ULI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

# THE MBTA ARBORWAY YARD

BOSTON (JAMAICA PLAIN), MA

JULY 24 & 31, 2023

ULI Boston/ New England

## URBAN LAND INSTITUTE (ULI)

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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 policymakers 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 which benefit from the pro bono recommendations provided by the TAP members.

A TAP consists of a group of diverse professionals with expertise in the issues presented in the sponsor's application. The Panel spends 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 consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

An independent study by Rivera Consulting surveyed municipalities that received assistance from the TAP programs and reported a positive impact by the TAP process on communities. Eighty-two percent of participating municipalities said their behavior and approach to municipal planning and economic development strategies were affected; 67% said there were increased municipal investments related to the stated goals and recommendations of their TAP report; and 62% said at least one key developable asset addressed in their TAP report had been redeveloped, consistent with ULI Boston/New England recommendations.

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## ULI and the TAP Process

Provides an overview of ULI's District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) and includes a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part in the information-gathering sessions. The section also highlights key elements of the tour of the project area for the TAP and describes the process undertaken by panelists and stakeholders to arrive at their recommendations.

## Purpose of the TAP and Project Background

Gives a brief synopsis of the purpose of the TAP, including the specific questions that the Emerald Necklace Conservancy asked the panel to address. The chapter also provides an overview of the site, its history, and stakeholder input regarding the project.

## Opportunities

Identifies the possibilities that a reconfigured site design could create, including cost savings, an increase in the number of attainable housing units, and the potential to develop a green feature by daylighting Stony Brook.

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Outlines the potential problems the project may encounter, including a lack of consensus between the parties on the redevelopment plan, a compressed design and construction schedule, and balancing the need for amenities and commercial space in this mixed-use project with the MBTA's need for security.

## Recommendations

Proposes a reconfiguration of the site as currently envisioned, suggestions on improving connectivity and the ground-level experience, and a plan for implementing future mixed-use development.

## Conclusion

Provides a brief summation of the findings of the panel.


The TAP study area.

# ULI and the TAP Process

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## 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 provide guidance to help the Emerald Conservancy Member practice areas included architects, a developer, and a finance professional. The following is a list of panelists:

**Chair**

Melvin A. Vieira, Owner/Realtor, The Vieira Group/ReMax Destiny

**Panelists**

Michael Epp, FAIA, Architect, Epp Architecture

John B. Lewis, Jr., Manager of Finance, MBTA (Retired)

Tanya Mitchell, Director of Human Resources and DEI Initiatives, The Davis Companies

Alan Mountjoy, AIA, Principal, NBBJ

Larry Spang, AIA, Principal, Arrowstreet

Julia Wynyard, Principal, Bear Mountain Ventures

*Panelists have donated their time.*

## ULI Staff

Michelle Landers, Executive Director

Timothy Moore, Manager

TAP Writer: Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications

## Stakeholders

The TAP also benefited from the participation of multiple stakeholders representing the MBTA, the City of Boston, and the DCR, as well as members of neighborhood associations and residents. The following is the list of stakeholders:


The panel toured the study area.

Kate England, Director of Green Infrastructure, City of Boston

Diana Fernandez, Deputy Chief of Urban Design, Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA)

Jim Fitzgerald, Deputy Director of Transportation & Infrastructure Planning, BPDA

Sarah Freeman, Member, Arborway Coalition

Scott Hamwey, Director of Bus Modernization, MBTA

Richard Henderson, Chief of Real Estate, MBTA

Jascha Franklin-Hodge, Chief of Streets, City of Boston

Ted Landsmark, Board Member, BPDA

Alexandra Markiewicz, Deputy Director of Bus Modernization, MBTA

Jeff Parenti, Deputy Chief Engineer, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)

Elena Saporta, Board Member, Emerald Necklace Conservancy

Rene Welch, Chair, Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council (JPNC)

