



CITY OF WATERTOWN

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The following are recommended amendments to the plan in response to the discussion by the City Council and Planning Board raised during the public hearing.

Recommended Amendments:

1) Introduction - from City Manager (page 4)

A draft 'letter' is attached to this document can be inserted as the first section of the plan as an expanded introduction.

2) Implementation Actions – Amend/add to the three topic area sections to clarify or expand next steps:

A. **Recommended Public Realm Next Steps (Page 22-23)** – Add new subsection after “Refinement of the Open Space Design” and delete/replace bulleted list on page 23:

Coordination of the Public Realm Plan and Construction

1. *As part of design, consider the zoning and urban design opportunities and context on adjacent private properties, for potential expanded planting to support canopy trees and sustainable plantings in the public realm.*
2. *Incorporate spaces for outdoor seating and expanded sidewalks to enhance the pedestrian environment.*
3. *In the design, incorporate curbside best management practices with consideration for the competing interests of the curb, especially in high demand areas adjacent to retail frontages.*
4. ***Continue to coordinate with MassDOT, MBTA, and DCR for adjustment to MassDOT’s proposed design for the roadway reconfiguration of Galen Street at Nonantum and Watertown Street and the bridge, including the removal of the California Street slip lane and expansion of recreation space along the Charles River between Galen Street and California Street, and the MBTA Watertown Yard frontage.***
5. *Collaborate with DCR on the design and implementation of the DCR’s open space and reconfiguration of Charles River Road and Watertown’s Riverside Street.*

6. *Coordinated improvements to the Community Path along Arsenal Street and Taylor Street. **As part of this, redeveloped private properties should strive to incorporate open space that includes segments of an additional off-street route for the Community Path between Taylor Street to Irving Street along the former rail alignment.***

B. Zoning and Design Implementation (page 41) - Add new subsection to end of section:

Recommended Zoning and Design Next Steps

The following steps are needed to adopt zoning that implements the Plan's recommendations:

1. *City staff proposes and submits zoning, architectural standards, and map amendments reflecting the plan recommendation. September 2024*
2. *Formal review and approval of proposed zoning/design and map amendments by Planning Board and City Council, including public hearing(s). Fall 2024*
3. *Economic Feasibility Assessment (required by state to maintain inclusionary zoning requirements in MBTA zoning district). The Assessment will be completed by Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), supported through an in-kind grant to the City by Massachusetts Housing Partnership. Fall 2024*
4. *Submission of MBTA zoning package to Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities for review and approval. Winter 2024*

C. Redevelopment Opportunities Implementation (pages 45-47)

1. Reorganize section so municipal properties are first (pages 45-47)

Move the City-Owned Parking Lots content (page 47) to be before the Library Expansion content, add the following section to be located after the Library content. In addition, page 47 should be updated by removing the reference to process and redevelopment authority:

*~~"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 **The City will need to** outline a range of development goals for the sites, require the **potential** 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 **The City may** 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 **may** also explore funding sources to engineer and implement utility and infrastructure upgrades, since they are the enabling projects that catalyze significant new housing production.”~~

2. Implementation Steps for City-Owned Properties (page 45) – After Library section add new section:

Implementation Steps for Considering the use of City-Owned Properties

The municipally owned properties (including the library lot, former police station lot, and various parking and former rail lots) are used and managed in significantly different ways but because these priority opportunities are related and are municipally owned, the implementation should consider the opportunities and options for a city-led property/facility reuse process.

3. The Watertown/Belmont Church (page 46) – Add the following to this section:

The next steps to consider this opportunity include:

- A. *Watertown Affordable Housing Trust (using on-call architectural firm) assesses potential for using all or part of Watertown-Belmont Methodist Church ("Church") property for affordable housing. September 2024*
- B. *City staff assesses potential for using all or part of Church property for community programs. Fall 2024*
- C. *Based on affordable housing/community program assessments, and conversations with the church leadership, City staff reports to City Council on feasibility of acquiring Church property or supporting acquisition by an affordable housing partner, and, depending on assessments, options for the City to consider. Winter 2024/25*

4. MBTA Bus Yard Site (page 48)

The next implementation steps include:

- A. *It is expected that the MBTA real estate department will formulate a Request for Proposal (RFP) for redevelopment of the MBTA Yard site consistent with amended zoning. City staff will work with the MBTA to coordinate efforts where appropriate. Since the Yard is state-owned and any redevelopment requires balancing MBTA service needs with proposed reuse, expected*

implementation of this step depends upon a timeline established by the MBTA

- B. After RFP issuance, the MBTA would need to do an evaluation of proposals, selection of a developer/development team, negotiating a contract, coordination with the city on a specific redevelopment proposal, submission of a redevelopment proposal, and public process (including community meetings, public hearing and formal review by the applicable city board(s)).*

3) Incentives (pages 40 & 42): Add language that identifies areas where possible incentives should be considered:

- A.** At bottom of “Affordable Developments” page (now p. 40) as new paragraph:

The City should also consider whether there are zoning, permitting or other incentives to increase the percentage of “family housing” (including 2 bedrooms, 3 bedrooms or more) in new developments.

- B.** At bottom of “Destination Square” page (now p. 42) as new paragraph:

The City should also consider whether there are zoning, permitting or other incentives to encourage building owners, particularly in new developments, to devote storefront space to small businesses. Similar consideration should be given to incentives that would encourage owners/developers to preserve all or part of the historic facades that are important to the Square.

4) Specific clarifications/additions raised during the formal review process – (pages 14, 19, 23, 33, and 38)

- A.** In the “Additional Urban Design Features and Benefits” section on page 14, add:

These transportation improvements allow for a reimagined public realm that promotes the City’s Resilient Watertown Climate and Energy Plan. 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. The City will hire a design team and 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 Plan will encourage the use of native species and pollinator gardens and other innovative green infrastructure to enhance the area’s natural environment.

- B.** In the “Additional Mobility Infrastructure Benefits” section on page 19, add:

Transit priority will be incorporated into the plan’s public realm design and implementation. Improving safety, access, efficiency and mobility for public transit

passengers (in coordination with the MBTA) is an important goal of the plan. Each bus or shuttle has the potential to carry significantly more people than an automobile and this redesign street network was used as an opportunity to improve the commutes of substantially more of the community who rely on transit. This focus is especially important for disadvantaged groups, those with lower income and resources, and others that are solely dependent on public transportation for mobility. Since buses and shuttles use roadways more efficiently than automobiles, particularly compared to single-occupant vehicles, the prioritization of transit is in alignment with Watertown's Comprehensive Plan and Climate & Energy Plan goals.

This plan improves opportunities for taking transit (with best practice design and planning for improved service) to pair with more efficient and right-sized streets and the overall roadway network. The City will continue to coordinate with the MBTA to improve and ensure consistent and frequent bus service, and assist with implementation of the MBTA Bus Network Redesign plan that commits to high frequency bus service on the 57, 70 and 71 bus routes.

C. In the “Rationale for Building Heights” section on page 33, add:

Applying new zoning standards to an already-built environment always involves judgments about how to transition to existing structures--and how to view existing structures that do not conform to the new standards. Two notable examples of this are the west side of Galen Street and taller buildings like Whitney Towers and the Williams Street Condos.

The Plan proposes use of the new NMU zone along most of the west side of Galen Street because of this segment's existing development pattern and proximity in low-scale residential blocks; it proposes the WSQ-3 zone along another segment as the corridor transitions to Newton corner. Most of the west side of Galen Street is zoned for two-family only--even though many buildings have mixed-uses on them—and abuts low-scale residential homes. The lots along this segment are fairly shallow and many historic building features are intact. NMU zoning will allow more flexibility in uses and some potential for increased housing, likely through additions to the more historic fabric of this neighborhood edge. In contrast, farther south, there are more underdeveloped blocks as Galen Street transitions into Newton Corner. WSQ-3 is appropriate there.

Whitney Towers and the Williams Street Condos are non-conforming under current zoning because of their height. 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. While it may seem incongruous to adopt zoning with lower heights than these existing buildings, this is common in zoning. 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.

- D.** In the “Rationale for Reduced Parking Minimums” section on page 38, add:

In conjunction with reducing parking minimums, the Plan proposes a central garage and more on-street parking. The garage will provide parking for the various retail and office uses and also may be able to support adjacent residential units that would be added. The garage could have an area dedicated to short-term parking for retail and incorporate a number of safety measures. 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.

