

Minutes of the Mayor's Special Advisory Committee on Neighborhood-Based Resiliency

March 29, 2016—795 Massachusetts Avenue, City Hall, Ackerman Room—6:30 P.M.

Members present: Craig Kelley, *Chair*; Sam Seidel; Gail Kubik; Steven Wineman; Rev. Paul Kim

Staff present: Wilford Durbin, *Acting Executive Assistant to the Committee*

Public present: John Hawkinson, *Cambridge Day*; Hasson Rashid

Chair Craig Kelley called the meeting to order at 6:42 p.m., thanked everyone for coming, and introduced the scope of the committee. He invited the members to explore versions of resiliency that they had not thought of before, and which might be more mundane than catastrophic events, and also to expand their view beyond climate based challenges. He explained that the idea for the resiliency committee sprung out of ongoing discussions with many members of the public, academic representatives, church goers, and other Councillors, some of whom included members of the committee.

Mr. Kelley explained that the city needed a more formal discussion of what resiliency means for the entire community, and to do so, they needed to form a representative committee. He invited members to think about people who would be interested in joining who represented different life experiences so as to better represent the diversity of Cambridge. Members would be an expert in something other than resiliency and climate change, who nonetheless could address the challenges faced by the City to a general public using their individual experiences in various communities and incorporating information provided by subject matter experts during committee meetings.

Mr. Kelley commented that most conversations are overly aqua-centric when talking about climate change and resiliency, but that is not the most important challenge facing Cambridge. Rather, extreme heat will most immediately affect Cambridge.

Mr. Kelley closed opening remarks by asking the Committee to consider how it will conduct business during its 12-14 month tenure, what issues it wishes to address, and what the participation from the public might be.

Introductions

Members of the Committee introduced themselves.

Ice Breaker

Mr. Durbin led the Committee in an Ice Breaker exercise with word associations.

Imagining Resiliency

Mr. Kelley opened regular discussion by asking the Committee to consider what resiliency means. He stated that he had received a number of emails from community members interested in joining the Committee, but who first wanted to know what he meant by resiliency. He did not want to provide a definitive answer, as he saw the primary task of the Committee to be providing a Cambridge-based definition of resiliency, and to break away from traditional definitions to see if they could tease something new out.

Mr. Wineman stated that bouncing back was central to his definition of resiliency, including at an individual level, and observed how the concept is applied to abuse and trauma as an ability to adapt. Said there were stunning variations on how individuals respond to negative life events, and resiliency is on one end of that continuum. Defined resiliency as not just the ability to get through, but to do so with little or no loss of spirit.

Ms. Kubik defined resiliency as the ability to adapt.

Mr. Seidel asked whether it was necessary to be impacted by events, and that adaptation is not denial. Said a person will be different from a traumatic experience, and asked the committee to tease out that idea.

Mr. Wineman sought to think of concrete examples. Using the food supply, he said that if you think of a community dealing with a food shortage, on one end of spectrum is some people getting through and on the other some people starve to death, or migrating by force or necessity. In the latter examples a city will experience enormous suffering and disintegration of the community, with the alternative being cooperation and support, where everyone is hungry but no one starves. That is what he pictured when he imagined resiliency.

Ms. Kubik stated that from a formal building perspective, buildings have lifespans. How planners build in redundant systems into those structures so that they can change use, or survive an event, or adapt, or serve another communal purpose are crucial to resiliency of that building. How do you build in adaptability over the lifetime of a building is a constant question for planners.

Mr. Seidel returned to discuss the definition of resiliency, and remarked that a frequent vision of resiliency is to be prepared, and the other is to weather an event with damage but still making it through.

Mr. Wineman added a third definition that it is some combination of the two together. That part of resiliency which is preparation only goes so far. He said that a plan that only relies on preparedness is more brittle than building a community to adapt and shift the load of an event.

He continued that a community plan that relies solely on bringing out the best in people is going to be less effective, because to rely on best practices in the absence of buildings that are multi-use, for example, complicates their efforts. When the best is being brought out of people, the city should have structures in place that make people known to each other so that relationships are made.

Rev. Kim added that in other communities, each family has a food storage so that every family can survive a nuclear attack, for example. He is amazed when going into family owned bunkers how well constructed they are. Though he noted that Cambridge does not have to face similar problems.

Mr. Kelley interjected that Cambridge hasn't faced those problems yet. Events like tornados are still possible, and in fact have occurred in the recent past in nearby communities.

Rev. Kim marveled at the response after the Boston bombing, how local cities are now prepared for a similar events.

How should Cambridge define resiliency?

Mr. Durbin asked the committee to consider how Cambridge might define resiliency differently than their local neighbors. If one accepts a definition of resiliency as the ability to bounce back, he said, then that definition must take into account the local exigencies of each community prior to a catastrophic event, which are different. Cambridge has two universities and a robust bio-tech corridor, how might a Cambridge specific definition of resiliency take into account those institutions?

