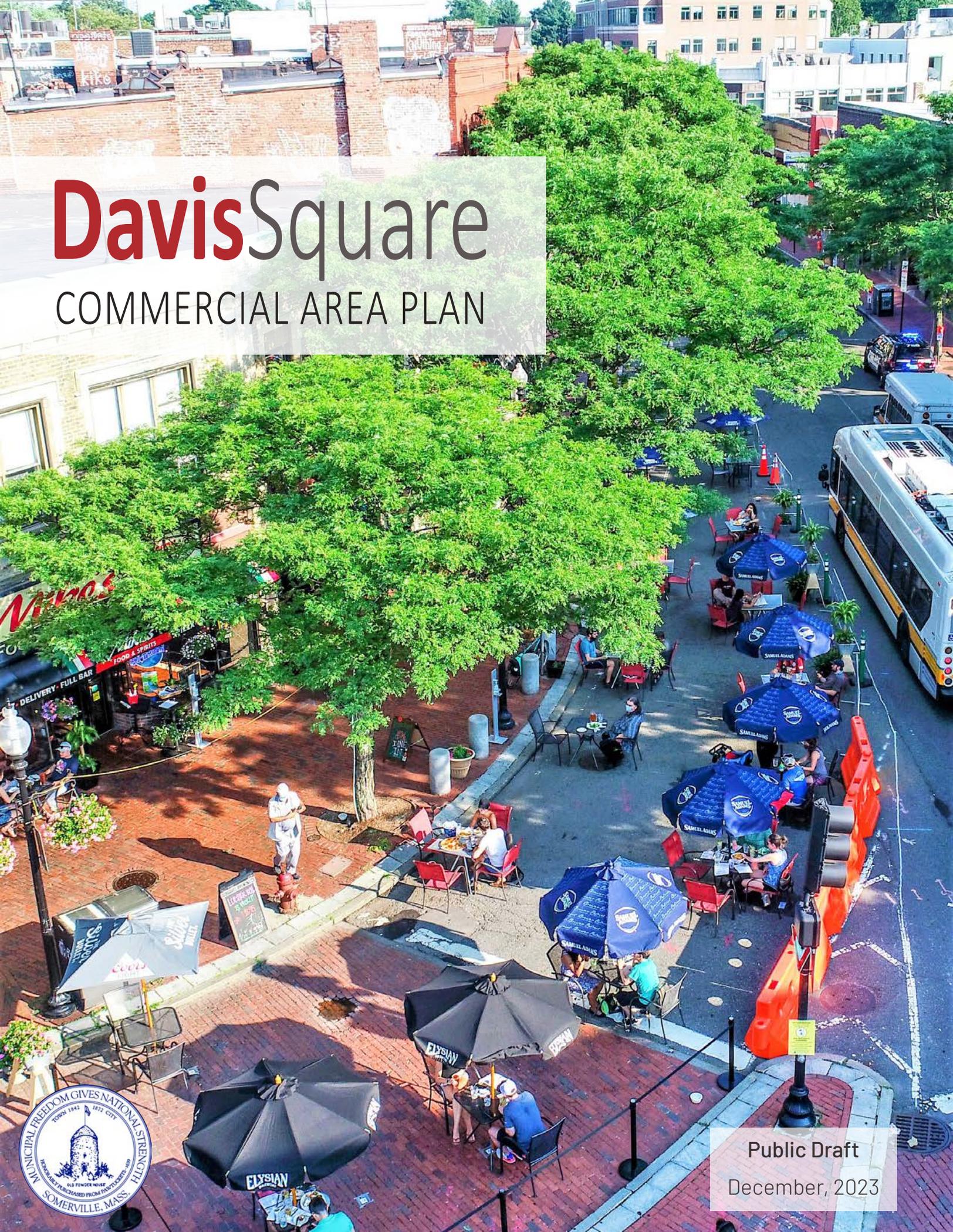


# Davis Square

## COMMERCIAL AREA PLAN



Public Draft  
December, 2023



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# Chapter 1

# Context and Framework



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# 1.1 Introduction

## a. Plan Background

During 2018–2020, the community collaborated with the City to create a neighborhood plan for Davis Square. In the later stages of that process, while City staff worked on finalizing the plan based on community feedback, Somerville declared a local state of emergency in response to COVID-19. This compelled the staff to shift their focus toward pandemic response efforts. Now, with the crisis behind us, we had the opportunity to revisit all the feedback, research, and ideas from the 2020 planning process. We considered all its proposals within the context of everything we learned over the last few years and built upon it to develop this updated plan.

Neighborhoods naturally change over time as property ownership shifts and economic markets adjust to new environments. However, the pandemic had an unexpectedly profound impact on our businesses and commercial spaces. Over 300 businesses city-wide had to apply for assistance from the City's Small Business COVID-19 Relief Fund. In Davis Square, closures and revenue losses impacted many local businesses. The square's public realm also changed dramatically during that period by allowing outdoor dining to expand into street space previously dedicated to vehicles and parking to limit indoor gathering risks during the pandemic.

While the pandemic response was challenging, dealing with adversity is also an opportunity to reconsider priorities and find creative solutions. We learned a great deal in the last few years and discovered that some ideas initially considered overly ambitious in early planning discussions may now be feasible. We also learned that topics like building local businesses' resiliency and addressing commercial displacement should be of a higher priority than previously thought. Lastly, this update gave us the opportunity to integrate the multiple city-wide policy efforts that have happened in the last few years.

The Davis Square Commercial Area Plan sets broad goals for the commercial core and compiles a wide range of ideas to help achieve them. Its primary aim is to address the square's challenges while building upon its existing strengths and preserving its cherished character. By providing a cohesive vision for the future of the square, this plan will help us determine what types of zoning regulations, direct public investments, and public-private partnerships to pursue in the future.

## b. Implementation

The Davis Square Commercial Area Plan is a guide for further study and implementation efforts. Each recommendation in Chapter 3 will involve a different implementation process. Some recommendations have already been thoroughly studied, and the resources are currently available, allowing implementation in the short term. Other recommendations are big ideas that will take several years to implement, requiring multiple additional studies and their own community engagement process. For those long-term efforts, conditions may change, community participation may alter the idea significantly, or further studies may reveal prohibitive challenges.

This Plan aims to strike a balance between being pragmatic and ambitious in its goals but favoring aiming high to push the City to find new resources and creative strategies to achieve them. City staff is committed to continuing conversations with the community throughout implementation, particularly regarding large projects, efforts to mitigate negative impacts due to construction, and substantial future adjustments to current proposals.

## c.Goals

The Davis Square Commercial Area Plan's purpose is to outline a vision for improving the neighborhood's commercial core to be more inclusive, attractive, and safe for visitors, residents, and workers. The three broad goals we are pursuing to achieve fall under three categories.

- **Mobility and Curb Usage:** Propose mobility strategies to make navigating the square easier, safer, and more equitable for residents and visitors.
- **Civic Spaces and Streetscapes:** Propose strategies to improve and expand civic spaces, promote tree health and increase the urban tree canopy, attract more visitors, and improve safety and accessibility while striving to preserve the Square's character.
- **Business Enhancement and Support:** Propose strategies to increase local businesses' resiliency, promote collaboration among businesses, enhance the commercial appeal of the square, and mitigate commercial displacement pressures.



Boston Burger Company, Statue Plaza

## 1.2 Plan Framework

This planning document must be considered in the context of the city's goals and values as expressed by our community in the comprehensive plan, our previous studies in the area, and the changing demographics and economic conditions impacting the square..

### a. Comprehensive Plan

SomerVision2040 (SomerVision2040.com) is Somerville's comprehensive master plan and serves as the broad policy framework for this plan. It was based on the community consensus of our city's identity as an accessible, mixed-income, multicultural community. It was created with input from hundreds of residents and a 60-member committee of community members from diverse backgrounds. SomerVision2040 outlines an actionable policy agenda to invite and leverage public and private investment in transit-oriented development, promote greater equity and inclusion, expand our local economy, combat displacement, and prioritize sustainability.

While built upon the same fundamental values as SomerVision2030, the previous comprehensive plan, SomerVision2040, further explores the inherent conflicts between different goals.

By recognizing that many things we want as a community come at the cost of other things we value – such as the desire for more open space with a need for increased subsidized housing – we as a community can make informed choices. SomerVision2040 also explores the history of systemic inequality in our community and the barriers to opportunity it has created. It calls on us to be critical and consider that even well-meaning policy initiatives can have unintended negative consequences that disproportionately impact historically disadvantaged groups.

### SomerVision Map

SomerVision2040 identifies the areas of the city we intend to enhance, preserve, and transform. This plan's study area is identified as an area to enhance in SomerVision2040. Fundamentally, that means building on its strengths, focusing on improving and expanding existing features, and striving to preserve existing character. That framing aligns with the community expectations we heard during the 2018–2020 process and informed our approach to this plan.

→ *Learn more about SomerVision2040 at [somerVision2040.com](http://somerVision2040.com)*

# SomerVision 2040

Comprehensive Plan Update | 2010 - 2040  
City of Somerville, Massachusetts



Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone  
Adopted MONTH YEAR  
[SomerVision2040.com](http://SomerVision2040.com)

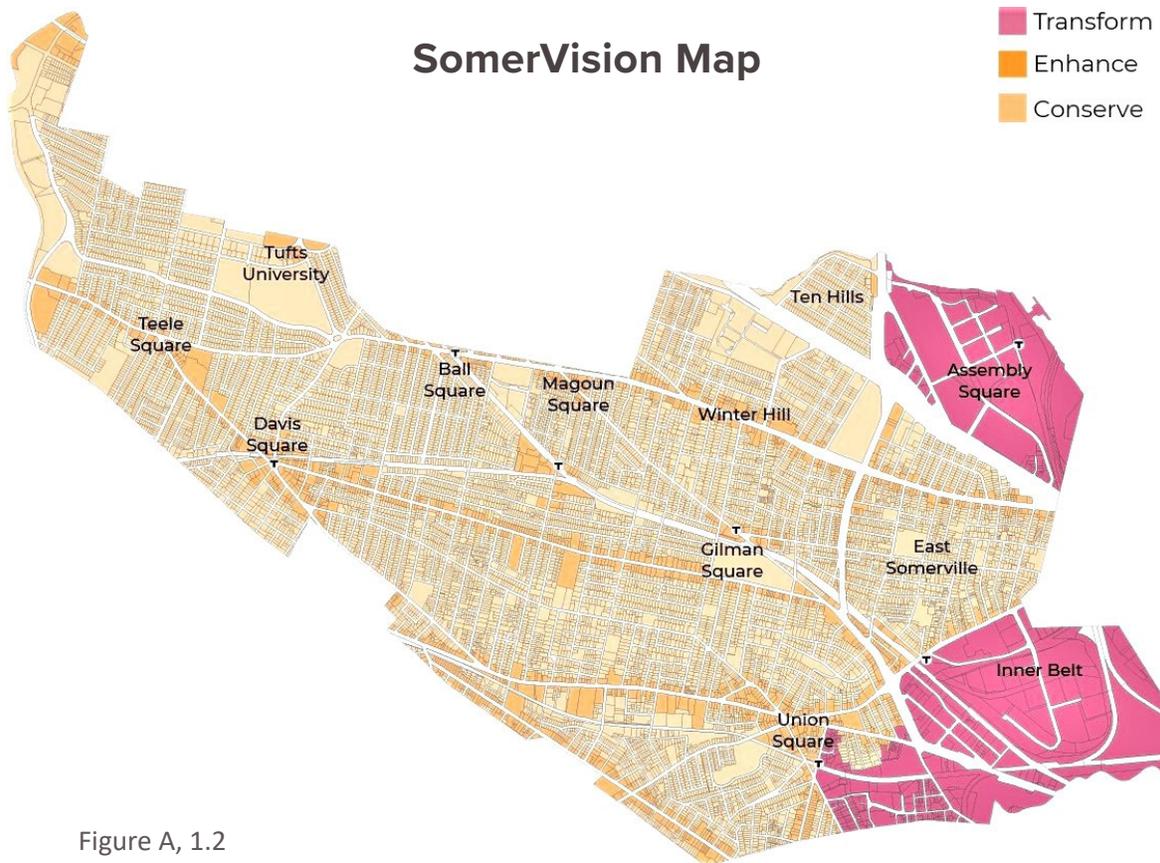


Figure A, 1.2

## Somerville Vision Values

- 1 Protect and foster the **DIVERSITY** of our people, culture, housing and economy.
- 2 Celebrate the unique character of our neighborhoods and the strength of our **COMMUNITY** as expressed in our history, cultures and vibrant civic engagement.
- 3 Invest in the **GROWTH** of a resilient economic base that is centered around transit, generates a wide variety of job opportunities, creates an active daytime population, supports independent local businesses, and secures fiscal self-sufficiency.
- 4 Promote a dynamic urban streetscape that embraces public transportation, reduces car dependence, and is **ACCESSIBLE**, inviting and safe for all pedestrians, bicyclists and transit riders.
- 5 Build a **SUSTAINABLE** future through climate leadership, balanced transportation, engaging civic spaces, exceptional educational opportunities, improved health, varied and affordable housing options, and the responsible use of our natural resources.
- 6 Affirm our responsibility to current and future generations through continued **INNOVATION** in business, technology, education, arts and government.

Figure B, 1.2

## b. Visioning Plans

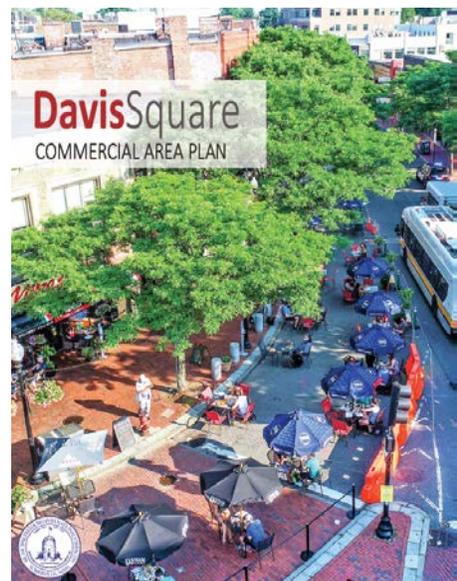
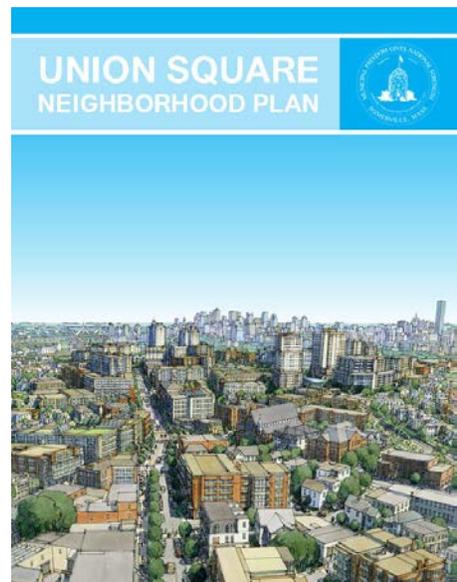
As the focus of planning studies is narrowed to the neighborhood scale, the goals and values of SomerVision must be reviewed and considered at that same scale. A vision plan aims to paint a picture of how we see an area evolving over the next decade or further. With that picture in our minds, we can determine the goals and steps we need to achieve it. Realizing a complete vision for an area typically involves too many considerations to be explored deeply at once, so our vision plans focus on the big picture of a smaller area and on laying the groundwork for subsequent study and implementation efforts. We create two types of vision plans based on geographic scope.

### Neighborhood Plans

Neighborhood plans generally focus on a major socio-geographic neighborhood, like the Union Square plan. These plans address the a full breadth of topics related to land use including commercial development, housing, mobility, open space, and sustainability. They help translate the citywide goals and policies of the comprehensive plan to a neighborhood scale and provide background information along with policy and capital project recommendations to guide future in-depth studies and decision-making.

### Area Plans

Area plans have a similar purpose of neighborhood plans but focus on more specific topics and more specialized areas that do not comprise a full neighborhood. Examples would be the area within walking distance of a transit station, the campus of an educational institution or as in this case the Davis Square Commercial Core.



## c. Related Planning Efforts

Several other citywide planning documents dive deeper into specific topics. These documents helped guide this plan and will serve as key tools for its implementation.

### Climate Forward

The City's comprehensive climate change plan. The Davis Square Neighborhood Plan addresses several goals from Somerville Climate Forward, including the transition to electric vehicles, equitable low-carbon mobility, and an expanded urban tree canopy. The City is currently updating the Climate Forward Plan to address gaps and opportunities and update progress toward existing goals.

→ [Learn more at somervillema.gov/departments/programs/somerville-climate-forward](https://somervillema.gov/departments/programs/somerville-climate-forward)

### Vision Zero

Puts forth the City's strategy for eliminating deaths and serious injuries from our transportation system. As this plan is focused on the public realm (which includes the transportation system), Davis Square's specific pedestrian and bicycle crossing safety concerns are addressed in later chapters.

→ [Learn more at somervillema.gov/visionzero](https://somervillema.gov/visionzero)

### Open Space and Recreation Plan

A community driven plan to guide public investment in conservation and recreation resources in Somerville. It was taken into consideration for the proposed improvements and additions to civic spaces in Davis Square outlined in the recommendations.

→ [Learn more at somervillebydesign.com/public-space/osrp/](https://somervillebydesign.com/public-space/osrp/)

## Urban Forestry Plan

The Urban Forestry Plan includes specific recommendations for addressing short-term and long-term maintenance needs for inventoried public trees, as well as suggestions for improving urban forestry operations and public outreach. Davis Square's urban tree canopy ties into this report.

→ [Learn more at somervillema.gov/departments/ospcd/psuf/urban-forestry](https://somervillema.gov/departments/ospcd/psuf/urban-forestry)

## Talent Equity Playbook

The Talent Equity Playbook provides strategies to build an economically resilient and prosperous Somerville where residents are empowered to remain close to the technological curve, find meaningful employment, and work closer to where they live. This playbook was among our economic development considerations.

→ [Learn more at somervillema.gov/workforce-and-talent-development](https://somervillema.gov/workforce-and-talent-development)

## Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study

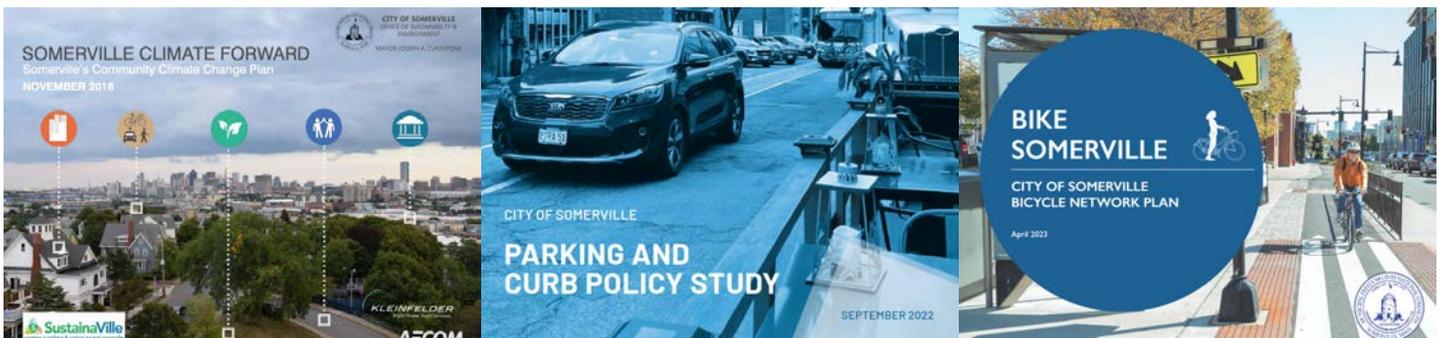
The Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study is an effort to comprehensively understand the on-street parking and loading system in Somerville and make recommendations that will guide the City in aligning its parking policies with city goals, community values, and future needs. Key considerations from this study were applied to our curb use recommendations and analysis.

→ [Learn more at somervillema.gov/parkingstudy](https://somervillema.gov/parkingstudy)

## Bicycle Network Plan

Outlines strategies to design our streets so that everybody, regardless of age and ability, can safely ride a bike anywhere in Somerville. Its application to this plan's study area is addressed in later chapters.

→ [Learn more at somervillema.gov/bikenetwork](https://somervillema.gov/bikenetwork)



## 1.3 Past Planning

There have been multiple planning efforts in Davis Square for the past 40 years. Many expressed goals from those processes have been met, some have not, and time has made others irrelevant. This history, however, provides crucial context for this plan and for understanding the area.

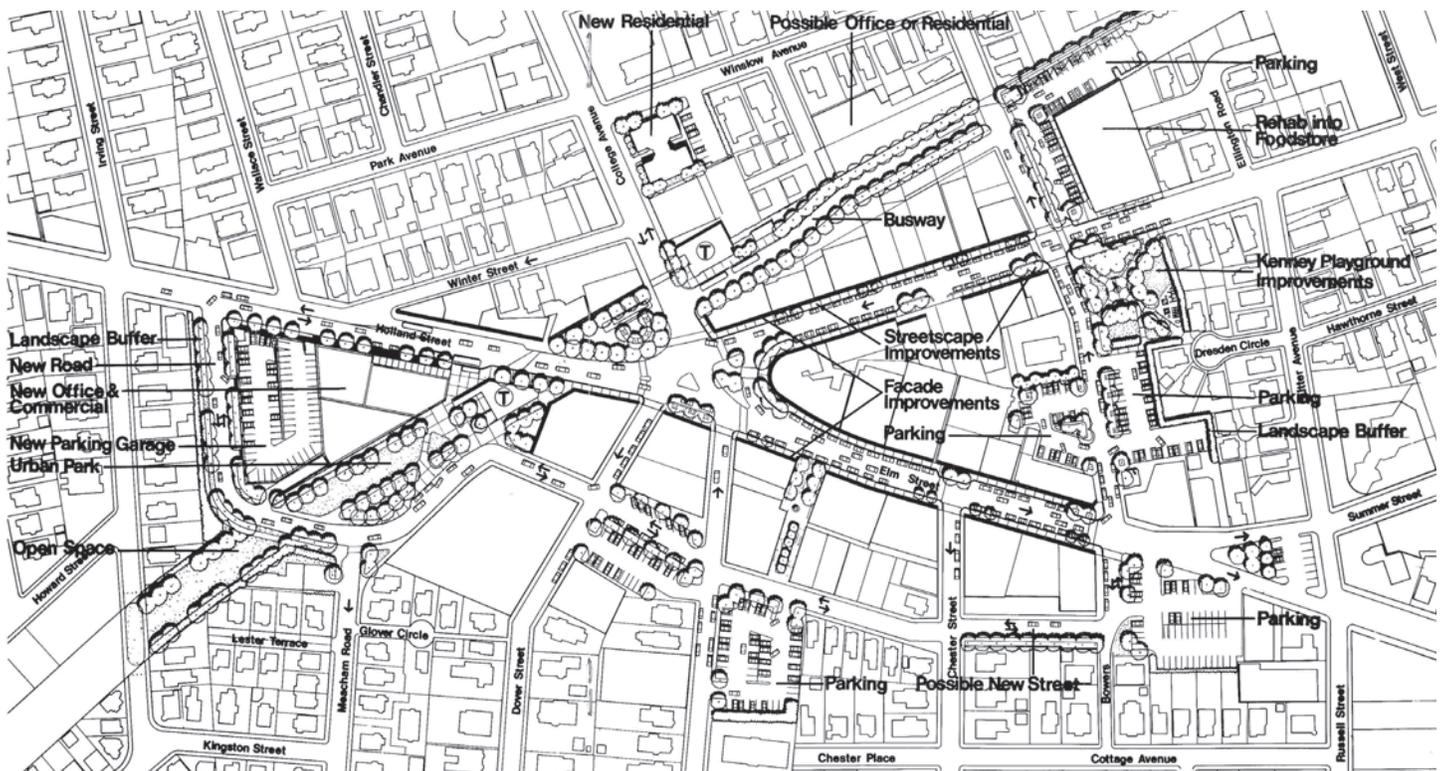
### a. 1980's Action Plan

The 1980s Action Plan provides important context regarding what has shaped Davis Square over the past 40 years. Planning for the arrival of rapid transit in Davis Square began in 1977. The City and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) worked together to evaluate future reinvestment possibilities as the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) began constructing the Northwest Extension of the Red Line. At that time, neighborhood residents also founded the Davis Square Task Force and developed goal statements to leverage public involvement in planning for the Red Line's arrival.

