



Watertown Square Area Plan

City Council/Planning Board Review Draft
May 30, 2024



City of Watertown, MA

Contents

1. Introduction	4
Impetus for the Plan	5
A Case for Housing	6
2. Plan Recommendations	10
Public Realm	10
Zoning Redesign	24
Destination Square	42
Priority Redevelopment Opportunities	44
3. The Public Engagement Process	50
Kitchen Table Conversations	50
Polis	51
Public Meetings	52
Since April	56
4. Appendix	58

Acknowledgements

George Proakis, City Manager
 Steve Magoon, Assistant City Manager for Community Development and Planning
 Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning and Zoning
 Gregory St. Louis, Superintendent of Public Works
 Tyler Glode, City Engineer
 Larry Field, Senior Planner/Housing
 Zeke Mermell, Senior Transportation Planner
 Laurel Schwab, Sustainability Program Manager
 Liz Helfer, Public Arts and Culture Planner
 Katie Swan, Environmental Planner
 Stephanie Venizelos, Community Wellness Program Manager
 Antonio Mancini, Zoning Enforcement Officer
 Tyler Cote, Community Engagement Specialist

The public meetings were supported by other city employees including those in the City Communications Team, Commander's Mansion, Public Buildings, and Public Works.

Watertown Community Conversations, Watertown Business Coalition, and Watertown Cable Access TV were all instrumental in supporting the public process and community dialogue.

City Council

Mark S. Sideris, President, Vincent J. Piccirilli, Vice-President, Nicole Gardner, Lisa J. Feltner, Emily Izzo, John Airasian, Caroline Bays, John G. Gannon, Anthony Palomba

Planning Board

Janet Buck, Jason Cohen, Abigail Hammett, Rachael Sack, Payson Whitney

Consultant Team

Utile, Urban Planning and Design

Tim Love, Loren Rapport, Kevin Chong, Courtney McCracken, Jessy Yang, Xiaoran Zhang

Stantec, Transportation Planning

Ralph DeNisco, Erin Cameron, Liza Cohen, Ethan Rankin, Jason Schreiber, Rory Weilnau

Speck Dempsey, Urban Design Vision

Jeff Speck

Landwise, Real Estate Analysis

Jon Trementozzi, Amy Fater

Regina Villa Associates, Community Outreach

Sarah Paritsky, Kristine McNulty, Kyle Olsen

Introduction

The City of Watertown has developed an ambitious area plan for Watertown Square that integrates all physical and human-centered aspects of the study area, including streets, sidewalks, open spaces, and the buildings that define and activate them. Watertown achieves this goal through the comprehensive integration of two factors: a design vision for the public realm that will be implemented by the City of Watertown using a range of funding sources; and a design vision for future buildings that will be implemented primarily by private landowners as a result of a new zoning code.

These new regulations both meet the requirements of the MBTA Communities Act and provide a regulatory framework that responds to the comprehensive urban design vision developed during the planning process. In addition, the resulting “form-based” zoning code will combine more predictable design outcomes based on the vision of the plan with a streamlined development review and approval process that still incorporates public input into individual project designs.

The plan includes street designs that promote walking and biking, lively public spaces, and enhanced access to the Charles River. At the same time, the proposed street reconfigurations will make navigation through Watertown Square safer and more intuitive for all modes of travel. Just as important, the enhanced public realm and more logical street layout will encourage new private investment, resulting in improvements to existing properties, thoughtful new development projects, and a wider range of sidewalk-activating retail spaces that will complement the mix of existing commercial businesses.

The City of Watertown is committed to moving this plan forward with the same level of public engagement that has shaped the plan to date.

Impetus for the Plan

For decades, Watertown Square has been seen as an intractable transportation and urban design problem as a result of larger changes to transportation priorities and the growth of Boston’s suburbs. The decision to locate a major Mass Pike intersection at the south end of Galen Street accelerated the evolution of the Square into an automobile-dominant space, a trend that was initiated in the 1920s when the Galen Street bridge rotated so that it would align with Mount Auburn Street to the north. The Pike interchange, the first one west of the Cambridge/Storrow drive exit, created new regional traffic patterns, including an influx of Belmont commuters who passed through Watertown Square on their way to the Pike, and commuters from the western suburbs who used the Newton/Watertown exit, Galen Street, and Mt. Auburn Street as an alternate route to job centers in Cambridge.

In Watertown Square, the solution was to welcome this cut-through traffic by adding travel and turn lanes, which required the narrowing of sidewalks and the elimination of street parking. The increase in the large number of lanes, combined with the large number of streets that converge in the Square, led to signal cycles with many phases, resulting in long waits at the main intersection for both cars and people.

At the same time that the Pike interchange was putting Watertown Square in the middle of a rapidly expanding car-centric commuting pattern, the MBTA was disinvesting in bus and trolley service that was already suffering delays from streets filled with private vehicular traffic. The relocation of the terminal bus stops of several bus routes to the west side of the Square further complicated traffic patterns and added yet more tarmac to an already asphalt-dominant landscape.

Fast forward to September, 2023, when the City adopted an updated Comprehensive Plan. Throughout the public planning process, there was a clear consensus that revitalizing Watertown Square should be a major priority. This policy direction outlined the necessity for a more detailed area plan and zoning update for Watertown Square, and included using this planning process to develop zoning to comply with the MBTA Communities Act by the December 31, 2024 deadline. The Area Plan also is a key tool for supporting implementation of the recently adopted Resilient Watertown Climate and Energy Plan, which directs the City to adapt to and prepare for climate change through greening, transportation mode shift, and sustainable building standards, among other actions. The Comprehensive Plan process also provided a useful road map for how the Watertown Square Area Plan should be conducted, including the role of public design “charrettes” to help inform, shape, and refine the plan.



Top: An aerial image of Watertown Square from the 1940s showing the growth of car-dominant street planning

Middle: An image of the old trolley and shelter in the Square, circa 1950s

Bottom: Watertown Square today, characterized by a large 6-way intersection with long crosswalks

A Case for Housing

The Boston area is facing an unprecedented housing crisis. As the region continues to be an attractive place to live and a magnet for high-paid technical professionals, it becomes more and more difficult for many residents to afford a place to live. Over the past decade, Watertown has contributed to meeting our regional housing needs by building new housing along the Arsenal Street and Pleasant Street corridors. These new developments have added to our diverse local tax base, while providing a home in Watertown for new families. Meanwhile, many communities in our region have not built new housing. This has led to recent state initiatives on housing growth and housing affordability, including the MBTA Communities Act and recent housing bond bills.

Nonetheless, housing continues to be a complex regional problem that impacts affordability and economic growth throughout the Commonwealth. While much of this new housing will need to be subsidized to be affordable in perpetuity, those subsidies are expensive, and can only serve a portion of our overall housing growth. The greatest need is for new housing production throughout our region, which study after study has established would mitigate increased costs. Without substantial new housing production, we cannot address the crisis of affordability. Nonetheless, production alone will not address those with the greatest housing need, and therefore affordable housing also needs incentives to be a part of the mix of new development.

Within this context, Watertown has limited areas that are most appropriate to contribute to our regional housing need, as we are being asked to do through the new MBTA Communities law. Widespread change to existing walkable neighborhoods of small single- and two-family homes would not be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's goal to "conserve" these neighborhoods. Instead, placing housing near transit, and focusing on redeveloping sites with low-density commercial uses and more automobile-oriented uses will allow for the evolution of a more vibrant and walkable center for Watertown.

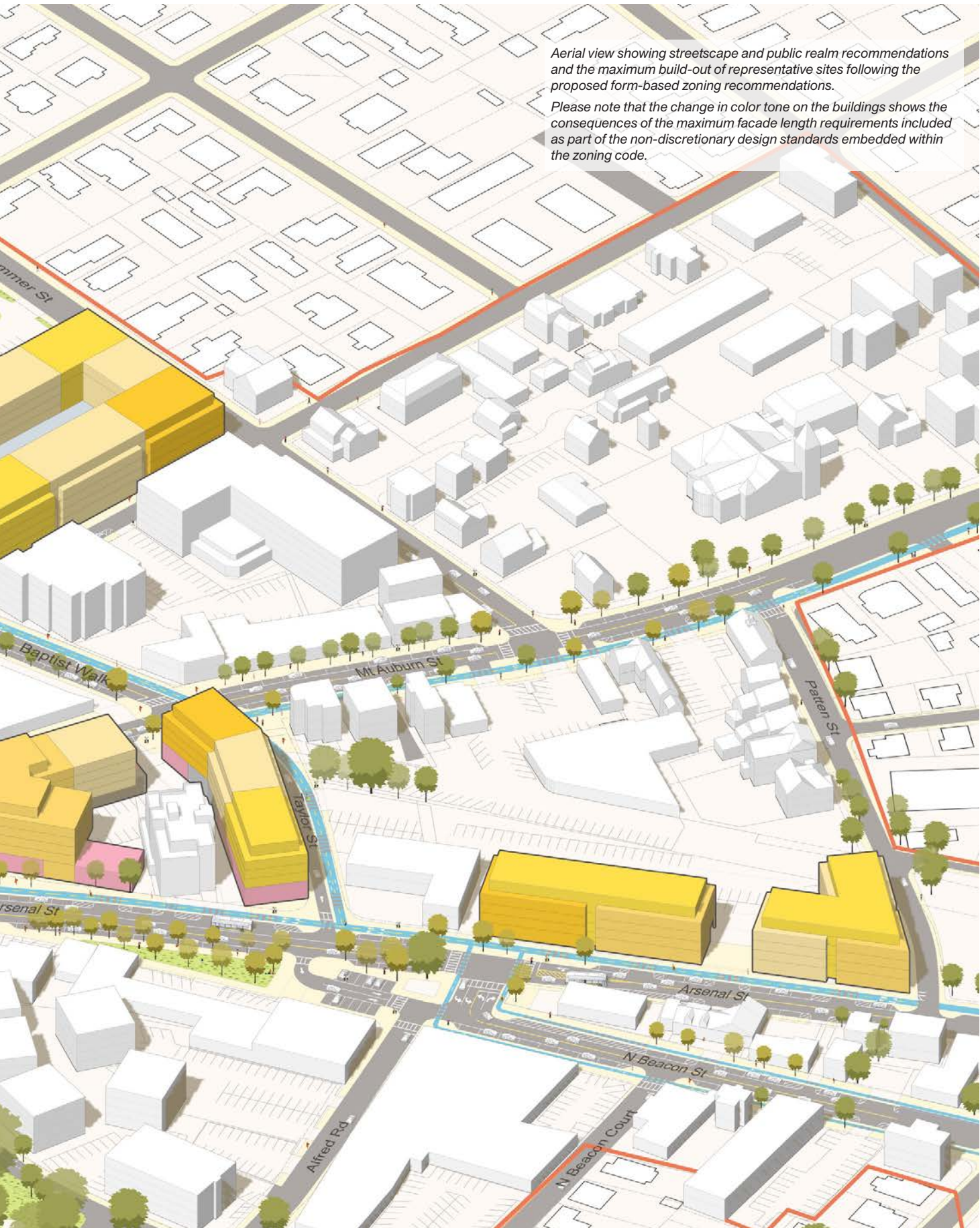
But, that is not the only reason more housing in the Square makes sense. In addition to a demonstrated need to tackle the redesign of the public realm in order to enhance walkability, existing and future sidewalk-activating businesses in the Square will only thrive if there are more people living in and around it. This is partly true because a large percentage of the retail business geared to everyday household needs has shifted to gig economy providers like Amazon. Meanwhile, more residents work partially or fully remote jobs, allowing them to spend days and evenings at home with breaks to visit nearby businesses.

Within this evolving context, brick and mortar retail establishments can only succeed when there is both a critical mass of households within a 2-3 minute walk and enough synergies between retail businesses that a walkable urban destination is created. As a result, the call for an increase in housing supply in Watertown Square is as much a place-making imperative as it is a response to the regional housing crisis, the primary driver of the MBTA Communities housing law.



Residential projects recently developed and/or under development around Watertown Square
 Clockwise from left: 101 North Beacon Street, 130 Arsenal Street, 166 Main Street, 104-126 Main Street





Aerial view showing streetscape and public realm recommendations and the maximum build-out of representative sites following the proposed form-based zoning recommendations.

Please note that the change in color tone on the buildings shows the consequences of the maximum facade length requirements included as part of the non-discretionary design standards embedded within the zoning code.

Plan Recommendations

Public Realm

Summary of Benefits and Street Redesign Approach

The recommended reconfiguration of the streets and open spaces in Watertown Square achieves the following objectives:

1. A decrease in the amount of roadbed as a percentage of the total area of the public right-of-ways
2. A corresponding increase in public open space both within the Delta and between the reconfigured streets and the Charles River, equaling approximately 3.4 acres
3. Wider sidewalks, including the stretch of Main Street between Merchants Row and Mt. Auburn Street, and the important Mt. Auburn/Main Street corner
4. The introduction of parallel parking, important for the success of sidewalk-activating retail and to create a buffer between cars and pedestrians and protected bike lanes
5. A simple four-way intersection that reduces signal phases and pedestrian crossing times
6. A more logical and intuitive street network that is easier for motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists to safely navigate



Plan of existing Watertown Square intersection

These benefits are partly a result of reducing the number of streets that converge in the Square from six to four. This was achieved by connecting North Beacon Street to Arsenal Street east of the Square at Alfred Street and bending the alignment of the western terminus of Charles River Road away from the Square and into the right-of-way of Riverside Street where it currently meets North Beacon Street. The Pleasant Street signal as well as the MBTA Bus terminal have also been removed from the signal configuration at Main Street in the Square in favor of a one-way southbound-only movement to Galen Street, which serves to remove additional traffic from the main intersection.

Since the future location of bus stops was going to have an impact on the final street configuration, the design team coordinated with the MBTA early in the planning process and developed a plan to terminate Route 71 and Route 59 in Watertown Yard, rather than the bus hub west of the Watertown Square Delta. This allows the bus terminal, a vestige of the original alignment of Galen Street north of the River, to be reclaimed as a conventional city street. The resulting new single lane street, with parallel parking on both sides, helps to better connect the Delta to open space along the river and provides a direct connection between the terminus of Pleasant Street and the Galen Street bridge, thus reducing eastbound traffic on Main Street.

Bike and Pedestrian connections along the River will also be improved by the installation of an actuated signal to allow direct flow east to west. While this will extend the travel time for these two bus routes, they will still have stops near the Square prior to crossing the Galen Street bridge. Potential impacts on the relocation of the terminus are further mitigated by the MBTA's decision, as part of the bus network redesign project, to transform the 71 bus into a high frequency "Key Bus Route." This means that the MBTA will commit to service at least every 15 minutes or better throughout most of the service schedule.



