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Staff Response to Questions/ Comments on Watertown Square Area Plan

Introduction

The following provides brief responses to some common questions and comments received as part of the June 13, 2024 public hearing.

For context, it is important to note the role of the Watertown Square Area Plan. This is a Plan to provide guidance and direction to the efforts of the City as to a vision for the future of Watertown Square. This document is not an engineered design, nor is it a zoning code with specific regulations. If a Plan is adopted, it will provide the roadmap for the next steps to make the vision a reality. The first step will be to make amendments to the Zoning Ordinance and map. The detailed work that will create the ordinance will be guided by the Plan but will inevitably involve some refinements and adjustments that will be part of the adoption process. This process will need to happen first, as we are under a deadline associated with the MBTA law to have compliant zoning in place by December 31, 2024. Similarly, when the City is ready to implement changes to the transportation network, the detailed engineering work will result in adjustments and refinements that will be part of the public process regarding implementation of the Plan. Plans for development on city land, including the library expansion, will also need to go through adjustments and refinements should they go forward.

The staff looks forward to answering questions from the City Council and Planning Board at the next meeting on June 27th. In the meantime, here are answers to some questions that came up at the June 13th meeting:

- 1. How many housing units do we have now? How many more will we build?** The 2020 Census determined that there were 16,936 homes in Watertown. Based on building permits pulled in 2021-23 (51 new units), we are at approximately 17,000 homes now. In the last 13 years, growth has mainly occurred within the Arsenal and Pleasant Street corridors. Under the proposed plan, more of the city's future housing growth can occur around Watertown Square, contributing to a more vibrant Square and more customers for our small businesses. Predicting the actual amount of new development is not feasible because there are so many variables. Most property is privately owned and has a number of constraints that limit possible reuse. Additionally, there are a number of factors that make it difficult to predict when redevelopment might happen, including federal interest

rates (financing), existing use, complex ownership, and physical and environmental property constraints. But, in general, a very small portion of land is developed to its full zoning capacity each year, and any “build-out” of this area would likely be over many years. As an example, the current CB Zoning in Watertown Square has allowed 5-story commercial or mixed-use buildings to be built for many years but only a few new projects were actually developed in the last several decades.

- 2. Then why do I keep hearing we are going to build 3000+ more units?** 3,133 is the “unit capacity” of the proposed MBTA Communities zoning district under their state law. It is not the number of new units that will or must be built. It is what could be built if nothing were on any of the lots and if every landowner decided to develop their lot to the maximum extent allowed by zoning. Multi-unit housing could be built on many of the sites in the proposed district under current zoning rules (although requiring a special permit), but these sites remain tire shops, gas stations, car dealerships, and small retail buildings. Making more sites by right will likely result in more housing being built, but it won’t be 3,133 new units – and likely not even 1,701 (the unit capacity required by the state).
- 3. What will be the impact of this Plan on the City's financial situation? Will this help our tax base? Shouldn't we be chasing more commercial development instead?** The net impact for new development will be beneficial to the City, even when considering any need for additional services. Multiple studies of multi-family housing in the similar communities have shown a net fiscal positive impact from new walkable downtown housing. To continue to support the City’s strong financial base, the Comprehensive Plan identified support for existing business clusters, but also supported looking for ways to diversify the tax base. Watertown is further constrained by a 1980’s era law that caps the portion of our taxes that can be raised from commercial buildings. We’ve received some relief from this rule via a home rule petition approved by the state, but if we continue to rely on commercial development alone, this will not allow us to build new taxable buildings without also impacting existing residential homeowners. By adding new multi-unit residential buildings, the value of commercial and residential development becomes more balanced.
- 4. What will be the impact of new housing on our schools?** The anticipated new growth will allow Watertown Schools to maintain and modestly grow our student population, consistent with our planning. Watertown Schools saw decades of declining student population. So, there may be some increase in student population. But, based on local data about where students live, one cannot substantiate the assumption that larger scale residential development increases the student population. And, while the MBTA Communities Act encourages communities to develop housing for families, and we will work to make sure that new units are friendly to families with children, families with children will not be the dominant group in new housing. Only a very small proportion of students are living within the larger scale developments, especially when compared to the single-and two-family homes. During the most recent timeframe in which new multi-family housing was built in Watertown (2016-2000) we added over 1000 housing units with a net reduction in student enrollment during this time.

