

# DAVIS SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN



## ADOPTION COPY

**July 19, 2019**  
**Updated September 26, 2019**

The Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development is finalizing illustrations, correcting any clerical errors, cross checking references, and ensuring graphics provide clear and properly labeled information that is not substantive to the content of this plan.







# DAVIS SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN

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Utile

## **ADOPTED:**

Date TBD

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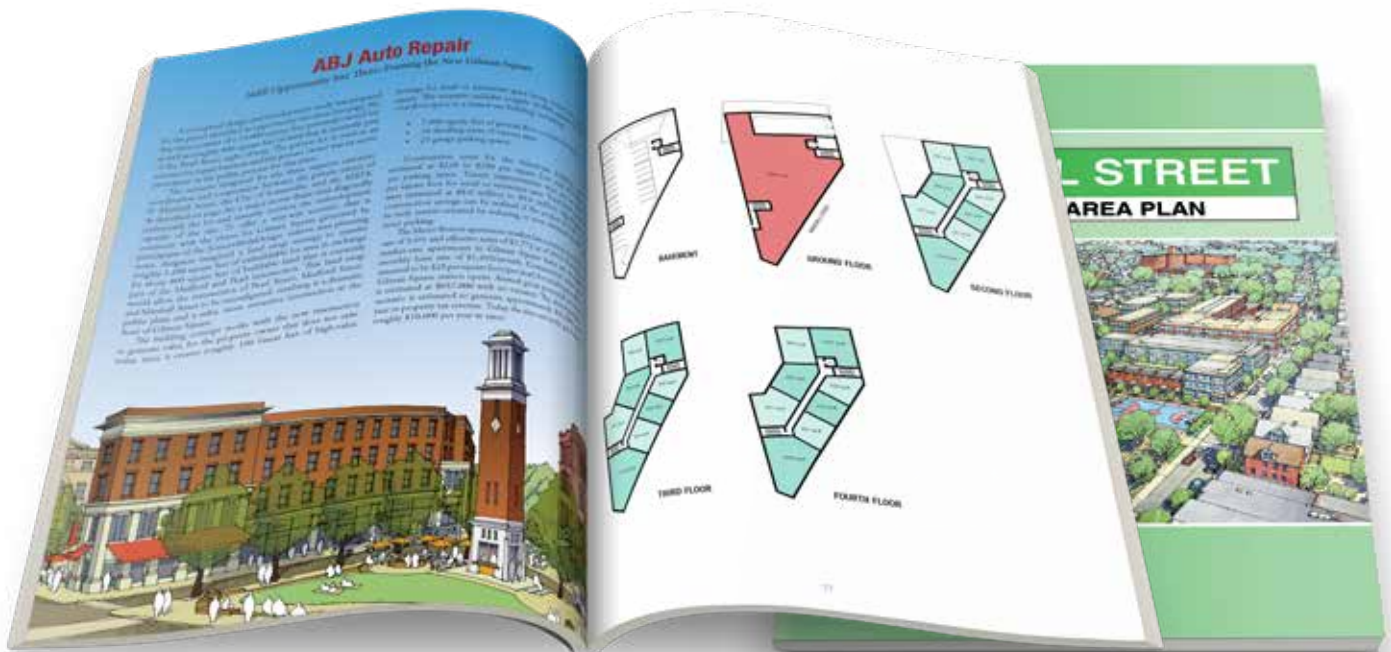
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## What's a Neighborhood Plan?

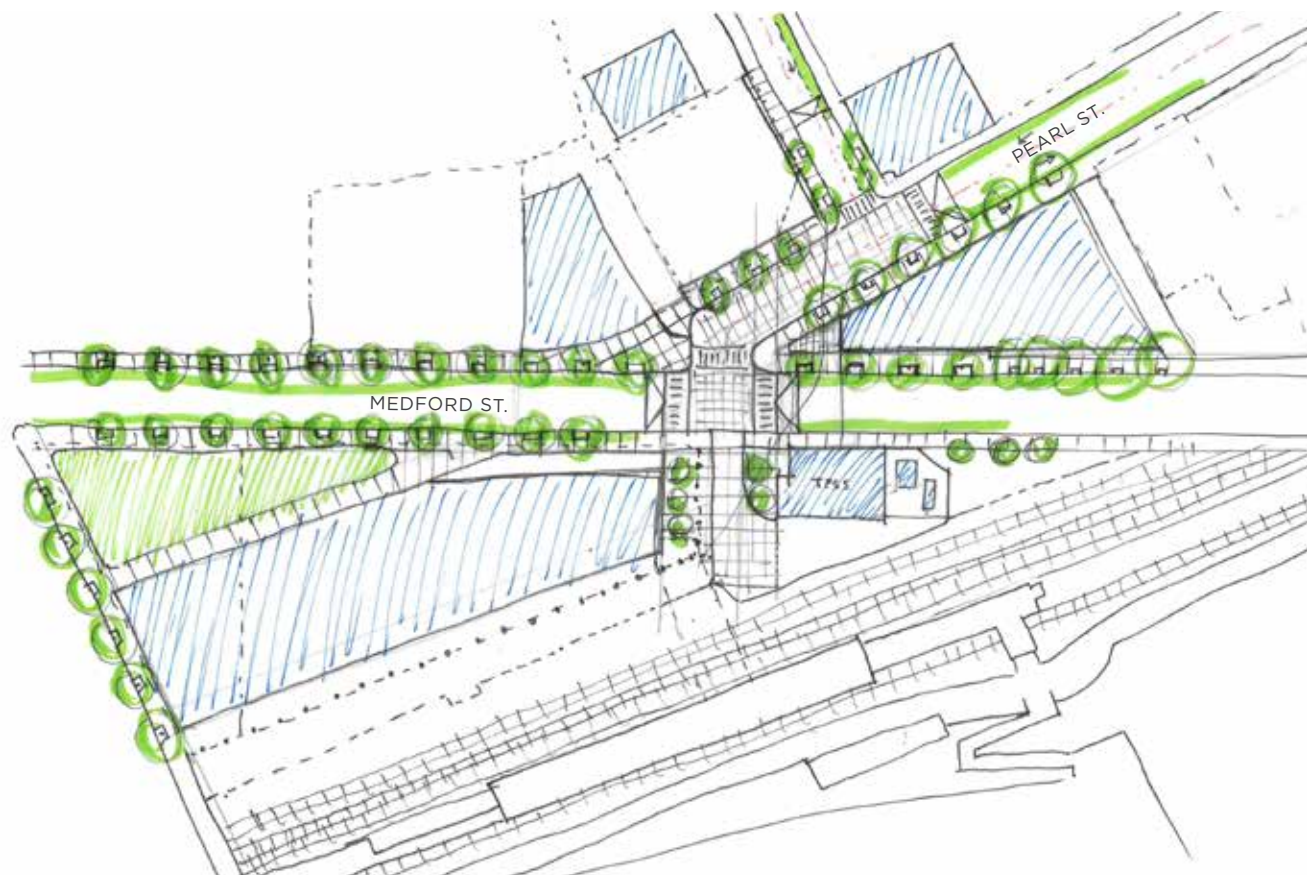
A neighborhood plan takes consideration of the long-term future of a neighborhood to identify challenges and opportunities, establish goals, and identify paths for implementation. It relies on extensive participation of residents, businesses, and other stakeholders to help translate the city-wide goals of SomerVision to the neighborhood level. Somerville's plans are action-oriented and values-based, with an implementation time frame up to 30 years.

### A Neighborhood Plan...

- Identifies neighborhood wishes and intended outcomes
- Starts to outline the required actions to get there/the steps necessary as a course of action
- Cannot be used as the final design or analysis of a project

Coming together as a community to think through challenges and solutions is just as important as publishing a document that records those efforts. The act of neighborhood planning allows members of the community to be proactive, contributing players in shaping the forces of change. A plan that expresses a common vision for the future and lays out clear objectives will allow stakeholders to provide a timely and well-supported response to proposals.

In Somerville, neighborhood plans are adopted by the Planning Board as an amendment and implementation appendix to the SomerVision Comprehensive Plan of the City of Somerville per Chapter 41, Section 81D of Massachusetts General Law. Adoption as part of the Comprehensive Plan means that the vision, goals, and objectives of a neighborhood plan are part of official City policy.



## (Incremental) Implementation

A neighborhood plan documents a community's vision for the future, and implementation begins as soon as the plan has been adopted. During the planning process, Planning Staff works with other departments, the community, and consultant teams to make sure a neighborhood's vision is achievable. The plan uses the best information available at the time, but more information is needed for implementation. Because of this, implementation isn't the end of the process; it's only the next phase!

The physical design in the Gilman Square Neighborhood Plan (GNSP) is a good example of the incremental steps in implementation. The 'big idea' in the plan is bringing the Square back to Gilman Square. This includes reconfiguring Pearl, Marshall, and Medford Streets; a new open space, and new private development framing the open space. The GNSP also overlaps with the Winter Hill Neighborhood Plan (WHNP) area.

The WHNP plan identified the need for a contraflow bike lane connecting Gilman to Broadway.

Since the adoption of the two plans City Staff has worked to identify the existing infrastructure and take traffic counts on the major streets. Follow along with the images starting above in a clockwise direction. This year, a grant was awarded to advance the intersection design from a conceptual phase. The Green Line Extension project has proceeded and the Homan's Building is now demolished.. Last year, a contraflow bike lane was painted on Marshall Street.

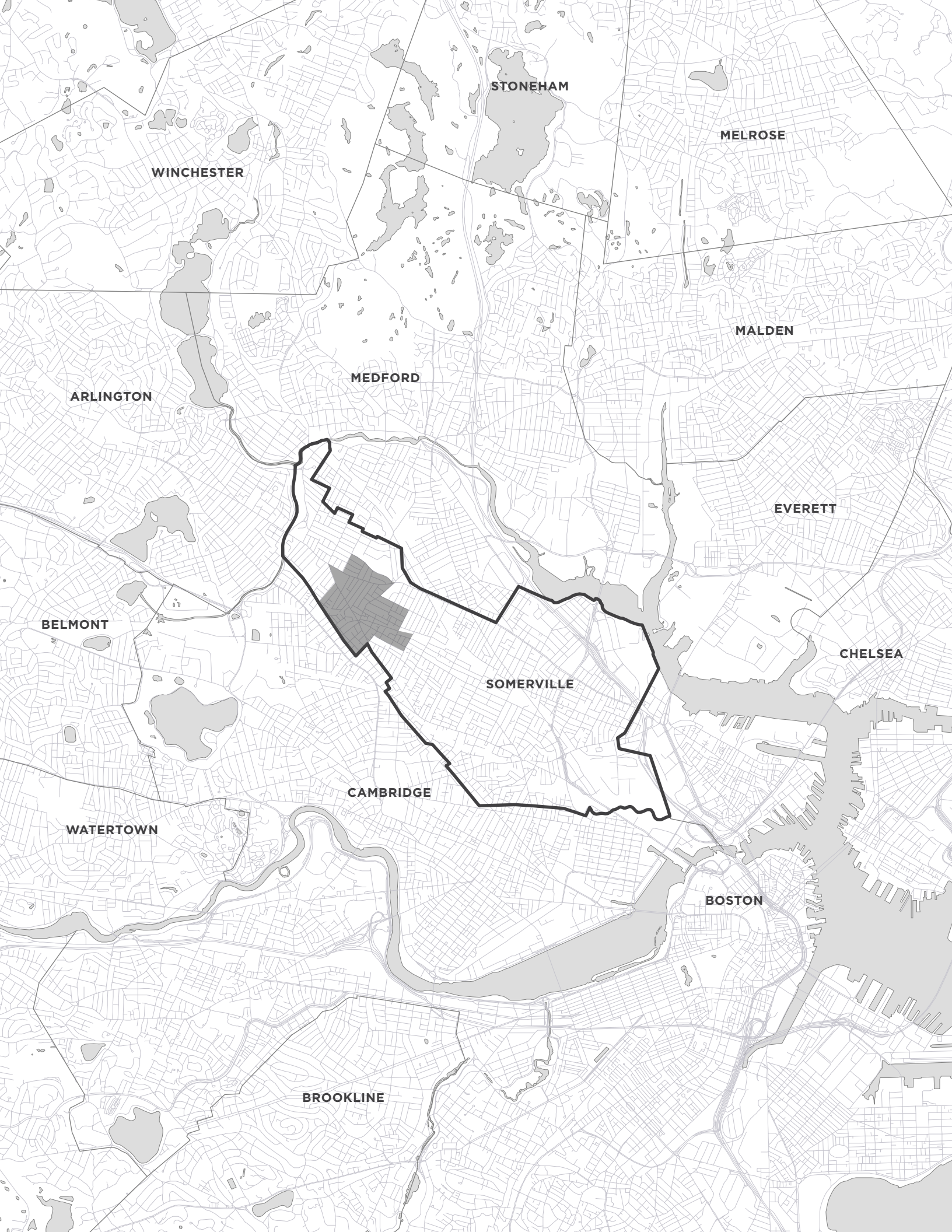
Implementation is incremental and not every step results in an observable difference. From a few cans of paint to major redevelopment, City staff remains committed to working alongside the community to bring the goals and ideas laid out in the neighborhood plan into reality.



Photo by MassDOT







STONEHAM

MELROSE

WINCHESTER

MALDEN

MEDFORD

ARLINGTON

EVERETT

BELMONT

CHELSEA

SOMERVILLE

CAMBRIDGE

BOSTON

WATERTOWN

BROOKLINE



## PLAN AREA

The 17 Somerville neighborhoods, including Davis Square, were identified using crowdsourcing by the website Bostonogrphay. People were allowed to draw their perception of the neighborhood boundaries to create a consensus of the neighborhood. This neighborhood plan primarily focuses on the properties located within the core of Davis Square. This area encompasses a mixed use district along Holland, Elm, Highland and College near the MBTA's Red Line.



# PLANNING HISTORY

## The Davis Square Action Plan

On December 8, 1984 the MBTA's Northwest Extension of the Red Line brought subway service to Davis Square for the first time. However, planning for the arrival of rapid transit began six years earlier in 1977. The City of Somerville and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) worked together to evaluate future reinvestment possibilities as the MBTA began construction on the extension. With similar timing, neighborhood residents founded the Davis Square Task Force to leverage public involvement in planning for the Red Line.

By 1979, the Task Force had developed goal statements and the City was able to provide consultants to assist with research and further policy development and planning. Through the combined efforts of the Davis Square Task Force, members of the business community, and residents participating in the planning effort, the City soon produced The Davis Square Action Plan - the first plan for the neighborhood.

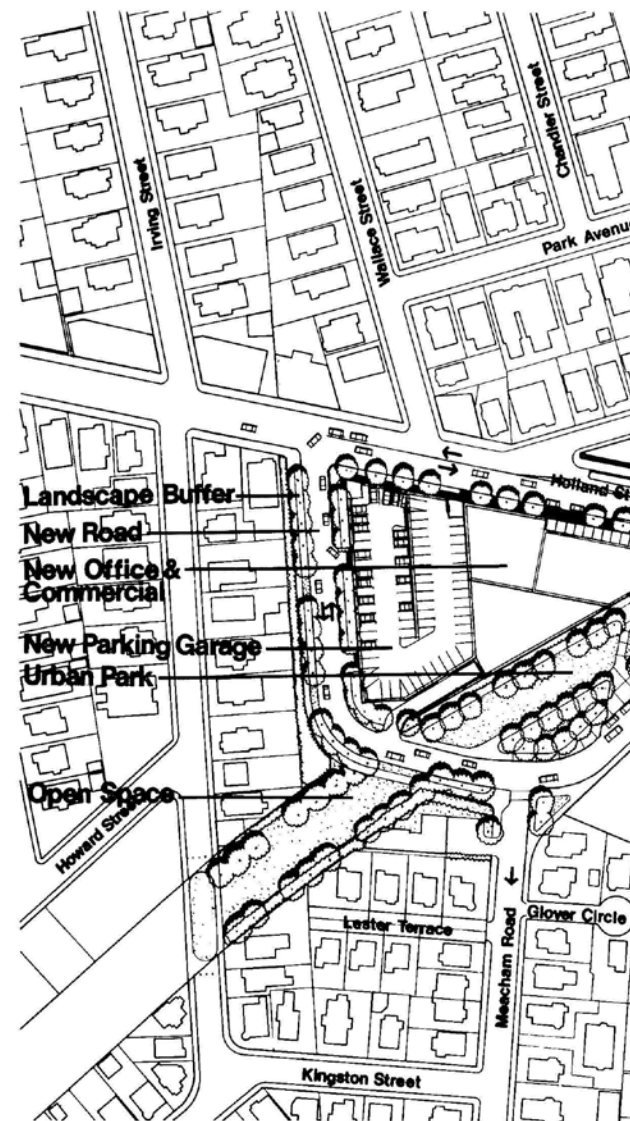
The Davis Square Action Plan focused on public/private investment in Davis Square and addressed three core issues:

- land use
- traffic and parking
- potential development

It also proposed public policy and various physical improvement programs to enhance the attractiveness and convenience of the Square. This first planning effort sought to make the most of the advantages afforded Davis Square as a result of the Red Line extension. Most of the plan objectives were implemented over the next decade (see facing image).

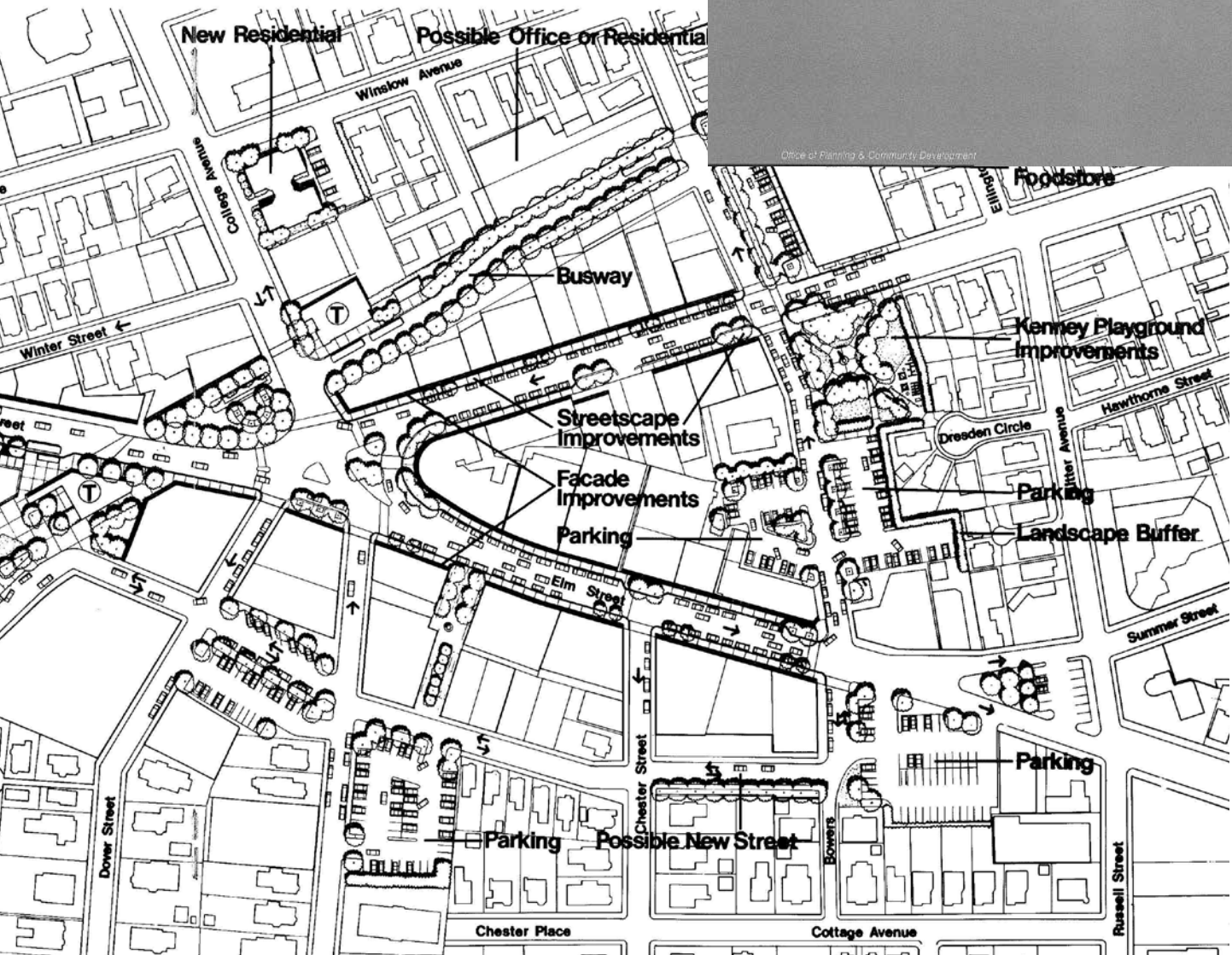
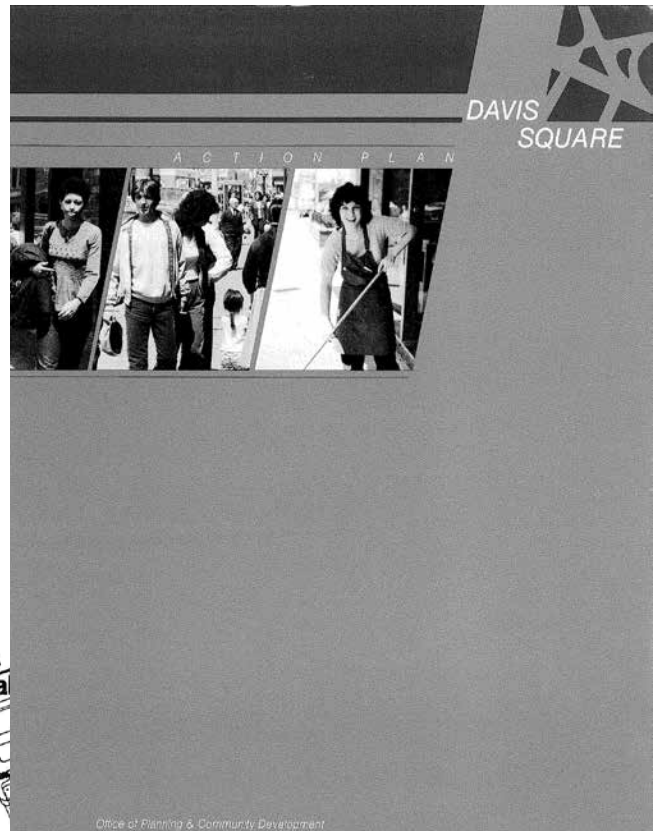
As the Task Force hoped, the image of Davis Square is a story of continuous improvement over the last 30 years. Multiple new commercial office

buildings have brought jobs to the neighborhood. The local retailers and restaurants have become well known across the Boston metro area. All while preserving the character and quality of the residential housing surrounding the commercial core. Overall, people enjoy Davis Square and the action plan is a part of the reason for the Square's success.





The following pages detail some of the most noticeable improvements brought about as a result of the Davis Square Action Plan and the Red Line extension.







## STATUE PLAZA

When the MBTA Davis Square station was built, the area over the station was finished as a plaza. The statues, the namesake of the plaza, are named *Ten Figures* (by James Tyler). They are based on residents of Davis in the 1980's and commissioned as part of the Arts on the Line program. Originally the skylight for the station was much taller and obstructive; the skylight was lowered to the current design in a later renovation.





## SEVEN HILLS PARK

Seven Hills Park, like Statue Plaza, was once part of the railroad network. When the Red Line was extended to Alewife, the park and Community Path was built over the subway tunnel. The park is named to honor the seven hills of Somerville: Central, Clarendon, Cobble, Mount Benedict, Prospect, Spring and Winter Hill. The hills are commemorated throughout the park in sculpture







## 212 ELM STREET

Somerset Bank redeveloped the underutilized lot and relocated to the new building in 1989. In an article from a 1989 Somerville Journal *Somerset proud of new investment*, the building is touted as an anchor in Davis Square and an encouragement to other developers. The Davis Square Task Force worked with the bank to get the right design for the building because of its close residential abutters.



## 40 HOLLAND STREET

The 40 Holland Street redevelopment was part of the Buena Vista Urban Renewal Project. The City used eminent domain to get ownership of the land. Following ownership, the City put out an RFP seeking a development partner to build what was envisioned in the 1984 Action Plan (see page 10-11). The building opened in 1989/1990 along with Buena Vista Road and Seven Hills Park.





# THE NEXT GENERATION

## It's time again to plan for Davis Square

Community members of Davis Square have shown time and again that they are committed to the improvement of the neighborhood. Almost 30 years after the Davis Square Action Plan, City interests in attracting a hotel to the area catalyzed the community to call for a new neighborhood plan prior to any significant development. Residents and business owners formed the Davis Action Group, an organization similar to the Task Force that preceded it, and met with the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) to chart a path forward.

Early conversations in the planning process centered around the idea that neighborhoods never stand still and that some amount of change is inevitable. However, the idea of change often brings with it concerns over the loss of neighborhood character. Community members emphasized they did not want to stop investment in the neighborhood. Instead they wanted to make sure that the ongoing development of Davis Square would help to evolve the neighborhood into a better version of itself - not something totally different.

Soon after these initial meetings, Mayor Joe Curtatone announced that OSPCD would bring its neighborhood planning efforts, better known as *SomervillebyDesign*, to Davis Square. In 2013, an intensive planning and design charrette would put residents, business owners, city planners, and design consultants at the same table to collectively generate ideas for the future of the neighborhood. It was at this event that the community would convey a strong message to the City: "focus on making the Square a better place for people."

In response, OSPCD turned to an urban planning and design philosophy promoted by the Danish architect Jan Gehl. After decades of research on the human scale and public spaces, Gehl became famous for helping Denmark enact a plan to make Copenhagen 'the world's most livable city.' Copenhagen now routinely earns some of the highest marks in the world for resident happiness, walkability, and bikeability. Today, Jan's firm, Gehl Studio, works globally to help make cities for people by focusing on public life, the events that occur between buildings, as the driver for urban design. The City hired Gehl Studio to assist with the development of this plan.

