

Boylston Street Visioning Group

Summary Report

12/11/2018

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Introduction

The section of Boylston Street (also called Route 9) that extends in Brookline from the vicinity of Cypress Street eastward to the border with Boston has been the subject of numerous planning and redevelopment studies over the years. Within the past 15 years, at least three different studies have analyzed the corridor and proposed scenarios for new mixed-use development as well as public infrastructure improvements (see page 3). A number of projects along the corridor have begun to implement the recommendations from these initiatives, most notably in the sub-area extending from approximately High Street to Boston. In this area, projects such as Gateway East, the Boston Children's Hospital at Brookline Place development, and the adoption of the Emerald Island Special District zoning, will cumulatively have a transformative effect. However, west of High Street the change has been slower to take hold. While the adoption of the Davis Path Special District has facilitated a new hotel development at 111 Boylston Street and other development projects have occurred in a sporadic manner, there has not yet been a comprehensive attempt to implement the vision and goals laid out in earlier planning documents.

Within this context, the Boylston Street Visioning Group was formed in summer of 2018 as a neighborhood-led initiative to review previous plans, evaluate existing conditions, discuss community priorities, and develop an updated vision for the corridor. The group, which was led by Tom Nally (member of the Economic Development Advisory Board and Greater Point Neighborhood Association) and Wendy Machmuller (TMM precinct 5 and High Street Hill Association), met three times during the late summer and fall. It included 20 members representing a range of community perspectives (for list of members, see page 11). Town staff from the Economic Development and Long-Term Planning Division of the Department of Planning and Community Development helped facilitate the meetings and arranged meeting logistics.

This summary report is intended to provide an overview of the Boylston Street Visioning Group and document the recommendations, priorities, and areas of both consensus and disagreement that arose from the Group's discussions. The report will not include an exhaustive review of existing conditions along the corridor, only a summary of issues that the Group identified as needing to be addressed. (For a comprehensive assessment of the corridor, please see the 2015 study [Bringing Back Boylston](#).) It is also important to note that the content of the Boylston Street Visioning Group report is intended to provide a foundation for further outreach and analysis, which will be necessary to refine the recommendations prior to any implementation steps.

Meeting Summaries

As mentioned, the Boylston Street Visioning Group met three times between September and November in the fall of 2018. Each meeting had a different focus and structure, as outlined below.



Meeting 1

On August 7th, 13 members of the Brookline community joined Town staff for a kickoff meeting at the Homewood Suites at 111 Boylston Street to discuss previous planning efforts, long-term visions, and near-term implementation steps for the section of Boylston Street that extends from Cypress Street to Washington Street. The conversation began with introductions and a presentation by Trevor Johnson, Economic Development & Long-Term Planner, who shared information on previous planning efforts along the corridor, including the [2005 Comprehensive Plan](#) (Town of Brookline), [2015 Bringing Back Boylston](#) study (MIT), and the [2018 Perspectives & Opportunities for Brookline's Commercial Areas](#) (MAPC). This provided background and context for a group discussion of the high-level visions and specific recommendations contained within these reports and how they should be adapted to align with present community goals.

Meeting 2

On September 20th, approximately 15 members of the Boylston Street Visioning Group joined Town staff for a site walk and discussion exercise facilitated by Tom Nally. In this exercise we asked participants to observe and discuss the following prompts at five stopping points along the Boylston Street Corridor (stops included Boylston Street at Cypress Street, Boylston Street at Smythe Street, Walnut Street at Walnut Path, 128 Boylston Street [Liner Tire], and Boylston Street at High Street).

- What works well and should be preserved?
- What does not work well and should be changed?
- What is missing and should be added?

The goal of this inventory and analysis was to help Visioning Group members articulate a list of current issues and opportunities and begin to set some priorities for the future. Participants recorded their views along the way on a worksheet. Following the site walk, members gathered at the Town of Brookline Public Health Building for a facilitated discussion to help synthesize, as a group, the disparate

and/or overlapping viewpoints recorded and expressed during the walk. The results of the site walk exercise and follow-up discussion were summarized and divided between corridor-wide perspectives and those related to specific locations along the corridor. In addition, the input was categorized based on relative level of importance toward achieving the goals discussed during the first meeting of the Visioning Group. This input and prioritization formed the basis for Meeting 3.