- 5. Where is the green space in this Plan? Will there be more and will it be great landscaping with native trees and plants and pollinator gardens, etc.?** The streetscape plan adds 3.3 acres of new open space. While some of this will be dedicated to streets and sidewalks, much of it will be green space. The design and construction phase for street reconfiguration will include the creation of a reimagined public realm with newly created open spaces and new streetscapes. The City will hire a design team with landscape architects that specialize in creating a high-quality public realm. This design will include a focus on resilient and meaningful landscape design to enhance the open space and plazas and contribute to the community's long-term sustainability goals. The design process can make Watertown Square an inviting environment including plantings that support our climate and energy goals as well as bringing natural elements that better connect the urban landscape to the adjacent Charles River corridor. As part of public realm improvements, the design will also incorporate innovative green infrastructure to enhance and support a more sustainable planting program. This can also improve the health of existing and new public and street trees.
- 6. How does this interact with our climate plan?** This Plan is consistent with the City's Resilient Watertown Climate and Energy Plan. The Plan furthers the City's efforts to promote a shift in transportation modes, encourages Watertown Square as a destination for the City (not merely an intersection), and incorporates the improvement and expansion of green spaces within the Square. The Plan encourages the use of native species and pollinator gardens to enhance the area's natural environment as well.
- 7. Why is the maximum height (88 feet) so much higher than a typical 6 story residential building?** This was included to provide flexibility for appropriate floor to ceiling heights, particularly first floor commercial. The proposed heights of between 38' for the lowest zoning district to 88' for the highest district will allow for needed flexibility for appropriate design, particularly for ground floor retail, while still allowing for the lower typical floor to ceiling heights (residential has an average of 11' floor to floor) for residential floors/buildings. The maximum height for each proposed district includes a height for a pitched roof and a flat roof. The 88' number is only for a pitched roof within the tallest district. The height also provides for some flexibility to ensure that first floor retail spaces have enough clear height to be successful, allow needed clear heights for all floors of commercial only buildings, and allow for the sloped roof design. This height also allows upper story office buildings so that a building could be built to include a mix of office and/or housing. In general, this office space would require higher floors as well.
- 8. Can we change the building code to allow single-stair and/or mass-timber buildings?** The Massachusetts Building Code governs when new technologies or revised safety requirements can be utilized locally. This is out of the control of a local government in Massachusetts. Both the single-stair building (which allows for smaller buildings to be constructed) and the mass-timber construction (which would allow more than seven stories without the need for steel construction) would potentially change the economics of construction. But neither is likely to become permitted in Massachusetts until the state further investigates these construction methods. The state is planning to roll out its latest

update (the 10th Edition) later this year. We don't recommend building a zoning ordinance around the possibility of having these new codes, although we would consider zoning implications if these new codes were to be approved.

9. Will there be open and available parking spaces for retail? Will the garage be safe?

While there are many details that are undetermined, the concept for the garage is that it would provide parking for the various retail and office uses and also may be able to support some adjacent residential units that would be added. The garage could have an area dedicated to short-term parking for retail. It could also incorporate a number of safety strategies. In addition to the potential reconfiguration of the municipal lot and garage parking, there are a substantial number of on-street parking spaces proposed; these tend to be the most desirable for retail customers making short visits and therefore support local business success.

10. Why isn't 104 and 166 Main "in the plan area"? Both of these mixed-use developments are in the plan area (104 Main Street was permitted in late 2023 and 166 Main Street was substantially completed this year). The blocks where they are located would remain in the area where special permits are required. The Plan proposes specific blocks that would use by right process (versus special permit) based on logical criteria (e.g., areas we want to transform and areas where there will be heightened public process and control).

11. The proposed zoning is NMU on Galen Street, when the zoning should allow higher and more density. Why? The west side of Galen Street is directly adjacent to lower scale residential areas. The existing parcels in this corridor were all zoned for two-family only, even though many had mixed-uses on them. A segment of this corridor is underdeveloped and transitions into the Newton Corner commercial area, so the proposed zoning for that segment would allow taller buildings. The middle portion of the segment has a number of 2-3 story developments with a mix of primarily neighborhood business/residential uses. The lots are fairly shallow and many historic building features are intact. Based on these qualities, staff suggested use of the new NMU zoning. This zoning will allow more flexibility in uses and some potential for increased housing, most likely through additions to the more historic fabric of this neighborhood edge.

