



ULI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

WEST ROXBURY, MA

WEST ROXBURY, MA

JUNE 11, 2019



**Urban Land
Institute**

Boston/New England

ABOUT ULI BOSTON

ULI Boston/New England is a District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a non-profit education and research organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the Institute today has more than 42,000 members worldwide. ULI members represent the full spectrum of land use planning and real estate development disciplines working in the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

The ULI Boston/New England District Council is committed to advancing ULI's Mission to "provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities" through its evolving platform as the leading real estate organization for convening and sharing best practices in our region. Our community outreach programs enables local ULI leaders to identify challenges to better development, feature best practices from across the country and devise new solutions to improve land use patterns.

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ABOUT THE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL (TAP) PROGRAM

ULI Boston's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) Program provides expert, multidisciplinary, and non-partisan advice on land use and real estate issues facing public agencies and nonprofit organizations in Boston and New England. Drawing from its extensive membership base, ULI Boston conducts panels offering objective and pragmatic advice to local decision makers on a variety of land use and real estate issues, ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The TAP Program is intentionally flexible to provide a customized approach to specific land use and real estate issues.

Learn more at: <https://boston.uli.org>



Tim White Way

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Executive Summary

The West Roxbury Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened on June 11, 2019, at the West on Centre restaurant in West Roxbury, under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England Chapter. Over the course of the day, eight ULI members met with local business owners, residents, civic organizations and non-profit organizations from West Roxbury. The purpose of the TAP was to provide guidance to West Roxbury Main Streets (WRMS) on ways to re-energize the neighborhood's primary commercial district, a nearly one mile stretch that extends from the Holy Name rotary to Spring Street. The TAP presented their findings and recommendations to the public later that evening at the Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church in West Roxbury.

ULI and the TAP Process

Provides an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) as well as a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part. The chapter also highlights key elements of the study area for the TAP, and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at the recommendations presented.

Background and History

Gives a summary of the issues that the TAP was to address and includes the questions WRMS posed to the panel. It also provides key population and demographic information and a brief overview of the study area.

Assets and Opportunities

Identifies the strengths of the Centre Street commercial district. These include an en-

gaged community; multiple public transportation options; the potential for a walkable business district; an active daytime population of seniors and children; and an abundance of restaurants and active retail.

Challenges

Examines the obstacles that create a challenge for WRMS and the community in their efforts to enhance the vitality of the business district, including: an unsafe pedestrian/cyclist environment; parking issues, a lack of green-space; and a desire for more destination retail within the corridor.

Recommendations

Proposes a number of actions that WRMS can implement to achieve its goal of creating a vibrant business district. Key recommendations include: creating a safe environment for all users by considering a redesign of Centre Street that includes lane reduction; improving the pedestrian/cyclist experience; addressing parking issues; allowing for additional multi-family housing along the corridor; and creating a more vibrant, walkable business district by adding greenery and gathering spaces.

Funding Sources/Resources

Provides a list of potential funding sources through federal and state agencies, as well as an appendix of articles and papers that could be used for modeling some of the recommended actions.

Conclusions

Offers a final assessment of the redevelopment possibilities for the revitalization of the Centre Street business district.

ULI & the TAP Process

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) non-profit research and education organization supported by its members. The mission of ULI is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities. Founded in 1936, the institute has grown to over 40,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines working in private enterprise and public service. ULI membership includes developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals as well as other practices.

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states and has over 1,400 members. As a preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI Boston/New England facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local and regional leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes TAPs at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations

facing complex land use challenges, who benefit from the pro bono recommendations provided by members.

A TAP consists of a group of diverse professionals with expertise in the issues posed, and are specially assembled to spend one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the state's economic development and finance authority. The quasi-public agency works closely with state, local and federal officials to boost housing and create jobs. With the power to act as both a lender and developer, MassDevelopment also works to fill in gaps in infrastructure, transportation, energy and other areas that may be holding back economic growth. MassDevelopment has worked with ULI since 2011 to help sponsor and support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth and objectives.

Panel Members

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing West Roxbury. Practice areas included architects, developers, designers, planners, attorneys, and financial analysts. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

James Heffernan, attorney, co-founder, Navem Partners, LLC

Nyal McDonough, asset manager

Panel

James Heroux, ASLA, PLA, principal, Copley Wolff Design Group

Sarah Kurpiel Lee, assistant director of transportation, Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)

Christine Madore, vice president of real estate services, MassDevelopment

Matt Marotta, AIA, associate principal, ICON Architecture, Inc.

Alykhan Mohamed, urban planner, Sasaki

Kartik Shah, AICP, LEED AP, associate director of urban design, Harriman

ULI Staff

Manikka Bowman, director, policy & outreach, Boston/New England District Council

Sara Marsh, manager, Boston/New England District Council

Eliza Daeschler, associate, Boston/New England District Council

Anna Fairfield, intern, Boston/New England District Council

Jon Hillman, senior consultant, Rivera Consulting

TAP Writer

Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications

(Panelists have donated their time)

Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders – local business owners, representatives from local non-profits, and neighborhood residents.