Meeting 3

On November 1st, 14 members of the Visioning Group met for a final meeting at Town Hall to discuss the ideas generated during the previous meeting's site walk and discussion exercise. The goal of the meeting was to review the feedback, reach consensus on common themes and recommendations, and identify areas of disagreement within the group. The results of this meeting are detailed in this report.

Guiding Principals

The Boylston Street Visioning Group based its work on three core values that underpin the approach and ideas expressed during the process. These core values are adopted from the Economic Development and Long-Term Planning division.

Inclusiveness: We will intentionally seek and integrate the interests and views of a diverse range of people that live, visit, work, or own property in Brookline.

Pragmatic optimism: We will focus the energy and enthusiasm we have as professionals to be the most effective in our work.

Innovation: We will bring creative thinking to our work and strive to approach projects with an open mind and fresh perspective, while always seeking novel ways to achieve our goals.

Vision

A community visioning process entails the development of a high-level vision statement that serves to focus discussion on a shared future outcome. Ideally, a vision statement is broad, long-term, and aspirational, but achievable.

The Boylston Street Visioning Group developed the following the vision statement for the Boylston Street Corridor.

The Boylston Street corridor will be transformed into a place defined by walkability, multi-modal transportation, a contextually-appropriate urban character, a mix of uses, open space, and an active public realm.

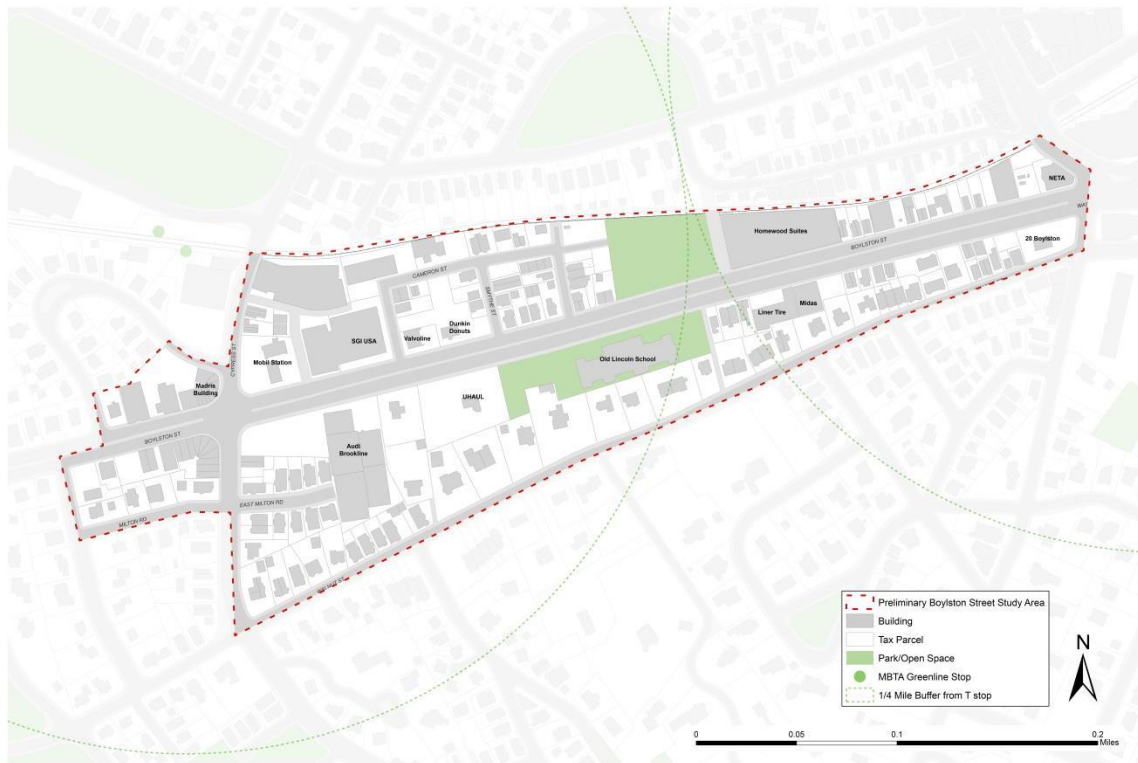


Figure 1

Issues and Recommendations

The Boylston Street Corridor study area (shown in Figure 1) extends along Boylston Street from its intersection with Milton and Brington Roads eastward to the intersection with Washington and High Streets. The study area focuses on the mix of land uses (commercial, residential, institutional, and public facilities) that line the state-owned roadway, but also includes several residential areas that are either interspersed among the existing commercial and institutional uses or directly abut those uses, such as along Walnut Street south of Boylston Street. As mentioned in the introduction, for a comprehensive review of existing conditions in the study area, please see the [Bringing Back Boylston](#) report.