**"Focus on making the square  
a better place for people."**

**- RESIDENTS OF DAVIS SQUARE**

Jan Gehl's planning philosophy has historic roots. "In the old cities, we have spaces; in the modernistic cities, we have left-over spaces. They put down the buildings first. Then they asked landscape architects to tidy up, and then they looked out the window to see if there were any people enjoying these leftover spaces, only to discover that there were none." Jan explains in his book *Cities for People* "in the old urban settlements, they always did it the other way around. First, it starts with life, and then next it's the spaces that human life requires, and then the buildings were built in relation to these spaces."

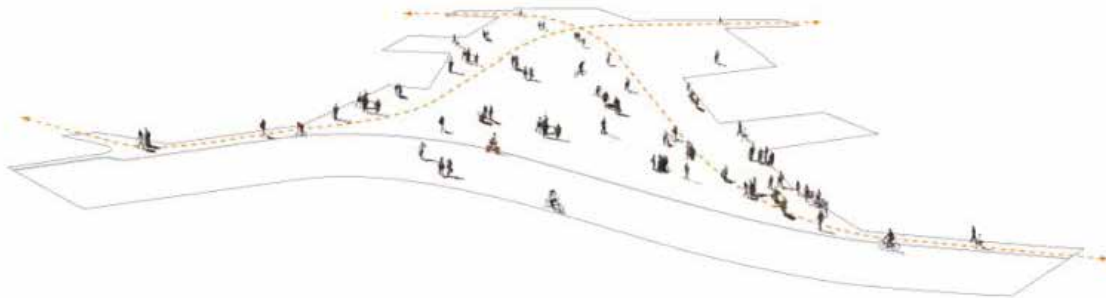


## A FOUNDING PRINCIPLE

This plan does not propose to transform Davis Square. The primary intent is to enhance the unique qualities and character that make Davis Square special. The focus is to make the core of Davis Square a better place for people 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 provide the residents, employees, and customers needed for public life.

“First life, then spaces, then  
buildings - the other way  
around never works.”

- JAN GEHL, CITIES FOR PEOPLE



**LIFE**



**SPACE**



**BUILDINGS**

## SOMERVISION

In 2012, the City of Somerville adopted SomerVision, its first city-wide comprehensive plan. This plan was developed to build consensus around strategies to preserve Somerville's identity as an accessible, mixed-income, multi-cultural city; while at the same time outlining an actionable policy agenda to invite and leverage public and private investment in transit-oriented development. The Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development coordinated the four-year project with a 60-member Steering Committee comprised of residents, business owners, nonprofit agencies, and elected officials. The City generated trust and buy-in among residents and community partners through development of the plan.

SomerVision is based on our shared values as a community and establishes our commitment to:

- Celebrate the **DIVERSITY** of our people, cultures, housing, and economy.
- Foster the character of residents, neighborhoods, hills, and squares, and the strength of our **COMMUNITY** spirit as expressed in our history, our cultural and social life, and our deep sense of civic pride.
- Invest in the growth of a resilient **ECONOMY** 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.
- Promote a dynamic urban streetscape that embraces public transportation, reduces dependence on the automobile, and that is **ACCESSIBLE**, inviting, and safe for all pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users.
- Build a **SUSTAINABLE** future through strong environmental leadership, balanced transportation

modes, engaging recreational and community spaces, exceptional schools and educational opportunities, improved community health, varied and affordable housing options, and effective stewardship of our natural resources.

- Commit to **INNOVATION** and affirm our responsibility to current and future generations in all our endeavors: business, technology, education, arts, and government.

Somerville's comprehensive plan creates clear expectations regarding neighborhood character and neighborhood change through The SomerVision Map (shown at right). The map illustrates a shared determination to "conserve Somerville's great residential neighborhoods, enhance our funky squares and commercial corridors, and transform opportunity areas on the eastern and southern edges of Somerville."

The SomerVision Map is closely tied to the SomerVision Numbers, a series of aspirational targets: 30,000 new jobs, 125 new acres of open space, 6,000 new housing units, 1,200 new affordable units, and 50% trips by non-automobile modes.

SomerVision sets out a course of action. However, to implement SomerVision, we must do further planning that translates city-wide goals, policies, and objectives down to every neighborhood, main street, and station area across the city. In 2019, a 10 year update to SomerVision, called SomerVision 2040 kicked off. As the Davis plan is implemented, we'll reflect on the outcome of SomerVision 2040 before proceeding.



# PLANNING FRAMEWORK

## Implementing SomerVision in Davis Square

SomerVision provides us with a policy framework to guide future decisions. It calls for design-based neighborhood plans to guide future development to achieve various aspirations on diversity, community, economy, accessibility, sustainability, and innovation.

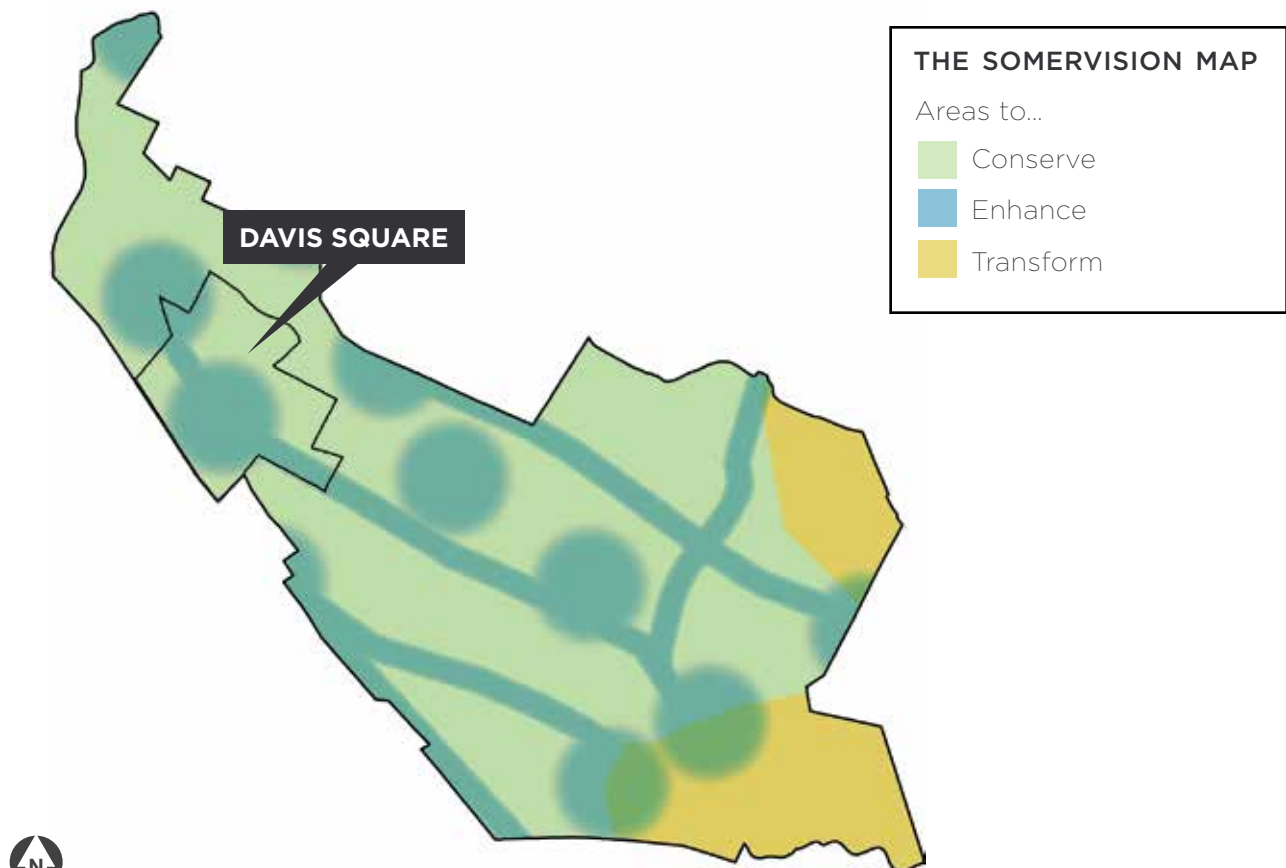
Each subsequent neighborhood plan is customized because each neighborhood is unique and will help to achieve the objectives of SomerVision in its own unique way. Davis Square is identified as an Area to Enhance on the SomerVision Map.

### WHAT DOES ENHANCE MEAN?

Nearly all of Somerville's squares and main streets are mapped as areas to enhance. SomerVision sets a goal of

4,500 additional jobs and 900 new dwelling units cumulatively for all of the areas to enhance. The majority of these places are frequently thought of as 'built out' by residents but each of these neighborhoods is still able to contribute toward progressing the SomerVision numbers and values. Place types are a way to categorize squares and neighborhoods to bring common language to all participants in the planning process.

Smaller squares like Teele, Ball, and Gilman function as **NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS** which have less of an impact economically and are usually close to their full development potential. Some opportunities exist for small improvements, but the possibilities for infill development are limited. Local



businesses and low- to mid-rise mixed-use buildings are the hallmark of Neighborhood Centers.

Somerville's mid-sized squares like Davis, Porter, and Sullivan are **LOCAL CENTERS**. They have more impact economically, draw visitors from a larger geography and usually have more capacity for infill development. Local Centers are home to small businesses, restaurants, and personal service uses, but their buildings are usually in the mid-rise range - three to six stories. Upper stories are typically residential unless the circumstances exist to attract larger employers to the area.

The presence of public transportation has a large impact on what's possible for a Local Center. If frequent transit or even access to regional highways exists, commercial office buildings are more likely. Employers add valuable daytime foot traffic that makes for a more robust local economy and a more visible public life throughout the day, further reinforcing the Local Center.

Local Centers have an upper limit to development or else they transform into a larger, more built up place type known as **URBAN CENTERS**. Somerville has an Urban Center evolving in Assembly Square. The eastern side of Union Square is also planned to be transformed into an Urban Center over the next 20 years. In some ways, planning for these transformational redevelopment areas is easier than planning for the sensitive infill necessary to enhance, rather than transform, existing Local and Neighborhood Centers.

The hierarchy of place types is used by the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) to inform planning decisions. The physical characteristics and development parameters that differentiate each place type can even help identify where the city's squares are in their evolution and guide future growth. OSPCD uses place types to plan for the enhance and transform areas identified in SomerVision.

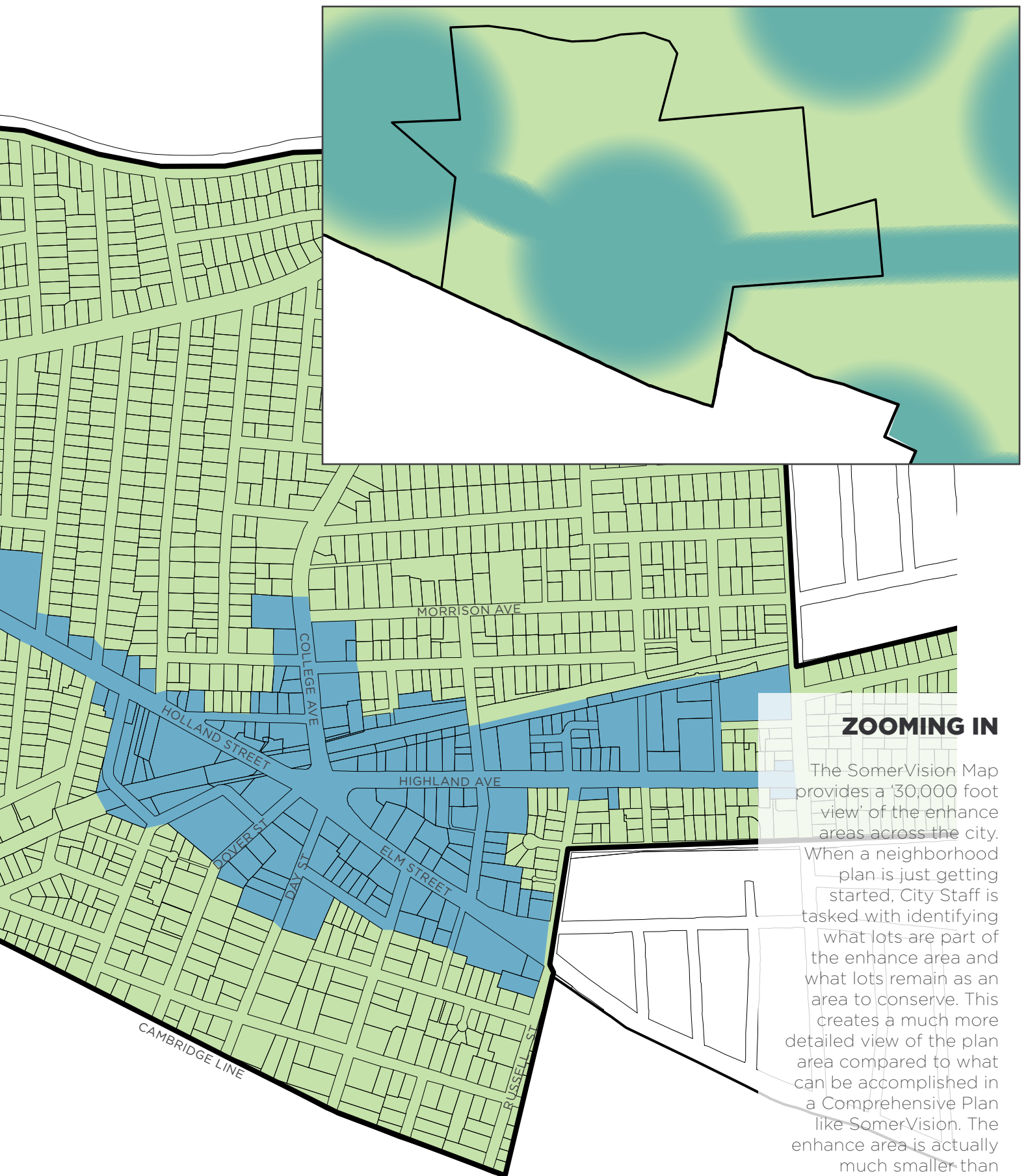
## DAVIS SQUARE: LOCAL CENTER

Within this classification of place types, Davis Square is most like a Local Center. The center of the neighborhood sits at the intersection of four major streets: Holland, Elm, Highland, and College - which connect it to other nearby Local and Urban Centers. Davis exceeds the expectations of Local Centers with multiple transit modes including the Red Line subway, cross-town buses, and even local feeder buses that bring passengers from the edge of the neighborhood to its subway station. The surrounding area has a moderate residential density with everything from multi-unit houses and multiplexes to rowhouses and apartment buildings. The core of Davis is home to neighborhood serving retail and a multitude of restaurants that attract customers from across the region. Since the opening of the Red Line, a number of commercial buildings have been built that provide employment opportunities beyond the service sector.

In the planning process, we engaged residents on what Davis Square is today and what it should be in the future. The majority of participants agreed with staff that Davis Square is currently a Local Center and would like to see an enhanced Local Center in the future.

Davis Square is not yet a fully built out Local Center. Multiple low rise buildings and underutilized parking lots provide an opportunity for a more productive use of the available space. Understanding Davis Square as a Local Center helps to facilitate conversations about the type of place that it already is and the type of place it strives to become as it continues to evolve. In this context, public realm improvements and infill development to enhance the neighborhood involve making small tweaks and filling in the gaps to reinforce the existing character of Davis Square as a Local Center.





## ZOOMING IN

The SomerVision Map provides a '30,000 foot view' of the enhance areas across the city. When a neighborhood plan is just getting started, City Staff is tasked with identifying what lots are part of the enhance area and what lots remain as an area to conserve. This creates a much more detailed view of the plan area compared to what can be accomplished in a Comprehensive Plan like SomerVision. The enhance area is actually much smaller than what is depicted on the SomerVision Map, which can have an impact on what is possible through infill development.

# PEOPLE FIRST

## Prioritizing What We Care About

Traffic and parking issues are generally well represented in conventional planning practice. When it comes to the people using the space, usually very little information is available. Data points representing the pedestrian point-of-view and how public spaces actually function for the people that use them are not collected.

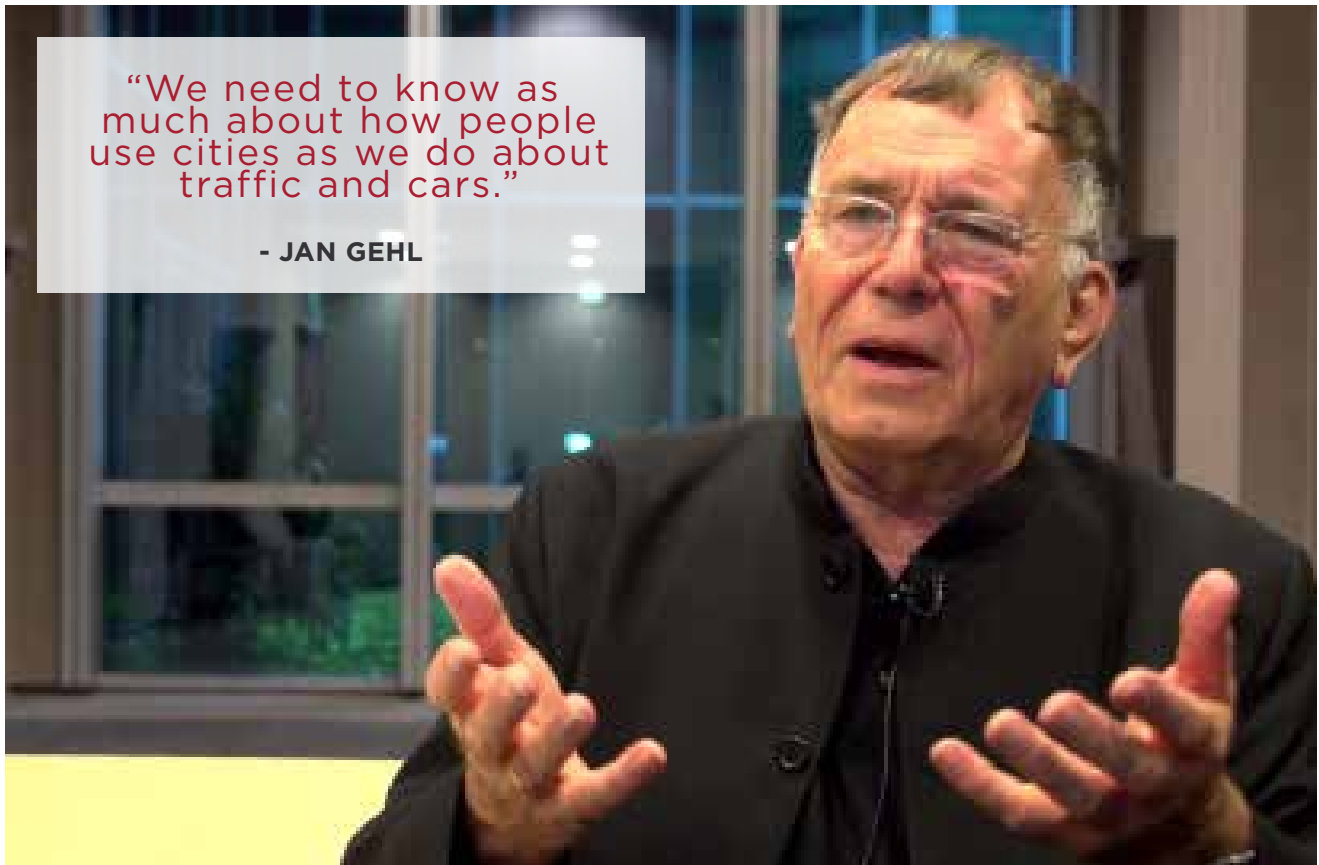
In May 2015, the City hired Gehl Studio, the U.S. office of Jan Gehl's consulting firm, to conduct a Public Space, Public Life Study. The purpose of the study was to **COLLECT INFORMATION ABOUT PUBLIC LIFE** in Somerville and make it easily accessible to the residents, politicians, planners, and business owners who work to improve the city. With the help of over 50 volunteers, Gehl Studio collected data on public life as it unfolded at 23 locations.



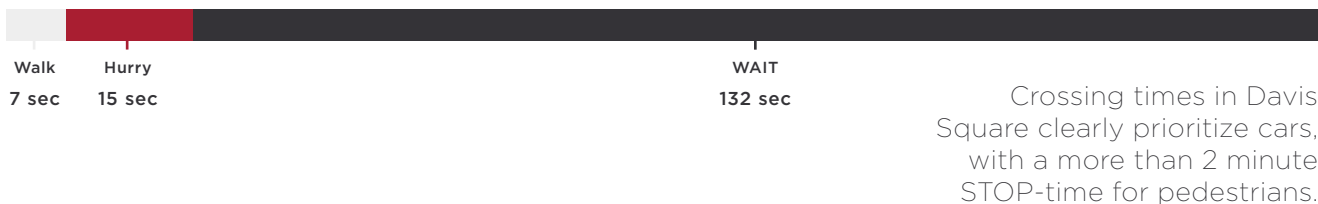
Many findings from the study are informative for planning in Davis Square. Residents responding to a favorite places survey identified the Community Path and Statue Plaza as their top two favorite public spaces in the entire city. Volunteer surveyors counting people and cyclists recorded **THE HIGHEST PEDESTRIAN VOLUMES ANYWHERE IN THE CITY** in Davis Square. In fact, the

**"We need to know as much about how people use cities as we do about traffic and cars."**

**- JAN GEHL**







number of pedestrians recorded in Davis rivals those found near City Hall in Center City Philadelphia. At the same time, Gehl Studio also observed that Davis Square was not designed very well as a place for people to walk or to sit and stay. A quality analysis indicated that the public realm generally fails to properly address the needs of pedestrians, despite the high volumes that were observed.

Fewer people stick around in Davis Square as observed in other places in the city. One reason might be that most of the outdoor seating is for bars, cafes, and restaurants, rather than public seating. If there were more invitations to stay, Davis could reach and even surpass other squares. The pedestrian volume is already there, it just needs the supporting infrastructure for it to transform from necessary activities to the optional and social activities that create a more vibrant, interactive public life.

The challenges and opportunities identified in Davis Square exist at a variety of scales, from how street space is shared to the specific design details of the public realm. For example:

- Vehicular traffic dominates the street, conflicting with other users.
- Despite recent improvements on Highland Avenue, cycling conditions are generally poor.
- Pedestrians cross the street away from designated crosswalks and against pedestrian signals.
- Public seating is limited, which restricts social interaction unless you are a customer of private outdoor seating.
- Brick sidewalks have become difficult to access for the disabled, elderly, and people with children.
- Until 2015, there was little data on pedestrian and cyclist movements over the course a day, differences in

their ages and genders, or how public spaces are actually used.

## INCREASING PUBLIC SPACE

The configuration of Davis Square's main intersection has little visibility of pedestrians and requires use of multiple crosswalks to reach the other side. Signal timing makes it hard for even able-bodied people to traverse just one of those crosswalks. Pedestrians cross against signals and even dart through the middle of the intersection.

To achieve a high-quality public realm, Davis Square must adjust from a place that prioritizes pass through traffic and accommodates only the functional types of pedestrian trips (shopping, eating,



and commuting). The core of the Square needs to be reimagined as a series of spaces offering a range of opportunities for a variety of activities.

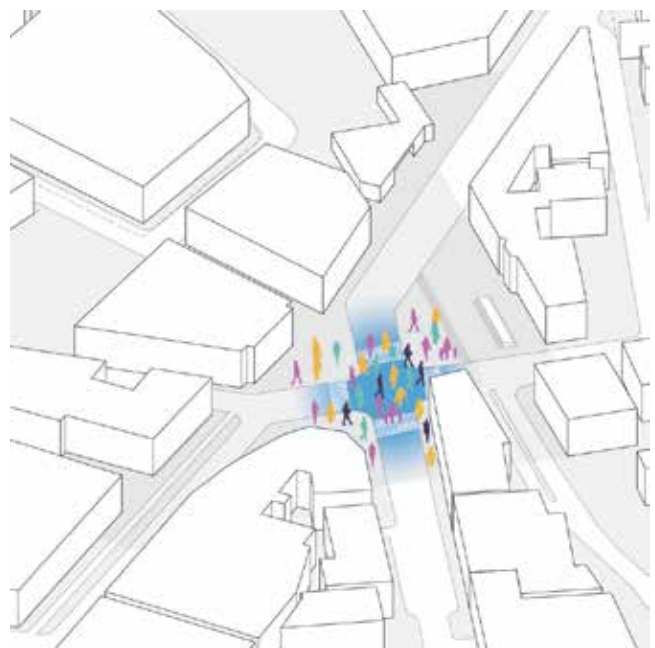
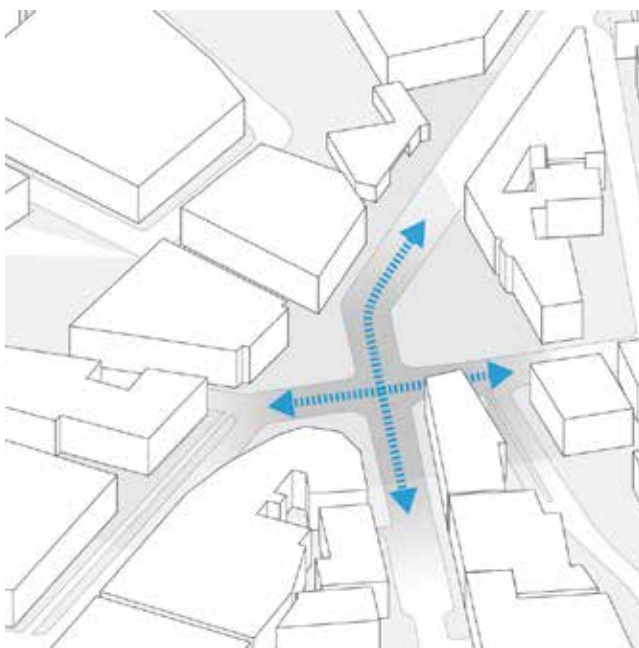
A **TRIPLING OF THE PUBLIC SPACE** can be created just by squaring off the intersection. Re-establishing two way traffic in all directions and shutting down one block of Dover Street reinvent movement through the Square that ends cut through traffic on neighborhood streets, eliminates conflicting turning movements yet maintains vehicle flow. Restriping the roadway maintains on-street parking where needed while accommodating automobiles, bicycles, and even a bus priority lane on Holland Street. With the intersection redesigned for all travel modes, the use of the newly created civic spaces for event programming is even more flexible to community needs.