The advantages include much-reduced pedestrian crossing times, an increase in open space, wider sidewalks, the introduction of parallel street parking adjacent to sidewalk-activating retail, connections between existing, planned, and future bicycle accommodations, and enhanced connections between the heart of the Square and the Charles River open space and trail network, with improved safety throughout.

Concept "after" plan of proposed Four Corners intersection, based on a simpler and more intuitive street network layout





Additional Urban Design Features and Benefits

**Gained Space
(including Delta):
156,730 SF**

**Lost Space:
10,220 SF**

**Net Gained
Space:
146,510 SF
(3.36 acres)**

In addition to reducing the number of streets that converge in the Square, roadbed is recaptured as a result of a reduction of lane widths to 11' for transit lanes, 10' for two-direction non-transit streets, and 12' for one-way street segments. The amount of pavement is also reduced through the tightening of radii at intersections and the shortening of left turn lanes, made possible by the Pleasant Street to Galen Street connection and other adjustments to the street network. The resulting 3.4 acres of space has been redeployed for an expanded Delta, larger open spaces along the Charles River, wider sidewalks, an expanded off-street bicycle network, additional on-street parking, and shorter crosswalks.

The sum total of these improvements will be a more walkable and bikeable Square that can better attract and support sidewalk-activating retail and housing. Besides the redesign of the streets, sidewalks, and bicycle infrastructure, the public realm plan also includes suggestions for new off-street paths that connect the “four corners” to the Charles River path network on both the west and east sides of Galen Street and Mt. Auburn Street.



The improved intersection design reclaims almost 3.4 acres of roadbed for public realm.

Retail Pavilions

The Plan recommends the addition of retail pavilions in the Delta south of Main Street for two important reasons. The first is to create a two-sided retail experience along the eastern end of Main Street and the newly reclaimed portion of Galen Street. This will increase the likelihood that existing and future retail on the west side of Galen Street and north side of Main Street will thrive. Enhancing the activation of these streets will also increase the chances that a walkable retail district can expand north along Spring Street and Merchants Row. The structures, primarily conceived as cafe, beer garden, or restaurant pavilions with outdoor seating, will attract pedestrian activity to the Delta, an open space at the heart of the Square that is currently cut off by several lanes of traffic.



Retail pavilions in an expanded Delta open space

Two or three retail pavilions on the south side of Main Street will create a two-sided retail street, increasing the likelihood that the walkable retail district will thrive. The structures have primarily been conceived as cafe or restaurant pavilions with outdoor seating, in order to activate the enlarged open space in the Delta and strengthen connections between the heart of the Square and the Charles River.

Opportunities for Civic Art

In addition to creating two-sided retail streets, retail pavilions with sculptural rooflines provide an opportunity to introduce visual whimsy to the heart of the Square. In a version of the pavilions drawn by Jeff Speck, FAICP, during the design charrette, small pavilions with a diverse range of colors and rooflines are meant for a different tenant mix than the restaurants and cafes in the scenario depicted above. Instead, they are intended to incubate new businesses in a highly visual location in the heart of the Square. Their self-conscious flamboyance combines creative placemaking with a targeted economic development strategy. The success of this concept will depend on subsidized rents and on-going curation of the tenant mix by the City or another public-minded entity.

Beyond the opportunities afforded by the retail pavilions, the expanded public realm provides a unique opportunity for a robust civic art program. As planning continues, there should be creative thinking about the location and type of art that will help make Watertown Square a lively destination.



Sketches of retail pavilions by Jeff Speck. FAICP

In addition to creating a two-sided retail street, retail pavilions present an opportunity to introduce small-scale landmarks to the Delta, while also anchoring views south on both Spring Street and Merchant's Row.

Additional Mobility Infrastructure Benefits

The simple four-way intersection at the heart of the recommended street reconfiguration creates a people-friendly downtown by reducing signal phases and pedestrian crossing times and narrowing pavement width on roadways approaching Watertown Square. The Plan also results in wider sidewalks and dedicated bicycle facilities, protected by new parallel parking along Mount Auburn Street, Galen Street and Main Street.

The key elements of the design, developed over several days during the design charrette and informed by conversations with members of Watertown's visually impaired community early in the streetscape design process, include:

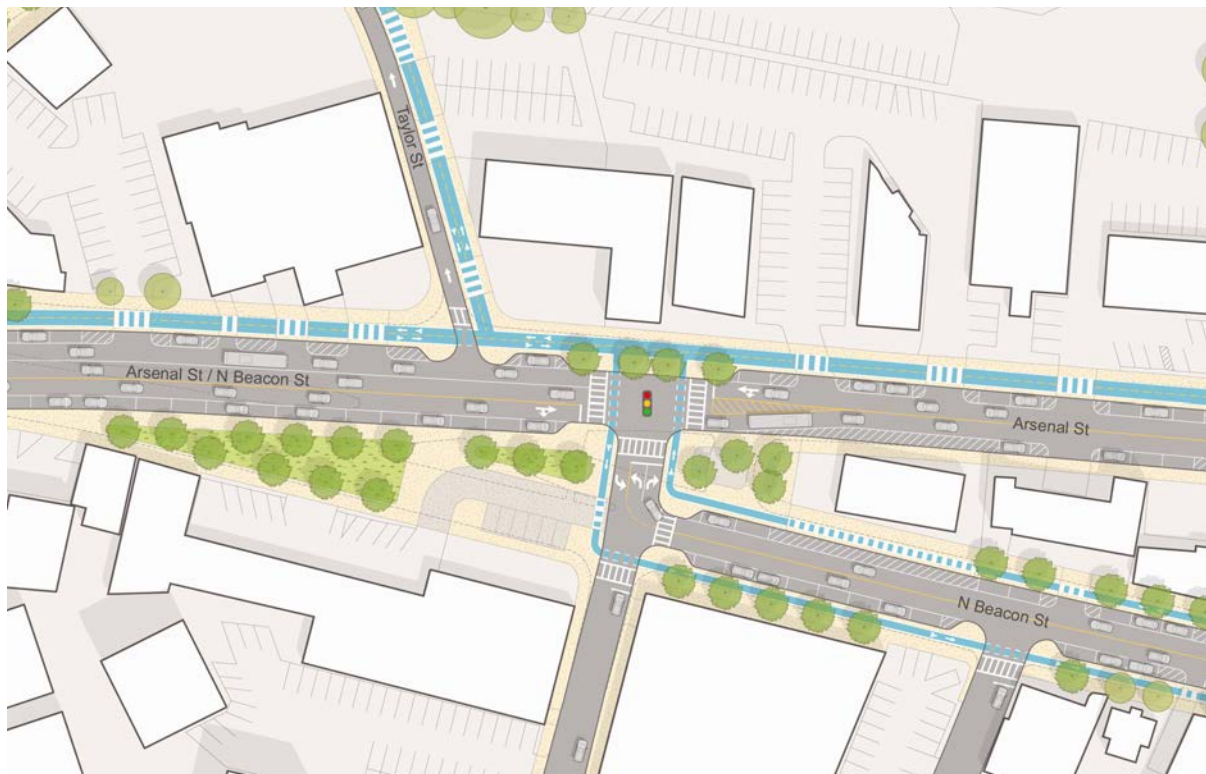
- Narrowed roadways to encourage Watertown Square as a space for people, not cars
- Preservation of primary east-west vehicular movements, from Main Street to Arsenal Street, since data suggests that they are mostly used by Watertown residents and employees
- Maintenance of the Galen Street/Mount Auburn Street alignment to optimize bus operations
- Relocation of the Route 59 and Route 71 terminus to the Watertown Yard south of the Charles River
- Reclamation of Galen Street between Main Street and Charles River Road for southbound vehicles from the west and maintaining two southbound travel lanes across the Galen Street bridge
- Relocation of the Charles River Road/North Beacon Street intersection to the east, away from the primary intersection
- Consolidation of vehicles on North Beacon Street and Arsenal Street east of the Mount Auburn Street intersection (see proposed plan on page 18)
- Two-way Cross Street and signalized Cross Street/Main Street intersection, with preemptive control for emergency vehicles
- A shorter overall traffic signal cycle, requiring less pavement area to store cars as they wait for green lights
- Safer and shorter accessible pedestrian crossings throughout the Study Area
- Addition of significant curbside use and parking, especially in critical areas adjacent to retail frontages, providing several benefits:
 - Pedestrian buffers
 - Curbside space for restaurant deliveries and food delivery services pickup



The Plan proposes a narrowed intersection for North Beacon Street and Arsenal Street, which will create wider, more pedestrian-friendly sidewalks.



The Plan provides on-street parking along key retail frontages adjacent to the Square, including Main Street (shown here), Pleasant Street, Mount Auburn Street, and Arsenal Street / North Beacon Street.



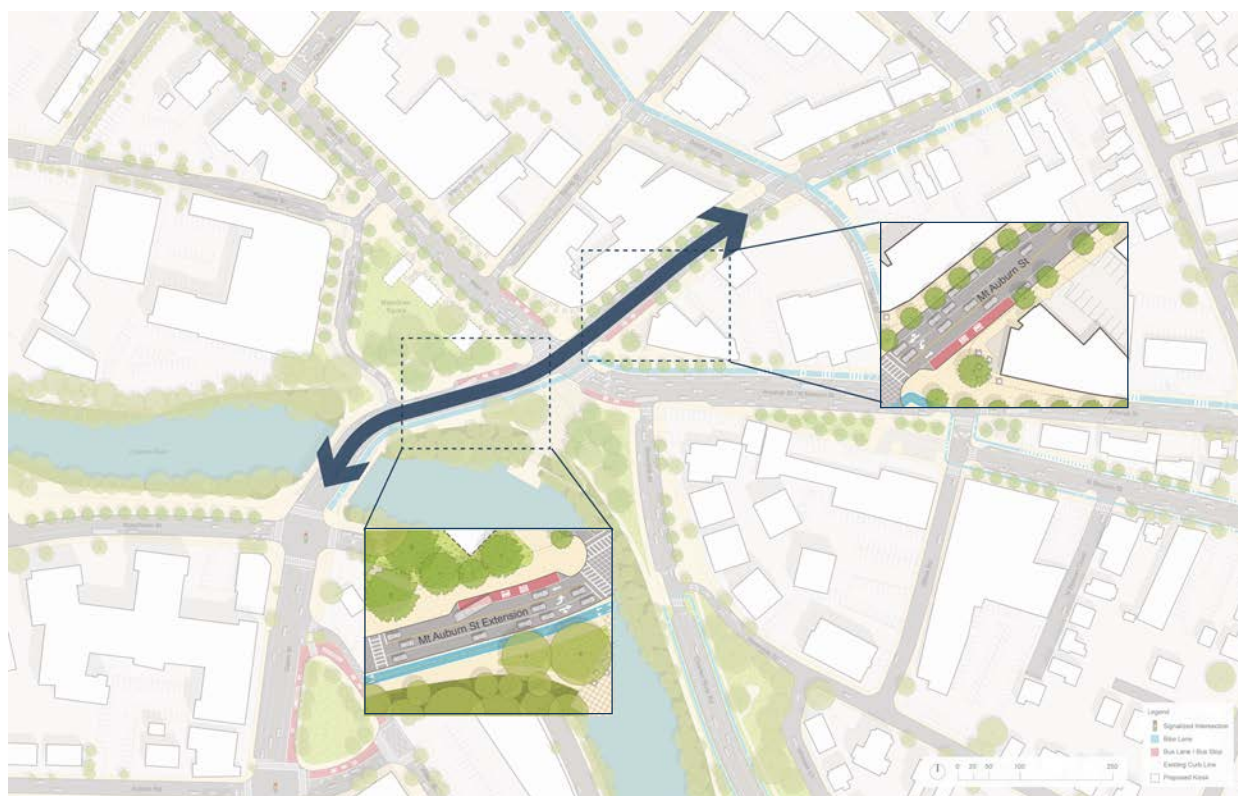
Detailed concept plan showing the simplified intersection of Alfred Road with Arsenal Street and North Beacon Street

By reclaiming the original Galen Street west of the Watertown Delta for vehicles rather than bus layover, Main Street can be narrowed through the elimination of the existing right-turn slip lane. Southbound Main Street and Pleasant Street vehicles will be able to use this one-way segment of the original Galen Street (in the opposite direction of the current bus traffic flow) to bypass the main intersection when traveling towards Nonantum Road and the Massachusetts Turnpike. Combined with the removal of Charles River Road from the Watertown Square intersection, where Mount Auburn Street meets Main Street and North Beacon Street, Watertown Square results in an intuitive four-way intersection, simpler for motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists to navigate, while preserving all movements accommodated in Watertown Square today.

The Plan removes vehicular lanes and pavement now primarily serving as queue storage space across the system, in exchange for wider sidewalks and expanded curbside use in the downtown core. By simplifying operations and modifying traffic signals, the main Watertown Square intersection can be expected to maintain a similar level of operation to the current alignment. This is primarily accomplished through the simplification of the approaches, redistribution of vehicular patterns and the balancing of levels of service across multiple signalized intersections in the study area.

In subsequent more engineering-intensive design phases, the phasing and timing of traffic signal operations will be fine-tuned, including the accommodation of transit, both at intersections and at a new bus terminal just south of the Watertown bus yard. The signalization design process will also address the traffic pattern on side streets between Charles River Road and North Beacon Street, with a focus on ensuring that residents of these streets seeking to get through and past the Square have access by way of North Beacon Street; while at the same time, keeping regional traffic from using neighborhood streets to cut through from Charles River Road after it is realigned out of the Square. Beyond these site-specific benefits, a modernized signalization system will have the long-term ability to be adapted to future circumstances.

