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### Webster Square Neighborhood Plan

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**Webster Square Neighborhood Plan**

**Conor McCormack**

**December 2018**

**A Master's Paper**

**Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester,  
Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in the department of International Development,  
Community, and Environment**

**And accepted on the recommendation of**

**Kathryn Madden, M.C.P., M.S. Arch.S., AICP, Chief Instructor**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Webster Square Neighborhood Plan**

**Conor McCormack**

In this study, Webster Square is examined as a neighborhood and commercial node within the City of Worcester, MA. Using a variety of data sources and analyses, the study looks at the characteristics of the area to define the condition and context of Webster Square as it currently exists. Guided by current planning theory, contemporary practice, and key informant interviews, this study then suggests different directions for future development and growth in Webster Square. These visions for the future look to address key issues to help make the neighborhood a more vibrant, cohesive, and walkable community. More broadly, this study highlights the need for neighborhood planning, specifically within the context of Worcester, where major investment in the downtown should now be followed by investment and planning in other neighborhoods and commercial nodes, such as Webster Square.

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## **DEDICATION**

To the good people of Webster Square

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Webster Square is one of the largest commercial nodes in the city of Worcester, a gateway to Worcester from the south and west, and a compelling intersection of the City's urban center and suburban edge. At an ascendant time for Worcester, with unequalled investment in the city's central business district, Webster Square has suffered from a lack of planning and vision for the future. This study aims to understand Webster Square as a neighborhood, a commercial district, and node within the City, and then look forward for opportunities for the area to reinvent itself once again (see Figure 1).

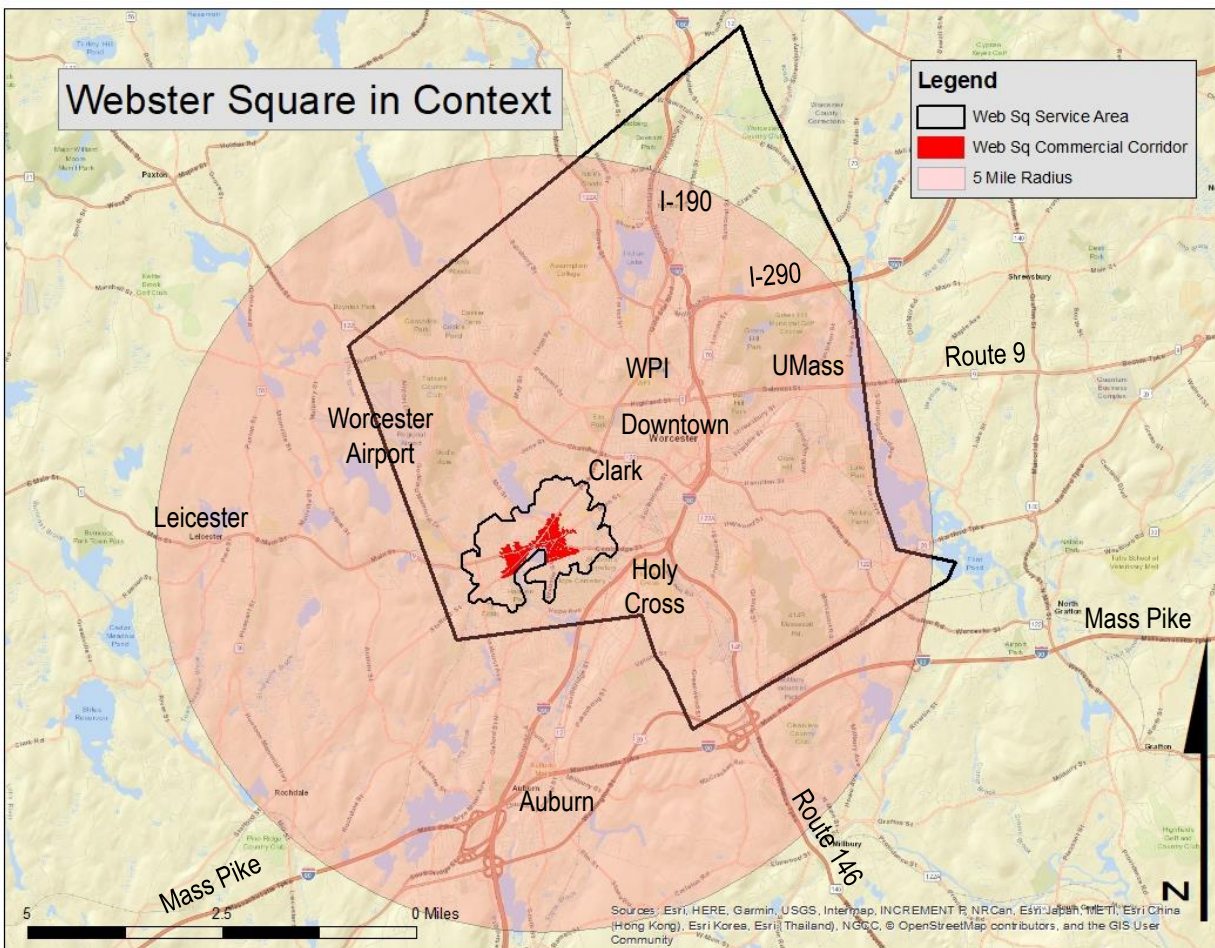


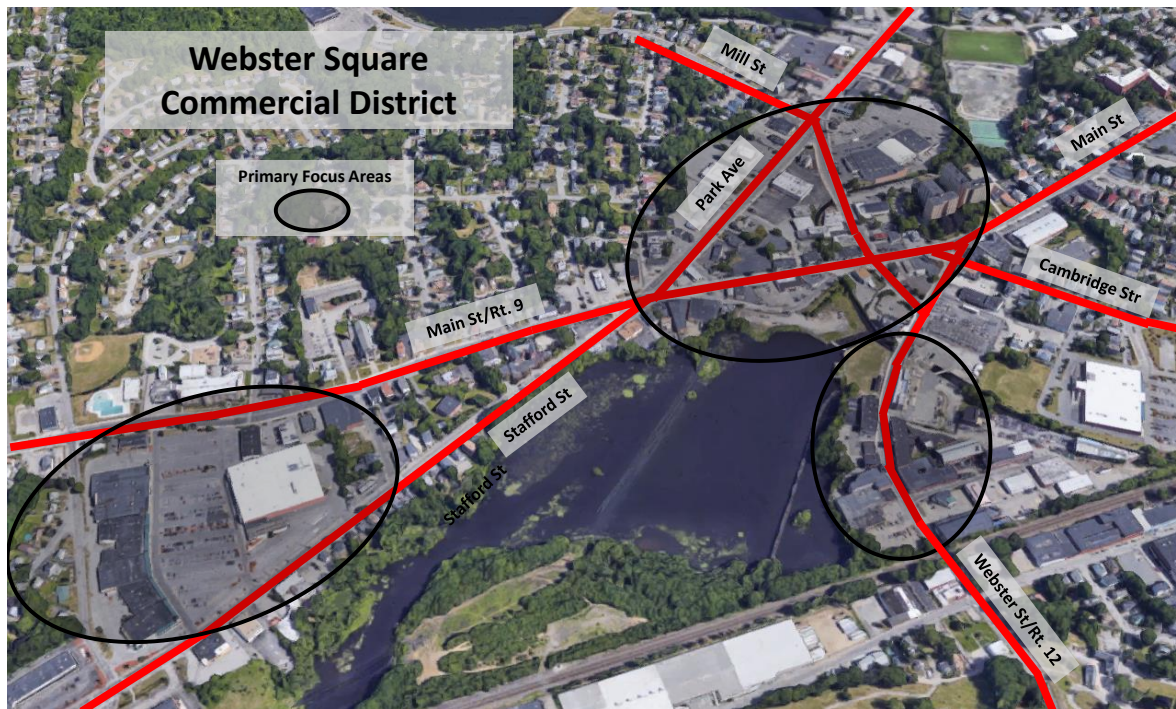
Figure 1 – Webster Square is centrally located within Worcester, in close proximity to downtown and other important areas.



Over the past two decades, Worcester has framed itself as a city on the rise. The resurrection of Union Station, the demolition of the Worcester Galleria, and a staggering cost of living in Boston has catalyzed interest in a once struggling post-industrial city. Anchored by the higher education and healthcare industries, Worcester has been able to breathe life back into downtown. The City has seen at least two billion dollars in investments over the past 15 years, mostly in downtown, the Canal District, and the Shrewsbury Street area (Caplan-Bricker, 2018). Leadership in the city has been busy bringing in major developments such as CitySquare, Harding Green, the Grid District, the Hanover Theatre, the Osgood-Bradley Building, the Worcester Ice Center, and Main Street Reimagined, among numerous others. With the Worcester Red Sox stadium and development deal coming online over the next few years, a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money will have been spent transforming the downtown area.

Webster Square, among other neighborhoods, districts, and nodes throughout Worcester, has not seen its share of development, planning, or attention. It has been largely untouched by recent public and private investment in Worcester. Yet, Webster Square exists as a node of commercial activity, distinct neighborhood area, and diverse population that is not well connected to businesses in the commercial district. It is an important hub of activity, transportation, and services for the neighborhood and for commuters and the approximately 17,000 residents within a 10-minute walk of the commercial district (see Figure 2). The neighborhood is well connected, with strong community groups and local organizations like the Webster Square Business Association, one of the most active in the City. Looking at redevelopment and investment in the city as a whole, it is time to look beyond downtown and start taking thoughtful approaches to the planning and development of other areas of the city.

Webster Square is ready and in need of something new to help shape a better, more vibrant community.



*Figure 2 – An aerial image of the Webster Square Commercial District showing the primary commercial areas to focus investment and redevelopment, Google Maps.*

## Goals

Neighborhood and district planning have become common practice for cities across the country. In the past, Worcester has understandably needed to focus its energy on bringing life back to the downtown and central business district. However, there seems to be enough momentum and development happening downtown to shift some resources to other neighborhoods, nodes, and residents of the City. More localized planning and development throughout the city will help more equitably distribute the success Worcester is experiencing and make the entire city a better community in which to live and work.

Webster Square, in particular, has the underlying infrastructure, resources, and assets to develop into a successful neighborhood and commercial district. Smart planning and investment from the public and private sectors and the strength of existing businesses and organizations,

like the Webster Square Business Association, can transform Webster Square into a thriving community within Worcester, serving neighborhood residents and the commercial district. A cross-sectional analysis of the neighborhood and commercial district will highlight Webster Square's challenges and strengths. This report will look for areas of opportunity to best leverage resources into creating a new future for Webster Square that is great place to live, work, and do business.