12. Why isn't there a proposed zone to reflect or match existing taller buildings like Whitney Towers and Williams Street Condos? These are two examples of taller residential buildings built prior to the current zoning. Their heights make them non-conforming under current zoning. As the question notes, the proposed zoning would maintain them as non-conforming, as there is no proposed district with heights that match these buildings. Within the Plan, the two 8-story residential buildings located on the west side of Galen Street would be in the highest WSQ-3 Zone as it transitions to Newton Corner. The Whites Avenue block with 7-8 story buildings along Main Street/west of Saltonstall Park would be in the second highest zone (WSQ-2) as it transitions to Linear Park and lower scale residential directly to its north. Although the alternative of WSQ-3 zoning for the Whites Avenue block could allow some flexibility by allowing for greater height than the WSQ-2, the buildings would still be taller (therefore, still non-conforming).

While we could develop a district that just matches these buildings, it isn't necessary. There was no recommendation to add new buildings at these heights, and under the rules for non-conforming structures, the existing buildings are allowed to remain, they can be modified through a review by the Zoning Board of Appeals, and, in the event of a disaster, could be rebuilt as they exist today.

13. What is a test-fit and why don't the test-fit illustrations reflect existing property lines?

Prior to and during the charrette, the design team worked on a series of 'what-ifs' to look at how potential redevelopment would work. The test-fits were intended to test out scale and placement using real Watertown lots as examples. The test fits highlighted underutilized areas, looked at combining adjacent parcels, or considered incremental redevelopment versus the potential of combining lots to create something bigger. The test fit drawings are not meant to suggest that those exact lots will be developed as shown. Some may not be built out under new zoning. Others that are not illustrated may be built out under new zoning. Therefore, these test fits informed our thinking on zoning and were not intended to reflect any build-out or denote the actual maximum zoning 'box' of the proposed zoning districts.

14. What do we mean by "affordable housing"? For purposes of the Plan, "affordable housing" refers to rental and ownership units legally restricted to households at certain income levels. Those units are created in two ways: (1) "inclusionary" units in market-rate developments (the city requires 15%) with no public funds spent in building the units, and (2) units in developments where 50% or more of the units are affordable, which requires public funding to build (typically some local money, along with significant state subsidies). The household income levels can vary depending on what the city requires for inclusionary zoning (type 1) or the specific federal/state funding program if an affordable development built with public money (type 2).

15. From what we hear, "affordable housing" isn't really affordable. Can you explain this?

Inclusionary zoning is created by private developers, taking money from their profits and/or cross-subsidizing from market-rate rents. To make that work, household income levels (and therefore rents) are based on median incomes for the Boston-Cambridge region. In Watertown, these units are based on making at or below 80% (or, under the second tier, below 65%) of that median area income. Since regional incomes are rising rapidly, so are rents. On the other hand, affordable developments that use federal/state subsidies can be targeted at lower household incomes, and those subsidies can allow those projects to work with lower rents. That's exactly why Watertown needs more affordable developments (50% or more of the units are affordable) because, in those projects, all the affordable units are publicly subsidized.

16. Can we allow the extra affordable housing floor without a special permit? The Plan allows a qualified development (50% or more affordable units) to have an extra floor (i.e., no special permit required).

17. Can we allow affordable projects in the special permit area without a special permit?

Making all affordable developments in the special permit portion of the Plan area “by right” is inconsistent with our goal to use special permits where we want more discretion (e.g., blocks with important buildings and blocks transitioning to lower density residential neighborhoods).

18. Can we allow more than 15 percent inclusionary zoning?

The MBTA Communities law limits our ability to increase the inclusionary zoning requirements in the “by right” district. The state is concerned that cities/towns could increase inclusionary zoning requirements to discourage development. This concern reflects a genuine issue about inclusionary zoning: if requirements are set too high, it leads to fewer market-rate units and fewer affordable housing units.

19. What traffic studies have been done to date and what is still to be done?

The project team performed in-depth traffic modeling that analyzed existing conditions and looked at key scenarios during the design process. This was based on data provided by the city and supplemented by the consultant, with supplemental source data including cell-phone data. City provided data included traffic studies for recent development that effected the study area, city-wide quarterly traffic counts that included key intersections/street segments in the study area, and the existing traffic model of Watertown Square and its surrounding intersections. The model was updated and expanded for the preferred concept plan, with updates made to the concept to resolve operational issues for turns from Arsenal St to the Galen St Bridge and from the south at the Galen St Bridge. Specifically, the City and project team reviewed proposed traffic conditions at traffic signals, along major and minor streets, and considered transit operations and other modes and focused on pedestrian safety and design. Although confident that the operation can be similar to current conditions, it is noted that the plans are at a conceptual level and will need to be further refined during the design and engineering phase. Details identified in the review that will be considered include options for improved transit operations, which must be coordinated with MBTA and DCR. The City is also continuing to coordinate with the MBTA to implement transit signal priority in combination with other techniques like que jump and/or select dedicated lanes to ensure the community has the best bus access and improved service within the study area.

