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To : The Board of the Cambridge Development Authority

From : Stephen H. Kaiser

***Comment for the March 12, 2015 Public Form on Amendment  
#10 to the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan***

I am submitting this comment in advance of the hearing for your consideration.

To date, I have found the CRA process to be the best in the city in terms of presenting a plan first, before zoning has been adopted. Nevertheless, it does appear that the process did begin with draft zoning language, and the zoning concepts still remain more polished than the planning details. The opportunity for public comment on the plan is excellent. The Board appears to have followed its statutory obligations in preparing a plan amendment.

In preparing its plan the Authority has properly reconsidered prior statements of purposes by the Authority in 1977 and various other priorities recognized in the intervening years. The 1977 statement of purpose has served as a good basis to structure Section 102 of the plan amendment - as a 21<sup>st</sup> century statement of purposes for the Authority at Kendall Square.

Several elements of Section 102 are worthy of note, in particular :

“... To insure the replacement of such [decadent] conditions by well-planned, well-designed improvements which provide for the most appropriate reuse of the land in conformity with the general plan for the City of Cambridge (the “City”) as a whole and with definite local objectives .....

“... The improvement of land development and design to facilitate multi-modal circulation, emphasizing transit and pedestrian, and bicycle travel;

“The improvement of public transportation facilities, public infrastructure and utilities, and other public realm improvements;

“... The provision of a decent, pleasant, and humane environment involving a mixture of those land uses needed to produce balanced development;

“To capitalize on the location of rapid transit facilities to maximize the full socio-economic potential of the project area with transit-oriented land uses and densities, and consistent with the other objectives stated herein;

“To promote economic development which strengthens the City's tax base without unacceptably impacting upon the physical, social, and cultural environment;

“To establish the minimum necessary land use controls which promote development, yet protect the public interest and the common good; with a flexible set of controls which are adaptable to both current and future market conditions;

“To encourage the development of Kendall Square as an activity center to live, work, play, and learn; and

“To promote neighborhood safety, public health, and wellness through universal access and active environmental design.

“To promote both environmental sustainability and climate change resiliency through resource efficient development and district level infrastructure planning.

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The Amendment proposes in Section 108 to create a “transit impact mitigation fund” to “provide support for the operation of existing rail service.” This effort is supportive of the goal for transit-oriented development and the need to improve transit services to the Kendall Square area. What is the necessary authorization needed to “obligate developers to contribute to the fund”? Who would be those developers so affected, other than Boston Properties? Could this fund be used to reimburse the CRA for any actions for immediate transit initiatives, as intended to further the purposes of Section 102 with regard to transit improvements?

The plan amendment makes reference to the Kendall Square or K2 study “completed by the City of Cambridge.” In fact, the City has never completed the study. The transportation study and report was never finished and submitted. To my knowledge, no organizational entity has prepared a traffic and transit study for the Kendall Square to account for the anticipated development of at least four million square feet of proposed construction. No such study report has been forthcoming from MIT, the Cambridge Planning Board, Cambridge Community Development, Boston Properties, the Federal GSA/Volpe Center, or from the Authority itself.

The need for such a study to be done prior to any upzoning should be recognized as essential to whether or not new development will be successful both socially and economically. The plan amendment appears to recognize that we cannot rely on roadway and automobile travel as a solution to Kendall's circulation problems. Given the severe winter damage suffered by the MBTA in the past two months, our transit system is suffering from a loss of credibility and a weakening of aspirations and trust.

The concept of transit-oriented development has been severely weakened. No developer can use that term without recognizing how our recent winter experience undermines any such mythology. It is one thing to discuss investing billions of dollars to correct for deferred maintenance, when the stated goal is little more than getting the MBTA back to the way it was last year. It is another to define the improvements that are necessary in order to grow the transit system into handling new ridership, gaining reliability and demonstrating superior management and service.

The MBTA has been making a valiant effort to restore service on the Red Line to the way it was. New managers with rail service experience are being brought into service leadership positions. However, even with restoration of peak hour service on the Red Line with at least 26 operational trains, the service is still an erratic mix of overloaded trains mixed in with half-empty trains.

The MBTA does impose on-time performance demands on the commuter rail contractor Keolis, but does not keep or enforce any on-time requirements for its own transit service. As a result MBTA trains and many buses are not run to any regular schedule. Riders incur unneeded delays and frustrations from long waits for trains to appear. When those trains finally do arrive, they are often overloaded. Anxious riders must wait to get on a second train, or possibly a third or a fourth.

Mass transportation should not be another Guantanamo - with its implications of undue confinement, pain and torture. Yet for transit workers, managers and riders, these are not comforting times. We forget that in the days after the January 27 storm, the local newspapers carried stories of how easily we had survived the dreaded blizzard, with little damage and inconvenience. The aftermath seemed blissful.

We should have learned from the actions of top officials in the months leading up to the storms. Richard Davey, Secretary of Transportation, resigned and left office on October 31 of last year, declaring that he - as the states highest transportation official -- did not want to face another winter. What did he know that we all should have known?

Over the past decade, the plight of the MBTA has been obvious to most public officials and many members of the public. Five years ago we were promised "Reform Before Revenue," and instead received no meaningful reform and insufficient revenue. Too many people it seems love transit, but do not care for the MBTA. Given the track record of the MBTA since the major scandals of the early 1980s and the struggles with winter weather in 2011 and 2015, we should be doing everything we can to prevent the MBTA from becoming the Detroit of the American northeast.

