An “Insider’s” “Outside” perspective on Zoning Reform in Cambridge

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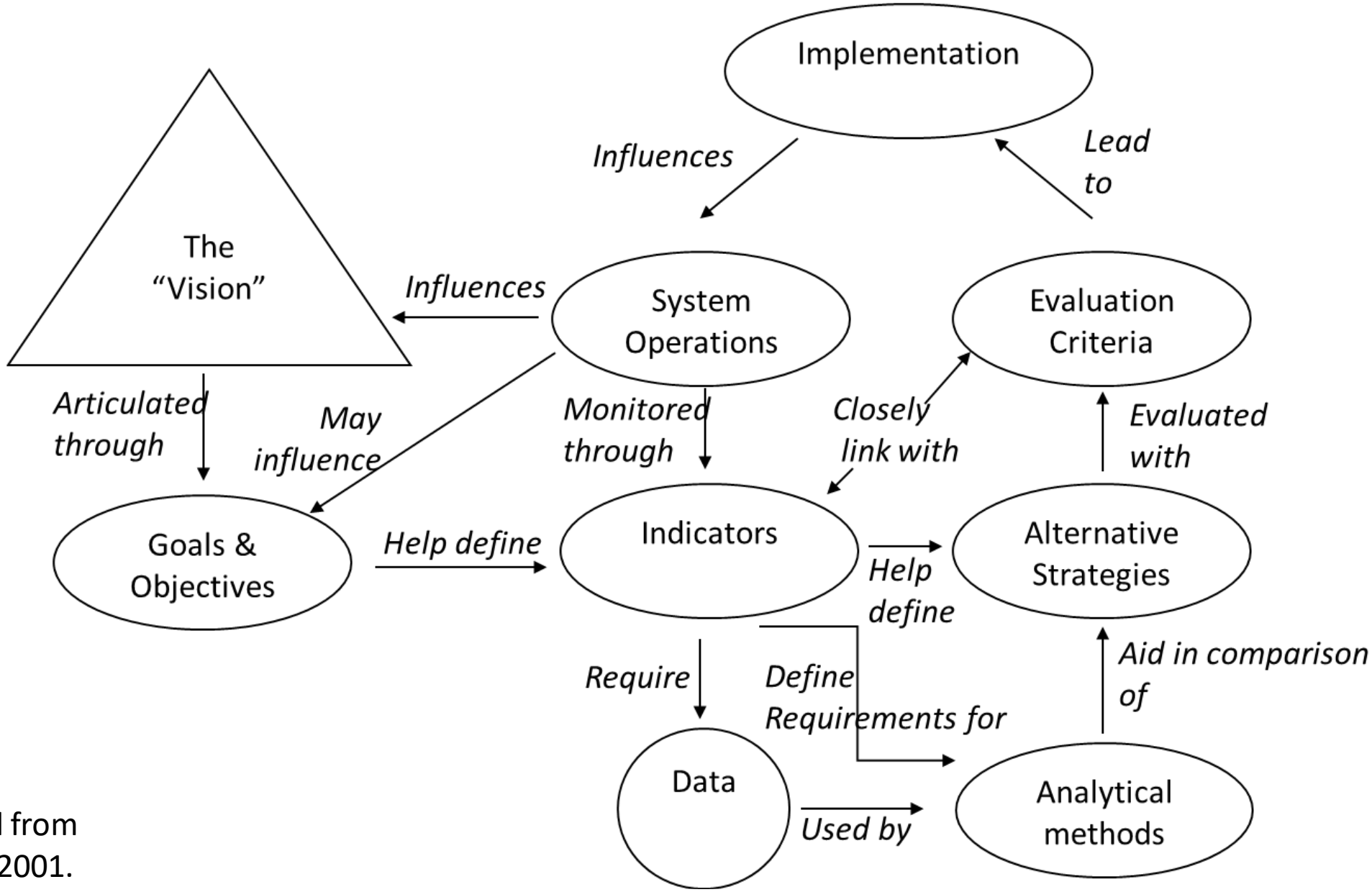
About Me

- Cambridge Resident since 2001
  - Renter: 2001-2006
  - Condo Owner: 2006-present
- Professor, Mobility and Urban Planning, Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP), MIT, since 2005
  - Primary areas of interest: behavioral modeling (e.g., how we choose to travel), simulation modeling (e.g., how ridership might change with a new metro line), policy implementation.
  - Since 2021: Dept Head.
- My views/perspectives today **DO NOT** represent my organization!