## Project Site Tour

On the morning of July 31, ULI TAP panelists gathered at the Jamaica Plain Car Wash on Washington Street, adjacent to the northern edge of the MBTA Arborway Bus Maintenance Facility. They were greeted by Emerald Necklace Conservancy president Karen Mauney-Brodek and Engagement and Policy Manager Jun Seung Lee. Before the meeting, panelists were given a comprehensive briefing book designed to familiarize them with the proposed MBTA Arborway redevelopment plan and its role in the broader strategy to fully electrify the MBTA bus fleet by 2040. Included in the book were photos of the site, articles on the MBTA proposals and their potential effect on the community, and a community profile provided by the Stonybrook Neighborhood Association. Panelists had also previously met online to discuss the briefing book and ask the Emerald Necklace Conservancy staff questions. Following introductions, Mauney-Brodek led panelists on a walking tour of the study area and was joined by Sarah Freeman of the Arborway Coalition and landscape architect Elena Saporta of the Boston Society of Landscape Architects.

Panelists walked up Brookley Road, which runs along the northern edge of the MBTA Arborway site. The mixed-use residential neighborhood is comprised of single-family, double- and triple-decker homes, as well as several larger, new multifamily complexes. The neighborhood is also home to some industrial uses on Stonley Road, a hair salon, and other commercial uses closer to Washington Street. The tour proceeded to Forest Hills Street, the eastern edge of the site that also borders Franklin Park, where panelists observed a large (acre-plus) parcel with a single Victorian home on Lotus Street.

Adjacent to Lotus Street, with a Forest Hills Street entrance, is the "pole yard," a 1.3-acre lot owned by the City of Boston, where lighting poles and snow removal materials (sand, salt) are stored. The lot is also home to an administration building and a facilities building used to store equipment. The parcel had been included in the original 2001 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the redevelopment of the MBTA Arborway site, which originally stipulated that eight (8) acres would be set aside and dedicated for community development purposes such as housing and retail development. Panelists were informed that the City has since decided to retain the lot to create a Center for Hard to Recycle (CHaRM), partly due to its proximity to a central transportation hub (Forest Hills MBTA Station).

The tour continued to the Arborway, a four-lane, divided parkway and part of the Frederick Law Olmsted designed Emerald Necklace that connects parks from Boston Common to Franklin Park in Roxbury. This section of the Arborway has recently been restored after removal of an elevated highway bridge (The Casey Overpass) that spanned over Washington Street since 1951.

Panelists observed a two-story MBTA office building at 500 Arborway that is no longer used by employees and is currently being used for storage. There is a green buffer with some small trees between the building and the wide sidewalk, which extends to Washington Street. Across the street from the MBTA office building heading toward Washington Street is the historic Forest Hills Covenant Church, the West Roxbury Division of the Boston Municipal Court, and a new multifamily residential complex. As panelists continued toward Washington Street, they observed a large, underutilized parking lot before coming upon a marker indicating that they were at the site of the Stony Brook, a major tributary of the Charles River that was ? enclosed in a culvert in the early 1900s to control flooding and improve sanitation in the area. Panelists then continued up Washington Street, where they observed the existing Arborway Yard bus maintenance and storage facility. Surrounded by chain link fence and barbed wire, the Arborway Yard does not contribute to the urban streetscape of the area. The panel returned to the original meeting spot.

Following the tour, the panelists re-convened at the Arnold ArboretumWeld Hill Research Building. They conducted interviews with key stakeholders, a continuation of a process that had begun on July 24 at the James Michael Curley House, the office space of the Emerald Necklace Conservancy. Panelists then assessed the information and developed potential repositioning strategies for the MBTA to consider in preparing the site for redevelopment. The panelists made their recommendations to the public in the Weld Hill conference room that evening and also broadcast the presentation via Zoom.

# Purpose of the TAP and Project Background

The Emerald Necklace Conservancy reached out to ULI Boston/New England to organize a TAP to review the best practices for the redevelopment of the MBTA Arborway Yard and to make further recommendations. The proposed project will provide a new MBTA electric bus facility and associated development that will benefit the community. The Conservancy feels this is a prime opportunity to develop transit-oriented development, including housing for various income levels, community services, retail, and other street-level, pedestrian-oriented features. The Conservancy also states they are particularly interested in the potential connection between two regional greenspace networks – the Emerald Necklace and the Southwest Corridor.