Through the combined efforts of the task force, members of the business community, and residents participating in the planning effort, the City produced the Davis Square Action Plan, the first plan for Davis Square's commercial core. On December 8, 1984, the

MBTA brought subway service to Davis Square for the first time, enabling the plan's implementation. Key implementation efforts of the 1984 plan included:

- The sidewalks of Elm Street, Highland Avenue, and Holland Street were widened, new honey locust trees were planted, and brick pavers and public furniture were installed to improve the image of Davis Square as an attractive place to live, work, and shop.
- The construction of Davis Square's station created Statue Plaza and an additional plaza in front of the Holland Street subway entrance. Soon after, the City built Seven Hills Park and the Somerville Community Path connection to Cambridge.
- Improvements to pass-through vehicular traffic efficiency by adding roadway space for drop-offs at the T-stations. These changes, unfortunately, did not consider pedestrians, bikes, or buses.
- Attracting commercial development to 212 Elm Street, the Citizens Bank, and 40 Holland Street, the Harvard Vanguard.



1980 Action Plan map

## b. 2018–2020 Plan Efforts

As conditions on the ground had changed significantly since the 1980's and 1990's, the City and residents knew it was time to revisit the plan for Davis Square. The neighborhood planning effort carried out from 2018 to 2020 began by trying to answer two key questions: What is our shared vision for how we want this area to change and evolve? And how do we see its character and purpose? To answer those questions, City staff primarily looked at qualitative data derived from extensive community outreach and in depth-conversations through meetings, forums, online surveys, tabling, group discussions, and interactive public events. This experience-based data was key to helping us understand the underlying reasons, values, and motivations behind the suggestions, ideas, and priorities of community members and stakeholders. Our multiple outreach strategies aimed at increasing the diversity of voices to ensure not only residents who have the time and interest to attend our public meetings were considered.

The broader framework of the 2020 plan was to enhance Davis Square into a better place for people. It aimed to do this by focusing first on the public life of the square, then the spaces that support that public life, then the buildings that

define the public realm and meet the residents, employees, and customers' needs. The broad goals were organized based on the concepts of "life, spaces, and buildings," summarized as:

- **Attract and retain public life:** Promoting work, shopping, leisure, and cultural experiences, including improved maintenance, integrated art, support for performance and exhibition spaces, and cultural programming.
- **Make better use of street space:** Optimizing street space by prioritizing cyclists and pedestrians, improving transit access, addressing parking inefficiencies, establishing structured curbside activities, and streamlining vehicular movement.
- **Invest in civic space:** Investing in civic spaces, repurposing city-owned parcels, introducing a market hall, creating Cutter Plaza, redesigning intersections to create more open space, transforming Elm Street into a pedestrian area, and enhancing private spaces.
- **Develop in context:** Studying infill possibilities and exploring development standards and design guidelines based on the existing architectural character.



2019 Davis Square Public Meeting

## Place Type Classification

As part of the foundation for the 2020 draft, place type categories are a tool to help guide planning by categorizing commercial areas. This framework helped us identify the primary role of different squares, the most common commercial areas in Somerville.

- **Neighborhood Center:** Smaller squares like Teele and Ball. Their economic impact is primarily on the immediate surrounding area. Some opportunities exist for small improvements, but the possibilities for large-scale redevelopment and density are limited. Small local businesses and low- to mid-rise mixed-use buildings are the hallmarks of neighborhood centers.
- **Local Centers:** Mid-sized squares like Davis, Porter, and Sullivan. They have a broader economic impact by drawing visitors from surrounding neighborhoods and often neighboring cities. Due to more visitors, these squares have more capacity for density, job creation, and heavier investment. Local centers are typically home to small and medium-sized businesses within mixed-use and mid-rise buildings ranging from three to six stories. The presence of public transportation has a big impact on what's possible for a local center. Commercial buildings are more likely when there is frequent transit or access to regional highways.
- **Urban Centers:** The largest commercial centers. These typically have multiple high-rise buildings, a high density of jobs, and a higher concentration of large businesses. They typically have a substantial amount of regular visitors from the broader surrounding regions. Somerville's only developed urban center is Assembly Square, but there is an evolving one on the eastern side of Union Square.

In the 2018–2020 planned outreach efforts, City staff engaged residents with this concept and asked them what Davis Square is today and what they thought it should be. Most residents viewed Davis Square as a local center and wished to see it remain one. While remaining a local center, Davis Square still has many growth opportunities, particularly with its transit connections, multiple single-story sites zoned for mid-rise density, and opportunities for expanded civic spaces.



Teele Square, Neighborhood Center



Davis Square, Local Center



Assembly Square, Urban Center

## c. 2023 Plan Revisions

Significant changes to the scope and policy recommendations were needed from the 2020 plan to this new version.

### Changes in Scope

We changed it from a neighborhood plan to an area plan because the proposals were overwhelmingly centered around the commercial core of the square rather than the broader neighborhood. Under the area plan type, there is a clearer understanding of why we are not addressing topics like housing.

Another key change in overall focus was to place greater emphasis on supporting existing businesses and planning for public investment while placing less emphasis on studying specific sites for private redevelopment. Our updated zoning code now includes more detailed guidelines and requirements and a more robust community process for redevelopment feedback, making planning for redevelopment on a site-by-site basis less important. Additionally, we expect redevelopment in Davis Square to happen gradually over the years as land ownership changes, making it difficult to predict conditions for each site at the time of redevelopment. We do provide general design and architectural guidelines for redevelopment in Chapter 4.

### Changes to Recommendations

While many of the proposals discussed in the 2020 neighborhood plan draft are still applicable, some of them are no longer relevant. For this update, we considered the 88 policy objectives outlined in that version and excluded proposals based on the following considerations:

- ❑ Objectives specific to sites that are no longer included in the study area.
- ❑ Objectives related to infill studies were excluded as the data projections from those studies are now outdated.
- ❑ Some objectives related to planning for private redevelopment and housing were excluded based on the change in scope to a commercial area plan.

- ❑ Other policy objectives were no longer relevant because they had already been achieved through other city-wide planning initiatives. For example, multiple objectives related to bicycle infrastructure and central intersection safety have already been implemented through initiatives by our Mobility Division.

A number of other objectives have already been achieved through updates to our zoning code, like the following examples:

- ❑ Requiring 5% of commercial floor space in new five- and six-story buildings to be set aside for Arts & Creative Enterprise use.
- ❑ Establishing standards for different types of signs and controls on sign lighting.
- ❑ Requiring neighborhood meetings and design reviews for all buildings in the Mid-Rise and Commercial Core districts prior to site plan approval.

Most other policy objectives were integrated into this plan's recommendation with updated wording or an adjusted concept, or combined into other broader recommendations.



2019 Community Walking Tour

## d. Zoning Overhaul

In 2012, the Somerville Board of Aldermen began the complex process of updating the zoning ordinance city-wide. In December 2019, the Somerville City Council adopted a new zoning ordinance, implementing about one-quarter of the recommended goals, policies, and actions of SomerVision. Prior to this change, Davis Square's core commercial area was mainly mapped in the Central Business District (CBD). With the passage of the new ordinance, several new zoning districts, use provisions, and dimensional standards were introduced.

→ *To find definitions for any of the terms in this section and to learn more about zoning districts, building types, permitted uses, and the approval process, visit [www.somervillezoning.com](http://www.somervillezoning.com).*

### Zoning Districts

The most prominent zoning districts in Davis Square's core business area are the Commercial Core 4 and Mid-Rise 4 districts. The Mid-Rise 4 districts permit three building types up to 4-stories: a general building, with ground story commercial and any permitted use on upper stories; an apartment building, which is all residential; and a commercial building, which is all commercial. The Commercial Core district permits only commercial use within various building types. Several properties fronting the farther extents of Holland Street and Highland Avenue have a Mid-Rise 3 classification (3 stories maximum) and parcels surrounding the commercial core are mostly in the Neighborhood Residence district.

The difference in the intent of Commercial Core 4 and Mid-Rise 4 districts relates to their permitted dimensions, such as maximum lot coverage, maximum floor plate, and building height. Larger buildings with higher ceilings are permitted in the commercial core to accommodate uses such as research and development, which often require ceilings tall enough for complex ventilation systems. In contrast, the Mid-Rise dimensions are meant to accommodate buildings with upper-story residential units or typical office space, on top of commercial ground floor use. Despite these differences, the front, side, and rear setbacks for all the permitted building types of these two districts are the same because both are urban districts that should produce buildings close to the sidewalk. Ideally, they are also attached at the side to their neighbors to create a continuous

street wall without gaps between buildings, blank walls, or curb cuts interrupting the pedestrian experience.

### Commercial Parking

Commercial parking facilities are the only form of automobile parking permitted in the Commercial Core district. The Mid-Rise district, however, permits both commercial parking facilities ("a lot or structure providing short- or long-term parking spaces to the general public for a fee") and accessory parking ("motor vehicle parking spaces that are incidental to but directly supportive of a principal use"). Our zoning ordinance requires that "motor vehicle parking spaces be rented or leased as an option rather than a requirement of the rental, lease, or purchase of a dwelling unit or non-residential floor space." This requirement ensures that as new developments build garages in commercial areas, those spaces are available to visitors and other workers in the area instead of just the people that occupy that particular building. The goal is for these parking facilities to serve as an area resource with high utilization and help offset potential losses in on-street parking.

### Pedestrian Streets

Almost all streets in the commercial core of Davis Square are designated as a pedestrian street on the zoning atlas maps except between the Cutter Avenue and Willow Avenue intersections along Highland Avenue. For the sake of walkability, curb cuts are not permitted on streets with this designation. The overall goal of the pedestrian street designation is to produce an active pedestrian experience with uninterrupted storefronts. The City requires a special permit for establishing a use for a building fronting a pedestrian street regardless of category, so these factors can be considered on a case-by-case basis.

### Small Business Overlay District

The Small Business Overlay District within the Davis Square commercial area limits the size of ground story commercial spaces and establishes design guidelines that encourage small businesses. The goal is to encourage smaller retail spaces, even in buildings with a large footprint, to maintain the small business character of Davis Square.

# DAVIS SQUARE STUDY AREA CURRENT ZONING

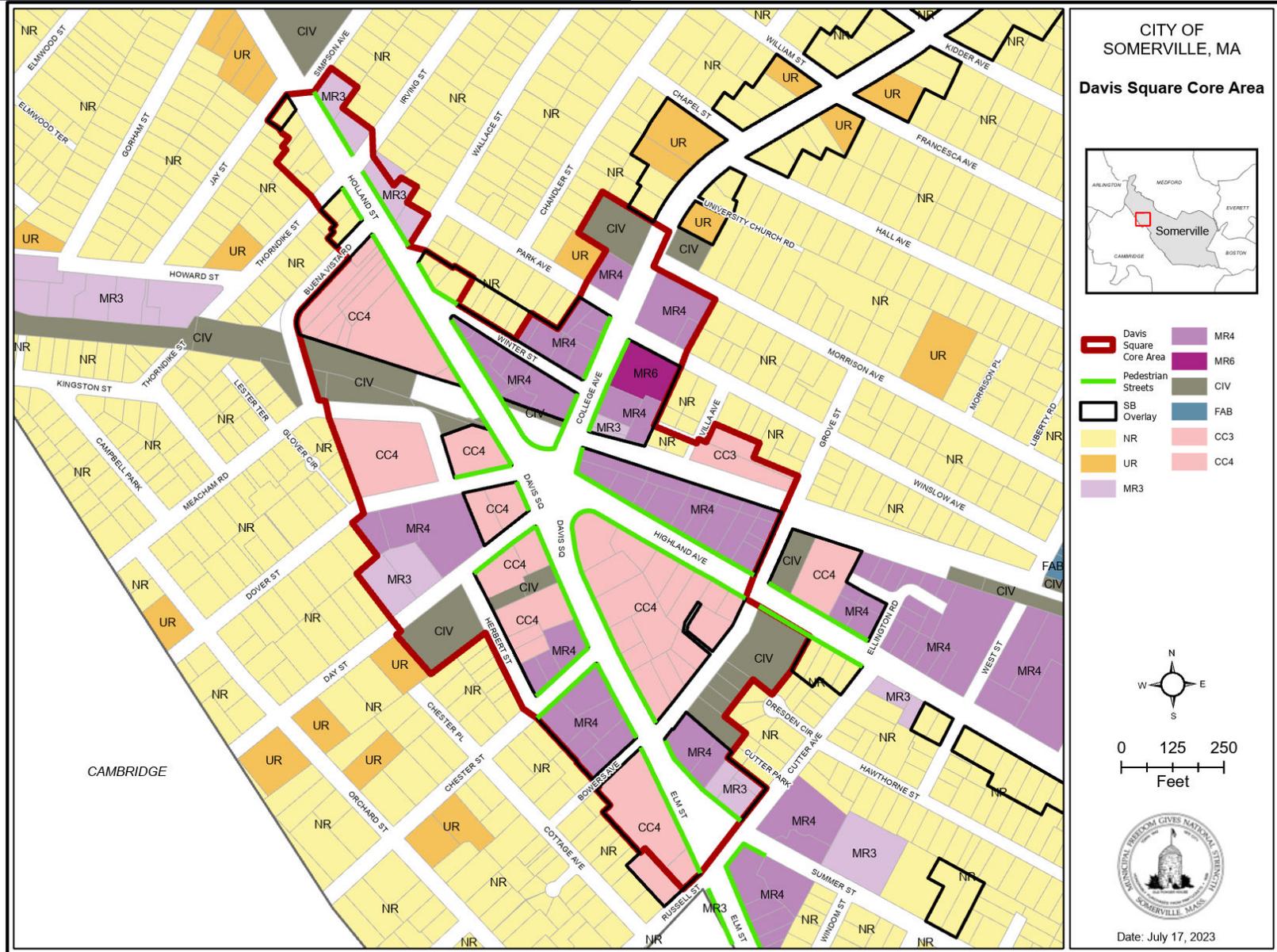


Figure A, 1.3

# 1.4 Study Area & Demographics

## a. Regional Context

Davis Square is connected to multiple neighborhoods throughout Cambridge and Downtown Boston via the MBTA Red Line and the Community Path. It is within short walking distance of Teele Square, West Somerville

residential areas, and the Tufts University campus. Regionally, Davis Square is best known for its nightlife, which includes restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues and attracts visitors from throughout Somerville and neighboring cities.



Figure A, 1.4

## b. Plan Boundaries

As previously explained, this plan is focused on Davis Square's core commercial area, defined as the primarily commercial sites and public realm surrounding the MBTA Red Line entrances. Nearly every site in the study area is either fully commercial or has a commercial use for its ground story. This study area extends from that

center south through the Elm Street and Cutter Street intersection and north through the Holland Street and Jay Street intersection. Based on key sites, specific parcels were also selected for new civic space proposals. Statue Plaza, which faces the MBTA Red Line Holland Street entrance and Somerville Theatre, is typically viewed by residents as the heart of this area.



Figure B, 1.4

## c. Area Demographics

The following data is based on a 5-year census by the American Community Survey released in 2021 for the zip code 02144, which covers the northeast quarter of Somerville. Demographic data regarding residents is more relevant within this broader area since this plan's study area is small and primarily commercial. Furthermore, as a local center, Davis Square serves as a gathering, recreational, and retail destination for multiple surrounding neighborhoods.

Residents in this zip code area have a higher average income (\$6,000 higher, figure D) and a significantly higher poverty rate (4% higher, figure C) than the overall Somerville average. These data points highlight higher rates of economic inequality, meaning that while there is higher overall income, it is also more concentrated among high earners. This context is important for equity considerations. It can produce market forces that advantage businesses that cater primarily to higher-income earners, leaving the lower-income population to struggle to find stores that sell affordable goods.

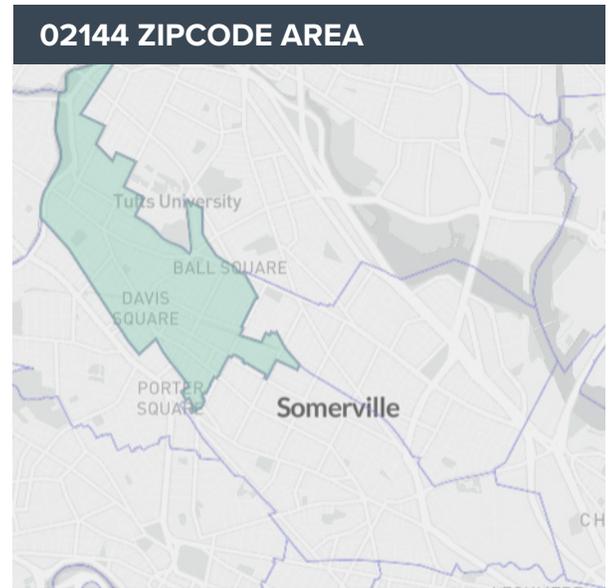
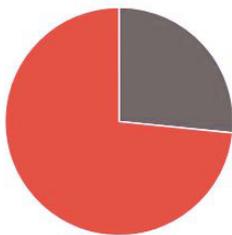


Figure C, 1.4

### POVERTY

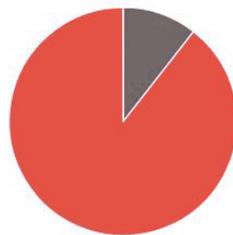
Persons Below Poverty Level  
**12.54%** (8.8% city-wide)

Population Under 18



■ Poverty	26.59% (10%)
■ Non-poverty	73.41% (90%)

Population 65 and Over

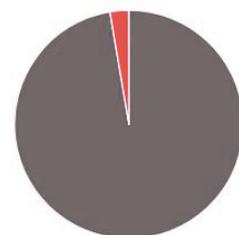


■ Poverty	10.57% (13%)
■ Non-poverty	89.43% (87%)

### INCOME

Per Capita Income  
**\$66,220** (\$60,340 city-wide)

Unemployment Rate



■ Employed	97.33% (96.4%)
■ Unemployed	2.67% (3.6%)

\*Universe: Civilian Population In Labor Force 16+

Figure E, 1.4

Figure D, 1.4

**Other demographic trends for the 02144 zip code as compared to city-wide data:**

- This area has a significantly higher rate of educational attainment (figure F). This is typically correlated with a higher average income and smaller immigrant population, which influence financial access to higher education.
- This area has a significantly lower percentage of non-white and foreign born residents (figure G). This is likely correlated with the higher cost of living in this area which disproportionately impacts immigrants and racial minorities.
- This area has a lower average age (figure G), probably affected by the presence of the nearby Tufts campus, and more single young professionals. This likely influences the business landscape in Davis, particularly in terms of demand for nightlife venues.

**FOREIGN BORN**

Nativity

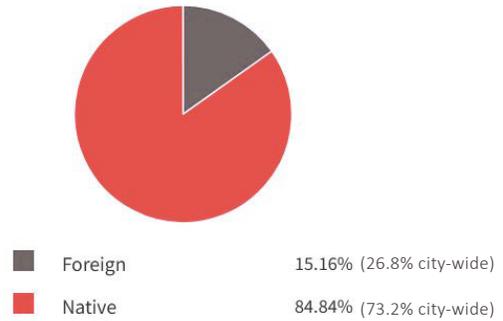


Figure G, 1.4

**AGE**

Median Age

**31 years** (33.2 city-wide)

Population By Age

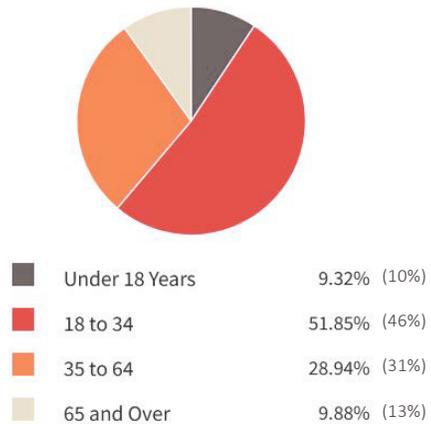


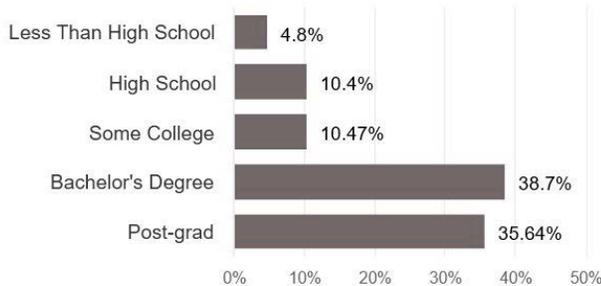
Figure H, 1.4

**EDUCATION**

High School Grad or Higher  
95.2% (89.9% city-wide)

Bachelor's Degree or Higher  
74.33% (62.6% city-wide)

Education Attainment for Population 25 and Over



\*Universe: Population 25 Years and Over

Figure F, 1.4

## 1.5 Equity Goals

As part of our efforts to implement the equity-focused goals of SomerVision2040 (outlined in section 1.2.a) and Mayor Ballantyne's equity-focused agenda, our visioning plans now include equity-specific goals to help inform our policy recommendations.

Cities exist in a broader context of state and federal policies, so we cannot single-handedly fully address equity issues locally. However, stating what our equity goals are in the context of this plan, even if we cannot fully resolve them, helps give our community a shared language with which to discuss these issues and explore further solutions.

When we talk about applying an equity lens to our policy proposals, we mean:

- Prioritizing human dignity above other considerations.
- Identifying how our proposed policies may impact different minority populations, particularly those with a history of suffering from discrimination.
- Considering unintended negative impacts of our policy proposals and including mitigation strategies.



Art mural depicting Somerville neighborhoods in Davis Square

## a. Mobility Equity Goals

An equitable approach to mobility means developing transportation networks and policies that provide accessible, affordable, safe, sustainable, and efficient transportation options to all community members, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, or ability. This also means prioritizing community members that are historically underserved and ensuring that people are not disproportionately burdened by the impacts of transportation.

Transportation is essential to daily life, enabling people to access jobs, education, health care, schools, and other essential services. Therefore, any barriers to transportation impact access to opportunities and detract from quality of life.

### Improve Safety

Historically, cities have prioritized the movement of cars rather than the safety of people. To have a more equitable transportation system, we must prioritize safety, especially vulnerable road users, people walking, rolling, and biking. That means slowing down traffic with traffic calming tools like speed humps, raised crosswalks, and curb extensions. Intersections should continue to move traffic but provide high visibility for people at crosswalks and ensure signalized crosswalk phases are long enough. We must increase safety around bicycle lanes and provide protected bicycle facilities or alternative low-stress routes.

### Support Car Alternatives

Much of the city reflects a history of car-centered urban planning from past decades, which includes

prioritizing public land for vehicle use and parking at the expense of safety and other transportation options. That emphasis excludes those who cannot afford a car, rely on public transportation, are not old enough to drive or seek to use more sustainable modes of transit like walking and biking. We must shift land use to support pedestrian travel, public transit, and biking to correct this.

### Improve Accessibility

We must consider the needs of a diverse range of people, including those who identify as people with disabilities. Those considerations include people with physical disabilities, sensory impairments or cognitive limitations, children, older adults, and people with temporary injuries or conditions. Wide sidewalks, level crossings, flat surfaces, audible signals, and easy-to-read signage help make the square more inclusive.

### Promote Sustainability

Climate change threatens all of us but will disproportionately impact those with limited resources. Transportation is one of the major sources of greenhouse gases accounting for 35% of Somerville's emissions, of which the majority came from gas powered vehicles. In addition to encouraging mobility options such as walking and biking, we must continue advocating for better mass transit access, supporting the transit experience by increasing reliability and bus stop amenities and encouraging the use of electric vehicles.



Central Intersection, Davis Square

## b. Civic Space Equity Goals

Equitable civic spaces are outdoor areas, facilities, and environments accessible to visitors regardless of physical ability and that feel welcoming and safe for people of various backgrounds and economic status. These spaces should meet the recreational needs of all residents, including children and older adults, and have high quality, maintenance, and sustainability standards. Civic spaces can also host cultural events that promote social interaction among neighbors from different backgrounds and help foster community and belonging.