Even better, many of these moves can be done incrementally - first the bus priority lane, then a plaza from the Highland to Elm slip lane, then restriping for bike lanes. With each step data can be collected and solutions allowed to evolve over time.

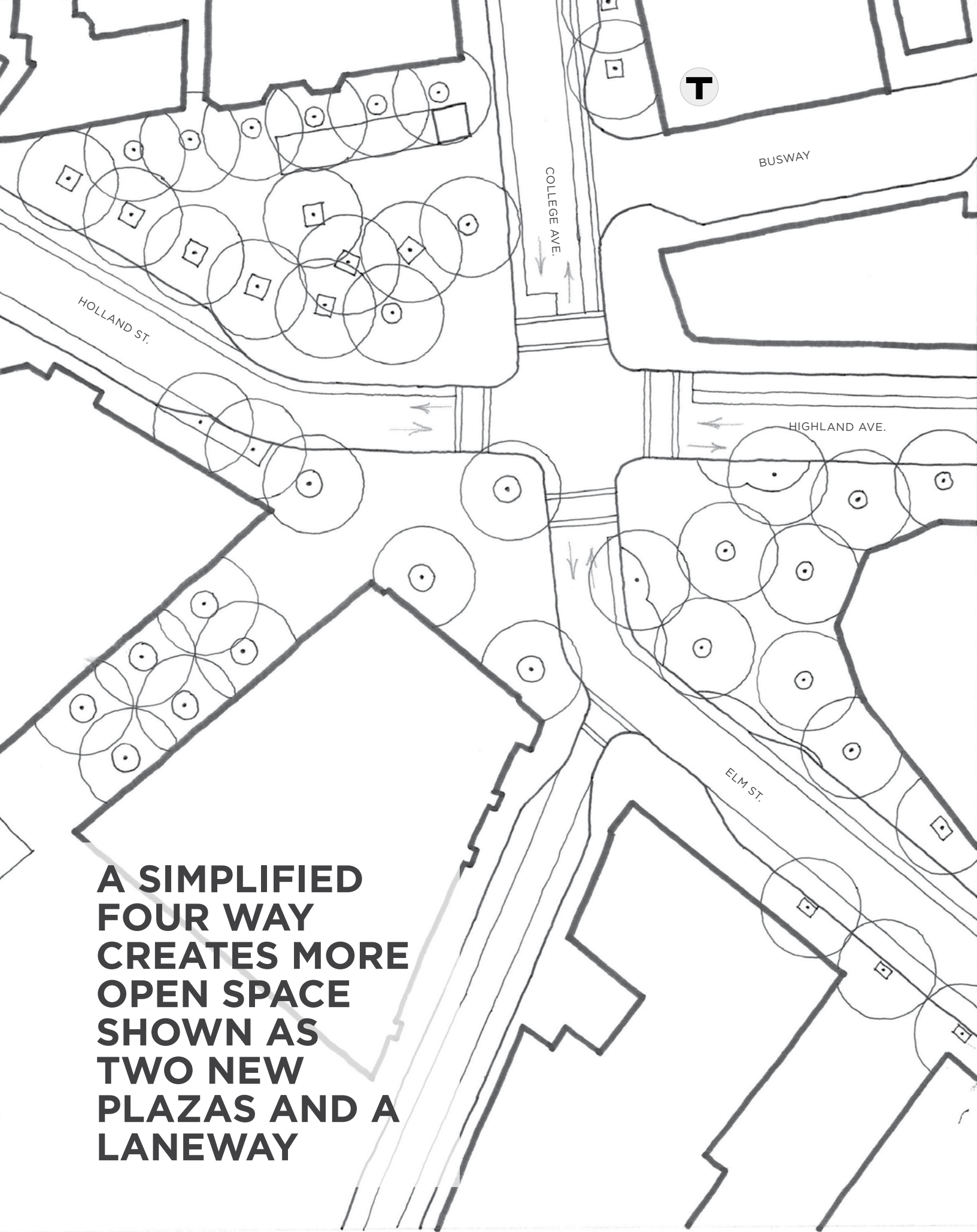
## IMPLEMENTING THIS PLAN

A neighborhood plan sets a path forward but this idea is not ready for construction. City staff worked with Toole Design Group to make sure that a 4-way intersection in Davis Square could actually work. It can. However, it can't be done immediately since there are several problems that need to be addressed prior to implementation. Most of these items are discussed in greater length in the Space chapter. Some topics are left for further community engagement prior to any construction. Some of the challenges are:

- Fix the loading problem
- Better utilize parking in the Square
- Improve signal timing and coordination between signals
- Further study and implement 2-way streets around Davis Square







HOLLAND ST.

COLLEGE AVE.

T

BUSWAY

HIGHLAND AVE.

ELM ST.

**A SIMPLIFIED  
FOUR WAY  
CREATES MORE  
OPEN SPACE  
SHOWN AS  
TWO NEW  
PLAZAS AND A  
LANEWAY**





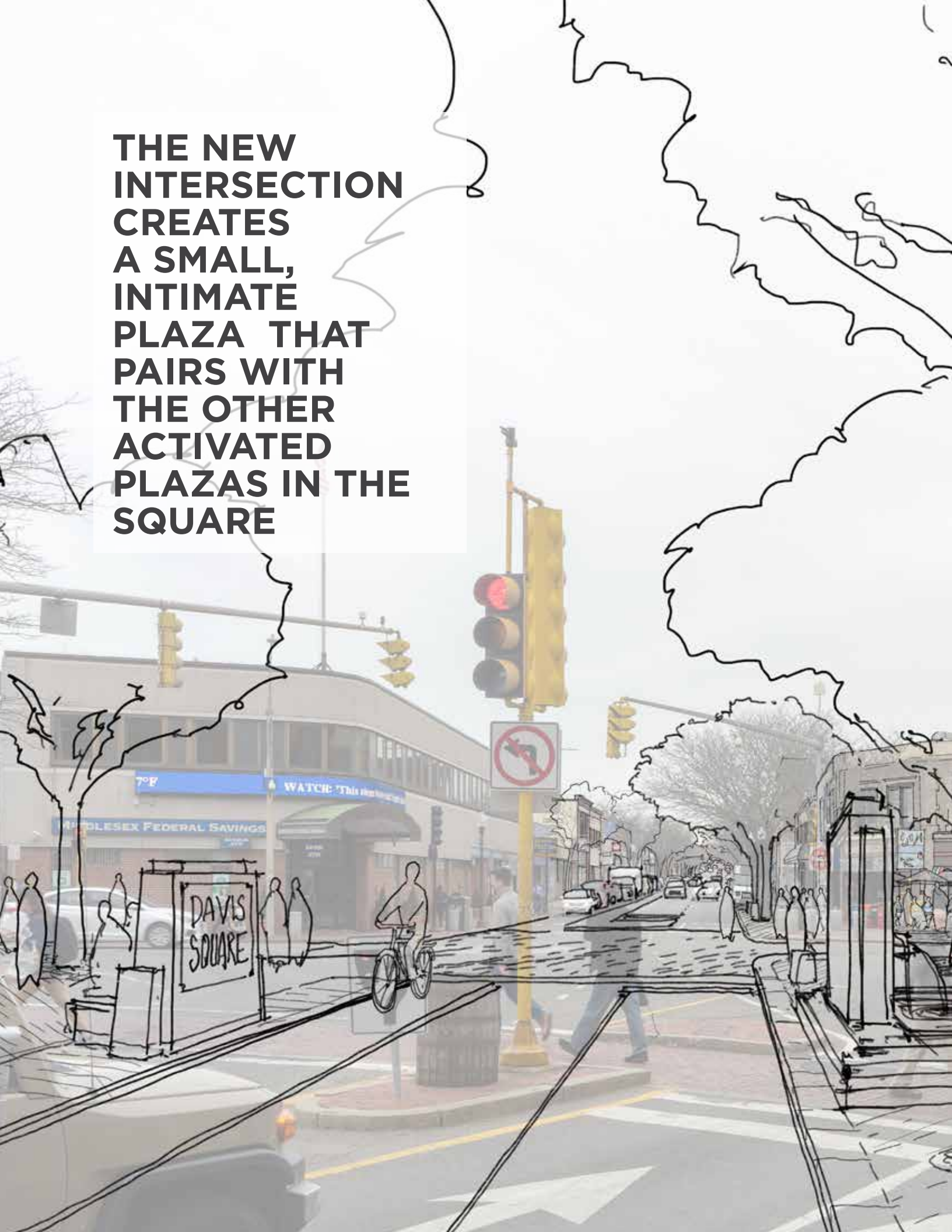


An architectural sketch of a city plaza. In the foreground, there are several outdoor seating areas with tables and chairs. A large tree on the left side of the frame provides shade. In the background, there are more trees, a building with a sign that says "FLOYD'S", and a street with traffic lights. The overall scene is a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly urban space.

**RECLAIMING  
THE HIGHLAND/  
ELM SLIP LANE  
FROM CARS CAN  
TRANSFORM  
THE SIDEWALK  
AND TRAFFIC  
ISLAND INTO  
A PLAZA  
WITH LOTS OF  
SUNLIGHT**



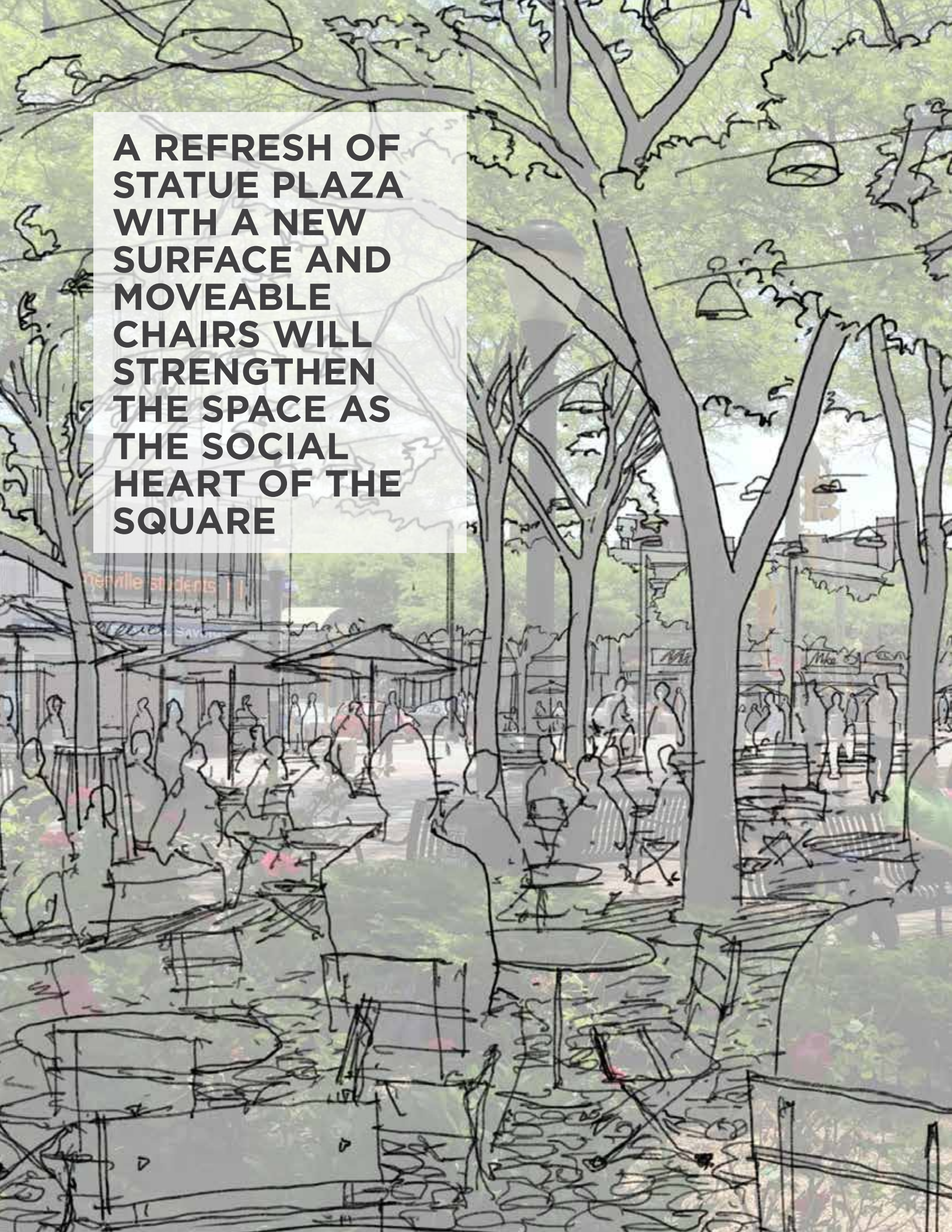
**THE NEW  
INTERSECTION  
CREATES  
A SMALL,  
INTIMATE  
PLAZA THAT  
PAIRS WITH  
THE OTHER  
ACTIVATED  
PLAZAS IN THE  
SQUARE**









An architectural sketch of a public plaza. The scene is filled with large, mature trees with detailed foliage. In the foreground and middle ground, numerous stylized human figures are depicted in various poses, suggesting a lively social environment. There are several outdoor seating areas with tables and chairs, some covered by large umbrellas. In the background, there are buildings and a sign that reads "Neville students". The overall style is a loose, hand-drawn sketch with a focus on human scale and social interaction.

**A REFRESH OF  
STATUE PLAZA  
WITH A NEW  
SURFACE AND  
MOVEABLE  
CHAIRS WILL  
STRENGTHEN  
THE SPACE AS  
THE SOCIAL  
HEART OF THE  
SQUARE**











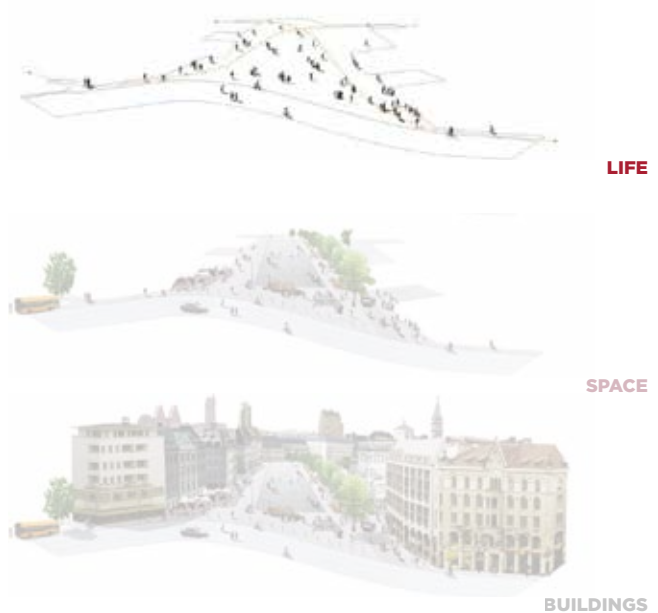


**LIFE**

# A PLAN FOR LIFE

## Goals for Public Life

Part one of this plan recommends ways to increase and reinforce or **ENHANCE** the public life that already occurs in Davis Square. The liveliness of any urban place is a question of the number of pedestrians multiplied by their length of stay. When the ingredients for a lively public life provide something for everyone, people are found outside in the sun, in the shade, out of the wind, in groups, alone, close to activity, and in relative seclusion. Seeing and being seen by other people is perhaps the strongest attractor of additional activity and provides the visibility necessary for safety and comfort. If the street environment is comfortable and invites people to stay longer, they will make use of the city to a greater degree.



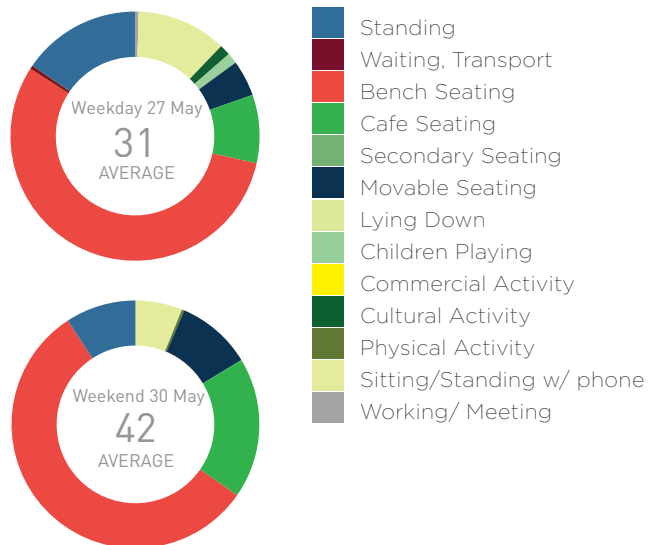
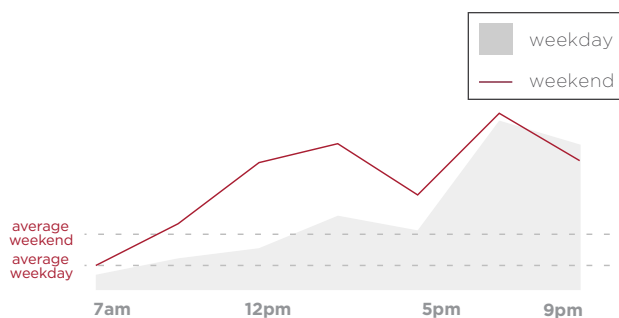
**“The presence of great numbers of people gathered together in cities should be enjoyed as an asset and their presence celebrated.”**

**- JANE JACOBS, AUTHOR & ACTIVIST**

**“What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people. ”**

**- WILLIAM WHYTE, SOCIOLOGIST**

Davis Square Plaza Activity  
From 2015 Public Space Public Life Report





### HOW TO STUDY PUBLIC LIFE

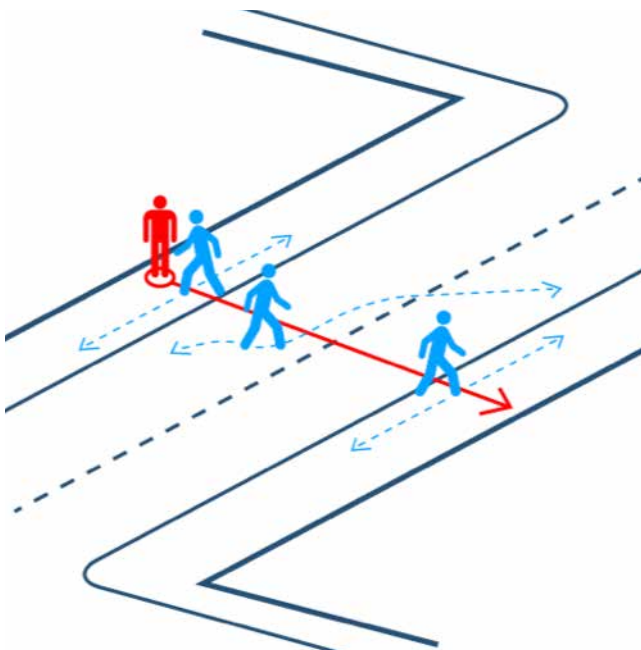
To implement the City of Somerville's 2014 Complete Streets Ordinance, the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development (OSPCD) established a pedestrian-first modal hierarchy for transportation planning. All transportation projects and programs, from scoping to maintenance, would now favor pedestrians first, then transit riders, cyclists, and finally motor vehicles. This prioritization is purposely designed to rebalance streets to make them more 'complete' to reverse generations of automobile-focused planning and design at the expense of all other transportation modes.

OSPCD is expanding the people first planning policy to all of their work. In 2015, Gehl Studio trained City Staff and volunteers on how to study public life. Gehl pioneered a methodology that flipped the conventional way of planning upside down to make people more visible in decision making. With the conventional model, transportation engineers specialized in automobile traffic; landscape architects focused on parks; architects designed the buildings; and urban planners pulled the pieces together through long-range plans. But, public life and the interaction between

life and space were completely neglected by these professions.

Making public life an important dimension of planning decisions requires putting knowledge about human behavior in the built environment on an equal footing with knowledge about buildings, plant species, and transportation systems. In their book *How to Study Public Life*, Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre write, "public life changes constantly in the course of a day, week, or month, and over the years. In addition, design, gender, age, financial resources, culture and many other factors determine how we use or do not use public space." Despite the unpredictability of life itself, understanding public life and how to support it is crucial to **IMPROVING LIVING CONDITIONS IN CITIES**.

Studying public life is based on, quite simply, making observations of how life unfolds in city space. People's behavior is documented, analyzed, and interpreted. How many people are present? Who is using a space? Where are people going? What are people doing? How long are people staying? The most fundamental questions of public life studies are how many, who, where, what, and how long.



## PLAN A SQUARE FOR PEOPLE

As a departure from planning in the abstract, public life studies rely on observation because it leads to greater understanding. Acting as a fly on the wall, the observer is “an invisible non-participant who takes in the big picture without taking part in the event,” write Gehl & Svarre, “using one’s senses, common sense, and simple registration techniques with pen and paper.”

The method for collecting this data was developed by Gehl Architects and used by dozens of cities for similar purposes:

- The age, gender, and number of pedestrians and cyclists passing an imaginary line are taken in specific locations for 10 minutes every hour between 8 am to 10 pm. Counts are later extrapolated to produce hourly estimates.
- Stationary activities are mapped for the remainder of each hour in nearby public spaces.
- Data is collected on a weekday (typically Wednesday) and Saturday.

The 2015 Somerville Public Space Public Life survey was Gehl’s first city-wide survey and recorded observations of public life in 23 different locations across the city. Since that first survey, OSPCD Staff have institutionalized the methodology and recorded additional data in both Davis Square and Union Square.

You never know how people actually use public spaces until you go take a look.

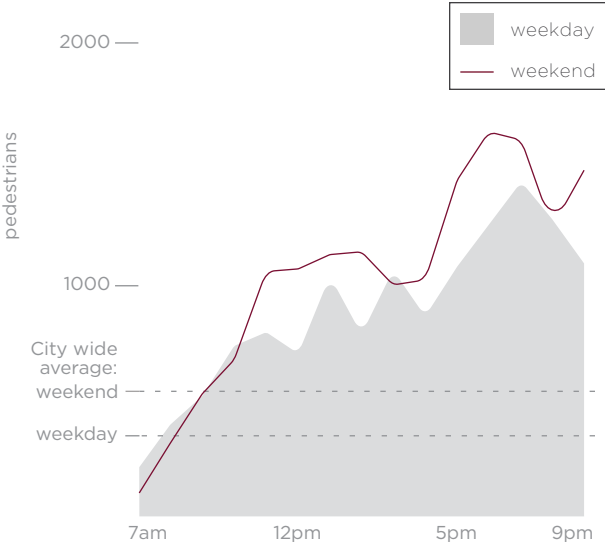




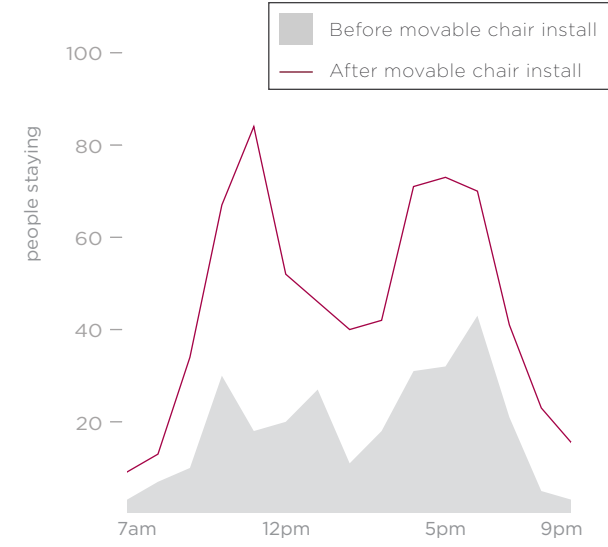
PUBLIC LIFE IN DAVIS SQUARE

Compared to other places in Somerville, Davis has the highest pedestrian volumes by far and is the most consistently busy across weekdays and weekends. Davis Square has the most equal distribution of genders. The average gender breakdown for pedestrians in Somerville is 53% men and 47% women. Davis Square has the highest peaks, with Holland Street seeing 282 cyclists at 8 am on the weekday and the Community Path seeing 275 cyclists in one peak weekend afternoon hour. The movable chairs pilot at Kenney Park and 7 Hills Park also increased Davis’ staying power - meaning more people lingered than just passed through these public spaces.