*Figure 3 – A sign welcoming drivers along Mill Street to the Webster Square neighborhood*

## Visions for the Future

Webster Square is in need of change. For decades it has served as a pass-through area for people entering the city. Its commercial district is dominated by car-centric buildings and businesses, catering to drive-by businesses. Just as city, state, and business leaders found and pursued a vision for downtown Worcester, Webster Square needs leadership to see an active and vibrant future for the area. To achieve this vision, several alternative scenarios were developed to imagine what a future Webster Square neighborhood and commercial district might look like. These are ways to frame the development and reinvestment in the area so that the outcome might meet the needs of residents, business and property owners, and the city.

### *Creating a Neighborhood*

Webster Square can become an inviting place for its residents, businesses, visitors, and people passing through by creating a sense of place. Modern planning principles can help guide development in the area to be a more connected and cohesive neighborhood. Developing a stronger neighborhood environment can be achieved by designing for the human layout and scale so that Webster Square is a place for people, not just for cars. Creating a neighborhood emphasizes the importance of developing Webster Square as a place for people where housing plays an important role in future growth. New development, including infill development, and renovation of the existing housing stock will play a vital role in the neighborhood's transformation. An improved streetscape, a more dense neighborhood core, and drawing people on to the sidewalks will help redefine the neighborhood into a more vibrant and walkable place.

### *Transportation Transformation*

A smarter, more efficient, and more effective transportation system in Webster Square can have a dramatic impact on the quality and condition of the neighborhood and commercial district. The existing auto-centric road system can be modified to reduce congestions, be less confusing for users, and better serve other modes of transportation. Webster Square can be an inviting place for people to live and visit instead of a convenient place for people passing through. An improved and reimagined transit system in Webster Square can fundamentally transform the neighborhood, reconnect it with the rest of the city, and be a blueprint for improving transit citywide.

### *The "New Worcester"*

Labeled the "New Worcester" over a century ago, the Webster Square neighborhood can once again be positioned to develop its own identity as a hub within

the city. As a key area for mixed-use development within Worcester, Webster Square's future growth can be anchored within the community. Developable land, low prices, great accessibility, and a diversity of existing businesses and institutions are assets that help make Webster Square a destination and place of opportunity. The future potential of Webster Square will allow for the development of an identity and sense of place that is attractive to residents and businesses alike.

## Summary of Analysis

Analysis of the neighborhood and commercial district found Webster Square to be a diverse and distinct part of the City that is in need of forward-thinking planning and development. Webster Square is one of the most prominent commercial nodes within the City, the confluence of several major arterial roads, and a gateway to Worcester from the south and west. It is also one of the most congested sets of intersections anywhere in the City. The car is still king throughout the Webster Square commercial corridor, where walking and biking can be an unenjoyable and unsafe experience (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4 – Looking north on Park Avenue where wide roads, parking lots, and drive-thrus dominate the landscape.*



The commercial area is surrounded by a diverse yet aging housing stock, but is otherwise largely void of residential units in its central core. Vacant and underutilized lots are holding back the vibrancy of the neighborhood but might be the key to its redevelopment. Vital blue and green space is hiding in plain sight and can be a big asset for the future of Webster Square. Being a mix of urban and suburban parts of the city, it is a line between the urban and suburban areas of the city. While there are some clear challenges the area faces, Webster Square is in an overall strong position to leverage its assets to create a vibrant, inclusive, and strong neighborhood.

### Summary of Methodology

This study used a variety of methods to gain an understanding of the neighborhood and to be able to make recommendations for the future. Field observations were initially conducted to get a layout of the area and provide a basis of direction for further research. Informal interviews were then held with a range of participants who represented diverse interests in the neighborhood and could provide first-hand knowledge. The interviews were formatted with broad questions to allow participants to guide the conversation. GIS analyses and further research was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the data and to define the study area. Finally, pedestrian counts were taken at specific locations throughout the Webster Square commercial district to get a sense of the pedestrian activity and quality of public space in the area.

### Summary of Findings

Using the analysis gathered and applying it to the visions of the futures for Webster Square, several recommendations for areas and places of focus were identified. The current condition of Webster Square provides almost a blank slate when imagining what can be done there. A smarter and more inclusive traffic and transit systems are obvious areas that need

attention. The introduction of housing in the commercial district can bring people and life back to the center of the neighborhood. Vacant and underutilized buildings are eyesores to the community that can be redeveloped or repurposed to fill in large gaps of activity throughout the neighborhood. Webster Square can make itself into a destination by encouraging business growth that will bring people into the neighborhood and by daylighting existing green and blue spaces. A smart approach to regulation, investment, development, and placemaking can transform Webster Square into what it can be - a vibrant neighborhood center that connects people to its commercial district and onto other destinations; a place that people live, shop, dine, and visit; a place that is affordable and accessible to the rest of the city; and a place that leans on its history and assets to build a stronger and more sustainable future.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As a city on the rise for the better part of two decades, Worcester has used its downtown as a catalyst for rebirth and growth. Long range planning, infrastructure improvements, tax incentives, and partnerships have transformed downtown. However, unlike most of its peers, Worcester has not deliberately and systematically engaged with its residents or neighborhoods during this period of 'renaissance'. Although efforts are in the works, a comprehensive citywide plan has not been developed in over 30 years (Welker, 2017). Master plans are designed to guide growth, development and spending priorities for the city, with localized context. Neighborhood planning has become a common practice for Worcester's peer cities in the Commonwealth and throughout the country. The Union Square Neighborhood Plan in Somerville, the Watershops Revitalization District in Springfield, and the Roxbury Strategic Master Plan are all recent examples of cities that developed neighborhood plans to direct growth, strategize investment, and identify specific planning needs for important neighborhoods

in their communities (see Figure 5). Worcester should follow what has become a common practice locally and nationally. Neighborhoods like Webster Square need attention and thoughtful planning so that future investment and growth is directed in way to optimize the benefit to the area and its residents.



*Figure 5 – A rendering from Springfield’s Watershops District Revitalization Plan, an example of neighborhood planning from a similar city.*

In addition to key takeaways from informant interviews, several modern urban and neighborhood planning approaches, including Smart Growth, Complete Streets, and transit-oriented development, inform the vision for the future for Webster Square and define a suggested process for making recommendations.

## Neighborhood Planning

Neighborhood planning rose to prominence over the last century as a distinct area of study within urban planning. Ebenezer Howard first published *Garden Cities of To-morrow* in 1898 in response to severely overcrowded cities and the perceived ills that filled them (Howard & Osborn, 1946). He planned highly structured and uniform “garden cities” with a population limits, strict land usages, and designated green space. Clarence Perry moved neighborhood



planning forward in 1929 with his paper promoting the idea of 'Neighborhood Units'. He conceived a neighborhood planning unit as a comprehensive, self-contained residential neighborhood bounded by arterial roads, consisting of local roads and schools, green space, and a maximum population (Bowman, 1930). Howard, Perry, and other early planners saw the need to address neighborhoods at the neighborhood level. The idea of analyzing Webster Square as a distinct part of the city and individual neighborhood stems from these early practitioners (see Figure 6).

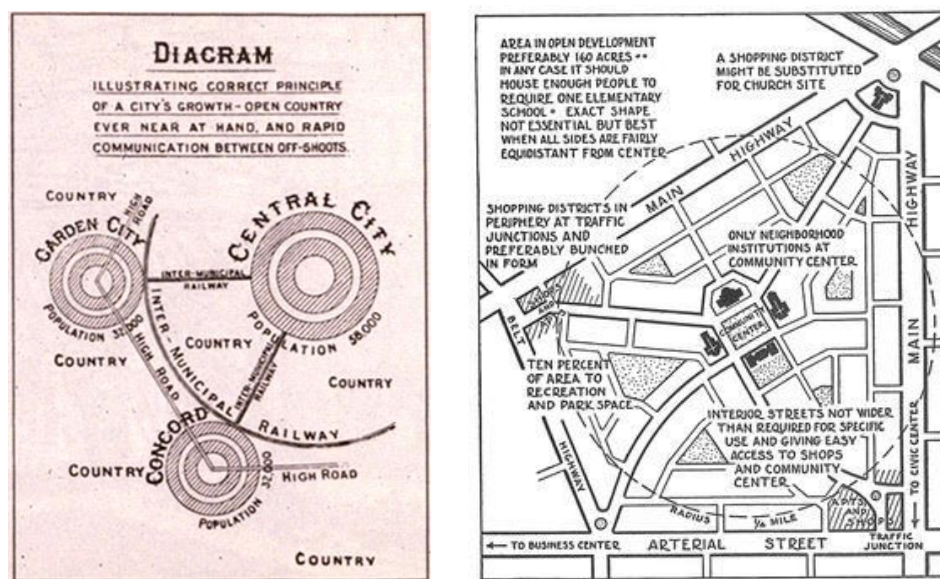


Figure 6 -Diagrams from Howard's *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* and Perry's *Neighborhood Units*

However, Webster Square as we know it today better reflects post-World War II planning practices of urban renewal, white flight, suburbanization, and the advent of the personal automobile. These practices altered the makeup of cities and neighborhoods throughout the country as slums were cleared, highways installed, and the built environment became designed for cars rather than people (Vrabel, 2014). To combat the legacy of these policies, new approaches to urban and neighborhood planning have advocated for a return to planning at the human scale. More recently, approaches to neighborhood planning have been well documented, with a "focuses on a specific geographic area of a local jurisdiction that

typically includes substantial residential development, associated commercial uses, and institutional services such as recreation and education” (Steiner & Butler, 2006). This study leans on the principals the Smart Growth, Complete Streets, and Transit-Oriented Development planning models to guide its analysis and recommendations.

## Smart Growth

Smart Growth “is an approach to development that encourages a mix of building types and uses, diverse housing and transportation options, development within existing neighborhoods, and community engagement” (Smart Growth America, 2018). In contrast with policies of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Smart Growth looks to blend land use so people, businesses, services, and institutions are closer together and more accessible. It aims to create a compact design that maximizes public investment in placemaking rather than traditional road infrastructure and leverages existing buildings and neighborhoods through infill development rather than outward sprawl. Smart Growth suggests development should come out of existing buildings and communities in a “predictable, fair, and cost-effective manner”, while encouraging collaboration between stakeholders and community members (Smart Growth America, 2018). It also looks at equitable housing options as vital to the success of communities and as opportunities to breathe life into commercial districts. It sees the walkability of neighborhoods as a convenient, affordable, and healthy way to get around that also injects life into the neighborhood. Smart Growth is a vision for future development and growth that Webster Square can look to as a model for planning and action.

