

**INTERVIEWER:** Today is Tuesday, September 15, 2015. I'm Joe McMaster. And as part of the MIT Infinite History Project, we're talking with Henrietta Davis.

Miss Davis is a former mayor, city councilor, and school committee member for the city of Cambridge. Miss Davis has lived in the Cambridgeport neighborhood of Cambridge since 1969. Among her many accomplishments during her career in city government were the Cambridge Compact for a Sustainable Future and the Net Zero Action Plan.

She's been an advocate for non-auto transportation, public health initiatives for children and seniors, energy efficiency as a tool to combat climate change, and as an advocate for preserving open spaces in neighborhoods, just to name a few. Miss Davis has a bachelor's degree from the University of Rochester, a master's degree in social planning from Boston College Graduate School of Social Work, and a master's degree in public administration from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Thank you for speaking with us, Miss Davis.

**DAVIS:** Nice to be with you.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you and MIT go way back, I gather.

**DAVIS:** Yes. Well, I've been here since the end of the '60s, as you noted. And in the early 1970s I went to social work school at Boston College, and enrolled in community organizing and social planning, and had the option of cross registering with other local institutions. So I took my basic social work classes and community organizing classes at BC, but I took a number of classes at MIT-- really important classes for me as a public policy person.

For one thing, I took a fabulous city planning class with Kevin Lynch, who was one of the icons of city planning for all people everywhere. I took a class with Rob Hollister in city services. I took a class on planning law with Bill [? Doble. ?]

I had great classes here. I really enjoyed it, and it augmented what I was doing at BC tremendously well. Not to mention that it was a shorter commute since I live in Cambridgeport.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. So you lived in Cambridgeport, as we noted, since 1969--

**DAVIS:** Well, actually '67.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, '67. In the same house, I read somewhere. I don't know if that's true.

**DAVIS:** Well, it's in the same house since 1969. I rented from MIT. I forgot-- I rented from MIT. MIT owned that property, and along with a lot of other property in my block. I think it was 16 or 17 houses in one block.

And MIT intended at some point to turn it into faculty housing. It was going to be a faculty green. And they were able to acquire the property because of the Inner Belt, the shadow of the Inner Belt on the Cambridgeport neighborhood.

So I lived there first as a tenant. And then I don't know who was advising them, but they put all these properties on the market at once. Well, you know you're not supposed to do that, right? Because if you do that, then the price gets depressed. And lucky for me, it did. And I bought this two-family house that I've been living in ever since.

So thank you, MIT, for that, for giving me a home. And yeah, so I've been there. And at first I was there with roommates, and eventually I got married and had children. And our family grew up there. And now it's my husband and myself are empty nesters with a dog.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you've probably seen a lot of change. What's it been like, and what's sort of your early memories of MIT? Maybe it goes back even before registering here as a student. I don't know.

**DAVIS:** Well, it was only a few years before then. My first probably, relationship, really was the house that I was living in, so that-- what was his name? I forget his name who represented the landlord, who was MIT. That was probably my first connection. But I don't think that was terribly significant.

I don't know. I think it was over there. It was more over there than it is now, because obviously the campus has grown and gotten closer and closer to the neighborhood. It wasn't quite as close then. It was on the other side of the railroad tracks.

So I think really my first encounter was pretty much as a student, although there was a lot of turmoil already because of the purchase of the Simplex site, which I don't know if you've gone into this in some of your other conversations. But MIT bought the Simplex Wire and Cable Company, which is now the site of University Park. And in the neighborhood there were lots of conversations and dreams about what should become of all this land.

It should all, of course, become a park. That's what I learned when I was an elected official, that every time land becomes available, it should become a park. Well, you know, that doesn't happen. But there was another MIT class, which I can't remember-- maybe I did register for it-- called Ecologue which was a participatory planning class, in which we sort of took on what would be the future of this huge site that MIT had bought, and the hopes and dreams of the neighborhood, again, including all the parkland that should be there.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how did it work out? Did it--

**DAVIS:** Oh, terribly.

[LAUGHTER]

**INTERVIEWER:** But it didn't work out as you guys--

**DAVIS:** Well, Ecologue, it turned out to be a focal point for a lot of conflict, because the dreamers thought, well, of course we should have our way. And some of us were not quite so dreamy, but we still probably had wishes. And so it became a point of conflict for poor MIT, who had this class that was not working in their interests.

So at the time, it was uncomfortable as a neighbor to be with other neighbors who felt somehow that they had the right to determine what the university would do with its property. I guess that makes me sort of conservative in a Cambridge sense. But I mean, a few things, but the whole thing?

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. I guess that issue went on for quite some time.

**DAVIS:** Oh yes, it certainly did. It certainly did.

**INTERVIEWER:** So did you originally plan to go into politics, or did you have other things in mind originally?

**DAVIS:** Well, that kind of happened at MIT also, because in this Bill Doebel class I took on planning law, he did an exercise and he said, picture yourself in 20 years. Where will you be? And it wasn't until I sort of did that free writing that I realized that I was interested in politics. And even though I had done kind of volunteer work when I was in high school in Newton on campaigns, I didn't really intend to go into politics.