Over the course of its three meetings, the Boylston Street Visioning Group reviewed a range of issues and opportunities along the corridor in order to arrive at a set of recommendations and/or recommended alternatives. The recommendations are intended as actionable ideas for achieving the vision statement. These ideas can be categorized as corridor-wide or related to a specific sub-area of the overall study area. To help organize the range of ideas, this report will divide the recommendations between those with a corridor-wide scope and those focused on one of three subareas (see figure 2), as described below.

Corridor-Wide Recommendations

Corridor-wide recommendations are those that apply to all three sub-areas or that relate to specific types of strategies that can apply in a variety of conditions. The Visioning Group recommendations with a corridor-wide scope are as follows:

- Utilize [Form-based Zoning](#) as a tool to promote contextually-appropriate design and building forms where new development occurs
- Promote uses that are economically viable and that contribute beneficially to the local community
- Support existing small businesses, while engaging in strategies to add new businesses where viable and there is a need
- Seek to achieve the goals outlined in the Town’s Climate Action Plan by encouraging sustainable design and infrastructure
- Wherever feasible, employ innovative strategies to manage demand for parking
- Reduce traffic speeds and unsafe bike and pedestrian conditions along Boylston Street

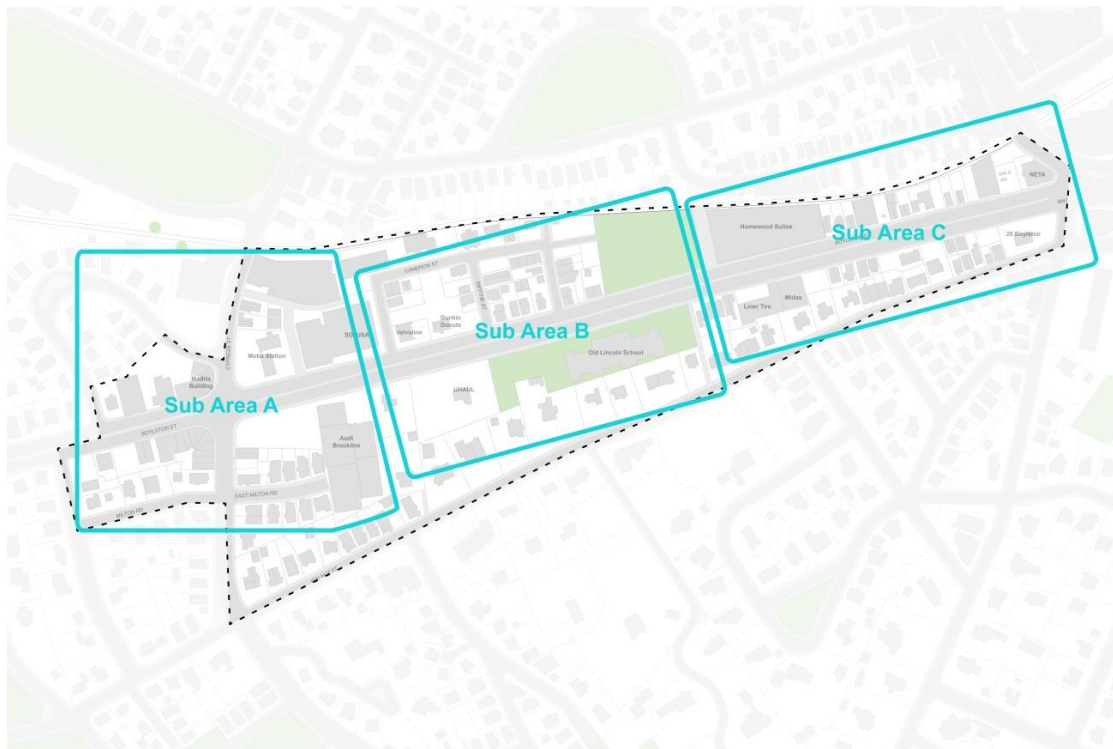


Figure 2

Subarea A

Subarea A centers around the mix of uses located at the intersection of Boylston and Cypress Streets. Major landmarks at this location include the Madris Building, Audi dealership, and the Mobil station, as well as the planned Brookline High School expansion at 111 Cypress Street. The Brookline Hills Greenline MBTA station is located nearby on Tappan Street.