## Complete Streets

A Complete Streets policy is designed to be inclusive of the transportation needs “for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities” (MassDOT, 2016). While there is no singular design for Complete Streets, the policy directs

transportation projects to routinely design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for all users. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation adopted a statewide Complete Streets policy in 2016 that argues “designing streets with these principles contributes toward the safety, health, economic viability and quality of life in a community by improving the pedestrian and vehicular environments and providing safer, more accessible and comfortable means of travel between home, school, work, recreation and retail destinations” (MassDOT, 2016). Worcester followed suit in 2017 by developing its own Complete Streets policy “to facilitate the development of an integrated, multimodal transportation system that provides safe, convenient, and efficient accommodation for all modes of transportation, including walking, bicycling, driving, and transit” (City of Worcester, 2017).

## Transit-Oriented Development

Transit-oriented Development (TOD) is a planning model that emphasizes the importance of “developing walkable, mixed-use, sustainable communities around rail and transit stations” (TOD Institute, 2018). With its core theories well integrated in Smart Growth and Complete Streets policies, TOD has a specific focus on the creation of future development that is connected to transit so that people can live, work, and recreate in a sustainable way for both the environment and the community. It advocates that dense development around transit develops more cohesive, safe, and vibrant neighborhoods. It also sees transit as an economic driver where development can take advantage of transit stations and clustering to make positive impacts to the area.

## METHODOLOGY

This study looked to analyze a variety of characteristics and attributes that can tell the story of Webster Square so that a vision for the area’s future can be drawn. To achieve this

goal, a number of methods were used to understand Webster Square as a neighborhood, a commercial district, and place within the City of Worcester.

Field observations were conducted to gain an initial understanding of the area's layout, design, character, flow, assets and challenges. This was done through several walking, cycling, and driving tours of the neighborhood where observations were recorded. Field observations

*Table 1 - Key takeaways from interview with study participants.*

| <b>Key Study Participant Takeaways</b>                      |
|---|
| Curtis Pond & Beaver Brook are an underutilized opportunity |
| Traffic is a major problem, Webster Square is a bottleneck  |
| Safety for all modes of transportation a concern, speeding  |
| Affordability a draw for businesses and residents           |
| Customers often from outside of neighborhood                |
| Little bike infrastructure or foot traffic                  |
| Not enough street parking                                   |
| Current zoning, parking restrictions not working            |
| A drive through area, not enough going on                   |
| Webster Square is not a destination                         |
| Missing quality, interesting businesses & restaurants       |
| Traffic volume can hurt/be beneficial to business           |
| Minimal investment or attention from the city               |
| Vacant buildings a big problem                              |
| Unattractive streetscape                                    |
| Great proximity   |
| Neither on the rise or decline, Webster Square is flat      |

were conducted at varying times of the day and days of the week to understand how Webster Square changes throughout the day or week. Observations also provided an understanding of the condition of buildings, streets, and the overall built environment. These observations helped guide and direct further analysis.

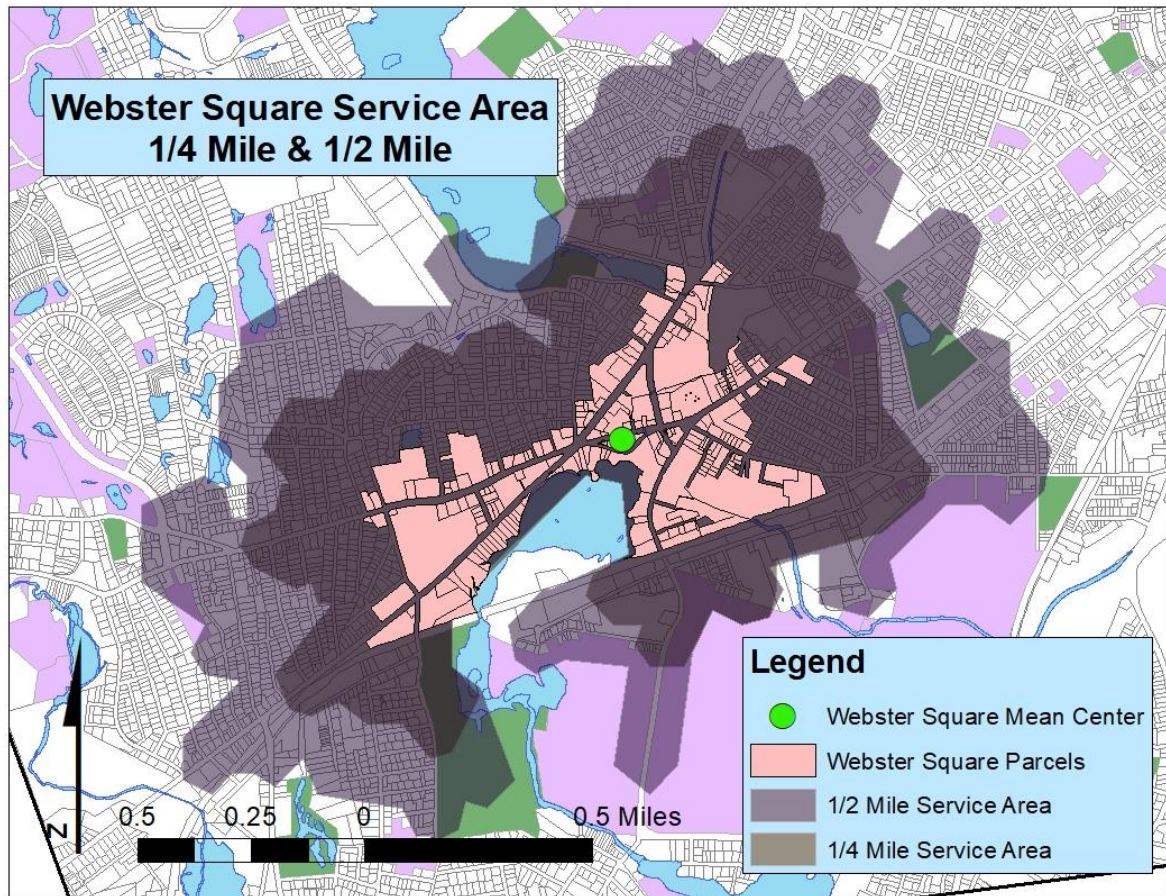
Twelve informal interviews were held with a range of participants. The goal of these conversations was to learn more about the neighborhood from people with a first-hand perspective and insider knowledge. Participants in the informal interviews represented local business owners, public officials, and institutional leaders. They were identified through in-

person solicitation, connections made by the study's advisor, and connections made by other participants. Participants were asked a series of questions to elicit their thoughts on the condition of Webster Square, its past and future, its assets and barriers, and overall assessment of the neighborhood. The format of the interviews was designed to allow for general questions and topics to lead into natural conversation. Notes were taken during the informal interviews and these were later coded and categorized to get a sense of common themes, as well as specific thoughts and ideas (see Table 1).

A variety of datasets and Geographic Information System (GIS) software was used to display and visualize data. ArcGIS's Network Analyst tool was used to define Webster Square as both a commercial district and a larger neighborhood (see Figure 7). The commercial district was defined by identifying parcels along the arterial streets of Main Street, Mill Street, Webster Street, Cambridge Street, Stafford Street, and Park Avenue. These parcels are generally understood to make up the commercial area within the neighborhood. A second level of analysis was conducted by creating a half-mile service area of all parcels within the commercial district. A half-mile was used for the service area because that is generally considered the distance people are willing to walk to a destination or to transit.

Data sources used in this study included the U.S. Census, the Worcester Regional Transit Authority, City of Worcester Assessor's Data, City of Worcester Property Records, City of Worcester Zoning Ordinance, Worcester Police CrimeReports, MassDOT Transportation Data Management System, MACRIS, and Zillow. Data were then analyzed using a variety of methods. GIS was specifically used to visualize data to understand spatial relationships and patterns in the neighborhood.





*Figure 7 – Using ArcGIS Network Analyst, a service area was created using a ¼ mile and ½ mile walking distance from the commercial district parcels to define the extent of the Webster Square neighborhood for this analysis.*

Additionally, pedestrian counts were taken at key intersections in the neighborhood to get a sense of the level of pedestrian and cyclist activity in the area. Multiple counts were taken at three locations in the morning, midday, and evening. Counts were also recorded on different days of the week and in good weather so that the data was as representative as possible. A count was also taken in the Pleasant Street neighborhood to be able to compare Webster Square pedestrian activity to other parts of the city. This pedestrian count data is by no means exhaustive or conclusive but is rather intended to give a sense of the street usage of the neighborhood.

There are several limitations that this study encounters. Due to limited resources and a constrained timeframe, a more extensive public process was not feasible. A comprehensive

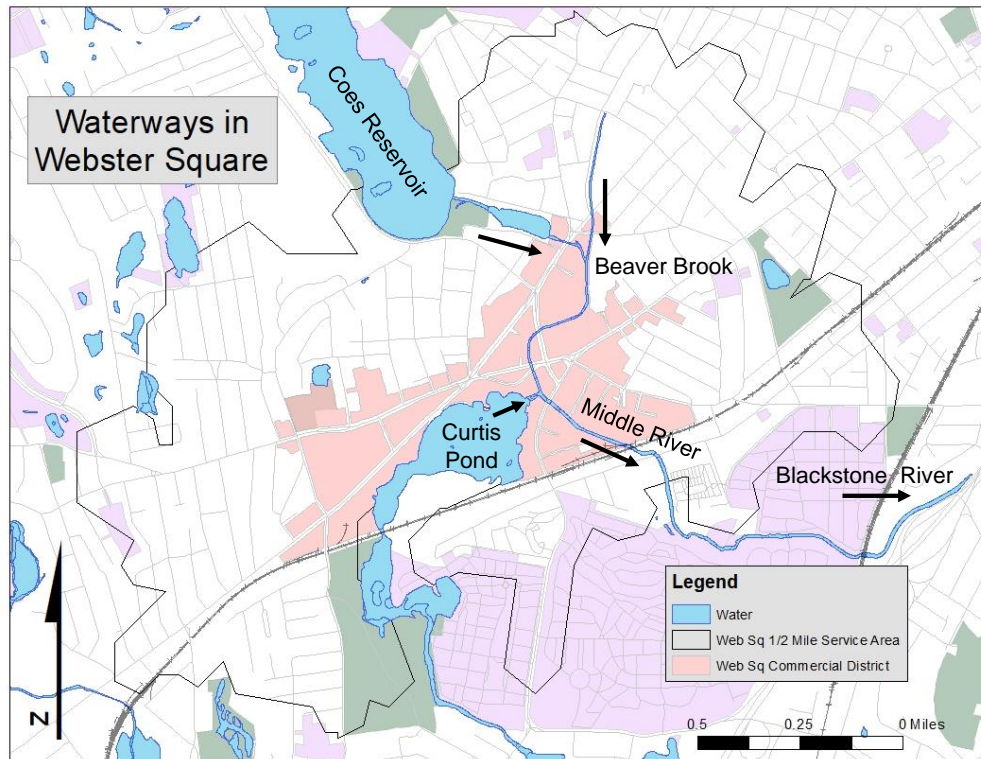
community process would be important to understand the needs, concerns, and visions of Webster Square businesses and residents. This study also does not address implementation for many of the recommendations it puts forward. While this study presents a vision for the future of Webster Square, it was not within the scope of this project to go into detail on how specific ideas might be carried out.