First… Thank you!

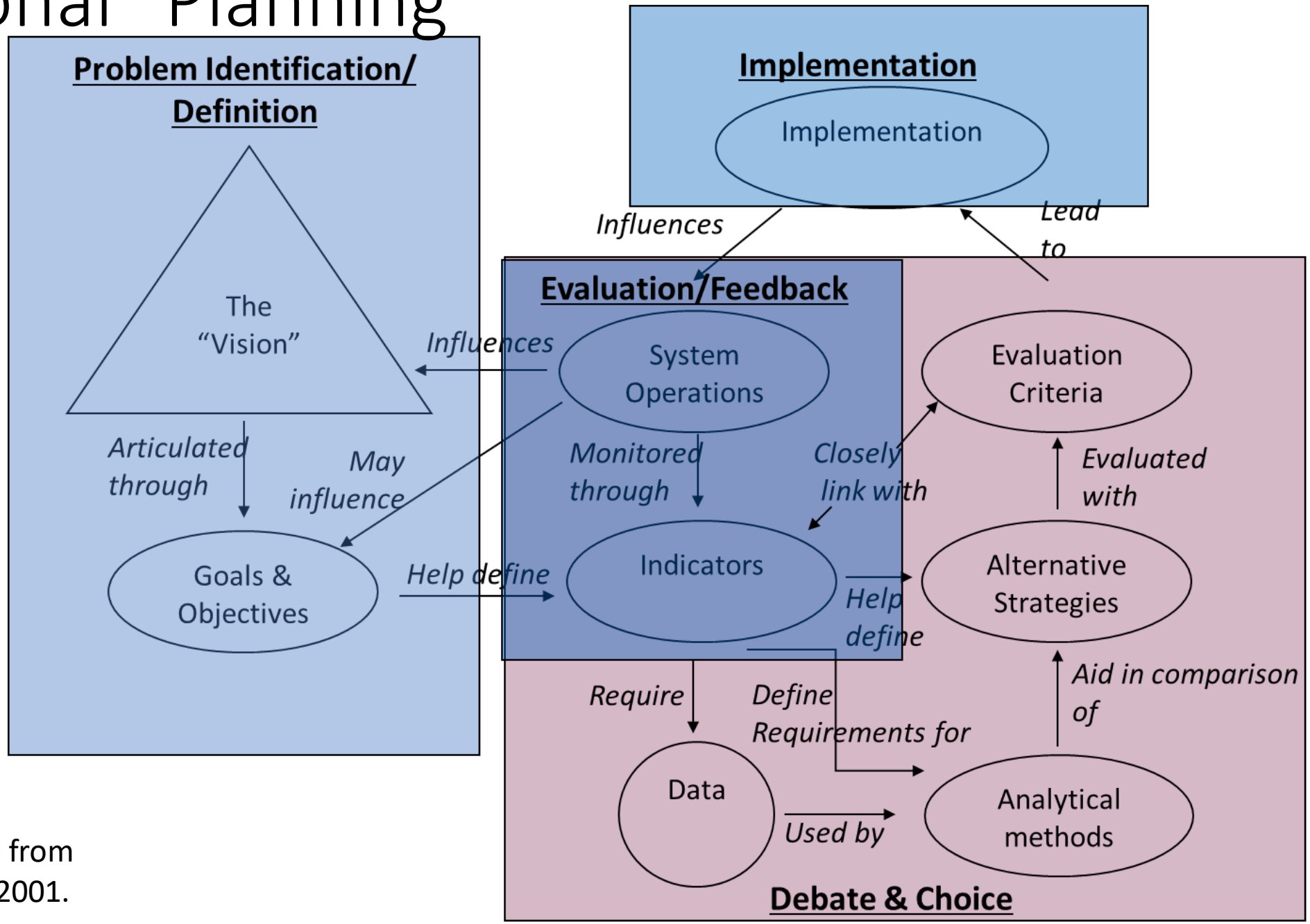
- City of Cambridge Staff
- Citizenry
- The City Council

“Rational” Planning



Source: Adapted from Meyer & Miller, 2001.