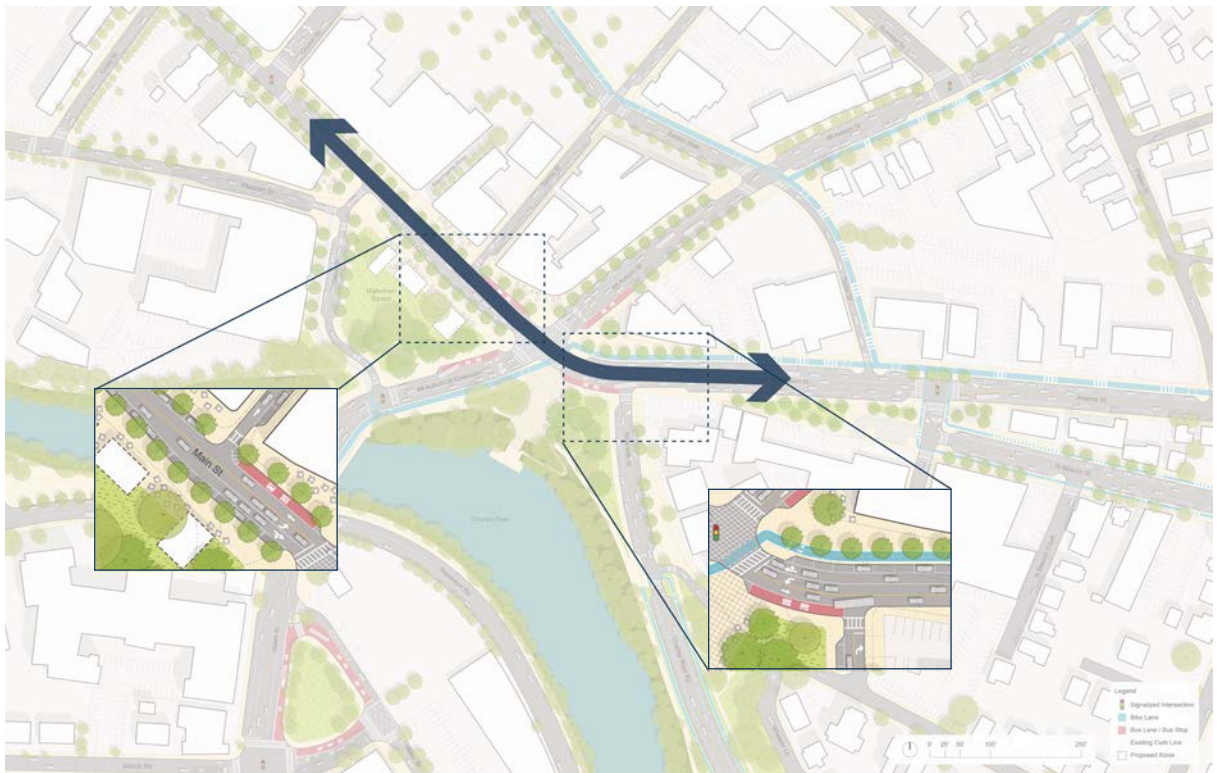
More generally, the Plan results in a more redundant street grid that is flexible for ingress and egress when streets are closed for emergencies or events. For example, the reclaimed original Galen Street builds in another way to get through the Square area, and the enhanced and extended Baptist Walk adds to the street grid and its connectivity throughout.



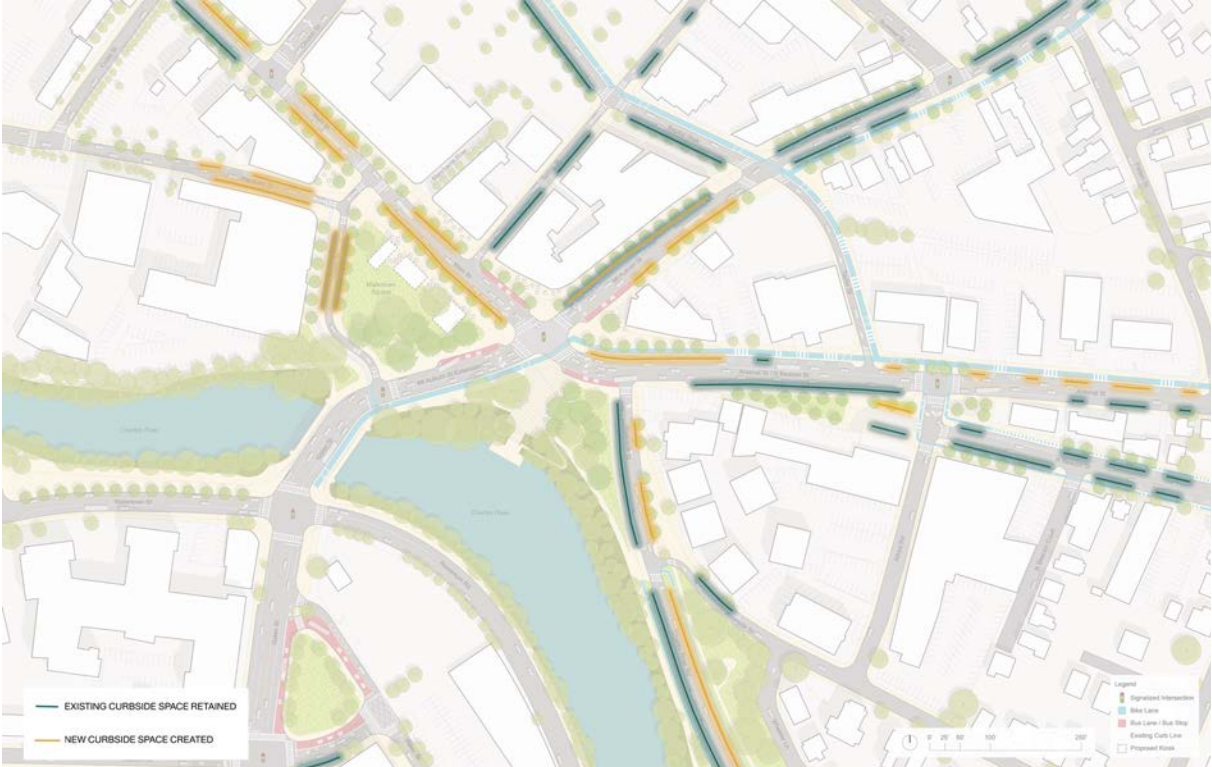
The north-south approach on Mount Auburn Street offers little to no change to existing travel patterns and provides one lane approaches to the intersection.



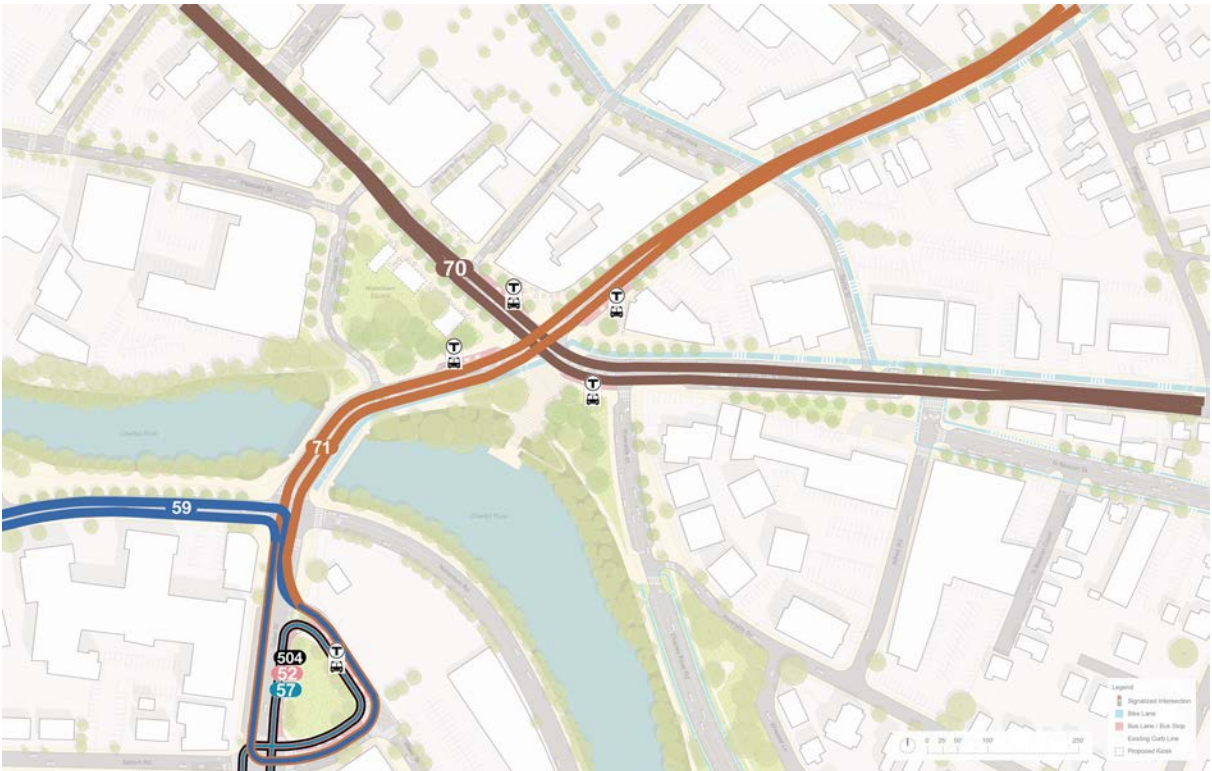
A feature of the street concept includes reclaiming Galen Street west of the Delta. This key connection in Watertown Square activates the Delta and 9 Galen Street frontage. This can now be imagined as a secondary main street, rather than a place for bus layover.



Heading east-west along Main Street and Arsenal / North Beacon Streets, the Plan proposes one lane approaches with left turn pockets. The reclaimed roadway space is used for wider sidewalks and additional curbside parking.



More curbside space is reserved for parking, bus stops, passenger and service loading, or on-street eateries. This space is important for the success of sidewalk-activating retail and to create a buffer between cars and pedestrians.



MBTA is supportive of relocating Route 71 and Route 59 terminus to Watertown Yard, eliminating the need for bus layover in Watertown Square.

Recommended Public Realm Next Steps

The proposed public realm improvements will require a phasing plan and significant additional design and engineering work. Future steps should also include a thorough study of the bus routing and layover space in Watertown Yard, as well as a comprehensive review of the proposed bicycle network and facilities.

Scope of the Streetscape Construction Project

In order to achieve the seamless integration with surrounding neighborhoods, the scope of work for the streetscape construction project should encompass all of the key streets in the study area, including the full lengths of Main Street, Galen Street, Arsenal Street, North Beacon Street, Mt. Auburn Street (and incorporating the previously planned improvements for Mount Auburn north of Patten Street), and Pleasant Street. This will ensure a continuity of treatments for sidewalks, crosswalks, traffic calming, complete streets strategies, multi-modal infrastructure, lighting, street furniture, and wayfinding. A broader streetscape construction project will also ensure that the public realm is legible as a single cohesive walkable environment, inviting residents from adjacent neighborhoods to walk to downtown amenities.

Refinement of the Open Space Design

The recapture of more than three acres of open space for community use is one of the primary achievements of the Plan and provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rethink the design of all of the open spaces in Square with a fresh eye. Thoughtfully-designed gathering spaces, while conceived for the entire community, will be especially important to residents of existing and future multi-family buildings in and around the Square. Although the expanded open spaces depicted in the plan show specific recommendations for pathways, tree canopy, and areas of turf versus hardscape, the full potential of these spaces will be refined as the plan advances through the next steps of the design process.

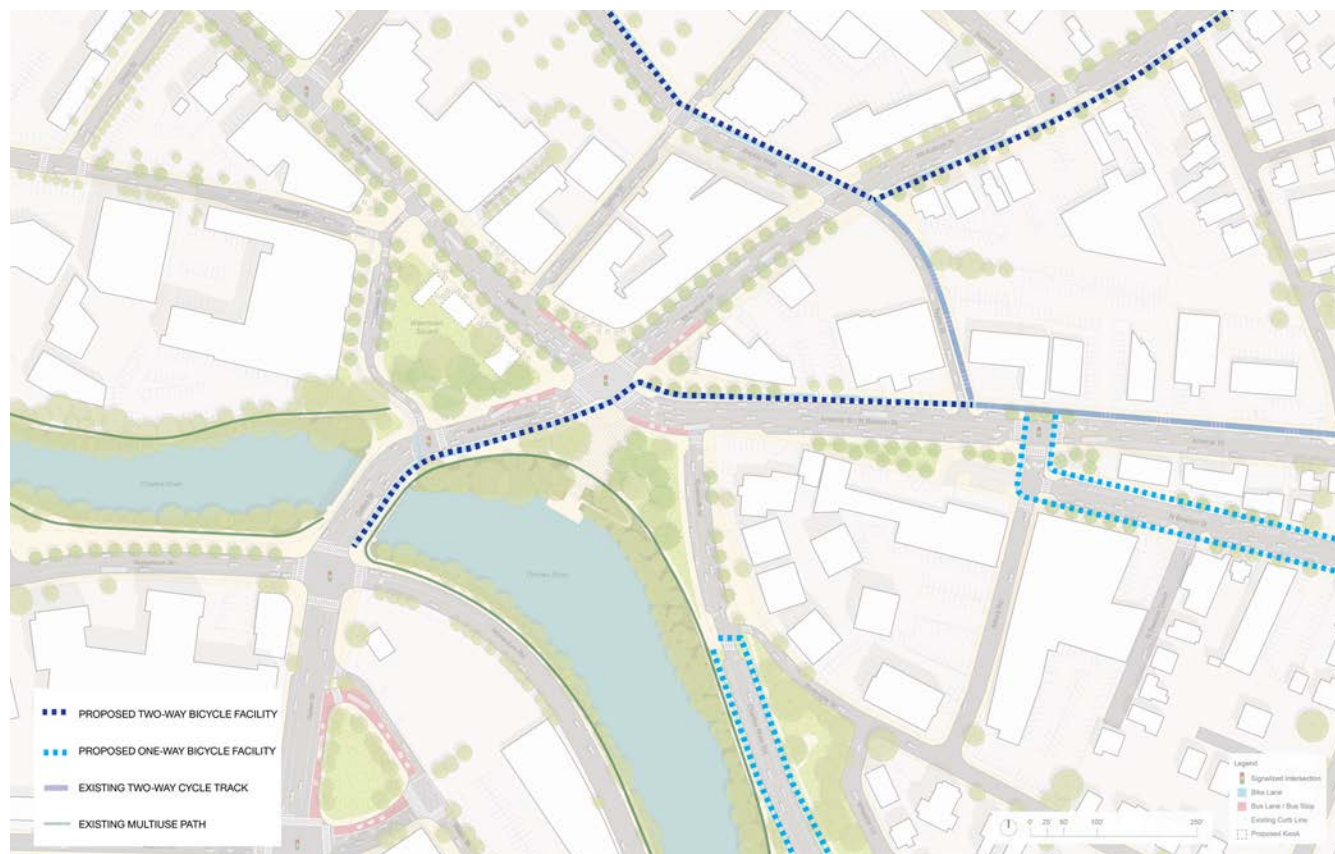
Since a high-quality and well-designed public realm is essential to the success of the project, the design team for future phases of the project should include a lead role for a landscape architecture firm. The inclusion of this disciplinary expertise will ensure that the landscape design prioritizes diverse plantings, native species, and pollinator plants while maximizing the addition of new tree canopy in order to provide expanded ecological benefits, address issues related to climate resilience, and fully leverage the place-making potential of the Plan.