The following is a list of stakeholders:

Larry Costello, president, West Roxbury Neighborhood Council

Michelle Sampson, founding member, West Rox Walks

Laura Dowd, governance committee chair, Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

Jamie Folsom, owner, Go West CoWorking

Frederick Gillis, financial advisor, The Cooperative Bank (TCB)

Maija Gray, founding member, West Roxbury Bicycle Committee

Eleanor Greene, owner, West on Centre restaurant

Elizabeth Hoenscheid, business owner, Top It Off

Marion Kelly, executive director, West Roxbury YMCA

Albert Meranda, owner, Atlas True Value Hardware

Steven Meranda, store manager, True Value Hardware

Matthew O'Malley, Boston city councilor

Joseph Steffano, asset manager, Linear Retail (owners of 1869-1881 Centre Street)

Margaret Vogt, broker/owner, Vogt Realty Group

The TAP Process

The West Roxbury TAP was held on June 11, 2019. Panelists from the ULI Boston/ New England District Council were greeted at the West on Centre restaurant by Jacob Robinson, executive director of West Roxbury Main Streets (WRMS); Charlotte Fleetwood, senior transportation planner at the Boston Transportation Department (BTD); Victoria Maguire, WRMS board president; Howard Traub, WRMS board member and design committee chair; and Preston Buehrer, engineer from the Toole Design Group, which is working with the BTD to assess opportunities for traffic calming measures along the Centre Street corridor, specifically a road diet. Following introductions, the panelists were taken on a walking tour of a major portion of the study area, which extended from just beyond the Holy Name rotary to LaGrange Street, a distance of approximately 3/4 of a mile.

The tour departed from West on Centre, a thriving local American fare restaurant located across the street from an eclectic group of smaller international-themed restaurants next to a bagel shop and cafe. The group proceeded west on Centre Street towards LaGrange Street. Panelists observed a number of small businesses, including gas stations, medical/dental offices, a bicycle shop, driving school and a nail salon, as well as restaurants and coffee shops before coming to the intersection at Willow Street, which serves as the entrance to the parking lot of the Roche Bros. supermarket. The northwest corner of the intersection is a newly constructed, 16-unit condominium complex with first-floor office space, which is currently vacant. Panelists were informed that first floor retail was not an allowable use for the building owner, which is inconsistent with the optimal use for the commercial district.

The northeast corner of the same intersection is a retail building with a single tenant and two vacancies that is in the process of being repositioned by the owner, the Gerasimidis Group. Brookline Bank and The Paper Store are at the corner of Roche Bros., in addition to a pocket park with a half-dozen trees. Continuing west on Centre, a large underutilized parking lot separates the bank from Macy's Liquors, which

leases the second floor to Go West Coworking. Further up, Tim White Way, is situated between a sizable medical office building (Brigham & Women's/Faulkner) and the U.S. Post Office. This tree-lined walkway with benches and greenery serves as a pedestrian access between the Highland MBTA commuter rail station and Centre Street. The walkway is one of the few public spaces that is inviting and safe for pedestrians along this commercial corridor.



1789 Centre St.



1783 Centre St.



Brookline/Macy's

The tour proceeded past a small cluster of banks to a vibrant block of concentrated retail and restaurants with well-maintained storefronts between that runs from Corey to Hastings Streets. Corey Street serves as an access street to the Highland MBTA commuter rail station and parking lot. According to local stakeholders on the tour, the MBTA parking



Tim White Way



Pavilion



Double Parked Delivery Truck

lot is well-utilized on weekdays but virtually empty on weekends. A landscaped plaza prominently serves as the entrance to a commercial building at the southwest corner of Corey and Centre Streets. The block is home to Atlas True Value Hardware, Recreo coffee shop, Sugar Bakery, the Real Deal Deli, Rox Diner, The Squealing Pig pizza/brew pub, as well as Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church.

The tour proceeded up to the intersection of Park Street, where panelists observed a 6,000 square office space for lease at 1895 Centre as well as a standalone Rockland Trust branch that is for sale on the other side of Hastings Street (1905 Centre). Further down Centre Street is a cluster of civic uses, which includes the Fire Station, the YMCA, the Patrick Lyndon School and the West Roxbury Branch of Boston Public Library, all within walking distance of each other. Panelists noted that the intersection between Mt. Vernon Street & Centre Street sees heavy automotive traffic to/from the Patrick Lyndon School and the YMCA.