“Rational” Planning



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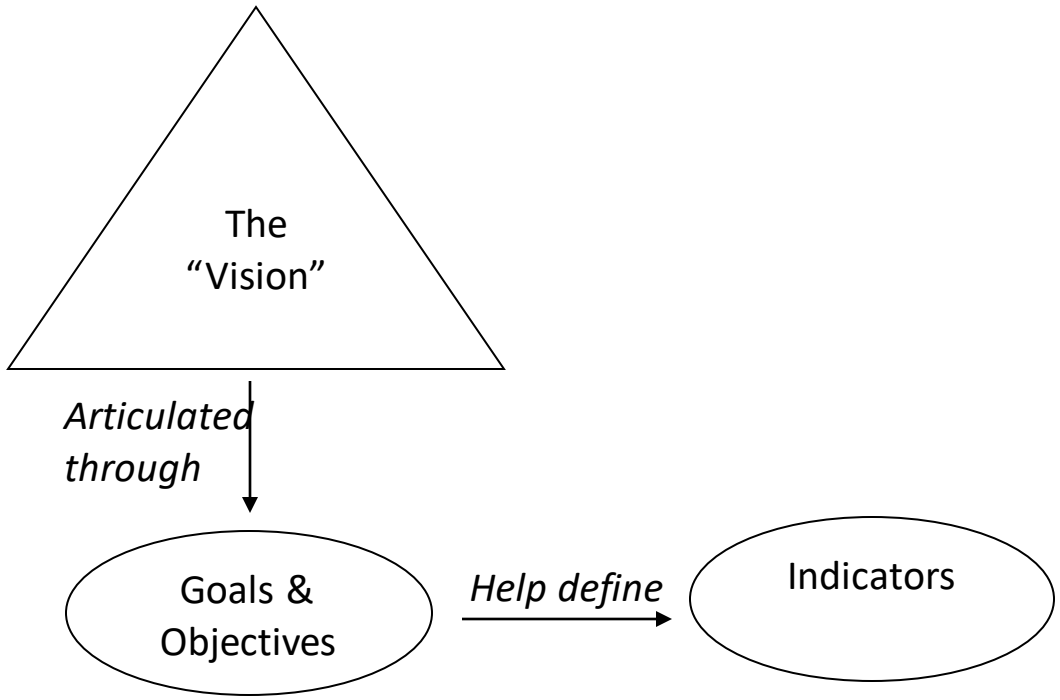
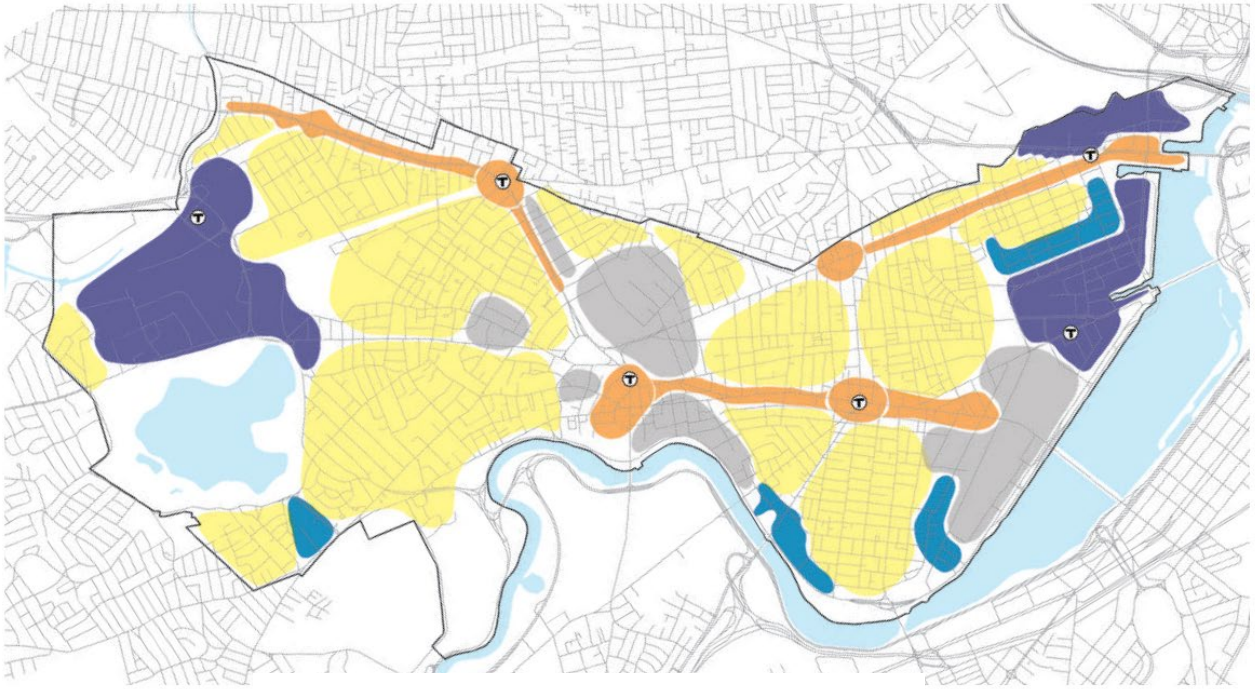
“Rational” Planning: *Envision Cambridge*





