

Local Government and Conditions of Uncertainty:
Cambridge and the Regulation of Nanomaterials

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POSTER ABSTRACT:

Local governments have limited capacity to address potential environmental and public health effects of new technologies, yet such effects are often felt first at the local level. This study looks at the experience of the Cambridge, Massachusetts, Nanomaterials Advisory Committee (NAC) in 2007-08 as it considered rules on nanomaterial research and production within city limits.

The NAC's path of action was influenced by the experience of Berkeley, California, which had implemented a nanomaterials reporting ordinance a year earlier, and, more important, by lessons obtained by the Cambridge Environmental Review Board (CERB), which for three decades has overseen what were the first regulations governing biotechnology enacted in the United States

In Cambridge, more than in Berkeley, deliberations involved open discourse among policymakers, industry representatives, academic researchers, legal experts, and local residents. Participants shared their respective expertise to build a common frame of knowledge from which to assess what was known about nanotechnology in general and activities in Cambridge in particular. The outcome – to *not* act– reflected a sober yet watchful understanding that too little was known to promulgate specific rules just yet.

Uncertainties surrounding the health and environmental effects of nanotechnology pose a unique dilemma to local and state governments invested in fueling economic growth through innovation. Understanding the processes by which Cambridge addressed this dilemma may guide other local governments in dealing with uncertainty.