The Square has unique natural assets and open spaces that would benefit from detailed landscape design expertise to create a more cohesive public realm experience.

In addition to the specific aspects of the street design plan described above, the Plan includes these additional features and benefits:

- Adjustments to MassDOT's proposed design for California Street, including the removal of the slip lane and expansion of recreation space along the Charles River between Galen Street and California Street
- Completion of the Community Path through the current parking lots and incorporation into future development.
- Coordinated improvements to the Community Path along Arsenal Street and Taylor Street
- Full integration with the City's proposed improvements to Mount Auburn Street, resulting in a seamless connection from Patten Street to Common Street
- No costly modifications to the historic MassDOT bridge
- Removal of any remaining catenary infrastructure
- Recommendations for clear and concise wayfinding



Bicycle Network Concept

Details for facilities and network alignments will be thoroughly reviewed during the design process.

Zoning Redesign

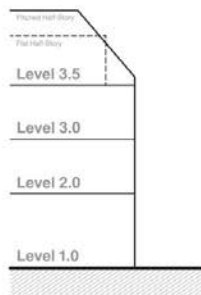
Summary of Zoning Approach

The recommended regulatory framework for the study area is a zoning code that is primarily framed by three form-based design standards, in addition to dimensional standards common to conventional codes:

1. A maximum allowable number of stories
2. A requirement that buildings include an articulated top floor, either shaped as an occupiable pitched roof or a penthouse that steps back a minimum of seven (7) feet from the primary facade plane below
3. Rules for the maximum length of uninterrupted facades and the design requirements at their terminus and/or transitions

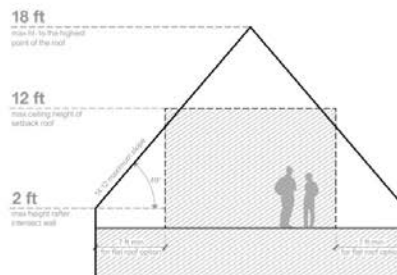
1 Building Height

Sets the maximum height in stories/feet



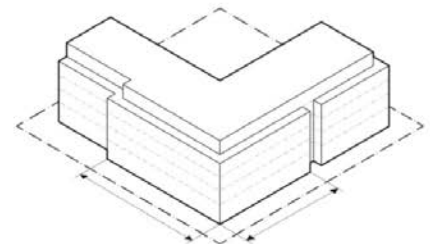
2 Roof Form

Provides options for a flat or pitched roof half-story



3 Facade Articulation

Provides options to break down building massing and diversify facades



Form-based Zoning Diagrams

The proposed zoning code is predicated on three fundamental form-based criteria: 1) the maximum number of stories, 2) the requirement that the top floor (the + floor) be shaped as a pitched roof or a penthouse stepped back from the facades below, and 3) the requirement that a single facade expression can't be longer than 100 feet, in order to make large buildings look like two or more buildings.

Beyond these design standard fundamentals, the code recommendations include more detailed requirements for open space, parking areas, and architectural components like dormers that make the occupation of the top floor feasible.

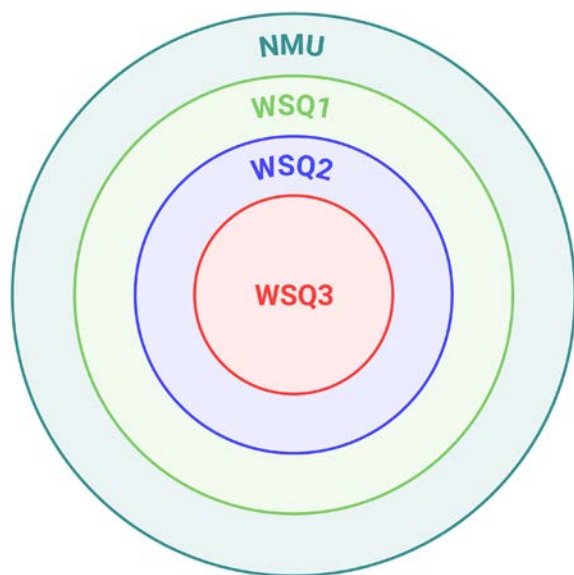
The code will still have a table of uses, but the list of uses will be simplified from what is used in other zoning districts in Watertown. Retail and restaurant ground-floor uses will be allowed throughout the district, and required in the portion of the core of the Square that requires first-floor retail. While upper story housing is a key component of the district, office uses will also be allowed. Large scale biotech lab / R&D uses will not be permitted in the new districts in the Square, as these uses generally require consolidating into large lots that are not consistent with the design goals for the study area.

In order to ensure a smooth transition to smaller-scale residential areas, a tiered zoning approach with four sub-districts are proposed, with each allowing a different maximum number of stories:

- Neighborhood Mixed Use (NMU): 2+ stories
- Watertown Square 1 (WSQ 1): 3+ stories
- Watertown Square 2 (WSQ 2): 4+ stories
- Watertown Square 3 (WSQ 3): 5+ stories

In each case, the plus (+) story represents either the occupiable roof or the penthouse floor described above. Given the design requirements of these two approaches, the floor area of the top floor of buildings built under the new code will be smaller than the typical floors below.

In addition to stepping up building heights as they get closer to the heart of the Square, the proposed code requires first-floor retail on designated parcels along Main Street, Mount Auburn Street and Arsenal Street / North Beacon Street. The combination of taller buildings in the heart of the Square and mixed-use requirements will increase vibrancy as the result of additional residents on the floors above and the preservation and expansion of sidewalk-activating retail.



WSQ3: 5+ stories



WSQ2: 4+ stories



WSQ1: 3+ stories

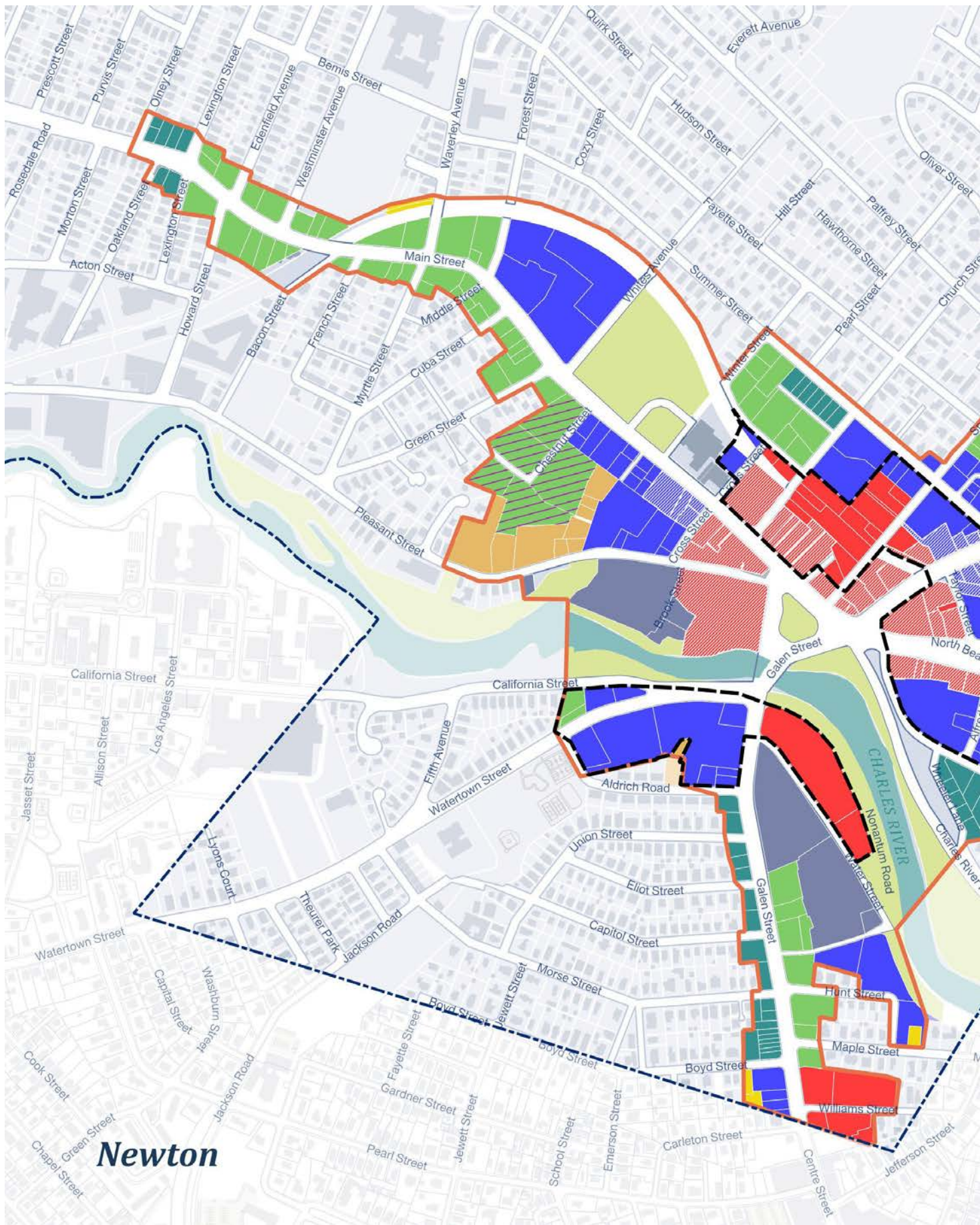


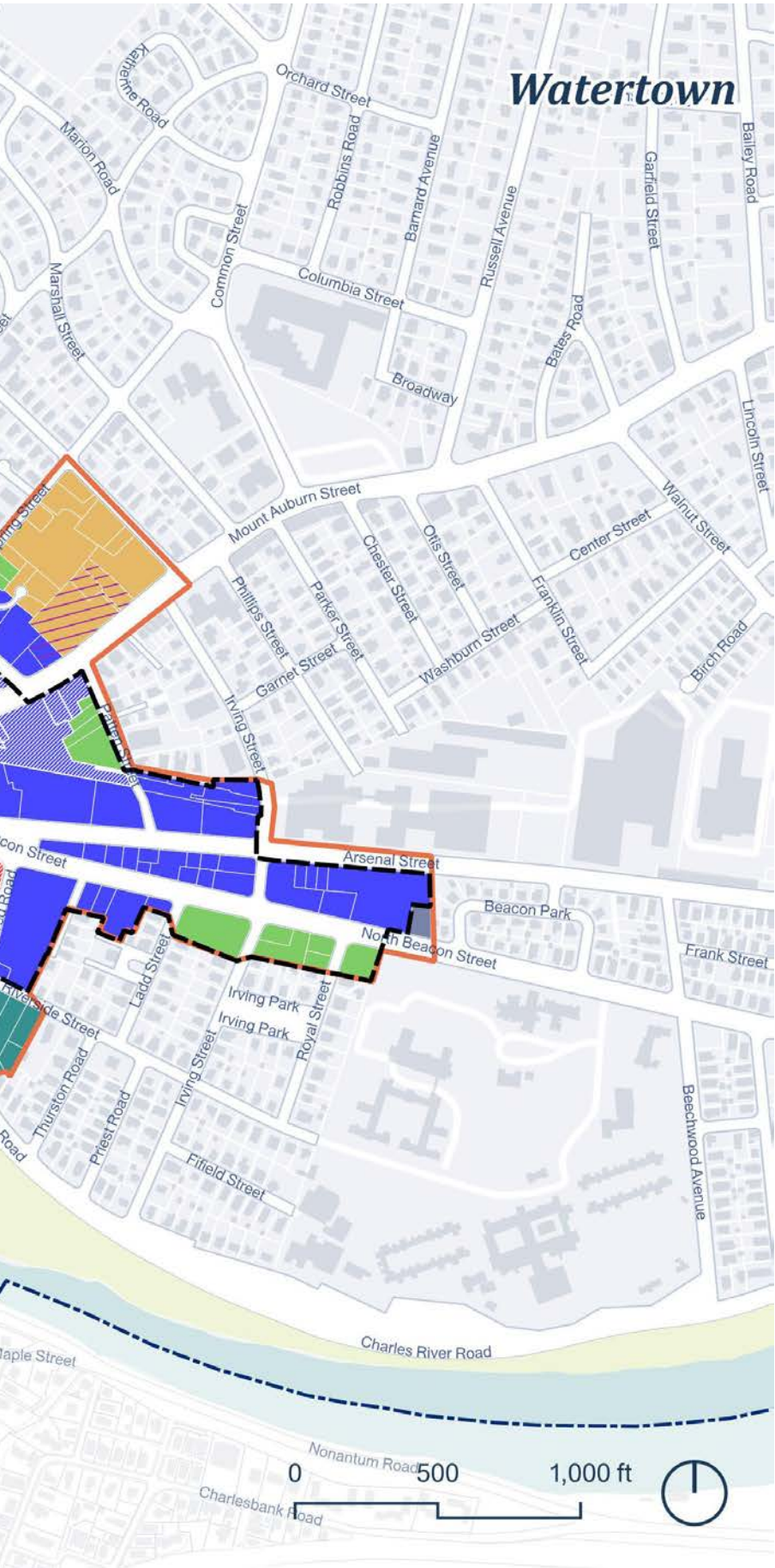
NMU: 2+ stories



Diagram of the Tiered Zoning Framework

The proposed zoning code is predicated on a tiered zoning approach based on the maximum allowable number of stories in each of the sub-zones. The + (plus) floor is an additional floor on top of the floors below that must be located under a pitched roof or stepped back 7 feet from the facades below. This strategy will help lower the perceptible height of buildings by lowering the cornice line and will result in a more interesting skyline than what would result from flat-roofed buildings.