### Improve Accessibility

Public spaces should be accessible to all community members, including seniors, families with young children, and those with disabilities. Features such as accessible playground equipment, ramps to access elevated areas, flat pathways, and ample and varied types of seating, particularly with shade, all help make spaces more inclusive.



Statue Plaza, Davis Square

### Improve Safety

For civic spaces to be equitable, all visitors must feel safe using them. We must ensure these spaces are well-lit, have good visibility, and are easy to navigate, especially at night, to discourage harassment or other harmful behavior that disproportionately targets women. These spaces should also include clear signage in multiple languages, outlining rules about using the space and contact information to report concerns or incidents.

### Expand Access

Expanding access to recreation and nature by increasing the number of civic spaces and expanding the urban tree canopy throughout public spaces are key Somerville equity goals. Historically disadvantaged communities in urban areas often have limited access to nature and recreation. By expanding the number of civic spaces and healthy trees in popular central areas like Davis Square, we can improve access to nature and leisure for residents of all surrounding neighborhoods.



Kenney Park, Grove Street

## c. Economic Development Equity Goals

As small independent businesses are often part of the cultural capital of the neighborhood, we need interventions and strategies to address the displacement of independent businesses in the face of redevelopment pressures. We must also support minority entrepreneurs facing barriers to starting new businesses. Lastly, we must empower our small business community by facilitating coordination and shared resources so they can assist one another.

### Mitigate Barriers of Entry

We should offer services and programs to help to address barriers of entry that minority and women-owned small businesses disproportionately experience. That includes limited access to capital, networks, and business development resources, where discrimination and bias have had a cumulative effect over many decades.

## Combat Displacement

We should fight to preserve small businesses that provide needed services and goods to the neighborhood, particularly those that cater to low-income or disadvantaged populations. We must also encourage all Somerville residents to buy local and support their local businesses. The City can play a role in helping negotiate with developers when a business is being forced out due to redevelopment and in adopting strategies to keep commercial rents affordable as land value rises.

### Support Small Business Networks

We need to encourage and support the development of local business organizations to assist small businesses in pooling knowledge and resources. Such organizations can play a key role in helping enhance the general appeal of the square, increasing the resilience of independent businesses in the area.



J.P. Licks, Statue Plaza

# Chapter 2

# Current Conditions



## 2.1 Mobility and Curb Use Analysis

Mobility is a broad topic that addresses the various ways people and goods move through our urban environment. Davis Square has been built around its bus and mass transit connections, and the central vehicular intersection of Holland, Elm, Highland and College Ave.

### a. Mass Transit

Davis Square is the biggest transit hub in Somerville and a major transfer point for the MBTA system. The Red Line Rapid Transit station stops in Davis Square, converging with seven MBTA bus routes that bring riders to and from destinations across many Somerville neighborhoods as well as Arlington Center, West Medford, Medford Square, Porter Square, Harvard Square, Sullivan Square, and Lechmere. In addition, a frequent private shuttle connects the Tufts University community to Davis and its transit services.

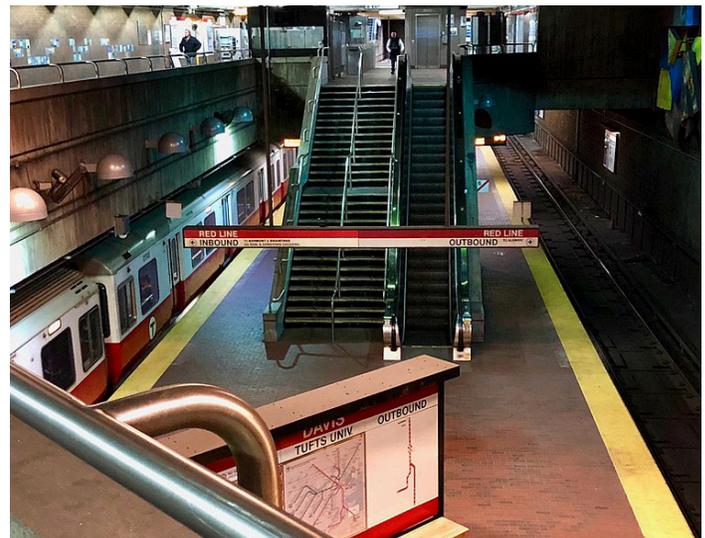
Further improvements to shorten bus travel times would likely encourage more use, as would shelters for riders waiting for buses throughout the square's bus stops. As an initial step, the City has installed bus lanes heading into Davis Square starting from Buena Vista Road on Holland St and from Morrison Ave on College Ave.

### b. Electric Vehicles

According to data from MassDOT, nearly 10% (3,166) of registered passenger vehicles in Somerville are hybrid plug-ins or zero emission. There are two dual port Level 2 charging stations in Davis Square, located in the 44 Day Street parking lot (Day Street Station) and the 393 Highland Avenue parking lot (Davis Square Station). According to data from ChargePoint, these two stations account for approximately 14 and 13 percent, respectively, of total charging sessions in the city. In 2023 alone, city-wide use of charging stations grew from 438 unique users in January to 705 in May. The Day Street station had 176 unique users in May, and the Grove Street station had 172 unique users, accounting for nearly half of all unique visitors city-wide.



MBTA busway at Davis Square



MBTA Red Line Station at Davis Square



EV charging station, Grove Street

### c. Curb Zone

The curb zone is the space between moving vehicles in the street and pedestrian space on the sidewalk. Somerville’s Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study found that 52% of Somerville’s curb zones are dedicated to parking or loading for vehicles, while another 19% are used as driveway curb cuts, amounting to 71% of potential curb space allocated solely to vehicles city-wide. The rise of rideshare services has further increased the competition for these spaces. We see this pattern in the Davis Square as well, where the curb zone space has historically been mostly used for on-street parking, limiting opportunities for commercial loading, outdoor dining, and protected bicycle lanes.

### d. Loading Operations

Davis started developing in the 1870s and has a legacy of narrow streets that were not designed for the level of traffic we see today. The narrow streets and a lack of alleys complicate the delivery of goods and trash removal, and large delivery trucks serving local restaurants and shops are common day and night. Particular problem areas include Bfresh, CVS, and the loading zone in front of Diesel/Foundry, where delivery trucks are often observed blocking bus stops, crosswalks, and travel lanes.

### e. Parking

According to data from the Cadmus Report, parking in Davis Square accounts for approximately 50% of city-owned parking spaces in Somerville. That amounts to 202 city-owned spaces, including both on-street parking and parking lots—the highest figure of any neighborhood. The square also has a higher concentration of metered and time-limited parking spaces that support access to small businesses compared to most other areas in the city. Our analysis points to Davis Square’s publicly owned parking spaces as being generally underutilized but indicates higher utilization rates and potential shortages on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturday evenings. On the other hand, privately owned parking lots appear to be consistently underutilized. These conditions suggest location inefficiencies in the use of parking resources and that some of these resources are difficult to find for visitors unfamiliar with the area.



Elm Street, curb zone



Summer Street, curb zone



Public parking lot at Summer Street and Cutter Avenue intersection



Highland Avenue to Elm Street closed slip lane

## f. Intersection Safety

The central intersection in Davis Square between College Ave, Day St, Dover St, Elm St, Highland Ave, and Holland St sees a high volume of vehicular traffic throughout the day. That same area also has high levels of pedestrian activity and crossing, particularly in the evenings when local businesses see higher customer volumes. This combination makes the intersection a high-risk area for conflicts, a sentiment expressed by many residents during the 2018–2020 community outreach process.

### Crossing Signal Timing Improvements

The signal cycle in the Davis Square central intersection used to be over two minutes long, translating into long waits for pedestrians. The wait was particularly challenging for those with different physical abilities and in cold, hot, or rainy weather. City staff observations in 2018 saw pedestrians often crossing during the long green signal phasing at various sections of the intersection when there were gaps in traffic. Per observed times by City staff in 2018, most pedestrians noticed that crossing during some parts of the green vehicular signal phase was relatively safe. At the crosswalk on Holland Street, for example, it was safe during 60% of the signal cycle. Similarly, at the Day Street crosswalk, it was safe for pedestrians to cross during 80% of the signal cycle. As a result, over 75% of pedestrians were crossing outside of pedestrian signals.

Rather than enforce this unrealistic and pedestrian-unfriendly phasing, the City moved

to formalize the safe pedestrian crossing opportunities that naturally exist during the signal cycle depending on where vehicles are turning. This was done by removing the exclusive pedestrian phase for the entire intersection with signal phasing for specific sections, allowing concurrent pedestrian and vehicle movements with higher efficiency and less waiting. Our Mobility Division implemented this new signal timing, including concurrent pedestrian phasing and leading pedestrian intervals, in the summer of 2018. Concurrent phasing means that some walk phases happen simultaneously as parallel vehicular movements and that turning cars must yield. Leading pedestrian intervals gives pedestrians a 3–7 second lead time before a vehicular signal turns green. These changes have allowed pedestrians to cross multiple crosswalks with wait times reduced by 24–70%, depending on the section. While this previous effort has led to better current conditions, we recognize further improvements are needed, and additional changes are currently being planned.

### Highland to Elm Slip lane

The Highland to Elm Street slip lane (in front of Mike’s), a term for a road that allows vehicles to change roads without entering an intersection, has now been closed for about two years. City staff analysis of the outcome has shown that this change slowed down traffic and made pedestrian crossings easier and safer, so the City has made this closure permanent. Temporary furniture has also been added so it can be used as a civic space until the area can be redesigned.



Davis Square central intersection

## g. Bicycle Safety

The City's Vision Zero Action Plan aims to eliminate serious injuries and fatalities from our streets. Riding a bicycle through Davis Square is challenging due to the lack of safe bicycle facilities and direct connections, especially between the Community Path access points on Holland Street at the T-Station and Grove Street. The irregular arrangement of streets and minimal wayfinding confuse people navigating a bike through the square. In addition, active street uses such as walking, taking public transportation, biking, driving, and outdoor dining are often not properly separated and compete for space on narrow streets. These conditions create an especially unsafe and uncomfortable experience for people biking.

A glimpse of future safer bicycle riding can be experienced on Holland Ave and College Street, where protected bicycle lanes were installed in one direction. On-street parking was maintained on one side of the street.

## Bicycle Network

In early 2023, the City released its first Bicycle Network Plan, proposing an 88-mile citywide network of protected bike lanes and low-volume residential streets we call "neighborways". Currently in Davis Square, multiple connections between safe bike routes are missing. The central intersection between Elm Street, College Avenue, and Holland Street for example, is still challenging to navigate safely, despite some recent improvements. Furthermore, while the square has two connections to the Community Path, it lacks a clear bike connection between them. To address these issues the plan proposes a combination of protected bicycle lanes and neighborways to provide access to, from, and through Davis Square, detailed in Chapter 3.1.



Bicycle parking behind MBTA Red Line station at Holland Street



Davis Square has one of the highest rates of pedestrian activity across all of Somerville, but over 60% of its land area is dedicated to cars.

## h. Mobility Infrastructure

Davis Square's infrastructure has proven challenging to maintain due to the age of the materials. During the 2018–2020 planning process, community feedback identified repairing public realm features in Davis Square as a high priority for residents and businesses. Many damaged and uneven crosswalks, bollards and signs have already been replaced through efforts by our Mobility and Engineering Divisions and the Department of Public Works since 2020, while others are scheduled to be repaired through upcoming street safety improvement projects and redevelopments.

### Sidewalks and Crosswalks

The most notable mobility maintenance challenge in the square are the brick sidewalks and

remaining brick crosswalks. Multiple decades of weather exposure, tree root growth, and high pedestrian activity have led to the upheaval of the sidewalks throughout the square.

The current conditions are an aesthetic eyesore but, most importantly, are a major safety concern for residents and visitors who have limited physical ability, are elderly, or families with strollers. The age of the bricks, which mostly dates back to the 1980s plan implementation, means that just repairs are no longer possible, it will be necessary to replace them with new materials. This work has already begun in some of the most urgent sections, but all instances of old upheaved bricks will need to be replaced.



Brick crosswalk conditions on Elm Street



Brick sidewalk conditions on Holland Street

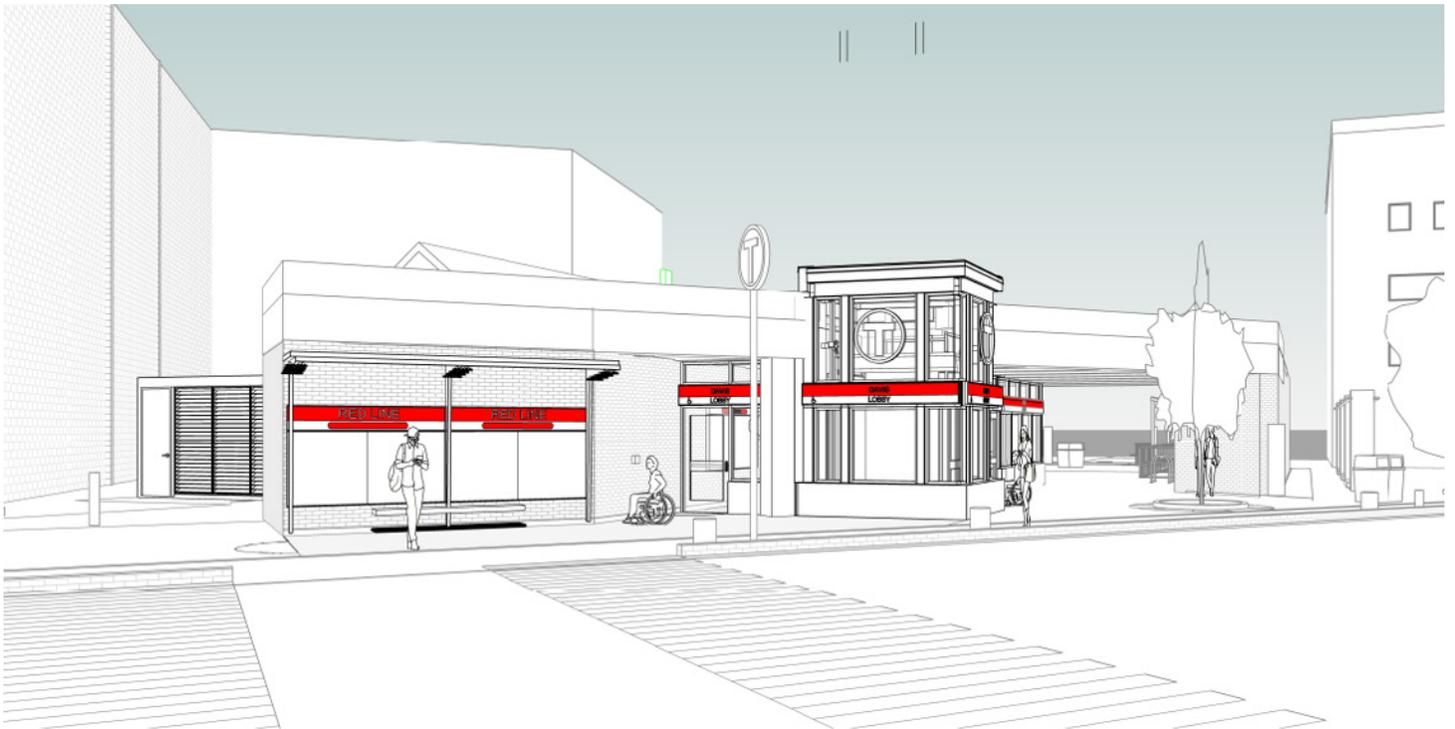
## j. Holland Street Headhouse

The Holland Street MBTA headhouse is a critical connectivity node for trains, buses, and the Community Path connection behind it. Current conditions show extensive disrepair, a significant lack of accessibility, and visibility issues. The MBTA has a current proposal to address some of those concerns. Their project would add an elevator to the Holland Street headhouse, relocate and renovate the bus shelter space, and make several other repairs and adjustments to the existing structure. While we strongly support accessibility improvements at this location and commend the MBTA for pursuing them, the City is concerned that the current proposal is too narrow in focus, given the depth of issues with the site. Key broad concerns with the proposal include:

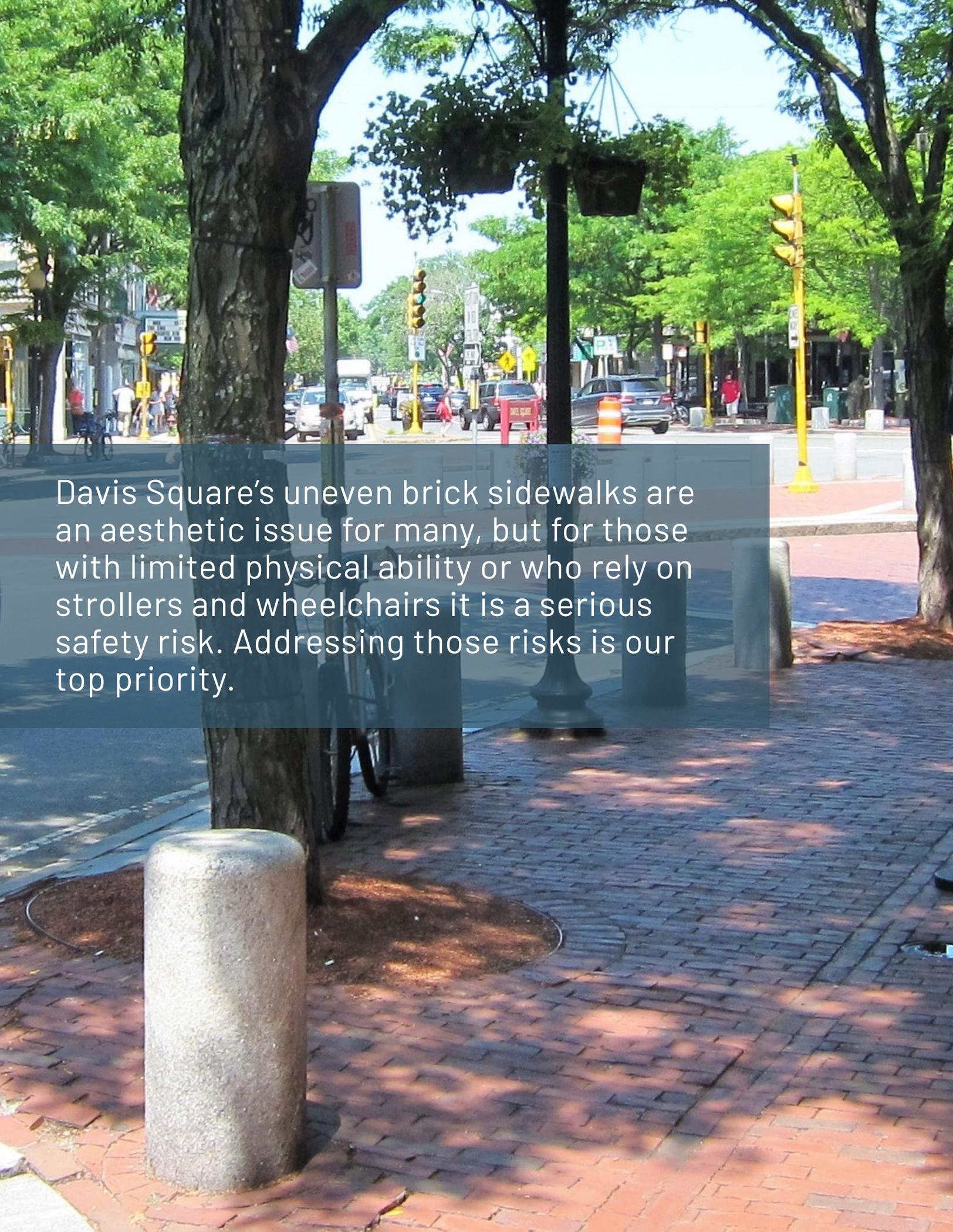
- The proposed elevator position would reduce space in the heavily trafficked courtyard outside the headhouse that connects to Seven Hills Park and the Community Path, exacerbating pedestrian and cyclist conflicts. It would also worsen issues with visibility between the back and front of the headhouse.

- The proposed new electrical substation between the headhouse and Meacham Road would create an unattractive narrow route unsupportive of two-way bicycle travel, worsened by the periodic parking of maintenance vehicles next to it.

The City has limited influence over this project as it is within the purview of the MBTA. However, we encourage MBTA leadership to pursue a comprehensive redesign of the Holland Street headhouse so that accessibility issues are addressed more comprehensively. Furthermore, we would like a design that improves visibility, safety, and ease for pedestrians and cyclists passing the structure to access the Community Path.



Rendering by the MBTA, provided on May 11, 2022



Davis Square's uneven brick sidewalks are an aesthetic issue for many, but for those with limited physical ability or who rely on strollers and wheelchairs it is a serious safety risk. Addressing those risks is our top priority.

## 2.2 Civic Spaces and Streetscape Analysis

Civic spaces include plazas, parks, and other communal spaces that contribute to the fabric of our communities. While Davis Square already has some well-loved spaces, we are always looking to improve, expand or create new open space.

### a. Civic Spaces

Civic spaces play a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging, promoting social interaction, providing venues for community activities, and contributing to the overall well-being of residents and visitors alike by providing access to nature. The liveliness of an area increases when people are encouraged to spend time in attractive, comfortable, and landscaped public spaces. Public realm features that invite people to stay longer give people the option to linger, encouraging social interaction and fostering community. High-quality civic spaces are also a cornerstone of a thriving commercial center.

They help attract visitors and potential customers, create a more attractive environment for outdoor dining, and encourage pedestrian activity near retail storefronts. They also create opportunities for cultural events, which can generate a large boost of activity and patronage. Davis Square has a number of civic spaces that contribute to the appeal of the square.

The City is one of the largest landowners in the square's core. Excluding the streets, the City owns 3.5 acres of land, of which 1.5 acres are surface parking lots. Extensive use of public land for parking reduces opportunities for active green civic spaces. Expanding civic space is a key objective outlined in SomerVision2040, but is one of the most challenging in terms of implementation. Land cost in Somerville is high, and while we can use higher density buildings to create more housing and jobs with less land use, we don't have that option for civic space.



## Statue Plaza

At the heart of Davis Square is a triangular public plaza defined on two sides by College Avenue and Elm Street and a series of retail businesses frontages. With its central location, seating options, tree canopy, and programmable space, Statue Park is popular among residents, visitors, business patrons, artists, and activists. Folks gather year-round, filling the permanent site furniture to unwind and socialize. Musicians regularly perform, and visitors enjoy food from nearby businesses. Adjacent businesses also utilize the plaza for outdoor dining, adding more activity to this dynamic space.

Statue Plaza's greatest challenge is the condition of the brick pavers, which, similar to the sidewalk bricks mentioned previously, need to be fully replaced. The permanent metal furniture also shows signs of age with rust spots and peeling paint. Another challenge is that while the space is regularly used for art performances, it lacks an elevated platform or other performance space that would make it more suitable for that use. The plaza also struggles with overall cleanliness as the city's standard operations struggle to keep up with its high rate of utilization and trash, particularly from food containers. This space is also a regular spot for folks to sit while they wait for buses, yet the lack of any covered seating makes the waiting unpleasant during inclement weather.



Musician performing



MBTA vent



Brick pavers conditions

## Kenney Park

One block southeast of Statue Park, at the Grove and Highland Ave intersection sits Kenney Park, which offers a small public plaza, a basketball court, a playground, a splash pad, and a significant tree canopy. Kenney Park is another heavily used space that attracts families and young people seeking active recreation and a place to cool off and gather. Its popularity is a result of a variety of amenities, visibility, and ease of access. As a newer space, it does not have the maintenance deficit challenges of Statue Plaza and is generally viewed as functioning well in its current conditions.