During the course of the tour, it was noted that there is very little retail vacancy in the business district. Panelists also observed multiple instances of double parking on Centre Street outside of businesses, including large delivery trucks blocking the inner lanes; and also witnessed firsthand the perilous nature of crossing the four lane street without the benefit of a median strip, as cars were often driving in excess of the posted speed limit of 25 MPH. It is also important to note that, during the tour, there were three separate instances of West Roxbury residents expressing their opposition to the lane reduction plan being considered to the group of panelists.

The group returned to West on Centre, where the ULI panel interviewed stakeholders, listed in the previous sub-section, in two separate panel discussions for the remainder of the morning. The panelists then engaged in an intensive charrette to develop recommendations based on the input from the stakeholders as well as background information provided by the briefing book compiled by WRMS. The analysis and recommendations were then shared in an open public forum at the Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church that evening.

Background and History

West Roxbury Main Streets (WRMS) sought the help of the ULI TAP to provide guidance on ways to enhance vitality into the Centre Street commercial district, a nearly one-mile stretch primarily comprised of retail and business uses. This heavily-trafficked four-lane undivided arterial roadway is also used as a pass-through for automotive traffic traveling to and from other Boston neighborhoods and bordering towns during commuting hours. Existing roadway conditions make the corridor unsafe for its users, attributed to vehicle speed, the number of lanes of under-coordinated traffic, and hazardous pedestrian crossings, and the lack of any on-road bicycle facilities.

Finding solutions to safety issues gained a new sense of urgency when a pedestrian crossing at the intersection of Centre and Hastings Streets was struck and killed in February of 2019. There appears to be strong public support from West Roxbury residents to improve the safety conditions of Centre Street, and officials from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Boston, including the Boston Transportation Department, are actively involved in finding a solution. WRMS would like to see any efforts to improve safety aligned with creating a more robust commercial business district, one that is welcoming to pedestrian and bicycle traffic, and to capture some of the retail leakage to surrounding communities.

One solution that has been proposed is to institute a “road diet” that would reduce the number of lanes on Centre Street from four to two, plus a shared turning lane in the middle. The plan would also include protected bike lanes and possibly pedestrian refuge islands to allow pedestrians to cross more

safely without the aid of traffic signals. While residents are interested in improving roadway safety of Centre Street, residents at public meetings have expressed concerns that such a plan would increase traffic on residential roads and the VFW Parkway, the other main thoroughfare in West Roxbury, as drivers seek alternate routes.

The ULI TAP was asked to address the following:

Questions to be addressed by the panel

- Which sections of Centre Street are the most critical areas to focus on in terms of making significant and impactful change?
- What types of changes are recommended in those sections and why are these areas most likely to be successful?
- Which properties are the most important to focus on? Are there specific uses that panelists feel are lacking that should be focused on?
- From the business and community perspective, what experiences, examples, and impacts can panelists point to in other communities that may have already completed a roadway diet?

Population/Demographics

According to estimates from the 2016 American Community Survey from the U.S. Census, West Roxbury has a population of 32,855 with a median household income of \$93,343. The population has grown by 14 percent since 2000 and occupied housing units grew by 11 percent from 2000 to 2015 (BPDA). The median age for the neighborhood

is 44.4 years – 40 percent higher than the average for Boston as a whole. The residential market is hot - homes are often sold above listing price. In June of 2019, the median listing price of homes in West Roxbury was \$549,000 while the median sales price was \$610,000 according to Zillow. Seventy-three percent of the homes in West Roxbury are owner-occupied, and the median rent in West Roxbury is \$2,442, which is lower than the Boston median of \$2,800. Nearly 80 percent (78.3) of West Roxbury residents commute to work by car/truck (the highest automotive rate of all Boston neighborhoods), while less than 15 percent (14.8) take public transportation.

The Study Area

Compared to other Boston neighborhoods, West Roxbury has a more suburban feel, with

a high percentage of single-family homes and tree-lined streets. Centre Street has long served as the commercial and civic center of this Boston neighborhood. The corridor is comprised of a mix of businesses, dining options, retail, religious institutions, as well as a small number of multifamily buildings. The study area is comprised of the section of the Centre Street commercial district that extends from the traffic rotary at Holy Name Parish to Spring Street, a stretch of approximately one mile. The district has an average daily traffic count of 16,200 vehicles, which is well within the suggested capacity for a road diet.

While there is very little retail vacancy, and some office vacancy (most notably 6,000 square feet at 1895 Centre), WRMS would like to add vibrancy to Centre Street.



TAP Panelists tour the Study Area

Assets and Opportunities

With its blend of restaurants, locally-owned businesses, schools, houses of worship, and community centers (BCYF Roche and the YMCA), with Roche Bros. serving as the grocery anchor for local retail, the Centre Street commercial district is the heart of West Roxbury.