- By Right/Site Plan Review Area*
- Open Space
- Religious/School Building Overlay
- Mixed-use Overlay
- WSQ3: 5+Story
- WSQ2: 4+Story
- WSQ1: 3+Story
- NMU
- Residential 0.75
- Residential_Two Family
- Industrial 3

* also MBTAC submission area

Map of the Proposed Zoning

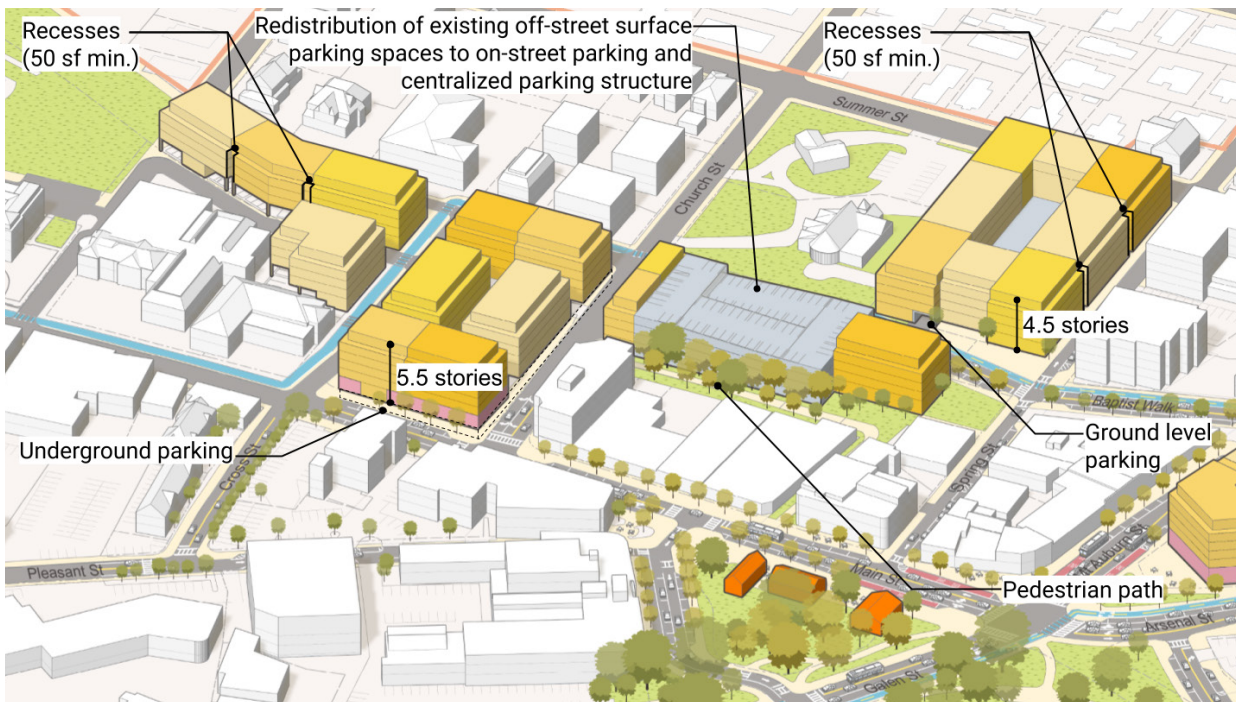
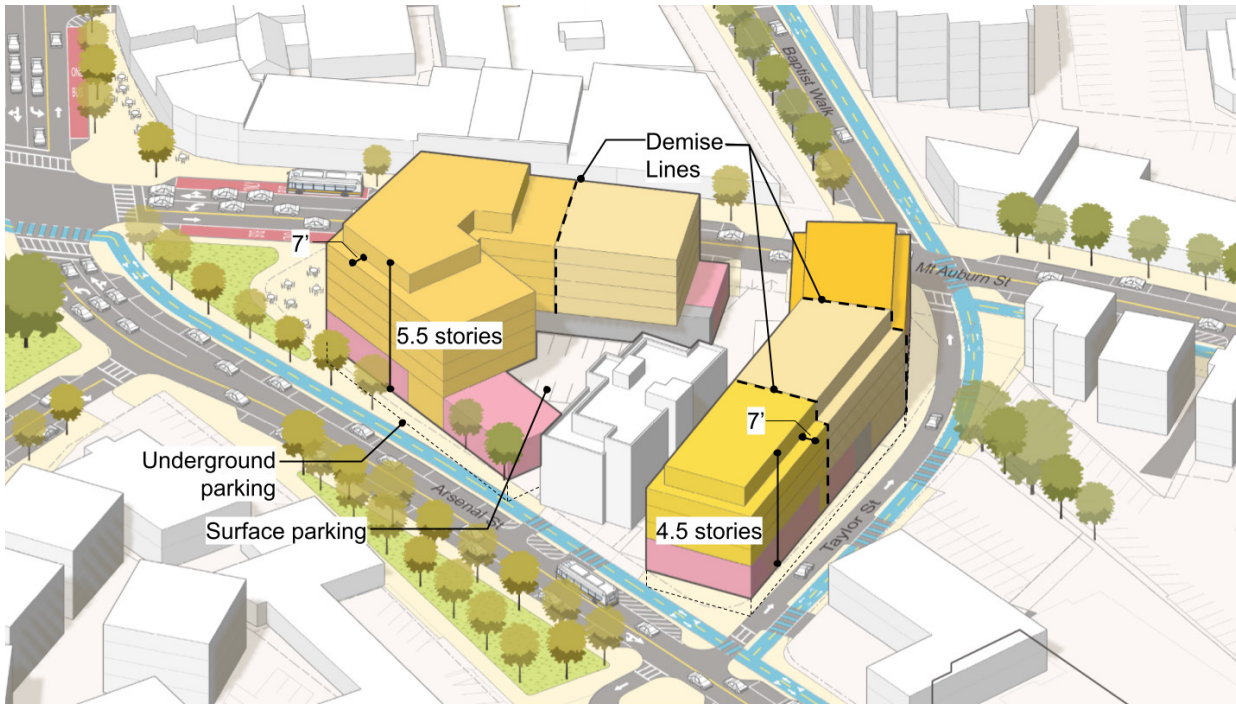
The color-code of the map is keyed to the bullseye diagram above. Each district allows a different maximum number of stories, from the tallest in the heart of the Square (WSQ3 at 5+ stories) to the lowest in the NMU district at 2+ stories.

Rationale for and Benefits of the Zoning Approach

Conventional zoning frameworks either establish the maximum allowable floor area of a building by applying a Floor Area Ratio (FAR), a dimensionless multiplier of the parcel area to determine maximum building area, or the residential density, established by a maximum number of dwelling units allowed per acre. While the maximum potential development yield of these zoning standards are easy to calculate, they are not a reliable predictor of the resulting urban form; and therefore, are not suitable for the kind of as-of-right zoning framework required by the MBTA Communities housing law (see more on the requirements and the recommended approach for Watertown Square below).

Instead of applying these abstract tools, buildings of different heights and configurations were tested on a few potential redevelopment sites in Watertown Square in order to test potential maximum building heights, the appropriateness of different configurations of shaped top floors, and to understand the impacts of maximum facade length requirements. After discussing the design scenarios internally and sharing them at the public charrette, the zoning code was reverse-engineered to create the dimensional standards for the code.

The resulting code will provide more predictable and better-designed outcomes. Some portions of the district will allow by-right development, but the Planning Board, through the site plan review process, will have the ability to place reasonable design conditions on these by-right projects to address site-specific design details that are not directly addressed in the code. This predictability means that the future entitlements process will be more streamlined than the current special permit path, while still keeping the public informed and participating. It is hoped that by reducing the risks and costs of project permitting, higher-quality projects will result that contribute to a more walkable Square.



Top: Zoning regulation test-fit on the triangular block bounded by Taylor St, Mount Auburn St, and N. Beacon St

Bottom: Zoning regulation test-fit on municipal parking lot site

Several parcels in Watertown Square were studied to understand the impact of proposed zoning regulations on the potential build-out of the sites. The issues that were explored included maximum heights, maximum facade lengths, and the impact of different parking ratios on the viability of development. The test-fits of the City of Watertown parking lots also helped determine the feasibility of replacing the existing parking lots with a parking garage, as part of a larger public/private development project.

Integration of the Zoning Code with Urban Design Goals

In concert with the public realm activation achieved by the street reconfiguration plan, the zoning reinforces positive urban design by promoting wider sidewalks throughout the study area. The new code requires new development in the WSQ1, WSQ2, and WSQ3 districts to be set back an additional distance so that at least twelve (12) feet of sidewalk is provided between the back of curb and exterior building facade. This allows adequate space for a clear accessible sidewalk, a furnishing zone along the street that also includes adequate space for canopy trees and sustainable plantings, and space for outdoor seating along the edges of buildings. The code also proposes zero lot lines along the front and side setbacks in the denser districts, along with a minimum facade build out ratio, in order to promote a more vibrant and walkable Square.

Integration of the Zoning Code with Open Space Goals

Open space on individual lots needs to be contextual to location and considered within the same tiered framework as allowable building heights. The homes in Watertown's residential areas, those marked "conserve" in the City's Comprehensive Plan, typically have their own yards. Modest multi-family buildings can often provide high-quality shared open space,

but planners must take care to ensure those spaces are gathering spaces and not just slivers of grass in the areas where buildings are not built. Downtown buildings typically may have a balcony or roof-deck, but the value of land makes it difficult to provide individual on-site open spaces. Instead, these places benefit from high-quality public parks in a community's downtown core area.

Given these considerations, outdoor space requirements in the Plan are recommended in the lower-height districts, with the potential for small lots (lots less than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre, that are unlikely to get more than slivers of grass) to opt out by providing a reasonable payment in lieu of on-site open space that will be used to improve nearby city parks. This will encourage private development in these districts to provide quality outdoor space, without burdening lots that may be inadequately sized or spatially constrained. Mid-sized, more urban sites will not have on-site open space requirements. Instead, the residents of these buildings will rely on nearby city parks to meet their open space needs. A minimum amount of civic space is recommended for large lots (lots greater than $\frac{3}{4}$ acre), to ensure that the largest of projects add to the total amount of publicly-accessible public space in the Square. The programming and design of these new privately-owned public spaces (POPS), whether parks, plazas, playgrounds, and/or community gardens, will be determined during site plan review during the entitlements process.



Watertown's parks and playgrounds provide space for the community to rest, play, and gather for seasonal events, as shown above.

Building Placement

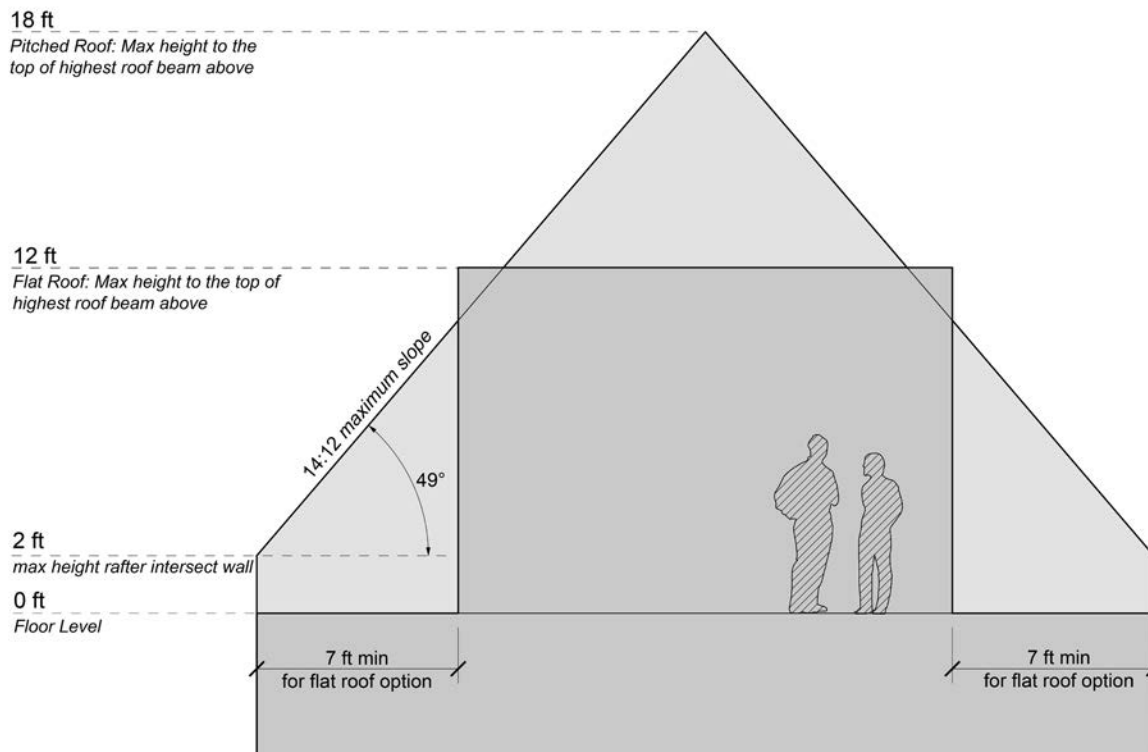
	NMU	WSQ1	WSQ2	WSQ3
Outdoor Space (min)				
	15%	15%	10%	-
Civic Space Uses	-	Lots 30,000 SF and greater shall provide a minimum of 5% civic space		
Building Setbacks				
Front (min)	0'-10' or Average ^{1*}	0'	0'	0'
Side				
Abutting a non-R District with a Party Wall	0'	0'	0'	0'
Abutting a non-R District without a Party Wall	10'	10'	10'	10'
Abutting an R-District²	10'	10'	10'	10'
Rear (min)				
Abutting a non-R District	10'	10'	10'	10'
Abutting an R-District	15'	15'	20'	20'
Building Separation for Multiple Buildings on a Lot (min)				
	20'	25'	25'	25'
Facade Build Out Ratio (min)				
Primary Front Lot Line	75%, or lot width within side setbacks minus 15', whichever is less			
Secondary Front Lot Line (Corner Lot)	50%			
Surface Parking Setbacks (min)				
Facing a right of way	12'			
Not facing a right of way	4'			

1 A range based on the amount of sidewalk needed to meet the requirement of 12'.

2 R-Districts include all residential-only zoning districts.

Building / Story Height

	NMU	WSQ1	WSQ2	WSQ3
Building Height in Stories/Feet (max)				
Pitched Roof	2+ / 44'	3+ / 59'	4+ / 72'	5+ / 88'
Flat Roof	2+ / 38'	3+ / 53'	4+ / 66'	5+ / 82'
Ground Story Height (min/max)				
	11' / 15'	13' / 15'	13' / 15'	15' / 18'
Roof Level (+ Story) Height (max)				
Pitched Roof			18'	
Flat Roof			12'	
Flat Roof Stepback (min)				
	7' on all sides of the building			



Plus (+) Story Roof Articulation Diagram

New buildings can accommodate the plus (+) floor in one of two ways. It can either be an occupiable gable end/or hip roof with dormers, or a penthouse stepped back a minimum of seven (7) feet from the facade edges below. This diagram shows the dimensional standards for both options in a single cross-section.

Rationale for Building Heights

There often is a tradeoff between allowing additional height (which makes buildings more economically feasible, especially in challenging areas and with the community benefits that municipalities often require) and other considerations, such as transition to lower heights in residential neighborhoods. The tiered approach to building height in the Plan is designed to make this tradeoff in a logical way.