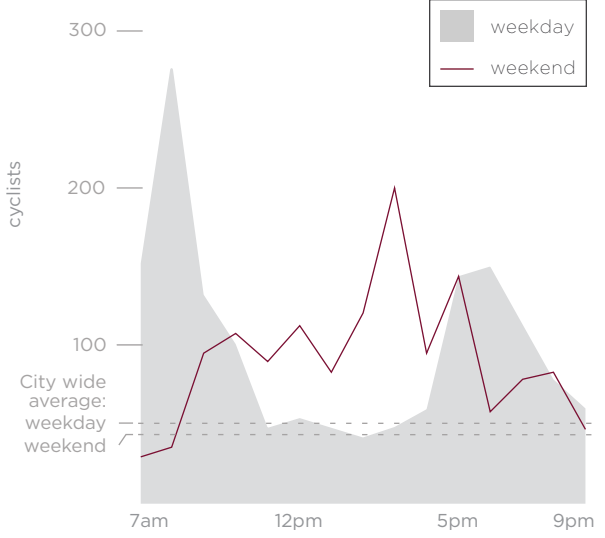
Davis Square Pedestrians per Hour



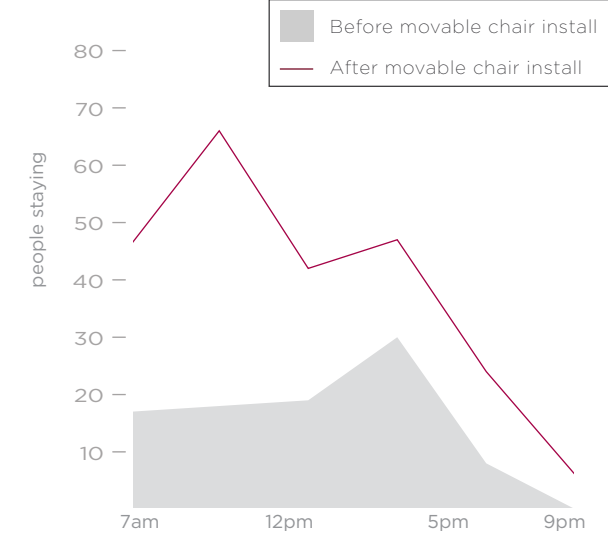
Kenney Park Staying Power



Davis Square Cyclists per Hour



7 Hills Park Staying Power



## ATTRACT & RETAIN PUBLIC LIFE

### A PLACE TO WORK

The Davis Square neighborhood seeks to enhance its quality as a Local Center by adding employment. This will increase the weekday daytime activity, something that's currently lacking in the Square. The ideal commercial sites in Davis can generate a building approximately 100,000 SF in size (400 jobs). The market demand is for 5,000-50,000 SF. The potential tenants do not generate enough demand to spur new construction. To mitigate risk, new buildings in Davis Square need to be "pre-leased" for banks to lend. The majority of tenants in the market cannot wait for a building to be built so they look elsewhere where space is available immediately. Fortunately, understanding the market leads to potential solutions for bridging the existing gap.

#### MARKET DEMAND

To analyze Davis Square's commercial real estate (CRE) market, City government

relies on professional CRE and investment management firms' outlook and trends reporting and property databases. These firms are made up of commercial real estate developers, tenant representatives, and property managers and have their finger on the pulse of both available space and who is shopping.

Davis Square is of interest to area businesses. There is a small but consistent demand for 20,000 - 50,000 SF of space by users looking for urban transit accessible locations in the Boston metro market. The median square footage for a business that has expressed interest in Somerville specifically is 5,000 SF. Increasingly, there are small start-ups from area incubators that have outgrown existing space and want to stay in Somerville, they are seeking 5,000 - 15,000 SF.



### RE-TENANTING

To achieve SomerVision's goal of 30,000 new jobs, more commercial space is needed. In Davis, it is common for industrial and auto uses to re-tenant as tech and incubator type office spaces. However, they don't add new jobs at a rate that meets the SomerVision goal. Nor is there enough industrial space that could be converted to meet Davis Square's employment growth goal. This photo shows a recent conversion from automotive to office space at 100 Dover Street.



### AVAILABLE SPACE IN DAVIS

The total office market in Davis Square is 720,000 SF. **ONLY 3% IS VACANT** (a healthy vacancy rate is 5-7%). The average Davis Square office tenant is in less than 8,500 SF of space.

There are 15 office spaces currently available for rent in Davis Square (Spring 2018). The largest is about 5,000 SF with the remaining spaces adding up to a total of only 15,000 SF (at a 714 SF average size). This availability does not match market demand or neighborhood goals.

### DEVELOPMENT REALITIES

Real estate development is an industry that brings together subject matter experts in finance, economics, market trends, and building designers to make a development reality. The conditions need to be right for all parties for new construction to proceed.

Lenders won't lend the money to construct the building unless they view the risk as manageable and the return as appropriate. Lenders will often require guarantees of the developer to mitigate their risk.

The best form of risk mitigation is to "pre-lease" space in the building. If a portion of the building is leased to a tenant before the building starts construction it reduces the lender's risk and makes the investment easier to underwrite. The least risky commercial development occurs when 100% of the building is pre-leased to a single tenant often called a "build-to-suit" project. The most risky commercial development occurs when 0% of the building is pre-leased. This is called speculative (spec) development because the building is constructed and the lender and developer speculate that tenants will lease the space when it's complete. Spec commercial development only occurs in the most mature commercial markets. Beyond Kendall and the Seaport, it's rarely done in the Boston area real estate market.

### STEPS FORWARD

Davis Square has several sites that meet the dimensional requirements of commercial buildings. However, **THE PROSPECTIVE TENANTS IN THE MARKET CANNOT PRE-LEASE ENOUGH SPACE TO MITIGATE RISK FOR LENDERS IN AN UNPROVEN COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE MARKET.** To stimulate commercial development, the City needs to work with land owners to achieve the plan goals. But knowing the challenges to the Davis Square commercial real estate market is important to strategizing how to recruit new office development, new jobs, and more daytime activity in Davis Square. Davis Square needs to be commercial ready.

#### Policy Objective 1.01

- Incentivize catalyst commercial development with the Grove & Highland city-owned parking lot

#### Policy Objective 1.02

- Preserve prominent sites for future commercial growth through zoning

#### Policy Objective 1.03

- Identify buildings for startup expansion

#### Policy Objective 1.04

- Recruit and play matchmaker with 20,000-50,000 SF tenants/property owners

#### Policy Objective 1.05

- Help merge the 'purchasing power' of commercial uses seeking 15,000 SF of space

#### Policy Objective 1.06

- Conduct advance market and pro-forma analysis for commercial development sites

## A PLACE TO SHOP

When neighborhood planning participants were asked to identify what made the neighborhoods character unique, the storefronts were one of the three elements identified. The storefronts are typically less than 30' wide - a major factor in keeping people's attention span and inviting them to keep walking. They also artfully display the available goods for sale or showcase the activity inside. Davis Square, as typical in Somerville's Local Centers, is a host of independent businesses. People feel connected with the employees, business operators, and other patrons, many of whom are their neighbors.

It is incredibly hard to be a retailer for several reasons. First, virtually everyone has a store in their pocket that is open 24/7, delivers in short timeframes, and is infinitely searchable. The convenience often trumps the best intentions of shopping locally.

Secondly, and this is especially true in Davis Square, per square foot real estate costs are high. Many 'cheap' rents are from property owners that inherited property with no mortgage. A change of management could quickly change the expectation of financial return.

Capital costs to maintain a store are high. Retailers pay upfront for everything in the store. It takes years of experience to balance the investment of stocking the shelves to store sales. Without the negotiating power of quantity that larger national retailers have, there's less profit margin for the exact same product.

Last but not least, labor costs are high. In a bull market, it's even harder to find good help. Proprietors have to pay more and/or offer better benefits than their competitors or risk losing staff to a neighboring business.

These retailers could benefit from high quality technical assistance like marketing, and market research, lease negotiating, and on-line marketing.

However, the City has a challenge in funding these activities because the area is not CDBG eligible and state law makes it difficult to directly assist businesses.

The Davis Square community is adamant: do not let Davis Square turn into Harvard Square. This problem requires patrons of the Square, the City, property owners, and business operators to work together. If you love Davis Square, shop local.

### Policy Objective 1.07

- Encourage people to shop local by expanding Somerville's #Loyal2Local campaign to Davis Square.

### Policy Objective 1.08

- Adopt the proposed Somerville Zoning Ordinance so that its many regulatory tools can be put to use in Davis Square.

### Policy Objective 1.09

- Encourage the creation of business condominiums.

### Policy Objective 1.10

- Encourage the creation of retail spaces less than 800 square feet.

### Policy Objective 1.12

- Identify resources for more small business programs.

### Policy Objective 1.13

- Explore programs to create affordable retail space.

### Policy Objective 1.14

- Conduct a Small Business Needs Assessment survey to identify priority needs for technical assistance services.

### Policy Objective 1.15

- Simplify licensing and permitting processes to help retailers offer experiences more easily.



## AWARD WINNING LOCAL RETAILER

Did you know that Davis Square has a national award winning comic book shop? In 2017, Comicazi won the Will Eisner Spirit of Comics Award. Awarded yearly at Comic-Con, it recognizes outstanding retailers and their contributions to the comic book industry.

In the same year, Travel and Leisure awarded Comicazi as one of the Best Comic Book Stores in the U.S. This is on top of their regularly awarded local accolades for best comic book shop.

Comicazi is almost 19 years old and is more than a comic book retailer. They offer toys and graphic novels and have a friendly and knowledgeable staff. Comicazi also has several weekly in-store events whether for comic book lovers or gamers. The Economic Development office recently supported them in the health permitting process

so they are able to serve food in the store to support events.

Comicazi has built a community around their store. For the last several years they have been running Bad Kids Press, a collective of writers and artists collaborating to showcase their work. Patrons have organized the Ladies of Comicazi. They are an, "...inclusive community devoted to consuming, critiquing, and creating comics and pop culture." They host regular events at the shop and a yearly LadiesCon.

If you are looking for the latest issue of X-Men or want to find a vintage He-Man figure, this is your one-stop local shop, check it out!



Image from Comicazi.com

### A PLACE TO LIVE

Davis Square is one of the City's liveliest neighborhoods but has seen very little development since the Red Line opened. People are quick to call Davis Square gentrified but that oversimplifies the multitude of factors that have led to expensive housing costs. For brevity, only a few are even touched on here.

The 1980's plan was created in the anticipation of the new Red Line station to improve the Square's "physical image and marketing position." The residential development strategy within offered a few sites for development including Ciampa Manor, 353 Summer Street, and the former Lowe school (185 Morrison Avenue) and renovation programs for existing properties. It did note that "increased levels of private investment in the neighborhood's housing stock by younger, upwardly mobile households" were anticipated. This was the housing plan.

What wasn't anticipated is just how much the demand for housing in urban areas with neighborhood services and access to transit would change. The nationwide trend of moving back to urban areas was in its infancy in 1984. People had turned their backs on cities for so long that the residents of Davis Square at the time had underestimated how much housing would be needed. After the Red Line opened, housing costs slowly increased around the station area because of the new amenity. Seeing value in the real estate made it easier for existing or new property owners to invest in their homes which in turn made them more expensive. Then the market demand ramped up sending prices skyward by people that prefer to live in cities backed by a booming job market in the Boston metro area. Housing production in Davis Square, Somerville, and the metro area, haven't kept up with demand.

To assess the current housing market, Planning Staff uses studies like the Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) from 2015 and Analysis of Residential Market

Potential from 2016. The Analysis of Residential Market Potential's moderate-growth scenario identified that the City could absorb 759 new units per year. Since 2010, there has been an average of about 250 new units per year, a 500 unit disparity. Of the 2,200 new units added in Somerville over the last nine years, only 53 of those have been in the Davis Square neighborhood, 30 in the Davis Square Core. Twenty-nine of the 30 units are in the recently completed 351-353 Summer Street site from the 1984 Action Plan. The development has 29 units which took over 15 years to develop because of zoning appeals by abutters.

As demand has gone up, land prices have increased because that is the finite resource. A number that hasn't adjusted is the lot area per dwelling unit dimensional requirement in the zoning ordinance. It limits the number of dwelling units per square foot of lot size. This number discourages the type of density that would distribute the land costs to more units and therefore make them more affordable. There's also a 20% affordable housing requirement for buildings of more than 5 units. Unfortunately, Planning Staff sees some projects take a lower density approach to avoid affordable unit creation but use the generous floor area ratio to provide suburban sized units with upscale finishes available for luxury prices.

The HNA identified, in some ways, what was already known anecdotally - housing (whether rental or ownership) is most expensive near Red Line stations. Condo and single family home prices are too high for the majority of middle income households. Davis and Porter Squares also have had the highest number of condo conversions in recent years. This moves units out of the rental market, where they were affordable to middle income households, and makes them unattainable for the same income bracket.

The City's two most common ways



of creating affordable housing are purpose built and inclusionary zoning units. Purpose built affordable housing are units constructed specifically for affordable housing. This is the way that Somerville has historically built most of its affordable units. Developments use a variety of financing mechanisms — grants, low-interest loans, and federal tax programs — to build new housing units. The Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) is a big contributor to this supply. SHA is a state funded agency that builds and maintains affordable housing. In Davis Square, they maintain the 53-unit Ciampa Manor.

Private development in Somerville also creates deed-restricted affordable housing. Developments over 5 units require up to 20% of the units be affordable. An inclusionary zoning requirement has existed since the '80's but there's only five of these units in Davis Square because there's been so little development.

In some ways, the 1984 Action Plan was successful because the housing projects identified were built. People that were interested in housing during the community process realize that Davis Square cannot solve the regional housing problem alone but that Davis Square has to do its part.

### **Policy Objective 1.07**

- Increase the supply of housing, particularly rental units, within the core of Davis Square.

### **Policy Objective 1.08**

- Increase the diversity of unit type in the housing stock.

### **Policy Objective 1.09**

- Consider using City property to spur the creation of purpose built affordable housing.

### **Policy Objective 1.10**

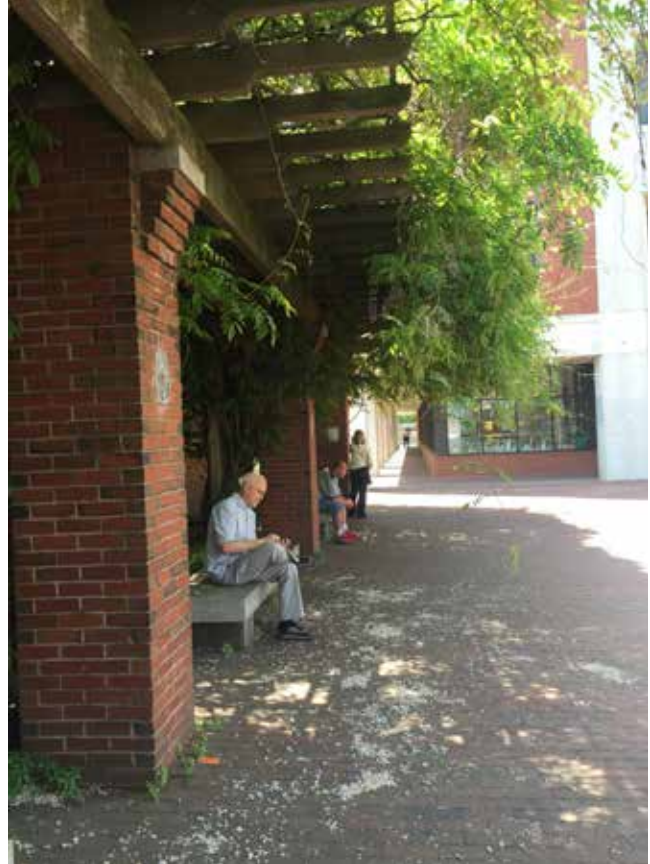
- Pass the zoning overhaul that has unit count minimums for many building types.



### **82 DOVER**

The 82 Dover Street project is an example of under-development in Davis Square's core. A three unit building with underground parking was built but it looks like a multiplex with six units. The building blends well into the existing context of the street and now serves as a transition to the residential buildings beyond. However, because of the low density and amenities the units are incredibly expensive. Zillow estimates each unit at \$1.7 million.

## ATTRACT & RETAIN PUBLIC LIFE



### A PLACE TO BE

By being a success, Davis Square has created a new problem, the public spaces in the core are too well-utilized. The plaza is jam packed on the weekends, Kenney Park is bustling with families, and the sidewalks are crowded. In some ways, Davis Square is the community's third space - a place outside of someone's home and office where they spend a lot of time.

These are good problems to have. However, when people's perception is that there's never a seat available or it's too crowded, this can discourage people from visiting the Square and patronizing the local businesses.

There's one public space that is under-utilized compared to the rest, Seven Hills Park. Just a stone's throw from the plaza, it acts as a passive park. There's only one bench and secondary seating, which are unintentional seats, on low walls around the T vent shaft and accessible entry

from Meacham Road. The adirondack chairs placed in the park in 2016 and 2017 were a low cost way to add seats and activation still fitting with the low-key nature of the park. All public spaces need to be explored as places for people; this includes sidewalks, parking spaces/parking lots, and parks.

The City has failed to create simple, straightforward rules for many business-friendly trends that can support local businesses to activate underutilized spaces and distribute activity. This includes regulations for parklets, food trucks, and public way seating. Understandably, the City needs to represent both existing businesses that are protecting their investment and new business owners trying to set out, but there's room for both in Davis Square.

For example, food trucks are seen as competition for existing restaurants. However, food trucks, offer options that



## ATTRACT & RETAIN PUBLIC LIFE

aren't in abundance in Davis Square - low-cost take-out dining.

In addition, parklets and public way seating are ways to add additional seating to brick and mortar businesses that might not have room to expand. By letting businesses provide seats outside of their storefront whether on the sidewalk or in a parking space, the City is supporting local businesses with low fees for more "real estate."

### Policy Objective 1.11

- Formalize the funding and maintenance of the moveable chairs program.

### Policy Objective 1.12

- Permit areas of Davis Square for privately contributed street seats.

### Policy Objective 1.13

- Create a parklet permitting program.

### Policy Objective 1.14

- Consider pedestrian volume when setting sidewalk widths in future streetscape projects.

### Policy Objective 1.15

- Increase the sidewalk width requirements when permitting outdoor dining in the core of Davis.

### Policy Objective 1.16

- Streamline business licensing programs for street vendors, food trucks, and micro-/pop-up retailers.

### Policy Objective 1.17

- Consider beer garden permitting in public spaces.

### The Current Process to Establish a Food Truck in Somerville

#### 1 Establish food truck

You'll need:

- Food truck & Commissary kitchen
- Hawkers & Peddlers License
- Workers' Comp Insurance

#### 2 Apply online

You'll need:

- Truck layout, equipment specs, photos
- Menu
- Vending site plan
- \$50 nonrefundable fee

City Process: Estimated to take 2-3 months.

#### 3 Health approval

Health Inspectional Services will inspect your truck and ensure you are following appropriate food codes.

#### 4 Fire approval

If you're cooking food on your truck using a flammable material, the Fire Department will need to inspect the truck.

#### 5 Location approval

If you want to vend in a location not already approved, Traffic & Parking must assess and the Board of Aldermen must approve in Step 6.

#### 6 Aldermen approval

The City Council will hear any public feedback about your application and decide whether or not to provide final approval.

#### 7 Pay & finalize

You will pay \$75 for the public hearing fee and \$165 for your annual license fee. Then, you'll be ready to start vending in Somerville!



### IMPROVE MAINTENANCE OF THE SQUARE

The Davis Square Neighborhood Plan Draft suggested to solve the maintenance issues in Davis Square by creating a Community Benefits District or CBD. A CBD can do more than maintenance but residents living around the Square want maintenance action taken immediately. Some efforts need the City's involvement, while others could be part of neighborhood initiatives.

#### BRICK REPLACEMENT

The brick sidewalks in Davis Square were laid in a streetscape project that was called for in the 1984 Davis Square Plan. The bricks pop up and are usually replaced with asphalt patches. As the City repaves streets and sidewalks, as part of annual general fund budget allocations, the sidewalks will be replaced with a concrete path of travel with a brick accent strip. This allows for an accessible path of travel and keeps in Davis Square's character.

#### TRASH COLLECTION

Trash is collected once a day from Davis Square. In high season, like outside JP Licks on a warm summer day, the garbage can is not emptied frequently enough nor maintained for the sticky goodness consumed. Davis Square resident, Rosemary Broome-Bingham collected data in 2013 about trash pickup in Cambridge and Boston and found that Harvard Square's trash is picked up three times a day.

Although increased commitments to pick up everywhere might be taxing, hot spots such as the Davis Square plaza or Elm Street should be a focus of an increased pick up schedule.

#### LITTER CONTROL

Littering is a problem in every city. Gum, paper, random items, and cigarette butts will continue to be a problem in Davis Square. How we deal with it though is under our control. The City should work on placement and style of trash receptacles. The City should also do hand sweeping during business district hours and save machine sidewalk cleaning for overnight hours because of the small sidewalks. Litter control is also a great opportunity for residents and business owners to volunteer whether through adopt-a-park type programs or monthly clean up days. Many business owners already help the public realm by hand sweeping in front of their store regularly.

#### LAWN REPLANTING

The grass is always greener...where you reseed it. Generally, the City has only reseeded during major projects. In the interim there are many ways to kill grass - too much shade, high tree roots, or overuse. Lawns need weekly maintenance like mowing during growing seasons but also watering, aeration, and reseeding at different times depending on the climate and frequency of use. Seven Hills Park was aerated and reseeded in Fall 2018 to help recover from years of use including a very wet Honk! festival. Each park and lawn needs to be evaluated yearly for this type of increased maintenance and the events that were hosted to keep the grass greener...on this side of the fence.

#### Policy Objective 1.18

- Work with residents to identify and solve maintenance issues

#### Policy Objective 1.19

- Consider permitting and fees for public spaces to prevent over-use or damage in inclement weather.



## ATTRACT & RETAIN PUBLIC LIFE



## BOLSTER THE LOCAL ARTS CULTURE

### INTEGRATE ART INTO PHYSICAL DESIGN

There is more opportunity for art in the public realm than one might think. The Somerville Arts Council (SAC) has been vital in creating these opportunities in Davis Square. They organized the Windows Art Project from 1993-2003, they facilitate the installations at the Inside Out Gallery at CVS/1 Davis Square, and they fund the Phone Art Box project run through the Nave Gallery.

Public art is free to appreciate and accessible to all. It builds a sense of place, community identity, and social cohesion. Public art also contributes to economic activity, wellness, and tourism. Public art also creates places where people stay because they are places with beauty, novelty, or the unexpected.

Somerville cares about public art. The 2019 city budget includes an additional \$25,000 for an improved Illuminations Tour (a city-wide event) and a new mural arts program. Davis Square should cultivate its sense of place by integrating art into the public realm.

#### Policy Objective 1.20

- Consider setting aside a percentage of the annual Capital Improvement Budget for public art.

#### Policy Objective 1.21

- Connect property owners of buildings with blank walls to the Arts Council's mural arts program.

#### Policy Objective 1.22

- Consider holding a public arts competition or request for interest to generate new ideas on ways to incorporate art into the public realm.

#### Policy Objective 1.23

- Consider new installation based arts programs, such as rebooting the Windows Art Project.





## BOLSTER THE LOCAL ARTS CULTURE



**Bottom Left:** Opportunities to make the public realm a more interesting environment should not be wasted.

**Top Left, Above, & Bottom:** Blank walls are found at almost every approach into Davis.



## BOLSTER THE LOCAL ARTS CULTURE



Image from The Rockwell

### SUPPORT PERFORMANCE & EXHIBITION SPACE

Historically, Somerville had many neighborhood theatres. Because of the visionary leadership from the Fraiman family, the Somerville Theatre survived and has been entertaining area residents for over 100 years. In 2012, successful restaurateur, Ken Kelly, had a vision and opened a theatre now called the Rockwell.

Davis had one arts exhibition space, the Nave Gallery Annex on Chester Street until it closed in late 2017. The Museum of Bad Art has a different quality, showcasing bad art, but is delightfully quirky and reminds everyone that it's

okay to fail sometimes. Their space within the Somerville Theatre is currently under renovation.

Performance and exhibition spaces enrich the culture of Davis Square and increase the amount of activity in the Square.

#### Policy Objective 1.24

- Consider exempting spaces with a capacity of less than 150 seats from the definition of Assembly and Entertainment in zoning.

#### Policy Objective 1.25

- Include areas for public performance artists in civic spaces.



## BOLSTER THE LOCAL ARTS CULTURE

### SUPPORT ANNUAL CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

Davis Square hosts the Squeeze Box Slam, ArtBeat, and Honk! The neighborhood also has a presence during Open Studios and Porchfest, two major citywide events. At the end of the summer Davis and Teele Squares host SomerStreets on Holland Street. Davis Square is also king of the road races with the race route starting and ending in Davis. Don't forget the summer farmer's market and the Davis Square Flea.

Festivals and events in the Square come with different levels of magnitude. For instance, a trolley is run during Open Studios to get people from space to space. ArtBeat has the tradition of setting up vendors on a closed Elm and Holland Streets. The farmer's market closes one half of the Day/Herbert Street parking lot one afternoon/evening during warm months.

City staff observes a love/hate relationship with festivals and events. They're fun and spirited, increase local pride, and provide entertainment for Somerville residents and visitors.

However, they can be inconvenient for area businesses or people trying to travel through the Square. These events create a sense of civic pride even though they are not necessarily easy to 'deal with' for some.

#### Policy Objective 1.26

- Consider the needs of special events programming in the design of new plazas and other civic spaces.

#### Policy Objective 1.27

- Consider loosening restrictions for temporary event permits to eliminate unnecessary red tape.

#### Policy Objective 1.28

- Consider improvements to the City's notification efforts related to public event (CTY calls, message boards, etc).











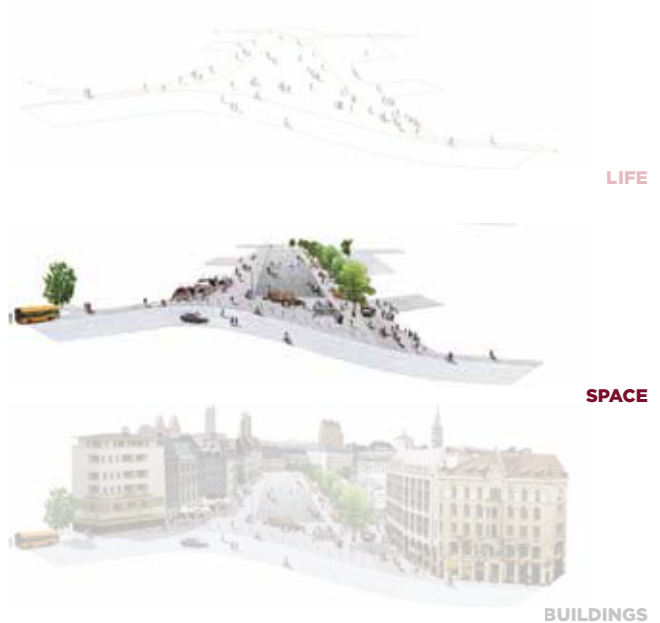
**SPACE**



# A PLAN FOR SPACE

## Goals for the Spaces that Support Public Life

Part two of this plan recommends specific improvements to Davis Square's public realm - it's streets, sidewalks, and public spaces. The liveliness of a city increases when people are tempted to spend time in attractive and comfortable public spaces. The extent of invitations for staying has the largest impact on the activity level of public space. High quality public spaces are always recognized by people interrupting their daily business to take a moment to rest, enjoy the city, and be around other people. Giving people the option to stay in the city creates possibilities for social interaction, which can bring people closer together and contribute to a good urban social setting.