Kenney Park, Grove Street



West Branch Library, College Ave

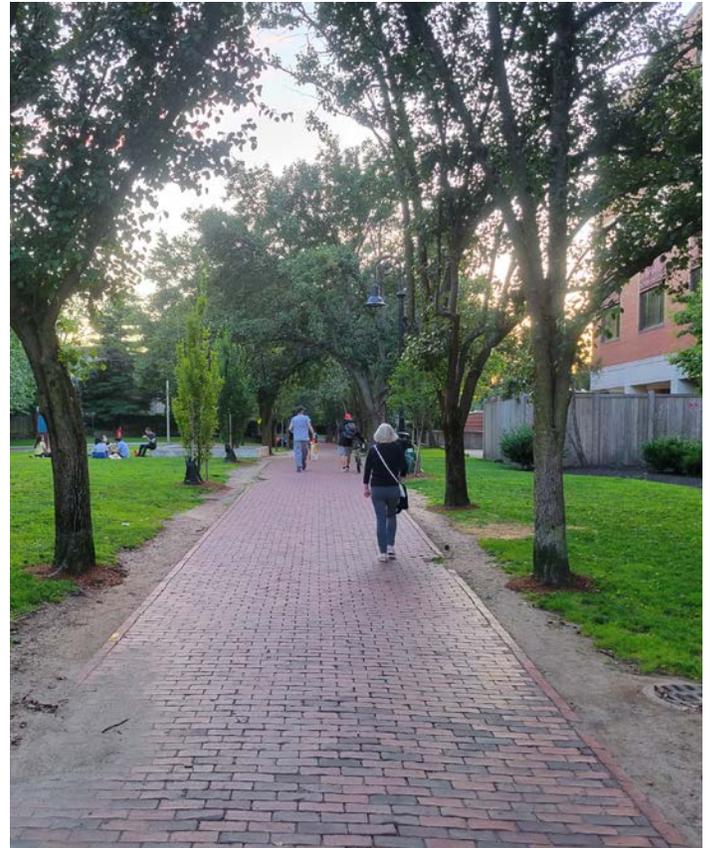
## Community Path

Somerville's Community Path is a linear travel corridor connecting Somerville to Cambridge, Arlington, Lexington, and Bedford to the west and, with the opening of the Green Line Extension, to Cambridge and Boston to the east. Whether commuting on foot or bike, walking with strollers or dogs, or jogging along the path, this vital civic space encourages safe and continuous pedestrian travel with few street crossings. The section implemented between Cambridge to the west and Lowell Street is framed by a dense tree canopy and plenty of opportunities to pause along the path to explore the art and nature throughout, making it a popular destination for residents and visitors.

The Community Path has two access points in Davis Square, one behind the MBTA Busway and Grove Street and one behind the T-Station entrance on Holland at Seven Hills Park. The community garden on the east side's connection near Davis Square is a successful community-led effort, allowing residents to grow food and flowers alongside their neighbors. The biggest challenge for the Community Path is wayfinding, as both entrances are tucked away behind MBTA structures and are not easily visible from the central intersection. Visitors arriving via the Red Line unfamiliar with Davis Square can easily miss the access points.



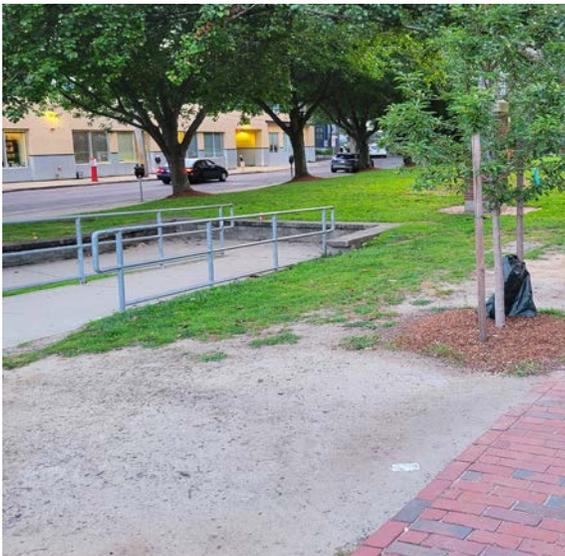
Community Path, east of Davis Square



Community Path entrance, Seven Hills Park

## Seven Hills Park

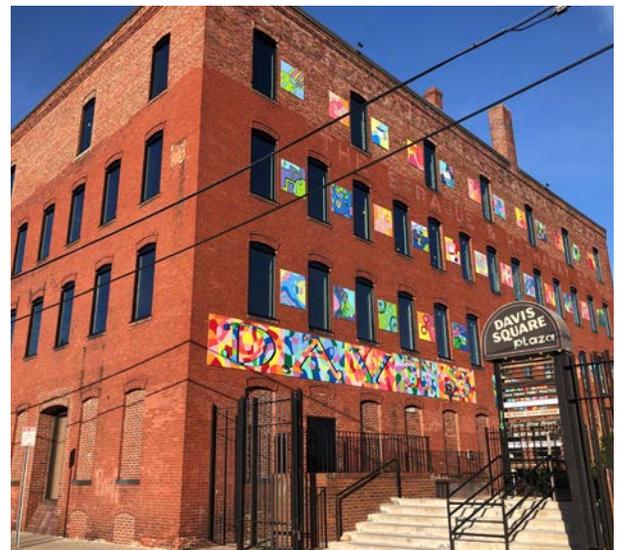
Seven Hills Park remains underutilized compared to the other public spaces in the square and is currently used primarily as a connection to the Community Path. Hidden behind the MBTA Headhouse on Holland Street, it acts as a passive park. It is the square's largest civic space but seems overlooked or undesirable by residents and visitors. There is only one bench, a general lack of programming, and significant drainage issues that produce a patchy lawn. It also presents a safety issue due to limited lighting and a lack of visibility from surrounding high-traffic areas because it is framed by the solid walls of a large commercial building on one side and an MBTA headhouse on the other.



Seven Hills Park conditions

## Privately Owned Public Spaces

The City of Somerville is limited in improving existing Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPs). Our opportunity to contribute to the design of these spaces happens mainly during the permitting process. The most notable POPs in Davis Square is the through-block plaza between Chipotle and Starbucks on Elm Street, which connects all the way across to Herbert Street and includes businesses such as Boston Tattoo Company and Sugidama. A private effort to redesign and revitalize this plaza in coordination with the City is underway.



Elm to Herbert Street through-block plaza



Seven Hills Park would benefit from additional furnishings, better lighting, and a healthier lawn.



## b. Urban Tree Canopy

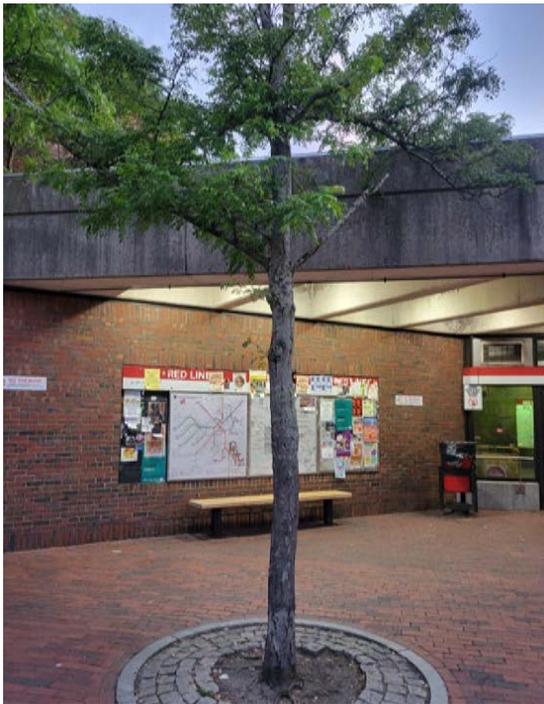
Davis Square is home to many thriving honey locust trees that are part of the square's character. Still, the area is not immune to the challenges of growing an urban canopy within a dense urban setting. Due to existing small tree pits and planting beds, most of square's urban trees struggle with sufficient area for roots to grow and for the tree to reach full maturity, while uncontrolled root growth damages sidewalks. Making matters worse, the complex infrastructure of the MBTA Red Line underneath Davis limits the weight and depth of the public realm and plantings above. The most successful trees in Davis are typically found in plaza spaces, parks, or sidewalk bump-outs that allow additional root space.

Until recently, the City primarily maintained trees on a reactive basis when such work was specifically requested. However, knowing that tree health can be significantly improved through proactive maintenance programs that seek to improve form, structure, and growing conditions, the City started two proactive tree maintenance programs in 2020. Through the Parks Tree Health Program, the City performs proactive maintenance on the trees in at least three to seven parks each year, such that all Somerville parks will receive tree maintenance on a six to seven year cycle. To

date, all of the parks in Davis Square have been proactively maintained as part of this program (Seven Hills in 2020, Statue Park in 2021, and Kenny Park in 2023). In addition, all young trees receive pruning on a 3-year cycle as part of the Young Tree Training Program, which improves the health and longevity of these trees by creating proper structure and growth habits.

## c. Street Furniture Maintenance

In addition to mobility infrastructure, other elements of the public realm in Davis Square need maintenance. Street furniture, such as aging and rusting benches, broken light fixtures, and damaged trash and recycling barrels, are seen throughout the square, as noted by community members. The greatest barrier to these repairs is resources. We must carry out infrastructure repairs equitably throughout all Somerville neighborhoods, and our aging infrastructure means we are strained to keep up with repairs across the city. Additionally, infrastructure with a big impact on safety, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and traffic signs, is a higher priority. Redevelopment can help us leverage resources to conduct these repairs, but greater public funding allocation may also be appropriate as conditions continue to deteriorate.



Struggling tree on Holland Ave



Broken light fixture on Elm Street

## 2.3 Economic Development Analysis

Davis Square is famous for its small shops, restaurants, taverns, and service businesses clustered around the central intersection and transit connections. However, as we have learned over the past few years, these businesses need support and protection as market conditions fluctuate.

### a. Small Businesses Landscape

The storefronts across the square average about 30 feet wide and become narrower along portions of Elm Street between Day and Grove Streets, where a cluster of storefronts are less than 20

feet wide. These dimensions communicate a concentration of small businesses to passing visitors, reinforcing the character of the square.

Davis Square has a high concentration of restaurants, bars, shops, and service businesses that foster a vibrant street scene. Activity is particularly high at night when residents and visitors flock to the area to eat, drink, and enjoy the entertainment venues, which include art, comedy, films, and more. The area's independently-owned small businesses are essential to making it a unique place and an essential part of its cultural appeal.

**DAVIS SQUARE BUSINESSES BY CATEGORY**

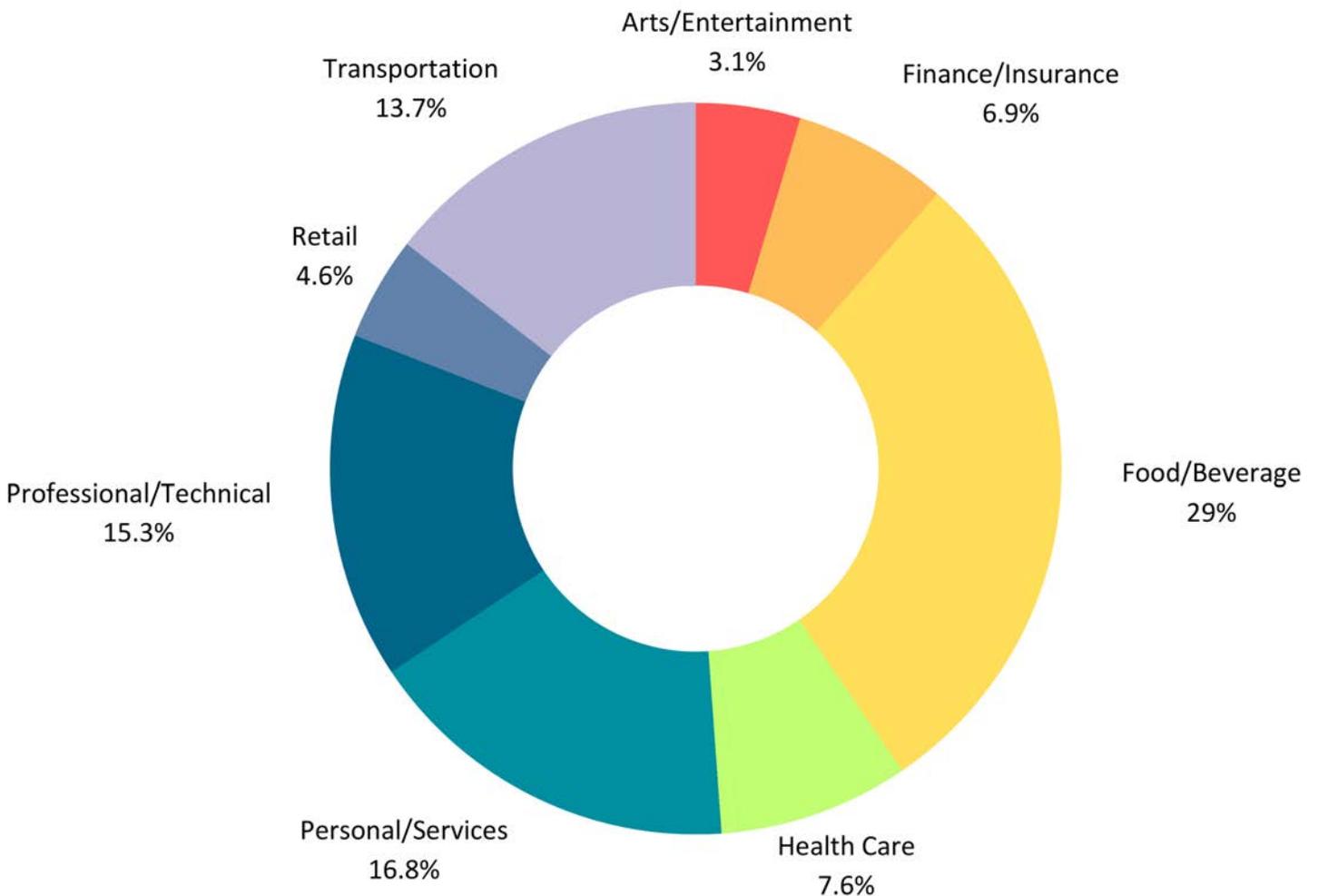


Figure A, 2.3

## b. COVID-19 Pandemic Disruption

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 drastically disrupted economic activity in Davis Square. Public health quarantines in Massachusetts and Somerville prevented employees from working, suppliers from shipping materials, and customers from physically patronizing businesses. Most businesses, particularly smaller ones, lost revenue. Many businesses had to close temporarily—a few permanently – and surviving businesses usually adapted to operate more online or outdoors. Consumer spending rebounded in 2021 with the deployment of COVID vaccines and the lifting of emergency regulations. Retailers caught up more quickly than dining. Even following the rollout of vaccines, restaurants, bars, and cafes relied on outdoor spaces to sustain operations. To allow social distancing and mitigate health risks, they used sidewalks and parking lanes, particularly on Elm Street, for outdoor dining and shopping. The City expanded and expedited permitting for private outdoor dining seating during the pandemic, and most of those spaces remain active.

The business community in Davis Square is recovering relatively well from disruptions caused by COVID by regaining customers and revenue

lost during the early phases of the pandemic. However, the loss of businesses that permanently closed during that period will be felt for years to come. It was a lesson about the need to develop more resilience in our small business sector and is encouraging us to allocate more public resources to business support. It also highlighted a need to expand the presence of business organizations around the city's commercial areas. The Union Square and East Somerville Main Streets organizations, for example, played a key role in facilitating business assistance during the crisis.

## c. Impact on Outdoor Dining

The pandemic made us rethink the importance of outdoor dining. Public preference for outdoor dining has continued post-pandemic and has only been tempered by weather and space—or lack thereof. Temporary outdoor dining areas during and after the pandemic shifted the curb zone function in many areas but were concentrated on Elm Street close to the central intersection. These changes gave us tangible insights into what those spaces could look like with fewer cars and more people while proving that traffic could adapt to still function. However, pandemic-era outdoor dining spaces relied on temporary structures in close proximity to moving vehicles, which did not create an optimal experience for customers.



Elm Street near central intersection during the pandemic

## d. Retail Prospects

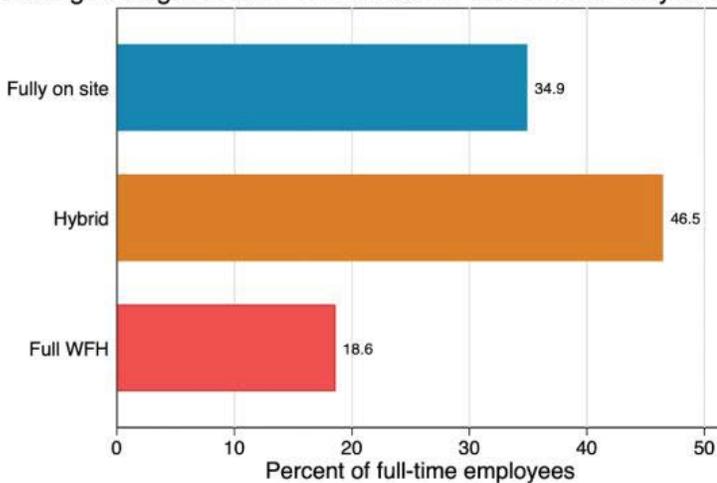
Operating a small business post-pandemic remains challenging, particularly for retailers, restaurants, bars, and nightspots. Ground floor space rent is rising in most commercial districts, while supplies and materials costs are still being impacted by ongoing supply-chain disruptions. The current market is seeing labor shortages while ordering and delivery services, crucial for restaurants' survival during the pandemic, have been seeing a long-term expansion and tended to erode profit margins.

On the upside, most people have returned to commercial districts to shop and eat at brick-and-mortar establishments. Foot traffic has been rising to near pre-pandemic levels, particularly in metro Boston and commercial districts serving residential neighborhoods like Davis Square. Data about customer preferences also paints an optimistic picture for dining-focused commercial areas like Davis. Surveys show that while 63% of households say restaurants are essential to their lifestyle, those rates increase to 70-75% for adults under 40.

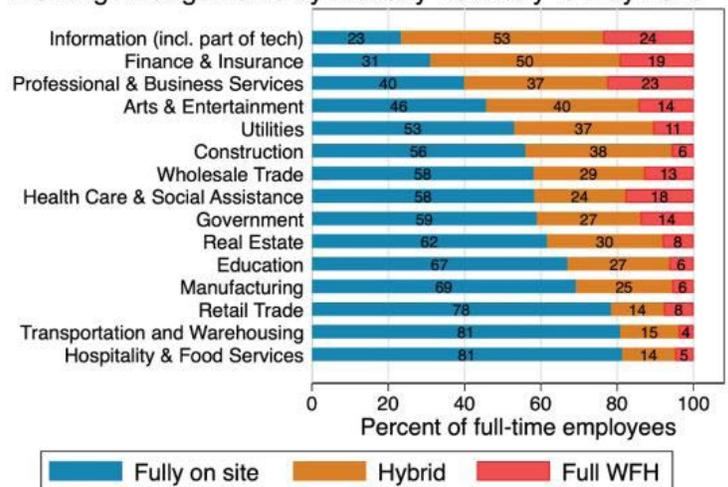
## e. Work-from-Home Trends

Long-term implications for work patterns and space use by businesses emerging from the pandemic are important considerations for office space development. The pandemic has drastically altered these patterns in many businesses, even as their adaptations have allowed many to recover and hire new employees. Hybrid work, where employees work remotely two to four days per week, has become a long-term fixture post-pandemic and will likely become more entrenched as highly skilled knowledge workers demand flexibility in a competitive job market. This trend means attracting knowledge industries and office space development in Davis Square will be more challenging. An exception to this trend is space for research and life sciences, which are typically less suitable for hybrid work and are in high demand in this area.

Working Arrangements of Those Able to WFH Feb to May 2023



Working Arrangements by Industry February to May 2023



Source: WFH Research (wfhresearch.com) by Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, Shelby Buckman, and Steven J. Davis

Figure B, 2.3

## f. Development Trends

In 2022, the Davis Square area had 1,124,000 square feet of commercial space, encompassing storefronts, offices, labs, auto uses, and factories. Currently, 3.6% of this space, approximately 40,000 square feet, is available for lease or sublet. The leasable space is concentrated around 212 Elm Street, which has 35,500 square feet of vacant or underused space. The remaining vacancies are in two properties on Dover and Grove Streets. Notably, this vacancy data, derived from CoStar Group listings, does not list every vacancy, particularly in small buildings.

Historically, there has been consistent demand for commercial spaces, ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 square feet, in Davis from larger employers seeking transit service and access to the Boston and Cambridge markets. In recent years, demand has also grown for smaller spaces, ranging from 500 to 15,000 square feet, from young technology businesses moving from local incubators seeking to stay in Somerville. Current commercial vacancies in the square range from 2,500 to 24,000 square feet, mostly on upper floors.

### Lab Development Pressures

The Greater Boston office market rents for research and life sciences have increased by almost 11%, while vacancies have dipped to

16% since 2020. Metropolitan Boston's large medical and biotech cluster of universities, teaching hospitals, and affiliated life-science and biotechnology businesses has attracted unprecedented research funding from public agencies and private investment businesses in this region, nearly \$14 billion in 2021 alone. Employment in these industries has soared to over 40,000 workers in the metro area, the highest in the nation. Demand for research and bio-manufacturing space for life-science businesses has also skyrocketed, exceeding 20 million square feet, about half of which is being met by new development or conversion of existing office or industrial properties.

In the Cambridge sub-market, demand for these spaces has driven vacancies down below 8%, inducing increased investment in lab and bio-manufacturing space in surrounding communities. Biotechnology and pharmaceutical businesses seek cheaper space outside but near East Cambridge and MIT, the current epicenter of the region's life-sciences sector. This has led to growing demand for these spaces, in Somerville's commercial areas with transit access, including Union Square, Assembly Square, and Davis Square.



Prospect Street Life Sciences Building, Union Square

## Clean Technology Industries

Amid this life-sciences boom, metropolitan Boston has also become an epicenter of clean-technology industries, leading the nation in venture capital investment and employment. Somerville is a hub for this industry as a home to Greentown Labs, the largest climate-tech incubator in North America. SomerVision2040 supports the location and expansion of these businesses in Somerville as part of our effort to promote sustainability.

Clean-tech businesses gravitate towards industrial and flexible commercial properties, which are relatively scarce in Davis Square. Furthermore,

transit-connected industrial properties are in high demand for redevelopment into research and lab space, as previously addressed, increasing the difficulty of keeping clean-tech businesses. In Davis Square, new upper-story commercial space developers will gravitate toward lab tenants in the life sciences sector, who can afford to pay higher rents than other knowledge-based businesses. The City will need to intervene and advocate for clean tech businesses if we want to expand that sector in Davis Square. If the lab boom trends ease, it could also create more opportunities for clean tech.



Greentown Labs Incubator, Somerville Ave

## g. Cultural Spaces

Historically, Davis Square has had many neighborhood theaters and music venues. The Somerville Theater opened in the Hobbs Building in 1914 alongside a basement café, bowling alley, billiards hall, ten ground-floor storefronts, and the Hobbs Crystal Ballroom upstairs. The building served as one of the City's primary cultural institutions for over half a decade. By the 1970s, neighborhood theaters declined due to competition from newer suburban competitors. The Fraiman family purchased the Hobbs Building in 1990 and invested in adapting it to new trends while preserving its architectural integrity. After being repurposed with two additional modern theaters, the Crystal Ballroom reopened as a 500-person live entertainment venue in 2021, partially filling a void left by the closing of Johnny D's Uptown Restaurant & Music Club years prior.

Performance spaces like the Somerville Theater and the Rockwell black box theater on Elm Street enrich Davis Square's cultural life and increase the vibrancy of public life through regular events and performances. Recent losses of the Nave Gallery Annex on Chester Street and the Museum of Bad Art in the Hobbs Building, however, show the business challenges of keeping these spaces profitable.

Davis Square's streets and civic spaces also serve as cultural facilities by displaying art and hosting events like Squeeze Box Slam, ArtBeat, and Honk! The neighborhood is also present during major citywide Open Studios and Porchfest events. At the end of the summer, Holland Street shuts down for the SomerStreets celebration, road races, the Somerville Farmer's Market, and Davis Square Flea Festivals.



Honk Festival (top left), and public art around Davis Square

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## h. Commercial Displacement

The mass displacement of residents and businesses due to redevelopment is an equity crisis, often disproportionately impacting minority customers and business owners. Preventing displacement is one of three primary recommendations of the City's SomerVision2040 comprehensive plan. While redevelopment can bring many benefits to an area, like more jobs and resources, the potential displacement of small businesses is a significant downside. Allowing existing businesses to stay in Somerville in the face of continual redevelopment requires us to adopt proactive and reactive policies to mitigate those risks.