A key factor in establishing the maximum heights in the Plan was to identify where additional height is necessary to transform underutilized sites that don't contribute to the future vision for the Square. A site with an existing tire shop, for example, may be more likely to transform if the land can be reused for a five-story building than it might be for a three-story building, especially if the business is profitable. Several parcels along Arsenal and North Beacon Streets, now dominated by auto use, is one area where additional height will be an incentive for existing owners and developers to move away from the existing businesses toward the mixed-use and residential uses that will be important to Watertown Square.

Sites are also more difficult to transform if they have substantial new infrastructure costs, like the City-owned parking lot sites, since redevelopment would require the construction of replacement parking in the guise of a new parking garage. Finally, the requirements for inclusionary housing and stormwater control add additional costs to new housing development that can partly be mitigated by allowing additional building height.

Potential redevelopment of the parcels in the heart of Watertown Square is particularly challenging for a variety of reasons, including:

- The need to aggregate smaller parcels and/or deal with a multi-tenant site can add complexity and cost (e.g., because of complex ownership structures, outstanding leases, and old easements)
- The need for public/private partnerships for projects that include some or all of the City-owned parking lots
- Older infrastructure and utility networks that must be updated for new development
- The need for upper-story residential development to cross-subsidize ground floor retail rather than rely on retail rents to help drive the financial returns, both because of larger structural changes in the retail real estate market and because subsidized retail will give developers more flexibility to curate the mix of tenants

Nonetheless, there are some limitations to maximum heights. Residential construction is expensive, and those expenses can be controlled by avoiding the need to use expensive steel- or concrete-frame “high rise” construction. Per the regulations of the state building code, mixed-use residential buildings under seven stories can avoid those higher-cost codes by combining a non-combustible ground floor “podium” with five stories of wood-framed floors on top. Recent analysis of development projects in greater Boston by the consultant team indicates that high-rise buildings only start to pencil out at eleven stories or more, since the added costs of more expensive framing types and other features required by the high-rise code, require more density to overcome the costs. This economic reality means that 8, 9, and 10-story buildings are not economically viable.

In the Watertown Square planning effort, participants showed little interest in new buildings taller than 10 stories. Based on this, buildings between three and six stories, with the top floor to be shaped as an occupiable roof or a penthouse floor, makes the most policy sense for Watertown. The code also includes a provision for a bonus story for projects with a substantial number of subsidized affordable units, although this additional story will probably not be added in the tallest district for the economic reasons described above.

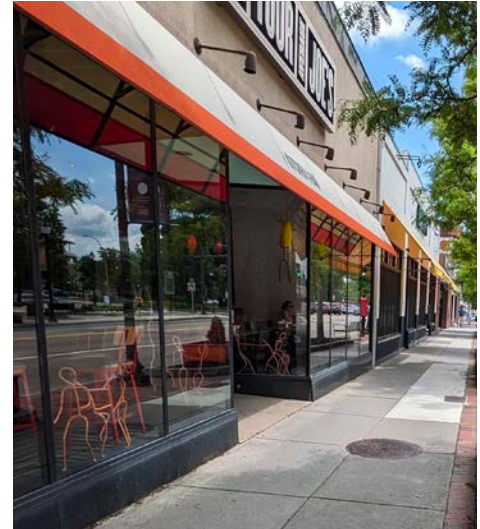
The maximum building height suggested for each tier is designed to provide flexibility for differing uses and design choices. The zoning recommendation incorporates real estate market requirements for the floor-to-floor heights of typical upper level residential floors (10'-6" or 10'-8") and ground floor commercial spaces (ranging from 13' to 15') and then adds a little bit of wiggle room, in case specific developers want to build slightly taller ceilings, especially important for condominium projects or those that choose to incorporate office uses in their buildings. In addition, slightly taller floor-to-floor heights are allowed for penthouse floors and the total allowable heights are designed to accommodate the additional height required for a pitched roof.

Overall, the limits in total stories are not radically different from what is allowed today in much of the Square. But, combined with the form-based code and new by-right / site plan review process for key parcels to meet the MBTA Communities Act, the new zoning will prioritize moving from automobile-centered development to more walkable buildings in and around the Square.

Architectural Design Standards

In addition to standards that regulate the overall building and individual story height, the proposed zoning code also limits the length of a continuous facade to 100' before requiring either a demise line or facade offset or recess. This facade length limitation will help break up the appearance of larger buildings by making them look like an assemblage of two or more abutting structures. Facade designs can be differentiated by a change in cornice, roof eave or parapet; a change in wall material or color; and/or a pilaster or column on either side of the division between each facade.

In addition to the facade length requirement, the code also includes design standards for the ground floors of buildings, including requirements for a minimum percentage of fenestration, with higher fenestration minimums proposed for parcels designated as mixed-use with a first-floor retail component. Additional standards are proposed for architectural features such as bay windows, balconies, and awnings in order to encourage architectural variety in new developments. The accompanying tables provide detailed recommendations to guide the shaping of facades and architectural features on new buildings.



The proposed zoning recommends higher fenestration standards for ground story retail spaces.



Facade

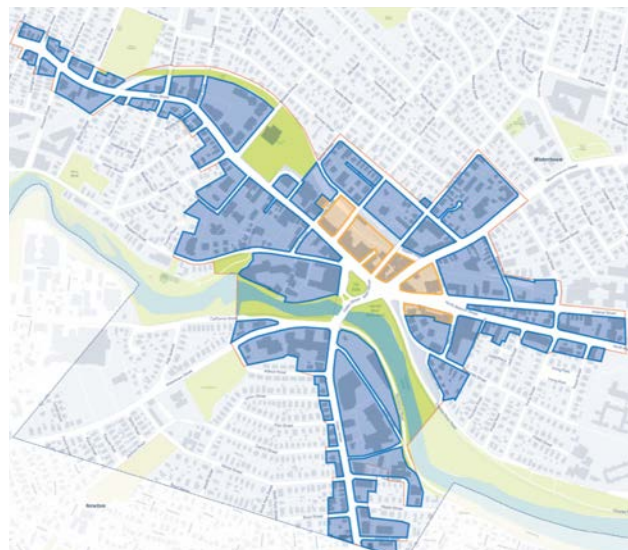
	NMU	WSQ1	WSQ2	WSQ3
Ground Story Fenestration (min)				
Mixed-Use Required Streets	–		70%	
All other streets, non-residential uses		50%		
All other streets, residential uses		15%		
Ground Story Active Use (min)				
Mixed-Use Required Streets	–		100%	
Active Use Depth	–		40'	
Articulation				
Length of continuous facade (max)		100'		
Area of facade recess (min)		Area of facade recess (min)		
Depth of facade offset (min)		5'		

Architectural Features

	NMU	WSQ1	WSQ2	WSQ3
Bay				
Width of each bay (max)		Greater of 20% of wall length or 12'		
Depth (max)		3'		
Front setback encroachment at the ground story (max)		3'		
Fenestration (min)		60%		
Extension into the right of way (max)		3'		
Clearance above grade within the right of way (min)		Top of the ground story		
Balcony				
Width of each balcony (min/max)		5' / Greater of 20% of wall length or 12'		
Depth (min/max)		3' / 8'		
Extension into the right of way (max)		3'		
Clearance above grade		Top of the ground story		
Front setback encroachment (max)		100%		
Awning				
Width of each awning (min)		-		
Clearance above grade (min)		9'		
Depth (max)		3'		
Extension into the right of way, principal entrance (max)		6'		
Extension into the right of way, other (max)		3'		
Front setback encroachment (max)		100%		



	Demise Line	Recess
	Required	Not Required
	Required	Required



Facade Articulation Zones

In order to break up larger buildings, the proposed zoning recommends establishing two facade articulation zones: at the heart of the Square (shown in the orange zone), development will be required to provide a facade demise line after a minimum of 100' of facade length; the rest of the proposed districts (shown in the blue zone), require a facade demise line and a facade recess or offset.

Resilient Design Standards

Watertown has led the way on sustainable building requirements that ensure development provides for comfortable, safe, and resilient neighborhoods into the future. It was the first municipality in Massachusetts to establish solar panel requirements and pass the new specialized stretch code. The proposed zoning will follow this trajectory, by including meaningful sustainable development standards for both by-right and special permit developments, including:

- An energy assessment requirement
- Resilient roof treatment (reflective, solar, or vegetated)
- Location of HVAC and other utility equipment outside of or above potential flood areas
- Meaningful greening of sites through a flexible menu of options
- Deep energy efficiency and electrification of buildings to the extent feasible
- Updated bicycle and electric car charging requirements

Rationale for Reduced Parking Minimums

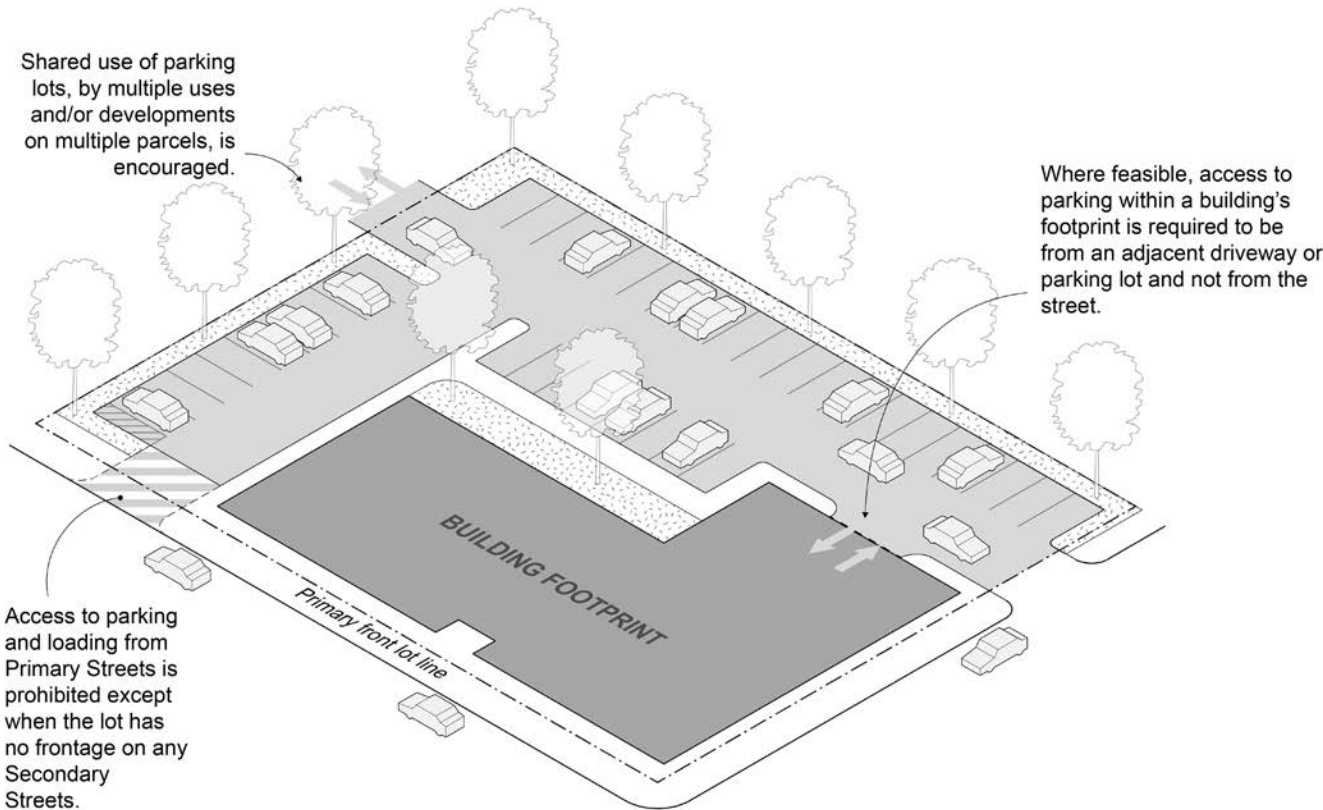
The proposed zoning both within the as-of-right zone and in the larger overlay area requires a minimum of 0.5 parking spaces per residential unit and a maximum of 1.0 spaces/unit³. Developments can exceed this maximum by special permit if they provide shared parking or are renting parking spaces to the general public. This range provides flexibility for developers, but does not require projects to overbuild parking to the detriment of other urban design, placemaking, and mobility priorities. The proposed zoning also eliminates the parking requirement for ground floor retail uses, which has been a barrier to new retail and restaurant uses. Visitors to those uses can park in public lots or, if built, a public garage.

The proposed zoning also allows for additional reductions by special permit. Allowing for less than the required amount of parking spaces may help incentivize the reuse of existing structures that contribute meaningfully to the historic character of the Square, since the space might not be available to accommodate adequate parking on site. It will also allow for construction of buildings with housing on lots that have small frontage on Main Street, since a garage door along this frontage would be detrimental to the walkable streetscape that is envisioned in the Plan. While the criteria for such a reduction will need to be specified in the zoning, it would make sense to require an approved Transportation Demand Management Plan and to track the criteria from Massachusetts G.L. Chapter 40A/Section 9. This section of the state's Zoning Act allows a municipality to reduce parking ratios by majority vote through a special permit process as long as the reduction qualifies as a "public good" in "the area in which the development is located" and not result in "a substantial adverse effect from the reduction in parking." Another approach would be to include specific factors that affect parking demand (e.g., lot placement and frontage, unit mix, distance from public transit, etc.)

Reduced parking requirements are likely to make Watertown Square a more attractive place to do development projects since parking is expensive to build in a downtown context. These requirements do not preclude the developer from building more parking, but they let the market decide the need and balance it against the cost of building garage space. The requirements are likely to ensure that new development does not invest in unnecessary parking instead of investing in well-designed buildings, great streetscapes, inclusionary housing, tree planting and the other priorities of the Plan.

Recent studies of new multi-family housing in Watertown have found that, while these projects are typically full (with vacancy rates under 5%), their parking garages are not full. Therefore the 1+ space requirement in existing districts is likely too high. In addition, a building with no attached parking will typically draw tenants who do not have cars. There is a significant subset of the population seeking housing that have no interest in owning a car. Targeting units to this population increases pedestrian activity and bus usage in the Square while limiting increases to traffic. In general, car-free residential housing allows for new housing, a larger tax base, and enhanced vibrancy, without new traffic - the best possible outcome for Watertown.

