

# 15-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOODS

REPAIRING REGIONAL HARMS AND BUILDING  
VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOODS FOR ALL

September 2021



The Boston  
Foundation **tBf**

**BOSTON INDICATORS**  
MEASURING WHAT WE VALUE

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## ABOUT BOSTON INDICATORS

Boston Indicators is the research center at the Boston Foundation, which works to advance a thriving Greater Boston for all residents across all neighborhoods. We do this by analyzing key indicators of well-being and by researching promising ideas for making our city more prosperous, equitable and just. To ensure that our work informs active efforts to improve our city, we work in deep partnership with community groups, civic leaders and Boston's civic data community to produce special reports and host public convenings.

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MHP's Center for Housing Data was created in 2017 to collect, analyze and share information to drive better conversations about housing in Massachusetts. The Center's staff identifies data gaps, acts as a data clearinghouse, and makes data easily accessible to non-housing professionals. It is part of the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, a quasi-public agency founded in 1990 that helps shape state housing policy, provides community technical assistance and has used private bank funds to finance more than 47,000 apartments and homes.

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# 15-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOODS

## REPAIRING REGIONAL HARMS AND BUILDING VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOODS FOR ALL

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not be possible without vital contributions from a range of local leaders, advocates, and researchers, including: Tracy Corley, Northeastern University & Conservation Law Foundation; Christopher Kuschel, Metropolitan Area Planning Council; Jonathan Berk, Patronicity; Andre LeRoux, MassINC; Dana LeWinter, CHAPA; Ben Forman, MassINC; Jarred Johnson, TransitMatters; Kyndal Feinman, Housing Forward MA; Josh Zakim, Housing Forward MA; Stacy Thompson, Livable Streets; Anabelle Rondon, MassDevelopment; Peter Dunn, City of Worcester; Karin Valentine Goins, WalkBike Worcester; Christine Madore, Massachusetts Housing Partnership; Callie Clark, Massachusetts Housing Partnership; Alma Balonon-Rosen, Massachusetts Housing Partnership, Helen Murphy, The Boston Foundation; and Soni Gupta, The Boston Foundation.

We also appreciate the time and invaluable insights shared by leaders and advocates from our paper's four case study communities: Worcester, Somerville, Reading and Boston's Jackson Square.

This report was also made possible with generous support from the Barr Foundation.

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MEASURING WHAT WE VALUE

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CENTER for  
HOUSING DATA

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# INTRODUCTION

Each of us deserves to live in a vibrant, healthy neighborhood, where we can get to everyday destinations without too much hassle. These are neighborhoods where you can pick up a library book on your walk to the local market, where children feel safe playing outside, and where welcoming public spaces encourage all sorts of gathering and community events. For years, planners and policymakers have advanced visions along these lines using a range of different names—smart growth districts, great neighborhoods, transit-oriented development, mobility-oriented development, superblocks, WalkUPs, complete neighborhoods, safe streets, and many more.



Source: Eryn Johnson for the Community Arts Center in Cambridge

In this paper, we use the “15-minute city” model as a jumping off point. This can feel like yet another urban planning buzzword, but we find it powerful for articulating a vision of what Greater Boston could become. Designed by Carlos Moreno and popularized by Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, the 15-minute city model aims to build vibrant, mixed-use neighborhoods where all residents can reach their daily needs within a 15-minute walk of their home. Our vision for Greater Boston is distinct because we add a few extra points of emphasis. First, we worry that a hyper-local focus can lead to a few, disconnected, amenity-rich islands of privilege, so we’ve designed our vision to be regional in nature, moving toward an interconnected network of 15-minute neighborhoods across Greater Boston.

Second, we emphasize high-quality public transit and bike options as supplements to improved walkability. Third, we believe that 15-minute neighborhoods should reflect our region’s racial and socioeconomic diversity, and any comprehensive regional planning initiative should be a means to reverse the entrenched patterns of racial and economic segregation. To accomplish this, the planning, creation, and stewardship of 15-minute neighborhoods must truly center the voices and needs of those who have historically been left on the margins, including Black, Indigenous and other residents of color, low-wealth residents, new immigrants, and those with disabilities.



Source: Jonathan Berk

Greater Boston has real potential to turn the vision of 15-minute neighborhoods into reality. Our region is already dotted with downtowns that are fairly walkable and have some measure of small business development. With the pandemic and increases in remote work, demand for living in many suburban downtowns has increased. Greater Boston is also home to “regional urban centers” like Worcester and Lawrence that feed local ecosystems largely independent of Boston. Connected by the MBTA’s rapid transit, bus, and commuter rail networks, this constellation of cities and towns outside of Boston is poised to support vibrant, mixed-use neighborhoods that are less car-dependent and more locally focused.

The state legislature actually took an important step in supporting 15-minute-style development in this past January’s Economic Development Bond Bill, which included a provision requiring that every MBTA community develop at least one multifamily zoning district. The Department of Housing and Community Development is currently drafting implementation guidelines, and there’s uncertainty about how much new housing it will yield, but this represents an important step toward revitalizing these transit-rich neighborhoods and requiring them to build housing that’s more accessible to low- and moderate-income families.



Source: Jonathan Berk

To date, though, too many policy decisions have moved us in the opposite direction. Transportation and land use policy has prioritized cars for generations, encouraging sprawl, separating residential from commercial uses, and relinquishing large amounts of public space to single-occupancy vehicles. Furthermore, while jobs, transportation, and housing markets increasingly operate at an interconnected regional scale, the state has ceded too many land-use and zoning decisions to the purview of small local governments. This has allowed many of these communities to adopt single-family-exclusive zoning, contributing to persistent residential segregation by race and income. Exclusionary zoning has also led to our region's severe housing shortage, high housing costs, and residential density levels that often are too low to support the development of vibrant downtowns and strong regional job opportunities. Local decisions are made without the input of those hoping to move into a community, such as service workers who cannot afford to live where their jobs are, making defense of the status quo the norm.

It's also worth acknowledging concerns that certain neighborhood improvements can serve to accelerate rising housing costs and spur displacement. These potential side effects are another reason why we focus region-wide. In the policy section below, we discuss policies both for opening access to Boston's exclusionary suburbs *and* for revitalizing neglected downtowns that have struggled with cycles of disinvestment. Equity-focused investments are more limited when we don't have growing economies, and localized displacement pressures are highest when we don't build housing in all communities. Neighborhood improvements also create a virtuous cycle of new job creation, increased economic activity and, ultimately, increased local tax revenue that should be spent on equity-focused investments like acquiring naturally occurring affordable housing or increasing the availability of small business capital to entrepreneurs of color.



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## AND KEY FINDINGS

Through this paper we hope to **popularize a vision of a regional network of equitable 15-minute neighborhoods**, and we provide a framework for action to advance this vision. To do this, the paper is structured in three parts:

### PART 1

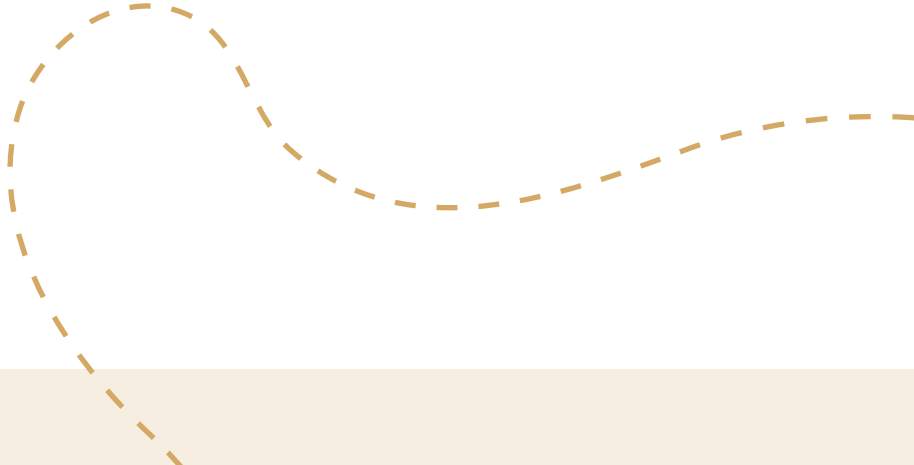
#### OUR VISION OF EQUITABLE 15-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOODS (P. 10)

**Key components:**

- Redesigned streets that make space for walking, biking, gathering, and high-quality public transit
- Accessible commercial spaces
- Diverse and abundant housing options
- Strong social infrastructure
- Diverse and empowered resident communities

**Examples of where Greater Boston falls short:**

Transportation and land use policy has favored cars over other transportation modes and single-family-exclusive zoning has contributed to persistent residential segregation and a regional housing shortage.





## PART 2

### CASE STUDIES OF FOUR NEIGHBORHOODS MOVING IN THIS DIRECTION (P. 24)

#### **Case study locations:**

- Assembly Row in Somerville
- Canal District in Worcester
- Jackson Square in Boston
- Downtown Reading

#### **Key findings:**

Many neighborhoods in Greater Boston are moving toward 15-minute-style visions, but progress is uneven. Many suburban towns are moving in a very modest direction as they haven't allowed for sufficient multifamily housing density to support truly vibrant commercial and local employment opportunities. Some redesign efforts have been shaped by dogged local organizing, and others are grappling with how to prioritize vulnerable residents in the face of reinvestment and possible displacement. The existence of highways and large through roads presents significant design challenges in several places, where longstanding residential neighborhoods are effectively cut off from new all-inclusive neighborhood developments.

## PART 3

### STATE AND LOCAL POLICY LEVERS FOR BUILDING A REGIONAL NETWORK OF EQUITABLE 15-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOODS (P. 50)

Massachusetts jobs, transportation and housing markets operate at an interconnected regional scale, but too many land-use decisions are left up to municipalities. To advance racial and economic justice--especially in a state with persistent residential segregation, shortage-driven housing cost inflation, and wealth and opportunity varying greatly by place--we should make more such decisions at a higher level of governance, where elected leaders represent a broader cross-section of society and redistribution of resources is more feasible.

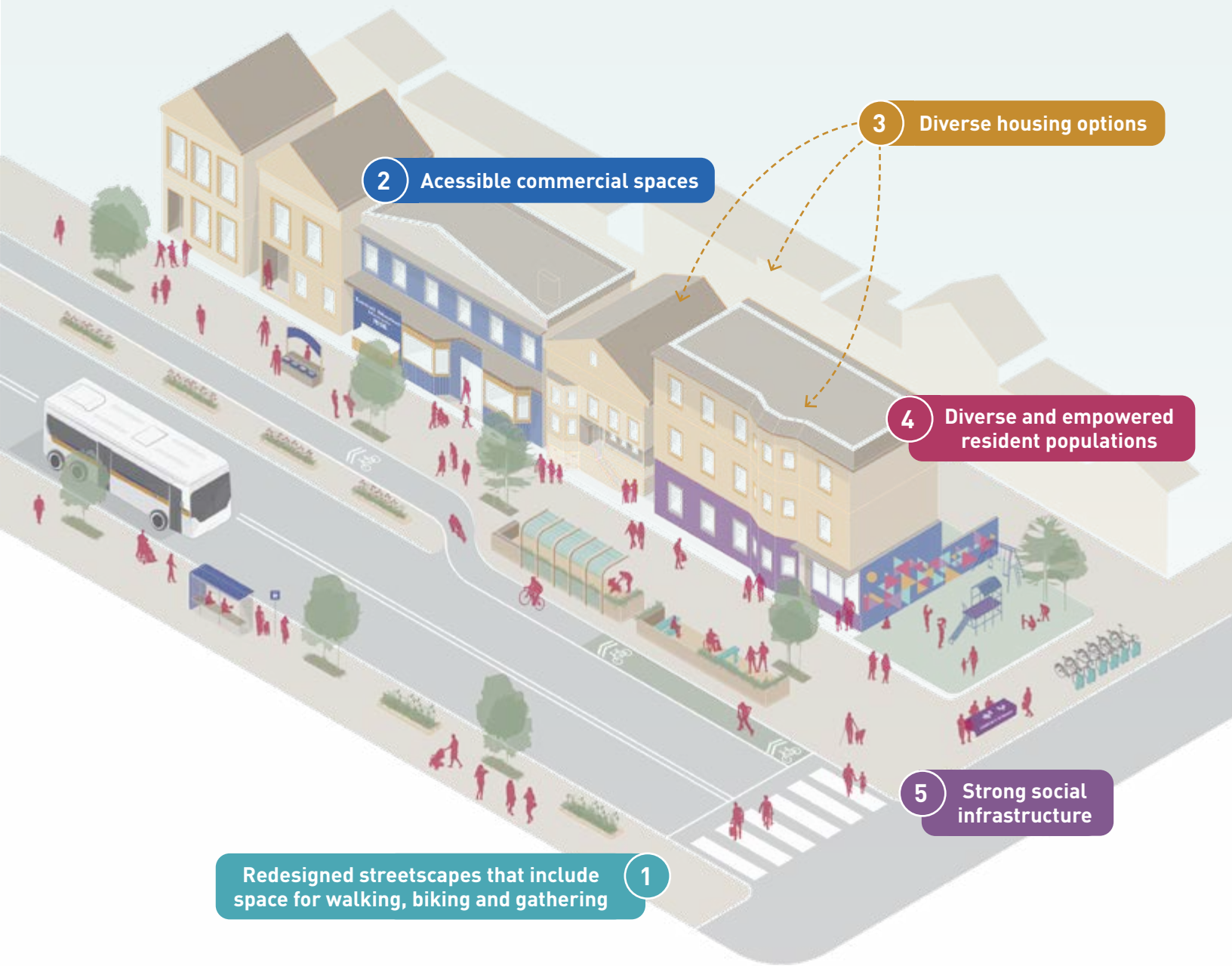
**Examples of leveling up:** use state legislation to legalize multifamily housing and eliminate minimum parking requirements, especially around transit stops. Leveling up strategies could also be advanced through stronger regional action.

Other decisions need to move down a level. Many details of the 15-minute neighborhood vision are best determined by inclusive, participatory engagement processes that reflect the local context. Unfortunately, many places use engagement processes that aren't accessible or welcoming, particularly to residents who have rigid work schedules, modest English skills or difficulty getting to meeting venues.

**Examples of leveling down:** involve residents from the beginning of a project to determine priorities (say, whether a new "safe street" program should focus on fixing potholes or closing streets to cars) and, more broadly, prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable residents when doing community engagement.

PART 1

OUR VISION  
OF **EQUITABLE**  
**15-MINUTE**  
**NEIGHBORHOODS**



**From Paris’s 15-minute city to Portland, Oregon’s 20-minute neighborhoods to Barcelona’s superblocks, many cities around the world are adopting policies that pursue a similar goal—changing how they use space to build lively and walkable neighborhoods.**

Our vision of 15-minute neighborhoods for Greater Boston is inspired by this work, and we build upon it by adding elements (like the need for regional connections) and putting additional emphasis on equity (like the need for these neighborhoods to be truly inclusive of the racial, ethnic, and income diversity of our region).

The five components in this section should be considered a vision and not a definitive prescription for all. Ultimately, the most suitable path forward will vary from place to place, but based on conversations with local leaders and policy experts, the components laid out in this section represent core elements that every community should consider in their pursuit of an equitable 15-minute neighborhood.



# 1

## Redesigned Streetscapes That Include Space for Walking, Biking and Gathering

Prioritizing walking, biking, and public transit usually requires reclaiming space from cars. “Road diets,” where the number of lanes is reduced, not only make roads safer for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other drivers<sup>1</sup> but can also encourage people to do all sorts of things that aren’t as utilitarian as getting to work or shopping for groceries—things like sitting on a bench to have a conversation, playing outside, organizing neighbors on a street corner, or sharing a meal in a small park or at an outdoor café.

Many cities took steps in this direction during the pandemic, most often reclaiming parking spaces for outdoor dining, but also sometimes redesigning roadways through “complete streets” programs. For example, Moody Street in Waltham closed a four-block stretch to vehicle traffic to create space for social distancing and outdoor dining in May 2020. The program was so popular that it was repeated in 2021.

MassINC found in June 2021 that an overwhelming majority of Boston-area voters supported setting aside more space for outdoor seating and dining, as well as creating separated bike lanes and adding more parking for bikes, even if it meant taking away space for cars.<sup>2</sup>

Ensuring that all residents can meet their needs in a 15-minute walk also requires developing better pedestrian infrastructure. Doing so means widening sidewalks, installing curb cuts at crosswalks for wheelchairs and strollers, installing benches, and prioritizing other “[universal design](#)” elements that allow all residents, regardless of ability, to use sidewalks. It also means creating an active and engaged street front where residents aren’t just comfortable walking but actively enjoy it. This includes planting trees for shade, adding public art to walls, plowing sidewalks during winter, and providing sufficient lighting at night.

It also demands robust bike infrastructure to extend the areas that residents can reach without a car. The number of destinations that can be reached in 15 minutes increases greatly when traveling by bike. Bike lane networks can connect residents not only to commercial centers but also to other municipalities and job centers. However, it is not enough to just paint bike lanes on streets. Protected bike lanes are not only safer for cyclists but also more popular.<sup>3</sup> A study in Boston found that the installation of protected bike lanes led to an 80 percent increase in bike share use. Bike share programs, especially when coupled with subsidized use passes and stations in lower-income neighborhoods, are critical to increasing bike access to both new riders, casual bike riders, and those who may not be able to afford their own bike.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, redesigned streets can free up space for public transit improvements like designated bus lanes or street cars. Public transit is critical to supporting longer distance transportation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and ensuring that individuals with limited mobility are able to access the resources they need without a personal car.

### Where We Are Falling Short

Many downtowns in Greater Boston are still very car-centric, with the majority of street space devoted to cars and too little space devoted to public or commercial space and cycling, pedestrian, and public transit infrastructure. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) [Local Access Score](#) shows what many of us already know: that there are many roads in our

region that do not even have sidewalks on both sides of the street.<sup>5</sup> Even places with walkable strips are often interrupted by parking lots or dangerous street crossings. Parking takes up a sizable portion of street space and not all cities in the region have established bike share programs or other programs designed to improve bicycle accessibility.