## WEBSTER SQUARE ANALYSIS

To build a vision for the future for Webster Square, it is essential to understand what is happening in the neighborhood today and how it got there. An analysis of Webster Square was conducted to help tell the story of Webster Square and to inform the place that it can become moving forward.

### History and Context

Located where Beaver Brook and Coes Pond converge with Curtis Pond to form the Middle River, Webster Square has historically been an important economic center within Worcester. The Middle River then meets Mill Brook and becomes the Blackstone River - a major economic catalyst for industry in the city's early years (see Figure 8). Water to power mill buildings and access to outside markets attracted industry to Webster Square in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Farnsworth & O'Flynn, 1934). As canals began to give way to railroads, the Boston and Albany Railroad Company laid tracks in 1839 connecting the Worcester-Boston line to the Hudson Valley. The new railroad passed through Webster Square, just south along Curtis Pond. Manufacturers were then able to connect into the railroad system for the shipment of their goods.



*Figure 8 –Water from Beaver Brook and Coes Reservoir meet with Curtis Pond and turn into the Middle River – happening in the heart of Webster Square, though going largely unnoticed.*

Worcester became a center for industry and innovation throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A major contributor to the city's industrial success, Webster Square was home to several large factories, including Coes Wrench Company, Curtis & Marble Manufacturing Company, and the Reed and Prince Manufacturing Company (Farnsworth & O'Flynn, 1934). Webster Square developed into its own manufacturing district within the city. By the turn of the century, these factories employed thousands of workers who mostly lived in newly constructed three-family homes adjacent to the factories. Many of the three-family homes built during the industrial heyday, between 1880 and 1920, are still home to working class families today.

Labeled "New Worcester" in maps from that time, Webster Square would have been a new and bustling neighborhood in the city, sustained by its commercial and industrial activity, its proximity to downtown, and its role as a transportation gateway (Richards, 1896) (see Figure 9). Roads, trolleys and railroads traveling through Webster Square connected



destinations to the south and west including Webster, Spencer, Auburn, Leicester, onward to the Berkshires. It had already developed into its own commercial node within the City.



*Figure 9 – A 1896 atlas of Worcester shows Webster Square labeled as ‘New Worcester’, with several factories and trolley lines throughout the neighborhood.*

Webster Square and Worcester, which were heavily dependent on the manufacturing industries, were particularly affected by the exodus of manufacturing jobs and white flight post-World War II. Factories began to close throughout the neighborhood and city, with Coes Knife Factory being the last major factory to fold in 1991 (WHM, 2018). At the same time, the way people moved around was rapidly changing. Personal automobiles were replacing trollies and rail as the dominant form of transportation. The last trolley in Worcester traveled to downtown from Leicester, through Webster Square, in 1945 (Kotsopoulos, 2018). Like most industrial cities in the Northeast, the automobile and rise of the middle class from the 1950’s to the 1970’s allowed residents, almost exclusively white residents, to leave the inner city. White flight saw much of the wealth in inner cities disappear and saw dramatic changes to the built environment

in places like Webster Square (Vrabel, 2014). The newly built federal highway system and a street network that was redesigned for commuters changed the landscape of public space in Worcester to serve cars rather than people.

Accordingly, the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw activity in the Webster Square neighborhood and the local economy shifted to the service, retail and automotive industries. Streets were widened to accommodate a higher volume of cars. Once bustling factories sat vacant or underutilized. The area was redeveloped with shopping plazas, gas stations, and drive-thru fast-food restaurants. Portions of once vital streams were buried or turned into culverts and brownfields were left behind, especially around Curtis Pond. The built environment of today's Webster Square carries the legacy of its past and poses challenges in developing its future.

## Built Form and Land Use

As maps from the turn of century show, Webster Square is identified as the intersection of Webster, Main, Mill and Cambridge Streets. This has long been a crossroads that connects South Worcester, the westside and the main entrance to the city for towns to the south and west, all linked to downtown and rest of Worcester via Main Street (see Figure 10). The modern definition of Webster Square has grown to include part of Park Avenue to the north and extends southwest along Main Street and Stafford Street. These six main arterial roads currently serve as vital transportation routes for the neighborhood and the surrounding area. They make Webster Square well connected to downtown, the airport, nearby communities of Auburn and Leicester, and other areas in Worcester.

The total area of the Webster Square commercial district is just over 155 acres. Land use in the business district is largely devoted to commercial use with 64% of the parcels and 77% of the land defined as commercial by the City of Worcester Assessor's Data, with the rest being split

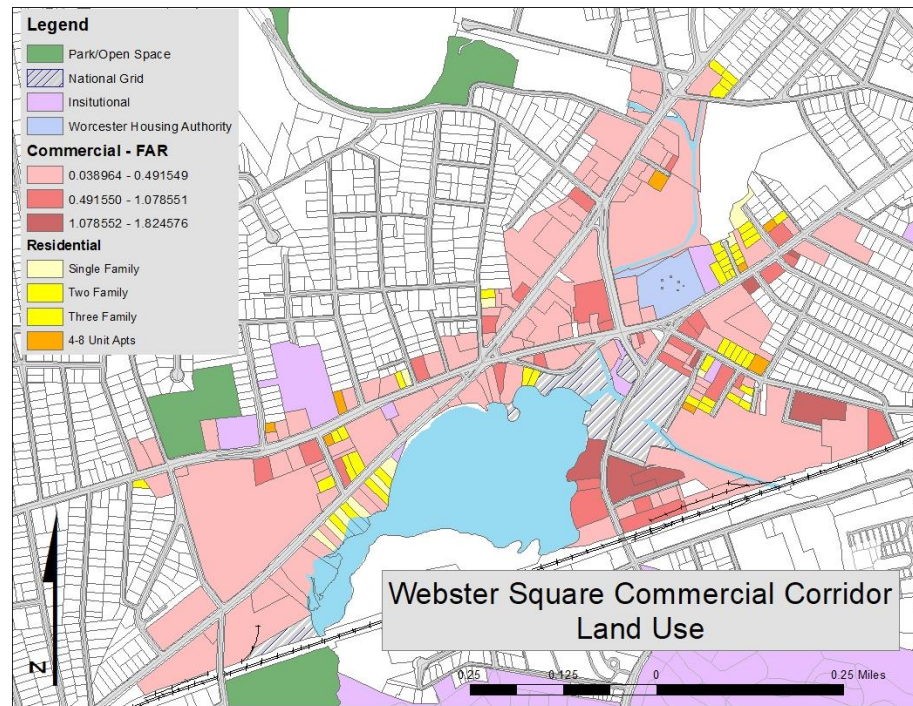
between residential and institutional uses (see Figure 11). With an average floor-to-area ratio (FAR) of 0.45, the commercial district has a relatively low FAR throughout, particularly for an area that is generally zoned for much high and denser use. The only buildings above a 1.0 FAR are several old mill buildings and apartment buildings.



*Figure 10 – Webster Square is a well-connected neighborhood*

Commercial properties only number 372 of 3,239 parcels in the Webster Square service area. While this only makes up 11% of total parcels, they make up 23% of the land in Webster Square with an average lot size of 0.92 acres. As mentioned previously, commercial buildings in Webster Square have a relatively low FAR of 0.45, especially when considering its proximity to downtown. The average assessed value of commercial properties in Webster Square, excluding tax-exempt properties, is \$708,104, anchored by several large developments such as the Webster Square Plaza and the Price Chopper on Cambridge Street. Commercial properties are generally of newer construction than residential with the median building year being 1942. Sixty-nine percent of all commercial parcels in Webster Square have ownership addresses in the

city, suggesting that there is a fair amount of local control over the properties. The total assessed value of commercial properties in Webster Square is approximately \$204 million dollars, translating to an annual property tax contribution by commercial properties in Webster Square of about \$6.9 million annually.



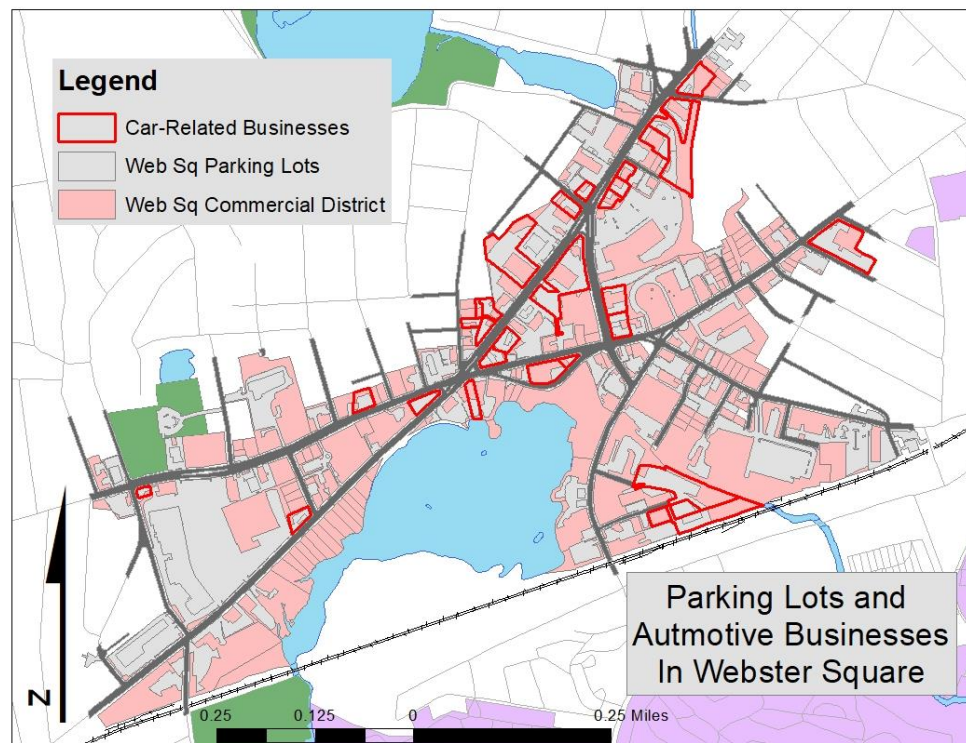
*Figure 11 – Land use in the center of Webster Square is largely dominated by low-density commercial parcels. Notable other features include 3 large National Grid properties, several schools and churches, Curtis Pond, and a small number of residences.*

The land use in the commercial corridor is heavily influenced by the automobile. Approximately 43% of the total land area is devoted to surface parking lots and there are at least 30 auto-related businesses in the commercial district, particularly prevalent on Park Avenue between Main Street and Lovell Street, including gas stations, auto repair shops, used car lots, and car rentals. Fittingly, these parcels are mostly dominated by large surface lots with significant setbacks from the street, diminishing any sense of a street wall or sense of continuity that creates a compact and vibrant feel.