When redevelopment threatens to displace independent businesses that are part of the local culture and provide important services to local communities, particularly low-income and minority residents, the City has a role to intervene as an advocate to try to find a path forward for them to stay through or return after redevelopment. Alternatively, if that is not possible, we apply strategies towards permanent relocation efforts if there is an appropriate site in another part of the city. The City currently employs multiple strategies in partnership with municipal agencies, local merchants, property owners, non-profit business organizations, and other stakeholders.

### City-wide Commercial Displacement Study

Somerville recently partnered with Harvard University to catalog the experiences of commercial tenants across Somerville in the face of redevelopment over the past decade. Davis Square participated and recounted their experiences facing these pressures in the context of two large redevelopment projects proposed for 231 and 260 Elm Street.

Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government prepared a comprehensive review of commercial displacement and methods to address and prevent it. "Mitigating Small Business Displacement" features interviews with over thirty small business operators, landlords, developers, and other stakeholders in Somerville's commercial property market. Beyond analyzing the needs of commercial tenants for stability, transparency, and knowledge, researchers determined developers' and landlords' capacity to keep commercial rents stable and affordable to existing tenants in the face of market and demographic trends.

The study then analyzed proactive and reactive tools and methods to prevent and address commercial displacement:

- **Preparation/Research:** Development of municipal systems to review property data, including communication with commercial brokers and deployment of computerized GIS models to spot and analyze future displacement in the City's commercial districts.
- **Direct Assistance:** Deployment of programs to aid existing businesses that are suffering from displacement or are threatened by displacement pressures.
- **Preventive Measures:** Revision of zoning regulations, policies, and permitting procedures to allow the City to prevent new commercial development from displacing or impacting existing businesses.

We should strive to preserve our independent businesses through redevelopment, whenever possible.



## Understanding Displacement Risks

Commercial development may affect existing neighborhood businesses directly, indirectly, or secondarily.

- **Direct displacement:** Involves the redevelopment of commercial properties with the eviction of existing tenant businesses and no provision of accessible replacement space for them.
- **Indirect displacement:** Entails the construction of new commercial buildings that do not offer spaces suitable for small local businesses due to high rents, layouts, lease arrangements, or other factors.
- **Secondary displacement:** Occurs when new, high-value commercial development causes rents to rise dramatically in a business district, typically by encouraging local landlords to stop leasing to existing commercial tenants in favor of new businesses that cater to more affluent clients and can afford higher rents.

Other forms of displacement can be contextual and occur through the disruption caused by redevelopment (noise, dust, street closures, etc.), particularly during projects with longer timelines. Proactive and sustained municipal assistance can help mitigate this but requires ongoing public resources.

Examples of these dynamics are the 231 and 260 Elm Street redevelopment proposals. If realized, the proposals will bring nearly 300,000 square feet of new labs and offices to Davis Square and significantly boost daytime pedestrian activity, increasing the customer base for retail and food businesses in the area. On the other hand, several existing businesses, including the Sligo pub, McKinnon's Meat Market, and many boutiques,

service establishments, and restaurants, have or are projected to leave the square due to these projects. The 231 Elm Street developer committed to keeping The Burren pub in its current location during and after construction, and the 260 Elm Street developer has committed to keeping Elm Street Tap Room, Chipotle, Sugidama, and Starbucks at their site. City staff has assisted with the negotiation process and is exploring ways of helping displaced businesses relocate within Somerville when possible and desired.

As we expand our broader strategies to address commercial displacement and mitigate its negative impact on our communities and commercial centers, we must balance our approach with an understanding that, to some degree, businesses closing or moving is a natural part of our market economy. In some cases, businesses may be better served by moving to more suitable locations when local conditions change. There is much more to learn about addressing commercial displacement equitably, but the issue's complexity means there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

In a long-term outlook, Davis Square's demographics may dampen future commercial displacement risks. Residents in the surrounding area, as reviewed in Chapter 1, tend to be young, well-educated, and relatively affluent. That demographic tends to be attracted to nightlife activities driven by restaurants, bars, and entertainment, which matches most of the square's commercial landscape. The existing customer base shares a profile similar to the knowledge workers likely to be employed in new labs and office spaces, lessening the future risk of secondary displacement pressures on existing businesses. Establishments that cater to older and less affluent customers are at the most risk, and interventions should be considered to ensure the square does not exclude that customer base.

## Current Displacement Assistance Efforts

Business owners in Davis Square threatened by displacement can obtain assistance from public and non-profit organizations. The City provides business assistance programs, including site search services, small grants for building outdoor commercial spaces, technical permitting assistance, and workforce development programs for residents. In the wake of the pandemic, the City is also exploring using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to help businesses recover from pandemic-era revenue losses and cost increases. The State of Massachusetts also offers several forms of assistance through agencies such as the Massachusetts Office of Business Development, MassDevelopment, Massachusetts Community Capital Corporation, and the Executive Office of Housing & Economic Development (EOHED). The US Small Business Administration

offers many businesses loan programs through banks, technical assistance, and grants.

Unfortunately, direct financial support for Davis Square businesses is challenging because the area's demographics in terms of wealth and income generally make it ineligible for most federal grants, while state grant funding is relatively limited. Local funds are even more scarce, limiting the scope of municipal services to site location, technical assistance, and small grants. Small businesses, in particular, need technical assistance in online sales and marketing, business planning, harnessing technology to improve operations, financial management, and lease negotiation in order to thrive in the emerging economy. City grants currently offered for designing, permitting, and building areas for outdoor commerce have also proven effective.



Shops that sell low cost goods on Elm Street



Long standing local businesses don't just offer goods and services, they become part of the local culture.

# Chapter 3

# Policy Recommendations



# 3.1 Mobility and Curb Use Recommendations

## a. Mass Transit Prioritization

To prioritize mass transit and achieve our equity and sustainability goals, we must pursue strategies to improve bus comfort, efficiency, and reliability.

Somerville has limited control over the bus system, which the MBTA manages, but there are opportunities for coordinated efforts. The MBTA's planned Bus Network Redesign (<https://www.mbta.com/projects/bus-network-redesign>) aims to reimagine the network to reflect present conditions of traffic congestion and travel patterns. It also intends to increase bus service in its coverage area by 25% overall and provide riders with a higher frequency of all-day and weekend services. The plan targets making Davis Square a new high-frequency route, connecting Medford to Union Square via Davis Square, and using the T96 to replace multiple low-frequency routes with a single route that runs every ten minutes or less all day.

There are also avenues for improvement where the City has greater control. For example, the dedicated bus lane installed on Broadway in Winter Hill in 2019 has consistently shortened travel times throughout the day. Following that model, we could explore adding additional bus priority lanes around Davis Square based on where they would be most impactful at shortening bus travel times.

City staff has studied adding traffic signal priority for buses, which modify timing or phasing when buses are present to shorten wait times, and determined it would be an effective improvement for the central intersection to shorten bus travel times.

Davis Square also has multiple high-use bus stops that would benefit from bus shelters with benches to make waiting more comfortable. These shelters are particularly beneficial in inclement weather and for all riders with limited physical ability.



## Policy Recommendations

1. Coordinate with the MBTA to help implement the Bus Network Redesign project in Davis Square and ensure it meets area needs.
2. Study options for priority bus lanes in the area where they will be most impactful at shortening travel times.
3. Study options to improve bus route efficiency as traffic patterns in local streets are modified to accommodate new civic spaces.
4. Implement bus transit signal priority at the main intersection and busway.
5. Coordinate the installation of shelters at bus stops for waiting riders.



## Key Challenges

1. Navigating changes that require coordination with the MBTA.
2. Bus stop infrastructure is expensive, and challenging to fit on narrow sidewalks.

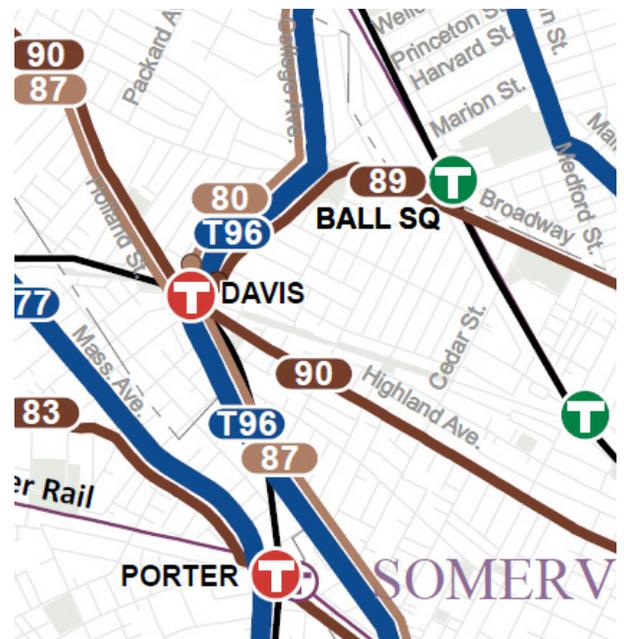


Figure A, 3.1

MBTA bus routes updates in Davis

## b. Encouraging Electric Vehicles (EVs)

Somerville has a shortage of publicly accessible or on-street EV charging stations, discouraging EV use and running counter to SomerVision2040 and Somerville Climate Forward's goals of reducing vehicle greenhouse gas emissions.

As a high-traffic and popular destination, Davis Square is an important area to target for increased charging station availability. Growth in EV use has surpassed City staff's expectations of 2,000 registered EVs by 2025. Based on the number of vehicles registered, which includes 2,181 hybrid vehicles and 985 zero-emission vehicles, we estimate we should have 57 regular EV charging stations and 11 DC fast chargers, which are more costly but significantly faster. We only have 24 EV charging stations, 2 of which are in Davis Square, and 0 DC fast chargers city-wide. Massachusetts has passed legislation to no longer allow the sale of new combustion engine vehicles after 2035, so we must greatly expand this infrastructure over the next several years.

This year, the City adopted the Specialized Stretch Energy Code, requiring that 20% of new residential and business parking spaces city-wide offer EV charging. New developments in Davis Square,

including the underground commercial garage portion of the 231 Elm Street redevelopment, will adhere to this code, increasing the availability of charging options in the area. However, we cannot rely solely on redevelopment and must evaluate the square for other appropriate locations for additional EV charging stations. Given its current high use rates and central location, the Day Street parking lot station is also an optimal candidate for an upgrade into a DC fast charger.



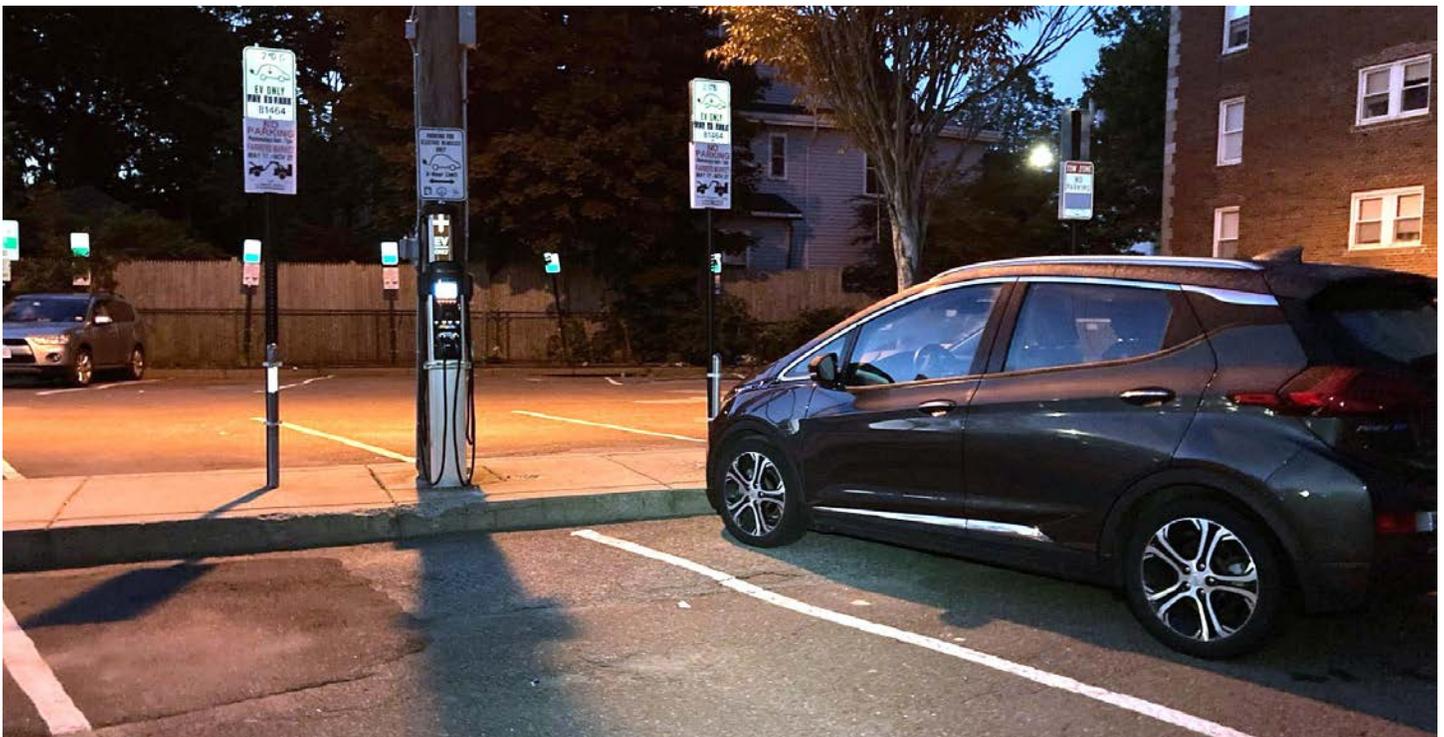
### Policy Recommendations

1. Evaluate Davis Square for additional locations of EV charging stations.
2. Consider upgrading the Day Street parking lot station to a DC Fast Charging Station.



### Key Challenge

1. Charging stations are expensive to install, particularly higher efficiency models.



Day Street public parking lot EV charging station



## d. Improving Loading and Unloading

Currently, in Davis Square, trucks and vans of all sizes deliver throughout the day and compete for on-street parking spots, often double parking when spots are full. As curb zone use shifts away from on-street parking, we need solutions to ensure commercial deliveries are carried out safely and efficiently.

To mitigate the conversion of on-street parking on one side to two lanes of protected bike lanes on Holland Street, the City created a passenger and commercial loading zone eastbound opposite Wallace Street and a commercial loading zone from Buena Vista Road to Winter Street. We will need similar strategies in other parts of the square as curb zone use shifts to accommodate civic spaces and protected bike lanes.

Loading zones will not be the right solution for every street. Limiting delivery hours of commercial loading trucks and vans to times outside busy visitor hours would help in those cases. Coolidge Corner and Malden Center are two similarly sized business districts in the Boston Metro Area that have successfully implemented those restrictions. Davis Square's restaurant scene is too active for frequent nighttime delivery but early morning, before commute times, may be feasible.

Limiting truck delivery sizes is another potential tool. It is challenging to implement in a single district because it requires truck companies to shift goods to smaller vehicles in some type

of nearby facility. We should study whether a city-wide or even regional effort in partnership with neighboring communities is feasible. A commercial district management organization could also help by coordinating deliveries district-wide.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Increase the number of curb zones dedicated to commercial loading, particularly near areas particularly where parking curb zone use is replaced with protected bike lanes.
2. Study the possibility of restricting commercial deliveries to early mornings before commuting hours.
3. Study the possibility of citywide or regional restrictions on large delivery vehicles in dense commercial districts.
4. Leverage the creation of a district management organization to help coordinate commercial loading.



### Key Challenge

1. Coordination and collaboration with private parties, both business and commercial delivery services.



Vehicles and delivery trucks on Day Street, near central intersection

## e. Improving Rideshare Loading

The rapid growth of rideshare services (e.g., Uber, Lyft, etc.) has worsened problems with double parking and competing curb zone use in Somerville, particularly at popular destinations with narrow streets like Davis Square.

The Parking & Curb Use Study recommends that the City actively engage with popular rideshare companies to collaborate in defining the safest and most desirable areas for their vehicles to pick up and drop off passengers. Using multipurpose loading zones for rideshare services would ensure that the curb space can be used most effectively. With its combination of narrow streets and frequent visitors, Davis Square is particularly susceptible to traffic infractions by these service providers. Somerville has supported legislation at the state level requiring additional data sharing from these services to track and automate enforcement of traffic violations by these services.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Define points of contact and coordination between the City of Somerville and rideshare services and share locations of passenger loading zones in commercial areas.
2. Continue to advocate for automated enforcement legislation to ensure compliance with curb regulations



### Key Challenges

1. Determining the best locations for these staging spaces.
2. Effective coordination with rideshare service companies.

## f. On-Street Parking Efficiency

Efficiency becomes essential as on-street parking is reduced in the commercial core in favor of other curb zone uses. We must prioritize handicapped parking, while metered parking is the second priority to discourage long-term use.

Data shows that residential parking is underutilized in most areas, including near popular squares like Davis Square. We can study adding more customer-oriented parking in the form of meters and time-limited spaces on adjacent residential streets to improve parking supply without impacting the residents. We can also consider demand-based pricing for meters in the area, a model that adjusts the cost based on the demand at that time of use, encouraging turnover.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Consider demand-based pricing for on-street public parking to discourage car use during high-volume periods.
2. Study converting some spots in residential streets near the commercial core for meters and time limits to increase the parking supply for visitors if needed.



### Key Challenge

1. Changes in on-street parking options can significantly impact businesses, so continued outreach and monitoring is necessary.

## g. Parking Lots and Garage Use

*The Davis Square area has over 50% of city-owned parking spaces city-wide, in addition to multiple privately owned parking lots. Staff analysis indicates a generally inefficient use of these district-wide parking resources, which can lead to a perception of parking shortages, when there are generally high vacancy rates.*

Key issues include public and commercial parking lots that are difficult to find and privately owned parking lots with consistently high vacancy rates. For example, the top deck of the Buena Vista Road garage, which is available as visitor commercial parking, has been historically underutilized due to wayfinding challenges, leading to the recent installation of live informational signage. The new 75-space commercial parking garage being built as part of the redevelopment at 231 Elm Street will play a key role in offsetting on-street parking changes and will have clear directions to this public parking for visitors. We need to review all existing public and private commercial parking lots in the area to ensure they have adequate wayfinding tools. The goal is to help visitors find parking resources easily and discourage drivers from circling the square looking for it, which adds to congestion and air pollution.

While our zoning code requires new parking resources in commercial districts to be offered as publicly accessible commercial parking, it does not apply retroactively. We should study

policy options and engage with owners to help transition legacy accessory private parking lots to commercial parking instead of serving only specific businesses. Higher use of private parking resources would benefit the entire district.

A commercial district organization to help build relationships between third-party parking apps and parking lot owners would also increase efficiency and make these resources easier to find for visitors.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Study permitting and encouraging existing accessory private parking lots as commercial (public) parking.
2. Leverage creating a commercial district organization to help build relationships between third-party parking apps and parking lot owners.



### Key Challenge

1. Without financial incentives visitors will favor on-street parking over garages and parking lots and
2. Coordination between various private parking landowners is difficult without an intermediary.



Grove Street parking lot

## h. Intersection Safety Improvements

While the 2018 signal timing at the central intersection helped improve safety and shorten wait times for pedestrians, further adjustments are needed to improve the complex six-way intersection. Our Mobility Division is planning several changes that will work together to achieve that goal as phase two of signal timing improvement efforts.

Phase two plans include:

- Adding a flashing yellow arrow for right turns from College Ave onto Holland Street to clarify that vehicles turning right on Holland need to yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk.
- Adding a flashing yellow arrow for u-turns from Highland Ave onto Elm St to clarify that turning vehicles need to yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk.
- Utilizing two lanes on Highland Ave for all vehicle turning movements rather than three, creating space for safer bike facilities.

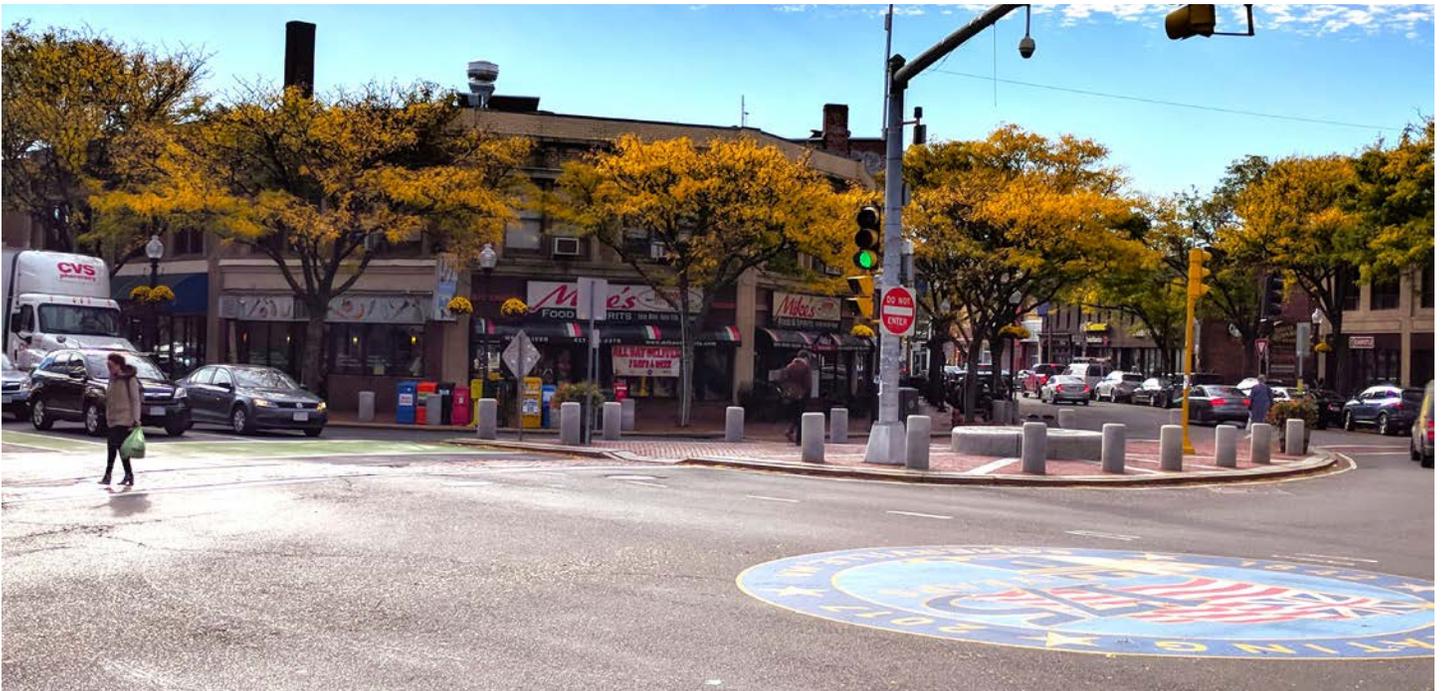
- Reordering the signal phases so that no vehicles can turn right from Highland Ave onto College Ave when the two crosswalks across College Ave have the walk sign
- Implementing bike signals at Highland Ave and the Davis Square Busway to clarify permitted movements and increase the ease with which the bus can exit the busway.

In addition to these traffic improvements, phase two is planned to include a rebuilt and realigned crosswalk at the central intersection where pedestrians cross from Elm Street to Day Street and from Holland Street onto Dover Street. This improvement will also bring all the crosswalks and curb ramps in the central intersection to ADA compliance.



### Policy Recommendation

1. Implement phase two of signal timing and other central intersection safety improvements.



Davis Square central intersection

## i. Encouraging Bicycle Use

Shifting travel away from single-occupancy vehicles and toward sustainable modes like biking is essential to meet our equity and sustainability goals, and has the added benefit of lowering car traffic. To achieve this, we must make biking safe and efficient for as many users as possible.

Somerville’s Bicycle Network Plan aims to create a city-wide safe bike route network, and Davis Square will play an important role. The shortest and most direct Community Path connection through the square would be a pair of two-way lanes on Holland Avenue and Highland Avenue, with an off-street connection on Grove Street. The plan also envisions alternative routes on low-traffic side streets - called Neighborways.