**LEFT** Street in Worcester without pedestrian infrastructure. Source: Anne Calef

**RIGHT** Potential bike and car conflict on a street in Boston. Source: Callie Gibson on Unsplash.





## 2

## Accessible Commercial Spaces

Having a strong mix of commercial spaces provides the goods and services that residents need, generates new job and entrepreneurship opportunities close to home, and enlivens neighborhoods. While some residents will always travel elsewhere in the region for work, especially to the urban core where jobs are more concentrated, advocates have worked for years to strengthen local economies outside of downtown Boston to make these areas more self-sustaining. The equitable 15-minute neighborhood model is one approach for supporting these shifts.

While the exact mix of commercial spaces should vary based on the specific cultural and social needs of a given community, it is important that neighborhoods contain places where residents can access healthy food (e.g., grocery stores, culturally relevant small markets, farmer's markets), home goods and supplies (e.g., hardware stores), basic services (e.g., post offices and banks), medical care and pharmacies, as well as dining establishments and entertainment (e.g., movie theaters).

Ideally, many of these businesses are locally owned, feeding a circular and inclusive economy within the neighborhood while also supporting wealth generation for residents.

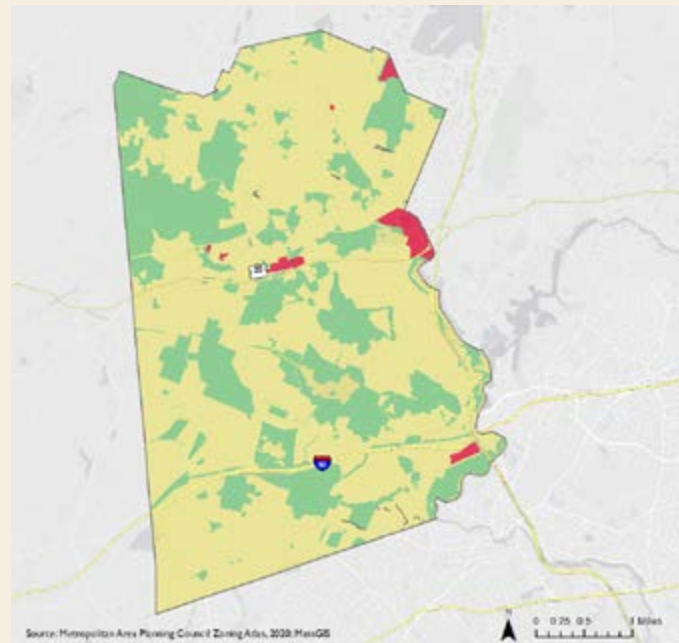
In recent years some Greater Boston cities have developed more intentional strategies for growing local businesses that both meet the needs of current residents and help generate opportunity. For instance, "innovation coalitions" in Lawrence, specifically Lawrence Community Works, Groundwork Lawrence, and the Lawrence Partnership, have cultivated a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem and helped many entrepreneurs of color build wealth and skills.<sup>6</sup> Cities such as Salem and Lynn have used public art and placemaking as economic development strategies that both attract shoppers and showcase local artists. These programs have helped revitalize neglected downtowns while also ensuring that low-wealth and lower-skilled households are able to participate in that growing prosperity.

## Where We Are Falling Short

Far too many Greater Boston cities and towns separate commercial spaces from residential areas through their zoning regulations. Rather than mixing commercial and residential areas throughout the town, commercial areas are instead concentrated in small pockets, generally along car-centric roads. By design, this separates where residents live from businesses and related job opportunities. In Weston, for instance, local zoning rules require that businesses be concentrated in only a few areas near the Commuter Rail and along Route 20. And none of this land is allowed to have a mix of both commercial and residential uses. The majority of the remaining land in town is zoned exclusively for housing.

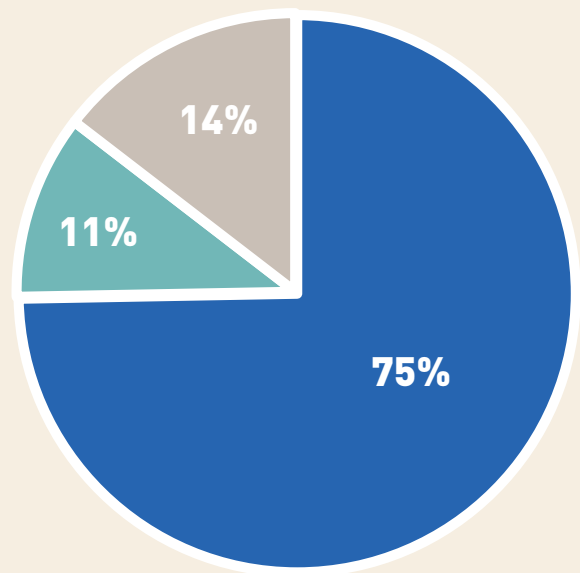
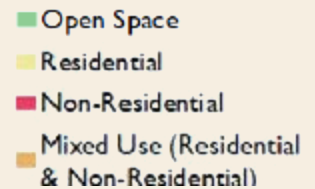
In 2019, the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) found that 25 percent of cities and towns with an MBTA station either do not allow for any mixed-use development within a half mile of the MBTA station or require a special permit for mixed-use approval. Requiring a special permit raises development costs and makes it difficult for buildings with new homes and businesses to be constructed, especially at an affordable level or by smaller, independent landowners. Eleven percent of municipalities with an MBTA station—including Milton and Wellesley—don't allow mixed-use development at all.<sup>7</sup>

It's important to note that in some contexts having mixed-use zoning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for supporting new business development. In some places key infrastructure is missing, such as sewer or other utilities, making development less likely to occur. The resources needed to start a business are also not equally distributed. Specifically, we know that many entrepreneurs of color lack access to basic levels of capital needed to finance the creation of a small business, so even in places where they may have enough potential customers and the zoning to allow it, they might not be able to get a business up and running. We discuss ideas for addressing these challenges further in the policy section of this paper.



### MAPC Zoning Atlas

Weston map of residential and commercial zoning  
(Source: MAPC)



**One quarter of MBTA communities do not allow mixed-use development by right around station areas.**

■ By right   ■ Only by special permit   ■ Not allowed

Source: Massachusetts Housing Partnership Center for Housing Data, 2019.



### 3

## Diverse Housing Options

Another pillar of our vision for equitable 15-minute neighborhoods is having abundant housing options available at a range of price points, including duplexes, triple deckers, and small apartment buildings that ultimately support the creation of a socioeconomically and racially diverse resident population. Building more housing overall will help address the statewide housing shortage and stabilize housing prices, creating additional paths to homeownership for lower-wealth residents. Building denser housing will also make an area more vibrant by supporting the creation of more local businesses in a given neighborhood. Without enough potential patrons living nearby, it becomes nearly impossible to succeed as a local business.

We use the word *diverse* here because vibrant downtown neighborhoods rely on a varied housing stock to meet the different lifestyle needs of potential residents. Neighborhoods should have the full “life cycle of housing” represented—from shared homes for young adults to modestly priced single-family homes for young families to smaller condos for empty nesters—and have units that can accommodate residents with limited mobility, such as elders and residents with disabilities. Below is a list of some of the different sorts of housing diversity that these neighborhoods should aim for:





**TOP** Jackson Square Mixed Use (Source: Trevor Mattos)  
**BOTTOM** Source: MarkinBoston on [Wikimedia Commons](#)

**TOP** Source: City of Salem and Chris Kuschel (MAPC)  
**BOTTOM** Source: Magicpiano on [Wikimedia Commons](#)

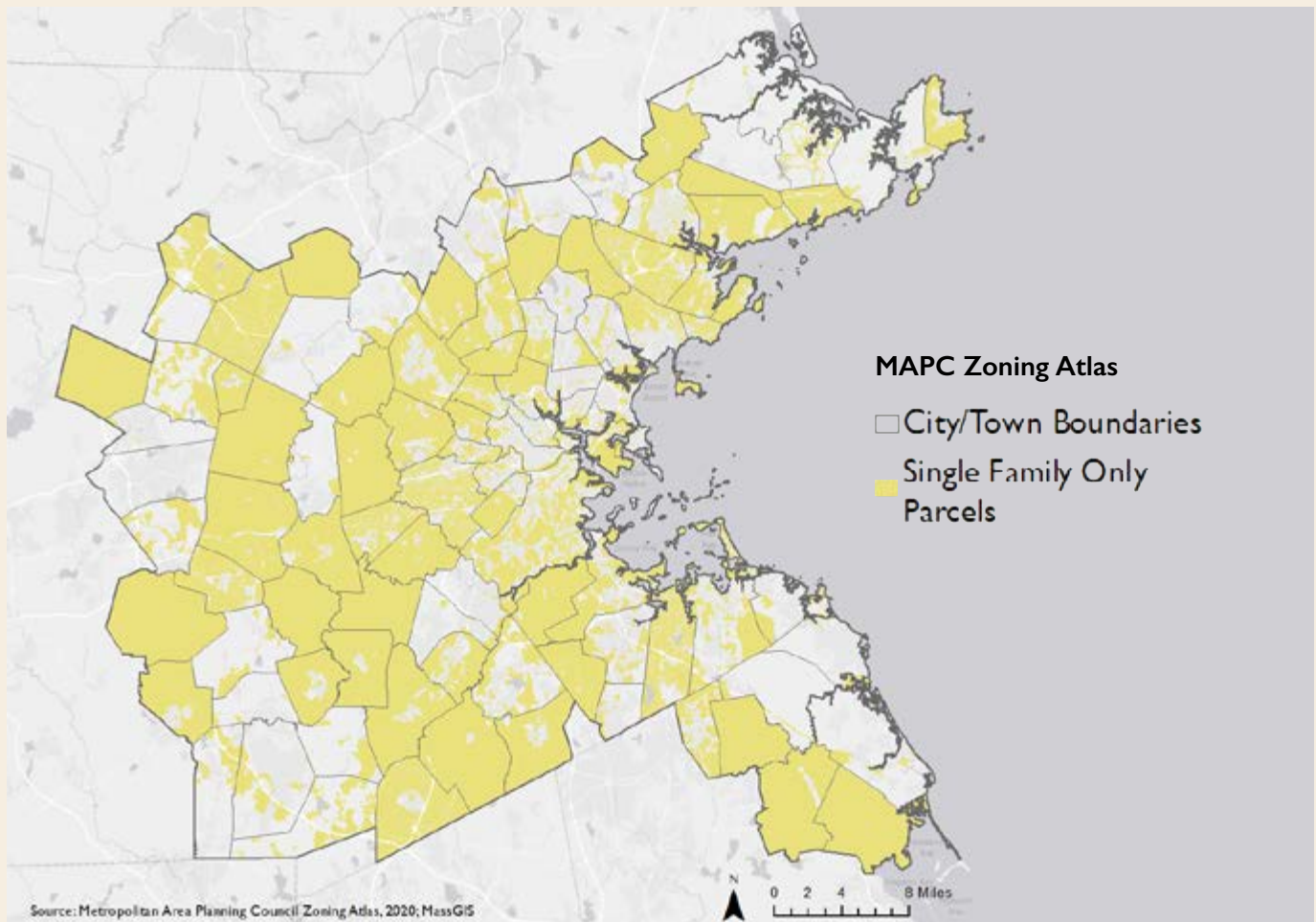
- **A mix of rental and owner-occupied units.** Denser urban neighborhoods will tend to have more rental housing than suburban ones, as more people will live in larger apartment buildings, so there's no perfect rental/ownership mix, but it's a useful target to have some of both.
- **A mix of building types.** Different kinds of buildings—ranging from multifamily blocks to triple deckers to single-family homes or accessory dwelling units (ADUs), including buildings that have other uses, like retail—will make the neighborhood more dynamic by avoiding a sterile cookie-cutter look and can increase density in places that were formerly single-family-only without inserting a big apartment building. Townhomes or triplexes, like the ones pictured above, can add a surprising amount of density and human energy to a neighborhood while staying in line with existing design standards.

- **A mix of unit sizes.** Having homes of varied scale allows families with kids, empty nesters, young adults, and people of all abilities to live next to each other.
- **A mix of market-rate and income-restricted units.** Income-restricted affordable housing can be created through a variety of channels, including vouchers to access market-rate housing. A range of programs support development of income-restricted housing units, including income-restricted set-aside units created through inclusionary zoning programs, public housing developments, and privately built or administered affordable housing projects that tend to be subsidized through state and federal low-income housing tax credits.

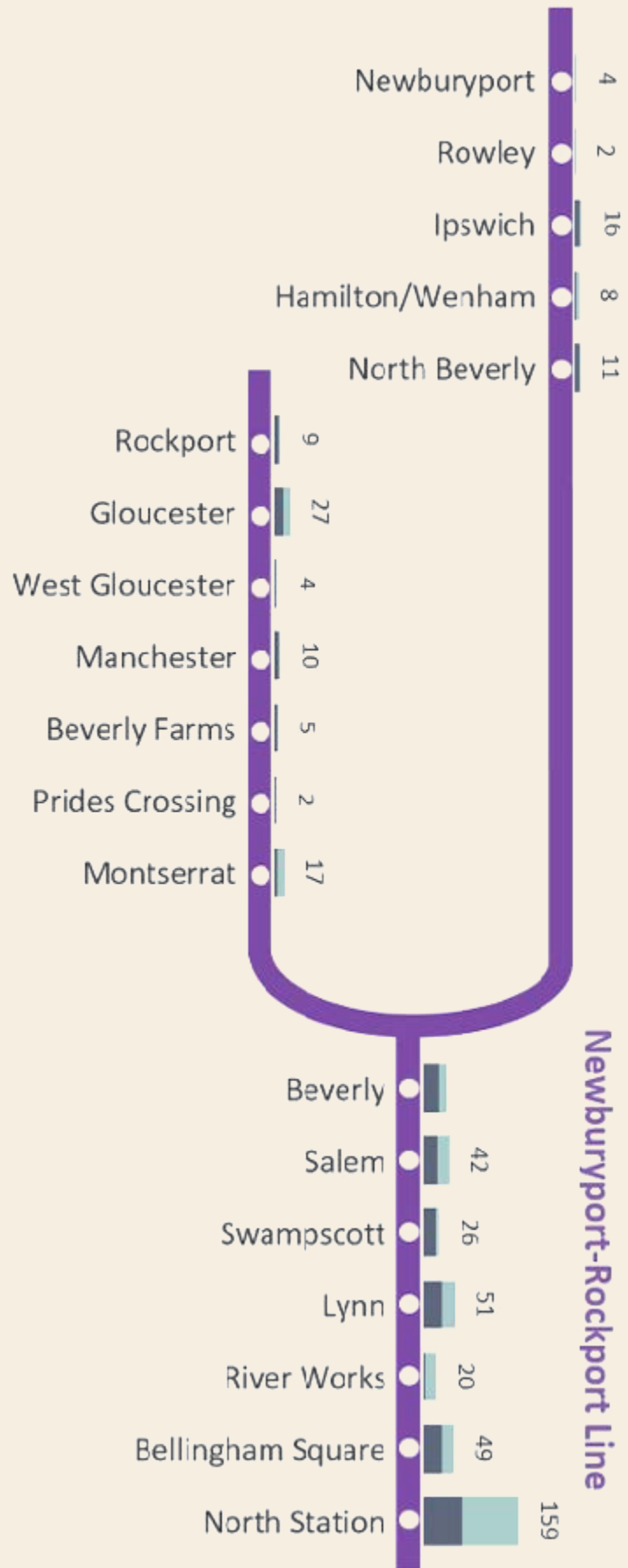
## Where We Are Falling Short

Housing is one area where we've fallen especially far short of our vision. Governance of Greater Boston is chopped up into dozens of small cities and towns, many of which have outright banned the construction of anything other than single-family homes on large lots and permitting processes are deferential to existing homeowners. Others have implemented onerous procedural barriers and zoning provisions that make housing production more costly and difficult than it should be. This has all contributed to a region that is plagued by a severe housing shortage, high housing costs, and persistent residential segregation. As a region we need to do everything we can to moderate market costs for all types of housing so that low- and moderate-income families aren't forced to squeeze into small homes or get pushed out of our region entirely.

The map below shows just how pervasive bans on multifamily housing are. Created with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) [Zoning Atlas tool](#), it shows parcels where multifamily housing is blocked by local zoning.<sup>8</sup> These places are effectively inaccessible to those who can't afford to purchase or rent a single-family home. Other than housing produced through the state's 40B requirement, the development of new income-restricted housing is essentially prohibited in these places since those projects are almost always done as multifamily units. Related to the affordability discussion lower in this list, suburban neighborhoods with little rental housing also end up excluding subsidized rental voucher holders since those can only be used in rental properties.