The panelists were asked to address the following questions:

1. What types of development best practices could be employed on the Arborway Yard site to provide an electric bus facility, community services, housing, and open space in such a way that it supports the adjacent Emerald Necklace park system?
2. How can the site be developed to incentivize the MBTA to co-locate and develop an electric bus facility that can be developed with other uses to encourage and support pedestrian and other active street-level activity, community benefits, and other goals?

## Project Background

The MBTA plans to fully electrify its bus fleet by 2040 through the use of battery electric buses (BEBs) in compliance with Massachusetts Climate Law, which requires the MBTA to purchase only zero-emission buses beginning in 2029. The plan calls for the redevelopment of the existing 18-acre Arborway Bus Maintenance Facility site in the Forest Hills neighborhood of Jamaica Plain, located at Washington Street and the Arborway in Boston, diagonally across from the multimodal (bus service plus the Orange Line) Forest Hills MBTA Station.

According to the MBTA website, the Arborway garage supports buses serving routes in neighborhoods with high proportions of transit-critical riders from low-income households and households of color in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Hyde Park, Roslindale, Jamaica Plain, and areas southwest of Boston. The existing Arborway Yard stores 118 buses powered by compressed natural gas (CNG). The new facility will be able to accommodate approximately 200 buses to support increased bus service for the region, which will be designed to accommodate and recharge the new battery-powered electric buses. The new, larger facility will also support 60-foot BEBs that will serve more routes and reduce crowding in these areas. Construction of the new Arborway facility is targeted for early 2025, which is anticipated to be completed by the end of 2028.

The Arborway Yard historically served as a central terminal for trolley cars and storing for trains for the Green Line's E Branch. In 2001, the MBTA demolished the barns that housed the trolley cars and built what was supposed to be a temporary bus yard for its then-new fleet of CNG-fueled buses. The "temporary" facility is still in use today, much to the consternation of the neighborhood groups.


Over the past decade-plus, the area surrounding the Arborway Yard has changed dramatically, accelerated by the demolition of the structurally deficient Casey Overpass and the former Forest Hills Station upper busway canopy. An at-grade parkway system and an expanded transit hub for bus and subway access was constructed in its place. What once was a heavy concentration of industrial uses is now a pedestrian/bicycle-friendly environment with several multifamily complexes built along Washington Street, the Arborway, and the neighborhood surrounding the Arborway Yard.

The original 2001 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the redevelopment of the MBTA Arborway site stipulated that eight (8) acres would be set aside and dedicated for community development purposes such as housing and retail development. This agreement was dependent upon the relocation of the City of Boston Department of Public Work's "pole yard" to another location allowing the MBTA to utilize the city-owned portion of the site. The City has since proposed to retain the lot as part of its "Zero Waste Plan," identifying it as a preferred location for creating a Center for Hard to Recycle (CHARM) due to its proximity to a central transportation hub. The change in plan diminishes the land available for community benefit from 8.0 acres to approximately 6.8 acres.

The Emerald Necklace Conservancy and other neighborhood groups maintain that the MBTA has not been responsive to public input in designing the new facility and feel that the MBTA is taking a limited view of the redevelopment possibilities – without considering public benefit – particularly with regards to adding attainable housing and increasing green space.

## Stakeholder Input

Three separate stakeholder constituencies were interviewed for the TAP, with the MBTA, City of Boston, and community groups represented. Panelists' questions focused on what each constituency would like to see as an outcome of the redevelopment project and what elements they considered non-negotiable.

**Community Groups** – Representatives from the Arborway Coalition and the JPNC felt strongly that the MBTA should honor the terms of the 2001 MOU – specifically the stipulation that 8.0 acres would be

set aside and dedicated for community development purposes such as housing and retail development, as opposed to the 6.8 acres in the current plan. The community groups felt the salt pile should be relocated to another site in the City of Boston.

Community representatives also strongly desire to see more affordable housing and increased green space, specifically a larger buffer between the new two story facility  and the Arborway. The need for neighborhood amenities such as a daycare center, a grocery store, cafés/restaurants, and a pharmacy was also expressed, possibly on the ground floors of the facility or within future multifamily developments. Residents also voiced that “aesthetics are important” and that the redevelopment should reflect the character of the neighborhood.