“A good city is like a good party - people stay for much longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves.”

- JAN GEHL, ARCHITECT & URBANIST



## MAXIMIZING OUR LIMITED RESOURCE

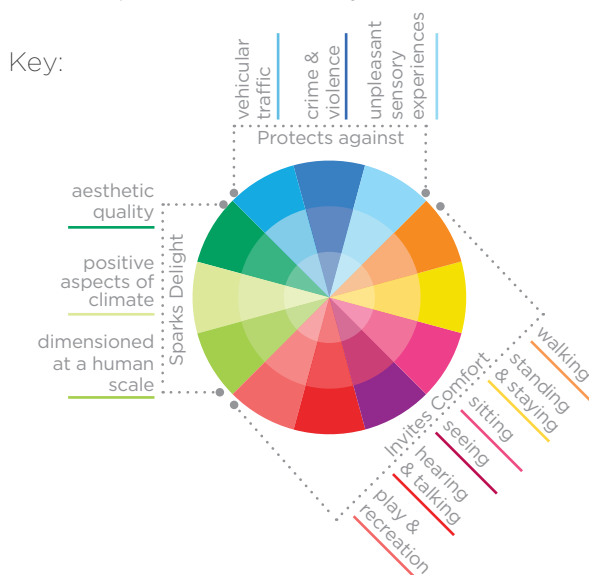
The Somerville Complete Streets Ordinance, the first of its kind in Massachusetts, states: “Complete Streets are designed and implemented to assure safety and accessibility for all the users of our streets, paths and transit systems, including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, motorists, commercial vehicles, emergency vehicles and for people of all ages and of all abilities.” By adopting this ordinance, the City is committed to incorporating Complete Streets planning and design into projects.

To implement the Complete Streets policy, the City is advancing a pedestrian-first modal hierarchy. All transportation projects and programs, from scoping to maintenance, will favor pedestrians first, then transit riders, cyclists, and motor vehicles. This will rebalance Somerville’s streets to make them more ‘complete,’ reversing generations of automobile-focused planning and design at the expense of all other transportation modes. This pedestrian-first modal

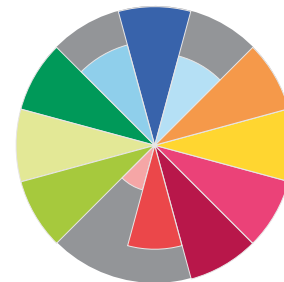
hierarchy resets the default premise for transportation projects in Somerville by acknowledging that **EVERY TRIP BEGINS AND ENDS AS A PEDESTRIAN.**

Adopting a complete streets ordinance is a good start in the effort to make the streets of Somerville a more equitable environment for all users. This type of policy provides guidance to government departments, consultants, developers, and community groups for the planning, design, construction, and operation of our transportation system. An important thing to remember when thinking about the design of our streets is that mobility is a means to an end. Achieving our goals for environmental sustainability, improved public health & safety, social equity, economic activity, and vibrant public life won’t happen without actually building complete streets.

Davis Square Plaza Quality Criteria (From 2015 PSPL Report)



Davis Square Plaza



The Davis Square Plaza ranks similarly to Assembly Square. Only two spaces score the highest on each quality criteria - Prospect Hill Park and Nathan Tufts Park.

# MAKE BETTER USE OF STREET SPACE

## PRIORITIZE CYCLISTS & PEDESTRIANS

People walk and bike because they feel comfortable and welcomed to do so. Surveys have found that the number one reason people do not consider bicycling as a valid means of transportation is because they are afraid to be on the same roadway as automobiles. The way to increase pedestrian and cyclist activity is to build the infrastructure to support all abilities and all ages. Already, the Davis Square neighborhood has more pedestrians and cyclists during commuting hours than motorists (see facing page). Adding the appropriate amount of space for the most frequent users is only fair.

To support pedestrians, sidewalks should be wide enough for the volume of people, the surface should be level with no tripping hazards, and street crossing distances should be shortened to the smallest width possible. In addition to crossing widths, crossing times (where signaled) should be set to allow adequate time for children or someone with a disability to cross safely.

### Policy Objective 2.01

- Adjust signal timing of the existing main intersection in accordance with the City's Complete Streets Ordinance to favor pedestrians first, then transit riders, cyclists, and finally motor vehicles.

### Policy Objective 2.02

- Consolidate and rationalize street furniture including lighting, parking meters, street signs, trash receptacles, newspaper boxes, and bike racks.

### Policy Objective 2.03

- Coordinate streetlight and crosswalks locations to increase the visibility of pedestrians to drivers.

### Policy Objective 2.04

- Include on-street bicycle facilities in the redesign of the main intersection.

### Policy Objective 2.05

- Use on-street bicycle facilities as a means to connect the eastern and western extents of the Somerville Community Path.

### Policy Objective 2.06

- Consider installing dedicated signals and phasing for cyclists at the main intersection.

### Policy Objective 2.07

- Increase short-term bicycle parking in the public realm.

### Policy Objective 2.08

- Consider including a bicycle repair station in one of the new plazas created by the intersection redesign.

### Policy Objective 2.09

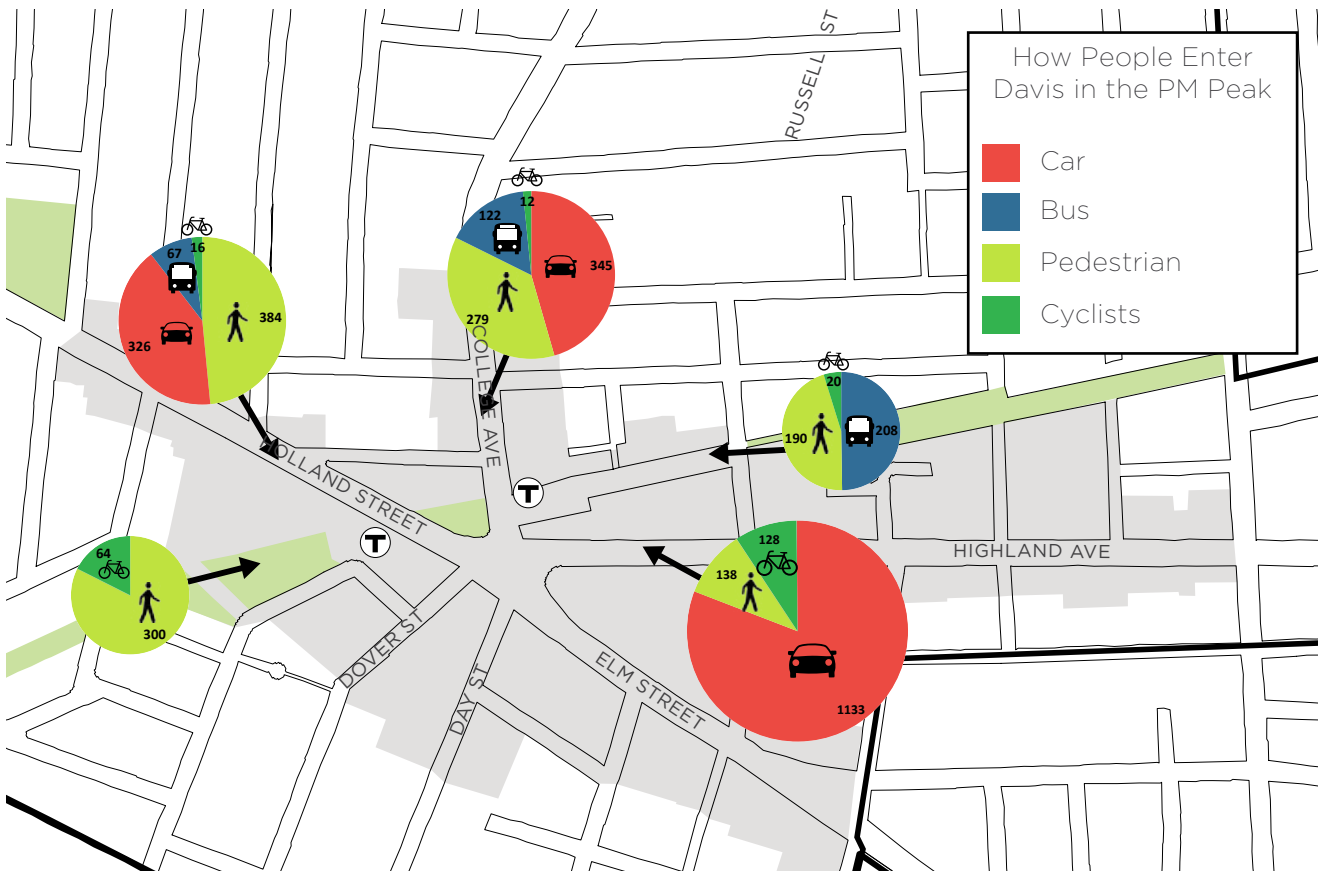
- Prior to redesign of the main intersection, continue to repave sidewalks to improve accessibility to people of all ages and abilities throughout the square.

## SIGNAL TIMING

In the summer 2018, Davis Square got new signal timing which includes concurrent pedestrian phasing and leading pedestrian intervals (LPI). Concurrent phasing means that some walk phases happen at the same time as parallel vehicular movements and that turning cars have to yield. LPI gives pedestrians 3-7 second lead time before a vehicular signal turns green. Pedestrians get 8 more cross signals an hour and early data shows that buses are moving through the intersection 35 seconds faster. Future improvements to signal timing will be done incrementally as the City can invest in signal technology and small capital projects like new crosswalks.

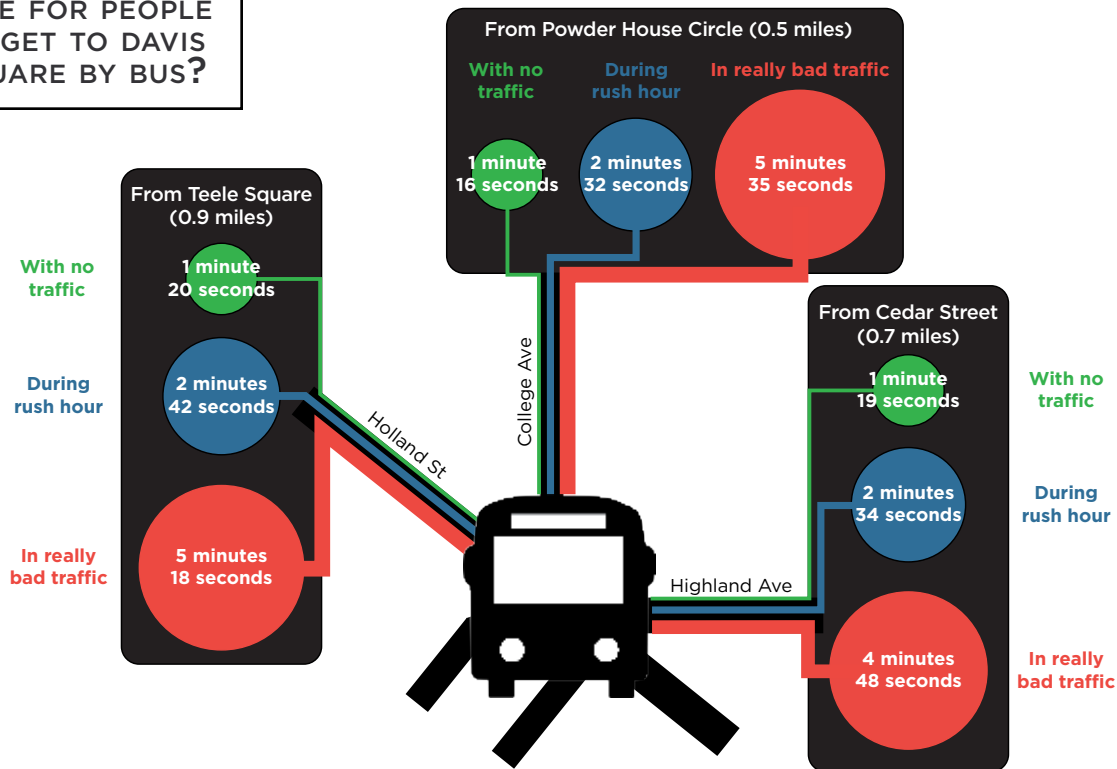


## MAKE BETTER USE OF STREET SPACE



## MAKE BETTER USE OF STREET SPACE

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR PEOPLE TO GET TO DAVIS SQUARE BY BUS?



## BETTER TRANSIT

Many of Somerville's neighborhood plans focus on future transit access whereas Davis Square has pretty great transit access with one heavy rail line, five bus routes, and the Community Path.

This Plan does show that there's still room for improvement, especially with regard to pedestrian amenities, cycling infrastructure, and bus transit. Davis Square station has the most boardings out of any station in the system during the 8 am rush hour. Not only are people walking to the station, they're taking the bus. The 88 bus runs over capacity during both morning and evening rush hours!

Buses have the added frustration of getting stuck in traffic. It's unrealistic to think that the problem in Davis Square can be solved with dedicated lanes as there is simply not enough right-of-way. However, there are small improvements such as bus stop location and/or consolidation and signaling that can be

made to reduce ride times. This extends to paratransit services, an essential connector for people with mobility issues.

### Policy Objective 2.10

- Consider providing Transit Signal Priority for MBTA buses at the main intersection and busway.

### Policy Objective 2.11

- Consider installing a bus priority lane on Holland Street in front of the Davis Square Station head house.

### Policy Objective 2.12

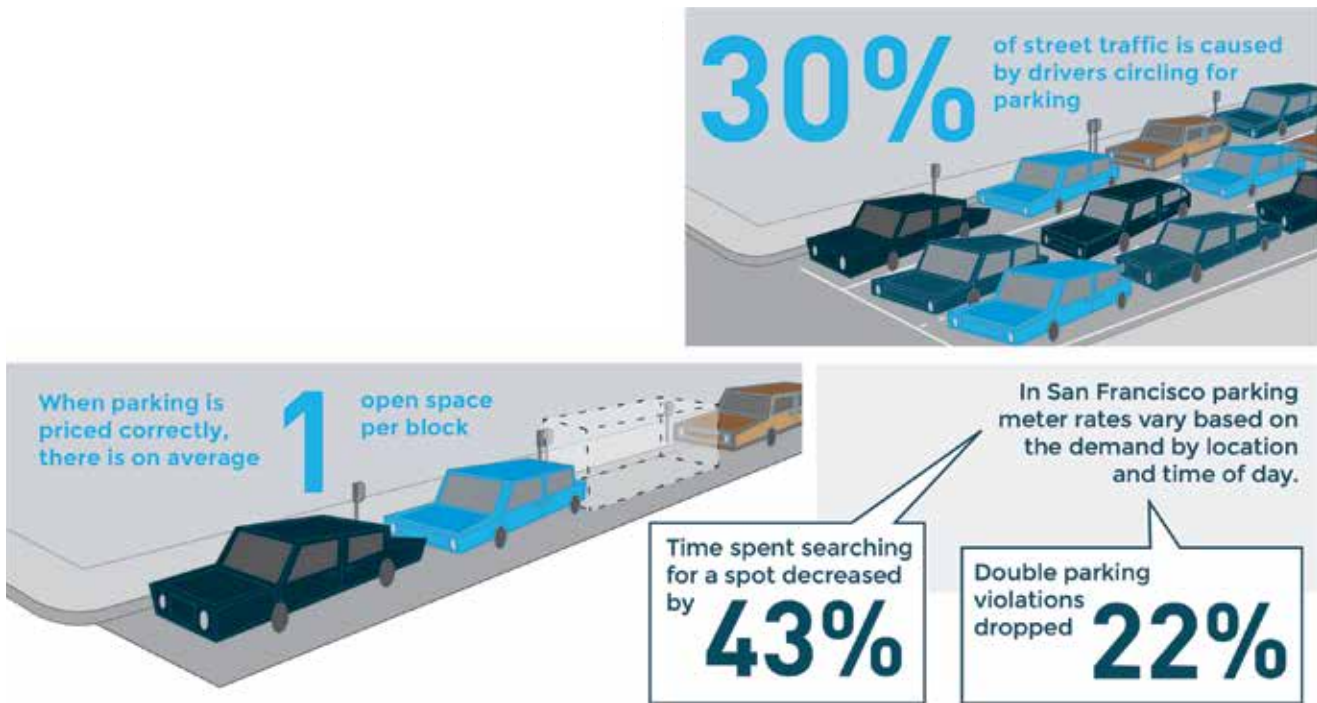
- Work with the MBTA to maximize efficiency of bus stops including frequency of stops and far-sided stops.

### Policy Objective 2.13

- Work with the MBTA to place drop-off/pick-up for paratransit services



## MAKE BETTER USE OF STREET SPACE



Graphic from the City of Boston

## SOLVE THE PARKING MISMATCH

The availability of parking often predicts driving behavior. Provide more parking and you'll get more automobile use - it literally generates traffic. This plan does not call for the creation of additional parking in Davis Square, but rather seeks to use the current supply of both public- and privately-owned parking in a more efficient way.

In 2012, OSPCD worked with a consultant to study parking supply & demand in Davis Square. Results showed that the Davis Square core experiences a parking shortage on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings. At the same time, privately-owned parking lots often sat underutilized, leaving those spaces as a unrealized resource.

### Policy Objective 2.14

- Permit existing privately owned parking to operate as fee-based public parking.

### Policy Objective 2.15

- Help build relationships between third party parking apps and parking lot owners.

### Policy Objective 2.16

- Consider demand-based pricing for on-street public parking.

### Policy Objective 2.17

- Identify on-street parking locations for mopeds, scooters and motorcycles.

### Policy Objective 2.18

- Consider installing multi-space parking meters to de-clutter the existing narrow sidewalks

### Policy Objective 2.19

- Streamline parking regulation and improve signage to available lots

## MAKE BETTER USE OF STREET SPACE



## GIVE STRUCTURE TO CURBSIDE ACTIVITY

Davis Square has a noticeable loading problem. The commercial core originally grew in the 1870's and 1880's, a time before private automobiles, but nevertheless large delivery trucks are prevalent. Narrow streets and a lack of alleys combine to make delivery of merchandise or trash removal complicated. These physical conditions have resulted in a free-for-all for trucks servicing Davis Square businesses. Particular problem spots are at Bfresh, CVS, and the loading zone in front of Diesel/Foundry. Trucks and vans of all sizes deliver any time of the day and compete for the same loading areas. If spots are full, the delivery drivers double park. The situation has become even more complicated with the onset of ride-sharing and food delivery services because they often illegally load and unload in travel lanes.

Coolidge Corner and Malden Center are two similarly sized Local Centers that

have addressed similar conditions by implementing loading restrictions. The restaurant scene in Davis is likely too active for nighttime delivery, but early morning, before commute times, may be possible. For Davis Square to build on its success, continue to grow, and to implement the public realm plan, addressing curbside activity must be a top priority.

### Policy Objective 2.20

- Manage curb-side loading activities.

### Policy Objective 2.21

- Designate required pick-up/drop-off locations for ride sharing services.

### Policy Objective 2.22

- Increase enforcement of double parking and loading violations.

### Policy Objective 2.23

- Consider city-wide restrictions of large delivery vehicles.



## RATIONALIZE VEHICULAR MOVEMENTS

Streets are an existing framework that serve as the foundation for building a strong community. When the ‘traffic’ function of our streets is prioritized over of the ‘civic’ function, it limits the ability of our streets to support the local economy and community to their fullest.

The design of Davis Square’s one-way street network was based on the idea that they move traffic better than two-way streets. However, the negatives of this system outweigh the positives. One-way streets frequently increase vehicular speeds, and there is some evidence that drivers are less attentive because there are no cars to watch for heading in the other direction. Vehicles stop less often on one-way streets, which makes turning harder for cyclists and pedestrians trying to cross the street. Taking public transit becomes more difficult on one-way streets because bus stops are not located on the opposite side of the street from one another. A trip in the other direction

requires you to find a stop on an entirely different street. Furthermore, one-way streets have an impact on the local economy because they reduce visibility of retail and restaurants because they route round trips onto different streets.

There are more obstacles than one-way streets in the existing network. Vehicular turning movements are wide which allows for increased speeds in these movements. Posted turn restrictions also hinder efficient flow. If design emphasized pedestrian access, the intersection could function like many of the unsignalized crosswalks in Somerville.

### Policy Objective 2.24

- Continue to incrementally improve the street network.



## GOING 2-WAYS

The City recently completed the first phase of traffic improvements for Prospect Street and Webster Avenue in Union Square. The former one-way pair were opened to two-way vehicular traffic, bike lanes and sharrows were installed, and pedestrian crossings improved. The improvements have resulted in **8,000 LESS** peak hour vehicles driving through the middle of the Square because they are no longer forced through the former one-way traffic pattern.

## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE

### REPURPOSE CITY OWNED LOTS

The City is one of the largest landowners in Davis Square. Even excluding the streets, the City owns 3.5 acres of land of which 1.5 acres is surface parking lots. There's a delicate balance to providing parking in the Square. The City wants to support local businesses, yet an oversupply can induce more vehicular trips and deteriorate the public realm. This was addressed in Solve the Parking Mismatch on Page 57.

A neighborhood planning process is the right time to evaluate city owned assets such as these and see how they can contribute to neighborhood or city-wide goals. SomerVision calls for new housing, jobs, and open space. Open space is the most difficult goal to achieve because it cannot go vertical like jobs and housing, nor is it typically built by the private market.

The Urban Institute published a paper, "The Public Value of Urban Parks" which discusses how traditionally parks have been valued for their open space and recreation but more recently they're valued for their broader potential. They can improve health, help mitigate the impacts of climate change, increase civic participation, and provide employment opportunities. Programs within the parks can also provide physical, intellectual, and emotional value for participants. It's this potential that needs to be measured.

The current monetary value of the Grove Street lot is a maximum of \$71,760 annually from meter fees. Planning Staff would argue that new open space would far exceed this value and have more users than the current parking lot.



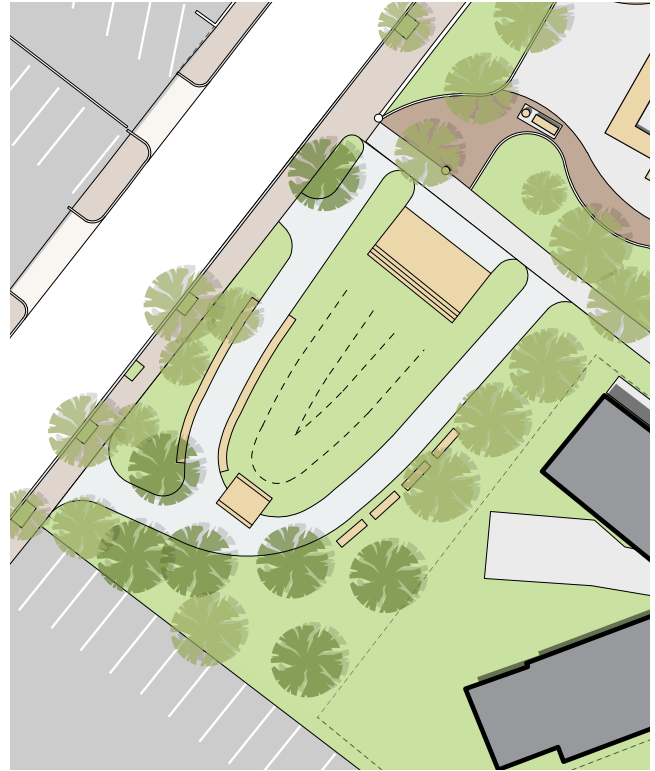


### EXPAND KENNEY PARK

Three parcels south of Kenney Park are owned and operated by the City as a public parking lot. Research into parking demand in the Square found that privately-owned parking lots were frequently under utilized or even empty even during high demand times when public parking was scarce. If owners of these private lots were allowed to manage their sites as fee-based parking, the City could find better uses for the sites it manages as parking today. Conversion of the parking lot on Grove Street could increase civic space by 0.2 acres and provide a more effective buffer for properties on Dresden Circle.

#### Policy Objective 2.25

- Consider conversion of the Grove Street public parking lot into additional civic space.



# INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE

## A MARKET HALL

The lot at Day/Herbert Street is currently a public parking lot with space for 61 vehicles. On Wednesdays from 12-6 pm from May 16<sup>th</sup> to November 21<sup>st</sup>, Mass Farmers Markets operates the Davis Square Market at this site. This location was once contemplated as a potential hotel, but the community identified the risk of displacing the farmers market as a major concern, among other issues.

Most markets are operated at-cost or with razor thin profit margins. Many are subsidized. Furthermore, patrons of farmers markets are creatures of habit. Moving an established farmers market can easily result in the loss of its customer base - which can take years to recover. Residents want to see the Davis Square Market supported and expressed a preference to improve the Day/Herbert lot to serve the market in a better manner.

If major improvements are pursued, there are many market halls around the country

that add value to the neighborhood - they support the local farmers market and host local goods and services making them convenient to residents. Each takes a different shape with a mix of indoor/outdoor facilities and event spaces. They are also an opportunity for new businesses to test an idea and a way for established entities to expand. Utilizing a City-owned parcel for this type of civic space would create a unique attraction in Davis Square.

### Policy Objective 2.26

- Install a power supply for the farmer's market.

### Policy Objective 2.27

- Redesign the lot to become a more flexible space.

### Policy Objective 2.28

- Study building a permanent market hall for the farmers market and other users









## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE

### BUILD CUTTER PLAZA

In 2012, OSPCD began advocating for the redesign of the Elm Street, Summer Street, and the Cutter Avenue intersection on the eastern side of Davis Square. The goal is to increase safety for pedestrians and improve traffic movements. During outreach, the public suggested the idea to re-purpose the 12-space public parking lot located in the middle of this intersection as a new plaza. Staff were able to demonstrate that idea during a three day pop-up event during the neighborhood planning charrette. The public instantly took notice. People began sitting at the moveable tables and chairs before staff were finished setting them up and enjoyed the space well into the evening. Food trucks and musicians were brought in to help activate the space. Survey responses collected from the temporary plaza stated “please make this permanent.”