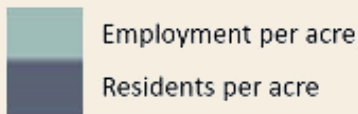


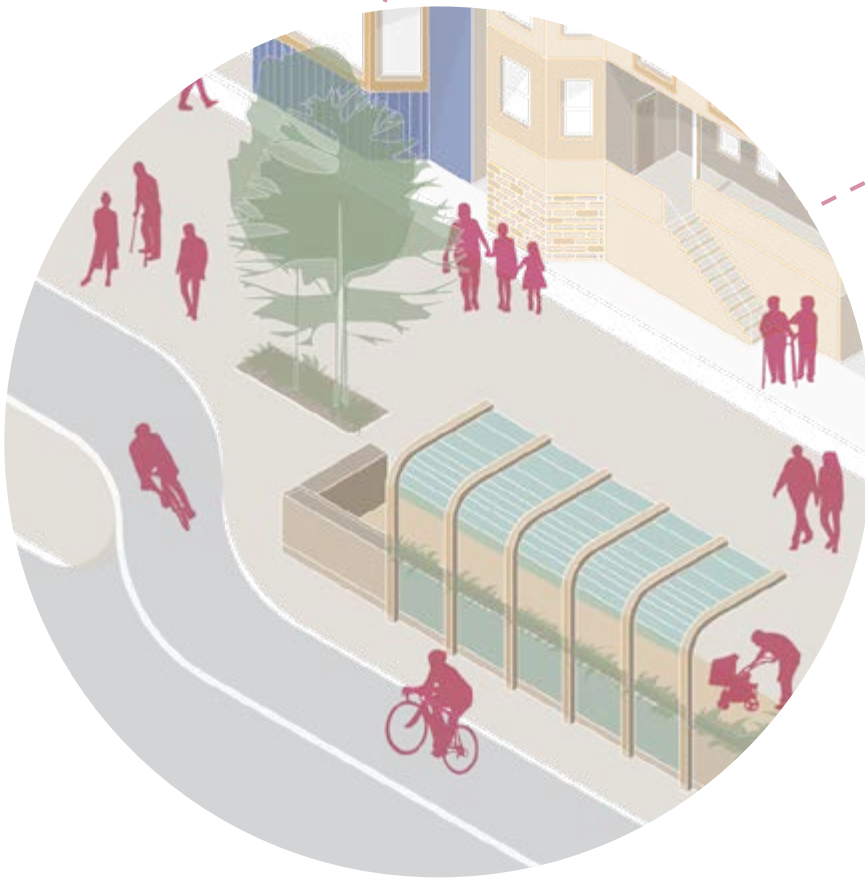
These policies add up to a segregated region that is sprawling and lacks density in many transit-rich areas. Looking across the MBTA network, MHP found that 113 station areas did not even meet the extremely low residential density level of five residents per acre within a half-mile radius of the station.<sup>9</sup> Many cities and towns have limited density not just through single-family-exclusive zoning but also through mechanisms like minimum lot sizes and low Floor-Area-Ratios. Many towns go as far as requiring at least one-acre lots for each single-family home. The chart at right shows residents and employment per acre within a half mile area of all stations on the Commuter Rail's Newburyport-Rockport Line in 2019, capturing how little residential density there is around many MBTA stations.<sup>10</sup>



**Massachusetts Housing Partnership (2019)**

**Intensity**





## 4

## Diverse and Empowered Resident Population

Everything discussed above is about the places, amenities, and infrastructure that are needed to make our neighborhoods vibrant, dynamic, and safe for all residents. These are important, but only because they're in service of improving the lives of the people who live in these places. An equitable 15-minute neighborhood must also be reflective of Greater Boston's tremendous diversity and must be accessible to *all*, regardless of socioeconomic status or background. It is a place of meeting—where rich cultural traditions, power, and resources are equitably shared and community forms across lines of difference. Scholars have questioned the 15-minute neighborhood model's ability to tackle racial and socioeconomic segregation, and for this reason we emphasize policy actions at the state and regional levels, maximizing the potential for progressive redistribution of tax dollars and for tackling our housing shortage at scale.<sup>11</sup>

An equitable approach to 15-minute neighborhoods also requires a careful attention to displacement pressures that may arise and pro-active steps to ensure that low- and moderate-income residents are able to stay in their homes.

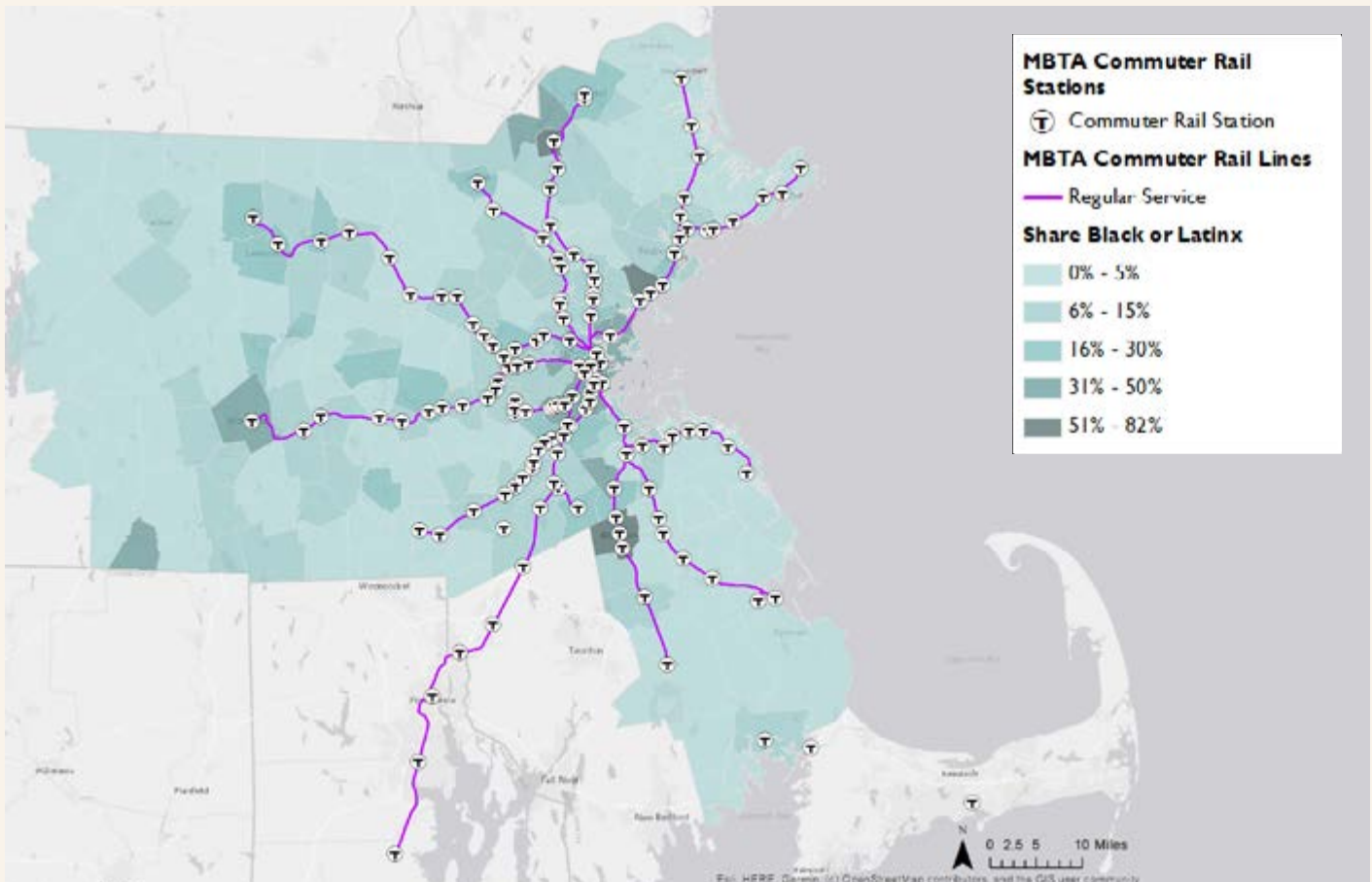
However, it is not enough to simply have diversity in numbers. Well integrated neighborhoods must also *equitably* distribute power and resources among residents. As we discuss in more detail in the final section of this paper, this means not only redistributing resources to those that have historically been denied them but also actively including all residents in local planning decisions so that decisions around how to redesign the local streetscape, for instance, best serve people who currently live there and hope to live there in the future. It also means having local institutions that respect and reflect the diversity of a given neighborhood, are welcoming to new residents, and ensure that all residents feel safe and included.

## Where We Are Falling Short

As we've noted, Greater Boston's residential segregation is as intense as it is persistent. In 2017, *Boston* magazine reported that two thirds of Greater Boston's Black population lived in Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, of the 147 communities in the Greater Boston area, two thirds were at least 90 percent White. Winchester and Hingham were only 0.5 and 0.6 percent Black, respectively. According to the 2020 Census, 71 percent of Greater Boston's Latinx population lives in Boston and the Gateway Cities. In Lawrence, 82 percent of the population is Latinx compared to just 0.3 percent in neighboring North Andover. While in aggregate Greater Boston may be more diverse than you'd expect, in many parts of the city and in many surrounding towns, you would not necessarily know it.

The 2019 Greater Boston Housing Report Card found that the more multifamily housing units built, the more racially diverse a place became. Cities and towns that allowed more multifamily housing units gained more Black, Asian, and Latinx residents, demonstrating that policies limiting multifamily development not only worsen our housing shortage and inflate housing costs but also perpetuate racial segregation in the region.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to residential segregation, planning processes have historically disregarded, disempowered and harmed vulnerable residents including low-income residents, immigrants, renters, and communities of color. This has led to the destruction of communities such as the West End, parts of Chinatown and parts of Roxbury.<sup>14</sup> Had organizing not stopped it, I-95 and an Inner Belt would have plowed through much of Roxbury and Jamaica Plain as well as parts of Cambridge and Somerville. Planning for more equitable and inclusive neighborhoods requires considering this history and actively pursuing more equitable strategies for planning *with* communities instead of *for* them and ensuring that policy makers are truly reflective of the community.





## 5 Strong Social Infrastructure

Social infrastructure includes the places where bonds develop and community forms. While this can also occur in commercial spaces, the emphasis here is less on where people are shopping, working, or conducting business, and more on where people are relaxing, congregating, playing, and contributing to each other's care. Many of these will be publicly owned places, such as public schools, public parks, town halls, or libraries where we participate in civic life. Others will be privately owned, such as private daycare centers, healthcare providers, museums, or places of worship. Community based organizations can play a large role in the creation and maintenance of these spaces and provide key services that individuals need to develop bonds and participate in community and civic life.

Social infrastructure can also include public art and performance spaces where residents engage with each other and cultural practices. As previously mentioned, cities such as Lynn and Salem have used public art as a part of placemaking initiatives and local economic development strategies. These also serve as social infrastructure as they bring people together and facilitate stronger community bonds.

Finally, open and public space is a critical component of social infrastructure by creating space for human interactions that are not dependent on commercial exchange. Public parks and green space can be the site of public events, summer programs, or small family gatherings. They can connect residents to the natural environment, help seniors or other residents battle social isolation, and be a place of refuge in urban heat islands. Parks can also enable the shared use of urban space by providing publicly accessible basic services, such as drinking water and public toilets.

## Where We Are Falling Short

Absentee property owners, dilapidated properties, brownfields, and high vacancy rates in municipalities where housing is less expensive present barriers to developing social infrastructure. At the same time, displacement caused by rising property values and an influx of new residents to previously low-wealth areas can destabilize a neighborhood's social fabric and infrastructure.

Around the region, many public spaces that could support social infrastructure have been devoted to private uses. Parking, for example, has removed a lot of space that could have otherwise been used for parks, parklets, or other places for gathering. Car-centric neighborhoods with high car volume streets hinder our ability to get to know our neighbors and build a stronger sense of community. Researchers have found that as traffic volume increases neighbors are less likely to interact with each other, know each other, or feel responsible for shared space.<sup>16</sup>

Many public spaces have also become heavily policed, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, and the rise of privately-owned public spaces, such as the Fan Pier Harborwalk in Boston's Seaport, has led to greater control of space that can limit access and the spontaneous uses that can strengthen a community. To encourage use of public space, people need to be able to hang out, linger, meet one another, and build relationships without fear or impediments. Over-policing or overly regulating the use of public space limits conversations, community events, and social cohesion.

**TOP** Privately-Owned Public Space in Boston's Seaport (Source: NewtonCourt on [Wikimedia Commons](#))

**MIDDLE** Brownfield in Chelsea (Source: Massachusetts Dept. of Environmental Protections on [Wikimedia Commons](#))

**BOTTOM** Dilapidated Lot (Source: Collin Burman on [Unsplash](#))





**PART 2**

**CASE STUDIES OF  
FOUR NEIGHBORHOODS  
MOVING IN THIS  
DIRECTION**





**Cities and towns throughout Massachusetts have made varying degrees of progress toward our vision of equitable 15-minute neighborhoods. To highlight the wide range of opportunities and challenges that municipalities face, we've put together four neighborhood examples that reflect some, but certainly not all, of the diverse community types we have in our region—newly built neighborhoods, lower-income Gateway Cities, suburban town centers, and inner core communities.**

Since our goal is to ensure that all residents in the region have access to the resources they need to thrive, these case studies look at the unique history of each place, considering questions like: Is this a lower wealth community that has struggled with cycles of disinvestment or a higher wealth community where many residents have benefited from racially discriminatory housing and wealth-building policies? If the latter, what steps are they taking to share prosperity and ensure that those with fewer resources are able to access their community fully? These case studies are not designed to be exhaustive; instead, our goal is to highlight how neighborhoods evolve over time, the various challenges they face, and the many steps communities have already taken to become more walkable, inclusive, and vibrant places.

## ASSEMBLY SQUARE (Somerville, MA)

**Unique among this report's case studies, the Assembly neighborhood of Somerville has been built out mostly from scratch over the past 10 years. Over previous decades the area featured a railroad yard, a mall, and a variety of underutilized industrial properties.**

Today, Assembly Square is shaped by two main centers. The first is the mixed-use Assembly Row district, which features housing, offices, and many new outlet shops. The second is Assembly Marketplace, a strip mall built into a former Ford assembly plant whose footprint (in stores and parking) takes up a large share of Assembly Square's total area. Yet, Assembly's transformation into the neighborhood it is today was no sure thing. Only through extensive community consultation, alongside advocacy and litigation led by Mystic View Task Force was Somerville encouraged to reclaim and rebuild Assembly Square, transforming it into an entirely new neighborhood. This neighborhood opened up access to the city's waterfront, added hundreds of new housing units, and created space for significant additional commercial and retail growth.

Though this new development has added much-needed housing and helped generate some new economic activity, it cannot yet be characterized as a fully walkable, vibrant, connected 15-minute neighborhood. While parts of the neighborhood are walkable and dynamic—such as the playground and open space along the Mystic River—large swaths of it are almost absolutely car-focused—like the Assembly Marketplace section, which features strip mall mainstays such as Bed, Bath & Beyond and TJ Maxx. As a major employment and retail destination, most visitors do not live in the neighborhood and get to Assembly Square by car.

The neighborhood is also physically walled off from the rest of Somerville in a challenging way. Even though parts of Assembly are short walks from longstanding residential neighborhoods dotted with triple-deckers and low-rise apartment buildings—like East Somerville and Ten Hills—they're separated by I-93 and the Fellsway, which makes walking and biking to Assembly a potentially hazardous trip across either the city's most dangerous intersection or the Fellsway, a six-lane boulevard.<sup>17</sup> These physical hurdles make it particularly difficult for visitors, a third of whom may be people of color, to access Assembly without a car.<sup>18</sup>

Though Assembly remains a work in progress, it gets a lot of things right. Just under half of new market-rate housing units, and around 40 percent of the city's new affordable units,<sup>19</sup> come from developments at Assembly. The active contributions of local residents in collaboration with City of Somerville planners and Assembly's owners shaped the new Assembly Square neighborhood plan, which will attempt to address many of the challenges the neighborhood faces.



Ten Hills

# ASSEMBLY SQUARE

Everett

Fellsway

Assembly Marketplace

Assembly Row

Grand Union Blvd.

Orange Line and Assembly Station

Interstate-93

East Somerville

## Good local mobility infrastructure, a variety of commercial space, and new housing construction give Assembly the potential to become an equitable, 15-minute neighborhood.

In the last 20 years there has been a focus on bringing more transit options to Assembly. Opened in 2014, Assembly Station gave residents direct access to Boston via the Orange Line, and likewise, Bostonians direct access to Assembly. The train station is not the only connection to Boston either. Assembly has almost two dozen transit connections, with service to over 800,000 jobs.<sup>20</sup> For getting around within the neighborhood, Bluebikes has a hub located right next to the station, though bike-oriented infrastructure (such as separated lanes), is limited and often poorly marked.

When it comes to pedestrian infrastructure, Assembly Row and Assembly Marketplace yield different experiences. Within five minutes of Assembly Station, pedestrians can reach the leafy green trees of Assembly Row, shop at outlet stores, and linger in restaurants or the square outside JP Licks. Traffic moves much slower within the Row, and street furniture in a few places allows residents and visitors to rest as they make their way from shop to shop. Shade is plentiful, provided by both the trees and the offices, residences, and hotels built across the Row's footprint.

Notably though, the retail, restaurants, and entertainment available are largely chains, giving the Row a corporate feel. Assembly Marketplace is a bit further by foot, functioning like a large suburban strip mall with a TJ Maxx, Bed Bath & Beyond, and a Trader Joe's. Though there are sidewalks, they are designed primarily to get shoppers from the parking lot to the Marketplace.

Due to Somerville's Inclusionary Housing Program (IHP),<sup>21</sup> residential developments at Assembly do have some income diversity. While market-rate condos are higher-end, Assembly's housing developments have created 168 affordable housing units (at a mix of 50 and 80 percent of area median income). These units were created under Somerville's 1990 IHP, which required developments of Assembly's size to include 12.5 percent affordable housing. In 2016, the IHP increased to 20 percent, ensuring that all future developments within Assembly will continue to support the creation of new affordable housing.