And when I went to social work school, I didn't think I was going to do that. It wasn't actually until my kids were born and I thought, a lot of these other things don't work with children. How about something that's sort of more amorphous in terms of the time? Like working all the time instead of just part time. And so working for the city, working as a school committee member made sense. Plus, I had of course the interest in what the schools were going to be like for my kids.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. But you started out, actually, I believe in journalism, and even some other fields, maybe.

**DAVIS:** Well, I started off as a planner for the city. That was my first job. I was a neighborhood planner, sort of really following up on the MIT part of my social work career. I ended up actually in city planning. And I worked there for a few years, and then did some social service planning. And then the market fell away, as it sometimes does, and what was left but journalism, which I loved doing.

It was really a lot of fun. I did radio and a lot of radio pieces. I had a column in the *Herald* and I wrote for the *Globe*. And I was the New England stringer for *Money* magazine. I was a stringer for *Time*. So I had like a whole bunch of little almost non-paying gigs that somehow kept me together.

**INTERVIEWER:** Somehow almost added up maybe to a paying gig.

**DAVIS:** Well, as long as Richard was working. As long as my husband worked, I could do that.

**INTERVIEWER:** So then somehow you came back to politics, I guess, right?

**DAVIS:** Well, I was working running a daycare center-- actually a parent cooperative, which is extremely democratic. Everybody gets at least one vote. Two votes out of each household. Very small, only 35 kids, but 70 adults who had a say. So part of my job was kind of to run that democratic process. And I realized, well, if I can do this, then I can certainly run for political office. It can't be any harder than working with a group of very interested, invested parents.

And it was a good grounding. It was such a good grounding at the Agassiz preschool that five people from that preschool ended up running for office-- like a democratic hotbed. And winning-- I mean, not just running. They served.

**INTERVIEWER:** All in Cambridge?

**DAVIS:** Yeah. So Craig Kelley was a parent at the Agassiz preschool. And Nancy Walser, who was on the school committee. Luc Schuster was a student there. I'm sure forgetting somebody, which you're never supposed to do. Oh, Alice Turkel, who went on the school committee after me, because when I knew I was going to city council, I said Alice, how about you? Why don't you-- and she did.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow. That's extraordinary.

**DAVIS:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** So tell me about the time on the school committee. What were sort of the challenges that the city and you all faced, and were sort of your goals for that?

**DAVIS:** Well, when I first ran, I ran with MIT and Harvard in mind. My stump speech was, here we are in Cambridge, a small city with a relatively small school system, between two major institutions, Harvard and MIT. Why aren't our schools the best in the country? So that was my stump speech. And that underpinned all that I thought, that our kids deserved to have the best opportunity, all of our kids, and that the benefit of the knowledge that there was in the community should devolve to what was going on in our school system.

So I actually became a kind of specialist in a couple of areas on the school committee. One was science education, and I worked with a lot of the university folks to develop a better science department for the schools. There was no coordinator for the science department. And the Partnership for Public Education, which was housed here at MIT, I worked with their staff and officers, including John Shattuck, who went on to become a famous ambassador, to make sure that we hired somebody to be the coordinator of science education for the Cambridge public schools.

And that kind of led to really practically everything that went from there. Because you couldn't do anything if you didn't have anybody in charge of it. And I think that was-- I'm very proud of that, because I think it was a major step that really said, we are a science city. Our science education should be really good, and get as good as it can get.

And it's not perfect now. It certainly wasn't perfect in the few years that I was on the school committee. But a statement was made. You can't just ignore this problem.

And so that's what I got involved with there. And also with health education for kids. And that continued to be an interest of mine on the-- when I was on city council for years and years.

**INTERVIEWER:** So what was the answer? Why weren't schools, like in many places probably, why weren't they better, given especially these two great institutions?

**DAVIS:** Well, having the institutions in the community, I'm sure you know, doesn't mean that what goes on in the schools reflects it at all. And it depended very much on who wanted to open the door and what potential there was for opening the doors between the institutions and the public schools. I think that fundamentally it had to do with Prop 2 1/2, that the coordinator positions had been eliminated when they could be. And that meant, you know, when NIH or NSF was calling, there was nobody really who answered the call.

And that's what happened, actually. I found out through somebody else that NSF was having a conference on urban science education in Cleveland, and got myself sent there as a lowly school committee member. And they came up to me from the federal government and said, well, who do we call? What do we-- who can we call to connect up with the school system? And I realized that there just really wasn't anybody who was championing science education. And as I said, I worked with the Partnership for Public Education to make sure there was a champion in the school system. And that worked out pretty well.

**INTERVIEWER:** And did you work with MIT? I mean, did MIT open its doors to the schools in some way or other?

**DAVIS:** Peripherally, that was going on anyway. Not to the degree that it does now, though. I mean, it's really vastly different now than it was then, for a lot of different reasons, and a lot of good reasons. But there's always more.

I mean, one of the last things I did as mayor was to write a letter to the president of MIT and say, we really need internships for our kids. We need our kids to have times, places, where they can work in the summertime, where they can experience science directly. And President Reif was very welcoming and said that that was a good idea.