³ With reduced parking minimums for vehicles, bicycle parking requirements must be independent (bicycle parking spaces are now tied to vehicle parking spaces). The zoning will include new bicycle parking requirements that vary depending on use and whether parking is for short-term or long-term. Commercial development has more demand for short-term spaces with a range suggested between 1 space per 1,000 to 1 space per 20,000 Square feet based on the use, as well as long-term parking of between 1/ 2,500 to 1/ 5,000 Square feet. Residential demand suggests accommodating one space dedicated to each unit as well as short-term parking of one space for every 10 units.



Parking Access Standards

Affordable Developments

The City's inclusionary zoning requirements have been effective in adding affordable units in the 60 to 80 percent Area Median Income (AMI) range. But, the requirement for 15% of units as affordable - a requirement we will extend through this plan area - pushes against the cap of how much affordable housing can be cross-subsidized by a private development seeking to build a financeable and profitable new building.

For the City to create deeper affordability, developments must be funded with federal, state and local affordable housing resources. These are typically created by developers that specialize in affordable housing, and are familiar with the steps to securing affordable units. Most of these developers are seeking to do projects that are a majority affordable if not fully affordable. And, while they can be a part of the growth of new housing in the Square, these types of projects are challenging to finance and implement, and therefore rare. The City will continue to seek partners and opportunities to develop these higher-affordability projects as a part of the mix of development in Watertown Square - but they need subsidy. One way to help that subsidy is to provide a lower land cost per unit, but allowing more floor area than a market-rate project would be allowed to do. For that reason, the Plan proposes that affordable developments (50% or more affordable units, at an AMI level at or below 80%) be allowed an additional floor at each of the four tiers and have a parking minimum of 0.25/unit.



Left: Any development of the municipal parking lots would be by-right with site plan review.



Right: Any new development on the Watertown Savings Bank parcel would require a special permit.

Compliance with MBTA Housing Law Requirements

Per the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) Watertown is required to approve zoning that results in a capacity of at least 1,701 multi-family housing units. EOHLC, which must approve the proposed district, encourages locations which meet criteria like transit access, proximity to an existing downtown, and the availability of under-utilized land that can be redeveloped into new multi-family housing. Watertown Square fully meets these criteria. The 2023 Comprehensive Plan and the work done in preparing this Plan point to the importance of additional housing in transforming Watertown Square. This planning process has focused on a form-based approach to zoning that will address design issues up-front, allowing for a simpler process for individual project review. It is, therefore, logical to propose part of the Watertown Square study area for the required MBTA zoning district, and use the new form-based elements in zoning to ensure any by-right project meets the expectations of the planning process.

In proposing where Watertown should draw the boundaries for this required district, we focused on where using “as-of-right” zoning would best serve the Plan’s goals—and where using a “special permit” approach would best serve those goals. The result, based on block-by-block analysis, is a recommendation of as-of-right zoning that exceeds the minimum required unit capacity, but is restricted to a small area in and near the center of the Square. The rest of the study area should follow the same zoning framework, but with project approval requiring a special permit process. In these areas, the special permit process will provide a better platform to discuss and refine design decisions for these more sensitive sites.

Several criteria were used to determine where the Plan’s goals were best served by using as-of-right or special permit zoning for particular areas:

1. By-right/site plan review permitting is desirable in areas where the City wants to encourage transformation since development is more likely in areas with zoning that offers more certainty.
2. By right/site plan review is desirable for publicly-owned parcels (e.g., Watertown Yard and the municipal parking lots) as significant community and City Council involvement will be built into redevelopment of these sites.
3. On the other hand, buildings that contribute to the existing character of the Square and/or contain important legacy businesses (e.g., the Watertown Savings Bank and Otis buildings) should not be zoned to allow for them to change by-right. If a new project, or change in use, was to be proposed on these sites, they should follow a special permit process. Using a special permit approach also provides the mechanism to maintain the existing ground floor retail requirement in these areas.
4. Finally, parcels that abut lower-density residential zoning districts should continue using the special permit process, since it allows for discretion and greater sensitivity to these important transitions.

Destination Square

The 2023 Comprehensive Plan includes the vision of Watertown Square as a destination that builds on its existing anchors and adds complementary new uses that could include restaurants, music and entertainment venues, and other cultural, institutional, educational organizations. The 2023 Plan also envisioned a Watertown Square where small businesses could thrive. The Watertown Square Area Plan fulfills this commitment by identifying the significant public realm and zoning changes that will be necessary to make the Square a lively destination and a great place to live.

Several specific aspects of the Area Plan will help encourage the desired mix of uses. The proposed zoning design standards, for example, pay careful attention to ground floor heights and plan depths to encourage attractive restaurant and retail spaces in new developments. In addition, the elimination of parking requirements for active ground floor uses addresses a major impediment to new businesses. The proposed streetscape improvements will add new on-street parking and loading spaces that will better serve both existing and new small businesses. As discussed elsewhere, the retail pavilions proposed for the Delta could be used as “incubators” for food or retail start-ups before they “graduate” to larger spaces in the Square. Introducing more housing will increase foot traffic and the enhanced green spaces and connections to the Charles River will provide more reasons for people to visit, linger, and choose to live in Watertown Square.

These public realm and zoning changes align well with other recent initiatives. The Watertown Square Cultural District designation is pending with the state. This is a joint marketing effort to enhance the Square as a cultural destination and includes 24 cultural partners, including the Watertown Free Public Library, Armenian Museum of America, Perkins School, Mount Auburn Cemetery, and Gore Place are all governing partners of the district, among others. The Public Arts & Culture Committee and the Watertown Business Coalition are developing recommendations to update live music policy for restaurants to enhance the appeal of operating a local venue. The City is adding an economic development planner who can develop the toolkit of policies, programs, and funding opportunities to support small business owners proposed in the Comprehensive Plan. The recommendations to consider assistance for façade or interior store improvements and small business planning, as well as a review of licensing/regulatory requirements, will be in that planner’s portfolio.



The Square has many cultural assets and activities that make it lively, including the Armenian Museum of America, the Farmers' Market, Summer Concert Series, and Community Sculpture Walk.

Priority Redevelopment Opportunities

The Plan recommends that four potential catalyzing redevelopment projects be studied further:

1. The expansion of the library on the former police station site or adjacent parking area
2. The redevelopment of the Watertown/Belmont Church on Mt. Auburn Street
3. A public/private partnership for development of the City-owned parking lots
4. The development of the MBTA Watertown Yard site

Initial thoughts about these projects are summarized below, partly to help frame a scope of work for future planning studies.

The Library Expansion

As the library continues its strategic planning process, the City planning team should work with the library trustees on a few potential alternative library expansion scenarios. These are two options:

1. Expand the library onto the site of the former police station.
2. Expand the library onto the site of the parking lot behind the library, requiring replacement of library parking, either below the new building or in a garage on an adjacent site.

As the library reviews strategic priorities, they should consider moving the Hatch program into the expanded main library, providing space for additional quiet study areas, and establishing effective locations for new priority programs. Either scenario could also consider including other municipal uses into a new building or addition.

Additional library space in one or both of these sites could be incorporated in a mixed-use building wing (or building wings) with affordable and/or market rate housing on the upper floors. Implementation of a mixed residential/library use project would benefit from a public/private partnership with a market or not-for-profit developer. A financial partnership with the City, the convenient walkable location, and co-location with the library would be particularly attractive to an affordable housing developer.



Watertown Free Public Library

The Watertown/Belmont Church on Mt. Auburn Street

The Watertown/Belmont Church property on Mt. Auburn Street is both a historic asset and an important redevelopment opportunity. In recent years, the Church has unsuccessfully attempted to sell a portion of the property while keeping the Church itself for religious and community use. The Church's congregation recently voted to sell the entire property, with affordable housing and/or mission-driven uses preferred. The City should work with the Church to explore redevelopment scenarios.

With the entire site available for redevelopment, it may be realistic for an affordable housing developer to reach the scale necessary for federal and state funding. Such a plan would reuse the historic Church structures with one or more additions that are compatible with the Historic District. It is also possible that the other structures on the property could be reused or expanded. The site may also be able to accommodate municipal or community uses in spaces that do not work as affordable housing. Redevelopment should retain the prominent landscape space on Mt Auburn Street.

To facilitate adaptive reuse of the Church, the City should apply the Religious/School Building Overlay District (R/SOD) to the property. While zoning has not been the central impediment to redevelopment, the R/SOD allows for more flexible use of the site. Under the R/SOD, any of the uses permitted in the Residential R.75, Residential R1.2 and Neighborhood Business Districts would be allowed, and a number of other uses would be allowed by Special Permit. It would also provide more flexible dimensional requirements. Use of R/SOD zoning requires the preservation of the historic structures on the site.



The Watertown/Belmont Church

The City-owned Parking Lots

Redevelopment of the parking areas behind Main Street businesses, requires a public/private partnership both to deliver the right mix of uses but also because the construction of a structured parking garage is the only way to convert the existing parking lots into developable parcels. A public/private partnership is also the best framework for exploring strategies for including affordable retail space geared to local small businesses in the new buildings and nearby locations such as the kiosks on the Delta.

The most effective strategy for pursuing such a partnership is to first create a redevelopment authority and then request that the City Council transfer the lots to the control of the authority. The authority should then find the most suitable private development partner, through a request for proposals (RFP) process. The RFP can outline a range of development goals for the sites, require the developer to participate in site preparation, and establish minimum goals for open space and a mix of small businesses. Before issuing the RFP, the redevelopment authority can undertake an economic analysis of proposed public benefits to ensure that the cumulative effect of preferred public benefits still results in a financeable project.

Once the partnership is made, the City and developer will collaboratively craft a strategy to finance and build the parking garage and then develop surrounding lots. The City and the redevelopment authority must also explore funding sources to engineer and implement utility and infrastructure upgrades, since they are the enabling projects that catalyze significant new housing production.

The proposed Community Path goes through these parking lots. In the short-term, the existing concept plans should be used for an interim “quick build” path that connects the completed east and west portions of the path. The long term locations and design for the path should be included, along with the new grid of streets, in planning for redevelopment of these lots.



The municipal parking lots offer an opportunity for substantial redevelopment in the Square.

The Plan tested 4+ and 5+ story residential buildings on the site of the municipal parking lots, including a 4-story garage.



The MBTA Bus Yard Site

The MBTA Bus Yard at Watertown Yard is an important redevelopment opportunity because of the prominent location of the site at a sweeping bend in the Charles River and directly across from Watertown Square. Importantly, the site is also conveniently located between all of the proposed future bus stops in Watertown Square and directly across the street from the reconfigured bus stops for the 52, 57, 59, 71, and 504 routes. As a result, it's the best transit-oriented development site within the study area of the Plan. Given these parameters, a mixed-use residential development is the best development program for the site. In addition to capitalizing on the site's location, a residential development, consistent with proposed zoning, will balance and complement the new lab building and proposed future commercial development along Water Street.

Since the site is controlled by the MBTA, the City plans to work with the Authority to frame development expectations in any future request for development proposals (RFP). These are likely to include a desire for active ground floor uses at the corner of Galen Street and Nonantum Road, guidelines for preferred massing configurations that include ample green space, and diagrams that clarify how a MBTA bus layover facility will continue to be accommodated on the site.



For future development, the City and MBTA can work together to frame development expectations for potential uses on the MBTA Yard site that will best serve the Square.

Infrastructure Improvements

Implementing the Watertown Square Area Plan, including the priority redevelopment opportunities, will require substantial infrastructure improvements. The proposed phasing plan can provide a preliminary list of those projects and their nexus to the outcomes desired by the City. The improvements will require a combination of local funds, state infrastructure grants, and private investment. In anticipation of the need for local funding as a part of this project, the City Council has already set aside \$1.8 million in a Watertown Square stabilization fund for this purpose, and the City Manager has requested an additional \$1.8 million for this fund in the coming fiscal year.

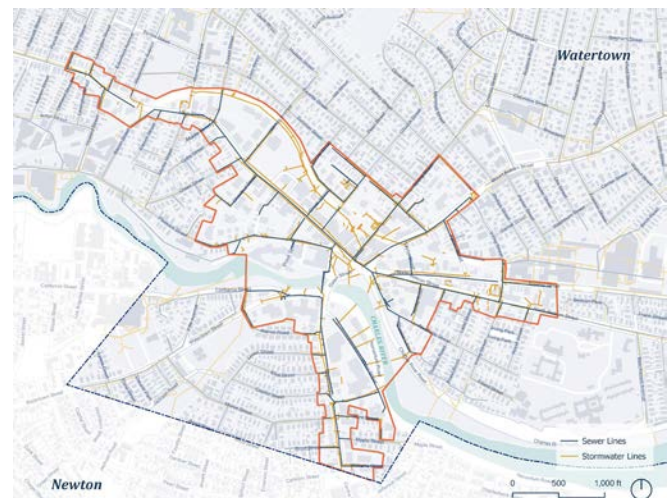
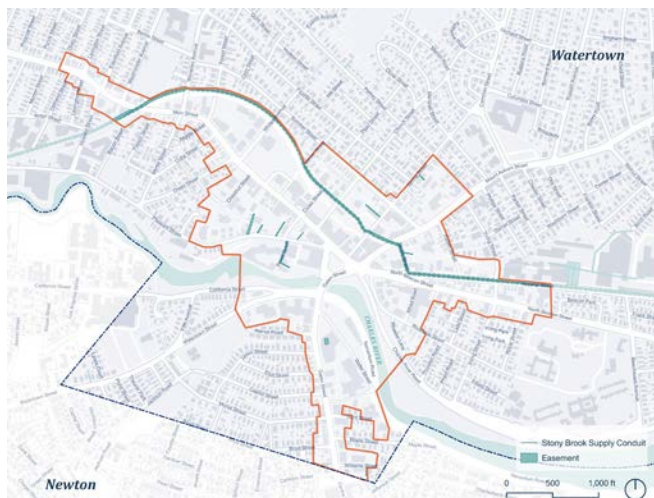
As previously noted, redevelopment of the municipal and private parking lots behind Main Street will require the relocation of utilities, creation of a street grid, and continuation of the Community Path, all while working around the City of Cambridge's water supply line that runs through an easement across these lots. These improvements will integrate this area into the overall fabric of Watertown Square and will help unlock the catalytic residential development proposed in this Plan.

While the City may be able to obtain state infrastructure grants to help with these utility/street grid improvements, it must rely on private investment or local funding for a new central garage. State grants to fund parking garages have become highly disfavored in the past ten or more years, partly because potential projected parking revenue doesn't come close to covering the costs of debt financing of municipal bonds or the ongoing operation and maintenance of the garage. That is why the Plan recommends that any garage or garages built to replace the City-owned surface parking lots be funded in conjunction with significant private development, with the potential for City involvement, if necessary. Such a level of private investment requires the zoning and the redevelopment process for the lots to allow the building heights proposed in this Plan.