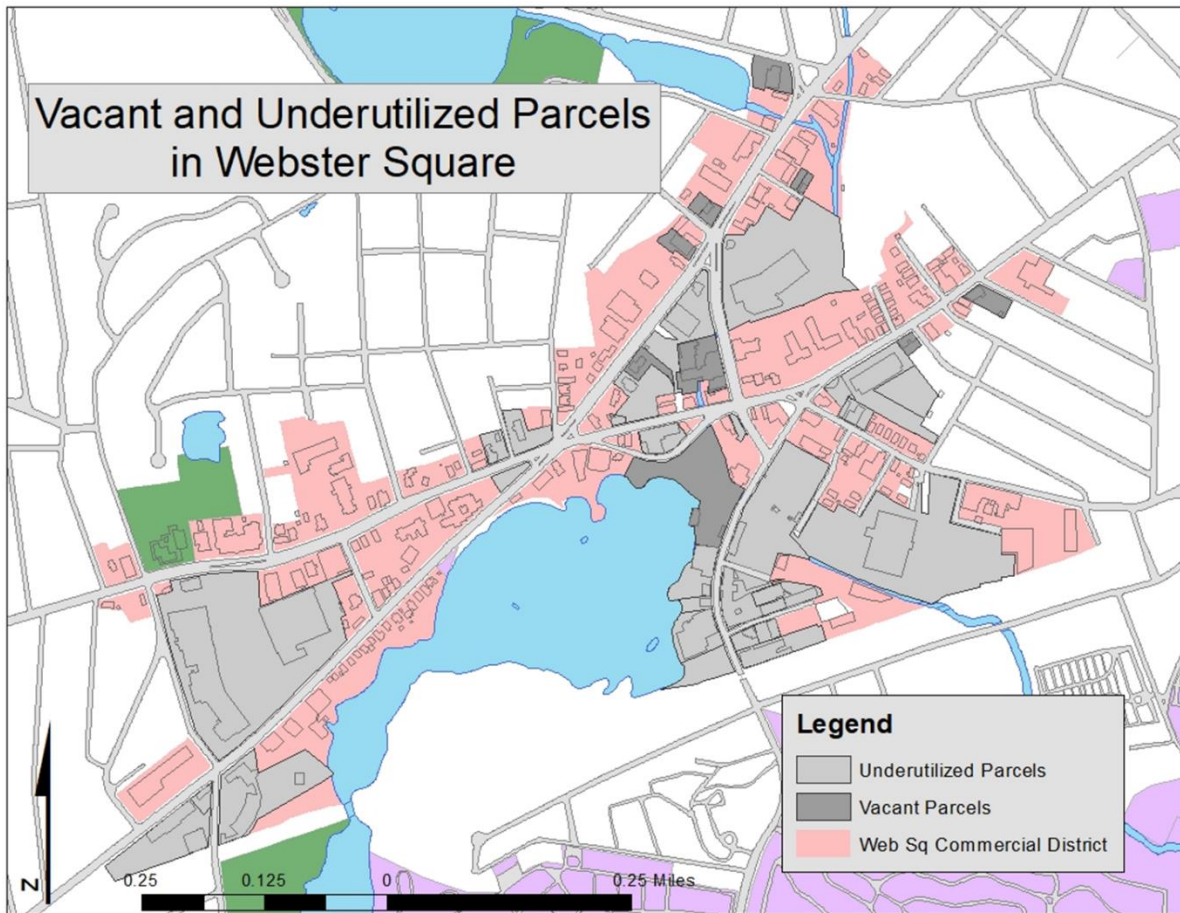
Dormant properties were mentioned by many participants as major barriers to positive development in the neighborhood. Vacant and underutilized properties line the commercial



corridor and significantly take away from the vibrancy of the neighborhood. The “triangle”, defined by participants as the area bounded by Park Avenue, Main Street, and Mill Street, is particularly distressed with several underutilized or vacant parcels in the heart of Webster Square, mostly held by one property owner. There are otherwise relatively few truly vacant properties. A bigger issue is the number of underutilized properties throughout the commercial district. A majority of parcels have low FARs with unnecessarily large parking lots, reflecting decades of market and social preferences for auto-centric development. Using participants insight, field observations, and calculations of assessed parcel values, a map of vacant and underutilized parcels was developed (see Figure 13). There were clear correlations between the outward appearance of the parcels, their assessed value, and its current use. These properties demonstrate the need for reinvestment and development in the commercial corridor with over half the land around the “Triangle” vacant or underutilized.



*Figure 12 – With 43% of the land area in the commercial district devoted to parking and many auto-related businesses, the area has long been dominated by the automobile.*



*Figure 13 – Vacant and underutilized properties in Webster Square, identified by interviews, field observations, and an analysis of property records, are key pieces to future development in the area.*

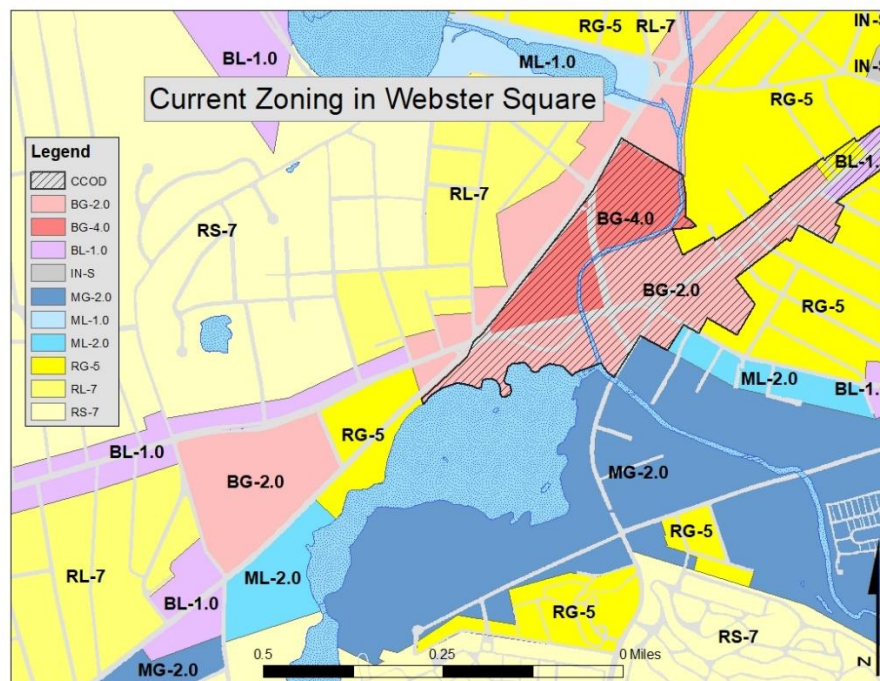
Notably, National Grid holds significant property in the Webster Square commercial district. They own over 10 acres, nine of which include a large substation along Webster Street, an adjacent office building, and two unused parcels along Curtis Pond, all in the heart of Webster Square. These properties were described by participants as eyesores and obstacles to connecting the historic mill buildings on Webster Street to the rest of the neighborhood. They also are situated along Curtis Pond, denying crucial access to a very underutilized neighborhood asset.

Looking at land use for the larger Webster Square neighborhood, there is a clear spatial divide between residential and commercial uses. Commercial parcels dominate arterial roads; there are few residential parcels within commercial district. Overall, residential parcels make up

about 55% of the total usable land in Webster Square. There is a strong diversity of housing types throughout the neighborhood, although the density of units gets higher as you go east toward Main South and downtown,

## *Zoning*

Current land use and the built environment in Webster Square can largely be attributed the area's zoning (see Figure 14). The commercial district's current zoning is comprised of several zoning areas; primarily BG (business general) 2.0 and 4.0 (Worcester Zoning Ordinance, 2018). Additional areas are zoned RG-5, BL-1.0, ML-2.0, and MG-2.0. Much of the area's zoning looks to be outdated with many examples of current zoning not reflecting current use. The triangle bounded by Park Avenue, Main Street, and Mill Street, as well as Mill Street Plaza and a few adjoining parcels, are zoned as BG-4.0, allowing for a FAR of 4.0. It is one of only three places in the city, outside of downtown, zoned to allow for increased FAR and density, even though the highest FAR in that area is 1082 Main Street at FAR 0.93.



*Figure 14 – Zoning in Webster Square enforces and reflects the divide of land use within the neighborhood, although many parcels no longer reflect the assigned zoning.*

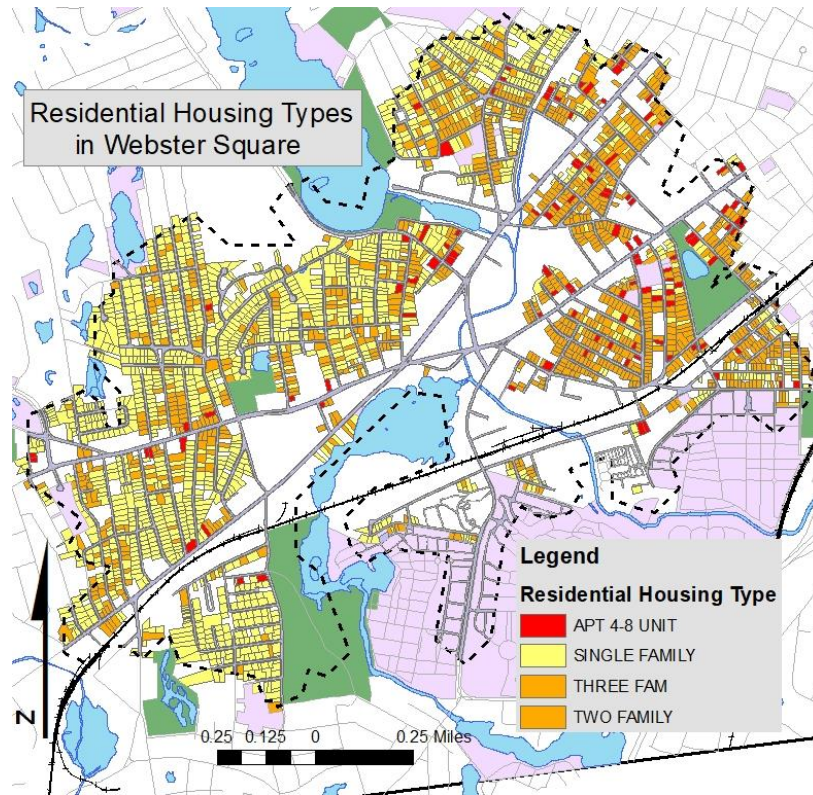
Additionally, the city's Commercial Corridor Overlay District (CCOD) partially extends into Webster Square, encompassing part of Main Street, Mill Street, and Park Avenue. The CCOD gives certain allowances and promotes building design to "encourage compact, pedestrian friendly development that is physically and functionally integrated through site design, dimensional and parking standards that limit parking, provide flexibility for development initiatives and provide incentives for mixed-use development" (Worcester Zoning Ordinance, 2018). Based on FAR calculations and field observations, it does not appear any buildings in the CCOD have been built to these guidelines.