Summary of Issues

In Subarea A, a series of issues were identified by the Visioning Group. These include:

- A generally inhospitable and unsafe environment for pedestrians with traffic, frequent curb cuts, noise, and fumes
- A cluster of under-utilized parcels that do not optimize their locational value (e.g., proximity to MBTA station and residential neighborhoods)
- Uninviting retail environment with some buildings in need of investment and improvement
- Surface parking lots fronting on the street and auto-oriented uses that are set back from the street and sidewalk
- A visually disordered and unappealing streetscape, including unsightly telephone poles and overhead wires, particularly on Cypress Street

Summary of Recommendations

Development

- Zoning should allow larger scale development and promote mixed use. Use the Madris Building (135 Cypress Street) as a model for the scale and character of potential future development on underutilized sites at intersection corners, including the mix of uses, location of active uses on the ground floor directly adjacent to the sidewalk, and height and form that is appropriate for this location
- Prohibit surface parking between buildings and the street/sidewalk while allowing curbside parking as appropriate
- Utilize parking maximums, where feasible, to regulate parking, rather than conventional parking minimums
- Encourage uses that engage pedestrians, possibly including green grocers, small shops, and coffee shops
- Encourage a mix of uses that increase foot traffic, possibly including housing, office, light industrial, maker space, retail, services
- Maintain certain uses in the near-term – for example, the Mobil station and neighborhood scale retail on southwest corner of intersection

Public Realm

- Create a more appealing sense of place by better regulating and investing in public realm design, including pedestrian-scale lighting, street trees, and improved landscaping/green space
- Promote engaging place-making activities and amenities

Infrastructure

- Improve pedestrian safety and experience, including by limiting the number of new curb cuts, investing in bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and reducing high traffic volumes and speeds on Boylston Street

Alternatives

- While the notion that the scale and form of the Madris Building is an appropriate model for future development in the area was agreed upon by the Visioning Group, there was disagreement on where and how soon such future development might occur. Some in the group felt that having a similarly sized development on all four corners of the Cypress Street-Boylston Street intersection would be desirable as a near-term goal, while others felt that some uses, such as the Mobil Station, offer services that are desirable in the near-term and should be preserved. Whether or not new development should occur on the site currently occupied by a one-to-two story retail building on the southwest corner of the intersection was another point of disagreement, with some urging redevelopment of a larger building and others having a preference for improving the existing conditions but maintaining the status quo.

Subarea B

Subarea B extends from roughly the point where Cameron Street meets the westbound lane of Boylston Street to the eastern side of the Boylston Street Playground. The subarea currently includes a mix of low-density auto-centric uses, the residential Cameron Street neighborhood, and the Old Lincoln School and Boylston Street Playground. The area abuts the Pill Hill Local Historic District.

Summary of Issues

The issues identified within Subarea B include:

- An unappealing and uninviting public realm with a character that is too suburban and auto-centric
- Heavy, unfettered traffic flow with inadequate pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, in particular a lack of pedestrian crosswalks / connectivity across Boylston Street
- Undesirable, incompatible uses and building forms at the Valvoline, Dunkin Donuts, and U-Haul sites. These uses include empty, single-use surface parking along the sidewalk that do not contribute to an active public realm.
- The Old Lincoln School is too enclosed at the sidewalk level and does not contribute to a lively sidewalk environment
- The Eversource transformer site could be better incorporated in the streetscape

Summary of Recommendations

Development

- Promote building uses, forms, and scales that are more compatible with an urban environment and that engage a street-scape, while offering goods and services that support local community needs
- Preserve housing stock and protect the community in the Cameron Street neighborhood
- Ensure new development respects the qualities of the historic neighborhood to the south along Walnut Street. This includes arranging building bulk of any future development on the U-Haul site to be focused closer to Boylston Street, scaling down to residential areas at the rear of the lot.
- Zoning should allow larger scale development and promote mixed use. Through zoning, encourage aggregation of sites to support larger-scale commercial development.

