

PAUL MCMORROW

Ask, then build in Cambridge

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CAMBRIDGE IS the home of one of the fiercest development battles in the region. But the city is also behind one of the most progressive, forward-looking development efforts around. The difference between the two is a willingness to talk, and listen.

A fight is now raging over a bid to rebuild East Cambridge's massive courthouse tower because state officials and would-be developers brushed off neighborhood input when the courthouse's development plan was forming. It turned a generally pro-development neighborhood into a hornet's nest of opposition. But even as the courthouse project founders, the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority is successfully rallying public support for other ambitious redevelopment projects. That's because the CRA is bringing residents into the development process early, and making partners of them.

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Cambridge's redevelopment authority doesn't enjoy the all-encompassing development powers that its cousin across the river in Boston wields. The planning and zoning powers that most folks know the Boston Redevelopment Authority for rest elsewhere in Cambridge's city government; the city's redevelopment authority is a more straightforward entity, a throwback to the urban renewal era of the 1950s and 1960s. The agency oversaw the clearing and redevelopment of Kendall Square. And now that its work in Kendall is mostly finished, the CRA is turning to Cambridge residents to tell it what to focus on next.

The CRA launched a strategic reset a year ago. The agency is trying to figure out where its unique urban renewal powers fit in modern Cambridge — or whether it's still needed at all. So the CRA has launched an innovative listening tour of Cambridge. It's soliciting ideas for parcels and neighborhoods that need attention from the city, and zeroing in on the ones that resonate most deeply.

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Tom Evans, the agency's executive director, has a working list of 10 possible projects he's sounding out, from a vacant CRA-owned lot outside Kendall Square to a busy but disjointed-feeling shopping center at Alewife. Evans has been surprised by the level of interest in taming the area around Fresh Pond and Alewife — a part of Cambridge that's seeing tremendous development, but that's far from the CRA's historic base of operations. A pair of local business groups have the agency looking at ways to reposition the neighborhood north of Inman Square in a way that would piggyback off Somerville's coming Green Line extension.

Whichever projects the CRA ends up focusing on will have grass-roots momentum ahead of time, because the CRA is engaging people early, and using public sentiment to shape projects that matter to Cambridge. As Evans says, "We're not looking to get involved in a project that people don't want to have happen."

State officials and the Boston-based developer Leggat McCall Properties took the opposite approach at the old Sullivan Courthouse in East Cambridge. And now they're paying for it dearly.

Neighbors have long resented the 22-story courthouse tower, which is ringed by low-slung rowhouses. When the state decided to sell the largely vacant tower two years ago, it should have been an opportunity to improve the building and repair its relationship with the surrounding community. Instead, it created an imbroglio.

The state never bothered to ask what types of redevelopment proposals might play well with the courthouse tower's neighbors. Nor did it take neighborhood feedback into account when weighing bids for the tower. Neighbors rallied to the cause of a

losing bidder who dealt openly with them; Leggat McCall made a calculated decision to focus on winning its bid with the state first, and only engaged neighbors after it got the bid.

These decisions have led to a politically toxic redevelopment proposal. Leggat McCall is chasing local development permits for a project that's not what the neighborhood wanted. The developer could have known this. Instead, neighbors have been in an uproar for more than a year, and local officials are now lining up in opposition to the project. The development process has been far more rancorous than it needed to be. That's because nobody actually put in the work of talking to the normally pro-development East Cambridge community. They failed to create boosters early on, so now they have opponents.

Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at Commonwealth Magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

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