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To : The Board of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority

From : Stephen H. Kaiser

### *CRA Forum of March 14 and New Transit Ideas*

The Board may be aware that there is a conflict in meetings scheduled for March 18. At the Main Library the Boston 2024 Olympics boosters will be presenting at a public forum, the same evening as the Board meeting. Because of my firm opposition to any Olympic proposal under the current plan and arrangements, I will be unable to attend the Board meeting and must instead attend the meeting on the Olympics.

With regard to an agenda report on the "benefits" forum, my own reactions were distinctly split. At first, I was highly negative, from the printed format of the forum and the drawn-out use of my old nemesis, PowerPoint. My later reaction was positive, because of the public interaction session and its results. The method was so successful it altered my view on the practical value of any such group interactions.

Initially, I was worried that the forum was a discussion only of the possible collateral benefits, and not of the pros and cons of the Kendall Square plan proposal. The public participation section appeared to be a variation on breakout groups, the method favored by CDD over the past 15 years. The initial PowerPoint presentation stretched out longer and longer. I was about ready to walk out.

By the middle of the meeting, what kept me there was that I was sitting between Heather Hoffman and Richie McKinnon, who are both Harvard graduates. If I had any old Harvard jokes to use up, that would be the time.

The public interaction process suddenly opened up as something quite different from the method used by Community Development and by the Authority in its strategic planning process. It took a while for the audience to catch on, but the use of small cards for written suggestions combined with the group doing the posting on boards allowed

for a more thoughtful and unadulterated participation process. It was a form of brainstorming that could be utilized either in a group or as individuals filling out the forms. Or a bit of both, which probably occurred in most cases.

The technology was not advanced. It was even primitive by modern expectations : foam boards, 5-by-8 cards, pens and stickers. The only flaw was in our penmanship - some people scribbled their comments illegibly. I spent five minutes block printing some of those comments on new cards to make them more readable.

This activity was not a review of the plan or the zoning. But it was a way of asking a rather motley group of citizens to think about some new ideas. How many ideas did we get - 100 or more? If one in ten is useful, that is excellent. If one in 100 is inventive, that is excellent too.

And we got at least one inventive idea, from another member of my group. It was the idea to install electronic display boards of train arrivals at street level, so people will know of the status of train arrivals before they go rushing pell-mell down the stairs to the platform. Display boards would mean less rush-rush-rush to get to a train that is not there.

Since that time, I have heard another suggestion for some sort of warning light to tell us that the Red Line is struggling or than service has been badly delayed. Now is the time to do more inventing. Take the earlier idea for a train display board and add three lights at the top. GREEN would mean system normal, YELLOW would mean some delays, and RED would mean the system is badly delayed. The colors would be controlled by on-time standards, not by MBTA public relations.

Now we have a composite good idea, and it all came from the grass roots. The idea arose from the people who ride the trains. And it would not have been possible if the Redevelopment Authority had not experimented with a new participation process.

Much of the media commentary for solving the ills of the MBTA has revolved around inconsequential issues such as firing MassDOT board members, eliminating the Board entirely, or playing shuffleboard with items in the T budget. This is all rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. None of that helps to actually improve the quality of service, which is actually determined by the riders themselves. From the March 14 CRA forum,

we now have a specific item to place on the list of actual improvements that can be made to enhance the public transit experience in Cambridge and Boston.

This one idea is worth more as a public benefit than all of the fluff being thrown up by the Olympics Committee. The danger here is that someone might suggest that the Olympics boosters should be fired and the CRA Board be appointed in their place to straighten out the Olympics snafus.

I did leave the meeting on March 14 with one regret. It is my sense that all improvements to transportation at Kendall Square are likely to be deferred to the MassDOT special committee on Kendall Square, and also with the select committee appointed by the Governor. My worry is that both the MassDOT committee and the Governor's committee will be too confined in their thinking - or will think only about billions of dollars in funding for transit.

The problem is more than money. It is about moving the hardware (trains) up and down the tracks in some sort of predictable manner. It is about an MBTA bureaucracy offering credible and trustworthy pronouncements, and not self-serving PR and coverups. Both the traveling public and businesses/institutions must come to trust the T again. It is about a population that is not angry with the T.

I contend that the mindset of government officials is unduly focused on money, and not on quality of service. Even before the snowstorms, transit service was erratic. Even before the storms, the MBTA did not operate any of its train systems by a fixed and predictable schedule. Will the train come in two minutes or will it come in 15??

These are totally unnecessary apprehensions for riders to endure. If the Japanese can operate their trains within a thirty-second window, and if the past MBTA practice is to have riders wait 15 minutes for a train and not be able to get on, then the MBTA should be able to choose the preferable Japanese alternative.

I disagree with any strategy for the CRA to defer to others. Waiting until others come up with solutions first is a formula for failure. Such a strategy relies on assuming the state processes will be successful, which they have not been in the past. If the state processes fail, then the CRA and Kendall Square fail with them.

In all the furore over the flaws of the MBTA, the one voice that has been largely silent is that of the professional engineers. They should be the ones who should look at the operations of transit services around the world and can recommend techniques that will help the MBTA correct its deficiencies.

The Redevelopment Authority can help by scheduling an agenda item for the April Board meeting, whereby Fay, Spofford and Thorndike would present their ideas on ways to achieve more effective transit service and more capacity in the system. Take that first step and then seek out a strategy for a proactive CRA to address transit priorities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in red ink, reading "Stephen H. Kaiser", is centered on a light gray rectangular background.

Stephen H. Kaiser