I don't know what actually happened. I hope that it was able to be followed through upon. But still, there's always more, because the challenges that are out there with science education are tremendous in so many ways. But for us in Cambridge, where all the jobs, so many of the great jobs are in Kendall Square and science and technology and engineering, arts and math-- STEAM-- we really have to work together to make sure that kids have a ladder, a roadmap, whatever analogy you want to use, or metaphor, for them to be able to feel very empowered over being able to get jobs in those really important fields.

Those are the jobs. That's what we need to train kids for in so many ways. So that's continued to be a really important part of what I worked on as an elected official, is that connection not just to the universities, but also to the jobs related to science-- to STEAM, what they like to call STEAM.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. And you mentioned sort of the health initiatives, too. Maybe you can talk a little bit about that.

**DAVIS:** In 1990, there was a project called the Health of the City that came from the federal government, and from a foundation, the name of which I'm not remembering right this moment. Maybe Rockefeller-- eventually became Pew. But we were setting goals for the city to become healthier.

And I became at that point the co-chair with David Link, who was at Cambridge Hospital, a pediatrician there, of something called the Healthy Children Task Force. And we worked for a good 20 years on finding barriers to healthy outcomes for kids and developing programs to meet those needs. We like to say that Michelle Obama called us about her initiative, because we didn't sign up because we were already doing it. And we had done so many early things on healthy eating and physical activity that have been a model for the country, I think.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's great. That's great. So some of this obviously spans much more than your school committee days.

**DAVIS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** But at some point you decided to run for city council, I guess. And how did that come about?

**DAVIS:** I remember it as experiencing the same problems coming around again and thinking, I don't want to do these again. And I had gone to the Kennedy School to get another master's degree. And part of being at the Kennedy School is kind of looking at yourself and saying, what am I going to do now? And as part of a course called To Be a Politician, I kind of looked inside myself and said, yeah, I kind of would like to continue doing this.

And the opportunity that came up was on council. Somebody stepped down, somebody who was in my neighborhood, so it made it even more of a natural fit. So I decided to run. And I only like to win when I run, because otherwise it's really quite boring. So I was lucky enough-- I worked hard enough, I should say really, to be elected the first time to city council. And the rest was history for another 16 years.

**INTERVIEWER:** With a term-- or more than one, I'm not sure, as mayor in there, right? Is that how that works in Cambridge?

**DAVIS:** I was the vice mayor for two terms, and I was the mayor for the last term that I was on the council.

**INTERVIEWER:** Great. So during that-- I mean, that's a huge amount of time that we're talking about, but what were some of the things that you're most proud of during that time?

**DAVIS:** Well, I am very proud of the Healthy Children Task Force and all the health things that we did. I'm really proud of the science things that we talked about as well. I'm quite proud of the environmental record, which we haven't talked about yet. But one of the things that I did when I got on the council is I became a real champion for climate issues.

And that was started in about the year 2000. And I was able to work a lot on things like LEED-- making sure the city built only LEED-certified buildings, and that-- what are some of the other things? Eventually-- I should think of all my roster of all those environmental things. But non-auto transportation, and by the end, by the time I was completing my service, we were talking about net zero, and that buildings could be built so that they would be so energy efficient that they would be able to supply the remaining amount of energy by generation-- especially good if it was generation on site.

So toward the end, say five, six years ago, I proposed that we build the first net-zero elementary school, which is the King School that's just been completed on Putnam Avenue. Unfortunately-- well it's almost completed. Just a skosh short. Unfortunately, it's not quite net zero, but it's net-zero ready.

And the next school building, which is going to be under construction next year on Cambridge Street, will be a net-zero building for sure, with a plan to make all succeeding buildings net zero. So this whole net-zero concept, this idea of what are we going to do so that we can get off of carbon and save the planet-- which always sounds so dramatic, but really it's very important, that we've been doing a lot of things here in Cambridge.

I'm very proud of that, because we're a model for what other, larger cities have done after that. And we kind of do proof of concept here. So with the net zero task force, we set a target of reductions. So 80% reduction in carbon by 2040, and it seems clear that if we get on that path, we would have 100%-- we would be carbon neutral by 2050. So that kind of thing, if a small city of 100,000 with a lot of commercial development can do that, and with labs and other things that we have, then we can say to others, look at this. Consider this. See if this is something you, Boston, could do. Is this something you, Chicago, could do? And I think that we'll turn out to be the kind of place that sort of shows, yeah, this is not something to be afraid of.

And in fact, when the idea first came up-- and it came from the public, not from me-- there was a lot of concern that this was one of those crazy ideas from an activist community, and this'll just scare business away. And some people here at MIT themselves were kind of concerned. Is this going to mean the death of development in the city?

And sure enough, when we put this task force together and everybody worked together to really look at the real facts behind it, we determined that if we went carefully, slowly, deliberately, and using science as our base, that we think we could do this, that we could cut this up into the kind of pieces that would mean that we would be reducing our carbon emissions by a greater and greater amount, even while growing at the incredible rate that Cambridge still is growing. So I'm really proud of that.