Source: Adapted from Meyer & Miller, 2001.

Envision Cambridge

"A balanced approach to development looks to direct and channel growth to those locations and districts where change would have the most positive impact, at the same time preserving neighborhoods with stable patterns of development and enhancing attributes that help achieve our overall community goals."

"We're a victim of our own success... We must strike a balance between moderate growth and NIMBYism... Build [new buildings] consistent with the neighborhood."

—Visitor to Danehy Park

"Cambridge feels like a neighborhood and should stay that way."

—Alewife resident

"[I envision...] mid-sized structure, not sky scrapers, but buildings large enough to accommodate more housing."

—Worker in Central Square

"[I envision urban form will be...] similar in scale (height) to the current Cambridge, but more dense, with infill and more people in the less populated parts of the city."

—Porter Square resident

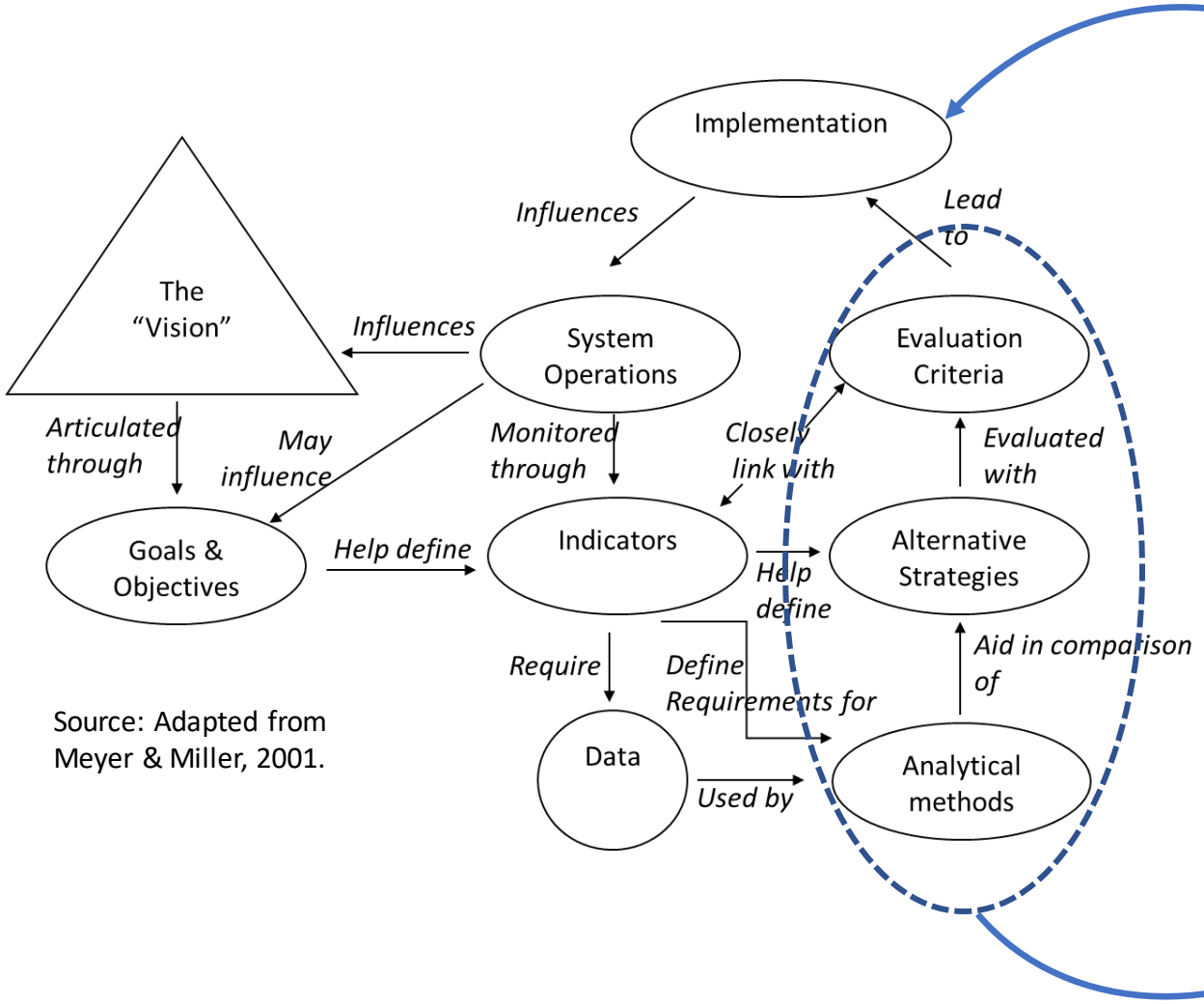
"[I envision Cambridge will have...] some density close to MBTA stations, while preserving the character in other parts of the city."