Left: Map of Easements in the Study Area

Right: Map of Sewer and Stormwater Utilities in the Study Area

There are a number of subsurface utilities that must be coordinated for any development projects on the municipal and private parking lots behind Main Street, including the Stony Brook Supply Conduit and sewer, stormwater, and water supply lines.



The Public Engagement Process

The City and consultant team developed the plan during a robust multi-tiered engagement process that included informal conversations in people's homes, multiple surveys, a multi-day public charrette, and well-attended public meetings. These touch points were carefully coordinated with the technical work to ensure that stakeholders and members of the general public were providing advice and feedback at steps in the process when the consultant team had the flexibility to be responsive.

At the same time, the City and consultant team made sure that the multiple audiences for the evolving plan had been given the appropriate background technical information so their feedback would be grounded in a general understanding of zoning regulations, transportation issues, real estate market dynamics, and the MBTA's ongoing bus service redesign project. The engagement steps are described below. Additional information about the engagement process, including the alternative public realm and zoning scenarios that were shared and discussed, can be found in the Appendix.

Kitchen Table Conversations

The engagement process was launched with a series of informal conversations conducted by the Watertown Community Conversations, a resident-led group that had participated productively in the engagement process for the Comprehensive Plan. Their participation helped bridge the gap between the plans and make explicit the connection between the two efforts. Discussions with the Kitchen Table Conversations volunteers provided the consultant team with a more robust understanding of the potential project issues than they would have gotten from the City staff alone.

Several major themes emerged from the conversations, including the need to invite and foster community, improve walkability and connectivity, foreground accessibility issues and green space, and to have special considerations for unique and historic buildings around the Square. There was less consensus on issues related to parking and transit, with participants expressing divergent opinions on the importance of parking and car-focused development versus making improvements to bus service in the Square.

Engagement Touchpoints:

- Number of individual meetings: 20
- Number of participants: 168

See the results of community feedback in the Appendix.

Polis

The Polis Survey is an online engagement tool that asks respondents to both react to statements and, optionally, to supply their own statements for future respondents to react to. This feature gives participants more agency than conventional surveys and provides the algorithm that undergirds the survey enough responses to be able to sort respondents into opinion groups, based on patterns of response.

Typically, two or three sub-groups emerge that can generally be defined as “open-minded and open to change,” “resistant to change,” and sometimes but not always “somewhere in the middle.” While the Polis data is dependent upon who chose to participate, this sorting out has the advantage of clarifying the relative percentage of those respondents in each category, and very often, the results can reveal that the relative percentage of people in each camp is different from perceptions of public opinion gleaned at conventional public meetings.

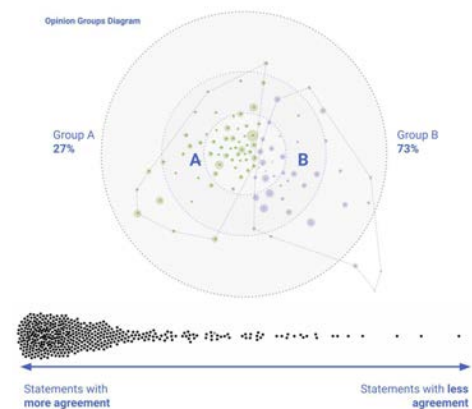
Sharing the Polis survey early in the planning process was helpful in gauging public opinions on a wide variety of topics related to the Plan. The survey was immensely well-used, with over 1,000 individual interactions and over 100 votes submitted per user on average. The results of the survey culminated in the formation of two opinion groups: Group A represented 27% of the participants and was more likely to agree with statements that prioritized the convenience of easy parking and minimizing traffic, while Group B represented 73% of participants, who were more likely to agree with de-prioritizing cars and providing dense housing in the Square.

Despite differences in opinion, there were a number of areas in which participants shared overlap on key issues, including the desire to see a diversity of retail stores, shops and cafes in the Square, as well as the desire to provide easier access to the Charles River. Additional shared themes included the aspiration to create more affordable housing development, provide faster and more reliable transit through the Square, and to create spaces for outdoor dining, socializing, and lingering.

Engagement Touchpoints:

- Number of respondents: 1,076 unique voters (based on logins or individual devices)
- Number of votes cast: 112,174
- Statements submitted: 1,073
- Average votes per individual login/device: 104.25

See the results of community feedback in the Appendix.



Group A (261 participants) agrees with:

Easy parking is more important to me than the walking and biking experience.

One reason businesses turn over so often is that parking is both limited and inconvenient. Why would I risk a parking ticket over dinner?

The most important consideration for Watertown Square is to keep traffic moving.

Denser housing development will contribute to the current traffic issues in the Square.

Group B (712 participants) agrees with:

Cars are loud, dirty, dangerous, and expensive. There should be less hardscape for cars/parking, and more room for people and shade trees.

Building dense housing in the Square would provide foot traffic that will support local businesses.

All major corridors should have physically separated bike lanes.

Build the square for people, bikes, and mass transit options, not cars with 1 passenger.

Polis Opinion Groups Diagram

The Polis survey resulted in the formation of two opinion groups: Group A represented the minority opinion and was more likely to agree with statements that prioritized the convenience of parking and minimizing traffic; Group B represented the majority opinion, and was more likely to agree with de-prioritizing cars and providing dense housing in the Square.

Public Meetings

In addition to the three-day charrette, three public meetings were held at various points during the planning process to present the proposed streetscape and zoning updates and hear feedback directly from the community.

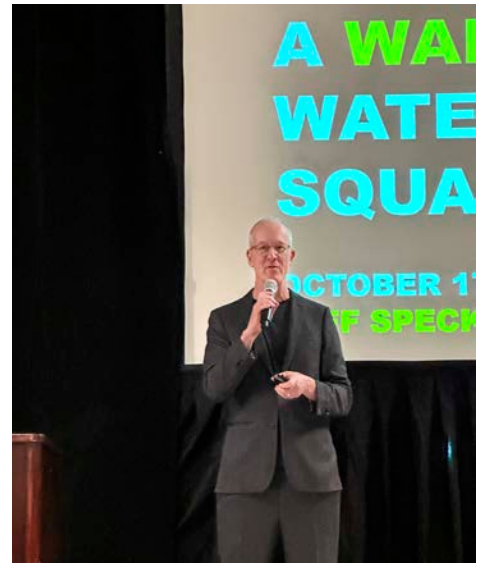
First Public Meeting/October 17

The first public meeting aligned with the project kick-off, but after some of the initial feedback from the Kitchen Conversations could be reported back. The kickoff meeting also included a talk by Jeff Speck that was meant to highlight the opportunities and potential strategies for making Watertown Square a more walkable mixed-use destination.

Engagement Touchpoints:

- Number of in-person and online signups: 210
- Number of survey forms: 37 paper survey submissions

See the results of community feedback in the Appendix.



Photos from the project launch, which included a talk by Jeff Speck.

Three-day Public Charrette

A three-day public design and planning workshop (“charrette”) was at the center of the planning process. The presentations, meetings, and design sessions were carefully timed to coincide with the consultant team’s own technical analysis and initial studies. This ensured that the designers and planners were well-prepared for the sessions but didn’t yet reach a point where they had created preconceived plans for the best approach for the redesign of the streets or zoning.

The sessions held during the first day of the three-day charrette were designed as teach-ins, with technical experts outlining the issues, followed by robust discussions with attendees. The discussions were fueled by challenging questions and far-ranging suggestions that helped frame next steps. In addition to the consultant team - which included experts in transportation, zoning, urban design, streetscape design, and transportation planning - City of Watertown staff and the MBTA made presentations, fielded questions, and engaged in discussions about alternative solutions.

Day two of the charrette provided opportunities for the planning and design team to sketch through alternative concepts and share and discuss them with small groups of the general public. Their work culminated in a presentation to more than 180 people that evening. After the talk, the consultant team and City staff were able to discuss the alternative concepts in more detail in front of the boards of the proposals that were distributed around the room.

Based on feedback during the previous evening, the consultant team zeroed in on two alternative scenarios in more detail: Four Corners, and Mini-Main Street, (see more details about these and other scenarios, including the “Deltabout” scheme, in the Appendix). The pros and cons of these schemes and a few initial zoning concepts were presented at the third and final evening of the charrette. The feedback from this and the other meetings held during the three-day workshop provided the necessary fodder for the consultant team to dig into the schemes from a technical standpoint.

Engagement Touchpoints:

- Total signups: 604
- Different people: 274

See the presentations of planning and design alternatives, working group results, and other information about the charrette in the Appendix.



Photos from the charrette depict the consultant team as they present during different design sessions, as well as engaging with members of the community to brainstorm responses to key design prompts.

Second Public Meeting/February 29

At the second public meeting, follow-up work done by the consulting team after the charrette was presented. This included refinements to the Four Corners and Mini-Main Street public realm proposals and a convincing case for dropping the third “Deltabout” streetscape option. The consultant team also made initial zoning recommendations based on a tiered, form-based zoning approach that stepped down building heights from five stories plus an occupiable roof to four stories with an occupiable roof to three stories with an occupiable roof.

In addition to a presentation of the potential design outcomes of the draft code on a few future development sites, the consultant team also calculated the unit capacity for two scenarios using the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities’ (EOHLC’s) compliance model. One proposed making the entire plan area into a by-right zoning area under the MBTA Communities Act rules. The other proposed a ‘collar’ that would limit by-right to a smaller portion of the project area. The majority of participants in the meeting supported the by-right zoning in the entire district, but feedback submitted during and after the meeting expressed concerns about how by-right zoning would impact buildings in the historic core of the Square and adjacent to current lower-height residential properties.

Engagement Touchpoints:

- Number of attendees signed-in: 181
- Number of individuals watching live online: 60
- Number of feedback form submissions: 215
- Number of comments written on boards: 236

See the results of community feedback in the Appendix.



The Second Public Meeting offered live polling during the presentation, where those attending in-person and online could submit responses to help guide the consultant team toward developing a preferred option for both the streetscape and proposed zoning schemes.

Third Public Meeting/April 4

As a result of public feedback and technical analysis, the City and consultant team determined that the Four Corners scheme best balanced the goals established at the outset of the project and reinforced and clarified during the charrette. These included the increase of pedestrian connectivity in and through the Square, more intuitive navigation of the Square by vehicles and bicycles, and enhanced placemaking potential to drive economic development and sidewalk activation. This recommendation, along with an updated zoning proposal, was presented at the third and final public meeting.

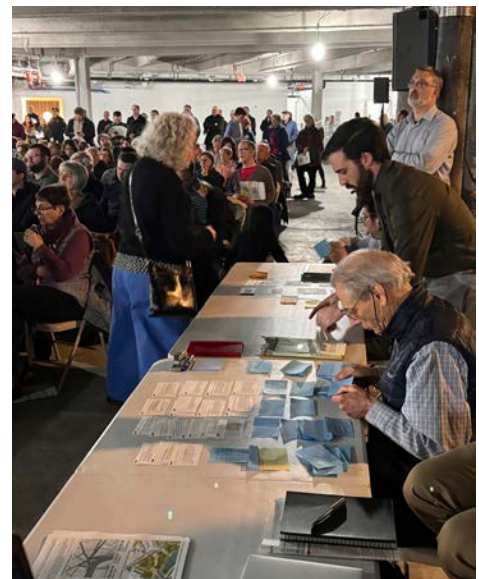
The adjustments to the zoning recommendation were mostly focused on refining the area where the new zoning code would be as-of-right. This was done by introducing an updated “collar” boundary where the new code would be as-of-right, and ensuring that key historic properties in the Square as well as those outside the Square that are adjacent to smaller residential properties would still require special permits.

The April public meeting included a large in-person crowd that asked many questions about the current process. Staff and the consulting team took the time to answer these questions, and the meeting took over three hours. Following the meeting, a feedback form was provided to participants in the room and on-line. The form had 499 responses, providing extensive feedback about the process and outcomes through the April meeting.

Engagement Touchpoints:

- Number of attendees signed-in: 219
- Number of individuals watching live online: 115
- Number of feedback form submissions: 499

See the results of community feedback in the Appendix.



The Third Public Meeting was one of the most well-attended project events. The meeting included an extensive Q+A session where participants asked questions to a panel of both City and consultant team members.

Since April

After the April public meeting, the team reviewed the feedback of 499 form submissions. These responses provided a variety of thoughts on the Plan, ranging from opinions on the need for higher or lower buildings, suggestions on changes to zoning districts; policy suggestions for implementing the Plan; ideas about open space, sustainability, trees and river impacts; as well as feedback on traffic, bus, bike and pedestrian flow through the proposed new road network. City staff and the consulting team sorted and reviewed the feedback and incorporated the suggestions when there was substantial support for an idea.

More generally, responses identified areas of consensus and areas where there is still a divided opinion on specific issues in the plan. Nonetheless, it reconfirmed that there is support amongst the participants in this process for new housing, the form-based elements in zoning, the intersection redesign, the open space enhancements, and streetscape strategies.

Finally, while there is majority support of respondents to the general strategy of the zoning, there is a substantial minority of the respondents with concerns about building heights particularly at the edges of the project area. For this reason, the zoning recommendation in the Plan has been refined to include a new NMU 2+ story district at key points where taller buildings would have the most impacts on existing single-family areas. The Plan, nonetheless, maintains the tallest buildings with the 5+ story district since this height was supported by the majority of those commenting and increases the likelihood that the financing of projects in the heart of the Square will be financially feasible while helping to catalyze the necessary parallel public improvements.



Appendix

Kitchen Table Conversations

- Kitchen Table Conversations Preliminary Feedback ([link](#))
- Watertown Community Conversations' Kitchen Table Conversations Summary Report ([link](#))

3-Day Design Charrette & Polis Results

- Watertown Square Charrette Presentation Part 1, including Polis Results Snapshot ([link](#))
- Watertown Square Charrette Presentation Part 2 ([link](#))
- Design Charrette Final Presentation Leading to Two Designs ([link](#))
- Watertown Square Area Plan Design Charrette Workshop Groups Summary ([link](#))
- Public Participation & Design Studio Charrette Drawings ([link](#))

February 29, 2024 Public Meeting & Feedback Form

- 2/29/24 Public Meeting Feedback Review ([link](#))
- Public Meeting Streetscape Presentation with Agenda ([link](#))
- Public Meeting Urban Design and MBTA Communities Zoning Presentation ([link](#))

April 4, 2024 Public Forum & Feedback Form

- 4/4/24 Public Forum Feedback ([link](#))
- Urban Design, MBTA Communities Zoning, and Streetscape Handout ([link](#))
- Public Forum Presentation ([link](#))