But before that, and something that led up to making that possible, I think, was that when I was the mayor, I decided to take advantage of the office, the ability to concentrate on one important project on climate, and to develop something called the Cambridge Compact for a Sustainable Future. I had for a long time been talking about how universities are a terribly important part of the environmental picture in cities. And I was the chair of the Energy, Environment and Natural Resources Committee at the National League of Cities, and at the time the chair of the University Community Caucus. And I was always trying to say to them, look, you have these universities. They're part of your community. And they can really make a difference. If you work together, then you could really make a difference in these environmental matters.

For us here in Cambridge, between Harvard, MIT and the city, we control 25 percent of the building stock. And most of our emissions, 80% of our emissions, are from buildings. So if we all work together, we are going to have a tremendous impact on the future of emissions in the city. And that was the basis, really, for being able to talk about net zero, is that we understood how important buildings were, how buildings work to some extent-- and need to know more. But if we all got together and we all did the same sorts of things that we'd be able to make a difference all holding hands.

The compact started with discussions between Harvard, MIT and the city, and quickly the conversation went to, well, it shouldn't just be us. It should include also some of these larger companies that are based here in Cambridge. If we get them on board, then we'll be able to really make even more of a difference.

In fact, obviously, when you work with companies that are based here in Cambridge, they have branches elsewhere too. So if you can make a difference here, you can have an impact, well, worldwide for heaven's sake, right? Why not?

And so that's what happened is that after about a year and a half, we were able to sign the compact with these partners. And they've hired a part-time person. They're in the process of doing some goal setting. I had to leave it behind when I left office, at least from the point of view of being the leader or the organizing person. But I'm now glad to see that we're still working together.

And I think as far as net zero went, that was really important. That's who sat at the table with citizens. Members of the compact sat at the table with citizens, sat at the table with city people, and all together-- and experts, and all together we were able to say, yeah, we looked at our building stock. We think we can do this. We think if we do it deliberately, carefully, and with a reasonable time frame, we'll be able to knock back the carbon in the city from buildings, and that that will make a huge difference.

**INTERVIEWER:** So the compact was the city and Harvard and MIT signing on to say, we're going to do this. We're gonna try to achieve these goals?

**DAVIS:** Yes. Well, yes, we're going to work together, but the goals per se, as far as net zero, that was a year later, with the compact working with others to do that. But it was really this idea that we'll march together on buildings. We'll work together on-- I think we had seven things altogether, on buildings, vulnerability assessment, district energy, all those kinds of things. People have to work together, including the city and the institutions and the major businesses. And that kind of thing is happening already.

**INTERVIEWER:** So it sounds like you in the city worked closely with MIT during that time, it sounds like.

**DAVIS:** Oh yeah. The great thing about being the mayor is you could convene meetings and people would come. I had a wonderful office and a wonderful staff, and I could say, I have an idea. Why don't you all come in? Let's talk about it.

And there was immediately a lot of enthusiasm for working together, because we'd already been working together. We just hadn't ever solidified. We never called it anything. It was just cooperation. But this took it two, three, four steps further, to create an institution that will endure, I think, for time to come.

So when the net zero plan went to the council, the compact issued a statement saying, we support this, we think it's really important, we think we should all do this together. And so you have that kind of cooperation and coordination institutionalized rather than ad hoc. And it's really good. It's a good period of time of university-community cooperation here in Cambridge, I think-- really good time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you see that evolve in the time-- well, it sounds like you did, from the Simplex days you referred to.

**DAVIS:** Oh, yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** Maybe you can describe that evolution, or what you've witnessed.

**DAVIS:** Well, yes, it really changed a lot. I think that at first, it was just like the '60s, right? Them and us. And the us was the community and them were the institutions.

And MIT was growing, and Harvard, too, growing enormously in the community in terms of land and taking away jobs, taking away whatever. It was just the enemy. It was terrible, actually. There was this image of the octopus, MIT the octopus reaching into every neighborhood. And it was kind of creepy, actually.

So over time, there was a more radical group that was confrontational, and then there got to be a more cooperative group that wanted to work with MIT. And I should mention the name of a good friend, Geneva Malenfant, who was one of the people who worked with Walter Milne here at MIT. And they would talk and figure things out. And they eventually started cooperating around zoning that was being proposed.

It was never perfect, you know, especially University Park. Zoning was really tough-- really tough for the neighborhood to see this very intense development go up there. But it was a far cry from what it would have been if there hadn't been cooperation, particular about housing.

And MIT has always had a really good ear about how important housing is in the community, from senior housing that they built in the '70s to housing that was proposed for the University Park area. And it's all rental. It's not the perfect kind of housing. But there is a significant amount of subsidized housing in there also, and that came from all these negotiations. So that was a good thing.

But it took a long time. You know, there was a lot of-- I mean, you can sort of hear the crackling in the system. And it was pretty uncomfortable. But eventually it got better.

And then it became much more subtle, things like when the recent-- the Pacific Street dorm was built, and the soccer field. And so the land belonged to the city, or-- now how did it go? I think the land belonged to MIT and MIT, in exchange for the land, got more development rights for Pacific Street. And I think there began to be a much more sophisticated way of negotiating, what's the community interest and what's the MIT interest, a little at a time in the sense that it wasn't going to be walled-off institution, that you couldn't turn your back to the community, that there needed to be a knitting together at the edge, at Brookline Street or Sydney Street. I always thought it was Sydney Street, but it turned out it seems to be Brookline Street.