Nodes of Activity

The Centre Street commercial district is the community center of West Roxbury and has within it a number of places which connect to form small clusters of interrelated activities. One example is the connection between the YMCA, the Lyndon School and the Boston Public Library; another is the grouping of restaurants near the Holy Name rotary, or the various food options between Corey and Hastings streets.

Engaged Community

As evidenced by the over 200 residents in attendance at the pedestrian safety meeting at the Elks Club following the pedestrian fatality in February 2019, the level of engagement at the ULI stakeholder discussions from residents, business owners and civic organizations, and the number of attendees at the Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church for the ULI presentation, the people of West Roxbury are fully engaged in the planning process for Centre Street.

Daytime Activity by Seniors and Families

With a growing population of seniors and young families in comparison to other Boston neighborhoods, the Centre Street commercial district has tremendous potential to capture spending from these populations and add

life to the street throughout the day. Within walking distance, the corridor is surrounded by high-density housing that serves as its primary market. Retaining existing and attracting new uses and/or businesses must focus on meeting the needs of residents in these immediate neighborhoods. Making the streetscape both inviting and safe for non-automotive visitors will encourage existing residents in the West Roxbury neighborhood to seek alternative modes of transportation and reduce traffic volume on Centre Street.

Multiple Public Transportation Options

Despite having three commuter rail stations along the corridor, 80 percent of West Roxbury residents commute to work by car. There are three MBTA bus lines that run through the Centre Street commercial district, the 35, 36 and 37. These buses make multiple stops along Centre and Spring Streets and connect to the Orange Line at Forest Hills. Further research should be conducted to understand the low ridership rates and identify potential issues including frequency and reliability of service. Advocacy from local and state legislators could address these issues and increase the use of public transit, therefore reducing the reliance of car travel to and from work.

Width of Centre Street

The entire width of Centre Street is 80 feet, with 10-foot wide sidewalks on each side, which provides flexibility for development options. The automotive right-of-way is 60 feet from curb to curb, including four 11-foot travel lanes and 8-foot on-street parking lanes on both sides. The width of Centre Street has the capacity to accommodate on-road

bicycle facilities such as protected bicycle lanes on both sides, bicycle turning boxes at intersections, and additional hardscape to improve safety of pedestrian crossings.

Quantity and Diversity of Dining Options

In addition to West on Centre, The Squealing Pig gastropub, and the Corrib Pub, there is a wide variety of smaller full service eating and drinking establishments, as well as cafes and bakeries. There are also a number of “take-out” restaurants along the corridor, including a concentration located in proximity to West on Centre and the Holy Name rotary. These establishments give visitors reasons to stay longer than the quick errand. However the lack of retail options results in patrons not staying beyond the length of a meal. Destination-based retail or entertainment options will complement dining activity and bring more life to the street.

Adequate Parking for Existing Uses

There is a widespread belief that there is inadequate parking in the business district. However, there are existing parking options that may be able to serve the needs of the businesses in the area during different times of the day, through better wayfinding initiatives and shared parking partnerships with private entities.

Intensity of Land Use

Uses along the corridor are dominated by 1-2 story retail or services. Opportunities to intensify residential use exist along the corridor, whether through new development or addition of existing single-story commercial properties. To minimize a potential “valley effect”, new development can be guided or governed by design standards that adopt the building step back approach or allowing more height only at street corners. Increasing residential density along the corridor will make retail uses along the corridor more economically feasible.



Credit: Northeastern University



West Roxbury YMCA

Challenges

After reviewing previous studies and background information provided by WRMS, interviewing stakeholders, and participating in a tour of the study area, it was clear to panelists that achieving the goal of a safe and vibrant business district faces a number of obstacles.

Street Design Does Not Serve Pedestrians, Cyclists, Retail Shops/ Business Patrons Well

Centre Street is very much an automotive-centric commercial district that prioritizes the movement and storage of cars. A number of large retail establishments have surplus parking, which results in vast underutilization of land.

Pedestrian Safety – The most pressing concern expressed by stakeholders during the meetings was the issue of pedestrian/ cyclist safety in the district. The four-lane design serves to promote vehicular speeding, creating an unsafe environment, according to a study, “Feasibility of a Lane Reduction ‘Road Diet’ on Centre Street, West Roxbury,” completed by a Northeastern University student in 2017. The width of the roadway, combined with a lack of median strips, make crossing Centre Street a hazardous exercise, particularly for children and seniors. Although the fatal pedestrian crash in February served to highlight the issue of pedestrian safety, stakeholders reported anecdotally that “near-misses” are a frequent occurrence, even when pedestrians use crosswalks.

One of the realities of expanding the roadway from two lanes to four on Centre Street (as

was done in 1970), was that in addition to encouraging greater speeds, there is a phenomenon known as the multiple-threat pedestrian crash. When a car in one lane stops to let a pedestrian cross, often a second car, not being aware that the first car has stopped to let the pedestrian cross, continues forward and strikes the pedestrian. Pedestrians, assuming it is safe to cross when the first car stops, often do not see or anticipate the second car.