#### Policy Objective 2.29

- Transform the Summer Street slip lanes and public parking lot into a new plaza.

#### Policy Objective 2.30

- Consider naming the new civic space as Cutter Plaza. after the Cutter family that occupied the land nearby in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.



During the charrette, Planning Staff programmed the parking lot to serve as a plaza.

Below is an illustration of what a constructed plaza could look like.

Both views are from standing outside of Davis Square Donuts.





## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE





## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE

### REDESIGN THE INTERSECTION

Davis Square's current intersection design prioritizes through-traffic with its one-way pairs and light timing called signalization. Traffic data shows that almost 30% of current weekday morning trips and 20% of weekday evening trips are only passing through. Furthermore, 25% of trips are from neighborhoods like West Somerville and West Cambridge. How can these trips be diverted to other routes or transitioned into other modes?

Planning participants were asked what they do and don't like about the Square in a dot exercise. Green dots were 'like' and red dots were 'don't like.' The actual intersection was a hot spot of red dots whereas the places surrounding it - the plaza, Mike's seating, and the movie theatre were all things that Davis Square residents enjoyed.

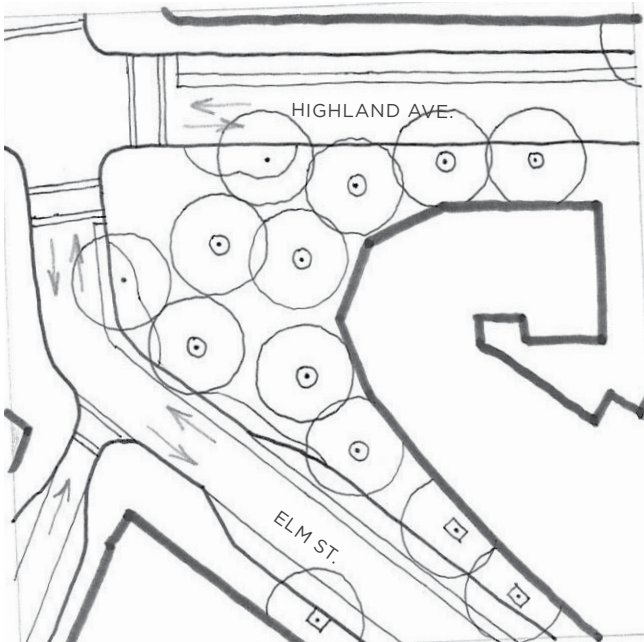
To achieve a high-quality public realm and make Davis Square a place for people, the core of the Square needs to be reimagined as a series of spaces offering opportunities for a variety of activities. This plan balances vehicular traffic with spaces for people by envisioning a four-way intersection.

A tripling of the public space can be created just by squaring off the intersection which includes new opportunities for activation at Dover Street between the theatre and CVS. Re-establishing two-way traffic in all directions reinvents movement through the Square. It will move cut-through traffic to more appropriate streets and eliminate conflicting turning movements. Re-striping the roadway maintains on-street parking where needed while accommodating automobiles, bicycles, and even a bus priority lane on Holland Street. With the intersection redesigned for all travel modes, the use of the newly created civic spaces for event programming is even more flexible to community needs, because closure of one of the segments of the intersection can still permit traffic to flow.





INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE



## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE

Some of these elements can even be piloted or done incrementally. First, the bus priority lane, then a plaza at the closed Highland to Elm slip lane, then restriping for bike lanes. With each step data can be collected and solutions allowed to evolve over time.

This illustration isn't the only solution for Davis Square. For instance, incorporating dedicated bike lanes is shown on the following page. The purpose of any neighborhood plan is to identify problems and start to uncover solutions. Planners do this with a consulting team to make sure proposals can actually work. However, streetscape projects take additional engineering, traffic analysis, and design. The next step for the redesign of the Davis Square intersection is identifying funding in the Capital Improvement Plan and bidding the design of the project which includes a robust community process.

### Policy Objective 2.31

- Redesign the main intersection in accordance with the City's Complete Streets Ordinance to favor pedestrians first, then transit riders, cyclists, and finally motor vehicles.

### Policy Objective 2.32

- Close the Highland to Elm slip lane to create a new public plaza from the slip lane, traffic island, and sidewalk area.

### Policy Objective 2.33

- Close Dover Street to through traffic for one block and create a new plaza and laneway between 1 Davis Square and the Hobbs Building.

### Policy Objective 2.34

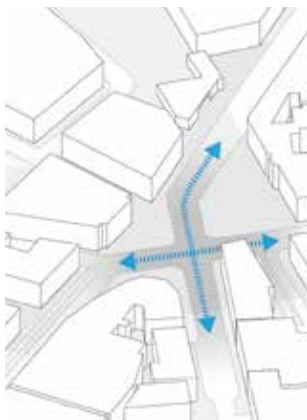
- Consider extending Meacham Road behind 1 Davis Square to provide a connection between Dover and Day Streets.



**Underutilized Space**  
Today, Davis Square is a confusing intersection for all modes which leaves little room leftover for people to stay. Currently a fragmented network of traffic islands and slip-lanes, Davis Square has the space for a thriving public life, it just needs to be reconfigured for people!



**Make Space for People**  
Pushing out from existing plazas and sidewalks, space for public life can be maximized by filling unnecessary slip-lanes and eliminating the need for inefficient traffic islands.

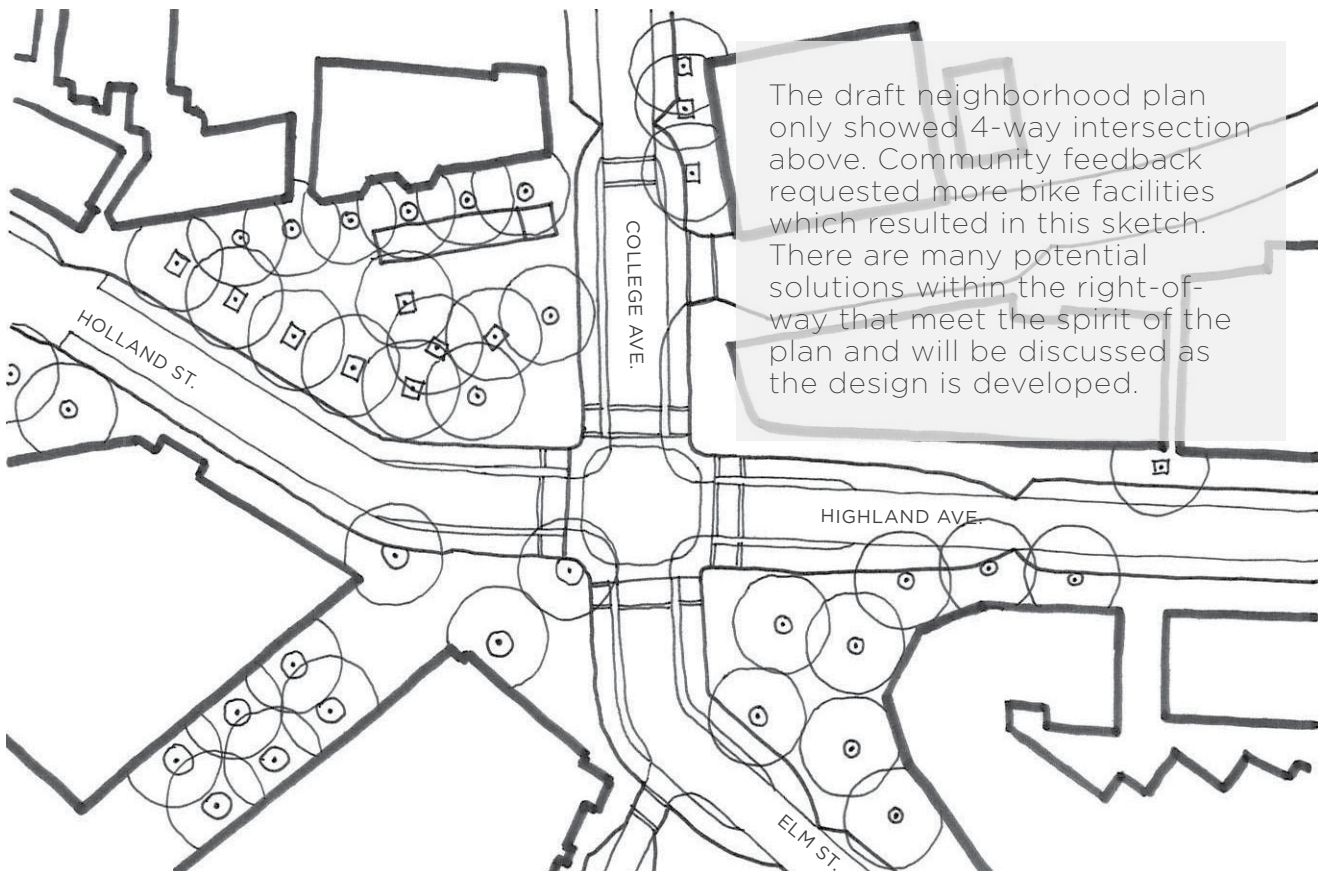
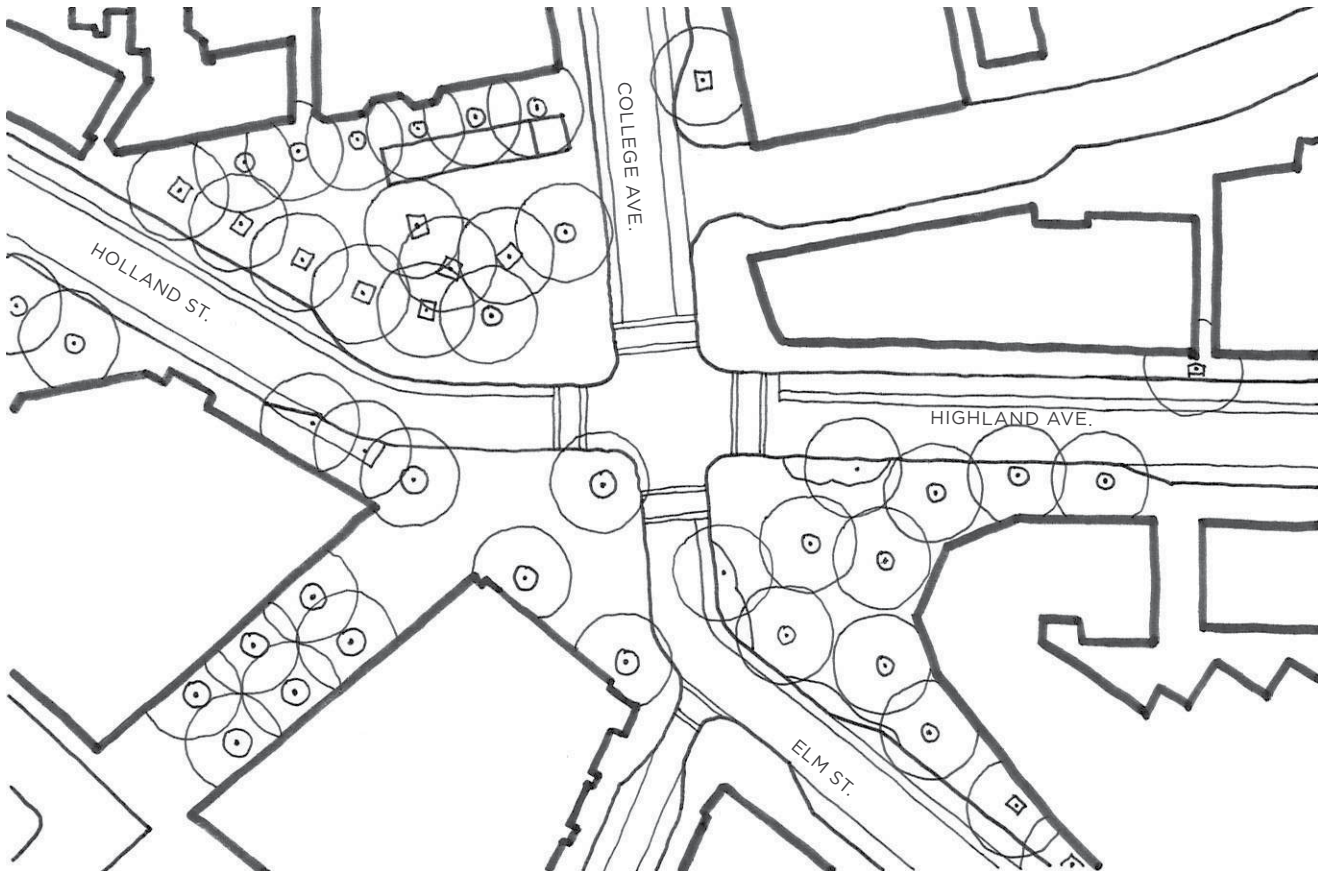


**Streamline Traffic & Intersections**  
Reducing an irregular and complex 5-way intersection to a simple rectilinear 4-way will both streamline traffic flow through Davis Square and reduce waits and intersections, all while creating more space for public life.



**Celebrate Crossings**  
Rather than the current disconnected patchwork of crossings, a simplified intersection allows for a condensed all way crossing that celebrates connectivity between the plazas of the square.



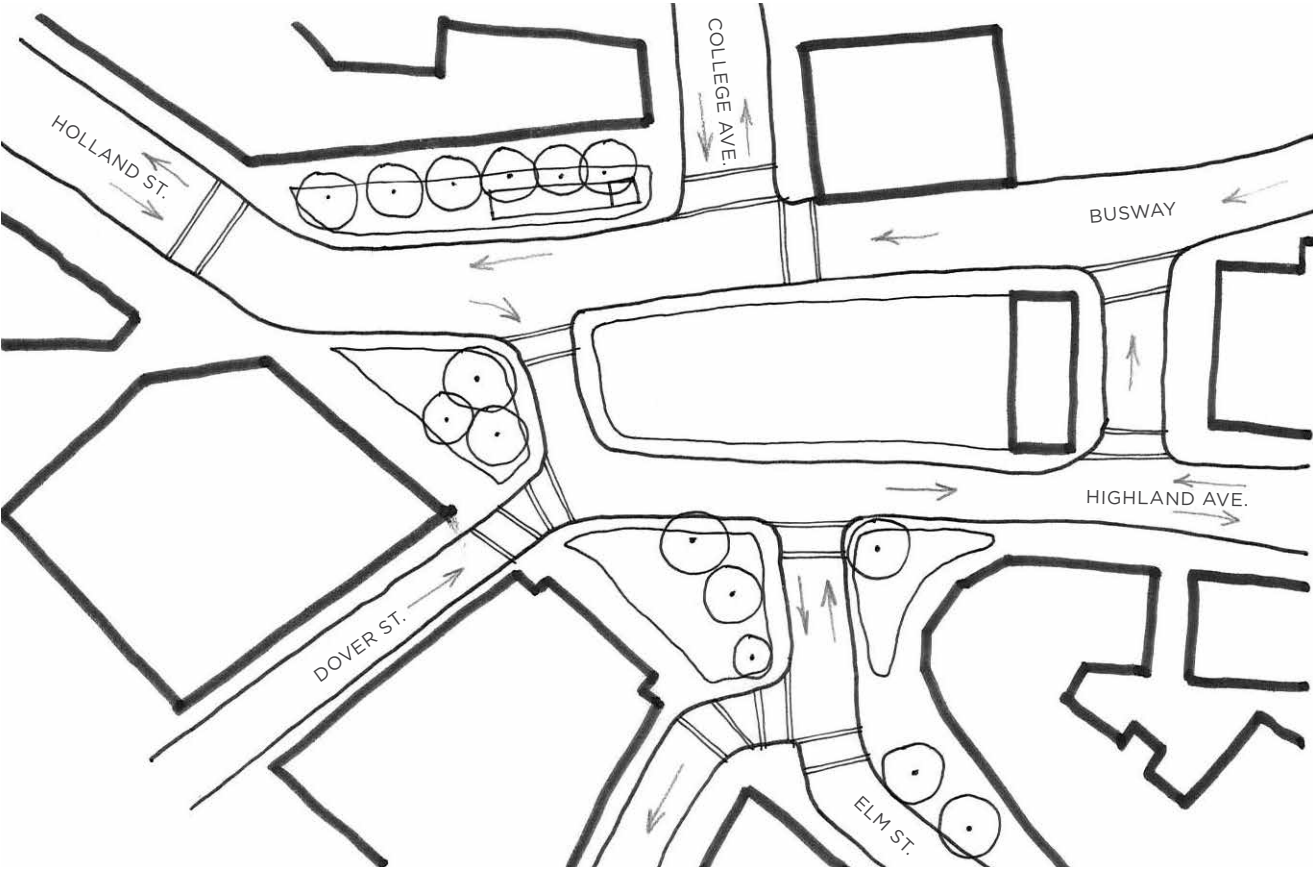


## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE



This page shows intersection concepts from the charrette. Based on feedback, the City pursued the 4-way intersection to be a primary part of this plan. There's many ways to reconfigure Davis Square - any redesign should make Davis Square a place for people.



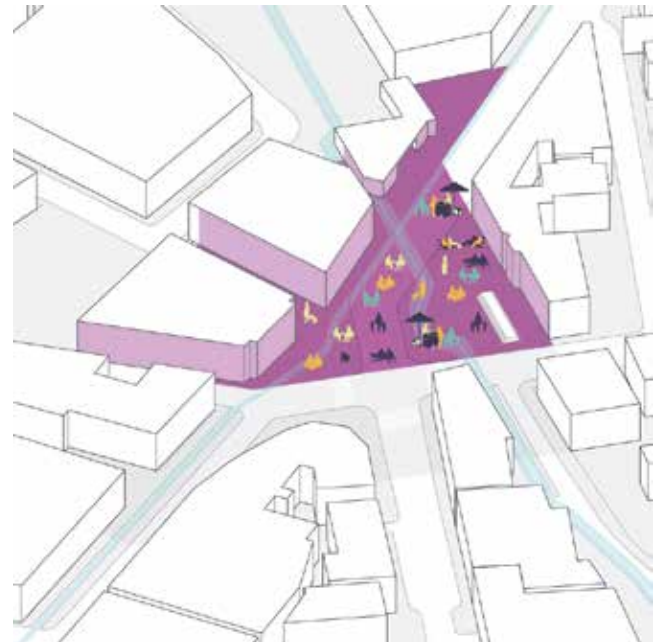
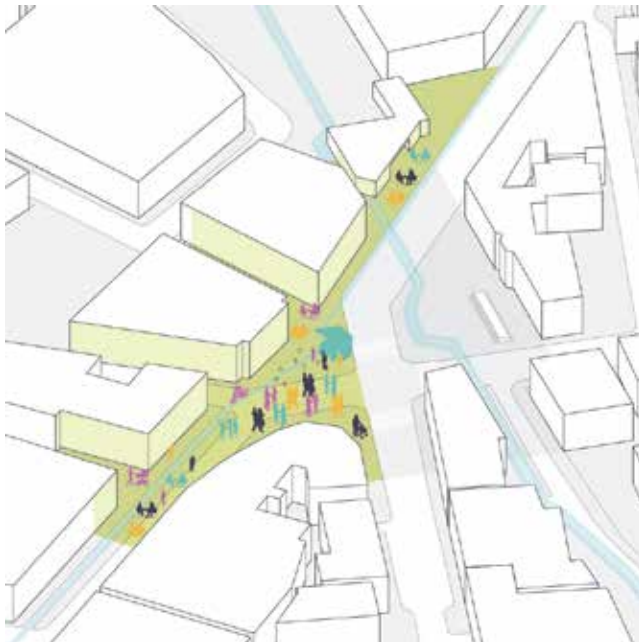


## INVEST IN CIVIC SPACE



### Maximize Potential for Activation

With the new plaza and more rational intersection, the area is staged to enhance public life as activities occur. With temporary reconfiguration, the plazas of Davis Square can be expanded and connected to accommodate different events and activities like road races, Honk!, ArtBeat and countless others.





# PEDESTRIANIZE ELM STREET

There were pedestrianized versions of Highland Avenue and Elm Street (from Grove to the intersection) shown at the 2013 charrette. Neither idea was pursued beyond the charrette because the majority of street design feedback focused on the layout of the main intersection.

While finalizing this plan, Staff has heard an increasing amount of interest in closing Elm Street to cars. Pedestrian streets take a variety of forms including being open for deliveries, allowing slow moving vehicles, and restricting access to vehicles during designated times. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach.

When exploring a four-way intersection design, the City worked with transportation engineers to make sure the idea was feasible. This idea has not been studied in detail but with the amount of interest expressed Planning Staff want

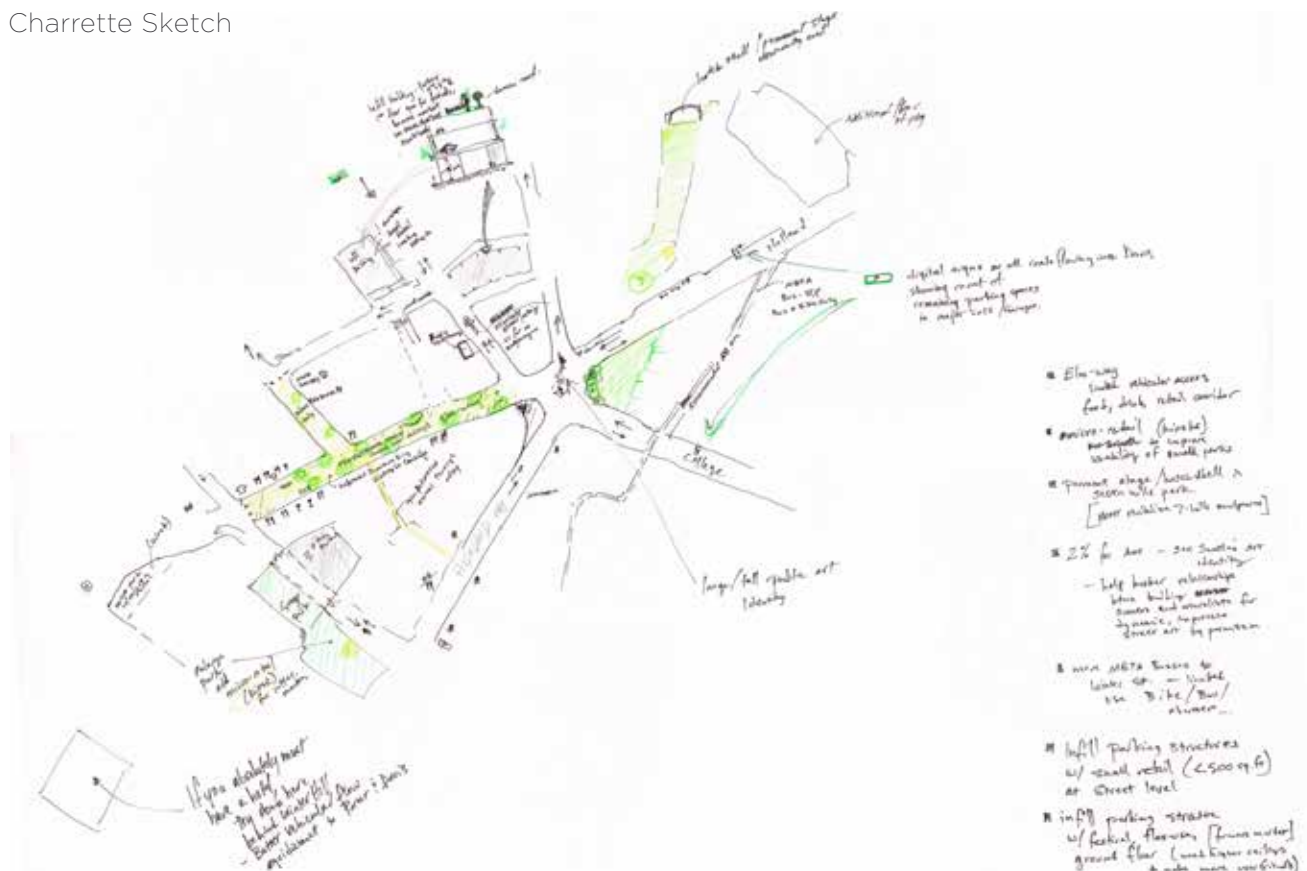
the idea to be a part of the neighborhood plan.

### Policy Objective 2.35

- Work with transportation engineers on the feasibility of a pedestrianized Elm Street



## Charrette Sketch







## IMPROVEMENTS TO PRIVATE SPACE

A city is limited in improving privately owned space. Residents, staff, and politicians can all advocate for improvements as they make contact with property owners. The only time improvements can be required is during a zoning permitting process. The improvements requested have to be in context with the zoning relief sought.