**The City of Boston** – City officials recognize that the priority is to deliver a facility that will be of greatest benefit to the neighborhood while not losing sight of its commitment to open space as well as sustainability and carbon reduction goals. The City wants to see the construction design process consider reducing impervious surfaces and improving drainage by increasing green infrastructure to reduce the heat island effect.

The City stated that it will not transfer the pole yard/ salt site, which is critical to their winter operational needs, unless there is a workable alternative. The location is vital to snow melt operations, reducing turnaround times by 50% over other proposed sites (although climate change is expected to eventually reduce how much salt will be used for operations in the future.)

The City would also like the CHARM site to be located on the parcel, although that is negotiable. However, the City indicated that it may only need .75 acres to accommodate these uses and may be amenable to making the other (approximately) .5 acres available for community benefit.

City officials continually stressed the importance of successfully completing the Arborway Yard redevelopment project, as the bus electrification closely aligns with their sustainability goals. However, officials expressed concern that the “perfect may be the enemy of the good.”

**The MBTA** – The MBTA emphasized the importance of complying with Massachusetts Climate Law, which requires the MBTA to purchase only zero-


emission buses beginning in 2029, lending an acute sense of urgency to the redevelopment project.

The MBTA has completed 15% of its design plans and stated that while some alterations can be made to the existing plan, major changes may be problematic, especially considering the lag in procuring construction materials and electrical infrastructure. The MBTA has concerns that any slowdown of the design and construction process may lead to a loss of funding for the project due to intense competition for state and federal dollars for large-scale construction projects.

The MBTA also recognizes that the project needs to be a "win-win for everyone" and is working closely with the City of Boston and the DCR. They also are committed to building the facility using sustainable measures (green roofs, solar panels, increasing green space, etc.). Constructing the site (including MBTA offices) in a manner that is appealing to the workforce and providing much-needed amenities would also enhance the MBTA's ability to attract and retain employees.

# Opportunities

Following the site walk and discussion with Stakeholders, the Panel identified the following potential opportunities for the site and project.

- **Cost Savings** – Since the MBTA is concerned about the cost of the project (currently estimated to be approaching $500M), any reduction in cost could help both the MBTA and the community. A reconfiguration of the existing MBTA plan could reduce project costs, particularly if a shared parking solution could be identified.
- **Increased Greenspace** – The reconfiguration of the existing MBTA plan could result in greater opportunities for greenspace, consistent with the goals of the MBTA, the City of Boston, and community groups.
- **Stonybrook** – If feasible, daylighting portions of Stony Brook at the corner of Arborway and Washington could create a green feature for the site.
- **Increased Attainable Housing** – Reconfiguring the existing MBTA plan would allow for more housing units to be built, a stated community desire.
- **More active uses along the Arboway** – If the office uses of the facility could be relocated to the Arborway frontage, it could create a more active front to the facility. Potential uses discussed include multi-use spaces for daycare, community rooms, or a training facility as a resource for the community.
- **Connectivity** –Allowing vehicular and pedestrian access through portions of the site would improve permeability and make the area more pedestrian friendly.

# Challenges

The panel also discussed the following challenges to the site and project.

- **Time** – The compressed schedule to meet the state-mandated electrification of buses leaves little time to alter the proposed project design. Any suggested alterations to the facility plan should focus on plan elements that might easily be relocated such as employee parking, office and support spaces rather than the core functions of the bus operations.
- **Budget** – The rapidly escalating costs of construction materials and continuing supply chain issues may inflate the project's cost, already estimated at $495 million. Removing employee parking from expensive facility space to a lower cost garage could reduce the cost of the facility.
- **Facility Security** – The MBTA has stated that a major priority for the project needs to be security, so some public-facing uses could be problematic and public access must be limited to prevent security breaches to the facility.
- **Scale of Project** – The sheer size and height of the project may make integrating into the neighborhood's character challenging.
- **Consensus** – Striking a balance between the needs and wants of the MBTA, the City of Boston, and the community, particularly regarding the "pole yard" and the salt pile – will require a thoughtful solution.
- **Feasibility of "Green" Building Goals** – Balancing the sustainability goals of the MBTA, the City of Boston, and the community may not be consistent with the limited space on the site and the project budget.