Source: Peter Ciurczak



Looking south from Grand Union Blvd. and Greater River Rd. illustrates this parking problem. On the left are two multi-story car parks, and on the right is a 5.6 acre parking lot. (Source: Peter Ciurczak)

## **“Missing middle” housing and car culture remain big challenges for Assembly.**

When it comes to housing broadly, the district has made critical contributions to addressing Somerville’s housing shortage. Just under half of the city’s new units since 2011 have been built at Assembly Row.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Assembly has so far only built housing at the top and bottom ends of the market—the top, which has facilitated Assembly’s continued construction, and the bottom, as required by Somerville ordinance. Absent from these developments are residences targeted at middle-income earners—the “missing middle.” These are workers and families that cannot afford the luxury apartments at the highest end of the market, nor qualify for Somerville’s subsidized housing. These are the folks that are running into difficulty finding housing anywhere within Somerville or the surrounding cities, forcing them to look further afield.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from housing, another major challenge for Assembly is reducing the sheer amount of space currently given over to car infrastructure. The promise of easily finding a parking space, combined with the relative isolation of Assembly behind I-93 and the Fellsway, encourages visitors to travel to the district by car. This means that Assembly faces many of the problems that come with high automobile utilization, most notably accidents, vehicle congestion, and the parking necessary to serve all the visitors (as in the image below).<sup>24</sup> Reducing and controlling car traffic in and around Assembly will be essential in reclaiming the space for people and allowing the growth of a more equitable neighborhood.



Assembly Square (Source: Pi.1415926535 on [Wikimedia Commons](#))

## **Assembly’s transformation into an equitable 15-minute district hinges on redeveloping away from cars—and it is in the process of doing so.**

At the beginning of this case study, we noted that Assembly is in the midst of a new neighborhood plan, designing—with resident input—the next phase of the district’s growth. Critically, the proposed plan appears to be addressing many of the difficulties facing the district, first and foremost the complete removal of Assembly Marketplace and its associated parking. Proposed in its place is an entirely new, mixed-use district with plenty of room for gathering on a central green, with spaces for festivals, playgrounds, and other civic uses.

While there is little that can be done to address the existence of I-93 or the Fellsway, the new neighborhood plan will creatively embrace building height to block the sight and sound of these roadways. By placing taller office and lab buildings along the border of the interstate, and smaller mixed-use buildings in the center of the district, Somerville is hoping to create a more cohesive neighborhood center—one that should have housing available for all income levels. Tied to all this new construction are planned expansions of bike infrastructure, more and better pedestrian infrastructure that reflects the best of what Assembly Row already has to offer, and even greater transit connections. Despite some ups and downs, Assembly’s development has consistently followed a path toward accessibility, and by extension, equity.

# CANAL DISTRICT (Worcester, MA)

New England's second largest city is on the move. Public and private investment over the past 20 years has led to the revitalization of the area now known as the Canal District, most notably with the recent opening of the Worcester Red Sox's Polar Park. With major mixed-use developments planned in the next five years, proximity to a MBTA Commuter Rail station, and dense residential neighborhoods nearby, the Canal District presents a real opportunity to build an equitable 15-minute neighborhood in the heart of Worcester.

However, a few challenges exist. The overwhelming presence of car infrastructure separates nearby neighborhoods from recent projects and challenges walkability. Much of the commercial area lacks residential density, and while new projects promise upwards of 700 units, it's unclear how affordable those units will be. Finally, as development spreads to the other side of Kelley Square, it also has the potential to create displacement pressures and raises the question of how access to the resources and prosperity from the Canal District will be shared with all residents.

**Worcester's Canal District has seen a lot of recent commercial development that moves it closer to a 15-minute neighborhood.**

The area now known as Worcester's Canal District was only briefly home to a canal. Constructed in 1828, the Blackstone Canal carried textiles, wire, and machinery from Worcester's factories to the port in Rhode Island for 20 years until it was rendered obsolete by railroads, ceased commercial operations, and was eventually covered over in the 1890s. Originally referred to as Water Street, the area was then home to a bustling, predominantly Jewish, immigrant community from the 1880s until the mid-20th century when many families began to move "up and out" of the neighborhood.<sup>25</sup>

The construction of Interstate 290 in the 1970s demolished much of the housing that had supported the mixed-use Water Street area and separated it from the more residential Vernon Hill and Union Hill neighborhoods. Coupled with the decline in manufacturing, increasing suburbanization, and the closure of Worcester's Union Station, the area suffered from disinvestment in the late 20th century. Over time, the area's population shifted as well. Residents in the Canal District, largely concentrated in the area south of Kelley Square, are now predominantly Latinx and White, with small Asian and Black populations as well.<sup>26</sup>

In the early 2000s, local residents and stakeholders came together to form the "Canal District Alliance" and build interest in the newly rebranded area through personal outreach and public events. While an attempt to open up the covered Blackstone Canal never progressed past a City-commissioned feasibility study, the "Canal District" north of Kelley Square took off.<sup>27</sup> It became an entertainment destination with 20–30 new bars, restaurants, and clubs opening in the early 2000s. Popular retail destinations emerged with the renovated mill building in 2013, an envelope factory that was converted into loft-style apartments, and the busy Worcester Public Market that opened in 2020. Finally, Worcester managed to lure the top Red Sox minor league affiliate to the city in 2020. Worcester officials partnered with the team and developers not only to build minor league baseball's most expensive stadium on an abandoned, formerly-industrial lot, but also redevelop multiple, adjacent brownfields into housing, commercial, and office spaces.



**CANAL DISTRICT**

**Union Station**

**Polar Park**

**Water Street**

**Kelly Square**

**Union Hill**

**Green Island**

**Vernon Hill**





Leaving Kelley Square heading toward Vernon Hill (Source: Anne Calef)

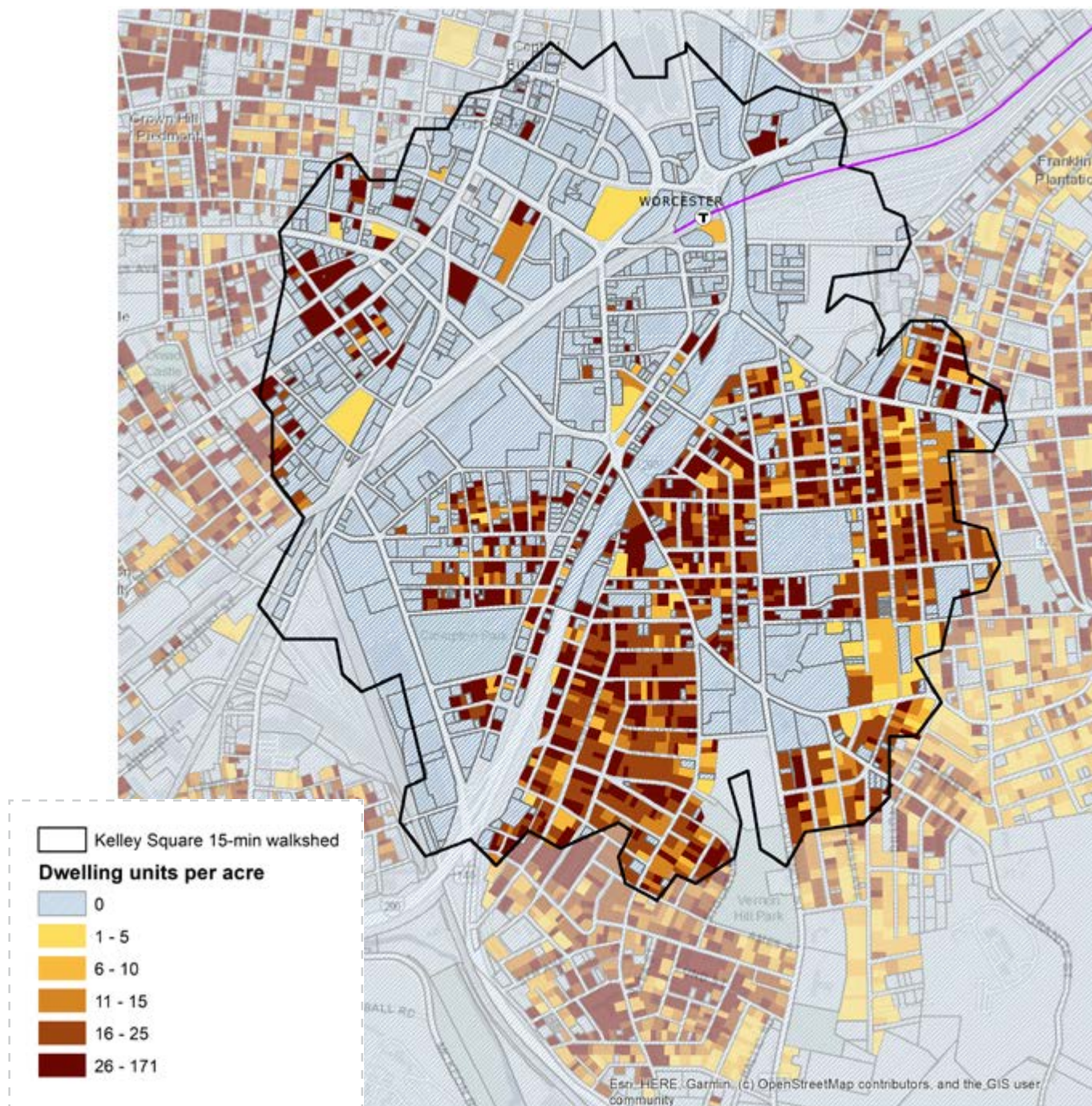
Development in this area north of Kelley Square has brought many of the commercial aspects of an equitable 15-minute neighborhood. Many of the new restaurants and bars are locally owned and culturally responsive. The recently opened Worcester Public Market, right in the heart of Kelley Square, houses 36 local food and retail vendors, serving everything from burgers to Jamaican cuisine to bubble tea. While there is not a large, comprehensive grocery store in the area, there are a number of smaller, more culturally specific markets, including the Vietnamese Binh An market, the Eastern European Golemo's market, and the Arab Al-Anwar market. A plumbing store provides hardware, barber shops are sprinkled throughout the Canal District, and the Worcester Ice Center serves as both a recreation facility for all ages and the home practice rink for many local collegiate and professional hockey teams.

### **Sidewalks and public transit access have improved but car infrastructure still limits accessibility by walking or biking.**

Busy roads, the railroad, and Interstate 290 separate much of the Canal District from neighboring areas, but the district has seen recent improvements in public transportation as well as pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. While Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) service through the Canal District is relatively sparse, the WRTA has taken bold steps during the pandemic to increase access to public transportation—suspending all fares through January 1, 2022, as a result of reports by the Worcester Regional Research Bureau and advocacy by the Zero-Fare WRTA Coalition.<sup>28</sup> Just a 10-minute walk from Kelley Square, Union Station connects Worcester to Boston and other municipalities to the east through the MBTA Commuter Rail. The recent redesign of Kelley Square has increased pedestrian, cyclist, and driver safety in what was formerly one of New England's most dangerous intersections.<sup>29</sup> The widened sidewalks for cyclists and pedestrians do not extend throughout the Canal District but several side streets connecting to Kelley Square were also improved with designated bike lanes and improved sidewalks. Worcester has signaled an ongoing commitment to shared streets through its recent Complete Streets Policy.<sup>30</sup>

A major challenge facing the Canal District is the lack of significant residential density in the areas north of Kelley Square and feeble connections to nearby residential areas. Significant residential density exists in the southern part of the Canal District, Green Island, as well as the neighboring Union Hill and Vernon Hill neighborhoods but separated from the commercial area by I-290 and busy streets.

There are four under- and overpasses that cross I-290 and link the Canal District to the Union and Vernon Hills neighborhoods to its east. However, limited lighting, high traffic speeds, inactive store fronts, and a large amount of space devoted to surface parking leave the areas unwelcoming to pedestrians or cyclists. Infrequent bus service and the lack of a municipal bike share program make connections even more difficult without a car.



Source: Massachusetts Housing Partnership analysis of MassGIS Property Tax Parcels and MassGIS Master Address Data



**TOP** Leaving Kelley Square heading toward Vernon Hill (Source: Anne Calef)

**BOTTOM** Approaching Vernon Hill from Green Island (Source: Anne Calef)



FRANCIS J. MCGRATH BLVD

Public Plaza

Winter Street

The Cove  
318-unit apartment building, bowling

Pond Street

Polar Park

Washington Street

Green Street

Harding Street

SOMA  
Life sciences lab building, two hotels, parking garage

Madison Street

Table Talk Lofts  
Ground floor retail + 82 units (Phase 1: affordable, workforce, market-rate)  
~318 units (Phase II: market-rate)

Crompton Place

GREEN ISLAND BLVD

SOMA  
228-unit market-rate apartment building, ground floor retail

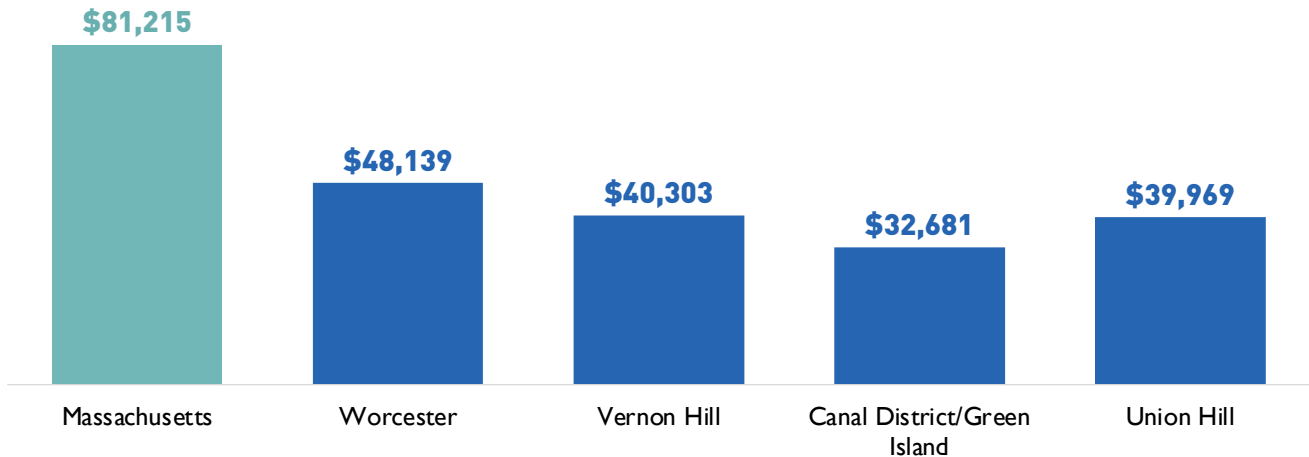
Worcester Public Market

Kelley Square

Lamartine Street

I-290

## Median Household Income



Source: American Community Survey 2015-2019 5-year Estimate, PolicyMap

Compared to the rest of Worcester and Massachusetts, these neighborhoods are overwhelmingly occupied by renters and have lower median incomes. Investment in the area has been very uneven, with broken sidewalks and litter right next to street improvements that have sought to fix sidewalks and beautify parts of Union Hill.<sup>31</sup>

### **New development will close the perceived division between Green Island and the Canal District areas north of Kelley Square, but will present new challenges to existing neighborhoods.**

While Interstate 290 is a permanent barrier between the Union Hill, Vernon Hill, and Canal District areas, perceived divisions between the area north of Kelley Square and Green Island will likely disappear as new development unfolds around Polar Park. New developments such as the Canal Lofts, the Edge, and Kelley Square Lofts have added some residential units to the area; however, planned developments of industrial or vacant lots will potentially yield another 1,000 units. In addition to the “Table Talk Lofts” (82 units planned in the first phase, estimated to have 400 total units) and “The Cove” (318 units planned) north of Kelley Square, 353 market-rate units, two hotels, and a life science building are currently planned for areas south of Madison Street, closer to Green Island. As of yet, the Table Talk development is the only one to include affordable units.

As these new developments bring luxury apartments and new life science jobs, it opens opportunities for further commercial development and raises questions about rising property values, rents and displacement in the surrounding areas, particularly Green Island.<sup>32</sup> The City of Worcester has committed \$3 million over the next five years to improve the housing stock in Green Island in exchange for affordability guarantees and \$1 million to improve Crompton Park.<sup>33</sup> It has also promised to invest \$37 million in street and sidewalk infrastructure. As development spreads from north of Kelley Square into Green Island, it has the potential to knit the Canal District into a walkable, racially diverse, mixed-income whole—or exacerbate inequity in the city, depending on the path it takes.

## JACKSON SQUARE (Boston, MA)

The Jackson Square neighborhood is located in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, largely anchored on the intersection of Columbus Avenue and Centre St. There is an MBTA rapid transit and bus station at the intersection, and the neighborhood has a moderate level of overall density with some high-density parcels as well as a mix of uses. This neighborhood experiences high traffic, but also has a good network of public spaces as well as walking and biking infrastructure. While Jackson Square has many great assets and is taking steps toward creating a more walkable, transit-oriented 15-minute neighborhood, high levels of traffic and an orientation toward automobiles poses a challenge to progress. Though Jackson Square is currently a relatively diverse neighborhood, increasing demand and high housing costs are driving changes in neighborhood demographics that are reducing levels of racial and economic diversity. Jackson Square must prioritize affordability and anti-displacement strategies while becoming a more walkable, high mobility 15-minute neighborhood in order to ensure just and equitable access to these neighborhood improvements.

### Jackson Square has been shaped by transportation policy and local activism.

In the late 1800s–1950s, Jackson Square was the location of an important factory and brewing center with thousands of residents employed locally at these locations, within walking distance or via a trolley along Columbus Ave. or Centre Street. Approximately 14,000 people lived in the three census tracts comprising Jackson Square, roughly 35 percent more than today.<sup>34</sup>

Source: Trevor Mattos





Mildred Hailey Apartments

Jackson Square  
Redevelopment  
Initiative

Southwest  
Corridor Park

As suburbanization accelerated in the following decades, plans to connect the suburbs to downtown Boston via highways brought tremendous pressure to this high-density, walkable, streetcar-served neighborhood. While community and church activists combated plans for highway construction for many decades and eventually were victorious in the mid-70s,<sup>35</sup> it did not prevent the demolition of nearly 800 homes to create the right of way for a highway in the late 60s–early 70s. The abandonment of the Southwest Expressway created the right of way that would instead become the route for the MBTA orange line and Southwest Corridor Park in the late 70s–early 80s.