Zoning for residential use varies significantly throughout the neighborhood. Areas west and south of the commercial district are zoned RS-7 and RL-7, limiting development mainly to single, two and three-family homes. Similar to other areas of Webster Square, it is interesting to note that a significant number of two- and three-family homes are in areas zoned for single family structures, likely having been grandfathered in. The divide between urban and suburban parts of the city is also evident here, where areas east of Mill Street are zoned RG-5 to allow for denser residential development.

## Housing

While the commercial district is home to a range of businesses and commercial properties, the Webster Square neighborhood is made up of the houses and apartments that feed into the neighborhood center. Looking at housing within the half-mile service area of the commercial district, Webster Square presents a number of issues and challenges for growth (see Figure 15).





*Figure 15 – Housing types become denser as you get closer to downtown; note a large gap in housing units in the center of Webster Square*

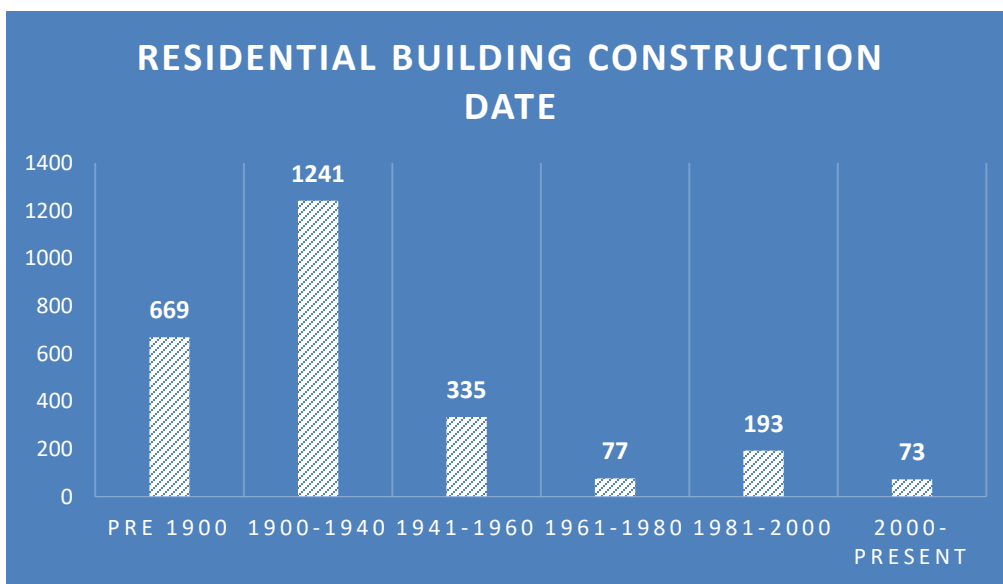
## *Residential*

Of the 2,588 residential parcels Network Analyst identified from the City’s Assessor’s Data, the first striking finding was the small number of residential buildings in the commercial district. Excluding the Worcester Housing Authority Towers, there are only 60 residential units in the commercial district, making up only 6% of the total land in the commercial area. This is highly reflective of the zoning in Webster Square that has mandated the separation of land use in the area for decades. This separation also means that anyone looking to access stores or services in the neighborhood must travel significant distances and cars almost become a requirement for interacting with the commercial district.

The housing stock in Webster Square, much like the rest of Worcester, is aging. This presents obvious issues as the quality of the housing can deteriorate and the cost of

maintenance can rapidly escalate. The analysis showed this is particularly a problem in Webster Square where the median year of construction for a residential building is 1915, compared to 1935 for the entire City (City of Worcester Assessor's Data, 2018) (see Table 2). Even more alarming is that when one looks at two and three-family buildings in Webster Square, the median construction year is 1900, meaning about a quarter of all residential buildings in the Webster Square neighborhood are at least 118 years old. The Assessor's Data also showed that 68% of the residential buildings in Webster Square were given a grade of less than good condition and 14% of buildings given a grade of less than average condition, compared to 61% and 10% citywide, respectively. Field observations and participant interviews supported this finding as many of the houses in the Webster Square neighborhoods look visibly distressed and in need of reinvestment.

*Table 2 – The median of residential housing construction in Webster is 1915, 20 years older than the rest of the city.*

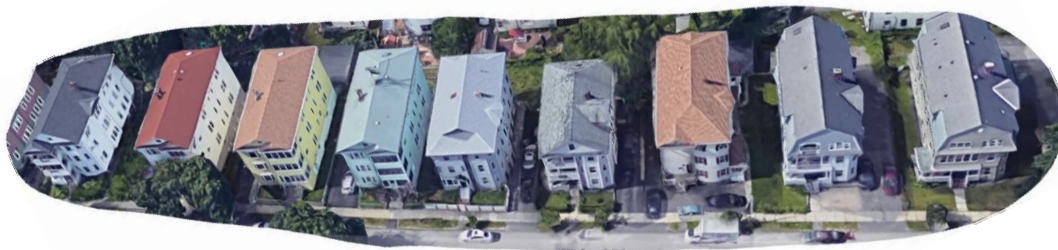


Looking deeper at the Assessor's Data, the average assessed value of residential parcels in Webster Square is lower than the rest of the city - \$197,224, or \$86 per SF, in Webster Square compared to \$218,851, or \$108 per SF, citywide – which reflects the size, age, condition, and location of houses in the neighborhood. While the prices may show Webster

Square as a slightly depressed market within the city, this can also make the neighborhood a strong area for investment. The real estate market in Worcester has been on the rise for years. Webster Square's proximity to downtown, highways, and the suburbs, as well as a downtown development boom and stronger transit connections to Boston and MetroWest, could make the area ripe for opportunity (Owens, 2018).

### *Multi-Family Housing*

Worcester is known as city of three-deckers and Webster Square is no exception. The Assessor's Data shows a sizable diversity of residential housing types between single family and multi-family parcels. Of the 2,588 residential parcels identified, 1,156, or about 45%, are multifamily buildings. The multi-family parcels tend to be located in areas east of Mill Street, where the side streets along Main Street are almost exclusively multifamily, mirroring the urban/suburban divide (see Figure 16). Given that, there are also a sizable number of multifamily homes in the west, north, and south areas of Webster Square, mostly two-families. This is likely a reflection of the eras of development in this area, with two and three families mostly along the main streets and single-family homes further removed.



*Figure 16 – A row of three-family houses on Hitchcock Road in Webster Square*

With 45% of residential parcels in Webster Square multifamily, it is important to understand the ownership of these properties. According to the Assessor's Data, 41% of multifamily buildings have the ownership listed at a different address than the property. Of that number, 44% of landlords have addresses somewhere outside of Worcester, potentially

contributing to the struggling condition of the multifamily housing stock. With around 59% of buildings being owner-occupied, there is a relatively high level of homeownership in the neighborhood. This is often seen as a stabilizing force for the neighborhood and an opportunity for individual to develop wealth, both significant assets for the community.

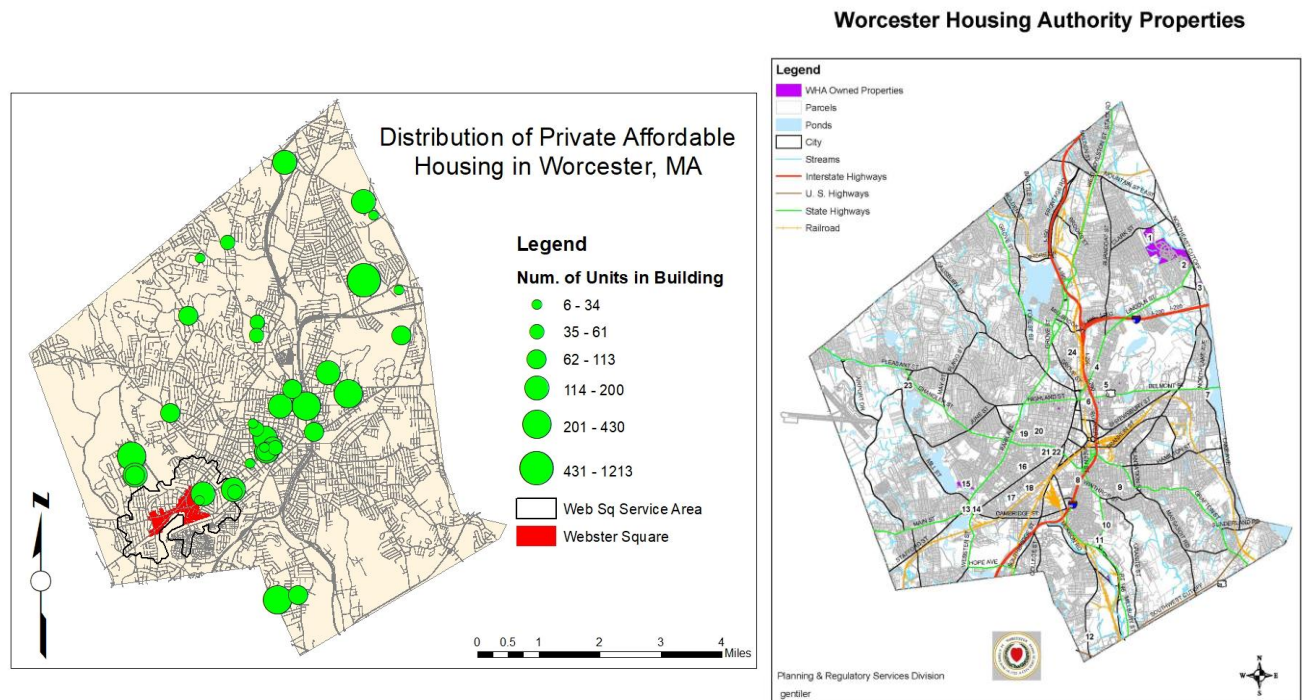


Figure 17 – Maps of deed restricted affordable housing and public housing (WHA map) show Webster Square as an area with limited deed restricted affordable housing options.