The planned changes for Davis Square include multiple options, which would include wayfinding signage and markings, to navigate between the Community Path access points on Holland Street

and Grove Street on either the main streets on protected bicycle lanes) or residential street on Neighborways.



### Policy Recommendation

1. Study how best to implement a two-way protected bike lane on Highland Ave.



### Key Challenges

1. Thoughtful design will be needed to reduce the amount of exposure to vehicle traffic at the central intersection.
2. Effective parking management will be needed to implement a protected bike lane on Highland Ave.

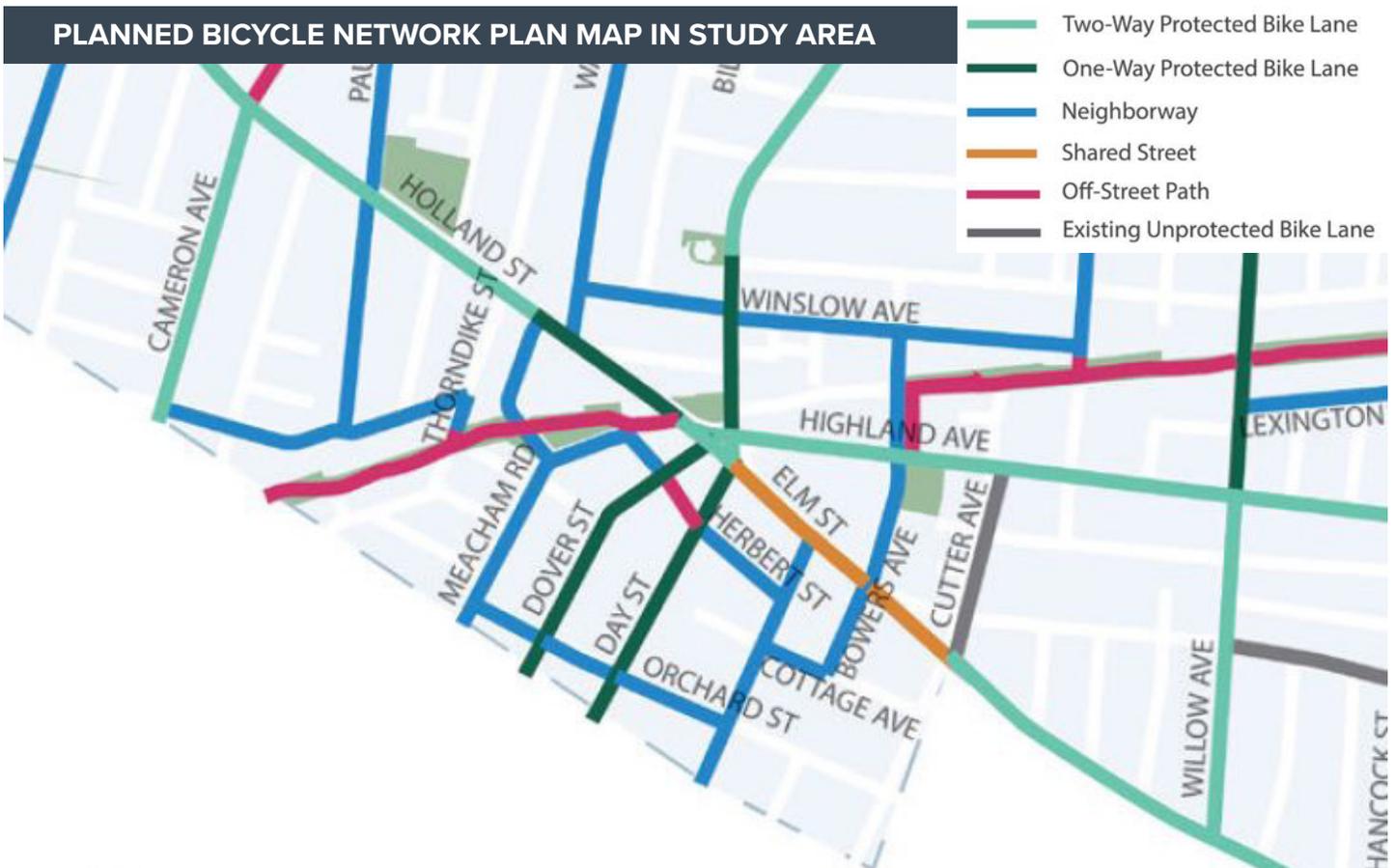


Figure C, 3.1

## k. Sidewalk Safety Improvements

*In their current condition, Davis Square's brick sidewalks present a safety risk for all users, particularly those with limited physical abilities or who rely on wheeled assistive devices. Furthermore, the material conditions are beyond repair and require a replacement strategy prioritizing accessibility and equity.*

Davis Square's brick sidewalks are recognized by many as part of its iconic character, so City staff weighted the choice of materials for reconstruction thoughtfully against multiple factors. In alignment with our community's equity values, safety and accessibility are the highest priorities. While new bricks installed with modern techniques can be ADA accessible, they are not the gold standard for creating optimal flat surfaces that allow users of limited physical ability or who rely on wheels to travel efficiently through the square. Future maintenance is another key consideration so conditions do not deteriorate to this level again. Based on the City's resources and internal expertise, brick sidewalks with high pedestrian traffic are difficult to maintain at a high safety standard over time. Therefore, the City has begun creating a continuous path of concrete sidewalks throughout the square in an effort that will continue over the following years.

To partially retain the historical character of brick, we will favor using new ADA-compliant bricks in areas where people are more likely to linger than traverse quickly, like plazas and furniture zones, as further detailed in Chapter 4 under design guidelines. On sidewalks, the pedestrian zone is the middle section of the sidewalk, typically five to six feet wide, where we will use concrete. Then, on wider sidewalks that can accommodate commercial frontage and furniture zone areas, we can favor and encourage the use of brick whenever it is contextually appropriate.



### Policy Recommendations

1. To prioritize accessibility, create a concrete pedestrian clear walkway on all sidewalks and plazas throughout Davis Square.
2. Favor new ADA-compliant red bricks in plazas, furniture zones, and commercial frontage areas.



### Key Challenge

1. Replacing sidewalks is a disruptive process for abutting commercial storefronts and, thus, requires mitigation strategies.

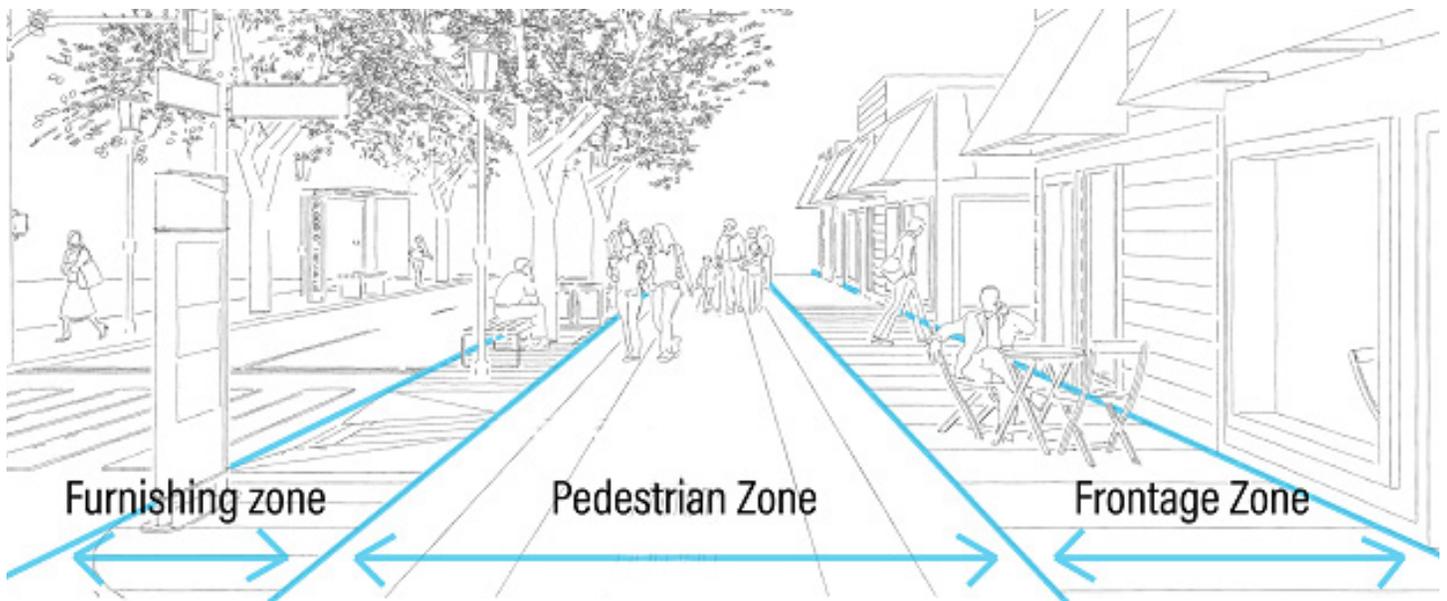


Figure D, 3.1

## 3.2 Civic Spaces and Streetscape Recommendations

### a. Wayfinding Improvements

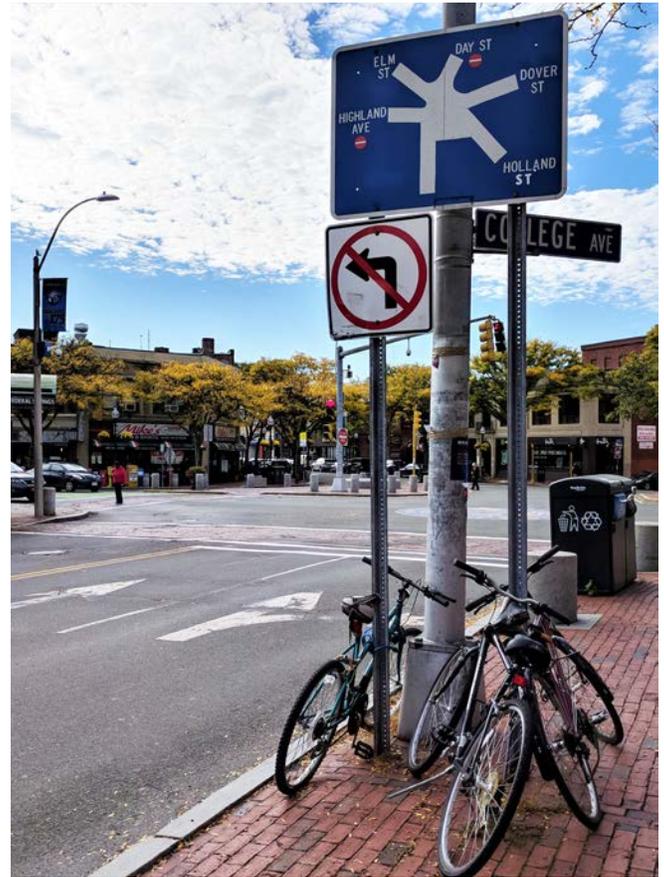
Seven Hills Park and the entrances to the Community Path often go unnoticed due to a lack of visibility from the central intersection in Davis Square. While the ideal long-term solution would be infrastructure changes to improve the line of sight to these spaces, we can employ better wayfinding tools as a short-term solution.

As a visual aid to direct visitors between the two Community Path connections, ground markings would highlight the connections and encourage their use. More broadly, the existing signage directing visitors to civic spaces around Davis Square is minimal and unclear. Installing a centrally located interactive map would greatly assist visitors unfamiliar with the area in getting a better sense of everything to explore. Interactive maps are digital maps that allow users to zoom in and out, pan around, and select locations for details or directions.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Install signs and interactive maps to show visitors the locations and identify the amenities of all nearby civic spaces.
2. Consider using sidewalk markings to visually connect the two entrances to the Community Path in Davis Square.



Central intersection sign, Davis Square

## b. Statue Plaza Improvements

Statue Plaza is already a popular and highly utilized civic space, but it suffers from major maintenance issues that would require a renovation. With that possibility, we also want to build on what makes it popular.

Statue Plaza sees regular art and music performances. While unsuitable for a dedicated performance space, we propose adding a low-profile platform with wide steps and a power connection that could be used for small-scale art and music performances and double as general seating and leisure space. An ideal location would be above the existing concrete structure between the air vents for the MBTA station below. Making the platform open on the sides and between steps would ensure continued airflow to the vents.

The plaza is also a popular place to sit with a bite or treat, like ice cream or sandwiches from nearby food shops, but those tables get full quickly during busy periods like weekends and evenings. We can add more permanent furniture and provide shade, making the space more usable for a wider range of visitors. Covered seating would protect users from inclement weather while waiting at the plaza's bus stop. A renovation of this space could also be an opportunity to add more trees.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Add a lowprofile platform with a power connection that can be used for small-scale art performances and can double as additional seating and leisure space.
2. Increase the number of permanent tables and benches to accommodate more visitors and consider adding umbrellas to create more shade and protect visitors from inclement weather.
3. Add more trees and aid in the health and growth of the existing trees to further improve the canopy



### Key Challenges

1. This renovation would require significant public funding.
2. Given its central location, renovating this plaza would be highly disruptive during construction.



Elevated platform at Oscar Grant Plaza, Oakland CA

# CONCEPTUAL ARTIST DRAWING OF RENOVATED STATUE PLAZA



*The above illustration is not reflective of final design and meant solely as a visualization tool*

## c. Seven Hills Park Improvements

Community feedback highlights this space as feeling unwelcoming and needing additional features. Our analysis shows this park needs improved drainage, more seating, better lighting, and a denser tree canopy to encourage greater use.

Currently there is a lack of seating in this space, and especially seating in shaded areas, so adding more seating closer to the trees would be a significant improvement. Multiple sections of the lawn are patchy, so we should pursue strategies to improve the health of the lawn or replace it with plantings. Multiple blank walls frame the space, offering a great opportunity for art murals to liven the space. In the evening, limited lighting can make the space feel unsafe.

This space would also greatly benefit from a visual line of sight to the central intersection. The MBTA Headhouse in its current configuration blocks the view. Reconstruction of the headhouse could allow for a better connect from the intersection into Seven Hills Park.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Add additional light fixtures to improve safety.
2. Add more benches and other permanent seating options closer to nature.
3. Increase the density of the tree canopy.
4. Consider more opportunities for public art, particularly murals for blank walls.
5. Advocate that the MBTA redesign and reconstruct the headhouse on Holland Street to provide visibility and connectivity between Seven Hills Park and the core of the Square.



### Key Challenge

1. Redesigning the headhouse is unlikely in the short term and will require substantial MBTA investment.



Copley Square MBTA headhouse, Boston



MBTA headhouse at Holland Street

## d. Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPs)

We expect more POPs to come to Davis Square as new development projects arise to meet our Zoning Code's civic space requirements. We need to ensure POPs feel welcoming to all residents, just like our public-owned civic spaces.

A POPs plan is currently in development to help guide developers on maintaining a public open space. I will outline the long-term requirements and responsibilities property owners have regarding these spaces to ensure expectations are clear and transparent.

A prominent POPs near the Square, the Elm to Herbert Street through-block plaza, is planned for a major renovation as part of the redevelopment of adjacent buildings. The redesign will provide appropriate amenities for all visitors, including enhanced lighting, planting, seating, art, wayfinding, and space for public events and gatherings. City staff have worked closely with the developers during the approval process to ensure

this space will be welcoming, safe, and accessible to all visitors, and that a maintenance plan is in place. Once built, however, we must monitor its use to ensure it thrives long-term, particularly given its prominent location.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Develop strategies to monitor the proper long-term maintenance and programming of new POPs.
2. Complete a long-term POPs plan to make design and long-term maintenance expectations clearer and more transparent.

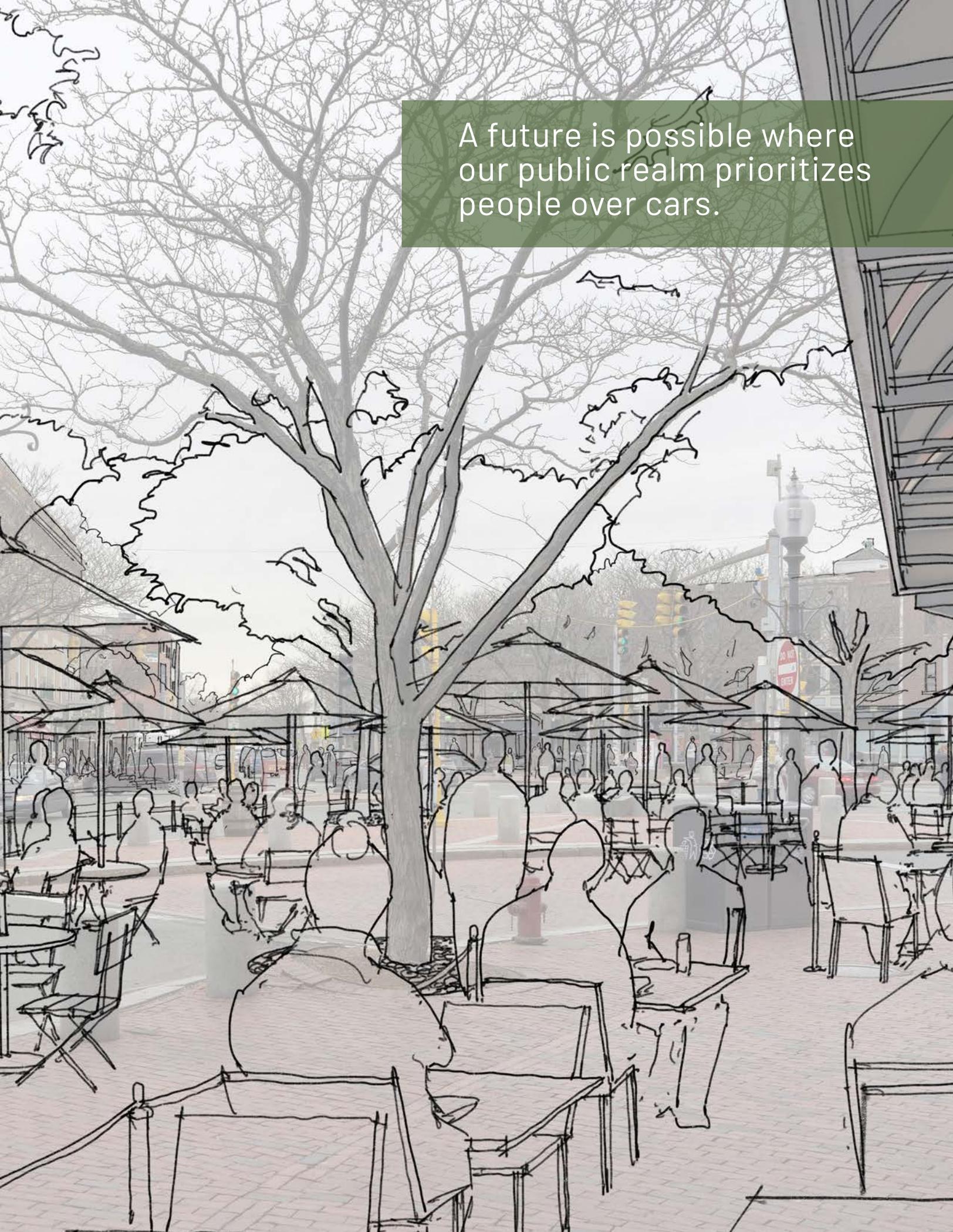


### Key Challenge

1. Potential future ownership changes may present coordination challenges, although legal agreements for public access are tied to the site in perpetuity.



Developer rendering by 7th Spoke of proposed through-block plaza improvement at 260 Elm Street, may not reflect final design



A future is possible where  
our public realm prioritizes  
people over cars.

# EXISTING AND PROPOSED CIVIC SPACES



## e. Davis Plaza Proposal

Since its permanent closure a couple of years ago, the Highland Ave to Elm Street slip lane at the square's central intersection has been successfully used as a temporary civic and outdoor dining space. The City plans to reconstruct it as a welcoming plaza that can serve as an extension of the popular Statue Plaza across the street.

Given this site's proximity to Statue Plaza, which becomes full quickly during evenings and weekends, it's a great option to accommodate the overflow of visitors by offering similar public permanent furniture. Ensuring public seating is abundant in the square is important to ensure visitors can enjoy the outdoors without purchasing food from nearby restaurants that offer private outdoor dining.

As one of the few areas near the central intersection not above the underground train infrastructure, this space also offers a great opportunity to plant trees that can develop deeper root structures and produce a larger mature canopy. Given its central location, this space would also be a great candidate for multiple large

planters where business and community members could plant flowers during the warm seasons. The 9/11 Memorial at the center of the pedestrian island would be preserved as part of the renovation due to its cultural significance.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Remove asphalt of vehicle slip lane and redesign the entire area as an expanded plaza with permanent public tables and benches and a dense tree canopy.



### Key Challenge

1. This renovation would require significant public funding.
2. Given its central location, renovating this plaza would be highly disruptive during construction.

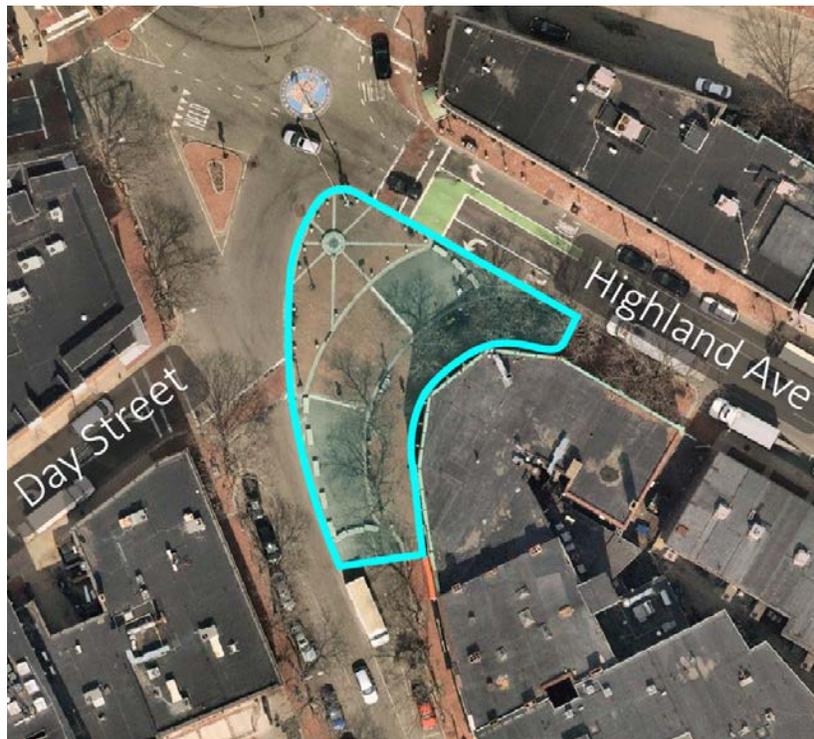


Figure 3.2, A

## EXAMPLES OF PLAZAS WITH TABLES AND TREES

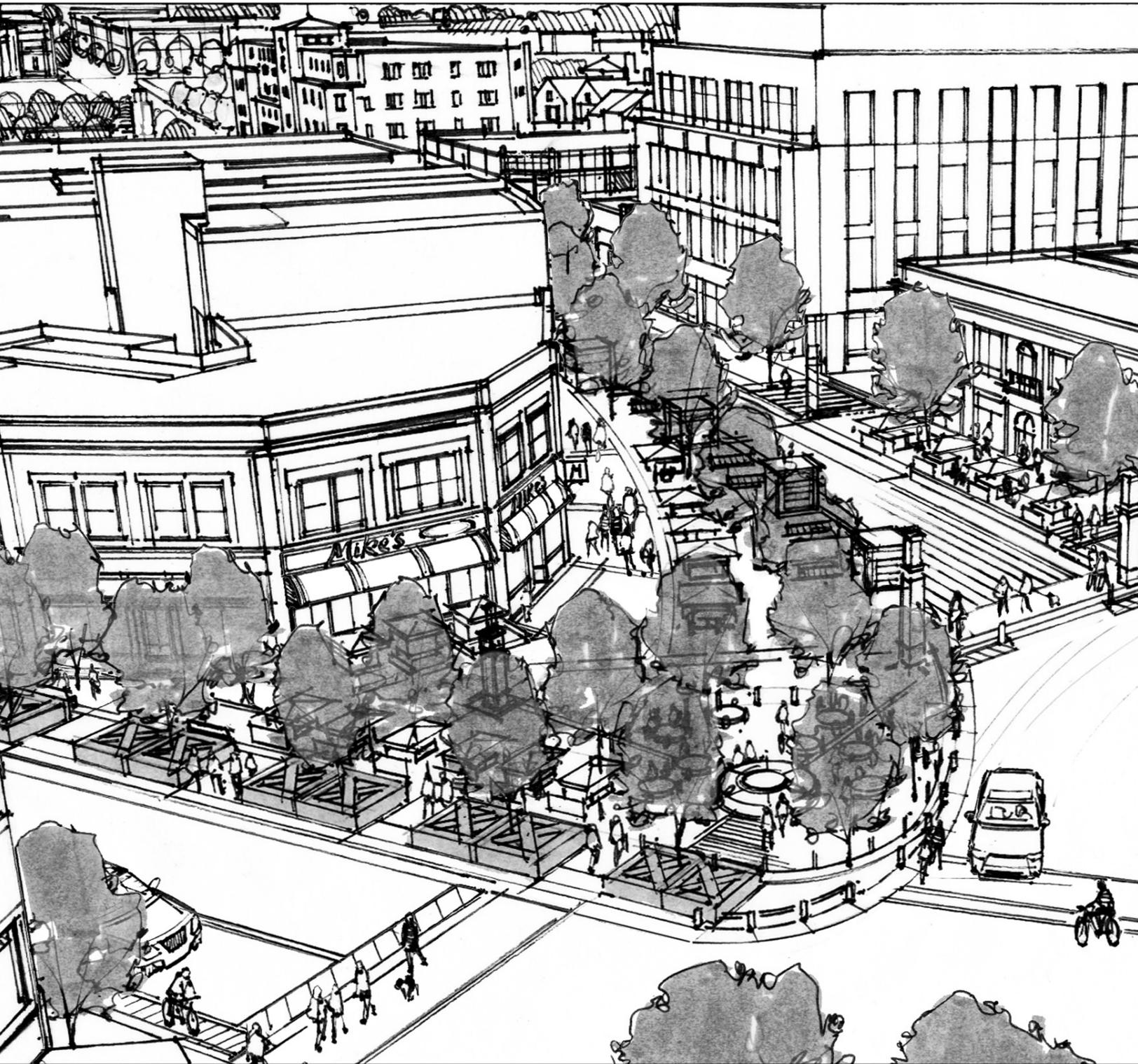


Davis H. Kock Plaza, Fifth Avenue, New York City



Fowler Square Plaza, New York City, image by Architectural Stone Source Inc.

