



*DRAFT*  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
**Lexington Center Charrette**  
June 11, 2005

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[insert aerial photo of center]

***Lexington Center Collaborative Chairs:***  
Daphne Politis, Lexington Center Committee  
Carl Oldenburg, Design Advisory Committee  
Greg Zurlo, Design Advisory Committee  
Joan Zahka, Lexington Center Committee

November 2005



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lexington Center Collaborative was co-founded by the Lexington Center Committee and the Design Advisory Committee in order to increase communication, coordination and collaboration among existing boards, committees, commissions and town departments all working towards improving Lexington Center.



*Displays at community-wide planning and design charrette included interactive exercises such as surveys.*

In an effort to bring all stakeholders together to help develop consensus and a common vision for the future, the Lexington Center Collaborative organized a community-wide planning and design charrette<sup>1</sup>. One of the steps building up to the charrette was a “Stakeholders Summit” where all relevant boards, committees, and town departments presented their current and planned projects for the center. Additionally relevant past studies were compiled and summarized. A web-site was developed where much of the information is presented to the public ([www.lexcollab.org](http://www.lexcollab.org)).

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<sup>1</sup> *The French word “charrette” means cart. The word itself initially appeared in the early part of the 1800s at the Ecole Des Beaux-Arts in Paris where a cart would circulate to collect the work of the architecture students who often not having finished working out the details of their project would get on the cart and continue working on their drawings until the last possible moment. Later the word’s meaning was broadened to describe an intense, interactive effort with a fixed deadline.*



*Participants formed small discussion groups and then reported back to the larger group at the end.*

Extensive outreach to the community included creating a booth for Discovery Day, widely distributing flyers and postcards, press coverage, and preparing an exhibit at the library.



*Sub-committees were formed to collect information regarding existing conditions and to make key observations regarding the town center to present at the charrette.*

The purpose of the charrette was to move forward from previous efforts and plans and to promote discussion among stakeholders about a vision for Lexington Center that catalyses action.

Approximately 100 residents, members of town boards and committees, town officials, merchants and landlords attended the day-long community conversation. The town center was viewed and discussed from every angle and a consensus reached about many issues regarding a desired future.

The following is a preliminary summary of the opinions, desires and concerns of the approximately 100 individuals who attended the day long community event referred to as “the charrette” held on June 11, 2005. The charrette was organized and managed by the Lexington Center Collaborative, founded by the Lexington Center Committee and the Design Advisory Board to facilitate and foster communication regarding improving Lexington Center.

The main purpose of the summary is to present a broad brush representation of public opinion as gleaned from charrette participants and to identify areas of consensus regarding Lexington Center’s future.

The conclusions presented in this summary are in no way to be considered statistically significant. In addition to the fact that the instruments soliciting input were not scientifically designed, participant responses are treated slightly differently by each small group facilitator and not all participants stayed all day and therefore did not participate in all modes. Additionally, those who chose to attend the charrette on a hot Saturday in June are a self-selected group. Instead the following draft summary is presented to you as a work in progress. It is intended to be used for discussion purposes and to inspire further exploration.

Participants included residents, landlords, merchants and town government officials and volunteers.



*Participants in the daylong charrette began by viewing information boards at booths staffed by volunteers prepared to discuss the various issues explained in words, photos, diagrams and maps.*



*Participants viewing a slide show on best practice examples from other towns.*

## **VISION STATEMENT FOR LEXINGTON CENTER**

The following vision statement is based on comments made by participants at the Lexington Center Charrette held on June 11, 2005 and developed by members of the Lexington Center Collaborative.

*From the openness of the Battle Green to the weekly farmers market, Lexington Center is the Town's Living Room. Tree lined streets and open spaces have areas for families to relax and connect with neighbors and where the families, residents, visitors and employees shop and dine. It's mixed use, walkable character, shaded seating, and areas of green open space are places to gather and connect. Neighborhood residents and families throughout the town come to the center for library, entertainment and municipal services and find unique and vibrant retailers.*