Another contributing factor to unsafe conditions for pedestrians may be a lack of consistent enforcement for both motorist and pedestrian violations. Vehicular speeding and failing to stop for pedestrians in the crosswalk are frequent infractions for motorists, and jaywalking by pedestrians is common. Stakeholders also indicated that long wait times to cross the street at signalized intersections leads to frustration and a willingness on the part of pedestrians to jaywalk. Stakeholders indicated that following the fatal crash, vehicular enforcement increased, but has since returned to previous levels.

Unsafe conditions for cyclists – The absence of a protected bike lane or even a shared lane marking (a painted lane which indicates that motorists must share the lane with bicyclists), discourages bicyclists from using Centre Street for commuting and/or frequenting the district’s retail and restaurants. Feedback from stakeholders revealed that there is strong desire in the West Roxbury community to increase use of Centre Street by bicyclists of all ages.



Double Parked Delivery Truck



Pavilion

Parking

During the stakeholder meetings, business owners cited a lack of parking as one of the major issues facing Centre Street establishments. However, it's not clear what portion of the parking deficiencies may be attributed to an underutilization of available parking and a lack of enforcement. Although there is all day parking available on side streets and some municipal lots, many employees of the businesses choose to park on Centre Street, reducing the number of available parking spots for customers. And while many of the available spots along Centre Street are marked as "2 Hour Parking", stakeholders stated that enforcement tends to be somewhat lax. There is also frequent occurrences of double-parked vehicles on the main street, including delivery trucks serving the businesses.

Although 2 hour parking may be appropriate in some areas, Centre Street has an abundance of convenience shopping which is best served by short term parking, so their customers can avail themselves of a convenient parking space for their short visit. Examples of Centre Street convenience retail includes the hardware store, banks and the many take-out food options. The underutilization of parking may stem from a lack of wayfinding signage alerting residents and potential customers to other parking options. Currently there is very little signage that indicates parking alternatives.

Lack of Vibrancy for Centre Street Business District

Despite the low vacancy rate and wide variety of restaurant/retail offerings along Centre Street, the retail offerings are less compelling and varied than one would hope. Roche Bros. is a destination but it is set back from Centre Street. Some of the restaurants are also destinations, but overall, Centre Street does not create the impact that it could, given the amount of retail space. The streetscape has a lack of landscaped areas, save for Tim White Way and a couple of small pockets of green on private developments such as the landscaped pavilion at the corner of Corey and Centre streets (Pavilion - photo). Business owners at the stakeholder meeting expressed concerns that this lack of vibrancy is causing retail leakage to Legacy Place in nearby Dedham and other area shopping centers. Given its size, unity of ownership and the access to major thoroughfares of Legacy Place, Centre Street is not attempting to compete with the lifestyle center, but Centre Street can be more vibrant and better activated.

Recommendations

Create a Safe Environment for All Users

In order to transform Centre Street into a more vibrant commercial district, West Roxbury Main Streets and their partners in this mission should begin by adopting a plan that improves traffic safety for all – motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists.

As was laid out in the Go Boston 2030 plan, the City of Boston is encouraging design that prioritizes safety over speed in its streets, while interconnecting the roads for all modes of travel. The Northeastern study provides guidelines for implementing a road diet, which allows for one through traffic lane in each direction, with additional dedicated left-turn lanes as appropriate at intersections. The multiple design options also allow for protected bike lanes, crossing islands that would create a safer pedestrian experience without adding traffic lights (and potentially reducing the number of lights), and wider sidewalks enhanced by greenery.

The return to two lanes (Centre Street was expanded to four lanes around 1970) would reduce vehicular speeding, and also eliminate instances of multiple-threat pedestrian crashes, where one car stops for a pedestrian, but the second car – whose driver's view is often obscured – does not. This was the case in the 2015 crash at the intersection of Centre and Hastings streets, where a pedestrian was struck and suffered a traumatic brain injury. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, studies indicate a 19 to 47 percent reduction in overall crashes results when a road diet is installed on an undivided road that was previously four lanes.

The installation of the road diet results in safer conditions for cars, pedestrians and bicyclists.

Automotive Traffic

- Reduces rear-end and left-turn crashes through the use of the dedicated left-turn lane
- Eliminates sideswipe crashes caused by frequent and sudden lane changing
- Minimizes points of conflict
- A single lane creates better visibility and simplifies road scanning
- Reduced speed increases reaction time for drivers

Pedestrians/Business Patrons

- Reduces points of conflict
- Improves sight lines for oncoming traffic now approaching from a single lane
- Crossing islands create shorter distances for crossing Centre Street
- Improves pedestrian environment for children & seniors

Bicyclists

- Prevents “dooring” – where cyclists collide with doors opened suddenly by parked vehicles
- Reduces points of conflict at intersections

Make Centre Street a Street for All

The current four lane configuration, in addition to being unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists, does not adequately serve the needs of residents or businesses. Much of the traffic, particularly at peak commute times, uses Centre Street as a cut-through, rather than a business or retail destination. Implementing a road diet will allow the commercial district to begin to function more as a traditional

Main Street for residents, businesses, seniors and children, as well as restaurant and retail consumers.