Anyway, there was that sort of, how do you knit together where the institution ends and the community begins? And that was more happening here than in East Cambridge. But I think East Cambridge has gotten more into the act lately with Kendall Square developing.

But I'm much more-- I was for a long time very familiar with this sort of neighborhood-scale, neighborhood-level MIT interaction with the community. Central Square, too. Very complicated problems. These are very complicated problems. So when MIT was building in Central-- purchased land in Central Square, the land-- the uses were more community-based.

But we meet together. We're just like right on top of each other. It's not out there in the wilderness with some kind of green campus with the trees all around it. We're all together here. And so learning how to do that, I think, took a long time.

And I credit MIT staff with being very patient. And I worked with Sarah Gallop a lot. And Sarah's done a great job. She really knows how to talk to people, all kinds of people. And it's made a big difference. There's real sort of kindness and generosity there that there wasn't at some other times.

So in a way, I think it's helped all our other development, too, because it's like an institutional education. How do you do this? How do you take these vastly different interests and have them come up with one place? And so I think it's worked out pretty well.

**INTERVIEWER:** It sounds like one of those things you mentioned, the Pacific Street dormitory, I guess it is, it involved some exchange that it created some more open space in the community or something? Is that right?

**DAVIS:** Yep.

**INTERVIEWER:** And maybe there was another one, another place like that, I think, or something like that?

**DAVIS:** I think as I was leaving office, I said, you know, you own these three little pieces of land on Brookline Street. Can't you get them to be back to the community as open space? And so people kind of worked that out and figured out that MIT was never really going to use a subsidized housing lot. And there were three of them on Brookline Street. And so a little bit of open space got returned to the community. The city hasn't figured out quite what to do with it yet, but-- at least two of the parcels aren't yet figured out. But I think it speaks to a less confrontational way of doing things. And I think that was very important.

**INTERVIEWER:** I heard some story about, I guess, some sort of opening celebration or inaugural celebration for the open space--

**DAVIS:** The little--

**INTERVIEWER:** Something about heaters and stuff,

**DAVIS:** Oh, yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** There was some story that goes along with this?

**DAVIS:** Well, I don't know. I think it was more of a-- it was a big problem for MIT staff, because they wanted to have this wonderful hoo-ha, this wonderful celebration, and it was cold and maybe was rainy. It was not ideal. But it spoke to something I haven't spoken of, which is MIT Real Estate, which is yet another part of what-- another player, because I don't think it's exactly the same player always.

But MIT Real Estate was developing along Brookline Street, and this was part of the leftovers, so to speak, were these parcels. And it sounds like you've heard of somebody's trauma with the opening ceremony. I didn't perceive it that way.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh.

**DAVIS:** I mean, it wasn't-- to me, the fact that that parcel is there, connected to more open space that was already there, is the most important part of the transaction-- the long term rather than the celebratory moment.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh absolutely. Absolutely. No, it sounded like there was some story there about heaters disappearing or something, I don't know.

**DAVIS:** Oh, the heaters were stolen. That's right. I heard that. The heaters were supposed to be out there and then the next day there weren't any heaters there anymore. Hmm. So I heard.

[LAUGHTER]

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. Yeah. I mean you mentioned the housing issue. How do you balance that within a place like Cambridge, where it's just booming and there's all these students, and then you want to maintain a place, a city where people can live who aren't fabulously wealthy. How do you balance those interests, and how does the city and these institutions-- how do they work together?

**DAVIS:** Well, it's been an evolving issue. I think it's probably most desperate now, more desperate than ever, although so many people who are in the middle class have left, are long gone, so you can't protect that anymore too much.

Real estate values are just totally crazy here. And the main thing is it's a regional problem. We're short half a million housing units, I think Barry [? Lewstone ?] said. So everybody has to be building housing of different types to relieve the pressure on housing.

And here we've concentrated for a long time on the most vulnerable people being able to live here and stay here. But a lot of that is in public housing, and that's in excellent public housing. In terms of the other housing stock, I don't know what the answer is. Just build more.

So right now in Central Square, they're going to be building I think a 270-foot tower that'll have a lot of housing in it, with a high proportion of it, 15 to 20% is going to be subsidized. But just gotta build housing where it's appropriate. I mean, I don't think you just build it anywhere. But you make possible the development of units so that there's not so much pressure.

It's beyond one city to be able to solve the problem of housing in the Greater Boston area. But I think we're particularly vulnerable because, I look at my own block, all the places that have gone up for sale have gone to couples in their 30s, maybe early 40s, and he or she walks to work in Kendall or on University Park, and he or she goes to work in the medical center. And this is it. Couple after couple, same description. Because this is the right place to be for where all the great science is happening.

And people want to live here. And the housing stock is nice. So it puts pressure on it. I don't know what the answer is. I don't know the answer. I think you have to push more middle-income programs to keep people who are maybe on the edge staying here and look for creative solutions.