5) Incorporate the following into the Plan and add full documents to Appendices:

- A.** MBTA zoning compliance fact sheet
- B.** Map of the Zoning height increase/decrease map (as shown in presentation and Response to Questions,
- C.** Staff Response to Questions/ Comments on Watertown Square Area Plan (incorporate the full response as an appendix)

Introduction (add on page 4)

An Introduction from the City Manager

As we embark on what I have called “the end of the beginning” of the long process to improve Watertown Square, I’d like to reflect on the progress we have made and the process we have taken to get to the publication of this plan. We have completed work going back to October of 2023 that has included:

- 210 participants in our kick-off meeting
- 604 sign ups with 274 participants in our three-day design charrette
- 240 participants in our February follow-up meeting
- 450 individual comments during and after the February meeting
- 334 participants in our April 2024 meeting
- 499 feedback forms from the April meeting

I appreciate the involvement of so many participants in this process. I have been participating in public processes and plans for decades, and this is the most robust public involvement process that I have been involved in. I believe it is also the most robust process that Watertown has been involved in.

We advertised the start of this process online, through Watertown News, mentioned it at regular council meetings, and included notes about it in multiple tax bill inserts, as well as with signage at businesses and in public places throughout the city.

This process has ultimately resulted in this thorough plan document. With each meeting, the City staff and consultants have taken time to reflect, review comments, make substantive changes and return with an updated plan that is based upon a blend of:

- Professional expertise and understanding of the circumstances in the Square
- A review of extensive data on traffic and related issues
- Community comments, ideas and concerns
- Reflect on the likely feedback that we don’t have from residents who do not participate, future residents who have not yet moved here, and the others that our staff often call ‘the people not in the room’
- A review of our other relevant planning documents like the Comprehensive Plan and the Climate Action Plan

After reviewing the 499 comments received since the April meeting, the staff and consulting team published this complete draft plan two weeks before the first Joint Hearing, held on June 13, 2024. City staff released it online, and, in the days that followed, made copies available at city hall, at the library and at the senior center for residents to take.

For its next step, the plan sits before the Planning Board and elected City Council to discuss, deliberate, take-in further public comment, and ultimately decide whether to endorse or not. There is no requirement in any state law or process that requires endorsement of an ‘Area

Plan'. Comprehensive plans, like the one recently approved in Watertown, require Planning Board approval, but not City Council approval. However, it has been a best practice here (and other places I have worked) to have high-level plan documents endorsed by the chief elected board. It is our way, as City staff, of asking the question: Are our elected officials ready to work with us to take this plan through the next step?

What you have before you is a plan. It is not zoning, it is not an engineering design. It is a blueprint for moving forward on the Square, albeit one with significant community process and input. If endorsed, there are three aspects of the plan to implement. Each of these actions require multiple discussions and decision points to move forward, and this plan is a living document that will be continually considered as we move to the next steps:

1. Approve zoning: This requires staff to write zoning that reflects the approved plan, to bring zoning to public hearing(s) before the Planning Board and City Council.
2. Design and build a public realm: This requires partnering with State Agencies, hiring landscape architects and engineers, designing finer details, dealing with underground utilities, coordinating with property owners, and much more.
3. Partnering on public land: The City Council will need to discuss and decide on what potential reuse should and must include. If we move forward, we will need to identify how or if we work with a developer or developers to build projects that are partially or fully on current city land. We'd have to have conversations with owners of neighboring properties and see if we can sort out a way to move this forward.

The most common questions we received over the past few months are: "Why are we doing this?" And "Why are we doing it all together at once?"

We didn't need to do the streetscape redesign and the MBTA Communities rezoning together. There are easier ways to meet the MBTA rules. We also could have left the intersection to operate as it has for another generation. But just because it is easier does not necessarily mean it is the best thing for Watertown.

Watertown Square was once a bustling, busy commercial core in the 1940s and 1950s. It was the place for Watertown residents to come and go shopping and meet up with neighbors. It was a very successful downtown.