# Recommendations

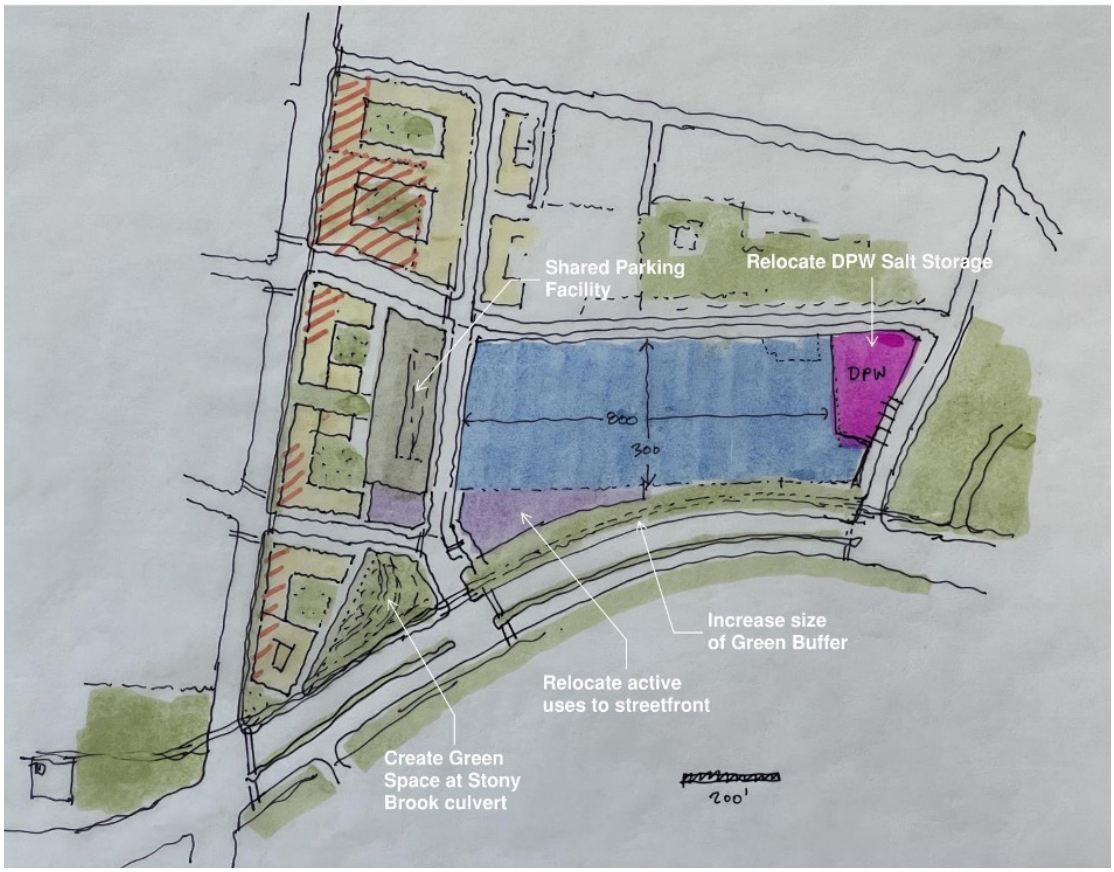
## Reconfigure Existing Plan

In looking at the existing site plan, panelists determined that reconfiguring the current design would better meet the goals of the MBTA and the greater Forest Hills community. In the existing plan, the two-story core facility is approximately 800 feet by 300 feet, extending out over the buried Stony Brook easement. During stakeholder interviews, the DPW indicated some degree of flexibility for reconfiguring the 1.2-acre 'pole yard' and the DPW facility currently storing snow melt materials (DPW officials estimated that only .75 to .90 acres would be needed for operations). Panelists propose moving the core facility eastward to take it out of the Stony Brook easement.

This would regularize development parcels on Washington Street, and the repositioning would *not* require significant changes to the redesign of the core facility itself. If the size of the DPW 'pole yard' were to be reduced, all of the critical features – the bus movements, the bus turning – could be shifted further east. During stakeholder interviews, panelists learned that it is feasible to reduce the facility at the DPW yard to 30,000 square feet, and it could be located in such a way as to optimize the efficiency of the site by placing it off to one side rather than its current configuration.