*There will be housing above retail in the center of town and buildings will be two- and three-stories high. Interesting and useful retail will occupy the ground floor of buildings. Signage will be creative and pedestrian-oriented with one-of-a-kind blade signs announcing the occupants of buildings that will be seen from all the way down the sidewalk. There will be pedestrian and bike amenities clustered in convenient locations. The Center will conform to universal design principles making it accessible to all. The backs of buildings will be aesthetically pleasing and trash and other service-oriented structures will be screened from view. The center will be safe, clean, attractive and diverse in its offerings and visual interest. It will preserve the historic character of the town while expressing it in more innovative ways. Buildings will have a more diverse architecture and be embellished with accessories such as beautiful signage and awnings.*

*Lexington Center will be alive and vibrant and thus will attract many visitors. It will accommodate those coming by car without letting the automobile dominate. Parking lots will be treated with landscaping and the connections between parking lots and retail will be enjoyable and attractive. These alleys and pathways will be places in and of themselves. Parking will be well-marked and additional spaces created when needed. There will be more public transportation options.*

*Mostly Lexington Center will be a warm and friendly place, geared towards providing a walkable and aesthetically pleasing and active center filled with interesting retail and diverse restaurants, municipal services, the library and Cary Hall, where residents of all ages can stroll and sit and gather and feel at home.*

## SUMMARY

The list on the following page represents a draft outline of issues around which there was the most consensus at the charrette held on June 11, 2005. This determination is based on a review of all modes of participation and the frequency and intensity of participant response. We have started to categorize the issues under potential types of action necessary to address the issue (e.g. zoning and other regulatory action, additional regulation and or/enforcement of existing regulations, design, administrative, and other types of actions). More will be done with this once the summary is complete.

The summary is based on the input compiled from the various modes of participation offered at the June 11<sup>th</sup> charrette; these included:

- Break Out Group Discussions including prioritization exercise
- Issue dots – opportunity to vote on which issues are most important to the center
- Issue Pads – opportunity to comment by issue
- Various short questionnaires, visual preference and other surveys

### Highest Degree of Consensus

Both in open-ended questioning as well as when asked directly their opinion on these issues, the following received the largest number of votes, the most discussion and commentary and enjoyed the highest degree of consensus. These are the need for:

- housing in the center
- taller buildings
- improved signage
- a review of the role of the Historic Districts Commission

***The number one issue around which there was almost total consensus was the need to allow housing in the center.***



In addition to the many discussions and other forms of soliciting input, the Land Use Sub-committee specifically surveyed participants as to their opinions with regard to housing and building height in Lexington Center. Participants were also asked to “vote” using dots on their preferences. There was a significant degree of consensus regarding both: by far the majority of those attending the charrette would like there to be housing in the center and most would like somewhat taller buildings (2-3 stories).

The following represents a preliminary summary of areas around which there seemed to be a relatively high degree of consensus among the participants of the June 11<sup>th</sup> planning and design charrette, which focused on improving Lexington Center.

### ***Zoning and Other Regulations***

- ❑ **Housing.** Revise current zoning to allow for housing in the center (needs more discussion regarding what kinds of housing and how much, e.g. degree of affordability)
- ❑ **Height Limits.** Revise current zoning to allow for increase in height limits
- ❑ **Parking.** Review parking regulations and parking needs (there seems to be no consensus regarding ways of addressing parking issues)
- ❑ **HDC.** Change how the Historic Districts Commission operates. Suggestions include removing the CBD from the Historic District, creating another design review body for the center, reviewing HDC mandate.
- ❑ **Signs.** Allow and encourage blade signs.

### ***Design***

- ❑ **Connectivity.** Improve connectivity, including crosswalks and alleys
- ❑ **Signage.** Improve signage
- ❑ **Accessibility.** Increase accessibility in the center by adhering to universal design principles
- ❑ **Visual interest.** Add visual interest in terms of awnings, signage, etc.

### ***Additional Regulations and/or Enforcement of Existing***

- ❑ **Sidewalks/walking/biking.** Increase sidewalk safety by making clear distinction between walkers and bikers; suggestions include providing more bike racks, bike ramps, bike lane on Mass. Ave., improve sidewalk connections

### ***Administrative/Governance/Leadership***

- ❑ **Cooperation.** Increase cooperation among committees
- ❑ **Need for a vision.** Need to articulate common goals and work towards them.