I was always concerned the school system would become the rich and the poor. I think to some extent that has happened. But I want-- have always wanted that school system to be an excellent school system for all. We have only one high school, and we mix all the kids up together. And I think the outcome beyond education says a lot for the values of our society. And I really want to support that always.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. You mentioned the sort of non-auto transportation initiatives too. Maybe you can talk a little bit about that, and where would you like to see those go, and what role they play in a place like Cambridge?

**DAVIS:** Oh, well, we already are the most walkable city in America, the top biking city. But it goes to show how much further you need to go, that bicycling is always such-- has so many sad stories of people who bike and it's not entirely safe. So there's a lot more work that has to be done about that.

But walking is great here. It really is. I mean, I walked here. And I take public transportation wherever I go.

We've had a wonderful city staff that's worked on this for a long time. Actually, I was a transportation planner back when I was working for the city for part of the time. But we were under court order from the federal government starting in the '90s around the Clean Air Act to decrease the use of single-car automobiles. And so we have a plethora of programs to discourage people from driving here and parking here.

It's always humorous, just because everybody only wants to talk to me about parking and traffic-- in terms of what they're complaining about, now. But I think it's a great, walkable city. It's great to get around here. And you just have to keep at it. Keep it safe, especially. Make sure the construction sites have sidewalks, things like that. Really important.

**INTERVIEWER:** Plenty of construction sites these days.

**DAVIS:** That's for sure.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. I think when you were in the mayor's office we all experienced this horrible tragedy, the marathon bombing.

**DAVIS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then the murder of Sean Collier and the extraordinary things that came out of that, the ceremony and everything, the memorial. I was sort of wondering if you can talk about, what was that time like to be the mayor of Cambridge?

**DAVIS:** I think of course it was a very hard time for all of us. And we're a small city, and so many of us knew victims, and the perpetrators, too. They were products of the school system. So the community was very torn up in so many different ways. And I know personally three people who were hit by shrapnel and harmed. And we just were a city kind of under siege for a while. A lot of mixed emotions.

I think that the role of the mayor at that time, more than anything, was to be kind of a minister to the community, to make sure that people knew that they were safe and they were together, and they were held in a way. It was really important to show that we were together. We're together with MIT, that we were cognizant of the great loss there was here, and a great sense of loss of safety that people felt overall. It was a very confusing thing to have happen. I mean, it just-- where did is this all come from? How did this begin?

But it was hard being in the city government because of the press. The press was everywhere. That was probably the hardest thing of all. Not-- the hardest of the things that happened after.

But I don't know. I suppose we learned some things. But still, it's just terribly sad. I mean, more than anything, it's just terribly sad to think that young men who had been like so many other kids, were no different apparently, somehow had these crazy ideas in their head and went on to harm people who were close to them, who had very nearly helped them personally. And it just didn't make any sense at all.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah, it's hopefully something we never revisit. In 2016, MIT is celebrating 100 years in Cambridge.

**DAVIS:** Yep.

**INTERVIEWER:** And I'm sort wondering if you have thoughts about that. I mean, I don't know, what's the significance do you think of that, for you or for the city or for MIT?

**DAVIS:** Well, I think MIT owns about 10 percent of the real estate in the city. I mean, MIT is not just an important worldwide institution curing cancer, solving the world's problems. But it's also for us, a big physical part of the city.

And I think that-- I was thinking of this on the way over here, that we're in a relatively good place, that as a result of the former city manager, Bob Healy, negotiating something that required MIT not to sell off too much of its property at once, depriving us of tax base, we're in a better place than we were many years ago. And some of the the tension around all this property ownership is somewhat abated. So there's that.

But there also has been the multi-million-dollar development that's going to be-- multi-million-square-foot development that's going to go up in Kendall Square. So the mystery of that has been somewhat solved. We know what's going to be happening. I think that from an institution sort of based on Mass Ave., that there's a sense that the Kendall Square portal for the university will become more important when all this gets done.

I think that the evolution of the institution is great-- has come quite a ways in the past 100 years in Cambridge. In some ways you could start the whole thing again saying, from this little bit suddenly there's this huge institution with many, many buildings and many, many important things happening. But I look at it from the point of view of the process. How are we in the process? Are we able to live together? Are we able to both have a city and have a giant international institution in our midst and have it work for everyone? I think we're getting there. And I think that's terribly important.

MIT has been so important for the community in terms of economic development, and the hundreds of small and large companies that have gotten started here have really made a lot of difference for us in terms of our cachet, our tax base for all those companies as well. I would like to see more of it devolve back, again, to our young people. And I think that that's a struggle. It's not easy. It means things like internships, but it means other things as well-- a serious cooperation between the schools and the city-- the schools and MIT. And that's as much from the schools as it is from MIT to really make that happen, to really become committed to that.

I think that's the challenge. It's the same thing as what I ran for office on. I mean, are we going to be in the city with all these riches in terms of intellectual and institutional riches, and is that going to mean a lot for our kids? I mean, that to me is what it's really all about. That's what makes-- will make Cambridge the best possible city it can be, is everybody gets to share. Maybe I'm a socialist. I don't know.

**INTERVIEWER:** You mentioned the Kendall Square initiative, and I'm sort of wondering, what do you think the impact of that will be on Cambridge and the people who live here?