In 2005, the Boston Planning and Development Agency (formerly known as the Boston Redevelopment Authority) designated Jackson Square Partners (JSP), led by Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation and Urban Edge—both large, experienced community development corporations—along with additional partners Mitchell Properties (now The Community Builders) and Hyde Square Task Force as master developer for the redevelopment of Jackson Square. The plan called for transforming Jackson Square into a vibrant crossroads between Jamaica Plain and Roxbury with hundreds of new mixed-income homes, retail and office space, open space, bike and pedestrian paths, and a state-of-the-art recreational and educational facilities. Since its initial approval, 179 homes in mixed-use properties have been created with 144 more homes and a recreation center still in planning and development.<sup>36</sup>

## Jackson Square residents have access to high quality mobility infrastructure, but large roadways designed to move cars through the neighborhood limit walkability.

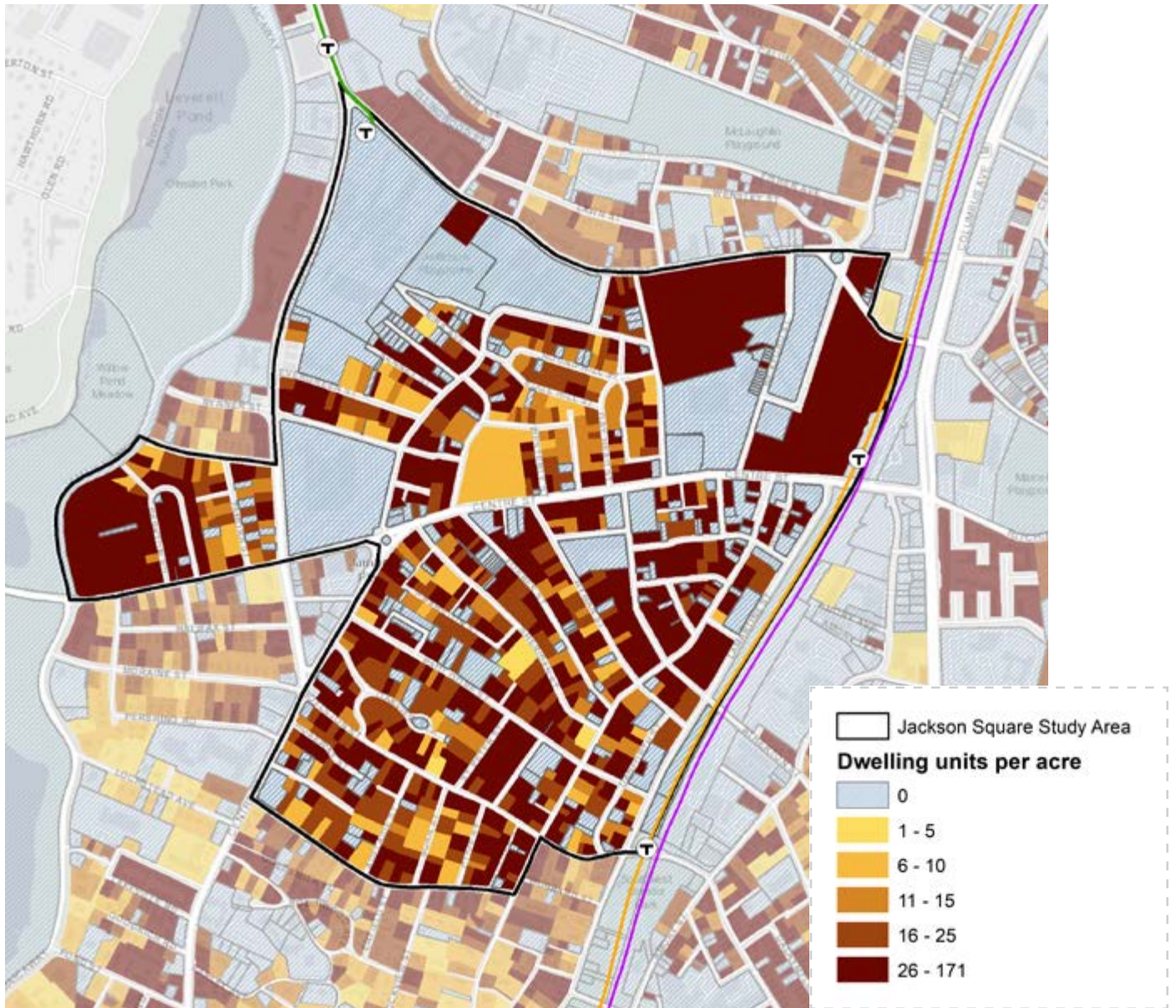
There are areas of Jackson Square that offer high quality, safe walking and biking opportunities, including separated paths and green space. The Southwest Corridor Park includes a 4.7-mile paved bike path that runs through parks, attractions, and commercial areas with amenities. Due to its central location and proximity to Boston job centers, a fair number of Jackson Square workers commute by public transit (48 percent) or walking (7 percent). Only about one-third of Jackson Square residents drive or carpool to work.<sup>37</sup>

Additional investments in transit are also underway in the form of a dedicated busway running down the center of Columbus Avenue, which is the first center-running busway in Boston. This bus prioritization will result in faster trips for transit riders between Jackson Square and other destinations such as Ruggles Station. Once completed, Columbus Ave. will be reduced to a two-lane road with new bus-only lanes running down the middle. In coordination with the new bus lanes and stops, the city will also install better pedestrian crossings so passengers and people who want to get from one side of the avenue to the other can do so safely.



Center running dedicated bus lane on Columbus Ave.  
(Source: Trevor Mattos)





Source: Massachusetts Housing Partnership analysis of MassGIS Property Tax Parcels and MassGIS Master Address Data

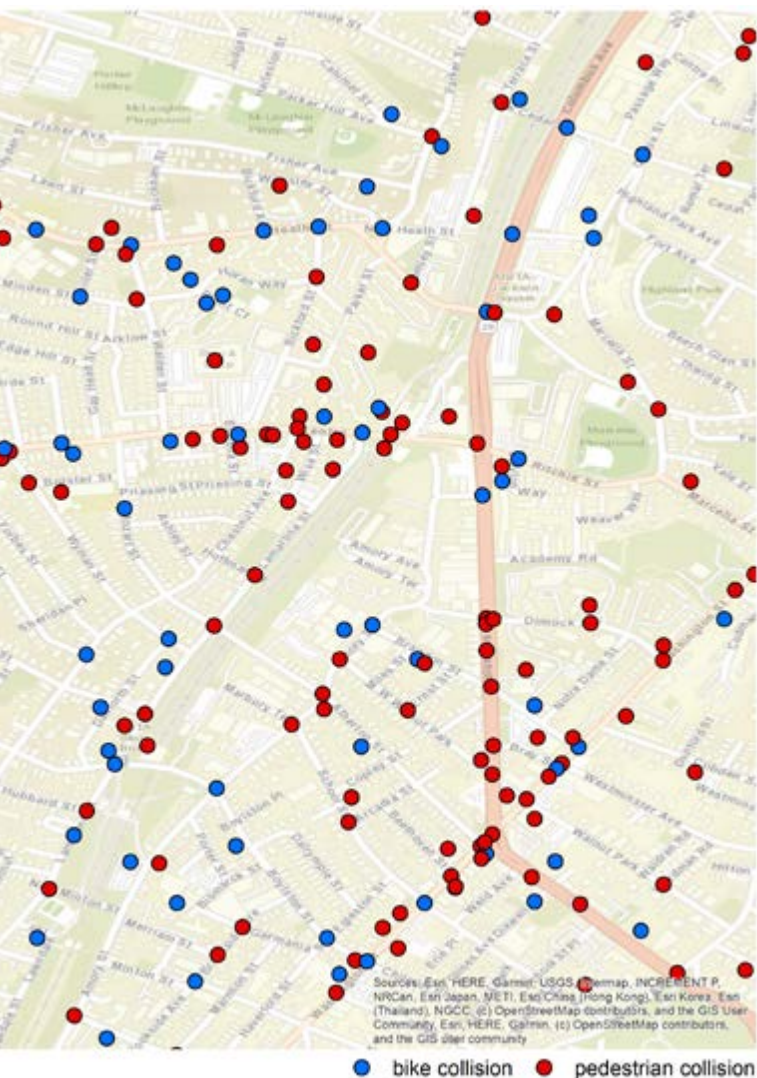
**Jackson Square has historically been, and continues to be, a dense, mixed-use neighborhood.**

The Jackson Square neighborhood has a fair amount of housing density, especially on some parcels located directly adjacent to the Jackson Square MBTA Orange Line station. This is where the Mildred Hailey Apartments public housing development is located, along with recent mixed-use, mixed-income developments, created under the Jackson Square Redevelopment Initiative.

Overall, Jackson Square has an estimated 5,146 housing units for an average gross density of 19.8 homes per acre and a total estimated population of 11,312. While this level of density is better than some other neighborhoods served by transit, there is room for improvement. Some studies of transit-supportive density suggest anywhere from 15–30 homes per acre should be a minimum target, so Jackson Square could certainly warrant additional housing development.

## Major roadways through Jackson Square present safety issues and discourage public transit usage.

Jackson Square faces a challenge since two of its major roadways cut through the neighborhood, forming a major intersection (Columbus Ave. and Centre St.). A traffic data count completed by Precision Data Industries on a typical Wednesday in September of 2018 between 7am and 7pm showed 32,233 vehicles passing through this intersection including 971 buses. Meanwhile, the intersection only saw 1,830 pedestrians pass through the intersection.<sup>38</sup> This is a space designed to move a high volume of cars through the neighborhood, rather than promote walkability within the neighborhood.



Cars zoom through the neighborhood from all over the region on their way to Boston, presenting major safety concerns and stymying the development of 15-minute neighborhoods. High-volume roadways, like Columbus Avenue, are hot spots for traffic accidents.<sup>39</sup> Injuries and deaths along Centre St. are also not an uncommon occurrence; therefore, although the new Columbus Ave. busway is expected to calm traffic and better protect pedestrians and cyclists along the route, further traffic calming measures and road diets should be considered for this major corridor as well. Major arteries also invite people to drive into and through urban neighborhoods rather than taking advantage of the region's transit system. This dynamic prevents Jackson Square and many neighborhoods like it from realizing their full potential as 15-minute neighborhoods. What could the neighborhood achieve in terms of mobility, density, diversity, and public spaces if more of the road and parking space could be reclaimed for less car-centric purposes? As currently designed, these roadways are obstacles to human-scale mobility. If these streets were redesigned to connect the neighborhood with a pedestrian and transit focus, with storefronts and public space, these roadways could connect the neighborhood rather than divide it.

In addition to these busy intersections and the high volume of cars passing through the neighborhood, much of the space immediately adjacent to transit and walkable areas is consumed by car infrastructure. On Columbus Ave. not more than a block from the Jackson Square MBTA station is an auto repair shop and a truck rental location. The Stop & Shop just a couple of blocks from the MBTA station and along a bus route is set way back from Centre St. in order to allow ample parking and requiring pedestrians to walk across a sea of pavement with little in the way of sidewalk to get to the store.

Bike and pedestrian crashes requiring emergency response (Jan 2015 - Jun 2021)

Source: City of Boston, Vision Zero Crash Data 2015-2021



**TOP** Columbus Ave - Centre St intersection (Source: Trevor Mattos)



**MIDDLE** Auto repair and truck rental immediately adjacent to MBTA station on Columbus Ave (Source: Trevor Mattos)

**BOTTOM** Large parking lots and car-oriented grocery store and shopping center one block from the MBTA station and along a bus route (Source: Trevor Mattos)



## Jackson Square's commercial spaces are concentrated on major commercial corridors where much of the space is devoted to cars.

Jackson Square has commercial developments primarily located along major corridors, and mostly along Centre St., where mixed-use properties with small storefronts house small businesses and restaurants. Also along this street are low-rise commercial spaces with potential for infill or building housing units above ground-floor retail. The Jackson Square neighborhood has many of the amenities associated with a 15-minute neighborhood, including multiple grocery stores, access to healthcare, several schools, and entertainment and leisure destinations, all within a short walk.



## Affordability challenges and displacement pressures are growing despite recent income-restricted housing developments.

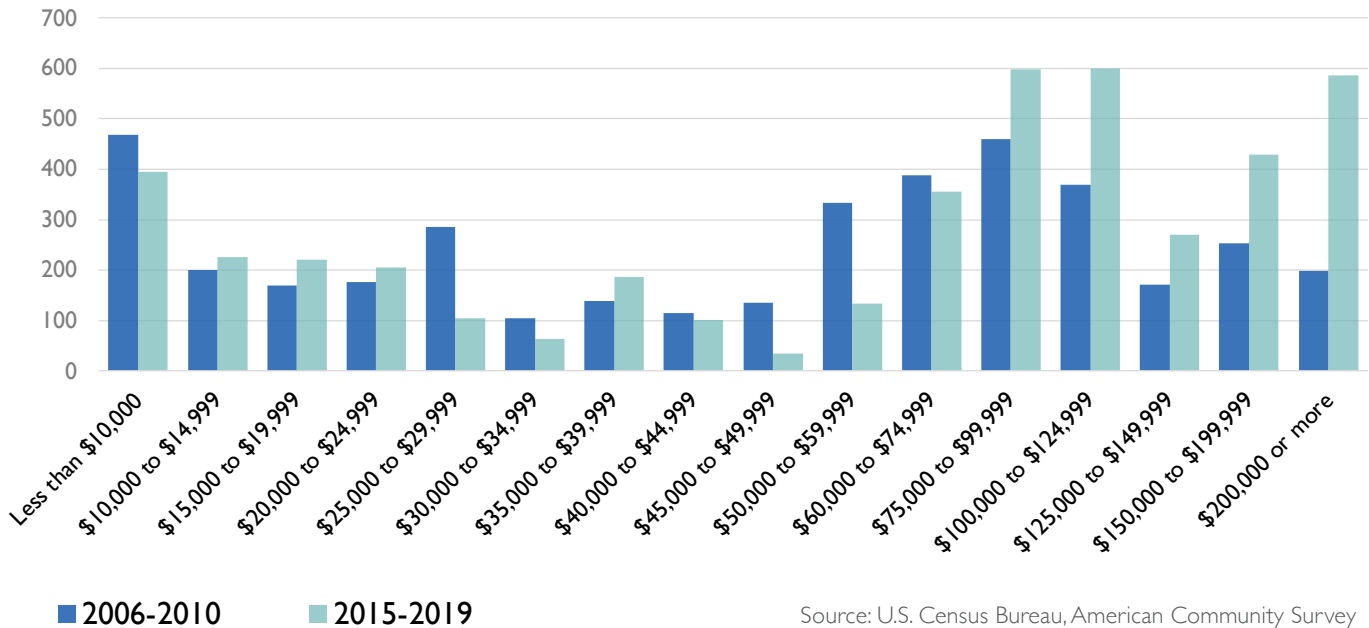
While income-restricted housing developments in the neighborhood such as Mildred Hailey Apartments and the properties developed under the Jackson Square Redevelopment Initiative offer much-needed affordable housing opportunities, market rate housing prices have consistently risen in this high-demand neighborhood, creating affordability struggles for many low- and moderate-income residents. This attrition of affordability puts displacement pressure on many households who may not quite qualify for subsidized housing or are not fortunate enough to be able to idle on a wait list for subsidized housing in their current neighborhood. Examining changes in the income distribution of households living in Jackson Square in the 2006–2010 period versus 2015–2019, there is an observable increase in the number of higher income households living in the neighborhood as well as a decrease in low- and moderate-income households (earning between \$25,000 and \$75,000).

The racial composition of the neighborhood has shifted over time. The Jackson Square neighborhood is part of Boston's Latin Quarter Cultural District, a designation made official in 2018 that recognizes the neighborhood's role in providing a home for Latinx immigrants, and aims to preserve the cultural identity of the changing neighborhood.<sup>40</sup> Despite this symbolic designation and the aforementioned investments in affordable housing, demographics have changed continuously in the neighborhood, with higher-income White households moving into the area. Businesses have been impacted as well. One much discussed example is the replacement of Hi-Lo foods, a popular Latino grocery store, with a Whole Foods in 2011.

**TOP LEFT** Mixed use on Centre St (Source:Trevor Mattos)

**BOTTOM LEFT** Mildred Hailey Apartments (Source: Boston Housing Authority)

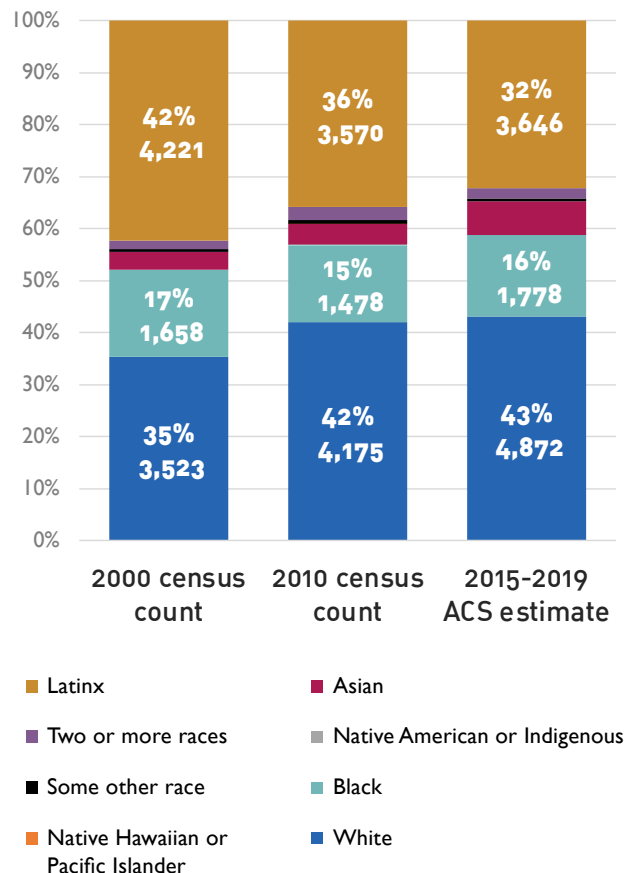
### Jackson Square has become an increasingly high-income neighborhood



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Since 2000, both the absolute number of residents as well as the share of residents that are Hispanic/Latinx has decreased (though the most recent census estimates indicate that perhaps this trend has stabilized). Meanwhile, the number and share of White, non-Hispanic households in the neighborhood has grown significantly. While Jackson Square remains a highly diverse neighborhood, the combined trend of higher housing costs, increase in median income, and increase in the percentage of White residents paints a picture of a rapidly changing neighborhood that is being reshaped by displacement pressures. The key challenge for Jackson Square as the neighborhood moves toward greater walkability, mobility, and neighborhood investment is to ensure that people from diverse racial and economic backgrounds are able to reside in and access all of the great benefits that a 15-minute neighborhood can provide. A failure to curb displacement would be a failure to achieve a truly equitable 15-minute neighborhood. While affordable housing development efforts and activism by local nonprofits and community development corporations have helped maintain affordability for many residents and thereby overall diversity, continually rising rents and market pressures will require even greater investments in affordability and protections for low-income residents of the neighborhood.