In addition, panelists suggest re-locating more of the office and support uses towards the Arborway. The upper levels of the building would be reserved for MBTA office uses and would include ground-level uses that are


The existing plan for the MBTA.




The panel's suggestions for reconfiguring the plan for the MBTA.

available to the public (community rooms, daycare, etc.), creating vitality for that section of the Arborway. Such a design would create a more appealing work environment for attracting and retaining MBTA employees while creating additional connectivity that will allow for more appealing development parcels on Washington Street.

The panel also suggests that one way to reduce the size of the core facility – without reducing the number of buses (200) that the MBTA has stated as its goal – would be to move some or all of the proposed interior employee vehicle parking outside of the facility. Constructing a standalone parking structure outside the facility would be a far less costly way to provide employee parking. The parking structure could also be used as a shared parking facility (noted in the grey area in the panel's suggested design), which could reduce the overall cost of the facility and create a shared resource for parking for future mixed-use development.

Finally, the panel suggests reserving the space where the current buried Stony Brook easement occurs as an acre of open space along the Arborway to further enhance the experience of the existing Greenway features. Alternatively, this open space could be excavated to daylight Stony Brook below, should water quality and hydrology studies show this to be feasible and environmentally beneficial.

## Improve Connectivity

The guiding principle behind reconfiguring the existing plan was to find ways to knit the MBTA facility into the existing neighborhood more effectively.

The first idea was to break down the "superblock," *i.e.*, the large footprint of the project site, in a way that will allow pedestrians to traverse the site while also increasing the appeal of the development parcels along Washington Street and improving the flow of traffic in and out of the garage.

The panel proposes opening up some cross-block streets through to Washington Street, relocating some of the secure access points that will allow the MBTA to use the area adjacent to the garage while keeping as much of the site as possible open to the public.

Panelists also recommend creating some options for flexible bus access. One option would be to transform a portion of the site that the MBTA currently uses for bus maneuvering into green space. If buses are not being driven back and forth on the site as the current plan envisions, it may be possible to reduce the number of entry points to allow for additional green buffer along the Arborway. This will create a facility that better serves the community and blends into the neighborhood's fabric.