There are a number of examples of neighborhoods that have adopted a road diet in the Boston area, including Tremont St. in Boston's South End, and Western Ave. and Mass. Ave/Central Square in Cambridge. The consensus is that the transformation serves the businesses better, as pedestrians feel more comfortable walking around the neighborhood while frequenting the restaurants and retail. And where it was formerly difficult for a bicyclist to travel along a route comfortably, the neighborhoods now attract many more bicyclists, who do not require parking spaces in order to frequent those businesses.

It is important to note that the principal objection on the part of business owners and residents of West Roxbury to adopting a road diet is that by reducing the number of lanes on Centre Street, there will be increased traffic congestion and a subsequent spillover into residential streets by motorists seeking alternate routes. The Northeastern University feasibility study concluded that the design would result in "no increase in delay to vehicles and therefore little risk of traffic spillover to other streets".

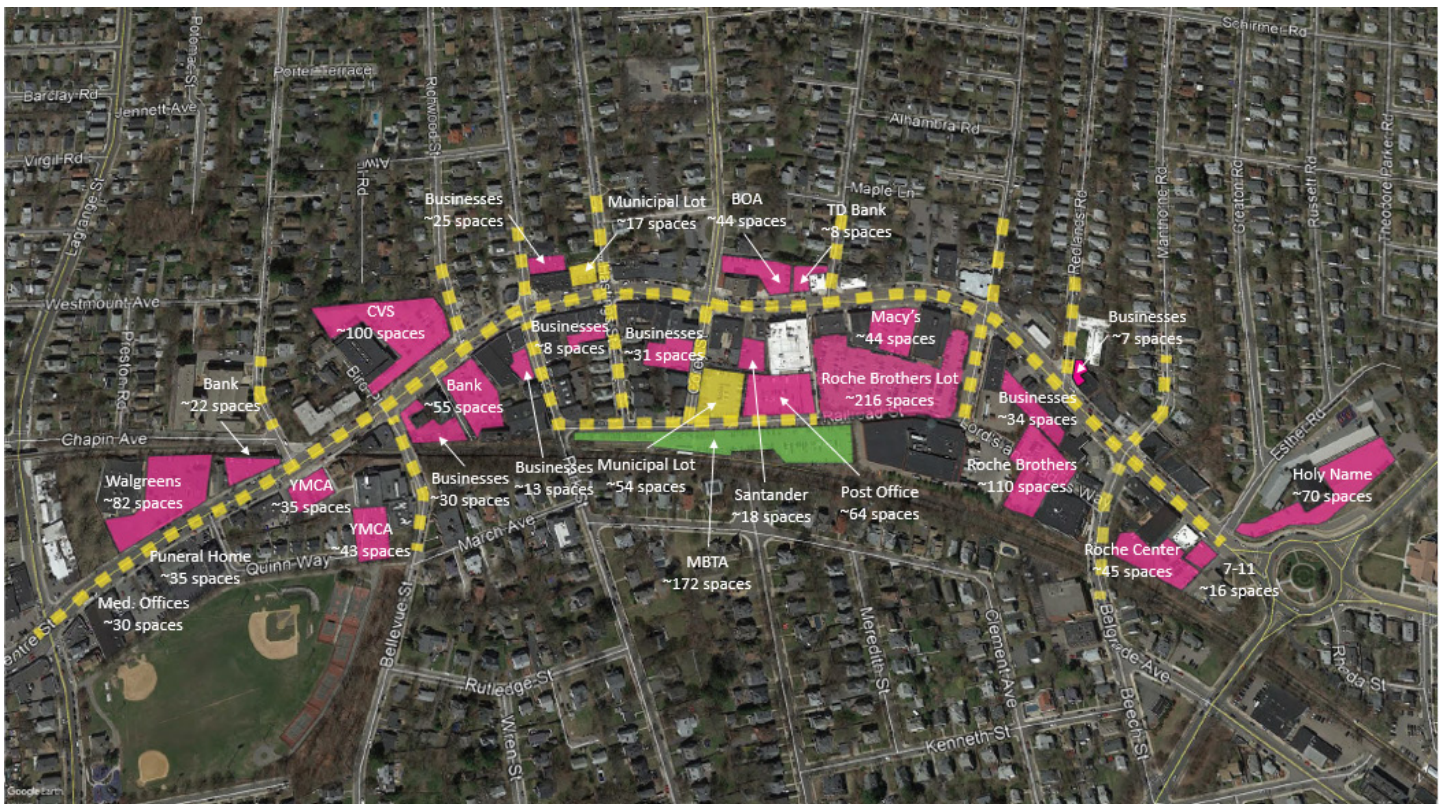
Address Parking Issues

Based on conversations with local residents and business owners, there are strong feelings about parking on Centre Street. Although many stakeholders voiced that there is no parking problem, some feel that there are not enough parking spaces to adequately serve the businesses in the district. As in any business district, an inadequate amount of parking can lead to a loss of customers for businesses as well as frequent occurrences of double-parked vehicles on the main street. The panel recommends:

- **Conduct a parking utilization study**
 - This would help WRMS understand current demand, utilization, and parking duration trends. The study would provide insight into current parking turnover which

is critical for a business district, and determine whether people are parking their vehicles longer than the regulations allow.

- **Create a parking management plan**
 - Using the data from the utilization review, develop a parking management plan that would maximize efficiency of all public parking assets within and near the corridor. Parking management improvements would likely focus on all parking assets including on-street, municipal lots, and large off-street lots such as the MBTA commuter rail lots. Possible focus areas include:
- **Enforcement** – According to business owners at the stakeholder interviews, while many of the available spots along Centre Street are marked as "2 Hour Parking," it is rarely, if ever, enforced. Enforcement is a critical part of any parking plan. If the hardware store is going to be able to serve its customers, for instance, those customers will need to be able to rely on the availability of 15 minute parking. Otherwise the customer is given another reason to explore options such as Home Depot, etc. Restaurants need longer times for parking and employees need a place to park for their entire shift. Given the availability of and the need for side street parking for employees, some portion of the parking plan must include an effort to educate the side street neighbors on the need to use side street parking.
- **Optimize Parking Utilization** – Determine the optimal amount of time to service the various uses on Centre Street. Parking spots near quick service retail (shade shop, hardware store) may only need 15-20 minute limits, while two hour parking is likely optimal for restaurants. The study must also include accommodations for trucks and other delivery vehicles.
- **Post Wayfinding Signage** – Currently there appears to be very little signage informing the public of the available municipal and MBTA parking (which has some excess capacity on weekdays and



an abundance on weekends). Making the public aware of available off-street parking through physical signage as well as on the WRMS website would help alleviate some of the parking issues. Businesses should also be encouraged to post signs alerting customers of parking in rear where applicable.

Encourage Concentrated, Diverse Retail and Allow for Increased Density, Diversity of Housing Types – “Retail follows rooftops” is an old adage in commercial real estate development, and essentially states that in

West Roxbury has a significantly higher percentage of seniors than other Boston neighborhoods, some of whom may be seeking to downsize from their larger homes to remain in the neighborhood. Allowing for multifamily units to be constructed in the area



Identified existing nodes of activity

enables seniors to do so, which in turn helps to provide the density needed to support the commercial district.

Require Ground Floor Commercial Space for Developments with Frontage on Centre Street

A property was redeveloped on 1789 Centre Street recently, and the developer was not allowed to have retail on the first floor of the building due to feedback from the neighborhood. This is a significant missed opportunity. By prohibiting retail along Centre Street, the continuity of the retail experience was disrupted and the chance to have the most current and usable retail configuration and amenities is lost.

Having active uses such as retail, restaurants or coffee shops on the ground floor, with office or residential above, provides a sense of continuity with existing retail and businesses, an essential element to building a walkable, comfortable and engaging commercial district.

Create Vibrancy by Diversifying the Business Mix along the Corridor – While the Centre Street commercial district retail has a very low vacancy rate and very few spaces available for lease, it lacks the type of 7-day,

18-hour vibrancy found in Main Streets of other nearby Boston neighborhoods such as Centre Street in Jamaica Plain and Roslindale Square. WRMS should build organizational capacity and a network to attract new businesses when a vacancy is available. Moreover, new businesses must contribute to street life throughout the day.

Focus on Attracting and Leveraging Private Investment to the Gateway Section of Centre Street

– The section of Centre Street between Belgrade Ave and Corey Street has the highest concentration of lower value uses, including two gas stations and large parking lots that may be well-positioned for redevelopment. Additionally, this section of Centre Street also has the most desirable pedestrian spaces along the corridor, including the Tim White Way and pocket park at Willow Street. WRMS and its partners must ensure they have a seat at the table when properties turn over, which can occur with little notice, especially in a highly desirable real estate market. New development should be leveraged to further improve streetscape and amenities for the most impactful change. For example, WRMS can advocate for bicycle parking facilities, street trees, and lighting during the permitting process.