### Jackson Square has become increasingly White and decreasingly Latinx



Source: U.S. Census Bureau  
\*Latinx can be of any race. All other categories are non-Latinx.

## READING TOWN CENTER (Reading, MA)

Despite easy commuter rail access to Boston and good bones with a village center, Downtown Reading's built environment is nonetheless very car-centric. This is typical of many suburban towns throughout Greater Boston; they have valuable commuter rail stations but are not able to maximize their potential. Zoning has been largely exclusionary, leading to low housing density, a lack of residential diversity, and only light suburban downtown activity. Reading has worked hard to increase housing density in recent years and is one of the few Greater Boston municipalities to make good use of smart growth zoning districts that allow greater housing expansion.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, local resistance to change of parking regulations (through fees or permits) or to the reduction of parking provides an ongoing barrier to more dramatic transformation of Reading's downtown.

### Reading has brought more housing and commercial space to the downtown core through new mixed-use developments.

Reading's downtown mixed-use district has enabled the production of just over 190 housing units, 43 of which are deed-restricted affordable—and it's not just in the mixed-use district that Reading has been able to spur development. Reading has approved a number of projects with 20–25 percent deed-restricted affordable housing<sup>42</sup> throughout the core and next to the station. The Metropolitan at Reading Station, for example, boasts 68 housing units, 17 of which are deed-restricted affordable.

A view of the Metropolitan at Reading Station, a project featuring 25 percent affordable housing. Reading has been very effective at building housing, particularly within its mixed-use district and at Reading station. (Source: Peter Ciurczak)



# READING DOWNTOWN

Downtown Smart Growth District

Haverhill/Reading Line Reading Station

Route 28 / Main St.

Market Basket



For Reading's residents, the downtown core offers perks that come with greater density. There are a variety of restaurant options, a couple of parks, specialty retail stores, and salons. In addition to these retail options, the downtown core hosts a plethora of medical offices and daycares, well suited to a town where both the 65+ population and under-5 population have increased since 2010. Still, the downtown core is not as well utilized as it could be. Roughly 56 percent of Reading's visitors spend a half hour or less in the downtown core. Improving entertainment and commercial options is therefore an ongoing campaign in Reading.<sup>43</sup> To address this deficit, the town received a state grant<sup>44</sup> to support the creation of a Business Improvement District (BID) that would help coordinate festivals, local art initiatives, and other efforts to draw more residents to the core.

## Downtown Reading's car-centric design is among its greatest hurdles to becoming an equitable 15-minute neighborhood.

More than anything else, Reading's greatest impediment toward change is parking. Reading's downtown public parking system of on- and off-street parking can be frustrating. The downtown features a variety of regulations that can be confusing to navigate, a permitting system that rewards "early birds," and parking spots and lots that often seem full. When drivers face all of these, it can appear as if Downtown Reading doesn't have sufficient parking. Yet, the core does indeed have a great deal of public parking available. At weekday peak, just 45 percent of the downtown's parking is utilized—much of which is on-street and within walking distance of most amenities.<sup>45, 46</sup>

Pedestrian and cycling infrastructure in Reading Downtown. (Source: Peter Ciurczak)





Despite the frustration Reading's residents frequently express about the downtown parking situation, efforts by the Select Board in 2020 to address these issues ultimately floundered. Proposed changes included paid parking for some of the larger lots, and improved clarity on who (residents, commuters, shoppers) had access to which spots at what times. In the end, the Select Board moved the parking reform project to a volunteer led effort that has yet to get off the ground. Future efforts to regulate or potentially reduce parking in the town may well run into the same political resistance.

Reading's core also deals with a pedestrian and bike infrastructure deficit. Benches and tables are few and far between, and while sidewalks can be wide and feature a nice tree canopy, crossing Reading's roads can be challenging. As an example, crosswalks connecting the downtown to Reading's station remain an area of concern; in 2014, MAPC found that these crosswalks "may pose a safety issue to pedestrians."<sup>47</sup> Additionally, while there are a few bike racks here and there throughout the downtown (as in the picture above), it's been a struggle to place them on public land. Instead, much of Reading's new bike infrastructure comes from bike lockers or racks in housing developments, rather than bike lanes or other public infrastructure. Indeed, Reading and MassDOT ultimately decided against new bike lanes for Main St.,<sup>48</sup> concerned that high-speed vehicle traffic would make these lanes too dangerous, despite a road diet.

Finally, even though Reading has one of the highest ridership numbers for the Haverhill line, the majority of Reading's downtown core continues to commute by car. In the two tracts that cover the study area, about 13.4 percent of workers take public transportation of any type, 2 percentage points above Reading overall.<sup>49</sup> Implementing more frequent service in accordance with the MBTA's Rail Vision—described in the policy section below—may be a good way of bolstering this ridership even further. Bringing additional bus routes into the core might also help here as, aside from the Haverhill line, Reading's downtown is served only by the 137 bus.

## As Reading continues to build additional housing, its community and their preferences will change.

Reading is a largely White (91 percent), wealthy community with median household incomes of around \$133,000, and in these aspects, Reading is not much different from other rail accessible communities where planning around cars remains a primary concern.<sup>50</sup> As in other towns, though the commuter rail enables easy access to Boston, transportation options outside of the commuter rail remain limited. Greater density might change this, but zoning in these towns often allows only single-family homes, making it difficult for new transit-oriented communities to form.

Still, recent construction around Reading's station may open the downtown to new residents who make greater use of the commuter rail, and otherwise might be unable to afford the detached homes outside the core. These new residents want additional, easily accessible entertainment and socializing opportunities<sup>51</sup> and meeting their needs, as Reading's support of a BID suggests the town wants to do, could help make the town's core a better, more interesting place to live. Yet, without the political will to tackle the significant parking and mobility challenges, the changes necessary to transform the downtown core into the kind of equitable, 15-minute neighborhood we've described in this paper are likely too great for any near-term plan.

PART 3

# **STATE AND LOCAL POLICY LEVERS** FOR BUILDING A REGIONAL NETWORK OF EQUITABLE 15-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOODS



Sources: Jonathan Berk

**Dotted with historic downtowns and an established transit network covering much of the region, Greater Boston has the potential to become a network of interconnected, equitable 15-minute neighborhoods.**

To date, though, too many policy decisions have moved us in the opposite direction. Transportation and land use policy has prioritized cars over transit, encouraging sprawl, dedicating far too much public land to roads and parking, not only hindering neighborhoods' thriving but contributing to higher greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change. We also have a "wrong level of government" problem. While jobs, transportation, and housing markets increasingly operate at an interconnected regional scale, the state has left too many land-use and zoning decisions up to local governments, whose interests and decision-makers may not reflect the needs of the larger region. Advancing racial and economic justice demands that we make more of these key policy decisions at a higher level of governance where we elect leaders to represent a broad cross-section of society and where a more equitable distribution of resources is possible. This is especially important in a state like Massachusetts that suffers from persistent residential segregation and where wealth and opportunity vary greatly by city and town.

While we need to move up a level of government on many land-use decisions, other decisions need to move down a level. Many decisions that will shape the critical details of equitable 15-minute neighborhoods are truly local in nature—e.g., whether "safe street" programs should prioritize fixing potholes or closing streets to traffic.<sup>52</sup> These are best determined by truly inclusive, participatory local engagement processes. Unfortunately, far too many cities and towns have conducted perfunctory local engagement processes that favor wealthier, White homeowners over the perspectives of residents of color, new immigrants, and renters.

Because advancing this vision of equitable 15-minute neighborhoods will require focused efforts across domains and across levels of government, this final section of the paper walks through three levels of action: state, regional, and local. The federal government also plays an important role—such as through transit investments and fair housing laws—but we leave discussion of these out of this paper due to our more local focus. Also, because we are fortunate in our region to have a strong network of local leaders, policy experts, and urban planners already working deeply within each of these domains, we keep the discussion somewhat high-level, offering a broad roadmap rather than specific prescriptions.

# STATE ACTION

**Advancing racial and economic justice demands more policy decisions at the state level, where we elect leaders to represent a broad cross-section of cities and towns, and make fewer at the local level, where leaders are only accountable to small geographies and often parochial interests.**

This is especially important in the context of this paper because equity, justice, and inclusion are all so central to our vision of 15-minute neighborhoods. Another reason we emphasize state action is that state government is positioned to pool tax resources from high-income and low-income communities alike and then target investments in areas that are most in need of investment. As we discuss below, some high-income suburbs can unleash tremendous economic growth and increased local tax revenue simply by legalizing new multifamily and commercial development. For other lower-wealth communities, zoning restrictions aren't the primary barrier to growth and new investment, but rather a lack of demand due to historic cycles of disinvestment and decay. State economic development dollars are a critical tool for boosting growth and improvements in these sorts of cities and towns. What follows is a brief discussion of these and a few other key state policy levers.

Land use reform provides an avenue to address many of these factors by facilitating density, deprioritizing cars and parking, increasing affordability, and encouraging a mix of uses. While these decisions have typically been made at the city or town level, the Commonwealth has the authority to make land-use changes statewide. People live, work, and play regionally, making such decisions too important to leave to town meetings and city councils that are only elected by a handful of residents in their small communities. Some changes to zoning that could facilitate 15-minute neighborhoods include:

Boston Aerial  
Source: Mohit Singh on Unsplash



## Legalize multifamily housing by right, especially near existing or planned transit nodes.

Compact development patterns allow residents to access more of what they need in the neighborhoods where they live, and when concentrated around quality transit service, afford residents easy and fast access to other key areas throughout the metro region. While *density* can seem like a negative term for many people, especially those in suburban communities, it really is the essential component of many of the places we love and rely upon. Density also doesn't have to mean tall apartment buildings or large developments—it can be “gentle” and mean more town homes or simply allowing smaller lot sizes for more compact single-family homes. Ultimately, density is what allows you to grab a sandwich on your way to the park or stop by the grocery store after walking your kids to school. Sprawling development patterns make this level of mobility and access impossible.

Unfortunately, the state has ceded far too much land use planning to local governments, enabling a pattern whereby many communities avoid contributing to meeting our shared regional needs and never generate levels of density necessary to support the development of these sorts of vibrant, walkable neighborhoods. Specifically, suburbs across Greater Boston have adopted policies that prohibit the construction of anything other than single-family homes on large plots of land. By banning townhomes, duplexes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and modest apartment buildings on most residential land, they have also effectively blocked many low- and moderate-income households from even contemplating moving to these communities. This form of “exclusionary zoning” perpetuates racial and socioeconomic segregation in the region while also funneling displacement pressure into the few cities near the urban core that do allow some multifamily development—like Boston, Cambridge, Revere, Malden, and Newton.<sup>53</sup>

It's important to stress that restricting density not only limits the vibrancy of an area, but also has a severe impact on the development of affordable housing. Zoning requirements dictate density levels in a variety of ways, from minimum setback requirements to restrictions on multifamily development to minimum lot sizes.<sup>54</sup> By adding land costs, increasing the size of housing units and reducing the number of units, density restrictions drive up prices, make homes less affordable and act as a tool to prevent lower income residents from purchasing or renting homes in wealthier communities.

There are many options for how the state could legalize more multifamily housing statewide, including a statewide ban on single-family-exclusive zoning, a bill like Oregon House Bill 2001 which banned single family zoning in larger municipalities, or something more focused with the ½ mile radius around all transit stops as proposed in *Zoned Out*, which was produced by Boston Indicators and the Brookings Institution in 2020.<sup>55</sup> It could also act to remove or lessen density restrictions.

Importantly, years of zoning reform advocacy by the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, planning and real estate associations, and others culminated in action by the state legislature this past winter to pass some meaningful zoning reform in these directions. Governor Baker's Housing Choice proposal now makes it easier for communities to change their zoning codes by reinstating simple majority rule. Perhaps more surprisingly, language was also passed in the Economic Development Bill that requires every MBTA community to develop at least one multifamily zoning district within a ½ mile of all transit stops. Because it doesn't apply to all land within the ½ mile radius of these stops, this one provision won't yield as much new housing as is truly needed in these areas, but it's absolutely an important step in this direction.



Kelley Square, Worcester (Source: Anne Calef)

## Encourage mix of uses across neighborhoods and within individual buildings and properties.

When a neighborhood has housing that coexists alongside shops, restaurants, parks, and essential services, it becomes a healthier, more lively, and environmentally sustainable place to live.

Unfortunately, suburbanization and single-use zoning have moved us in the other direction, creating a sprawling, car-dependent landscape over the past century. Single-use zoning forces residents to drive longer distances for basic needs and services by placing homes away from basic necessities. The largest share of carbon emissions now comes from transportation, and here in Greater Boston the level of traffic congestion has become unsustainable as far too many people take far too many trips in their cars to perform the basic tasks of life.

As a remedy, the state should push both for the creation of districts that allow for a variety of congruent uses in the same neighborhood (such as residential and commercial uses side by side) and, even better, more zoning that allows for mixed-use properties (such as ground floor commercial with apartments on top) by right. The state can move in this direction through incentives and planning or through more direct state legislation that actually prohibits communities, especially those with transit stops, from requiring only single uses in a given area. It's also important to note that mixed-use zoning by right can still have clear rules attached; it just clearly communicates the community's expectations and reduces the uncertainty that comes with a special permit process and drives up development costs.

## Increase the provision of affordable housing and strengthen tenant protections.

Ensuring that all individuals are able to live in a community, regardless of income or wealth, will require not just increasing market rate housing, as we discussed above, but increasing all sorts of subsidized housing options so that more lower-income families don't have to pay the full market rate. Revenue generated from the equitable economic development strategies discussed below can be used to fund this work. Some ways to increase the provision of affordable housing include:

- **Develop more income-restricted housing.** Income restricted housing is reserved for households earning below a certain income threshold. Inclusionary zoning is a key way that income restricted units are developed, as described in the local policy section, as are state and federal tax credits for affordable housing development. Lowering development costs by legalizing multifamily housing production or eliminating minimum parking requirements would also help affordable housing developers build more units with existing resources.
- **Expand housing vouchers.** Subsidies for low-income housing supports, like the Massachusetts Rental Voucher program, can be given to low- and moderate-income renters to support rental payments. During the pandemic the state and federal government have dramatically expanded funding for these programs, and it will be critical to continue funding them at these higher levels for years to come, even when the pandemic is over. It's important to note as well that discrimination against voucher holders is pervasive and strong regulatory action and an ecosystem supportive of vouchers are necessary for them to work well.<sup>56</sup>
- **Support community land trusts (CLTs) that make home ownership more affordable by removing the cost of property from the home price.** Community-based, nonprofit CLTs hold land and make the housing units on top of it permanently affordable. Prospective homeowners enter into a long-term lease with a CLT for the land and purchase a house on top of it, allowing for wealth building. Many CLTs also provide low-interest mortgages and other supports to help low-income families access stable housing and promote wealth building. The state can support CLTs by, for example, providing seed grants and technical assistance to CLTs or prioritizing CLTs when state land is disposed of.
- **Acquire and preserve naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH) to ensure continued affordability even as property values rise around it.** These properties are often at risk of being purchased by investors and converted into higher cost housing. Cities and towns can facilitate the acquisition and preservation of NOAH as they appear on market.<sup>57</sup>
- **Leverage publicly owned land for affordable housing development.** The state can make publicly owned land, particularly parcels near transit, available for affordable housing development. Making these properties available at reduced, or no cost, would help projects pencil out and increase the number of affordable units, or level of affordability, they are able to provide. The state could tie provisioning of land to affordability requirements.



Source: Magicpiano on [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Developing equitable 15-minute neighborhoods also requires proactive policy solutions that ensure that growth and opportunity are broadly shared with a wide range of current and future residents. Dense, walkable 15-minute neighborhoods are, by definition, amenity-rich and desirable. As with any market-based approach, this can lead to increased economic growth, prosperity, and vitality—but it can also increase inequality and spur displacement of low-income residents, renters in particular, and small business owners. Investing in neighborhood improvements—like better sidewalks and public parks—is indisputably something we should do, but we must simultaneously take proactive steps to ensure that existing residents and small businesses are able to stay in their neighborhood and benefit from new investment.



Source: Magicpiano on [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Some ways that the state can support renters in lower wealth communities at risk of displacement are:

- **Expand and streamline emergency rental assistance programs.** The Commonwealth already provides rental assistance through several programs, like Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT), but such programs could be streamlined and expanded to provide additional benefits to residents. Workshops and public education campaigns are also needed to inform tenants of existing programs.
- **Rent stabilization strategies,** like rent control, were narrowly outlawed by a state ballot question in 1994. However, as the housing shortage continues to drive exponential rent increases in the region, momentum is building to push the state legislature to allow city leaders to again implement rent control policies.<sup>58</sup> Should such a measure pass, cities and towns could limit annual rent increases to the consumer price index or take other steps to stabilize rents while working to expand housing options to more adequately meet demand.
- **Expanded legal aid** to tenants facing eviction can help renters stay in their homes. This should also include ongoing workshops and other educational efforts to inform tenants of their rights.