—Visitor to River Festival

"Density is OK to increase as long as the character of the neighborhoods are maintained."

—Porter Square resident

“Rational” Planning: *Envision Cambridge*



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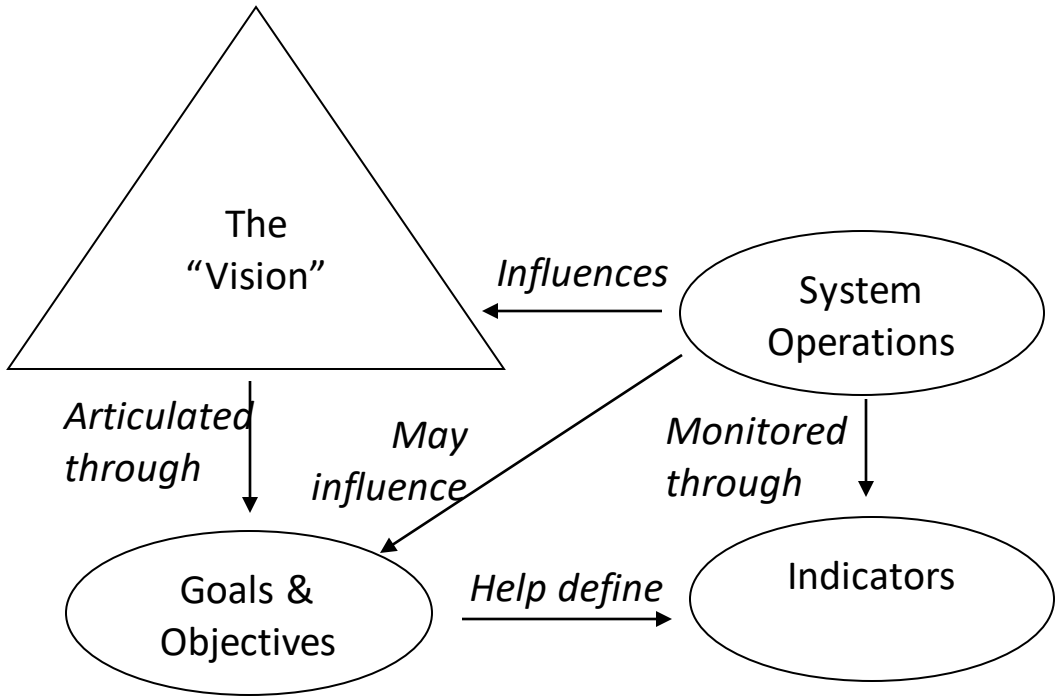
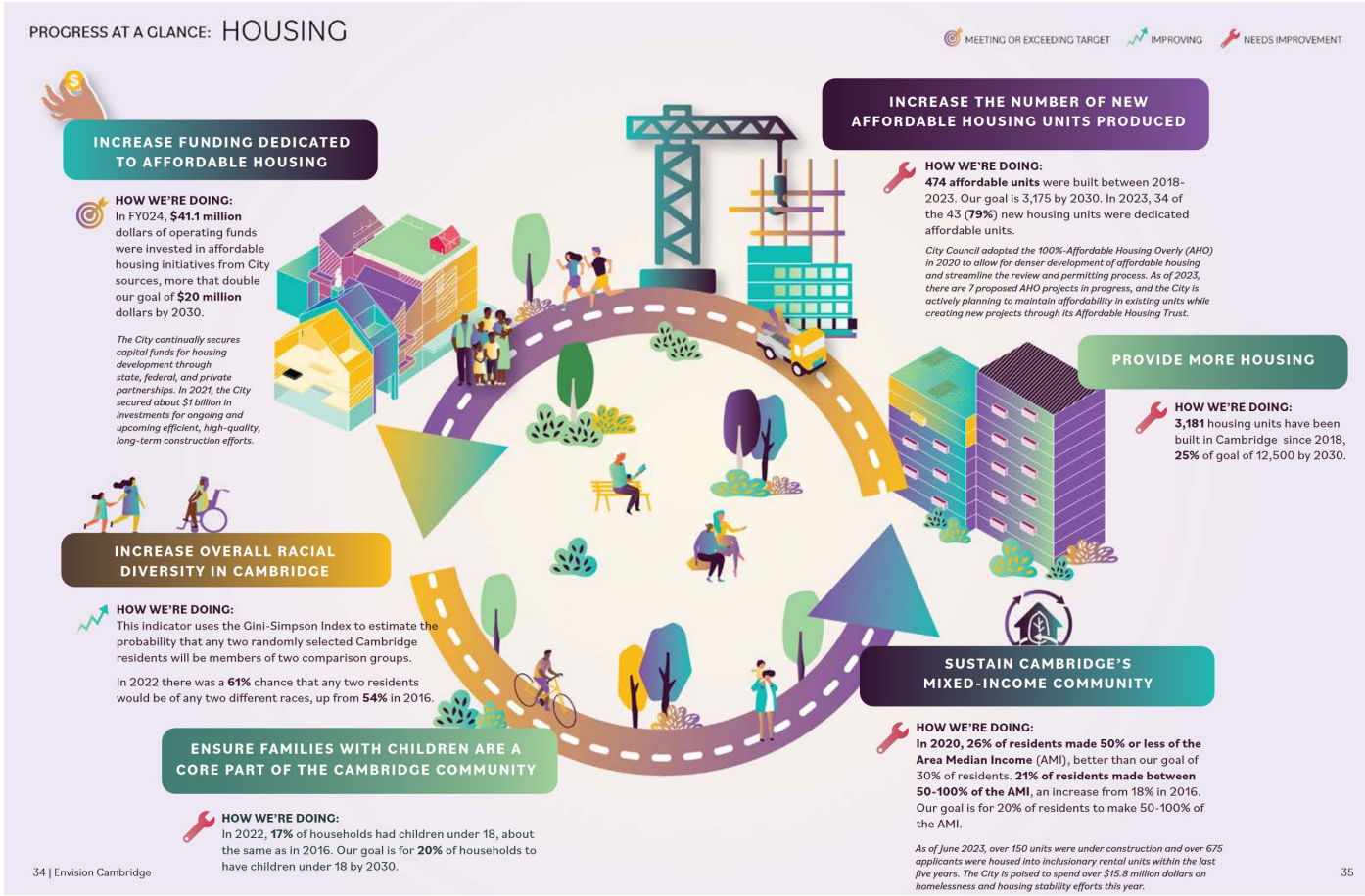
Envision Cambridge – Five years in…