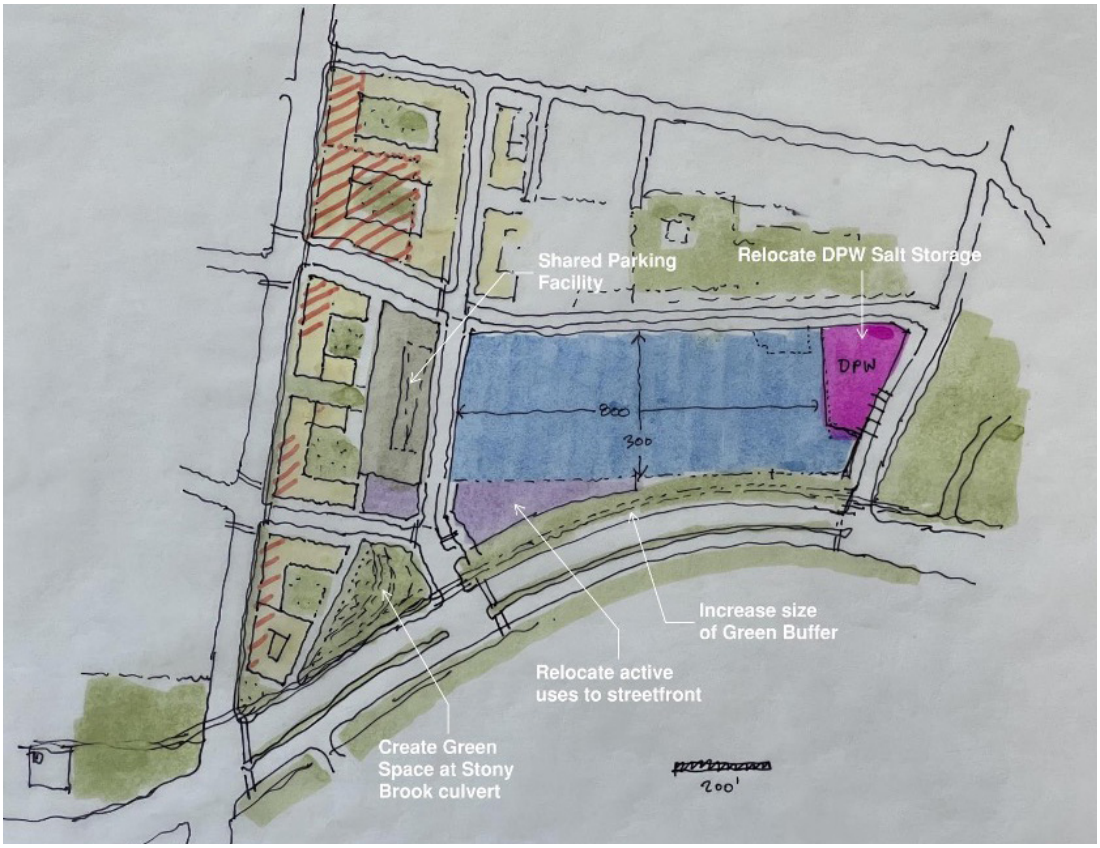
## Improve Ground-Level Experience

One of the goals of the TAP was to help devise ways to "encourage and support pedestrian and other active street-level activity" along the Arborway. The panel suggests moving some of the components of the existing plan closer to the Arborway, including the aforementioned offices, as well as the proposed community/crisis center currently planned to be located at the back of the facility. The panel also suggests considering a daycare center for the ground floor on the Arborway, which would create a much-needed amenity for both MBTA employees and the neighborhood residents, as well as other community benefit uses.

The panel also recommends using the building design to foster more green space along the Arborway; re-iterates the call for a pocket park above the Stony Brook culvert, which would help to soften the edge of the MBTA facility; and relocating the visitor and employee parking in a shared garage in a way that supports the MBTA's mission but also supports the redevelopment of the parcels along Washington Street.

## Plan for Future Development

Preparing the site for multifamily development is a significant component of the Arborway project.




The panel's recommendation for ground-level reconfiguration.

**Connectivity** – The new street network proposed by the panel divides the future development site into three regular parcels, each approximately 300 feet by 300 feet. The parcels in this configuration should be large enough to garner interest from many developers as standalone parcels or to attract a single developer that would develop all three parcels in phases. Whatever the development scenario, the new cross-street network will benefit developers by increasing connectivity and creating intersections that will appeal to retailers seeking the visibility and access that a corner location provides.

**Benefits of the Reconfigured Plan** – By shifting the location of the facility eastward, the depth of the development parcels along Washington Street is significantly enhanced. The Panel estimates this could increase the number of potential housing units by 200-300 (to as many as 900 total) which has been a goal of the project since its inception.

The reconfiguration also enables the shared parking garage (which can be screened from Washington Street by development ), which makes developing the parcels more financially feasible. The shift to the east also provides a larger buffer from future residents as the MBTA building will be quite tall and will not offer appealing views. The buffer and the other proposed changes to increase greenspace will also make it more attractive for developers. The additional width of the future redevelopment parcels will also provide extra "breathing room" for the various uses (*i.e.*, parking for retail, loading areas, fire lanes, safety and service infrastructure, etc.)

Prior to redevelopment along Washington Street, the MBTA can use the existing surface parking lot – as they are presently doing. A multi-level garage can be constructed when there is certainty around what mix of uses the garage will serve.

# Conclusion

Panelists view this TAP as having four major clients: the City of Boston, the MBTA, the Arborway Pole Yard facility, and the surrounding neighborhood. The panel attempted to focus on providing a benefit to each of those entities. Given the time constraints the MBTA faces, these recommendations do not significantly change their existing design; instead, they move the facility to the east. The recommendations also improve access to Stony Brook, so the facility is no longer over the culvert. The change also shields activities such as bus washing from the street view, correcting the original design. The move from extensive parking inside the MBTA facility to a more cost-effective parking garage improves the flexibility and access for potential developers of the parcels along Washington Street, increasing the likelihood that additional multifamily units across income ranges will be built promptly, which will benefit the neighborhood.

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