### ***Other***

- ❑ **Resistance to Change.** Address perceived residents' resistance to change
- ❑ **Senior Center.** Provide senior center in the center
- ❑ **Teens.** Provide more for teens
- ❑ **Uses.** Encourage mixed use and one of a kind shops as opposed to national chains.
- ❑ **Utility Poles.** Bury utility poles.
- ❑ **Public Transportation.** Increase public transportation options, including better promotion of Lexpress

## List of Assets and Liabilities

The following is a compilation of responses by charrette participants to the questions: “What are your favorite things about Lexington center?” and “What are your least favorite things about Lexington center?”

### Assets

#### *Most mentioned:*

Library  
Restaurants, coffee shops  
Open spaces: Depot Square, Battle Green  
Sense of place, character, that there is a definable center  
Pedestrian-orientation, wide sidewalks, benches  
Movie theater  
Historic character  
Meeting and greeting, social center

#### *Other:*

Bike path  
Trees, flowering pots in the spring  
Friendly to all ages  
Mix of uses/activities, including municipal, adjacent uses (high school, churches, fields)  
Residential integrated  
Location and potential for growth



### Liabilities

#### *Most mentioned:*

Lack of housing  
Vacancies and turn over  
Not enough diversity of uses  
Not handicap accessible  
Conflict between pedestrian and bikers  
Signage needs improvement  
Lack of enforcement of rules  
Lack of variety in building design, lack of whimsy in design, architectural blandness, lack of surprises  
Historic preservation is not reflective of current culture, feels like a stage set, fake design  
HDC regulations stifle active street life and interesting design

#### *Other:*

Traffic  
Parking  
Cleaning of ice and snow not adequate  
Lack of mass transit  
Lack of restaurants  
Lack of places for teens  
Connectivity: parking to businesses  
Lack of sense of having arrived  
Overflowing trash cans  
Depot Square park – no life in the center  
Lack of nightlife  
Back of stores by CVS  
Inconvenient parking meters  
Separation of towns people and businesses  
Battle Green Inn (the way it is now)

## Summary of Break Out Group Discussions

Perhaps the most representative mode is that of the report back from each small group. Based on extended discussions (which were in turn based on presentations and review of materials) participants were asked to outline their most important issues and to then prioritize these by “voting” on them in terms of their importance.

The following are the top priorities as “voted” on by the break out groups (not all group responses are compiled). Priority is defined by those issues receiving more than 5 votes per group.<sup>2</sup> . Again, the summary presented below is not intended to be fully representative (not all groups voted on all questions), but instead to provide stimulus for discussion.

### THINGS TO IMPROVE

Bring housing into the Center	25
Make Central Business District Zone separate from Historic District	21
Increase building height	17
Improve collaboration between committees and bldg. owners	17
Mixed Use (public/private) development w/parking on Meriam St.	16
Improve connectivity	15
Improve Signage (safety and aesthetics)	11
Locate Senior Center in the center	10
Introduce Rapid Transit to center from Cambridge	10
Follow Comprehensive Plan	7
Introduce more progressive style/architecture	7
Separate parking from zoning	7
More hotel and B&Bs and inns	6
More Flowers	6

### OBSTACLES

Historic Districts Commission	32
Zoning by-laws	22
Resistance to change by residents	15
High Rents	14
Lack of vision /lack of commitment to common purpose	12
Too much fragmentation, lack of cooperation	8
Linkage of parking & use in by-laws	7

<sup>2</sup> Each group was comprised of approximately 10 members each of whom was given 5 dots for each prioritization exercise, with which the groups “voted” on issues as outlined by the members as a response to a given set of questions. Each participant was instructed not to place more than 3 dots on any particular issue so as not to inadvertently skew the results.

## NEXT STEPS

It is the intent of the Collaborative to determine whether or not the issues as they emerged at the charrette are representative of a larger cross-section of the town. In addition to doing a more thorough review and summary, the Lexington Center Collaborative intends to publish the final summary in the newspaper, post it on the website and other venues with the purpose of soliciting input from additional members of the community, validating and clarifying the issues further.

The Lexington Center Collaborative has set up an exhibit of materials prepared for the charrette in the downstairs of the Cary Library building. Residents may submit their reactions and comments while at the exhibit.



*Report back from the small group discussions at the charrette included a teen perspective. They provided their input on a vision of the town's future through words and drawings.*