## Affordable Housing

Webster Square is home to two of the city's 38 subsidized private housing developments, the Marble Street Apartments and Mental Health Housing, both along Main Street, and totaling 181 affordable units (see Figure 17). Several other affordable developments are just outside of the neighborhood service area further up Main Street and off Mill Street. The Worcester Housing Authority (WHA) has the Webster Square Towers East & West in the center of Webster Square, providing housing for elderly tenants (see Figure 17). The towers were found to be the highest source of pedestrian activity during the pedestrian counts. The Lakeside

Apartments are additional WHA properties just on the edge of the neighborhood service area and are home to one, two, and three-bedroom family housing. Relative to the income of the neighborhood and the area demographics, Webster Square has a relatively limited stock of preserved affordable units in the neighborhood. Worcester Common Ground and the Main South CDC are both community development corporations that focus on developing affordable housing in their neighborhoods. While both the CDC's operational areas include part of the Webster Square service area, their activity covers much larger territories in Piedmont, Elm Park, and the rest of the Main South area.

### *Rental Market*

According to Zillow analytics, the average rent in Worcester was \$1,400 for the month of September 2018 (Zillow Research, 2018). While this is below the county and state averages, Worcester is an expensive market when compared nationally. Doing a random search of 20 available rental units in Webster Square in the same month, the rent in Webster Square came in lower; finding an average of \$1,300 for a 2.5-bedroom, 1.125-bathroom apartment (see Figure 18). While tracking current rental prices can be challenging, this analysis implies Webster Square is a more affordable rental area within the city. While rent in the area might be low, the condition and quality of the units might reflect the prices. Nevertheless, lower prices in Webster Square make the area one of the more affordable areas of the city – potentially a draw for redevelopment and gentrification.

Analysis of GIS and Assessor's data of the housing stock in Webster Square shows that the neighborhood is slightly older, less valuable, and denser than the rest of the city. While the age of housing units presents challenges to ensuring residents have access to quality housing options, the price of the units can be seen as a strength for the neighborhood. It remains relatively affordable within the city and could benefit from reinvestment. The housing types in



the neighborhood, with a high numbers of multi-families, set the basis for Webster Square as a dense, vibrant community that supports a range of incomes and demographics. However, the lack of housing in the central commercial district is a concern and an area that can be improved upon.

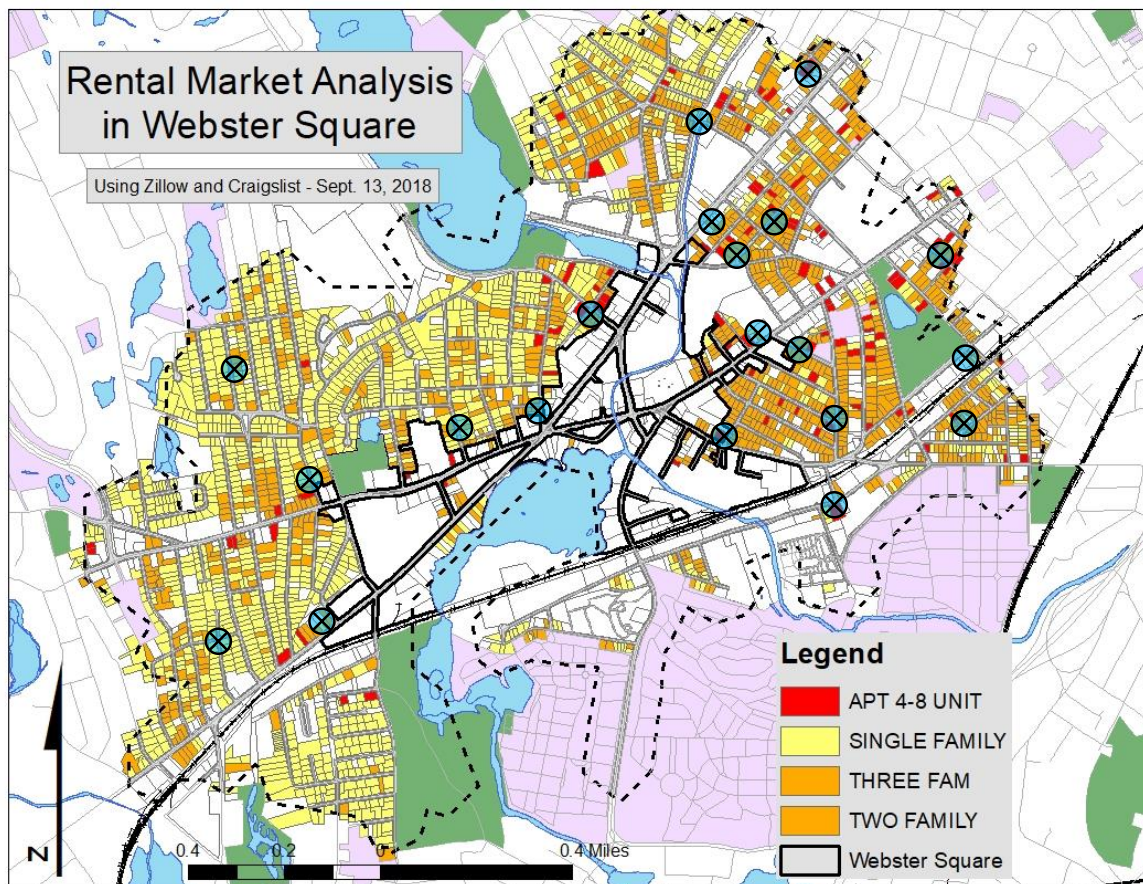


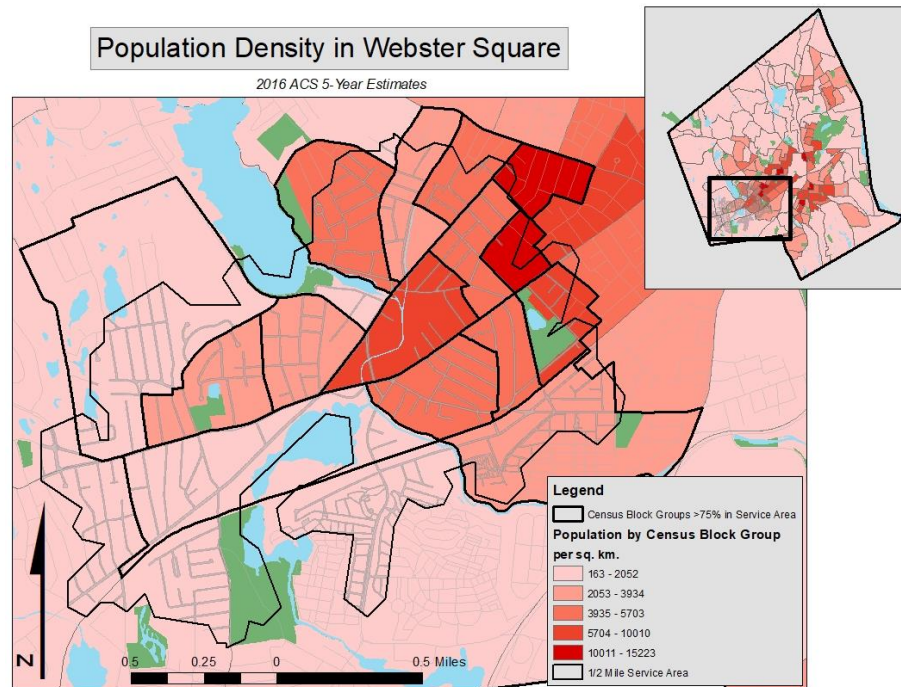
Figure 18 – A rental market analysis finds that rents in Webster Square are less expensive than in other areas of the city.

## Population

Webster Square is an incredibly diverse and representative area of the City, with a range of people, incomes, housing stock, and neighborhood conditions that make Webster Square surprisingly reflective of the characteristics of the city as a whole. As the data supports, Webster Square is a unique meeting place of Worcester’s urban core and its suburban periphery, with one of the largest commercial nodes in the City at the center of several distinct



neighborhoods. It is a place where the true socio-economic diversity of the City is in full display. Within a half mile of the commercial district, you can find households living in suburban areas just down the road from some of the most distressed households in Worcester.



*Figure 19 – A map of population density by Census Block Group, ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates*

Using data from the U.S. Census 2016 American Community Survey (ACS), the Webster Square half-mile neighborhood service area has an estimated population of at least 17,258 residents (ACS, 2016) (see Figure 19). Nearly a tenth of Worcester’s population resides within an area that makes up just less than 5% of the total area of the city. The population density map shows that the densest areas of the Webster Square neighborhood are located in the block groups along Main Street, going east toward downtown from Webster Square. Areas north, south and west of the Webster Square Plaza are less dense than the rest of the neighborhood.

The demographics of Webster Square paint the picture of the urban/suburban separation. Mill Street and Park Avenue form a figurative divide where one can see

notable differences in the racial make up the census block groups. Looking at the white population as a percentage of the total population, areas west, south, and north of Mill Street become areas of higher concentrations (see Figure 20). Conversely, the block groups east of Mill Street have significantly higher concentrations of Hispanic populations (see Figure 21).

