we knew, they abruptly changed the rules for the park, including the times the public could use it. Once the park was re-opened, we were met by Harvard Police! The public hasn't been allowed a dialogue and therefore have been forced into a reactive mode."

The neighbors want better communication with and access to the decision-making bodies of the Academy and questioned the legitimacy of renting the Academy's facilities for catering and private events.

Resident Joel Bard stated, "This sounds like an issue of communication. It doesn't seem that the closings are frequent. Also Harvard and the Academy can't just cut off public access, they have to honor the variance."

An overall list of concerns included:

- Who determines gate closings?
- Poor stewardship of the area
- Damage to native plants
- Poor or no access to the academy's administration
- Lack of proper signage
- Fear that the trees in Norton Woods are being reduced
- Neighbors should have input on how the area is preserved for posterity
- Do events booked at the Academy require that the woods be closed? (The Academy responded "No.")
- The woods are "not just a dog playground" and shouldn't be treated as such

After neighbors voiced their concerns, Mark Robinson, Chief Operating Officer, and Paul Karoff, Director of Communications for the Academy, responded by thanking the neighbors for their feedback and providing a schedule for work to improve conditions in Norton's Woods. Following the June 16 meeting, the Academy supplied additional information to be included with the minutes. Please read below.

Academy's Notice to Neighbors

Prepared by Paul Karoff, Director of Communications for the Academy

In response to the concerns raised, the Academy would like its Agassiz neighbors to know the following:

- **The Academy's grounds at Norton's Woods are now open from 7 AM to 7 PM seven days a week.**
- We recognize that communication about the recent changes has not been as effective as it might have been. We are committed to improved communication with the neighborhood and will continue to share updates as new information is

available. If you would like to be on an email list for this purpose, please contact us at community@amacad.org.

- The recent closures of the Academy grounds were necessary due to extensive damage to our property following the severe rains in March.
- A significant portion of the lower woods was affected, which created unsafe conditions, including falling trees. For safety reasons, we were advised to limit access to the grounds.
- To prevent entry into the most compromised area, a section of the woods was temporarily fenced off. Given the reduced area, the gates on Beacon and Irving Streets were opened for pedestrian use only.
- The Academy retained professional arborists and civil engineers to evaluate the condition of the lower woods. Based on their recommendations, work to remove a number of trees that were dead or dying due to flood-related root damage took place in June.
- Members of the community, including their dogs, are now welcome on the property. Owners must keep their dogs on leash and remember to clean up after them.
- We apologize again for the inconvenience these storm-related closures have caused. Thank you for your continuing patience as we work to ensure that the Norton's Woods property is safe for the enjoyment of all visitors.

ABC Board Report

“This past year has been extremely busy for the board but things are going well,” stated Miriam Goldberg, ABC Board Co-chair.

Mrs. Goldberg reported that the board has been reviewing the agency's overall budget to make the most of existing resources, review expenditures, and make economies. They are happy to report that enrollment for Outback Summer Program is strong and construction of the Maud Morgan Visual Arts Center (MMVAC) will be completed shortly. MMVAC will host a summer intensive program for middle school students during the summer and roll out programming for artists and art-lovers of all ages in fall 2010.

Mrs. Goldberg encouraged council members to bring items of concern to the board's attention by contacting Stephen Diamond, ANC meeting chair and ABC board director.