Mr. Seidel spoke to the human side of resiliency. He divided the human response into what he called "Official Resiliency," including police, firefighters, first responders, EMT, etc., but said that can be overly strained. Such a situation developed after Hurricane Sandy, for example, and in their absence there was the other "Human element," which was untrained individuals, that was relied upon to form a response.

Mr. Kelley said that the Committee did not need to agree on a definition for resiliency during its first meeting. He stress, however, that how Cambridge defines resiliency is important because it shapes other discussions about the need to address zoning, equip the fire department,

and gauge a response. As a city, he said, we want to have an idea on what we should spend our money on.

Neighborhood Based Resiliency

Mr. Kelley directed the conversation to the definition of “Neighborhood-Based Resiliency.”

Ms. Kubik said that ownership formed a crucial component in that definition, taking it down to blocks and parcels. Where people feel ownership for a certain place, they should be encouraged to establish resiliency for that neighborhood.

Mr. Wineman thought that citizens knowing their neighbors and having a commitment to each other formed the foundation of neighborhood-based resiliency.

Mr. Seidel pointed out that a neighborhood has definitive boundaries to them, which can present a different set of issues in terms of cooperation and engagement. A neighborhood has geographic boundaries. He didn't know if it's a good thing or not in terms of forming a response.

Mr. Wineman commented that some of these boundaries fall on semantics, he hoped to be internally clear on the Committee's terms. Some people would use community and neighborhood differently, he said, to include the whole City and perhaps different cities.

Mr. Kelley said that community might migrate across borders, such as in church environments, and that these different connections were important when talking about building systems.

Mr. Wineman thought it might be useful to define neighborhood as a concretely defined geographic place, whereas community means an affiliation between people. Such affiliations may be defined by schools, interests, religions, and identities. At its core, he thought a community represented a conscious affiliation between people based on something shared.

Rev. Kim said that the city has eleven neighborhoods, and when he picks up parking permit the City is already dividing communities by neighborhoods. Coming to the more concrete neighborhood example would be useful, and thought Neighborhood Crime Watch networks might be useful to structure resiliency responses.

Mr. Kelley noted how hard it can be to be connected to Cambridge's multiple communities. While he has numerous email lists, and communication connections between several different communities throughout the city, he didn't, for example, have one specifically for Central Square, and so one person might receive numerous identical Central Square related

communications through his neighborhood-based lists. This illustrated the need to have multiple definitions of neighborhood.

Mr. Seidel asked how the Committee might deal with a building with 25 floors, like Rindge Towers, that house so many people that may not consider themselves a community, who may not know each other, and who may not have similar backgrounds. He further asked how the Committee might think about people who work in Cambridge.

Mr. Wineman explained that neighborhoods have boundaries, and to the extent that people identify with their neighborhood, it creates an “other,” which may have negative impact on cooperative efforts. His ideal vision of resiliency in Cambridge was one that starts with a neighborhood base, a sense of community affiliation within a neighborhood, and which is then nested between neighborhoods. In a food shortage, for example, he imagined various neighborhoods taking care of each other internally, and then down the line, those various communities checking in each other. In this way, hyper-parochialism is constantly addressed.

Mr. Seidel pointed out that some neighborhoods are going to start with different capacities, and those with more are going to address their problems more quickly. He asked how the city might frame resiliency equitably to account for those differences.

Mr. Kelley added that different parts of the city face different challenges. Cambridge is facing a persistent threat to its tree canopy from the death of numerous street trees, a trend which he thinks will continue in the future. To reverse this trend, the City is encouraging residents to plant and care for trees in their yards and behind their sidewalk. While more trees planted would have a broad impact on the entire community, the City relies on individual actions. How people manage the trees in their yard will depend on the resources people have, which as previously mentioned, are not equally distributed.

Rev. Kim said that Cambridge is especially in a unique position with two major universities. The university themselves form their own communities. When he thinks about a neighborhood, however, he doesn't think about dorms, but some are every bit as large as neighborhoods.

Ms. Kubik observed that from the outside, a community might end at the campus boundary, and asked how relationships can form across those lines. When universities are the institutions with resources and capacities, while the outside communities have not, how can those resources be equitably shared?

Mr. Seidel reflected that there are many students and workers who may not identify with a Cambridge community or neighborhood at all, but they are still part of the city fabric, and if a catastrophic event occurs, they will still rely on the City's resiliency network.

Mr. Seidel asked the Committee whether it thought that a catastrophic event had to occur for resiliency to occur, or whether it was latent or passive. He further inquired whether resiliency implied a perfect world.