The Massachusetts Turnpike extension through Newton opened in 1964. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation responded to the arrival of the turnpike by working to speed traffic through Watertown Square into surrounding communities. Even as the highway revolt reached Boston in 1970, our state transportation leadership thought it was important to use our street network here in Watertown to get traffic from the Turnpike to Cambridge and beyond. They turned Mt. Auburn Street into four lanes – a highway of its own. They replaced the rotary that had been built in a previous generation with the intersection we have today – one that prioritizes moving and storing cars. After all that, Watertown Square became a place to pass through – a

place to wait two minutes at a red light before moving along to somewhere else. While we have some valuable and well-loved local businesses in the Square, we don't have a cohesive center.

The plan we put forth is based completely on one thing – returning the Square to a place where Watertown residents both present and future can shop and meet-up with neighbors.

Why should we let the people who want to get from Wayland to Cambridge determine the decisions of what we do in our downtown? This is your city, your Square, your downtown. We can stop pandering to the cut through traffic. There is nothing radical about trying to take back your downtown.

It is not going to be the same as it was in the past. This plan will not bring back Woolworths and Fox Drug. It won't bring back the 35-cent sandwiches that residents were recently reminiscing about online. But the plan can create a new, present-day version of a great Watertown Square. It will be different. It will have more buildings. But they are right-sized for a mid-size inner-core downtown served by extensive bus service. We can do this. We can do it in a way that respects and includes our existing small business and immediate neighbors. We can do it in a way that offers our residents the ability to continue to get here by driving, biking and walking. We can do it in a way that ensures we have the services downtown that we need for our residents. We can do it in a way that respects and enhances green space and tree canopy.

It will be much better than we have today, and it will be something we can all look back on and say that we did together. In order to accomplish all this, there's three simple things that need to be done:

1. **We need to prioritize people who are out of their cars.** This doesn't mean we expect everybody not to have a car, because we still want people who prefer to drive to still come to the Square, and that is the only way that some people can get around. Therefore, we need to have options for short-term parking, for people to go out to dinner, visit the library, or come to work here daily. But it is important for us to make sure that once those people get out of their car, they are a pedestrian, and they are the priority. The same thing goes for those who walk or bike to the Square. They eventually find themselves on a downtown sidewalk – so let's make sure those sidewalks are what they need to be to make everything work.
2. **Second, retail needs housing.** The time when an automobile oriented single-use mall could replace all retail is gone. Now, time and time again, malls want to build housing because of the positive impacts it can have. Any recent case study on revitalizing a town center or a dying shopping mall – housing is the key to the short and long-term success of those efforts.

It is a simple formula, but having enough people living here who can walk around and spend money here is key to the prospects of bringing back a downtown. Even if that's the only reason to support housing, it's a good enough reason if you want the Square to be successful. This strategy has been what worked in downtown Lowell when I worked there, it's working in Beverly, Quincy, Salem and Malden as they've added housing

around their retail cores. People need to live here for this to work. It's the secret sauce that makes Arsenal Yards work where an old, enclosed mall didn't work.

For those who might be saying “but I wouldn't want to live there” – “I wouldn't want to live without a car” – “I wouldn't want to live in a mixed-income multi-family building over a store” – “I wouldn't want to live without a yard” – that is okay. Many of us want a house with a yard. But that doesn't take away the many other people that DO want to live in a walkable downtown. Many people may be living in a big five-bedroom house in Watertown and looking to downsize. Others may be living with family and looking to get their own place. Some may be looking to move closer to work. Living a car-free, low-carbon-footprint, walkable downtown lifestyle is desirable for many people – and just because they are in a different place than others, does not mean we shouldn't meet those needs as well.

3. **Lastly, we need to make great public spaces.** That means great trees, great river connections, places where we can have lush, green landscapes in the middle of the city. And we need those spaces to work for a downtown environment. We discussed what that means at one of the public meetings, in that there is a ‘transect’ of solutions for different levels of growth and development. We have different solutions to ecology, to stormwater and to streets in different contexts. The ecological solution to land is different if you are on a farm, in a neighborhood of single-family homes in the West End of Watertown, or in our downtown. How we address stormwater is different, how we address trees is different.