By contrast, the 1978 blizzard brought forth headlines telling of hundreds of motorists stranded overnight on Route 128. A regional emergency was declared, with driving bans lasting a week. Many side streets in Cambridge were blocked by four feet of drifting snow. In 1978, coastal damage was severe in Revere and the South Shore. But during those difficult days the MBTA still struggled to keep running. And it survived with no images of collapse.

Our recent winter storms dropped record amounts of snow, but the situation was hardly a severe blizzard. The streets of cities and towns were cleared and kept open with surprising ease. Cambridge had only a few instances of "losing" a street to snow accumulations for long periods, as occurred in 1978.

This winter we have had a bigger loss. It was the loss of our transit service and our trust and belief in them. A couple of days after the first storm, our tranquility was shattered by a smoky fire aboard a Red Line. Patrons were forced to kick out a window to escape and were then castigated by an MBTA spokesman for overreacting. Broken-down trains, snow blockages, and third-rail icing forced the MBTA to shut down entirely.

Businesses could have opened their stores and offices, but instead they were kept closed. Neither their customers nor their employees could get there - without transit service. Stores lost business by 25% to 50%, and some will take a long time recovering. Transit services had been a major part of keeping our social and economic process working as one piece. We can recognize the institutional damage done to the MBTA. We have yet to recognize the emptiness of recent proposals to do halt our transit decline.

Consider these facts : three entities have proposed significant increases in development around Kendall Square. Each group is seeking to expand by a million square feet or more. MIT seeks a million square feet for its holdings at Kendall Square. The Federal GSA and the Volpe Center are proposing to expand the Volpe site by over one million square feet. With allowances for the current underdevelopment of the Volpe site by allowed zoning, the total new Volpe area development could rise by two million square feet. Of course, the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority is proposing one million square feet of new development at Kendall.

This is the four million square feet that I alluded to earlier. City officials have not alerted us to how much the individual pieces add up. And where are the transportation studies and plans to deal with this significant "storm" of new development?

MIT, widely recognized for its scientific and engineering erudition, retained a traffic consultant during the K2 study. Did MIT produce a traffic and transit study? No.

The Cambridge Community Development Department commissioned a traffic study as part of the Kendall Square K2 study. Did this consultant produce a report on their work? No.

The Volpe Transportation Center is a national laboratory that assists other government agencies on matters of transportation policy, planning and analysis. It has been in existence for almost 45 years. At the first information presentation meeting by Volpe and GSA to the Cambridge Planning Board last year, I suggested to the Director of the Volpe Center that he initiate a creative transportation study to deal with the likely expansion of activity. He had not even thought of the idea, let alone considered it. Has the Volpe Center done any subsequent traffic studies to deal with the impacts of its new site development? No.

Over the past several months, the Redevelopment Authority has heard numerous suggestions that the Authority become proactive in the area of transit operations and service planning. One early effort would be to look at simple and inexpensive programs to recoup lost system capacity due to irregular operation of trains and buses.

Given all the inactivity by the government and business community in seeking positive new ideas for improved transit service, a creative effort by the CRA would seem useful, welcome, and an example of government agency leadership. In its Plan Amendment, the CRA does propose seeking funds from developers to be used for improvements to mass transit, and this is a positive step none of the others has been willing to take. But has the Authority come up with a plan for how the transit monies could be used to positive effect? No.

The transit crisis in the Boston area has been written about in many reports over the past quarter century, including the sadly neglected report by David D'Alessandro. Two others are noteworthy. One is the January 1989 report by the Conservation Law Foundation, "Gridlock : Facing Boston's Transportation Dilemma." As well as being a recognition of the limits of auto traffic in cities, it also contained chapters describing the need to improve MBTA operations and management, as well as system expansion. The second report was released by the Urban Land Institute in 2012, "Hub and Spoke : Core Transit Congestion and The Future of Transit and Development in Greater Boston." Both of these reports were written by the same person, Stephanie Pollock, now the state Secretary of Transportation.

This year should be a time of transportation opportunity, both in resolving the problems with MBTA operations and in bringing about a new future for the Volpe Transportation Center. We would appear to have the best leader in the right position to create a new future for the MBTA and to be open to new ideas. This unusual situation should be seen as a significant opportunity for the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority.

The choice is fairly straightforward. Does the Authority wish to take the initiative and work for an effective mass transit solution to provide the essential infrastructure necessary for the daily functioning of four million square feet of new development? Does the Authority recognize that creating the transportation equivalent of eight East Cambridge courthouses or about ten Volpe Centers is a major problem waiting to be solved and that the Authority controls the resources that could contribute to a solution?

Or is the Authority content to take no action to resolve transportation needs? Is it content to be part of a triumvirate that will have the effect of hitting the MBTA with the impact of another massive snowstorm?

There is only one way to make sense of any of this development load and to allow the social values of the city to survive. That is to provide for adequate mass transit, and this means a functioning Red Line. We cannot afford to lose the Red Line, even partially, for a day or a month.

True, there are other priorities to consider in the city. There seem to be five primary issues today -- mass transit, schools, housing, jobs and the Olympics. Any concern for the true social values of the city would immediately knock the Olympics out without argument. All the more reason to attend the March 18 forum at the city Library, 6:30 PM, and to stress the top priorities for the city - mass transit, housing, and jobs. The Authority should revise its draft Amendment #10 to include a stronger commitment to mass transit and to housing. No upzoning should occur without it.

Sincerely,



Stephen H. Kaiser