20. Are our public safety departments OK with this plan?

The City has had a series of meetings that involved our DPW/Engineering, Planning, Police, and Fire Departments’ staff. Public safety is a priority of the project design, and staff input has informed the plan to improve the public realm. The recommended design and plan highlight measures to ensure that public safety access and operations continue to be met or improved. The concept designs will continue to be refined to provide a better, safer, and improved public realm, in continued coordination across departments.

21. How does this plan address public transit? Will this slow my ride on the 71 bus? Why can't we build a bus hub north of the river?

Maintaining and improving mobility for public transit passengers is one of the most important considerations in the Area Plan. The

project team meets regularly with MBTA planners to ensure the best outcome for transit. For instance, with the 71 Bus being proposed to cross the River and the 70 route having a new stop on the far side of Main St at Mt Auburn, bus transfers will be safer, quicker and more pleasant for all bus routes within the Square. Bus stops for all bus routes will be moved in accordance with transit best practices, typically on the far side of intersections for safer pedestrian crossings and to minimize delays at traffic signals. 71 bus service is improved in a number of ways with better signal design and bus stop placements and total trip times for passengers should be improved despite the addition of the river crossing with improved key stop locations. Bus service is expected to be further improved, as bus lanes at relevant locations, queue jumps (buses being expedited at intersections) and other tools in the transit planning toolkit are used.

22. Why can't we have bike lanes on Main Street? Main Street is the “living room” of our community. Main Street has been prioritized for pedestrians, in order to give as much space as possible for walking, sitting, resting, eating at sidewalk café tables, etc. The Community Path (our multi-use cycling and walking path) is one block to the north of Main, while bike routes along the river are one block south. Best practice bikeways for all ages and abilities and bike racks are planned to connect directly to and from Main Street. The City recognizes that walking and cycling visits lead to more income for retail and restaurants compared to visits using automobiles.

23. Who has jurisdiction to allow the streetscape design to be built? The jurisdiction of publicly owned lands includes mostly City owned Right of Way (ROW) but also includes property owned by the MBTA (Watertown Yard), DCR (Charles River Road/Riverfront Park, Charles River Reservation/Greenway), MassDOT (Galen Street Bridge and Main Street west of Bacon Street). All of these partners have been a part of the discussions of the Watertown Square plan.

24. What's all this talk about a redevelopment authority? What do they do? Will we give up control? Will they use eminent domain? As mentioned by the City Manager, if there is to be a redevelopment of public properties in concert with some adjoining private properties, a redevelopment authority is the way to make these relationships work. With a redevelopment authority, the city and the private neighbors can work collaboratively to find solutions that will be of benefit to all parties. State law makes it very difficult for cities and towns to do these partnerships without the involvement of a redevelopment authority. This is the strategy Watertown used to address the Watertown Arsenal site when it was sold by the federal government. It will work well if the City Council wants to pursue a plan to do any sort of partnership on the city's parking lots. If a redevelopment authority is to be created, it will take an extensive process with numerous hearings and votes by the City Council to make it a reality. The Plan does contemplate redeveloping some areas on the Square where an authority would be needed, and therefore mentions this as a tool to move forward.

25. Why is the Zoning for the Methodist Church property not including a change to the base zone to allow more flexibility? The base zone was not changed but an overlay was

added to allow more flexibility if the site is redeveloped. The base zone could be changed to add further flexibility, but as the site remains within the Historic District, all changes to the exterior of the buildings, additions, and/or new buildings will require a Historic District review and approval.

Appendix Resource: Change in Height Map

Comparison of proposed vs. existing zoning heights

The proposed zoning **does not substantially increase building heights** compared to what is currently possible with the existing zoning in the Square.

Half of the parcels in the study area will have no change in height under the proposed zoning, with the other half increasing in height by 0.5 - 1 story.

There are some instances where the existing buildings on site are taller than the proposed zoning, as noted on the map.