**DAVIS:** Well, we had many conversations at the council about this when the project came in, and I think several of us were really concerned about, what does it mean for the square? And I think we envisioned world-class subway stations where squares around them were full of excitement and nightlife and all the rest of that. And I hope that that's what it means. I hope it means that Kendall Square becomes another great square, not a place where there's one hotel and a bookstore and students going off to food trucks. Not just that, that it really has a real retail liveliness and tells the message about what excitement there is around it. So I'm hoping that that development leads to that there.

I'm less concerned about some of the other things, although I want to make sure that the connection to the river is there. I think that's really important. I just want Kendall Square to be a place where you don't say, where is Kendall Square? Which is where people-- they [LAUGHTER] come out of the subway and they say, where's Kendall Square? And well, they're there already, but you can't tell that you're at Kendall Square. So I want you to know that you're really there and that it's a great place and MIT is an exciting place.

And I have ideas-- I think we all did for things that should happen there that probably won't. But I thought, that'd be great place for the MIT Science-- the science museum-- MIT Museum, which has all that science in it. You know, you get out and you find out right away, here's what's happening here. Here's an explanation for what is MIT and how to get from here to there and why you want to be hanging around here.

So that's my hope. My hope is it gets to be like that kind of world-class place. And it's interesting also that the Department of Transportation has 18 acres across the street that's just getting developed as well. And how is that all gonna happen? Are we going to continue this charade that we're a suburban office park, or are we gonna be urban? And we're going to make the most of what that urban environment could be, and following what I learned from Kevin Lynch so many years ago at MIT. Is it going to be that kind of a place?

**INTERVIEWER:** This is the Volpe transportation and former NASA site I guess?

**DAVIS:** Uh-huh.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is that right? Yeah.

**DAVIS:** That place is really spooky right now. It has cars parked there from-- I don't know, maybe from Mars. But--

[LAUGHTER]

--they're all covered with dust. And these old Department of Transportation vehicles, the sea of parking and one little building that they developed for NASA. Well, they developed for the Department of Transportation, when it was supposed to be NASA. And so that will all probably come to play.

There'll be more connectivity into the square, more retail, more housing, more of everything. So it should be pretty exciting when it all comes to pass. And it seems like things are going along on a pretty good direction.

But there was a lot of talk. The community talked for years and years about what they wanted to see, and MIT did, and now the Department of Transportation is talking about what they need. And it all comes together as one vision of what a place would be that's called Kendall Square, not just a subway stop.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. Yeah, it's interesting, I mean, as a former city planner and with all your various experience, how do you take a place that has been sort of this no man's land and make it not that? I mean, what are the ingredients? And make it also continue to be this innovation ecosystem that it's become?

**DAVIS:** Well, I think it starts with how you view the connectivity and the bones of the area. I actually had gone to an-- I think it was an AIA conference of mayors on architectural problems, and I brought that problem with me to that meeting. It was just about a dozen mayors, and they dug into what should Atlantic City do, and what should Philadelphia do. And when they looked at this site, they just basically, the architects who were consulting, said, just make sure you put the roadways in right. Make sure it connects from here to there, that the blocks aren't too big, that you don't cut it off from the central action, that you make it work together.

And I think that that's the fundamental thing. The Kevin Lynch thing was nodes, where you need to have these connections to the nodes and figure out how you make them work together. I think University Park has not been a great success because it doesn't have that kind of feeling about it. It's just, it's like a very tight suburban office park. I mean, it works probably for the building by building, but as a place it's not a nice place, especially when you get back away from Mass Ave.

And I think Kendall has the possibility of becoming a nice place. But it has to do with these roads and these blocks and how big are they and what are the faces, and do people come outside, or do they go right into parking garages and never see the light of day? I mean, that's obviously a bad idea. When they come out of their building-- they don't come out of the building ever, then nothing ever happens on the street.

So the transportation's important too. But they got a good start there. In the long run, they're going to have to fix that station and that head house. And you know what that's like. Transportation projects cost so much money and there's so little money devoted to them. Something's going to have to happen with that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah, that's a problem Boston's struggling with these days, isn't it?

**DAVIS:** Uh-huh. Yep.

**INTERVIEWER:** So after serving as mayor, you decided you were going to move on and do something else. So maybe you can talk a little bit about that decision and what you've been doing since?

**DAVIS:** Well, I've been on-- I was on council for-- 26 years, I think-- no, it was council and school committee for 26 years. And I feel like that was about enough. And I had always wanted to be doing some other things. And my husband is semi-retired, and so I thought, well, this is a good time to make a break.

And frankly I wasn't sure what I was going to do with that, except I knew I wanted to do some artworks, which I have been doing, and that I had grandchildren, which that predated my decision. And I'm still working doing advocacy on environmental matters, and working as a policy consultant on things like that.

So it's a process, though, figuring out what to do when you retire. And I think of it as retiring, but I struggled with that, because I don't really want to not work. I'm just-- I'm not cut out for not working at all. I'm just not that kind of person. So I have to do some work and some other. And I'm open to suggestions, I guess you could say. Still very interested especially in the environmental issues.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. So you're involved in one, I guess, conference, the Solve conference that's coming up at MIT, which, is that an example of sort of the kinds of things? Maybe you can tell us about that. But is that sort of an example of the kind of direction you're heading?