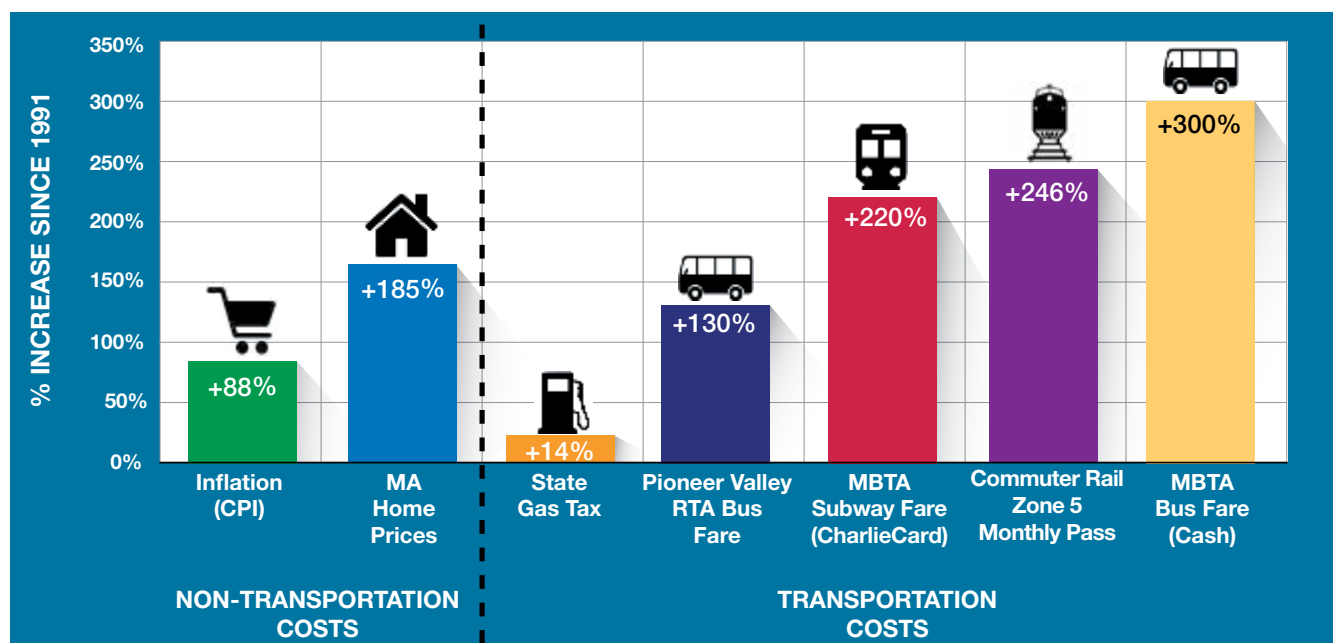
## Better capture the cost of cars and rebalance streetscape design to include alternate uses.

Part of why our region currently has so few thriving, equitable 15-minute neighborhoods is that fiscal policy has subsidized the cost of car ownership and local design decisions have often been excessively auto-centric. On the cost side, better capturing the true costs of owning and operating cars will help reduce the frequency of car travel, reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and also generate new revenue to support improvements in other modes of transit. Some ways to better capture the costs associated with private vehicle usage are:

- **Increase parking fees to reflect the true cost of public parking.** The direct, indirect, and opportunity costs of parking are high and not at all captured when parking is made free or available at a very low cost. Charging more for on-street parking and restricting the number of parking permits allowed per household would not only encourage people to use often ignored off-street parking, but also help reduce trips by car.

- **Implement congestion pricing.** Dynamic, real-time congestion pricing “bends the curve” of traffic by implementing flexible tolls that are lower during off-peak times and thus smooth traffic demand.<sup>59</sup> Of the 10 largest metropolitan areas, Greater Boston is the only one that does not have congestion pricing.<sup>60</sup> Congestion pricing could be implemented on existing toll roads and added to popular roads that currently do not have tolls to discourage car trips that could be taken by transit. Revenue from congestion-pricing could be used to improve public transit service.
- **Raise the gas tax and index it to inflation.** Massachusetts has a relatively low state gas tax, and because it is not indexed to inflation the value of our state gas tax has largely declined over time, implicitly making the cost of driving cheaper each year it is not adjusted. Since 1991, the gas tax has lost almost half of its value due to inflation, while public transit fares have increased by as much as 300 percent. Gas tax revenue goes into the Commonwealth Transportation Fund that supports road maintenance, road and bridge operations, capital improvements, and public transit. Raising the gas tax and indexing it to inflation is an easy way to sustainably fund transportation projects and invest in better public transit.

Public Transit Fares vs Gas Tax (% Increase 1991–2019)



Source: Transportation for Massachusetts (2019)

- **Increase fees on ride share apps, especially on single occupancy trips.** The state currently levies a 20 cent fee on all ride share rides, much less than the fees levied in other states or major cities.<sup>61</sup> MAPC estimates that raising Uber and Lyft fees to 40 cents for each shared ride, \$1.20 for non-shared rides and adding an extra \$1 on luxury vehicle rides would raise up to \$112 million per year.<sup>62</sup> Such a tiered structure could not only raise funds for cities and public transit, but also encourage more riders to take shared rides, reducing car trips and easing road congestion.
- **Regulate carbon emissions through a carbon tax or programs such as the Transportation and Climate Initiative.** Taxing carbon dioxide emissions would discourage driving and provide a clear incentive for residents and businesses to invest in energy efficiency. British Columbia found that a carbon tax reduced carbon emissions by 5 to 15 percent between 2008 and 2016 and even became more popular with voters during that time.<sup>63</sup> Massachusetts has signed on to the regional “cap and trade” Transportation and Climate Initiative (TCI) that would function similarly. The program would “cap” carbon emissions for vehicles, require fuel companies to buy rights to the emissions their products create, and then create a marketplace where those rights can be bought and sold. Fuel suppliers would decide how much of the cost to pass on to consumers, but Massachusetts would invest the revenue generated by TCI in mass transit and other programs that cut vehicle emissions. Cap and trade programs have been criticized for failing to improve, or even worsening, pollution near vulnerable communities, and TCI revenue should be equitably distributed—that is, prioritizing projects in low-income, environmental justice communities that have been disproportionately impacted by pollution caused by our transportation system.<sup>64</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that while electric vehicles could help with emissions and gas consumption, it would not be a solution to the myriad other challenges facing communities, such as congestion, conflicting land use, and the deprioritization of public transit.

In addition to better capturing the cost of car use, the state should also take steps to reform land-use regulations and streetscape design to better balance uses. Cars take up a lot of physical space. They need to be stored at home, need a lot of room to move around in, and need parking at every destination. When we dedicate valuable space to cars, it leaves less for other uses. Deprioritizing private cars in transit-rich locations can make transit, walking, cycling, and other means of transportation safer and more desirable. This can most often feel like a challenge with suburban development and design patterns, but it's also a real challenge in more urban areas—in fact, three of our case studies are relatively urban (Jackson Square, the Canal District, and Assembly Row), and as we describe above, they face real barriers by current auto-centric design. To be clear, we are not talking about eliminating car travel, but rebalancing systems and incentives so that other mobility options, like public transit, biking, and walking, get equal, or in some cases more, weight than cars.



Sources: Jonathan Berk



Source: Jonathan Berk

## Eliminate minimum parking requirements, especially near transit nodes.

One critical regulation reform that would better balance land uses, reduce car dependency, and allow for greater affordable housing construction is removing Minimum Parking Requirements (MPRs). By requiring developers to set aside land and construct a certain number of parking spots for each housing unit, MPRs drive up development costs of new buildings that are passed on to residents through higher rents or purchase prices.<sup>65</sup> Surface parking costs \$5,000–\$10,000 per space to construct and structured parking adds an average of \$50,000 per unit to development costs.<sup>66</sup> The cumulative toll is heavy. MAPC's "Perfect Fit" study estimated that the construction costs associated with 5,910 empty spaces in their Inner Core study area amounted to \$94.5 million in development costs that could have been used to increase the number of feasible units or subsidized units.<sup>67</sup>

Ample parking in developments near transit also encourages residents to drive. A UCLA study of affordable housing residents in San Francisco found that availability of on-site parking changed residents' decisions on whether to own a car or take public transit.<sup>68</sup> Residents in a building with at least one space per unit were more than twice as likely to own a car. MPRs around public transit mean that residents are less likely to rely on the transit they are close to, leading to more car trips, air pollution, and road congestion.

Removing parking minimums doesn't mean removing parking—it just gives developers and local leaders the flexibility to choose the right amount of parking for each project based on its context. While cities and towns can eliminate MPRs at the local level, the most efficient way to make this change would be for the Commonwealth to take decisive action and eliminate MPRs within half a mile of transit stations. California's legislature already has a bill (AB 1401) that would eliminate MPRs within  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile of transit stations, depending on the city's size. Somerville has already eliminated MPRs in most of the city. Massachusetts could go one step farther and extend such policies across the state.



South End of Boston (Source: Anne Calef)

## Invest in local economic development in low-wealth communities.

Fifteen-minute neighborhoods require not only dense residential areas, but also thriving commercial centers with a mix of businesses, including those that are locally owned and culturally responsive to their setting. In suburban areas dominated by exclusionary zoning, upzoning and allowing commercial and residential development to rise to meet demand will do a lot of the work. Since there's latent demand to live and work in these places, eliminating the regulatory barriers will lead to new residential and commercial developments that create new jobs and raise new tax revenue. Infrastructure challenges may emerge (e.g., lack of water or sewer) but state loans or other resources can assist with this. This unleashes a virtuous cycle of growth and investment that can do a lot with minimal state funding. Lower-income communities, by contrast, face a different dynamic, where zoning restrictions are less often the central barrier. Instead, it's often a cycle of disinvestment that has led to lower demand to work and live in these places. It's here where direct and smart state investments can help break this cycle. The Commonwealth can help by:

- **Support mixed-use developments around transit.** MassINC found that in some Gateway Cities construction costs exceeded projected revenues by as much as 44 percent and many of the projects that do occur are too small to generate enough activity to encourage investment in nearby properties.<sup>69</sup> MassINC suggested several ways that the Commonwealth can help close that gap. It could further invest in incentive programs such as the Housing Development Incentive Program that helps make projects financially viable while also maximizing land value near infrastructure. The state could also support commercial and mixed-use developments through larger allocations to the Commonwealth Site Readiness Fund that helps with pre-development costs. Finally, the state could support local land acquisition, particularly around transit, by capitalizing existing acquisition funds at a higher level.

- **Increasing access to small business loans, particularly for entrepreneurs of color.** Thriving, locally owned small businesses are key to an equitable 15-minute neighborhood, but entrepreneurs of color, particularly Black and Latinx ones, face significant barriers to capital access to start a business. As we detailed in our *The Color of Capital Gap* report, the Commonwealth should increase access to small business loans by creating a statewide credit enhancement fund; scaling up mission-driven funds; increasing access to equity investment, grants, and alternative financing structures; regulating the small business financing sector; and pushing for greater diversity in capital allocation roles.<sup>70</sup>
- **Investing in workforce development in low-wealth areas.** Investing in local worker development is not only critical to attracting new employers but also ensuring that local residents are able to access new jobs that are created. Many workers in Gateway Cities could benefit from reskilling for future jobs in industries like health care that are expected to grow.<sup>71</sup> The Commonwealth already has a robust workforce development system but expanding key programs, including digital access programs and programs for speakers of other languages, will be critical to ensuring equitable access to jobs.<sup>72</sup>
- **Supporting local leadership development.** Capacity building is key to growing local economies and inclusive entrepreneurship. The Commonwealth can support local business leaders, particularly business owners of color, by providing expanded technical assistance, supporting network-building organizations, and assisting with access to markets and customers.
- **Supporting creation of local Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) led by and serving local entrepreneurs, particularly entrepreneurs of color.** BIDs, cultural districts, and other district management entities can help local businesses market their neighborhoods, develop placemaking activities, and attract more customers. The state can support vibrant main streets in lower-wealth communities by investing in the creation and capacity-building of BIDs led by local residents and entrepreneurs.



Source: Richard Howard for the Boston Foundation



Source: Todd Kent on Unsplash

## Support local planning efforts for walkable neighborhoods and open space.

Although the implementation of many street-level improvements is managed by cities and towns, the Commonwealth can do much to support those efforts, both financially and technically. Technical planning capacity varies greatly by city/town and state support can be critical to the implementation of new programs, particularly in municipalities that lack planning departments. Some discrete ways that the state can support local planning for walkable neighborhoods and open space are by:

- **Extending and expanding the Shared Streets and Spaces program.** During the pandemic, Massachusetts Department of Transportation initiated the popular Shared Streets and Spaces program that awarded cities and towns small grants for quick-build improvements to streets and public spaces in order to support safe mobility and local commerce. Many of the parklets, bike lanes, outdoor dining programs, and even designated bus lanes that emerged in the past year were products of this program.<sup>73</sup> Shared Streets and Spaces awarded more than \$26 million since it began in June 2020, and should be continued to support an ongoing spirit of experimentation and healthy urban design in cities and towns.<sup>74</sup> Funds should also be provided to help turn successful projects into permanent infrastructure.

- **Support local community planners.** Many local planners are interested in making their streets more walkable, supporting forms of mobility other than personal vehicles, and encouraging dense, vibrant development in their cities or towns but lack the experience to launch the politically and technically complex projects that they require. The Commonwealth can offer technical assistance and training. For example, the Shared Streets and Spaces program made rapid planning assistance available to groups who were interested in applying to the program but needed help crafting viable, impactful applications for the program. Such support could be replicated in other state-administered grant programs to build local capacity and support new leaders.
- **Increase local planning grants.** The state can provide additional grants to help communities, particularly those without a planning department, to develop master plans and other planning resources. Such resources are an important part of a competitive application when capital funds do become available.



- **Restart the Office of State Planning.** Unfortunately, the Commonwealth has disengaged from regional and state planning over the last several decades. Unlike many other states (such as our neighbor Rhode Island), Massachusetts has not had state planning office since it dissolved its Office of State Planning (OSP) in 1979. Prior to its dissolution, OSP coordinated transportation, climate, housing, and other sectors within the state government.<sup>75</sup> The OSP could also help coordinate local planning efforts. Currently the state does not enforce the requirement for municipalities to create and update a municipal master plan every 10 years, nor does it provide resources for communities to do so. Even where municipal master plans are conducted, there is no requirement for local zoning to be consistent with the plan. Sporadic attempts to pursue state-level planning through corridor plans (as for South Coast Rail) can be successful, but they lack an integrated policy and investment framework for implementation. Regional planning agencies (RPAs) have stepped in where possible, although many of them lack adequate staffing and resources, and only the Cape Cod Commission enjoys any regulatory authority over development projects.

Approximately half of U.S. states have the equivalent of an office of state planning that are responsible for data collection, analysis, mapping, and policy related to land use, economic development, the environment, and transportation.<sup>76</sup> In Oregon, the Department of Land Conservation and Development is responsible for ensuring that local comprehensive plans are in place and are in line with state planning priorities. It is Oregon's DLCD that is responsible for ensuring compliance with House Bill 2001, which abolished single-family zoning in many parts of the state.<sup>77</sup> Reopening the OSP could bring coherence to a highly segmented state government and thus help it support a regional strategy that empowers regional planning agencies.

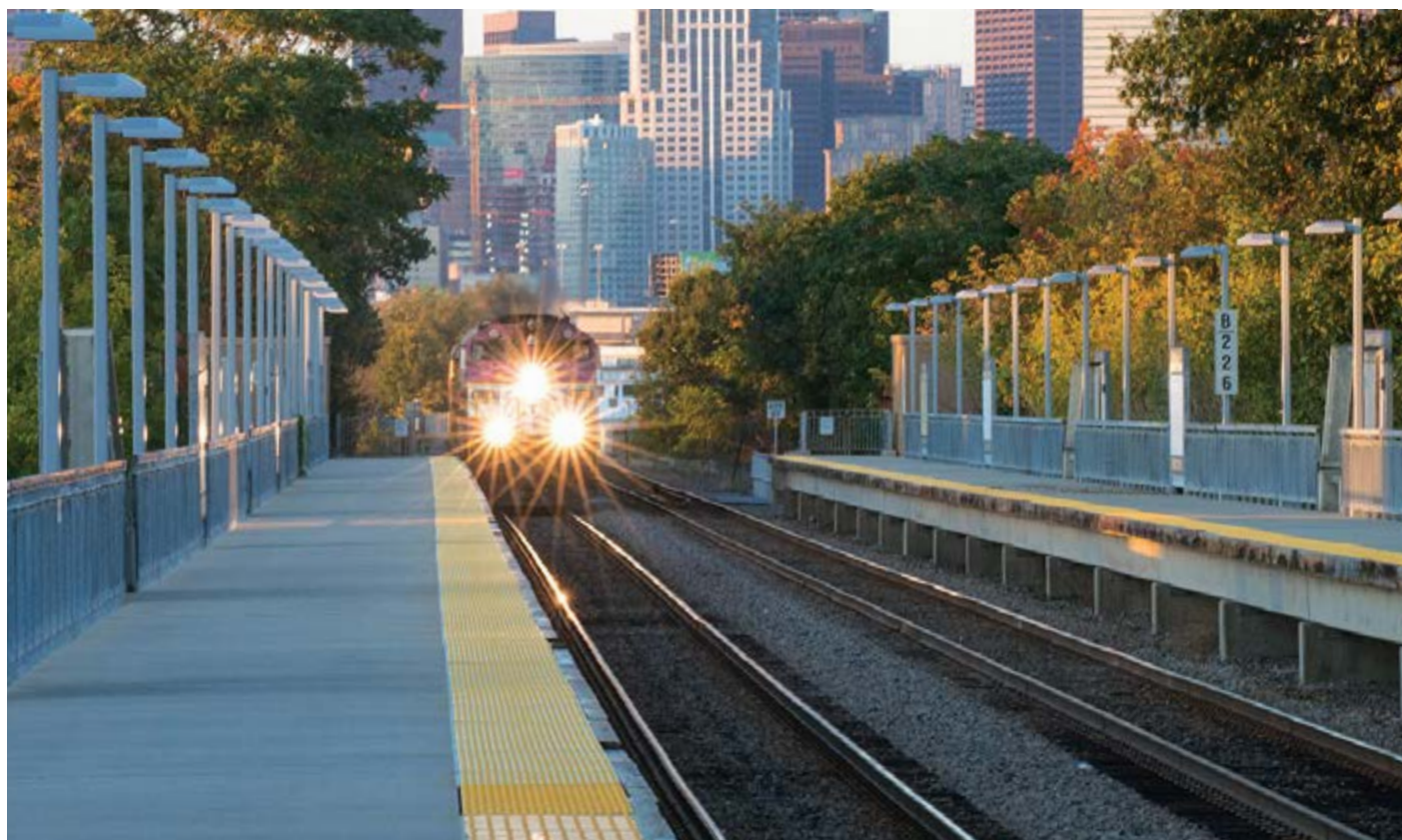
Source: Richard Howard for the Boston Foundation

## Invest in public transportation.

High quality public transportation is integral to our vision of 15-minute neighborhoods because it encourages safer, more sustainable, and more inclusive forms of mobility and it also serves to knit 15-minute neighborhoods together. Creating thriving, mixed-use, equitable 15-minute neighborhoods would be a huge advance, but it would be a tragic missed opportunity if they function only as islands unto themselves. Many people would be able to find new jobs close to their homes, for instance, but there will always be a large share of people who work elsewhere in the region. High quality public transportation is also needed so that all residents with limited mobility can move through a neighborhood or city without a personal vehicle.