## CONCEPTUAL ARTIST DRAWING OF RENOVATED DAVIS PLAZA



*The above illustration is not reflective of final design and meant solely as a visualization tool*

## f. Elmway Proposal

The Elmway proposal would convert the section of Elm Street from the central intersection to Bowers Ave and Grove Street for primarily pedestrian use, secondarily for cyclist use, and potentially transit. This conversion would transform the area, turning over half an acre of land dedicated to cars into a civic space.

We propose to accomplish this by limiting vehicle traffic only for commercial loading outside regular business hours and by replacing the asphalt with pavers to visually represent the change. Adding movable planters, additional seating, tree plantings, and expanding outdoor dining areas would aid in the street's transformation into a civic space. Bicycles would always be allowed, but the lack of a dedicated lane would encourage them to slow down and crowds of pedestrians may require bikes to be walked during festivals and cultural events.

The expansion of outdoor dining onto Elm Street during the pandemic illustrated the suitability of this space for this type of conversion. Community interest in converting streets in commercial centers into non-vehicle areas has been growing in Somerville, and we think Elm Street is one of the best candidates. This type of street conversion has grown in popularity across the US, and many have proven successful, offering us many case studies to draw from.

Due to the scale of the change, it will require extensive studies. Before committing any resources, we must thoroughly consider bus routes, traffic, loading, local business needs, and parking impacts.



## Policy Recommendations

1. Conduct feasibility studies and outreach to determine the feasibility of converting Elm Street, between the central intersection to the Grove Street intersection, into a pedestrian and bicycle civic space.
2. Promote the health of trees in this corridor, by planting new trees, installing tree well structures, and improving support for existing trees.



## Key Challenges

1. Elm Street is currently a key route for highly utilized bus lines, a study of alternative routes will be needed.
2. Traffic impacts may be significant and need to be studied.
3. Business parking and loading needs should be carefully studied to reduce potential negative impacts.



Figure 3.2, B

## EXAMPLES OF PEDESTRIAN STREETS



Church Street Marketplace, Burlington, VT



Ithaca Commons, Ithaca, NY

CONCEPTUAL ARTIST DRAWING OF PROPOSED ELMWAY



*The above illustration is not reflective of final design and meant solely as a visualization tool*

## g. Cutter Plaza Proposal

The small public parking lot at the Elm Street, Summer Street, and Cutter Avenue intersection offers only 12 parking spaces in a central and highly visible location on public land. It is an ideal candidate for conversion to a civic space that could serve as a gateway into Davis Square.

In 2012, the City studied redesigning this intersection to increase pedestrian safety and improve traffic movements. During outreach, the public suggested repurposing the parking lot in the middle of this intersection as a new plaza. At the time, staff demonstrated the idea during a three-day pop-up event by adding movable furniture to the area, and it was quickly fully utilized. We want to bring this concept forward again as a proposal to fully transform the parking lot and the adjacent existing passive space into a gateway plaza that would welcome visitors and lead them toward Elmway, Davis Plaza, and Statue Plaza, creating a continuous network of civic spaces. To push this concept further, we are also proposing the conversion of the adjacent Summer Street into a pedestrian area to limit vehicle traffic to only one side of the plaza and offer a better outdoor dining space for the restaurants along the street.

As an alternative to Statue Plaza and Davis Plaza, this space would be more of a pocket park, and offer a more open area with some permanent seating but no movable furniture or tables. Other proposed features include a mix of pavers and grass, a dense tree canopy, and a large art feature or landmark near the center that would stand out from a distance and attract visitors. Somerville artists would make this feature, which could be a tower, art installation, or large sculpture. The City already plans to install public restrooms in the existing small passive civic space, so the proposed space would also incorporate that feature.



## Policy Recommendations

1. Convert the public parking lot and adjacent small passive park at Elm Street, Summer Street, and Cutter Avenue intersection into a plaza with an open central area, a mix of grass and pavers, and a large central art installation.



## Key Challenges

1. This project will require significant public funding.
2. Construction will be disruptive to nearby businesses.



Figure 3.2, C

## EXAMPLES OF PLAZA AND CENTRAL FEATURES



Santa Fe Plaza, Santa Fe, NM



Doris C. Freedman Plaza Central Park, New York City, image by Susan Xu

CONCEPTUAL ARTIST DRAWING OF PROPOSED CUTTER PLAZA



*The above illustration is not reflective of final design and meant solely as a visualization tool*

## h. Improving Street Furniture Maintenance

Damaged street furniture throughout the sidewalks in Davis Square, including benches, trash barrels, and light fixtures, is an eye sore and impacts the experience of visitors and residents. The greatest challenge in carrying out repairs and replacements is resource allocation.

Carrying out a full assessment of these conditions and estimated costs of repairs and replacements in Davis Square would help us better understand the types of resources it requires. That would not mean we can simply assign those resources. We must carry maintenance of street furniture equitably throughout all Somerville neighborhoods. Additionally, infrastructure with a high impact on safety, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and traffic signs, is the higher priority.

During redevelopment, there are opportunities for replacing sidewalks and street furniture, but that route will not suit the entire district. A better long-term solution would be a commercial district organization that could help fund and coordinate these repairs and other aesthetic improvements as part of broader efforts to increase the commercial appeal of the district. Although privately funded public furniture would require City review and approval to ensure it meets our standards.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Carry out a detailed analysis of damaged or missing street furniture in Davis Square and estimate repair costs.
2. Seek alternative funding sources to accelerate the repair and replacement of Davis Square's street furniture, such as a commercial business district organization.



### Key Challenge

1. Maintenance challenges have accumulated over time, adding to the scale of the problem.

## i. Improving the Urban Tree Canopy

Many trees in the plazas and sidewalks of Davis Square struggle with small tree pits and planting beds that limit root growth, and from general exposure to urban elements. As we rebuild sidewalks and renovate plazas, there will be opportunities to add more tree protection elements.

When planting new trees, a suspended pavement solution, which prevents soil from getting compacted and allows tree roots to grow freely without buckling sidewalks, would improve the chances for trees to reach full maturity while lowering the risks of damage. Increasing the size of tree pits and installing tree guards would also help set trees up for success by minimizing soil compaction and other damage from the urban environment, particularly in high-traffic areas. Where it is not feasible or practical to add guards, the City could consider placing permeable pavement around trees which reduces soil compaction but maintains water flow to the root zone. Existing street trees would also benefit from proactive maintenance programs, where trees are regularly pruned and maintained to increase health. It can also include replacing twinkle lights regularly to reduce damage to branches and trunks and reapplying mulch to tree pits.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Install new trees surrounded by suspended pavement as plazas and sidewalks are reconstructed.
2. Enlarge tree pits and add tree guards whenever possible as protection against urban hazards, particularly in high-traffic areas.
3. Implement a proactive maintenance program for existing street trees.



### Key Challenges

1. Some of these efforts can only be implemented during the reconstruction of plazas and sidewalks.
2. Existing mature trees with root systems impeding sidewalks will be difficult to protect during repairs.

## 3.3 Economic Development Recommendations

### a. Promoting Vibrant Streets

*A key strategy to increase pedestrian activity in Davis Square is to continue to build on its character of active storefronts, particularly with small independent shops and retailers, and by leveraging its rich history and culture.*

Independent businesses selling unique products help attract visitors by offering goods people cannot easily find through online shopping. Unique and creative experiences are also key to maintaining active retail as online shopping trends grow. Small storefronts with diverse offerings invite pedestrian activity and exploration, helping create vibrant streetscapes. Our zoning already encourages small retail spaces but may be unfriendly to businesses offering unique experiences that combine use categories (like a cafe/plant shop hybrid for example), or cooperative agreements where different small businesses share a space.

Another strategy for attracting more visitors is for the City to pursue a cultural district designation for Davis Square given its rich culture and history. The designation is provided by the the Mass Cultural Council and can help market and generate name recognition for districts in order to attract more tourism and investment.



#### Policy Recommendations

1. Study adjustments to zoning to facilitate the approval of business looking to offer unique experiences to customers, combine multiple uses, or shared spaces between different businesses.
2. Study the possibility of developing a cultural district in Davis Square and market the area as a tourism destination.

### b. Promoting the Arts

*Somerville has a vibrant artist community, and Davis Square offers many opportunities for them to grow their businesses while enhancing the square's public realm.*

To incentivize more public art in Davis Square, we need to consider additional ways to integrate it into existing spaces that are already popular with visitors. We can encourage dining commercial spaces to double as music performance venues or leverage the lobbies of commercial buildings to display local artists. With the creation of new civic spaces, we can hire local artists to create outdoor sculptures, murals, and other art installations. Expanded civic spaces would also provide increased potential for the frequency and scale of outdoor cultural events. We can also work to connect Davis Square property owners of buildings with blank walls to the Somerville Arts Council's mural arts program, which employs diverse local artists.

Davis Square has multiple venues dedicated to the arts, like the Somerville Theater, yet has also lost venues in recent years. We must recognize the additional value venues that center on art and performance bring to our communities and their value in attracting visitors to commercial districts and explore options for how the City can best support them.



#### Policy Recommendations

1. Establish more opportunities for local artists to perform or display their work in Davis Square, including the lobbies of commercial buildings, blank display windows, dining areas, and civic spaces.
2. Connect building owners with blank walls with the Somerville Arts Council's mural arts program.
3. Study establishing programs to support and subsidize cultural venues, given their positive general positive impact on the attractiveness of commercial districts and local culture.



Art in public spaces is a community investment in fostering culture, supporting our local artists, and enriching public life.

## c. Supporting Outdoor Dining

*Outdoor dining and café-style seating on sidewalks and parking lanes break up long building facades and stimulate visual interest, activity, and vibrancy along commercial streets such as Elm and Highland.*

The presence of outdoor dining increased in Davis Square due to the pandemic, and given its positive impact on the area, we want to encourage ways to retain that expansion. By expanding civic spaces around outdoor dining areas we can enhance both spaces. While outdoor dining seating areas are for private use, they positively influence adjacent civic spaces by making the overall space livelier and more active. At the same time, outdoor dining spaces benefit from the ambiance and lack of cars of adjacent civic spaces, making them mutually supportive.

Through the Outdoor Dining Assistance program the City provided many businesses in the square with grants for designing and constructing outdoor dining spaces during the pandemic. We should explore expanding that program as a long-term effort.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Ensure new and existing civic spaces and sidewalk designs integrate space for private outdoor dining.
2. Expand the municipal Outdoor Dining Assistance Program to assist all retail businesses in developing outdoor commercial space and market this program to Davis Square businesses.



### Key Challenge

1. Expanding the municipal Outdoor Dining Assistance will require public funding allocation.



Outdoor dining on closed Highland to Elm slip lane



Outdoor dining for Five Horses Tavern

## d. Creating a Market Hall

*The popularity of the farmer's market at the Day and Herbert Streets parking lot within the Davis Square community inspired the idea of developing it into a permanent market hall. We envision this space as oriented toward small vendors and farmers and as a potential steppingstone to help small food business entrepreneurs grow their businesses. It would also create a unique visitor attraction, expanding the square's small business character.*

44 Day Street, at the corner of Day and Herbert Streets, is a publicly owned parking lot with 61 parking spaces. The Mass Farmer's Markets currently operates the Davis Square Market at this site on Wednesdays. The City previously contemplated this location as a potential hotel, but the community identified displacing the farmer's market as a major concern. In this plan, we want to build on what the community values about the farmer's market

The 2020 Davis Square plan draft included an idea to create a permanent structure for the farmer's market. In our current concept, we're building on that idea with a multi-story market hall that would integrate the farmer's market and additional small business support features. The first story of the market hall would be designed as an indoor space with an open-space atmosphere characterized by entrances from all sides and extensive natural lighting. It could serve a similar purpose to Boston's Public Market on a smaller scale, offering a space for year-round farmer's market style shopping where food vendors, artists, and farmers can rent small, affordable booths. The upper stories could house small business incubator-type spaces, event spaces, and other business support services that would support the overall goal of small business development. Even if rented at market value, by sharing bathrooms, service areas, and even soft costs such as marketing and advertisement, market halls can provide affordable spaces. The intent would also be to retain some parking spaces for visitors, particularly the highly utilized EV charging station on that site.

This type of space would be particularly helpful for entrepreneurs with limited capital access who are disproportionately minorities. The Somerville Arts Council's Nibble program, a kitchen incubator, is a local model of success we can reference. Other interesting models we can study focused on incubating new restaurants and food/beverage businesses include the Smallman Galley in Pittsburgh,

Chicago's One Eleven Food Hall, City Test Kitchen in New York, and the Budd Dairy Food Hall in Columbus, Ohio.

Redevelopment of this site would most likely require a competitive bidding process for a public-private partnership to develop the building. While the City owns the parking lot, we cannot manage this type of space and would seek a private partner with experience in this sector to fund and manage the project. Although many examples of small-scale market halls exist, each building takes a different shape based on a unique mix of shops, booths, tables, stands, and carts used by vendors. Before finding the right partner, we will need to conduct multiple studies to determine the desired structure of the public-private partnership, measure community support for the initiative, and refine the physical and programming concept.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Study the feasibility of a public-private partnership to redevelop part of the 44 Day Street parking lot into a permanent public market hall to support small vendors.
2. Consider including other business support services on the upper floors, including event and incubator spaces subsidized by the City.
3. Study the particular public-private partnership structure that would suit this project and gauge community support for the proposal.



### Key Challenges

1. Finding the right partner and developing an agreeable partnership structure.
2. Mitigating the partial loss of parking spaces.
3. Determining the level of required City involvement to ensure the project meets our equity goals.

# EXAMPLE OF MARKET HALL



Boston Public Market



Boston Public Market Interior

## e. Attracting Clean Technology Industries

*To attract clean energy technology industries, we must focus on workforce development, leverage local green technology incubators, and consider zoning and permitting incentives.*

Many cities look to tax incentives to induce particular industries or firms to locate or stay within their borders. However, research indicates that tax breaks by themselves are unlikely to attract businesses, and there are more important nonfinancial factors we can pursue that better align with our community values. According to a survey of corporations considering expansion or relocation, labor availability and quality of life are the most important factors. That data illustrates the importance of non-tax incentives such as workforce training, infrastructure investments, streamlined permitting, and access to developable property and commercial space.

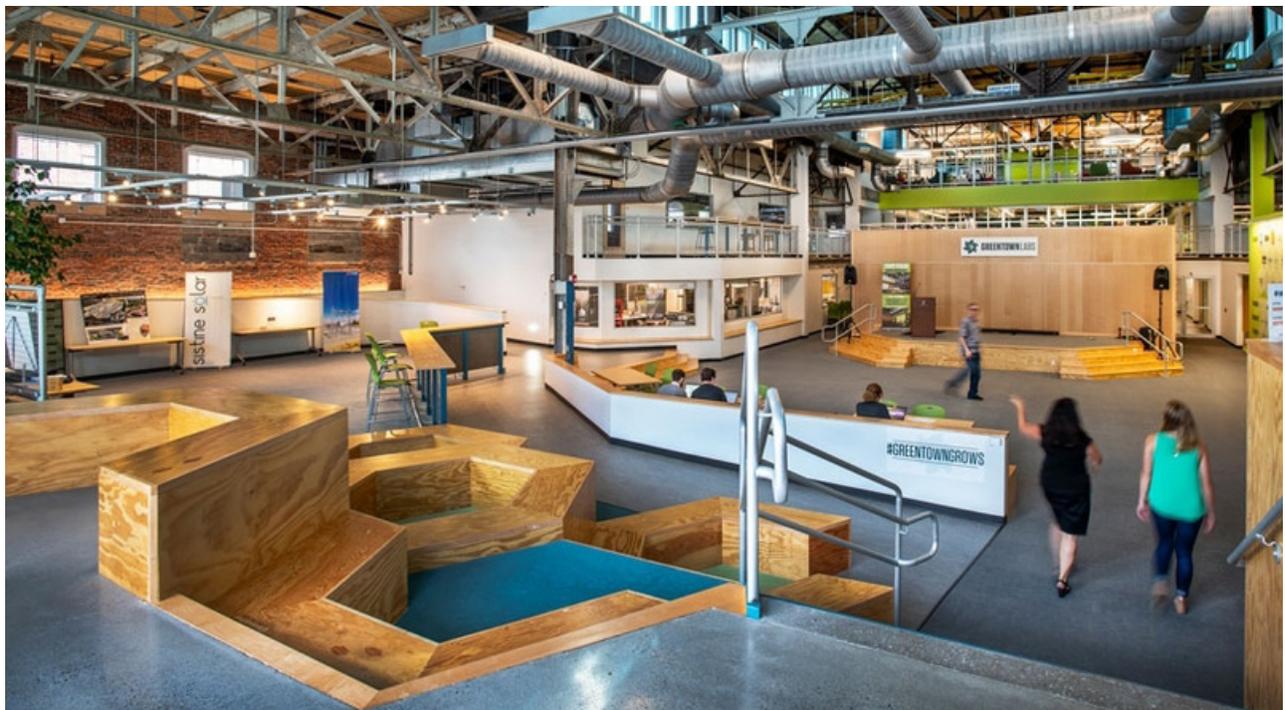
Somerville operates a robust workforce development program funded by linkage payments from new commercial projects. We can direct this

program to ensure our local workforce builds the skills the clean tech industry needs. Adjustments to our zoning and permitting incentives are also worth further study. Relationship-building and coordination efforts from our Economic Development Division could also encourage smaller clean tech businesses from Somerville's Greentown Labs and other incubators to seek spaces in transit-connected areas like Davis Square for the next step in their growth.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Consider varied program or regularly incentives to encourage the development of clean technology industries in Davis Square.
2. Advocate for green technology businesses to stay in Somerville after growing out of incubators, emphasizing transit-connected areas like Davis Square.



Greentown Labs interior, Somerville Ave

## f. Promoting Upper-Story Development

*Increasing daytime activity is a vital strategy to support businesses in Davis Square. The best way to achieve it is to increase the number of workers in the square during the day, and creating local jobs is a key SomerVision goal.*

Most residents in the neighborhoods surrounding Davis Square do not work locally but commute to their employment. As a result, activity levels drop during the day and rise at night, when locals and visitors flock to experience the square's nightlife. This trend limits local business revenue because they have a smaller window of time to maximize sales and patronage. As addressed in Chapter 1, demand in the greater Boston market is currently highest for office and laboratory space for technology businesses in the life sciences and IT/software industries. For example, the large projects on 231 and 260 Elm Street will employ almost 1,000 workers who will likely eat, shop, and patronize local businesses during the day. That will bolster revenue for Davis Square's food businesses, currently over-reliant on evening activity.

There are many other suitable locations for similar types of upper-story development around the square, but current zoning, which limits most sites to four stories, may discourage those projects. Increasing key sites to six stories would maintain the square's mid-rise character while facilitating upper-story development.

Redevelopments of this type are not without downsides, from construction disruptions to the potential displacement of small businesses. On the other hand, creating more local jobs in Somerville is also a key equity goal, and concentrating them near transit hubs lessens their impact on traffic. We must strive to balance these priorities.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Study whether height increases from four to six stories in Davis Square are needed to encourage upper-story development.
2. Consider other strategies to attract upper-story development.



### Key Challenges

1. Height increases may affect the perceived character of the square.
2. More redevelopment also means more construction and potentially higher risks of commercial displacement, requiring a balanced approach.

How would six stories zoning impact the character of Davis Square? During the 2018-2020 plan process a group of artists and designers created drawings that can help us visualize it.

### 99 Dover Street

Reimagined as a commercial six stories redevelopment with the top 2 stories stepped back from the primary facade. This would provide an estimated 130,000 square feet of commercial space. Current zoning only allows a 4-story commercial building.



*Conceptual artist drawing for visualization only, not reflective of approved project or zoning*

### 1 College Ave

Reimagined as six stories of redevelopment. At this height, this site could provide 44,000 square feet of commercial space. Current zoning allows a four story building.



*Conceptual artist drawing for visualization only, not reflective of approved project or zoning*

## h. Mitigating Commercial Displacement

*There is currently limited data on the outcomes of broadly implementing commercial rent stabilization policies, and they can be legally challenging. The City will need to conduct further studies to consider the feasibility of these policies.*

The City is considering anti-commercial displacement strategies that require rent management provisions as a condition for approving additional height in commercial construction. Commercial rent management is a relatively untested strategy for preventing new development from displacing existing businesses. It is conceptually similar to the established residential rent stabilization regulations in New York City and other communities. California and Oregon have adopted these commercial rent management strategies to control the pace of rent growth in line with an index, usually the local or national inflation rates. These

commercial rent management provisions can be added to existing zoning regulations or incorporated into informal negotiations between developers and community groups.

A localized pilot program in a commercial district like Davis Square could be attempted on a shorter timeline, allowing us to measure outcomes. This pilot program could require rent caps on ground floor commercial rent, or part of the ground floor, as a condition for approving additional height in commercial buildings. If we set the numbers correctly, the added value of additional floors for uses like office and lab space could attract private development despite the rent caps on ground floor rents. As an alternative approach, a portion of ground-floor commercial space could be rented at below-market prices to a non-profit group, and this group could serve as a master tenant that would sublease space to local small businesses at affordable rates.