Since this section is dominated by daytime uses (banks, post office), new businesses should emphasize nighttime “third places” for social gatherings. Further, new dining establishments should build capacity for programming such as live music and events in order to attract critical mass for other uses.

Explore Opportunities for Community Events to Build on Existing Activity at Mt. Vernon Street

Plans to build a public deck above the YMCA parking lot has the potential to bring more civic uses at the intersection of Centre Street and Mt Vernon Street. This section of Centre Street is dominated by community and civic destinations, including the public library, YMCA, Lyndon Elementary School, and nearby Billings Field. WRMS can consider coordinating a farmers market, summer flea market, craft fairs, live music, etc. at this location once the deck is complete. Encouraging more pedestrian activity in this area could have traffic calming effects and benefit local businesses near this section of Centre Street

Improve Streetscape with Landscaping

– Centre Street is lacking street trees. The addition of shade trees is a small investment with substantial long term impact. A mature urban canopy will reduce the heat island effect and make walking and lingering along the corridor comfortable. Currently there are few places along the Centre Street business district where people can comfortably gather. There are few city-owned parcels along the corridor, so WRMS may want to work with business owners to create spaces that will enhance the pedestrian experience. There is also a dearth of greenery and benches, so any redevelopment design should include an enhanced streetscape and landscape amenities. Roadway redesign must include considerations for street trees along the entire corridor.

Advocate for Bike Share Program in West Roxbury

– Other than Hyde Park, West Roxbury is the only other Boston neighborhood where there are no Bluebikes stations. There are opportunities to create transit hubs around the three commuter rail

stations and encourage bicycle use between Centre Street and its surrounding residential streets. Bluebikes could also provide a first mile/last mile solution for those who take the commuter rail. Given the long length of the corridor, bikesharing provides a non-automotive option for people to travel between destinations along Centre Street.

Funding Sources

MassDevelopment Real Estate and Finance Programs

The Technical Assistance program works with municipal officials, planners, local stakeholders, and others to provide technical assistance that uses creative solutions and clear action steps to address site-specific and district-wide economic development challenges.

<https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/real-estate-services/technical-assistance/>

Commonwealth Places, a collaborative initiative between MassDevelopment and the crowdfunding platform Patronicity, provides a funding mechanism for community-driven placemaking projects throughout Massachusetts.

<https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/real-estate-services/commonwealth-places/>

MassDevelopment finance programs help strengthen communities by providing flexible financing products for housing, nonprofits and manufacturing businesses that drive economic growth and eliminate blight.

<https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/financing/>

Metropolitan Area Planning Council

The MAPC Technical Assistance Program (TAP) is a funding program that enables and assists municipalities in implementing projects that are beneficial to the community. Municipalities are invited to submit project concepts for work to be undertaken by MAPC through their Technical Assistance Program (TAP).

<https://www.mapc.org/about-mapc/funding-opportunities/>

Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (DHCD)

The Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI) offers a range of services and assistance to communities seeking help on how to revitalize their downtowns.

<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/massachusetts-downtown-initiative-mdi>

Conclusions

Centre Street is West Roxbury's jewel and its heart. It is a terrific asset for what is a very special community - a bit of suburbia in Boston. West Roxbury's residents are invested in their community and in the importance of Centre Street as a part of that community. The TAP was requested as a means to bring some outside perspective to the changes in the configuration of the street and to the opportunities that will be afforded to the community by the reconfiguration of Centre Street. The TAP panelists are in agreement that the reconfiguration will be a tremendous improvement to Centre Street. The road changes will greatly enhance the business health, walkability, bikeability and livability of Centre Street.

The Panel was also asked to opine on what they believed were the critical areas of focus for Centre Street and what recommendations we could make. We would recommend a plan that starts by recognizing the strengths of Centre Street and enhancing them. The proposed roadway changes are a great start, but longer term improvements will need to focus on the things within the control of WRMS, including:

1. Completing a parking study
2. Adhering to the recommendations, especially with regard to:
 - a. The amount of parking time allowed in various segments of the corridor
 - b. The penalties for parking violations
 - c. Strong, consistent enforcement
 - d. Vastly improved wayfinding and signage

3. Zoning Revisions - Well configured and amenitized first floor retail should be required for redevelopments that have frontage on Centre Street. Residential units on the floors above will provide housing options for newcomers to West Roxbury as well as for long term residents who need to downsize.
4. Consider forming a Business Improvement District

From a merchandising mix perspective, WMRS might consider Central Street in Wellesley (Crest Road to Weston Road) or Massachusetts Avenue in Lexington (Clarke Street to Winthrop Road) as models. Given that Centre Street is made up of smaller parcels without common ownership, the best way to effect change may be through a municipal process.

And while the length of the commercial district does not lend itself as well to the type of village feel achieved by the Jamaica Plain Centre St. or Roslindale Square Main Street commercial districts, there is much to be optimistic about if the recommendations are implemented.



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