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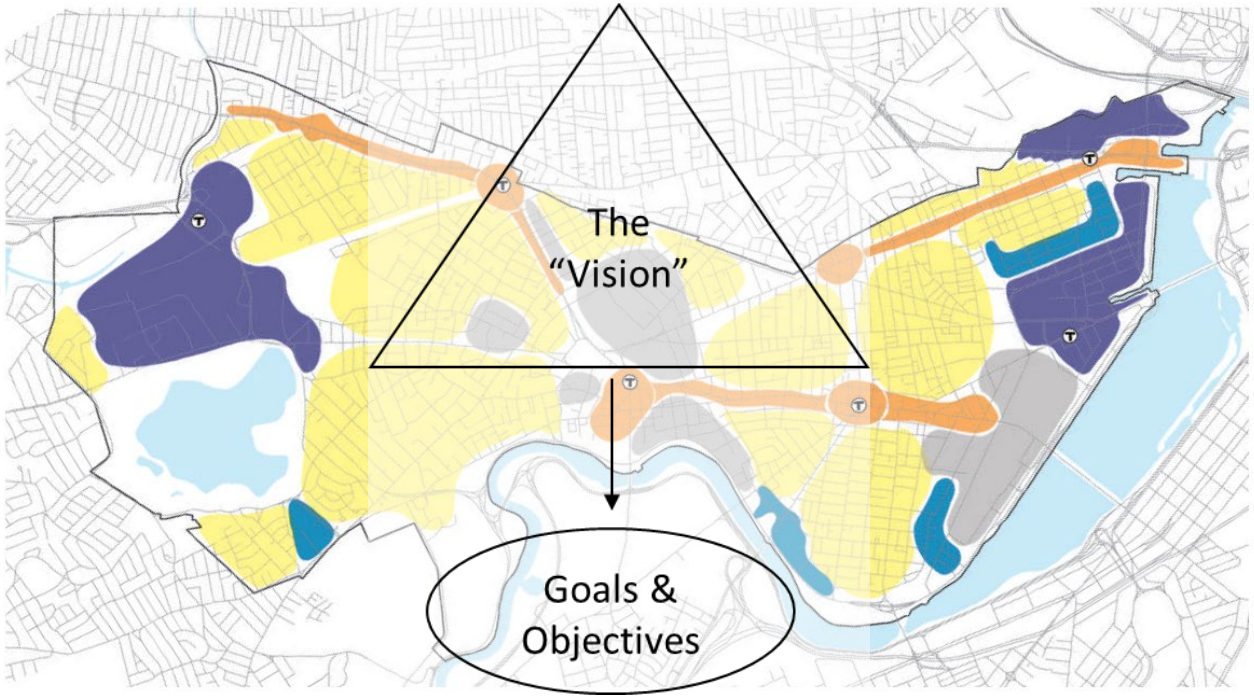
The Zoning Proposal and Cambridge's Vision…