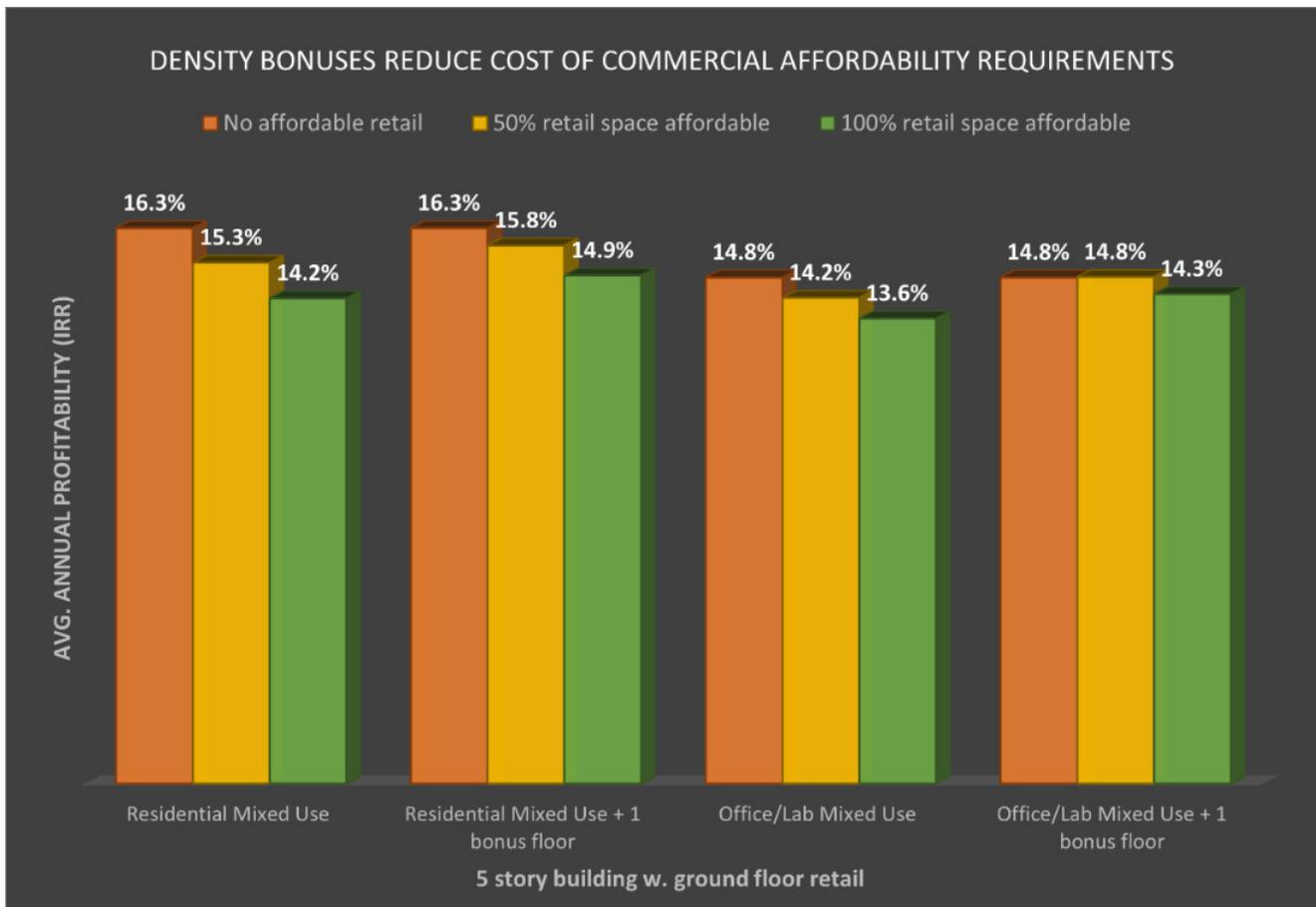


Figure A, 3.3

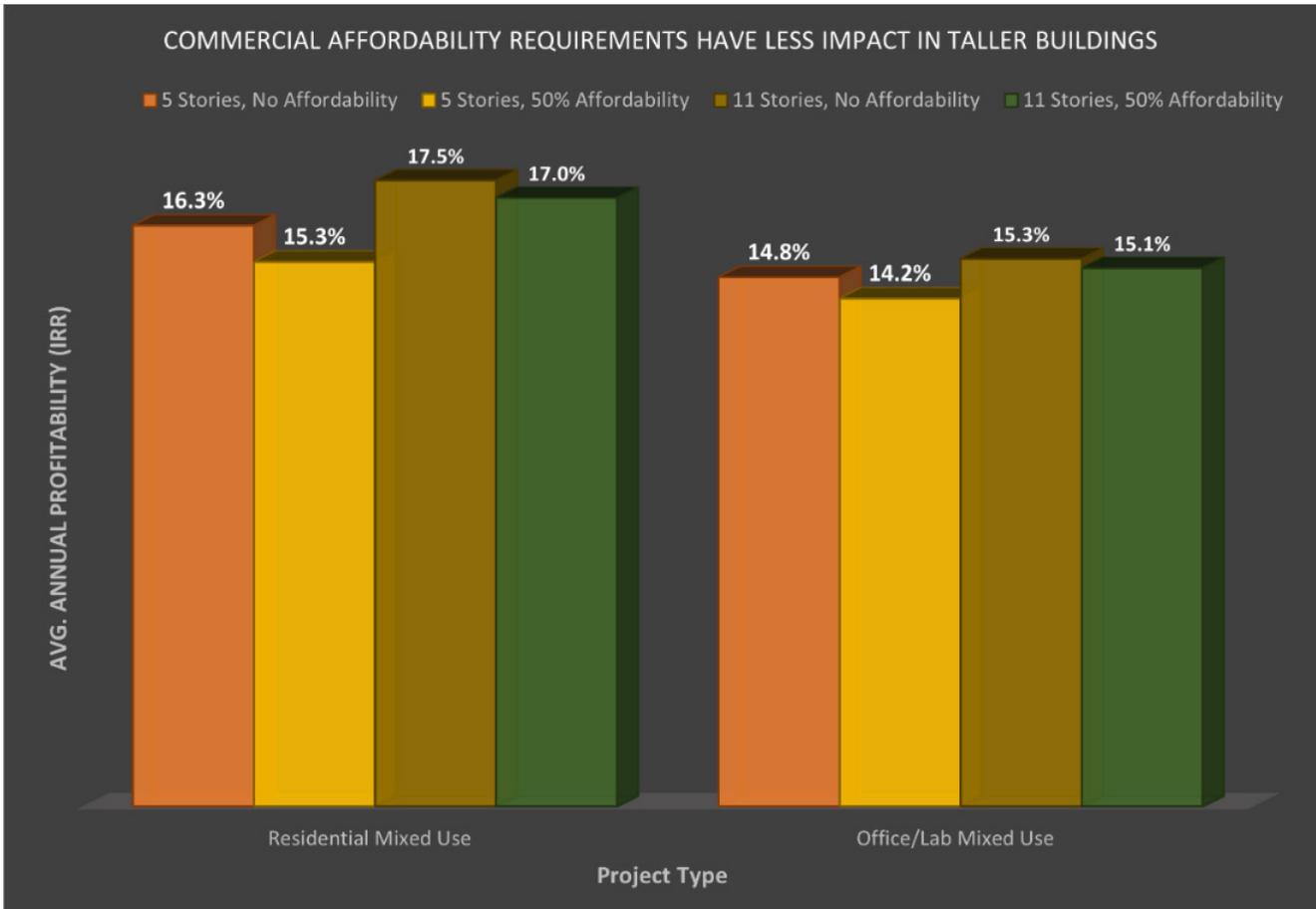


Figure B, 3.3

The Harvard commercial displacement study referenced in Chapter 1 used modern financial modeling techniques to examine potential commercial rent management policies for mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail space and apartments or offices/labs on upper floors. A projected comparison of commercial projects with no affordable ground-floor retail space versus identical projects revealed that in projects where half of the ground-floor retail space is leased at below-market rates, average profitability would decline by relatively small amounts (5%-10%). Unsurprisingly, profitability losses resulting from affordable commercial space requirements would decrease further with building height.

Policy interventions on commercial rents can negatively impact market competition and place new businesses at a disadvantage, making its implementation more complex than residential interventions. We want to explore it, but we must approach it cautiously and will likely need different iterations to find the right balance.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Study establishing a pilot rent stabilization program for ground floor retail spaces as a special permit condition for additional height Davis Square.
2. Study strategies to lower the volatility of commercial rent prices and their impact on existing small businesses.



### Key Challenges

3. These strategies are new, and data on their long-term effectiveness is limited.
4. Policy interventions on commercial rents can adversely affect market competition and are more difficult to implement than housing interventions.

## i. District Management Organization

*Preserving, enhancing, and promoting Davis Square's unique character and vibrant street life requires regular and sustained maintenance, marketing, and advocacy efforts. The City will continue to invest in the square and its public realm, but a local business organization could amplify our efforts. As we referenced throughout this plan, many key issues, including coordinating privately owned parking resources, district-wide improvements, and deployment of business support programs, would all benefit from an intermediary organization.*

These non-profit organizations can coordinate, market, and advocate for local merchants, amplifying the City's small business services and state/federal grant funding. The East Somerville and Union Square Main Street groups are successful examples of such groups, providing accessible, consistent resources for businesses in their respective neighborhoods. Through a collective effort, a district management organization can achieve dramatic results with programs like supplemental maintenance and marketing. These are the types of initiatives that property owners may not find cost-effective to undertake alone. For example, it is often more efficient to contract with one vendor to provide landscaping services to the district than for each property owner to do so individually.

This type of organization could also be structured to respond to various public realm issues, such as enhancing gateways or addressing cleanliness in alleys, plazas, and other high-traffic pedestrian locations. They can help recruit businesses when there are vacancies more efficiently than individual property owners can. They can also help brand and market the district, attracting more customers and visitors from neighboring cities. Lastly, this type of organization could provide individual businesses in Davis Square with a stronger collective voice on issues that impact the district as it relates to the City, which we also support.

Ultimately, while the City can recommend, encourage, and help fund this type of organization, as an independent non-profit, it must be

led by the local business community. With this recommendation, we intend to begin a conversation and offer support.



### Policy Recommendations

1. Support the establishment of a Davis Square Commercial District Management Organization that would support local businesses, help coordinate district-wide parking resources, commercial deliveries, assist with public realm improvements, and bolster the impact of grants and programs.
2. Study the viability of allocating public funds to offset start-up costs for staffing and services.
3. Consider the depth of involvement of the City as a partner, particularly given the specific roles the City would like this organization to serve.
4. Engage in extensive outreach with the local business community to determine the feasibility of this proposal.



### Key Challenges

1. This proposal would require backing, active participation from the area's business community, and financial contributions. difficult to implement than affordable housing restrictions.





## BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS (BIDs)

- Local property owners design, fund, and manage an improvement plan
- Typically the most effective due to its stable funding source
- To form, needs support from over 60% of property owners
- Participation by property owners is mandatory and is reauthorized every 5 years
- Highest buy-in cost for business
- Local examples: Boston Downtown, Amherst, Springfield, Hyannis, Worcester, Hudson, and Boston Greenway



## VOLUNTARY MANAGEMENT DISTRICTS (VMDs)

- Stakeholders develop a management program for an area that includes organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring
- Participation is voluntary
- Funding is through donations, grants, and local government support
- Local examples: Somerville's Union Square and East Somerville Main Streets programs

# Types of Commercial Districts



## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS (CDCs)

- Typically formed to address development objectives that meet the needs of low- and moderate-income residents
- Funded through voluntary contributions
- Eligible for funding from federal and state governments
- Local examples: Somerville Community Corporation, Just-A-Start Inc., and other programs in Greater Boston



## PARKING BENEFIT DISTRICTS (PMDs)

- Geographically defined districts
- Can use some or all parking revenue to support district services
- This type can be combined with another, such as a BID, to manage it
- Local examples: Arlington and Rockport

# Chapter 4

# Design Guidelines



## 4.1 Streetscape Guidelines

Streets tend to make up the majority of public space in US cities. Yet, for many decades, they have been built to prioritize vehicular traffic, often failing to integrate their surroundings and support safe walking, biking, and outdoor activities. That legacy is reflected in the infrastructure of Davis Square. The guidelines in this section are intended to help reverse that trend and create a more welcoming, safe, and equitable streetscape. They were based on consultant studies, City ordinances, and nationally recognized best practices resources.

NACTO's (National Association of City Transportation Officials) Urban Street Design Guide is a key best practice resource. It outlines strategies to build cities that offer safe places for people with sustainable, accessible, and equitable transportation choices while supporting a strong economy and vibrant quality of life. In Somerville, replicating the ideal street sections illustrated in the guide is often difficult. Our row widths, the space between buildings on one side of the street to the other, is too narrow in many areas, including Davis Square, due to inherited street grids that

date back hundreds of years. However, within that fixed dimension, there are many changes we can make to accommodate improved safety and user comfort.

Another key resource is our Complete Streets Ordinance, adopted in 2014, which was the first of its kind in the state. It covers road planning, scoping, design, implementation, operation, and maintenance to address the safety and accessibility needs of all users in a balanced manner. The ordinance's infrastructure guidelines consider the safety needs of motorists, pedestrians, transit users, and cyclists while encouraging non-motorized transportation. It also prioritizes the needs of the most vulnerable users: children, older adults, and persons with different physical abilities. Our Zoning Ordinance establishes all regulations that govern private development. This chapter references it the zoning ordinance and suggests additional factors for consideration but does not supplant any aspect of the Zoning Ordinance or establish new regulations for private redevelopment.



Image by Chris Rycroft, Elm Street

## a. Streets

Specific engineering guidelines govern the street portion dedicated to motor vehicle traffic. Recommended street design features regarding other elements should include the following:

1. High-visibility raised crosswalks should be utilized whenever possible.
2. Pedestrian signals with countdown timers and accessible push buttons for the visually impaired should be included at key intersections.
3. Conventional and buffered bicycle lanes should be included when the street width can accommodate it.
4. Dedicated cycle tracks or shared-use lanes should be included when dedicated bicycle lanes are not feasible.
5. Bicycle parking facilities should be included in both curb zones and furniture zones whenever appropriate.
6. Speed humps or raised speed raised crosswalks/intersections should be included whenever necessary to improve pedestrian safety.
7. Safe and attractive public transportation stops should be included whenever possible, preferably with curb extensions.
8. Transit Signal Priority (TSP) should be included at key intersections and bus routes.
9. Dedicated bus lanes should be included whenever appropriate to prioritize mass transit users.



Packard Ave and Professors Row raised intersection



Bike parking in a parallel parking space, Elm Street

## b. Sidewalks

Recommended sidewalk design features should include the following:

1. All new development of four stories or higher must be setback from the curb by a minimum of 12 feet to produce wide sidewalks.
2. All new and reconstructed sidewalks must be accessible by pedestrian ramps based on ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) guidelines and the Rules and Regulations of the Massachusetts Access Board (521 CMR).
3. Outdoor seating areas are desirable but should never intrude on the accessible walkway.
4. Fixed objects, such as utility poles, light fixtures, and other street furniture, should not intrude on or restrict the walkway.
5. Driveways and curb cuts should be limited, and sidewalks should be maintained at grade through the conflict zone.
6. New and reconstructed sidewalks must include a walkway and furniture zone and may include an edge and frontage zone.
7. Walkways must be at least five feet wide, with an optimal goal of six feet wide. They must be concrete to prioritize accessibility and kept clear of fixtures and movable furnishings.
8. In edge zones, red brick to match the existing brick areas in Davis Square is encouraged, where contextually appropriate.
9. Furniture zones should be approximately six feet wide. Red brick to match the existing brick areas in Davis Square is encouraged when contextually appropriate, but other materials, from concrete to decorative pavers or stone, may be more suitable in some sections to produce a harmonious streetscape.
10. Furniture zones may be designed to accommodate green infrastructure, such as flow-through planters or bioswales, where appropriate.
11. Frontage zones may have various depths to accommodate the minimum required sidewalk dimension. They may be detailed to appear as an extension of the walkway or designed with materials that reflect the design of the building.



Red brick edge zone and planted furniture zone, Elm Street



Bench and trash cans in furniture zone, Elm Street

### c. Landscape

Recommended landscape design features should include the following:

1. Street trees should be included wherever possible to frame the sidewalk, create shade and expand the urban tree canopy.
2. Street tree species must consider diversity across the city based on the guidance of the City Arborist.
3. Street trees should generally be located in the furniture zone but may also be located at curb bump-outs, and should incorporate structures to aid in tree health where possible.
4. Installation of a street tree into an existing sidewalk must be planted along a straight line between 35' and 45' apart, depending on the species.
5. Street trees may be planted along retail frontages in an irregularly spaced manner to avoid visually obscuring storefront windows and signage.
6. Tree pits must have an open soil area centered at the tree trunk, with a tree guard installed around the outer perimeter of the tree pit to shield a tree's trunk from physical damage.



Regularly spaced street trees, lacks a tree guard and tree pit is too small, Davis Square

### d. Furnishings

Recommended furnishings design features should include the following:

1. All street furnishings, including lighting, seating, and trash receptacles in the furniture zone of sidewalks, must match city standard specifications and exclude anti-homeless features.
2. Trash cans and benches in a frontage zone installed by the property owner do not need to match city standard specifications but must be adequately maintained by the property owner.
3. Lighting at a scale suitable for pedestrians should be provided in addition to overhead lighting for vehicles.
4. Informal seating may also be incorporated into other elements in the site furnishings zone, such as planter edges.



A bench in a frontage zone of a commercial storefront, Davis Square

## 4.2 Context-Sensitive Development

The public realm is more than building heights, commercial storefronts, streets, sidewalks, and civic spaces as discrete elements. It is also about how they interact with one another to produce a unique and recognizable character and how it makes people feel. Creating an inviting, comfortable, and attractive pedestrian experience invites people to participate in public life, visit local businesses, and feel connected to the urban landscape.

To support the successful development of engaging and visually pleasing projects, the city worked closely with the community and consultants to develop guidelines on the characteristics and elements that make for a good streetscape and the buildings shaping that space. These guidelines do not predetermine architectural design style. They are focused on environmental psychology, the study of the human response to the built and natural environments, and are meant to be achievable in various architectural styles.



Small business facade character, Elm Street near Cutter Ave intersection

## a. Nurturing an Active Streetscape

One of the most important functions of buildings in the core of Davis Square is supporting an active, walkable, and engaging pedestrian experience. The design of a building, particularly the portion that faces the street, is key to defining its character and relationship with the neighborhood.

The design and detailing of these building facades (the primary building face at the street) should prioritize the experience of pedestrians through careful details, keeping the street-level experience interesting throughout a building's length.

1. Facades should be visually divided into architectural bays generally derived from the building's structural bay spacing and typically aligned with individual or groups of storefronts and lobby entrances.
2. Piers, pilasters, or other features defining each architectural bay should always project forward of the main building plane and either extend to the ground or terminate at a horizontal articulation defining the base of the building.
3. Windows and doors should be inset from the plane of exterior wall surfaces. Ribbon windows, a series of windows set side by side to form a continuous band horizontally across a facade, should be avoided.
4. At the base of the building, broad expanses of glass should provide display space for shops and a pleasant view of the street from the inside. However, monotonous and repetitive storefront or glass curtainwall systems, awnings, canopies, sign types, colors, or designs should be avoided.
5. While multiple establishments may occupy the ground floor of a large building, the character of Davis Square has each storefront articulated individually, and this character should be maintained.
6. Storefronts and lobby entrances should include awnings or canopies to provide weather protection for pedestrians and reduce glare for storefront display areas. These awnings should be open-ended and operable.
7. Architectural details and finish materials for the base of a building should be constructed of architectural concrete or pre-cast cementitious panels, natural or cast stone, heavy gauge metal panels, glazed or unglazed architectural terracotta, or brick. These materials give a sense of permanence, withstand the wear and tear of a pedestrian environment, and are generally lower maintenance. Exterior Insulation and Finish Systems (EIFS) should be avoided.
8. Wall materials appearing heavier in weight should be used below wall materials appearing lighter. For example, stone materials should never appear above wood siding.
9. The type and color of materials in facades should be kept to a minimum, preferably three or fewer.
10. Lobby entrances for upper-story uses should be optimally located, well-defined, clearly visible, and separate from the entrances for other ground-story uses.
11. Lobby entrances should also be limited in width and total area to preserve floor space and frontage for retail and other uses.
12. Private or secondary entrances should use a simpler design to go unnoticed by pedestrians.
13. Buildings should use any combination of facade articulation, a double-height ceiling, a distinctive doorway, a change in wall material, or some other architectural element(s) to make lobbies visually and materially distinctive.
14. The horizontal or vertical board siding or shingles should be avoided regardless of the material. Materials with a traditional wood siding or clapboard look are inconsistent with the existing buildings in the commercial area of Davis Square.
15. Vents, exhausts, and other utility features on building facades should be architecturally integrated into the building design. They should be located to minimize adverse effects on pedestrian comfort along sidewalks and within open spaces.
16. Mechanical penthouses and other equipment screening should be located to minimize adverse environmental impacts on civic spaces, sidewalks, and abutting lots.



## b. Maintaining the Street Wall

Redevelopment projects in the commercial core are expected to provide a visually rich and engaging ground floor to encourage pedestrian activity. Above the first floor, new buildings should preserve and enhance the streetwall to provide visual coherence and a sense of enclosure.

1. A building's design should focus on how it looks and feels from the perspective of pedestrians through careful detailing to articulate its height and length.
2. Building designs should visually organize the facade of the building by dividing it up into three sections, similar to a classical column (base, shaft, capital), by establishing clear horizontal bands of base, middle, and top.
3. The selection of materials, fenestration, and ornamentation should result in a consistent and harmonious composition that appears as a unified whole rather than a collection of unrelated parts.
4. Detailing used to provide depth and variation in the storefront base of a building should carry upward to the building as a whole and along the street to help create a unified and well-articulated street experience. The upper areas of a facade should focus vertically.
5. The pilasters, columns, or piers that define the bay structure of the base should carry up through the upper surfaces of buildings to the cornice, providing multiple layers of detailing to the facade.
6. Windows above the first floor should be smaller and align vertically with the bay structure of the base and horizontally with each other in regular horizontal bands.
7. At the top, the verticals should have a strongly expressed cornice to reinforce the upper edge of the street wall. This cornice should have a clear relation to any smaller cornices established at the building's base, though it should be larger, with more detail, and could project further from the face of the building.
8. Above the cornice line, the building mass should use a different palette of colors or materials and should step back from the front of the building.
9. Vents, stacks, railings, and other mechanical equipment components required to be outdoors or to project above a penthouse should be limited in height and located toward the center of the roof.



One Davis Square's facade showing a clearly defined base, middle, and top architectural bays, and articulated horizontal bands.

## c. Context-Sensitive Development

The design of new buildings should be mindful of the architectural details that help create the character of Davis Square. During the 2018-2020 plan community outreach process, community members joined City staff for a long walk around Davis Square to identify as a group architectural features they felt captured the character of the square. The elements identified helped inform this section. New projects should not simply copy existing buildings but be sensitive to the existing context, including form, material, and color choices. Contextual new buildings can give a sense of continuity and unity rather than transforming the neighborhood.

On prominent sites and at the ends of avenues, buildings should be designed to frame memorable views and provide a focal point for long vistas. Prominent corners, scaled-up entrances, projecting or recessed bays, panels of more ornate detailing, or contrasting colors are only a few of a wide range of gestures that a project in any style can use to create a memorable project that enhances the aesthetics of Davis Square.

1. Corner commercial spaces should typically have a storefront on the side street frontage for the width of a least one architectural bay.
2. Entrances to corner commercial spaces should preferably be located at the corner of the storefront and chamfered or recessed to provide an entryway for pedestrians.
3. Storefronts should preferably have a recessed entrance to provide a weather protected entryway for pedestrians.
4. Recessed entryways should preferably be decorated with tiles, pavers, or other artistic pavements to add visual interest to the entryway.



### c. Context-Sensitive Development (cont'd)

5. Particularly for dining establishments, City staff recommends folding, sliding, and tilt-turn display windows, doors, and other storefront systems that open to visually connect the interior with the public realm.
6. Facades should have a cornice either at the top or at the transition that differentiates the building's middle floors from its top. We also encourage the use of a parapet at the top of a facade to hide rooftop machinery.
7. Permanent signage for ground floor uses should preferably be three-dimensional and externally lit.
8. Permanent or moveable frontage planters are preferred along the frontage area in front of the facade, as long as they do not obstruct the walkway.

