

Watertown Square Area Plan

February 29, 2024
Public Meeting
Public Feedback Review



On February 29, 2024, the City of Watertown hosted a Public Meeting reviewing the street reconfiguration schemes, as well as urban design and the MBTA Communities zoning details of the Watertown Square Area Plan project. With the number of attendees approaching 200 and several more watching online, the community learned about updates to the project, asked questions and gave comments to what would like to be seen in their downtown. Below is an overview of the common themes and takeaways of the public engagement contributed by the community in-person, virtually live, and on the post-event online feedback form.

Review of the Streetscapes

A critical topic of discussion at the February 29 Public Meeting was reviewing the potential streetscape redesigns of Watertown Square. Between all forms of feedback, it was apparent among the Design Team and City staff that the community is relatively split between the Four Corners design, and the Mini Main Street design. Attendees on the live poll responded 53% in favor of the Mini Main Street scheme; meanwhile the online feedback form responses indicated 47% preferred the Four Corners scheme, as opposed to the 39% preferring the Mini Main Street scheme, with the remaining 14% suggesting a combination of the two. Although there was a general split between the designs, there were several themes that arose across the many modes of engagement worth sharing.

Safety Across the Square

Regardless of the mode of transportation being taken across the Square, the community voiced their desire for safety to remain a priority. Comments received ranged from requests to further protect the bike lanes, to other expressing the walk across Watertown Square offered in these schemes appears safer compared to what is presently there. Regarding automobile traffic, there is a repeated theme of the Four Corners scheme being easier to navigate and safer for those unfamiliar with the Square. The community's predominant comments regarding safety with the Mini Main Street scheme was around the relationship between the automobiles and pedestrians, including reducing speeds and crosswalk lengths.

Transit in the Square

With the proposed new streetscapes in Watertown Square, residents shared many thoughts regarding the bus lanes, stops, and routes. Feedback ranged from asking questions about the possibility of expanding bus lanes around the Square, to suggestions about improving bus stops and their locations. Many of these suggestions are being examined by the Design Team.

Total Online Feedback
Form Submissions

215

Number of Sticky
Notes Received

236

Number Live Polling
Responses

614

Traffic Congestion

A theme that arose frequently in the post-event online feedback form was about automobile traffic through the Square. It was generally felt that the Four Corners scheme is simpler for drivers, especially those unfamiliar with the Square; however, residents raised concerns about how much traffic would be diverted to the surrounding neighborhoods under both proposed schemes. As for the Mini Main scheme, residents see the potential for a calmer traffic flow through the Square, but worry about confusion and congestion at certain areas, especially on the Galen Street Bridge.

A common consensus among the community was in support of the increased green space and access to the Charles River.

"I love the additional green space nearest the river"

- Watertown Resident

Review of the Urban Design and MBTA Communities Zoning

Public feedback regarding the urban design and zoning of the Square is widespread across several different viewpoints. Some topics seemed to draw a general consensus, such as the general approach to zoning taken by the design team. During the meeting, 63% of live poll respondents indicated they believed the draft zoning recommendations were "headed in the right direction". On the online form, 65% of respondents reported being either "strongly" and "somewhat" in favor of the façade articulation. Meanwhile, there were other elements of the presented designs that were met with differing opinions among the community.

Building Height and Density

One of the topics that had the widest dispersion of opinions surrounded the height and density of the buildings in the Square. There was no consensus on building height. While many did not express an opinion, there were comments (roughly the same number on each side) requesting lower height limits around the Square (and especially close to the river) and supporting the proposed heights of 5.5 stories (or even suggesting higher). For those supporting the higher-density, it was common for those requests to be coupled with a desire for more housing units in those spaces.



Zoning Options

In the breakout sessions at the event, there was a consistent support for entirely by-right zoning, versus the partial by-right option. In the online feedback form, varying opinions were present, with some raising support for expanding by-right zoning throughout the study area as a way to encourage developers to invest in Watertown; while others raised worry that it could impact the types of buildings that get developed around the study area, and how that might not always align with the community's vision of Watertown Square.

Parking Around the Square

At the event, and through the online feedback form, the community supports the reduction of parking requirements around Watertown Square. Recommendations ranged from reducing the required parking, or even eliminating it all together. As for potentially redeveloping the parking lots behind Main Street, the online form yielded 64% of respondents saying "Yes", and 20% reporting "Maybe" to the idea.