Residential Neighborhoods

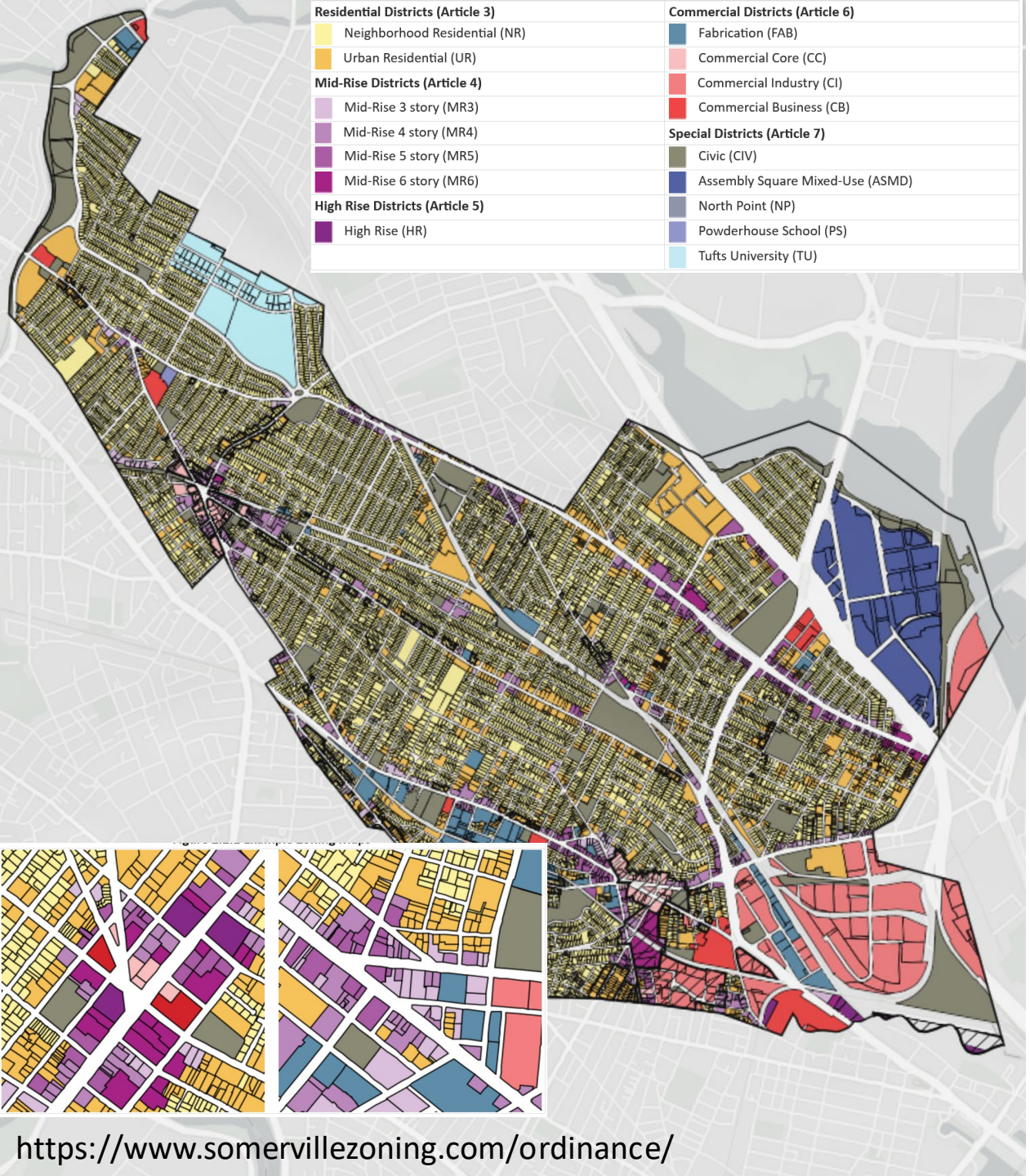
Squares and Major Mixed-Use Corridors

Higher Education Institutional Areas

Transition Areas

Evolving Mixed-Use Districts

- How, specifically, will it lead to the form and function laid out in *Envision Cambridge?*
- Based on what type of analysis?
- Are the results of that analysis public?
- What alternatives were considered?



https://www.somervillezoning.com/ordinance/

What about Form-Based Codes?

- Reflect meaningful spatial patterns, based on locational intensity
- Incorporate smaller dimensions, keyed to locations
- Aim for diversity of uses within smaller zonal areas
- Prioritize size, shape, placement of buildings, not use
- Integrate plans (e.g., *Envision*) with codes

E.g., Talen, 2013; 2021

In sum/parting thoughts

- Again, Thank you!
- It’s “easy” to be a critic…

In sum/parting thoughts

- *Envision Cambridge:* Strong foundation
- Zoning reform
  - critical to achieving the vision
- Zoning reform: *not* panacea to affordability crisis
  - Evidence is a ambiguous, **at best** (e.g., Freemark, 2023)
- Current proposal: unclear spatial link to *Envision Cambridge*
  - Too much faith in "the market" delivering
  - And, unclear what alternatives were considered
- Form-Based Codes: An alternative worth considering
  (e.g., FBCI/SGA, 2021; Garde and Hoff, 2017; Talen, 2013, 2021)
  - Explicitly deal with form, can be easier to interpret, context-sensitive, community-engaged, etc.
  - *Not* a light lift, *not* panacea
- Let's look to our neighbors as compelling precedent (City of Somerville)

References

- City of Somerville. Zoning Ordinance. https://online.encodeplus.com/regs/somerville-ma/doc-viewer.aspx?secid=921#secid-326
- Freemark, Y. "Zoning change: Upzonings, downzonings, and their impacts on residential construction, housing costs, and neighborhood demographics." *Journal of Planning Literature* 38.4 (2023): 548-570.
- FBCI/SGA. *Zoned In: Economic Benefits & Shared Prosperity with Form-Based Codes* (2021). https://smartgrowthamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Economic-Benefits-of-FBCs-sRGB.pdf
- Garde, A., A. Hoff. "Zoning reform for advancing sustainability: insights from Denver's form-based code." *Journal of urban Design* 22.6 (2017): 845-865.
- Talen, E. "The socio-economic context of form-based codes." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 214 (2021): 104182.
- Talen, E. "Zoning for and against sprawl: The case for form-based codes." *Journal of urban design* 18.2 (2013): 175-200.