Mr. Wineman responded that for him, resiliency implied quite the opposite. It did not imply internal perfection. He stated that he associated vulnerability with our humanness. But recognizing our weaknesses is not to be vulnerable, but rather the opposite, he argued. It is not strength to deny weaknesses. In the context of being resilient, an openness to the experience of vulnerability is critical to the robustness of a resiliency response system.

Mr. Seidel observed that the definition of “vulnerable,” implies “woundable,” which he equated to a chink in the armor. It required some event to happen to find that one weakness.

Mr. Kelley asked whether it should be the city’s responsibility to have a ready-made flier with fixed and variable fields to post in neighborhoods to answer questions after certain events. He stated that he didn’t think the City had a great communication system to circulate information on events and the city’s ongoing response.

Mr. Wineman asked what the role of the city should be in preparing resiliency. He noted that discussion up to that point had been focused on a diverse response, but the Committee needed to address centralized response as well. He hoped the Committee would develop a formal structure for thinking about this, both to form concrete recommendations, and think about blending decentralized responses and centralized responses.

Mr. Seidel said that the City has systems that are in place, some of which are paid for through large federal grants, and thus he doubted whether the City would be likely to change its practices after the recommendations from the Committee.

Mr. Kelley thought the Committee could explore much more common experiences besides those requiring a FEMA response team. He pointed out that Cambridge will be facing a warming world, and when people leave their homes to escape the heat on summer nights, how the City might address and respond to such people differently than a party going on outside could be explored by the Committee. He stated that while snow doesn’t kill people, aside from accidents, heat can be lethal. This would be only further compacted when a power outage eliminates air conditioning.

Mr. Wineman asked for the Committee’s indulgence in expressing that an economic collapse is a certainty. He said that the timeframe for such an event is imponderable, but it is not localized to Cambridge or the United States. He said that as a species we are consuming the world’s resources, and we cannot sustain an economy when they run out. We will get to a position where there are cascading economic effects. He stated that in some ways we already

have felt those effect, and that if it had not been an El Nino year, the CA drought would have continued to destabilize an economy that provides much of the food for the United States.

Ms. Kubik asked if the Committee knew how a disruption of the food distribution system affects the price and availability of food here. She said that addressing this question requires the City of Cambridge to set up their systems to handle larger issues with scale, and consider the intersections between Cambridge and larger area.

Mr. Wineman offered to break down the stages of community impact as: 1) Acute events; 2) gradual, long-term events; and 3) gradual events that become acute.

Mr. Kelley commented that when we look at stresses to a community, economic collapse is just as likely as environmental events. He stated that being resilient to one event is likely to help prepare for another and we should not overly focus on specific challenges but look for broader capacity building.

Mr. Kim said that the two universities have systems for attacks or shootings on campus, and asked if the City had similar programs for sharing information.

Mr. Kelley responded by saying that there were systems, provided by a vendor, but he didn't think they were well adapted at responding to traumatic community events.

Ms. Kubik stressed that in order to build a robust communication network, one must identify the weakest populations, and those furthest removed from current communication systems, and then adapt programs to address their needs and abilities. During Sandy, such individuals were the most difficult to communicate with, she noted, and response to those communities was slower. She asked the Committee to start with systems that cater to those weak populations, and then build up from there.

Mr. Wineman asked whether the Committee should look at a regional approach when exploring its mission, by having some communication between Somerville, Boston, etc. He also wanted to know whether the Committee could include in its scope an initiative to communicate with a peer city to discuss how they are planning resiliency.

Mr. Kelley stated that finding such peer cities was a major goal that he envisioned for the Committee.

Mr. Seidel asked if developing resiliency should be specifically related to environmental events.

Mr. Kelley responded in the negative, and referred to earlier examples of economic collapse, and noted that an event could be resource based, etc.

Mr. Seidel concurred, and stated that for the Committee to come out solely looking at environmental events would unduly limit its scope.

Committee Goals

Mr. Durbin asked the group to think about individuals and entities which the Committee might like to invite to future meetings. Members of the committee offered the following: Cambridge DPW, Department of Public Health, MIT, Harvard, National Guard, DCR, MBTA, Natural Emergency Response groups, someone from the local food system, and Hospitals. Members agreed that after formed, the Committee should seek to fill in demographic omissions of representation by inviting various communities to provide input.

Mr. Seidel asked if the Committee could dedicate a meeting to infrastructure in the community, and whether the group could take field trips.

Mr. Kelley responded that the Committee is encouraged to come up with places to visit.

Mr. Durbin stated that the Committee was still looking for members, and names of appropriate candidates should be forwarded to both Mr. Kelley and himself.

Mr. Kelley stated that his office was looking into ways for the Committee to communicate outside of meeting times and to share research and articles, including OneNote and Slack.

Mr. Kelley closed the meeting at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Wilford Durbin, *Acting Executive Assistant to the Committee*