Downtown, we need to put our walking people first and that includes having robust street trees and green spaces. We also know that we can't force green onto every small private lot. Instead, most of our downtown green space should be in shared public spaces. This plan reclaims over three acres of shared public space, and that's quite a bit for a downtown. Those spaces need to be great, they need to contribute to ecological sustainability and they need to be green. And they will.

So, why do this all together? The issues of traffic, housing and sustainability will have separate solutions, but we understand that they must first be addressed as a single plan as a way of understanding their synergies and shared benefits. This is an opportunity to make a real positive difference in our community at the right time on these several issues that are all very closely interrelated.

Sustainability:

My staff and I have been asked on many occasions about how this plan meets the sustainability plans for Watertown. The reality is that there is nothing more ecologically sound than a walkable downtown.

Every family that moves into our walkable downtown and not into a suburban cul-de-sac in Boston's outer suburbs is doing amazing things for the environment. They are:

- Taking the bus to their daily job, instead of getting in a car that would be driving every day through Watertown Square.
- Walking to go out to dinner, get to the pharmacy and get their daily needs met.
- Taking a bike ride to nearby parks and amenities, including using the path along the river.
- Having their kids walk to school
- Living in a housing unit with more shared space, in an energy-efficient building, with solar panels, and built under the new specialized stretch energy code.
- And, likely, living in a one-car family (or maybe with no car at all)

This is everything we want our climate plan to be.

Transportation:

Watertown Square moves a lot of traffic every day. Those traffic movements are often slow, with intersections creating congestion, but this is not too different than other town centers where road networks converge. What is different is that Watertown has responded to the regional traffic that cuts through Watertown by providing a significant amount of pavement to store those cars. They wait at each leg of the intersection for a red light to turn green, and then clear out that storage area, leaving behind empty pavement. This makes it difficult for pedestrians to enjoy the Square as a destination. Watertown Square will always have traffic congestion. But, if we develop a more efficient road network, we don't need to have all that pavement. And, if, through that process, we convince some of those cut-through drivers to stay on the turnpike and work their way to their destinations through other communities, that's not a bad outcome.

The plan changes traffic movements in two ways to reduce the need for car storage. It removes one leg, Charles River Road, from the intersection, thereby shortening the total time spent for all the other legs of the intersection. It also restores traffic movements to the current bus stop area at the delta, further dissipating overall traffic. The plan then reduces total travel lanes, picking up that important three acres of open space for trees, sidewalks, outdoor seating, etc. This should continue to serve traffic about as well as the square does today.

Housing:

Retail centers need nearby housing to succeed. But, furthermore, building new housing contributes to addressing a larger issue: our housing shortage is the greatest threat to our regional economic development goals. We need to do our part, and our neighboring communities also need to do their part.

We fully understand that this plan alone won't solve the housing crisis all by itself. It also does not help that the current financial and construction markets make it challenging to build the housing that we propose in this zoning.

But, there have been several economic studies looking at housing in recent years and they confirm that housing follows the most basic of economic strategies: building lots of supply stabilizes the increase in prices. We've seen that in places like Austin, TX where the answer to the hot housing market has been to build more housing, and rental prices are now stabilizing and coming down.

We are not proposing that we over-build Watertown. Watertown has contributed substantially to our regional housing needs, most significantly with a growth in multi-family housing along Arsenal Street and the Pleasant Street Corridor between 2010 and 2019. But, since housing provides such a clear advantage to our downtown's future, we do think this is the right housing in the right place. If we work to meet the greater Boston area's 200,000+ unit housing unit shortage by letting the growth happen in subdivisions in Bellingham, Shrewsbury and Southern New Hampshire, we will clog our roads with more and more cars as people try to get to jobs close to Watertown. If we build it in our downtown, we will support our walkable retail.

In our next steps, we will break the plan's component pieces apart and start digging deeper. We'll be back with more meetings and more conversation about how to implement the steps of the plan, and with more opportunities to hear from the Watertown community. We will build upon what we have here and refine it to create zoning, streetscapes and public spaces that will create a better Watertown Square.

This is just the end of the beginning of this process, but this plan can and should be the beginning of the future of Watertown Square.

Sincerely,

George J. Proakis
City Manager | City of Watertown, Massachusetts