**DAVIS:** Well, I'm on the board of something called the Institute for Market Transformation, which is a spinoff from NRDC that has to do with building energy efficiency. And that group is doing really important work on energy efficiency in major cities across the country. And that's something that I'm putting some effort into.

I'm also currently on a coordinating council in the run up to the Paris climate talks-- just a little bit of involvement, sort of talking about the city perspective. This is a very exciting time for the climate talks, and I have a little bit of regret that I am not still the mayor. I think that's probably the only reason I really wish I was still the mayor, because now they're doing all these terrific things and going to the Vatican and meeting with the Chinese delegation. And cities are really leading the way to show that even without the federal government doing what it should do, what Congress should permit, that cities have a lot of power on their own to control their environments and to control their emissions. And so I'm trying to help that along. And that's pretty exciting now.

The friends of mine were at the Vatican, and now they're meeting with a Chinese delegation in California, and they'll be in New York, and they'll be in Paris, and so I have some regrets about that. I wish I were there too. But I'm certainly watching on the sidelines feeling very proud of what we did here in Cambridge that gave people the idea that they could do it too. And that's certainly what the role has been.

So my continuing role, I'm not really sure. I kind of look, casting about for how I can keep being helpful in that area. And I find myself saying that, like, I want to be helpful. And I guess I do. I guess that's really what motivates me, is to be able to see the process go forward.

And I think that our net zero plan here in Cambridge is something that needs to be shared, so that may be something I work with that. I'm working a little bit with the group Mothers Up Front, which is an advocacy group on climate that's got started here in Cambridge by some Cambridge people. So I'm doing a little here and a little there. And I learned to draw in the last year, which was pretty exciting, because I never thought I could do that. And I can. So that's fun.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's great. That's great. If you look ahead, MIT doesn't seem to me to often kind of pause and look backwards, so the centenary celebration is a bit of a time to do that. But also looking towards the next century, what do you see as sort of the great opportunities or challenges that Cambridge and MIT might face?

**DAVIS:** Well, I think about these refugees now. And at this point, there are what, half a million refugees coming from war-torn parts of the world converging on Europe. And I think that that's true now, but it would be true in the future as well. And how we're able to assimilate these many peoples into our society, I think that that's going to be one of the critical things to be working on.

So looking at what's the role for MIT in that, I think about all these kind of digital learning experiences and figuring out how to get that right, because I don't think people who are desperate about where they're going to live are going to want to sit in front of a computer screen suddenly. So I think the problem of how to accommodate all those folks is a critical problem that needs to be solved, and that there must be a role for a place like MIT in ameliorating the situation for these people. I'm not sure what it is yet. But I know that the creativity of a place like this would be put to use for that.

Certainly around water, clean water. Clean water is going to continue to be a really important problem. And the climate issue is going to be underneath a lot of other problems that come up. Some say this refugee issue is just the first of those, because of the refugees in Iraq who were fleeing from drought, and where did they go? Where could they go? So I see the institution having a role to play in that.

And there will always be things that people are thinking of here that we never thought of before, right? Who thought of cell phones? I never knew it. I would never have thought that I would be so reliant on my iPhone. Never imagined such a thing. So I can't really foresee exactly what those other kinds of things are, but I think in terms of physically as being part of the city, I think some of the key issues have been played out.

It will always be very important to balance what's city and what's university, and not have universities overwhelming the city and the residential neighborhoods. And as soon as that becomes threatened, there'll be trouble again. But I think right now we're in a pretty good static place, where neighborhoods feel they're safe and that they're not about to be swallowed up by Harvard or MIT.

That being said, I do live on the street where one end is-- it's only a five-block street. One end is Harvard and the other end is MIT. So you could see it happen. You could see the universities kind of come down Mass Ave., say, as well as Chestnut Street, where I live, and kind of take over more. I don't think that would be good. I don't think you'd want to lose the sense that you're in a real place and not just a university enclave. What that means though is that the university, that MIT has to be a player in some social issues as well as the physical issues to make it all work right, to give opportunity to the kids who live here, and I think to facilitate some of the adult education that's needed for some of those who have a harder time finding jobs. I would love to see that happen.

**INTERVIEWER:** Great. Well, I mean there's so much one could talk about. Are there other things that occur to you that we might--

**DAVIS:** Let's see, what did we talk about? We talked about housing. We talked about environment, schools--

**INTERVIEWER:** Development.

**DAVIS:** Development, yeah. Those are a lot of the key points. Just overall, I think it's just very exciting to have MIT in the community. And something like the Solve conference makes it very clear that this is a hub of activity, a hub of creativity, and all the little companies that have been spun off, I mean, how exciting is that? How great is it that there's an innovation center in Kendall Square, and that so many bright ideas are being deployed from here, from our little city, out to the rest of the world? I find that terribly exciting. And I applaud MIT for that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Great. Wonderful. Well, thank you for speaking with us.

**DAVIS:** Oh, you're very welcome. It's been a pleasure.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you.