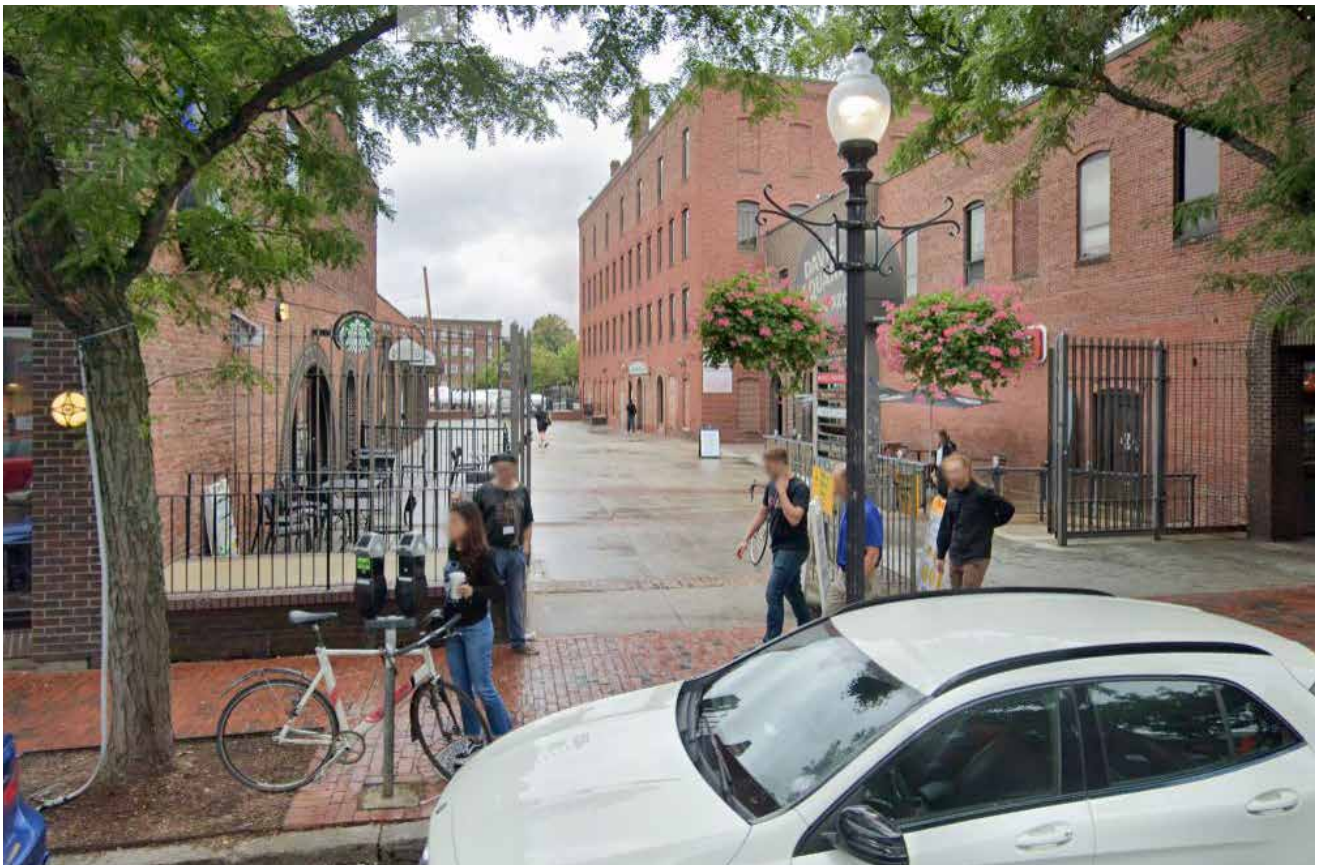
The Davis Square Plaza, between Chipotle and Starbucks, was mentioned several times during the planning process as a place people would like to see improved. Many think this is City owned but it is not. This private property serves as a pedestrian connection between Elm Street and the neighborhood south of Davis Square and also serves as frontage for several small businesses. It being privately owned is a reason it is locked at certain hours.

There's an opportunity for privately owned public space (POPS) to be

created as part of larger redevelopment. However, in Davis Square, that scale of development is not desired. When new projects are permitted, Planning Staff would make sure new spaces like the Davis Square plaza are not created. However, activating existing places is still important to support existing tenants and users.

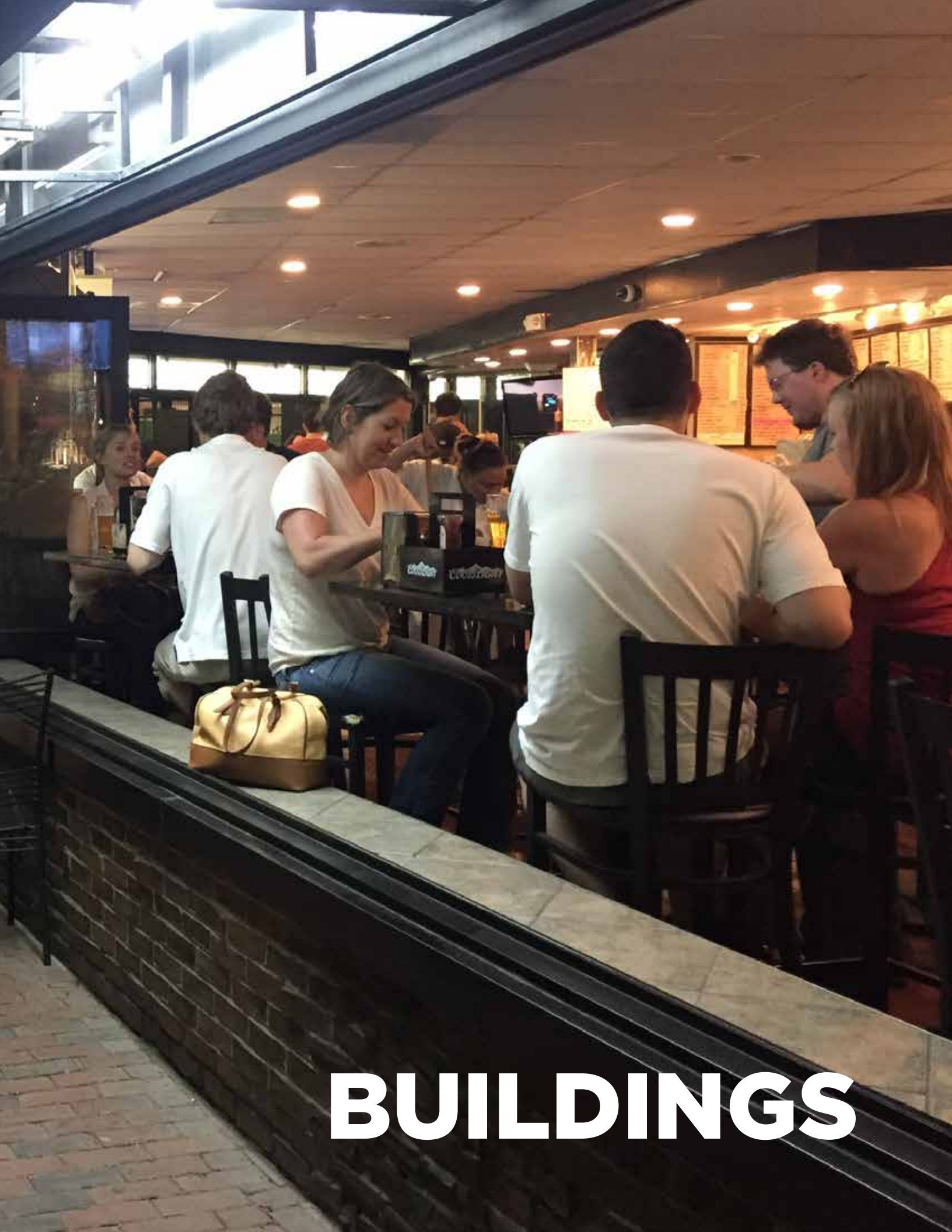
### Policy Objective 2.35

- Advocate for property owners to make improvements to private space.









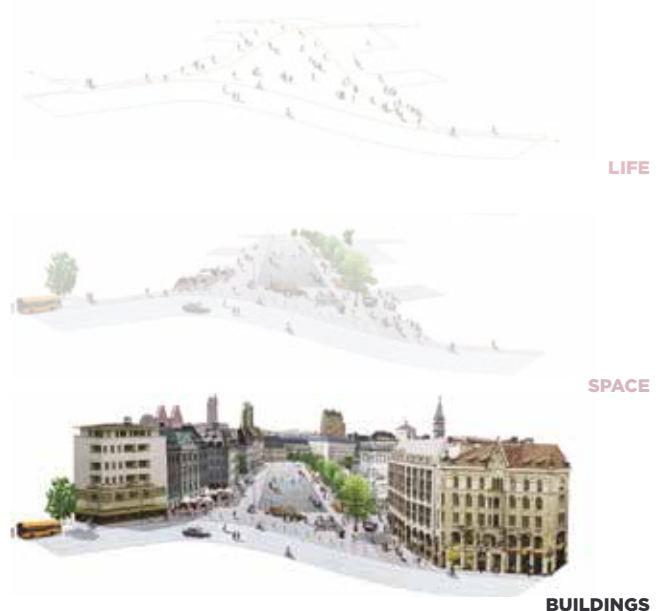
**BUILDINGS**

# A PLAN FOR BUILDINGS

## Goals for the Buildings that Define the Square

Buildings play an important but supporting role in creating a complete neighborhood. Good urban design results when the inter-relationship between people, public spaces, and buildings is well understood. Part three of this plan establishes principles for the evolution of Davis Square as a Local Center, recommends policies for regulating development, establishes design guidelines for new buildings, and identifies goals for selected redevelopment sites.

New housing and the people that it brings will infuse more pedestrian activity into Davis Square, but a mix of uses will secure public life in streets and spaces across a greater portion of the day. Ground floor activities that are visually connected to the outdoors contribute to the experience of an attractive and lively city. The detailing of buildings directly impacts our perception and experience of quality and comfort. Buildings are frequently overlooked as part of good public space design, but facades, walkways, spaces, and roadways should be considered parts of a greater whole that can either support or detract from life between buildings.







### 45 COLLEGE AVENUE

The City acquired 45 College Avenue in 2017 to make certain that the programmatic needs of the West Branch Library could be fulfilled. The West Branch Library expansion will start construction in 2019 with the exception of one programmatic requirement, a large community room. The City and the library need a community room for special events, programming, and community meetings like the biannual ResiStat series.

Every neighborhood meeting in Davis Square takes place in buildings that the City does not own. This makes it more difficult to engage the community because time slots are limited in private buildings and sometimes there are rental charges.

Other than a community room, the needs of the West Branch Library will be met in its renovation. Even with a large community room, there is more square footage available in the 45 College

Avenue building. Using SomerVision as a guide, there are other city priorities including housing and jobs that the site could be utilized for.

A community process could identify additional uses beyond the already identified need of a community room. An idea from Magpie owner Davis Sakowski is something like Bow Market. This process will likely be modelled after the one used to explore the reuse of the Powderhouse Community School. That process involved community meetings, a request for proposals, and a technical advisory group evaluating the RFP's. They made a recommendation to the Mayor on the preferred development partner.

#### Policy Objective 3.01

- Hold a community engagement process to determine if any additional uses beyond a community room are desired at 45 College Avenue.



## INVEST IN COMMUNITY SPACES

### WEST BRANCH LIBRARY

The City is renovating the West Branch Library to include an accessible entrance, lobby, meeting and reading spaces, restrooms, and an elevator. The renovation will include site improvements which will open up the grounds for multiple types of seating and gardens.





### REPLACE THE HEAD HOUSES

With over 26,000 daily train boardings and alightings, Davis Square is one of the most heavily used stops on the MBTA's Red Line subway service. The station opened on December 8, 1984 and was part of the MBTA's Northwest Extension project that was constructed between 1979 and 1985.

The station platform spans under Statue Plaza following the trajectory of a former surface railway. Two head houses provide access to the platform at either end, one on Holland Street and one on College Avenue adjacent to the MBTA's busway. The College Avenue head house is handicap accessible and also functions as a bus terminal for the 87, 88, 89, 90, 94, and 96 bus routes. The station and nearby civic spaces were included in the MBTA's arts on the line program that brought art installations into the subway system.



**Right:** Escalator breakdowns now impact travelers many days out of the year.  
**Bottom:** The Holland Street entrance to the Davis Square T Station



## INVEST IN COMMUNITY SPACES

Almost 35 years have passed since Davis Square Station and its head houses were built. All man made objects have a design life - the period of time during which a product is expected to function without repair. Some products have a long life expectancy and some short, but even infrastructure, is typically built for a 50 year design life. Over time, repairs become necessary on an ever more frequent basis and maintenance liabilities continually increase.

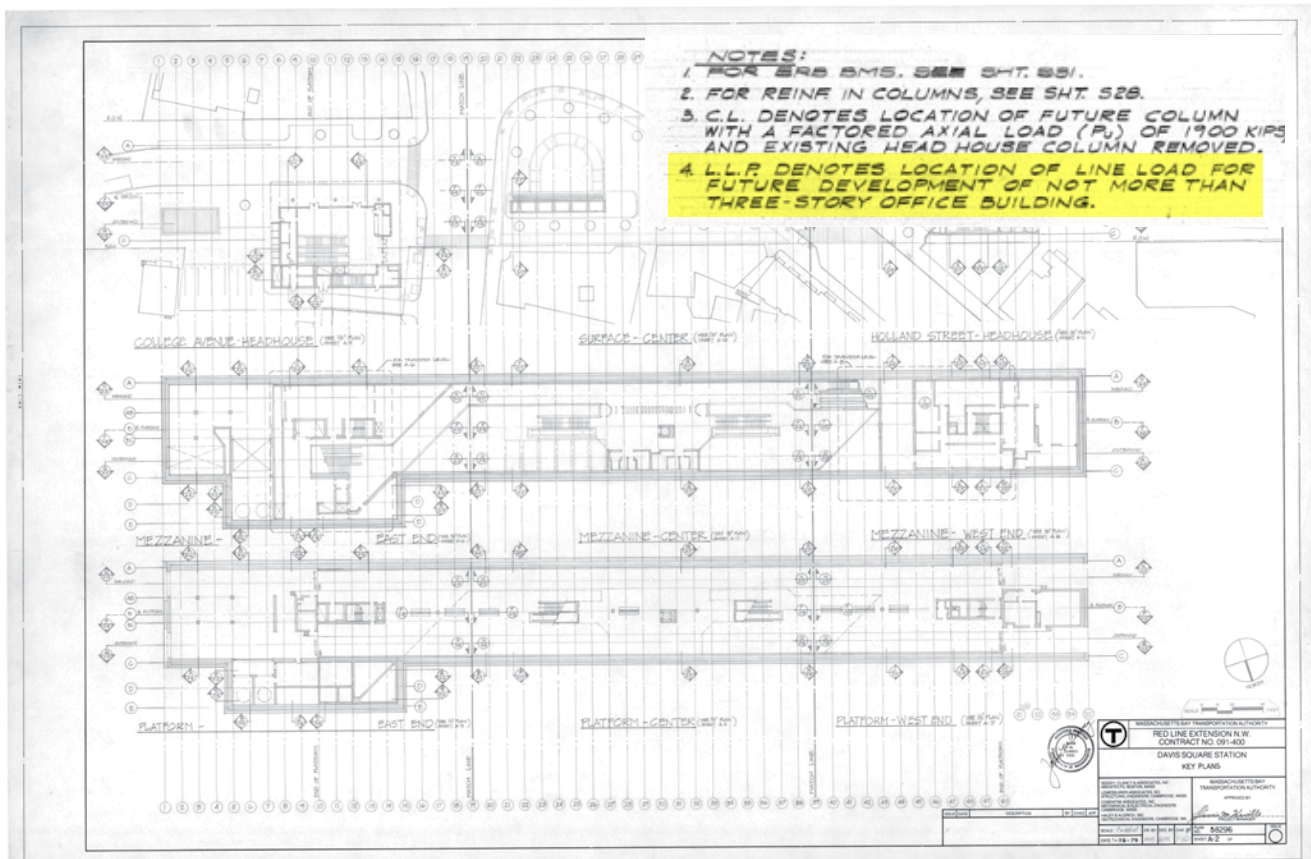
A sizable portion of the MBTA's annual expenses are spent on maintenance, contract cleaning, public safety, injuries, damages, and risk insurance. Aging infrastructure reaches a point where a rehabilitation project is necessary to reduce its operating costs. The MBTA recently completed improvements to Government Center Station adding new elevators, renovations to both the Green Line and Blue Line platforms, a new station entrance and lobbies, and reconstruction of a portion of City Hall plaza in the vicinity of the station 'to

provide accessible paths of travel to the station.' Eventually, Davis Square Station will need similar work. It's best to think in advance about what improvements should be considered when this day finally arrives.

### Policy Objective 3.02

- Advocate for renovation of the Davis Station Station and replacement of the head houses

**Below:** The Holland Street entrance to the Davis Square T Station





## COPLEY SQUARE

Copley Station was renovated in 2008 to make the station handicap accessible. Two new outbound glass head houses and elevators were included with restoration of the existing wrought iron inbound head house.

The MBTA is now using this glass head house style in other neighborhoods as a less intrusive means to integrate station access into the public realm. In Davis Square, this same style of head house could visually reconnect Seven Hills Park to Holland Street.



### INFILL POSSIBILITIES

The introduction of this plan categorized Davis Square as a **LOCAL CENTER** within the hierarchy of place types used for planning purposes by the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development (OSPCD). Local Centers are densities smaller Neighborhood Centers, like Teele Square and Ball Square, and larger Urban Centers, like Assembly Square or the planned transformation of the eastern side of Union Square.

Local Centers are mixed-use areas that have evolved at the intersection of major streets which connect to other nearby centers. Frequent and reliable transportation services help to support the greater densities found in Local Centers as compared to Neighborhood Centers. The mix of uses in a Local Center includes moderate to high density residential with supporting commercial and employment uses. Retail and services are neighborhood serving and directly support local residents, with a few cultural institutions adding flavor to the mix. Davis Square meets most of these characteristics.

Buildings in Local Centers range from low-rise (1-2 stories) to mid-rise (3-6 stories) structures. The height of

buildings in Davis Square has waxed and waned within this low- to mid-rise range throughout its history - typically around 3- to 4-stories. Achieving many of the community's aspirations for the future will require figuring out how to sensitively add mid-rise infill buildings into the existing context.

The planning process focused on the 90+ lots in the core of Davis Square. These sites are in the existing Central Business zoning district, with the remainder in Neighborhood Business. The existing zoning of Davis Square is generally understood as holding back the evolution of the neighborhood due to its high parking ratios and low permitted floor area, despite the allowed 4-story building height.

As part of the city-wide zoning overhaul, OSPCD created new zoning districts specifically designed to deliver mid-rise buildings: Mid-Rise 3, Mid-Rise 4, Mid-Rise 5, and Mid-Rise 6 (abbreviated MR[story height]). Application of these districts to properties in Davis Square requires careful study to understand what size and scale of building is a contextual fit for each property, but also the economic impact of changing the permitted

### ONE DAVIS

Permitted in 2005, One Davis Square is the most recent commercial building constructed since the arrival of the opening of the MBTA's Red Line Subway service. It was built 15 years after the Harvard Vanguard and Citizen's Bank Buildings.





development entitlement. How might changes to zoning actually influence the evolution of the Square?

To study this, RCLCO, an economic development consulting firm from Washington D.C., created a development suitability index for each lot in the core of Davis Square. The goal was to better understand the impact of changing zoning from a 4-story district to 5- or 6-stories and the potential for redevelopment under each scenario. The index considered walking distance to the Red Line, the potential additional square

footage, and the potential additional assessed value to rank each site based on the combined score. Although it is not possible to predict the actions of individual property owners, RCLCO's index provided the City with an objective framework and analysis to rank the list of sites in Davis Square for further study.



## DEVELOP IN CONTEXT



## DETERMINING APPROPRIATE HEIGHT & MASSING

During the fall of 2017, OSPCD conducted a four-day infill design charrette with two rounds of public feedback to explore the impacts of 4-, 5-, and 6-story infill development on as many sites within the core of Davis Square as possible. The team used RCLCO's development Suitability Index to prioritize which sites to explore first.

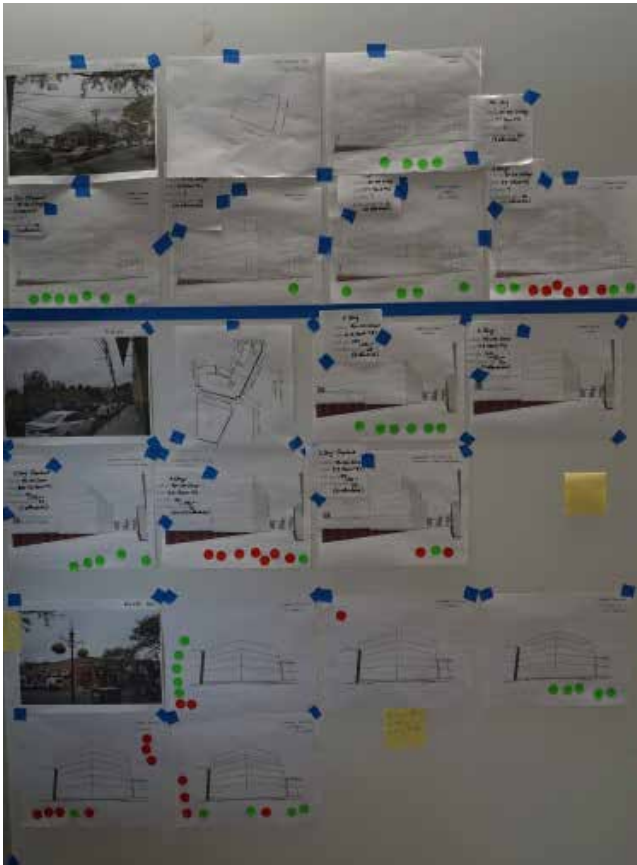
For each site, 4-, 5-, and 6-story infill buildings were modeled three-dimensionally and illustrations drawn both with and without upper story step-backs. Sites were either shown as the general building or commercial building type from the MR4, MR5, or MR6 districts of the proposed zoning overhaul.

Which building type was depicted depended on the size and shape of each lot. The ideal dimension from the elevator core of an office building to the exterior window wall is around 45 feet. Including

the elevator core results in a dimension of around 140 feet (max) in at least one direction. Work space on all four sides of the core requires this dimension in both width and depth. Additionally, banks will not typically finance construction of an office building under \$25 million in total cost. To meet that, a commercial project costing \$250 per SF needs 20-30,000 square feet per floor for a 4-6 story building.

In total, five of the top 25 sites on the suitability index were studied as potential commercial office buildings and nine sites were studied as general buildings. The public was invited to critique the three-dimensional models and building illustrations to identify contextual design impacts, such as shadows and privacy issues. They also provided input on the ideal building height and massing for different sites in the Square.





**Top:** Hand sketches were drawn over 3D models created for each site to explore development.

**Left & Bottom:** Two rounds of feedback by the public helped the design team narrow down the possibilities for each site.





### 99 DOVER

This site ranked #1 on the Suitability Index for all three building heights analyzed.

The size and shape of the lot combines with its high suitability to make it **THE MOST IDEAL LOCATION** for a new office building in all of Davis Square. If the property owner chooses to redevelop, there is preference for a 5-story building with an upper story step-back. An alley should be built between the building and existing houses and the top floor stepped back.

**128,000+ SF**  
**475+ new jobs**



### 1 COLLEGE

This site is a long term 'stretch goal' of this plan. It is difficult to redevelop due to its shape. The combined properties rank at 11 & 12 on the Suitability Index. However, most people agree that if the property owner chooses to redevelop, it could be an iconic building that enhances the Square. Due to site constraints, six stories is necessary to meet financing minimums. Redevelopment could also include the MBTA head house.

**43,650+ SF**  
**44 Dwelling Units (DU) + 8 Affordable DU or 170+ new jobs**



### **393 HIGHLAND**

If 393 Highland is combined with the City owned parking lot it increases to a rank of 2 on the suitability index. It is also the ideal dimensions for a commercial office building. If the City partnered with the property owner the preference was for a 5-story building with an upper story step-back. Feedback identified an improved Community Path connection as a critical component of any redevelopment.

**110,000+ SF**  
**410+ new jobs**



### **233-239 ELM**

This site ranked highly on the Suitability Index for all three building heights because of the amount under common ownership. If redeveloped by the property owner, the dimensions work well for both a commercial building or general building. In the center block, preference was for 5-stories with an upper story step-back.

**120,000+ SF**  
**76 DUs + 18 ADUs or**  
**550+ new jobs**





### 96-100 DOVER

This site serves as an important transition to residential areas south of the core. Due to the lots irregular shape, four and five story general buildings were explored during the site studies.

The two properties abutting this site, after the bend on Dover Street, have already been (or are in the process of being) redeveloped into three story buildings. If the property owner chooses to redevelop, four stories was preferred on this site.

**25,000+ SF**  
**15 DUs + 4 ADUs**



### 246-250 ELM

This building just made it into the top 10 in the Suitability Index rating. It was shown as a general building at both four and five stories in height. If the property owner chooses to redevelop, most people preferred the five story design with a setback. The community also preferred the design of this building to others in the process.

The residential typology does allow for elements like bays that are not typical of commercial buildings.

**30,000+ SF**  
**15 DUs + 4 ADUs**



## DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

The following policy objectives address zoning regulations for development in Davis Square, with a special focus on supporting the other objectives for public life and public spaces of this plan.

### Policy Objective 3.03

- Adopt the proposed Somerville Zoning Ordinance so that its many regulatory tools can be put to use in Davis Square.

### Policy Objective 3.04

- Establish a more nuanced zoning map that better focuses development into the core of Davis Square.

### Policy Objective 3.05

- Require 5- and 6-story buildings to have an upper story step-back above the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, excluding development on shallow lots.

### Policy Objective 3.06

- Map the Commercial Core district on sites that are highly suitable for commercial buildings.

### Policy Objective 3.07

- Map the Fabrication district to protect buildings used for Arts & Creative Enterprise uses.

### Policy Objective 3.08

- Designate Holland Street, Elm Street, Highland Avenue, and College Avenue as Pedestrian Streets.

### Policy Objective 3.09

- Require 5% of commercial floor space in new 5- and 6-story buildings to be set aside for Arts & Creative Enterprise uses.

### Policy Objective 3.10

- Permit uses from the Arts & Creative Economy uses by-right within Davis Square

### Policy Objective 3.11

- Require a Special Permit for non-residential uses over 10,000 square feet in floor area.

### Policy Objective 3.12

- Require a Special Permit for formula uses including Retail, Eating & Drinking, and Lodging uses.

### Policy Objective 3.13

- Establish standards for different types of signs and controls on sign lighting.

### Policy Objective 3.14

- Implement off-street parking maximums, rather than minimums, for all properties within walking distance to the Davis Square Red Line Station.