As the primary funder of public transportation systems, the Commonwealth has a large role to play in improving the quality of public transportation and thus encouraging increased ridership throughout the state. Here's how the Commonwealth can improve the quality of public transportation:

- **Invest in regional rail.** Transforming our commuter rail system into something approaching a true regional rail network will unlock tremendous benefits on the way to 15-minute neighborhoods. A regional rail network would bring the convenience and frequency of rapid transit to the commuter rail, opening up new commutes with fares and schedules that work for a wider cross-section of residents. It would allow greater economic development in nodes along the rail network, rather than concentrating it predominantly in the center of our region's urban core. And it would allow many more families to travel to a mix of work, commerce, and recreational destinations without using single-occupancy vehicles. Progress toward this vision is underway, led primarily by TransitMatters, which has published clear, practical steps to implement the MBTA's Rail Vision that was endorsed by MBTA's Fiscal Management Control Board in late 2019.<sup>78</sup>



Source: Richard Howard for the Boston Foundation



- **Invest in bus service improvements.** Buses that are more frequent and reliable not only better serve existing riders but also attract new ones. Things that we can do to improve bus service quality include all-door boarding, traffic signal priority, dedicated bus lanes, coordinated transfer points (“pulse points”), and ensuring that buses stay 10 minutes apart (“headway maintenance”).
- **Increase access to public transportation.** High fares limit low-income households’ mobility.<sup>79</sup> Ensuring fare equity through policies such as reduced fares for low-income riders or no fares on MBTA and RTA buses would improve access to public transit. This is an important way to increase transit ridership in Gateway Cities and directly benefit low-income seniors and families living in these communities. This should also include pursuing fare equity on the commuter rail so that more low- and moderate-income residents in suburban areas and Gateway Cities are able to access the commuter rail.
- **Expand MBTA’s rapid transit network.** MBTA’s rapid transit network is growing with the Green Line extension, but critical connections are still needed to link existing routes.<sup>80</sup> Extending rapid transit lines could also further increase access to suburban areas and Gateway Cities outside of the inner core.



Source: Jonathan Berk

# REGIONAL ACTION

**Greater Boston's empowered cities and towns benefit from very local decision making, but their independence can hinder regional coordination and planning, especially in the absence of county-level governance.**

Regional strategies are needed for issues that are not limited to municipal boundaries, such as bike lane networks or housing demand, but that also vary across the state. Many other states have regional governance models to make coordinated decisions across municipal lines. For example, in Washington state, counties have broad powers akin to if not greater than cities and towns. Counties are run by officials elected by the public. They can set taxes and create strategic plans for the region. Absent the creation of new regional governance, Massachusetts state government is the only level of governance charged with making decisions that address shared needs across town lines.

A key step toward regional action is allowing regional ballot initiatives. Regional planning agencies play an important role in coordinating local efforts, but we could also consider creating real regional governance. Without regional ballot initiatives it is difficult to generate revenue to support regional entities or strengthen regional coordination and collaboration. Many other states have successfully funded transformative projects with regional ballot initiatives and Massachusetts has pending legislation to follow suit.<sup>81</sup> Absent that, the state could encourage voluntary networks of cities and towns through subregional agreements.<sup>82</sup> Many states already do this through county-level governance.



Fitchburg, MA (Source: Nick Allen on [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Finally, neighboring cities and towns can coordinate to strengthen Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) and ensure that public mobility investments, such as bike lanes or designated bus lanes, connect across municipal borders. Regional associations can also enter into joint purchasing agreements, often facilitated by regional planning agencies, to acquire bike share programs or other micromobility devices. Mobility needs are not restricted to one city or town and jointly acquired bike share programs can facilitate easy movement across the region. An example of this would be 300+ Bluebike stations across Arlington, Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Chelsea, Everett, Newton, Revere, Salem, Somerville, and Watertown. RTAs manage bus networks and have also had success managing regional mobility in and outside of Greater Boston.

Regional Transit Authorities provide bus and other mobility services to areas outside of the inner core and are critical to the development of 15-minute neighborhoods in the region. During the pandemic, RTAs maintained higher ridership than MBTA rapid transit or bus lines, demonstrating how essential RTA service is to frontline workers.<sup>83</sup> Several RTAs, including the WRTA as mentioned in the case studies, have experimented with fare-free buses in order to better serve low-income residents, often residents of color, who are dependent on buses. In Lawrence, ridership increased 20 percent when three key routes went fare-free.<sup>84</sup> Over 90 percent of riders during those first months earned less than \$20,000 per year.



Source: Jonathan Berk



Pioneer Valley Transit Authority in Springfield  
(Source: Newflyer504 on [Wikimedia Commons](#))

# LOCAL ACTION

**Responsible for everything from repaving sidewalks to approving new housing developments to building a new street parklet, municipal actors are drivers of local decisions that could help shape the creation of equitable 15-minute neighborhoods.**

Progress in one town will ultimately look very different from progress in another. Although the actions and strategies a city or town decides to take will depend on the needs of its residents, developing inclusive and diverse 15-minute neighborhoods demands prioritizing equity in both the development process and the desired outcomes.

Doing so will require that planning work be done with communities, and that communities that have historically been denied opportunities for investment be prioritized, particularly low-income and communities of color. The list below includes some guiding principles for municipal action to foster 15-minute neighborhoods in Massachusetts.

Source: Richard Howard for the Boston Foundation



## Plan *with* communities, instead of *for* communities

In many large cities, urban planning has historically been top-down, with the public typically only invited into the decision-making process to agree with a course of action or perhaps weigh variables. In smaller municipalities, small subsets of community members often have outsized influence and control of the planning process. While we have seen some neat local examples of community engagement that is deliberately inclusive and begins with the public, such as Go Boston 2030 or Reviviendo Gateway Initiative in Lawrence, to achieve equitable neighborhoods across the region, such processes must become the norm. The goal of engagement should be to define a shared community vision and a committed set of local stakeholders who will stand behind that vision. City leaders can then prioritize initiatives and projects that are aligned with that vision and call upon stakeholder input. Some basic principles of well-designed local input processes include:

- **Build trust.** Top-down decision-making and structural racism in planning has caused many communities of color to lose trust in planning institutions. In order to ensure equitable participation—that is, greater participation from voices that have traditionally been excluded—planning should move at the “speed of trust.”<sup>85</sup> Relationships are the foundation of trust. Planners can build trust by becoming an active community presence, participating in events, and actively soliciting resident input on what needs to be addressed.
- **Involve residents from the very beginning of the planning process.** One way to build trust, and a good practice for its own sake, is to involve residents at the beginning of the planning process—when the problem or opportunity is first articulated. Too often public input is only called upon to provide comments on already-made plans or to validate near complete decisions. Ceasar McDowell explains in his Civic Design Framework that good public engagement doesn’t just seek feedback, it is “structured to support transparent exchanges of information between participants of different interests and abilities.”<sup>86</sup>



**TOP** Source: Richard Howard for The Boston Foundation


**BOTTOM** Source: Jonathan Berk

- **Design engagement processes that prioritize the most vulnerable residents and honor equity as a core value.** McDowell encourages leaders to “plan for the margins,” designing processes and solutions to work for the most vulnerable residents, such as residents of color, recent immigrants, low-wealth residents, renters, or those who are disabled, because those solutions will likely work for others as well. To do that, planners should create spaces where participants are able to express themselves in multiple forms, collaborate with each other, and heal from harms caused by previous public processes.<sup>87</sup> Engagement methods must be accessible to all, regardless of their digital literacy, caregiving responsibilities, or work schedules. Good processes also build buy-in. Engagement is not only a way to solicit ideas and feedback, but to build consensus and facilitate collective learning. Particularly where progressive reform is sought, engagement is essential in daylighting histories of structural racism, steering action toward equity, repairing harm, and rebuilding trust.
- **Ensure all residents can access planning processes.** Getting all stakeholders' voices into the process means doing things a little differently from habitual practice. Some ways to increase access to planning meetings and decisions include:
  - ▷ Provide childcare at meetings
  - ▷ Translate all flyers and public notice materials into languages used in the community
  - ▷ Provide adequate translation services at all meetings
  - ▷ Hold meetings at a variety of times, including after 5 p.m.
  - ▷ Allow input through methods other than attendance at town/city hall meetings, such as virtual participation or online surveys
  - ▷ Demystify the planning process by providing clear instructions to the community on how and when they can submit input and suggestions
  - ▷ Bring questions to the people by participating in street fairs and other community events

- **Build and maintain momentum.** “Planning fatigue” is real. Producing master plans and visioning studies that are rarely heard of afterward can cause local leaders and planners to burn out. Residents can tire and lose trust when the feedback they provide seems to land flat and is never actualized. Small, tactical interventions can help keep energy high and encourage ongoing public engagement.
- **Ensure that professional planning staff and city leaders are representative of the community.** Who is at the table when engagement processes are designed? It matters. In their recent “Diversity Deficit” study, MAPC found that the municipal workforce was not representative of the broader workforce.<sup>88</sup> Of municipal employees in Massachusetts, 85 percent are White, compared to 74 percent of the overall workforce. While nine percent of the Metro Boston workforce is Latinx and eight percent is Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI), just five and two percent of the municipal workforce are Latinx and AAPI, respectively. Municipal workers are the individuals deciding how to allocate resources, whom to engage in decision-making processes, and how to engage the community. It is important that community leadership—including planners, town officials, and appointees—are representative of the community that they serve. Some ways to increase representation of communities of color in municipal government include:
  - ▷ Low-barrier pathways to joining local boards, planning commissions, and municipal workforces
  - ▷ DEI strategies to retain a diverse workforce reflective of community
- **Ensure that local government structures represent all residents.** As Massachusetts demographics evolve, it is important that elected officials reflect the diversity of the residents they serve. Electing leaders in at-large, or city-wide, elections, without ranked choice voting, often leads to elected bodies that disproportionately represent the White population and underrepresent communities of color. Cities like Springfield, Lowell, and Worcester have recently switched to a district-based system after legal challenges under the Voting Rights Act, and others that still maintain an at-large system should follow suit.
- **Embed equity as a core value of city government.** Unelected positions and city budgets are critical indicators of a city or town’s priorities. If cities and towns want to seriously pursue equitable development, it is important that they set clear goals and have individuals to help them stay their course. Cities such as Arlington and Boston have created cabinet-level equity officers who are responsible for ensuring alignment to equity-values across city departments. Passing resolutions or charter amendments that assert a commitment to equity can help guide planning efforts down the line, and encourage buy-in to specific policy strategies by connecting them to a higher, collective goal. Communities can also set a goal of representation on appointed boards such as historic commissions, zoning boards of appeals, housing trusts, and others.

## Design for people, not cars.

The 15-minute neighborhood vision starts with streets and public spaces designed at the human scale. Much of our built environment is designed at a car scale that is neither friendly nor safe for pedestrians, cyclists, and other users. In many downtowns, 50 to 60 percent of public space is devoted to car infrastructure.<sup>89</sup> This is true in many of our smaller cities as well. MassINC estimates that in Brockton, Haverhill, and Fall River, approximately 45 percent of all downtown land is devoted to car infrastructure.<sup>90</sup> Reclaiming some of that space, as we've seen happen during the pandemic, can create ample room for parks, socializing, outdoor commerce, faster and more reliable public transit, and safer walking and cycling. Some strategies for more people-centered streets are:

- **Make roads safer for all users.** There are many ways that planners can make streets safer for pedestrian, cyclists, and other users by slowing traffic and reducing collisions. Some of these methods include lowering the number of lanes (road diets), adding left turn lanes, designating loading zones, curb extensions, raised medians, and protected bike lanes, and improving traffic signals.
  - **Prioritize universal design while improving sidewalks.** In order to access their needs within a 15-minute walk, all residents must be able to navigate safely on city streets. Particularly for those with limited mobility, sidewalk improvements such as increasing the width of the sidewalk and ensuring that there are ADA compliant curb ramps are key. Walking infrastructure varies greatly across the region. In some places, even just installing sidewalks will be an upgrade, while in others constructing pedestrian “refuge” islands in wide boulevards or improving lighting will help encourage more walkers.
  - **Expand space for public life.** Expanded public space is key to fostering community and providing residents spaces to gather without having to pay or make purchases. Public space can be expanded by converting parking spaces or parking lots, opening access to schoolyards outside of school hours, or increasing access to publicly owned buildings and grounds.
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- **Encourage street-level activity.** Expanding public space will encourage the street-level activity that makes places feel more welcoming and walkable. Activating storefronts through window displays, sidewalk displays, or outdoor furniture also increases street-level activity by building business owners' investment in the street and neighborhood in front of them, while at the same time making strolls through the area more lively, interesting, and fun.<sup>91</sup> Some ways cities and towns can encourage business owners to enliven their store fronts are by allowing for outdoor dining and other sidewalk uses, or installing more permanent outdoor seating.
  - **Develop green streets and public spaces.** Trees and plants not only make a street more pleasant for pedestrians and other users but also produce shade that counters the urban heat island effect.<sup>92</sup> Greenery can also reduce pavement maintenance, support stormwater management, and improve air quality in a neighborhood.

Source: Jonathan Berk



## Reform zoning for density and affordable housing.

Zoning reform can most efficiently be performed at the state level, as detailed in the state section above, but in the absence of state action, cities and towns can pursue the same policies within their boundaries. Housing Choice zoning reforms passed in January 2021 should make it easier for communities to pass sensible zoning changes with a simple majority vote rather than empower a minority of opponents to control the process with a two-thirds majority required.

Regardless of who makes the changes to zoning codes, cities and towns will still have a lot of decision-making to do. For example, even if the state mandates higher density, cities and towns will still have to determine where multifamily districts are placed, exactly what is allowed, and how new multifamily zoning interacts with other parts of their zoning code, such as road setbacks. Even if the state sets an affordable housing goal, local municipalities will still need to determine at what affordability level and in what developments and through what methods affordable housing will be built. Decisions that municipalities make can either enhance the impact of statewide zoning reform or diminish it.

South End, Boston (Source: Anne Calef)



## Leverage economic growth for equity-focused investments, either directly through taxation or indirectly by requiring contributions from developers.

Cities and towns can ensure that economic development funding is prioritized for communities that have experienced disinvestment and unequal access to wealth-building opportunities. Cities with weak markets will likely require state investment, as detailed above, to spur local economic development. In cities with high market demand and areas with incentivized development, there are some market-based economic development policies that can help them leverage future development for equitable outcomes:

- **Progressive local tax policies.** The most direct way for a city and town to raise local revenue is through taxes. However, MassBudget found that low- and moderate-income households tend to pay a higher portion of their income on property taxes than higher income residents.<sup>93</sup> Cities and towns could consider slightly raising property taxes, within the constraints of Proposition 2.5, while also making them more progressive by applying different tax rates for different properties or providing targeted exemptions.
- **Inclusionary zoning.** Requiring developers to set aside a portion of new residential units for low- or moderate-income households can increase the affordable housing stock in a city, often without direct city investment. Incentive zoning provides density bonuses, expedited permitting, or other cost offsets in exchange for affordable units.
- **Community benefit agreements.** Agreements signed between a developer and community can benefit groups (such as local organizations or neighborhood associations) and contain a range of benefits the developer will provide the community in exchange for its support of the development. Benefits can range from local hire agreements to the creation of a new bus stop to additional affordable housing units.
- **Linkage fees.** Large commercial developments pay fees to support affordable housing, or affordable housing and job training programs, such as in Boston.
- **Local transfer fees.** Imposing an additional tax on certain property sales can help fund affordable housing programs. Cities such as Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, and Nantucket have already sought permission from the state legislature to implement transfer fees.
- **Community Preservation Act.** The Community Preservation Act (CPA) allows cities and towns to create a local Community Preservation Fund for open space, historic preservation, and affordable housing program and generate revenue through a local property tax of up to 3 percent. Communities that have not already adopted CPA should consider doing so.



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September 2021