Public Realm

- Create a more appealing sense of place by better regulating and investing in public realm design, including pedestrian-scale lighting, street trees, and improved landscaping/green space
- Identify and implement temporary community-focused programs and uses for Old Lincoln School when not in use for school functions
- Incorporate Eversource transformer into new development or otherwise better integrate into the built environment through public art or other interventions

Infrastructure

- Improve pedestrian safety and experience, including by limiting the number of new curb cuts, investing in bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and reducing high traffic volumes and speeds on Boylston Street
- Increase pedestrian connectivity across Boylston Street

Subarea C

Subarea C extends from the Walnut and Davis Paths to the eastern extent of the study area at High and Washington Streets. Key landmarks in this area include the Homewood Suites at 111 Boylston Street, the historic Brookline Savings Bank building, and recently permitted mixed-use development at 20 Boylston Street. The area also includes a mixture of smaller-scale residential and commercial buildings fronting on Boylston Street and portions of the Pill Hill Local Historic District. The Brookline Village Green Line MBTA station is located nearby on Station Street.

Summary of Issues

- Area lacks a coherent character fronting on Boylston Street, with many non-public uses on ground floor and/or uninviting storefronts and uses. This contributes to a feeling of separation and disconnection from Brookline Village.
- Form of Homewood Suites building is too “boxy” and monolithic, and the signage and lighting is not suitable for the location
- Appearance and configuration of Liner Tire and Midas buildings do not positively contribute to the area
- Volume of traffic on Boylston Street and especially at the intersection of Boylston and High Streets can be very high and overwhelming, which is exacerbated by lack of sufficient pedestrian infrastructure

- Shallow depth of parcels on south side of Boylston Street means future development must be carefully configured to minimize impacts to abutting residences on Walnut Street
- The Eversource transformer could be better incorporated in the streetscape and/or future development

Summary of Recommendations

Development

- Maintain existing mixed use and promote new infill development with contextually-appropriate building forms that preserve light and air access to residential areas, including the Pill Hill Historic District
- Possible rezoning to permit more density and scale on key sites could enable better design and configuration of structures, and promote more vibrant uses
- Maintain charming older structures that front directly on sidewalk with attractive, engaging storefronts / window displays
- Area is suitable for less height and density, as compared to other sub-areas along the corridor

Public Realm

- Create a more appealing sense of place by better regulating and investing in public realm design, including pedestrian-scale lighting, street trees, and improved landscaping/green space
- Wrap the feel and character of Brookline Village around the corner and west on Boylston Street
- Incorporate Eversource transformer into new development or otherwise better integrate into the built environment through public art or other invention

Infrastructure

- Improve pedestrian safety and experience, including by limiting the number of new curb cuts, investing in bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and reducing high traffic volumes and speeds on Boylston Street
- Address traffic and pedestrian safety concerns at intersection of High Street and Walnut Street
- Consider the addition of a pedestrian bridge to cross the MBTA tracks near the Eversource transformer to connect to the end of White Place at Washington Street
- Make improvement to appearance of Walnut Path, including addition of lighting

Alternatives

- There were varying perspectives regarding potential development scenarios for this sub-area, especially on the Midas and Liner Tire sites. While group members agreed these sites are underutilized and do not contribute positively to the built environment, there was concern about how development on these sites might affect abutting residences along Walnut Street. Some group members felt that only smaller-scale residential development would be appropriate on these sites, in order to maintain access to light and air. While this scenario would minimize impacts to nearby residences, there was concern that restricting development to such uses would not allow an economically feasible development program and thus ultimately result in no change to the existing conditions. The alternative to this is an approach that permits larger scale development but only once individual parcels had been assembled to create a larger site permitting a development configuration that would minimize impacts to residences.

Next Steps and Implementation

The work of the Boylston Street Visioning Group, as summarized in this report, provided an essential community-based update to prior planning efforts. This work will serve as the foundation for a series of next steps toward implementing the Boylston Street Vision. These include:

- Outreach to stakeholders, including community members, property owners, and businesses (such as a public open house)
- Technical and financial analysis of potential development scenarios
- Development and revision of the now-outdated Boylston Street design guidelines
- Work with Central Transportation Planning Staff (CTPS) and MassDOT on roadway improvement planning
- Pending further outreach and analysis, proposal for zoning by-law changes to Town Meeting

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