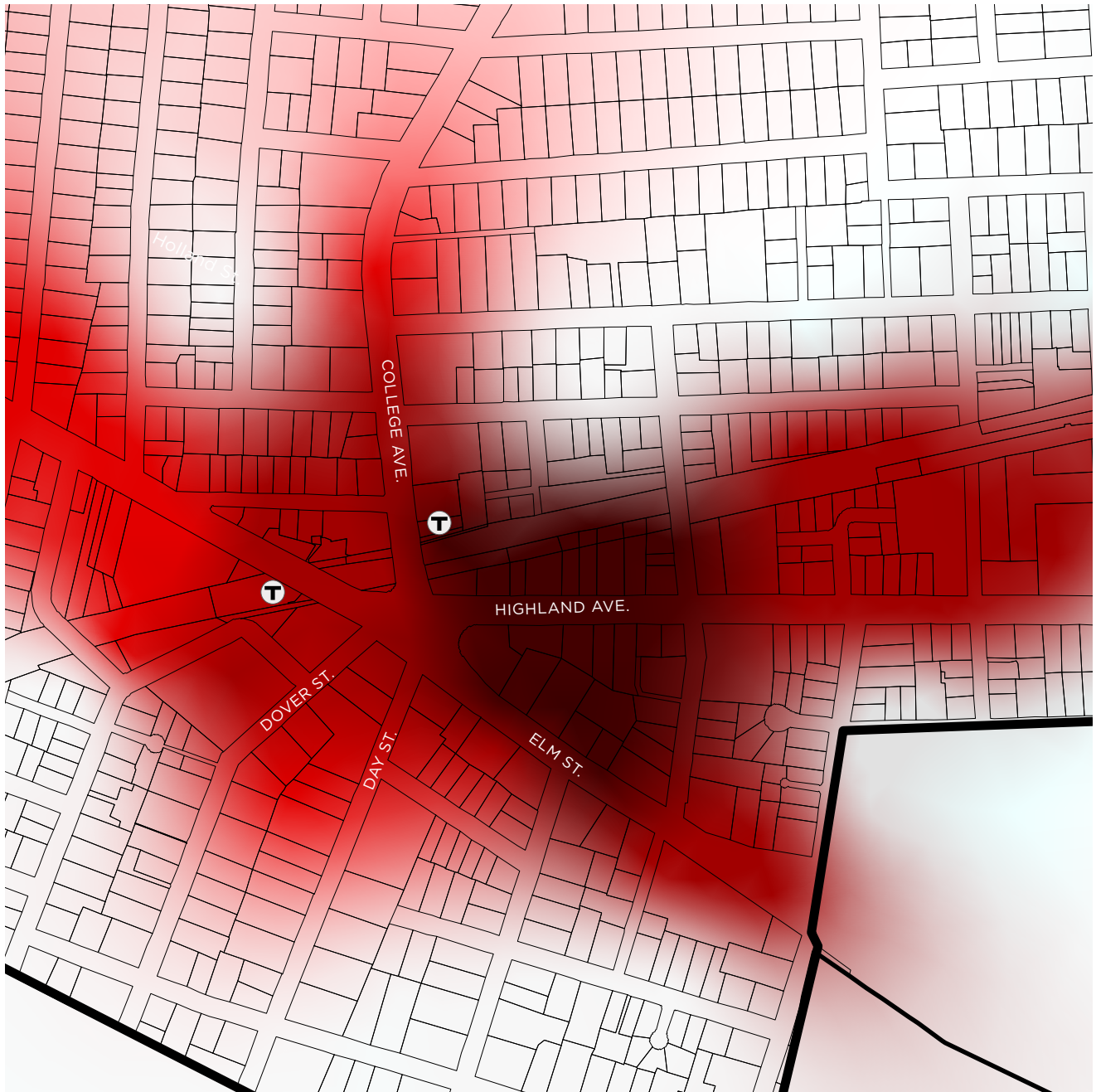
### Policy Objective 3.15

- Permit development by site plan approval in the Mid-Rise and Commercial Core districts to streamline the permitting process.

### Policy Objective 3.16

- Require neighborhood meetings and design review for all buildings in the Mid-Rise and Commercial Core districts prior to site plan approval.

## REGULATING DEVELOPMENT



### A DENSITY GRADIENT



Existing Neighborhoods

Mid-Rise Buildings including  
Commercial, Apartment, and  
General Buildings

Height in the middle of the square on the 'islands' that include Middlesex Federal and Mike's were better received throughout the community process than properties that directly abutted houses. In absence of a zoning map, this conveys the sentiments of the process where height is focused in the center of the square and decreases around the perimeter and streets leading into the Square.





## DESIGN GUIDELINES

### Davis Square

The previous section described the form that be prevalent in the Square - Mid-Rise 4-, 5-, and 6- story development. The story height and use(s) don't define the unique character of the Square - the storefronts and streetscape does. The community helped Planning Staff tease out the character of the Square in a series of meetings in early 2017 (see images below). Many of the features the community identified were incorporated into the proposed zoning language but are worth repeating here with additional detail on how they relate to the existing character of Davis Square.

Recent studies have confirmed what common sense suggests - that visually pleasing urban areas attract more visitors, real estate investment, and business activity.

To support the successful development of engaging and visually pleasing projects, Planning Staff has worked closely with the community and consultants to develop guidelines on the characteristics and elements that make for a good building. The goal of this effort has been to promote projects that will **REINFORCE THE CHARACTER** of Davis Square.

Once zoning is adopted, proposed projects will be presented before the Urban Design Commission. Using these design guidelines and the zoning code, they will consider whether a proposed project has reflected or could respond more to the character of the neighborhood.

These guidelines and the proposed zoning don't predetermine architectural design style. The guidance provided is concerned with environmental psychology - the study of the human response to the built and natural environments. All of these issues are achievable with any architectural style.

The design of a building, particularly the portion that faces the street, called a frontage, is the first chance for a building to define its character and establish a relationship with the neighborhood. Projects in Davis Square have a range of responsibilities to fulfill. Buildings in Local Centers are expected to have a pedestrian focused design. To foster this experience, projects are expected to provide a visually rich and engaging streetscape to serve as an attractive setting for everyday life. Above the first floor, new buildings should preserve and enhance the streetwall to provide visual



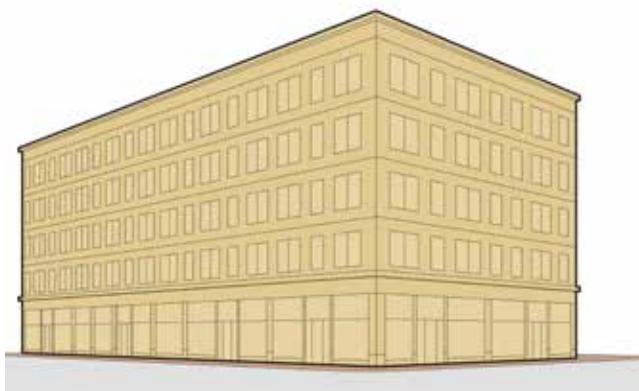


coherence and enclosure for street life. Lastly, while projects should not copy existing buildings, new buildings should be sensitive to the existing context including materiality and detailing present in the Square.

## CREATING A WALKABLE, PEDESTRIAN-FOCUSED EXPERIENCE

The first and most important responsibility of projects in Davis Square is to support an active, walkable, and engaging pedestrian experience. Successful urban neighborhoods have a range of formal characteristics that contribute to a pleasant street experience. In order to make pedestrians feel comfortable and welcomed to walk and linger, the design and detailing of the façade of buildings at the street edge is very important. A building's design should focus on the human scale by using careful detailing to articulate its height and length. Building designs should establish clear horizontal bands of base, middle, and top. The design of a building's base is extremely important because it engages the visual field of a pedestrian

To add to the sense of welcome and invitation at lobbies and shopfronts



along the street, designers should take special care in the design of doors and entryways. The façades of buildings should create zones along the sidewalks, with more protected space close to the buildings for standing or window shopping. This allows passing pedestrians unobstructed flow just a few steps further out from the building (see image below).

All choices for how to deal with the space created at the edge of a building should be made with pedestrian experience in mind, creating comfortable conditions for people visiting or passersby.

These design gestures are important because they set up the physical conditions for people to be active participants in public life, consumers of local business services, and good neighbors to one other.

## NURTURING AN ACTIVE STREETSCAPE

New buildings should also make use of design elements and gestures that address the broader streetscape. The patterns and details that make Local Centers like Davis Square so attractive for visitors and residents alike have evolved over time and have developed through trial and error into informal rules.



## DESIGN GUIDELINES

### Davis Square

Wherever new buildings are proposed in the Square, they should follow these 'rules' and continue these patterns to enhance the spaces people so love.

Seen as a whole, the shopfronts and entries incorporated at the base of a building play a significant role in defining the character of a street. 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.

In addition to the vertical and horizontal division of front façades, buildings should have a clear hierarchy expressed in their design elements. The pattern of storefront windows and shop or lobby entrances should be carefully arranged to create a pleasant rhythm along the street, not too long as a pedestrian loses interest nor too short where there's no longer a viable storefront (see image below). It's important that entrances are detailed to be easily identifiable and welcoming when public. Private or secondary entrances can be simpler in design so as to almost go unnoticed unless someone is looking for it (see photo below on right).



First floor lobby spaces should be constrained to make sure that they don't make extravagant use of floor area that could be more productively oriented toward public uses. One potential public use that relates both to the local streetscape and the broader city at the same time is the provision that arts and creative space be provided in new buildings. New buildings should be as creative in their design for this use as the artists and makers of the City of Somerville.

### MAINTAINING AND ENHANCING THE STREET WALL

The base of a building should be broken into bays that provide for a series of shopfronts and entries that focus on horizontal flow through the Square, while the upper areas of a façade should focus vertically.

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 façade. At the base of the building, broad expanses of glass provide display space for shops and a pleasant view of the street from inside. Windows above the





first floor should be smaller, and should align vertically with the bay structure of the base and horizontally with each other in regular horizontal bands.

At the top, the verticals should have a strongly expressed cornice to reinforce the upper edge of the street wall, like a thick outline on a drawing. The expression of the cornice at the upper edge of a building should have a clear relation to the signage band and any smaller cornices established at the building's base, though it should be larger, grander in detail, and could project further from the face of the building. 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.

## PROMOTING CONTEXT-SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Over time, the streets and squares of Somerville have developed their own particular character, defined by the forms of the buildings and their details, as well as the materials and colors used. The design of new buildings should be mindful of the details that make up this character, and provide detailing that blends well with the best of the existing.

While it is important that a project doesn't copy its surroundings, careful form, material, and color choices can help reinforce the character of the Square. New buildings can give a sense of continuity and unity instead of trying to change the neighborhood (see example below).

On prominent sites and at the ends of avenues, buildings should be designed to frame memorable views and provide a focal point to 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.



## COMMON BUILDING FEATURES



- Entrances to corner commercial spaces are located at the corner of the storefront and are chamfered or recessed to provide an entryway for pedestrians.
- Corner commercial spaces have storefronts on the side street frontage for the width of a least one architectural bay.



- Storefronts have a recessed entrance to provide an entryway for pedestrians.
- Recessed entryways are decorated with tiles, pavers, or other artistic pavements to add visual interest to the entryway.







- Folding, sliding, and tilt-turn display windows, doors, and other storefront systems that open to permit a flow of pedestrians between the interior/ exterior are frequently provided for eating and drinking establishments.
- Permanent signage for ground floor uses is three-dimensional.



- Facades have a cornice either at the top of the façade or at the transition that differentiates the building's middle floors from its top. The inclusion of a parapet at the top of a façade is common.
- Permanent or moveable frontage planters are included advantageously along the storefront.



### APPLYING DESIGN STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

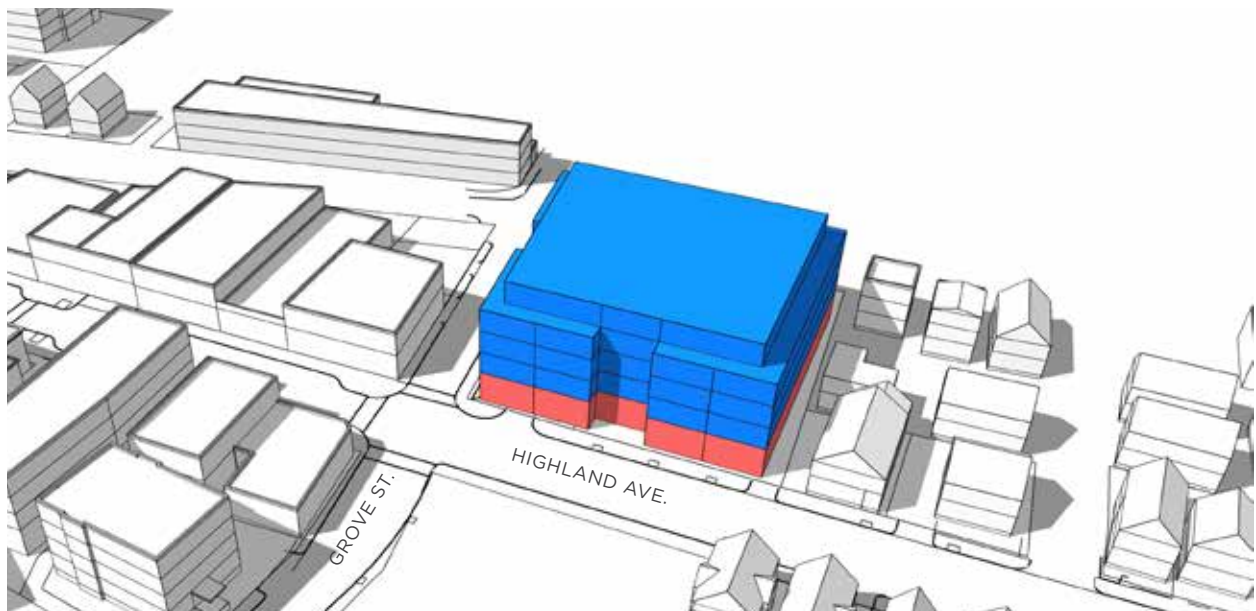
Planning Staff selected 393 Highland Avenue as a demonstration site to test the recommended development standards and design guidelines included in this plan. The site includes the City-owned parking lot along Grove Street and a privately held single story commercial building currently occupied by Rite-Aid, a formula retail drugstore. Recently, Rite-Aid corporate has gone through major transitions including many of their stores being acquired by Walgreens.



Although the location ranks seventh on the development suitability index but if combined with the City owned adjacent parking lot makes the location the second most ideal site for a commercial office building. The ownership of the parking lot may even be able to be leveraged to encourage redevelopment earlier than other suitable sites - which influenced the desire to study the site in more detail.

either side, all punched into voids framed by columns or piers. Two architectural designs are shown on the facing page: one traditional and one contemporary. The same design guidelines are met with each design including a corner entrance, wrapped storefronts, recessed storefront entrances, a parapet or cornice at the top of the building, and three-dimensional signage.

The example infill building is five stories with an upper story stepback and a floorplate of about 25,475. A lobby entrance is centered on both Highland and Grove Street with storefronts on







### APPLYING DESIGN STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

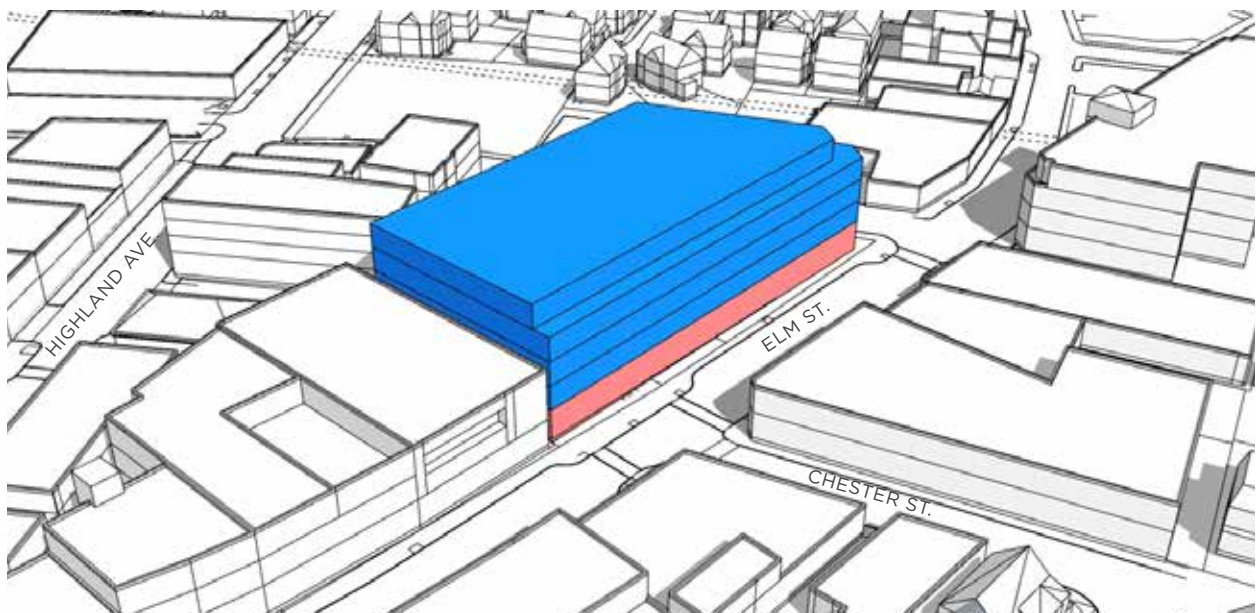
Planning Staff also studied 233-239 Elm Street as a demonstration site to test the recommended development standards and design guidelines included in this plan. The site is part of two 'islands' in Davis Square in which the majority of the block is commercial with some apartment buildings but has no immediate small scale residential abutters.

The site ranked third on the development suitability index due to its location and current buildout compared to existing zoning. The site would work equally well for a commercial building or a general building. Either would have first floor retail and restaurant uses with either office or residential above.

A new building would have upwards of 120,000 square feet of built space, enough for about 100 residential units or commercial space for over 550 jobs. The example building is five stories with an upper story step-back. The floor plate is 27,000 square feet. There's a small lobby entrance on Elm with otherwise continuous storefronts that wrap onto Grove Street. The first cornice line picks up the height of the



Citizen's Bank building catercorner from the site. The far corner is angled with a corner entrance. This detail is not only typical in Davis Square but helps with visibility at the odd geometry at the Grove and Elm Street intersection. Two architectural designs are shown on the facing page: one traditional and one contemporary. The same design guidelines are met with each design including a corner entrance, wrapped storefronts, recessed storefront entrances, a parapet or cornice at the top of the building, and three-dimensional signage.



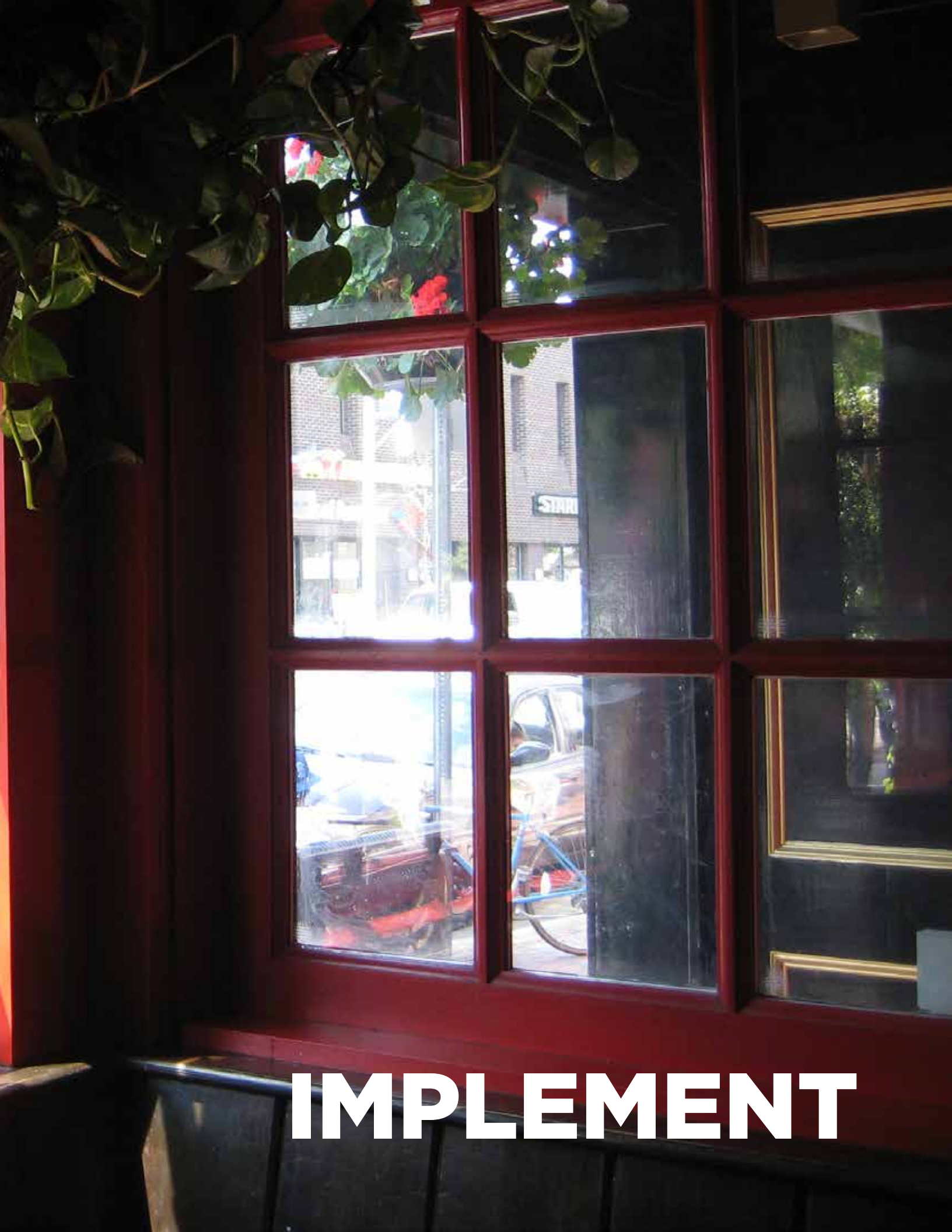












**IMPLEMENT**

# IMPLEMENTATION

## Priorities for the 1-2 Years

A neighborhood plan documents a community's vision for the future, and implementation begins as soon as the plan has been adopted. During the planning process, Planning Staff works with other departments, the community, and consultant teams to make sure a neighborhood's vision is achievable. The plan uses the best information available at the time, but more information is needed for implementation. Because of this, implementation isn't the end of the process; it's only the next phase!

There are over 70 policy objectives in this plan. Each is intended to provide direction on how to achieve the goals identified in the community process. Planning Staff has identified xxx Policy Objectives to be prioritized for implementation. These objectives are achievable within the next 1-2 years.

### LIFE

#### Policy Objective 1.18

- Work with residents to identify and solve maintenance issues

During the creation of this plan, a group of concerned residents started DavisNow to advocate for improved maintenance of the Square. Their documentation which they called an illustrated punchlist showed just exactly the maintenance issues that needed addressed. Currently, the Engineering Division is working with a consultant on sidewalk and crosswalk repairs.

#### Policy Objective 1.21

- Connect property owners of buildings with blank walls to the Arts Council's mural arts program

In 2018, the Somerville Arts Council started the Somerville Street Arts Project to inject the city with more bright and colorful public art. Davis Square has several blank walls that could host public

art. Are you a property owner that's interested? Contact the Arts Council!

### SPACE

#### Policy Objective 2.XX

- Adjust signal timing of the existing main intersection in accordance with the City's Complete Streets Ordinance to favor pedestrians first, then transit riders, cyclists, and finally motor vehicles.

#### Policy Objective 2.01

- Consider providing Transit Signal Priority for MBTA buses at the main intersection and busway.

The City worked with a consultant to identify strategies to improve signal timing through the existing intersection configuration. This led to the signal re-timing in 2018. The mid-term recommendations require acquisition of new signal technology and some minor curblane adjustments. These improvements will further implement a complete streets ordinance and will provide the technology for the MBTA transit signal priority at the busway.

### BUILDINGS

#### Policy Objective 3.03

- Adopt the proposed Somerville Zoning Ordinance so that its many regulatory tools can be put to use in Davis Square.

The Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development has been working on a zoning overhaul for over five years. The fourth submittal will be in late summer 2019. OSPCD is optimistic that the Council will adopt this version. Specialty topics, of interest to the Councillors and advocacy groups, can then be incorporated with amendments.



## STEP BY STEP

Implementation happens incrementally. These are photos from the Davis Square signal timing work in 2018. To get to this step there were vehicle counts taken, the old signal timing was studied, and a new signal timing was created. Contractors did wiring updates to implement the signal timing and Planning Staff did outreach so pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists, knew of the changes happening. Each piece seems to fall in place faster as implementation progresses.



# PART OF A LARGER PICTURE

## One of Many Planning Efforts

A neighborhood plan takes consideration of the long-term future of a neighborhood to identify challenges and opportunities, establish goals, and identify paths for implementation. They rely on extensive participation by residents, businesses, and other stakeholders to help translate the city-wide goals to the neighborhood level.

There are other city-wide policies and planning that are either still in process or have been completed since the beginning of this plan. To name a few:

- Climate Forward
- Vision Zero
- Open Space & Recreation Plan

- Urban Forestry Plan
- Talent Equity Playbook
- SomerVision 2040

Neighborhood planning does not go on hold until all city-wide planning is complete. Nor does the adoption of another plan mean a neighborhood plan is outdated. Planning is a constant evolution of ideas that uses the best information available at the time. As elements of the plan are implemented, it's another opportunity for Planning Staff and the community to reflect on the new information from other planning efforts and see how the spirit of those plans can be implemented in Davis Square.

## SOMERVISION 2040

Ten years ago, the community brought together the best and most ambitious ideas to write SomerVision 2030, the City's comprehensive plan for 2010-2030, and it has helped guide the City's work since.

In January 2019, the City kicked off SomerVision 2040, a comprehensive plan update. The intent is to improve upon the plan, measure progress, add new ideas, and consider what has changed.

The process started with a public meeting, organization of a committee to represent a variety of viewpoints, small casual events to get feedback

called SomerSuppers, and an unprecedented 2-day conference to deep dive into the issues. Next steps include engaging in Forums to get feedback from underrepresented groups in the planning process and working with the committee on individual chapters of the plan update.

By the end of 2019, SomerVision 2040 should be adopted. SomerVision will continue to be a guiding document in planning work and implementation throughout the City.



# SOMERVISION2040

Sustainability • Diversity • Opportunity • Connectivity • Community