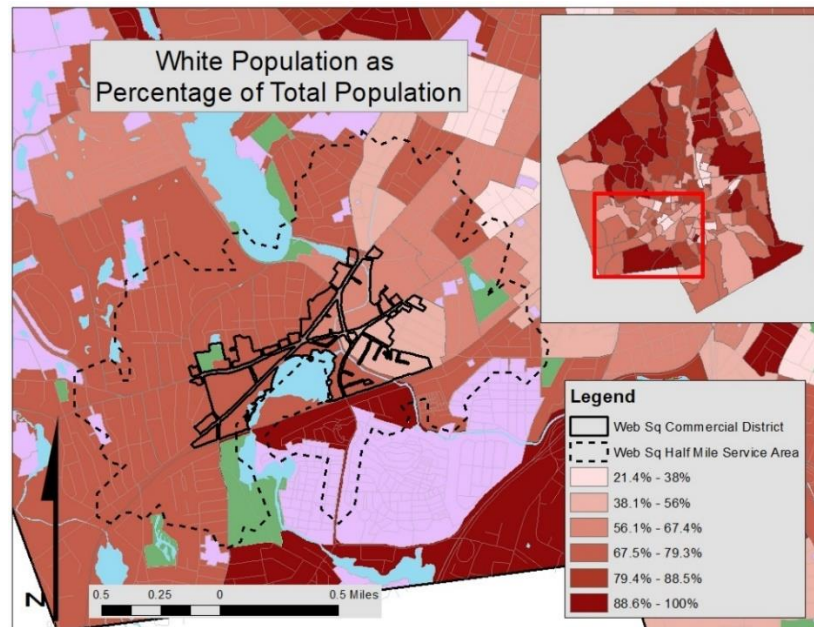


Figure 20 – A map of white population as a percentage of total population by Census Block Group, ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates

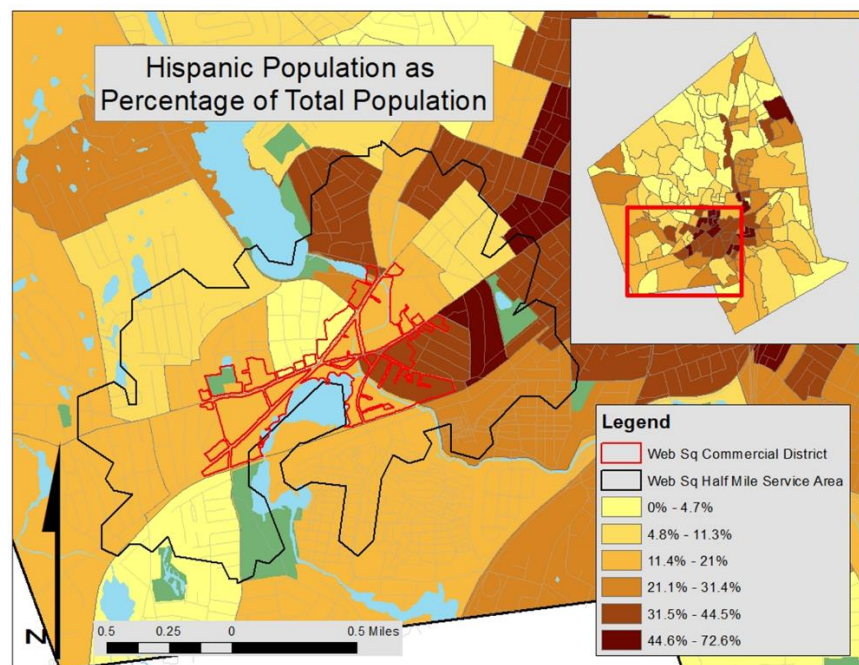
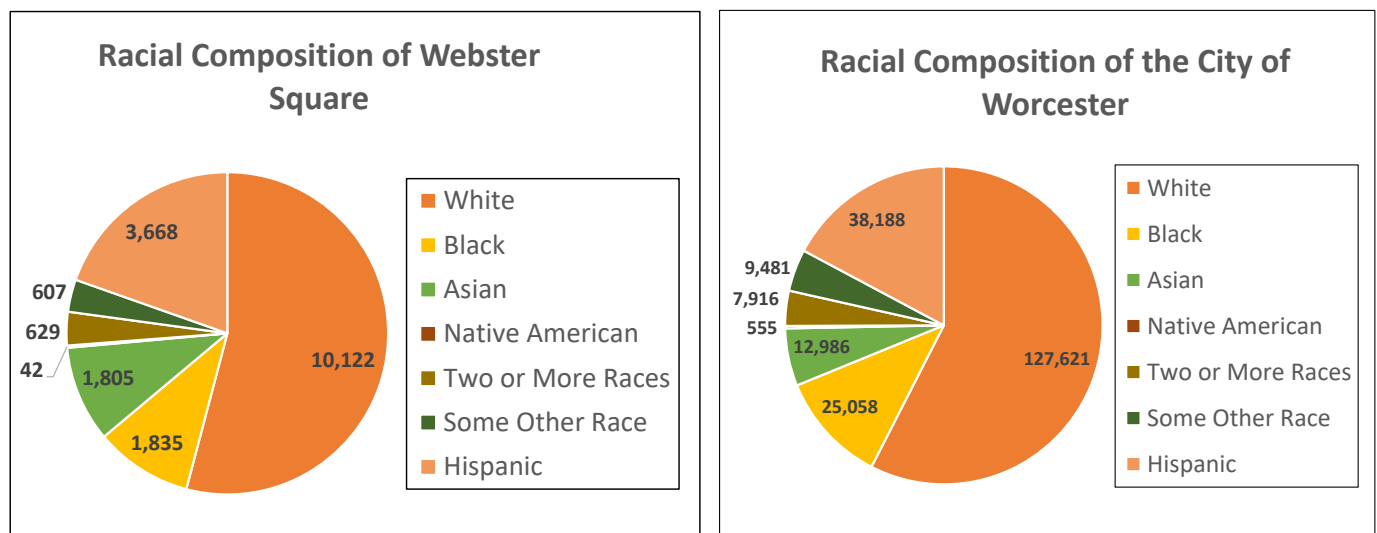


Figure 21 - A map of Hispanic population as a percentage of total population by Census Block Group, ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates

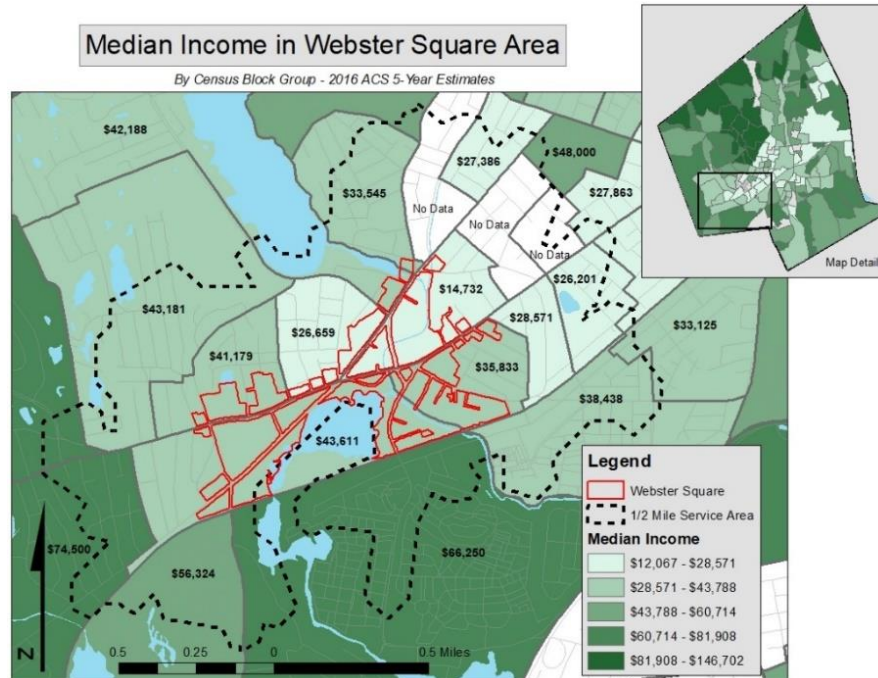
Overall, the demographic makeup of Webster Square is strikingly similar to the City of Worcester. A side-by-side comparison reveals almost identical racial breakdowns of the city and Webster Square, based on Census block groups within the commercial district service area (see Table 3). Also similar to Worcester as a whole, there is a trend in Webster Square where whiter neighborhoods tend to be in areas with less density and farther away from the urban center of the city.

*Table 3 - Similar racial profiles for Webster Square and Worcester.*



Income levels and poverty rates in the neighborhood also support the urban vs. suburban narrative that is played out in Webster Square (see Figures 22 & 23). Poverty rates double and triple when one moves from the west side of Mill Street to the east. Similarly, median income levels on the east side of Mill Street are anywhere from half to a third the levels seen on the west side of Mill Street.





Figures 22 – Area median income in Webster Square by Census Block Group, ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates

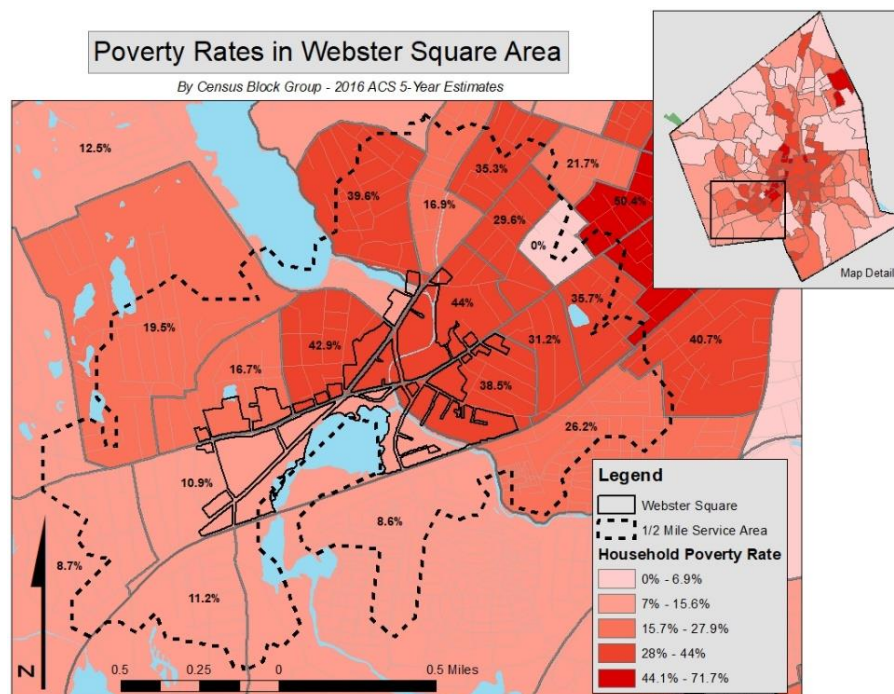


Figure 23 – Poverty rate in Webster Square by Census Block Group, ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates

Webster Square is neither an inner-city neighborhood like Main South, nor is a suburban neighborhood like Tatnuck Square on the westside. The diversity of people and income in the neighborhood can be seen as an asset in planning for the future of the area. Datasets of the

Webster Square neighborhood and the city show that the center of the commercial district – the tangle of intersections that include Mill Street, Main Street, Cambridge Street, Webster Street, and Park Avenue – is a dividing line in the city (see Figure 24). GIS analysis shows this is where the dense, urban center meets the more sprawling, more affluent suburban edges of the city. Understanding this divide is critical to the understanding of the neighborhood. While Webster Square is home to people across the socioeconomic spectrum, the commercial district at the center of it might not meet the needs of the population.

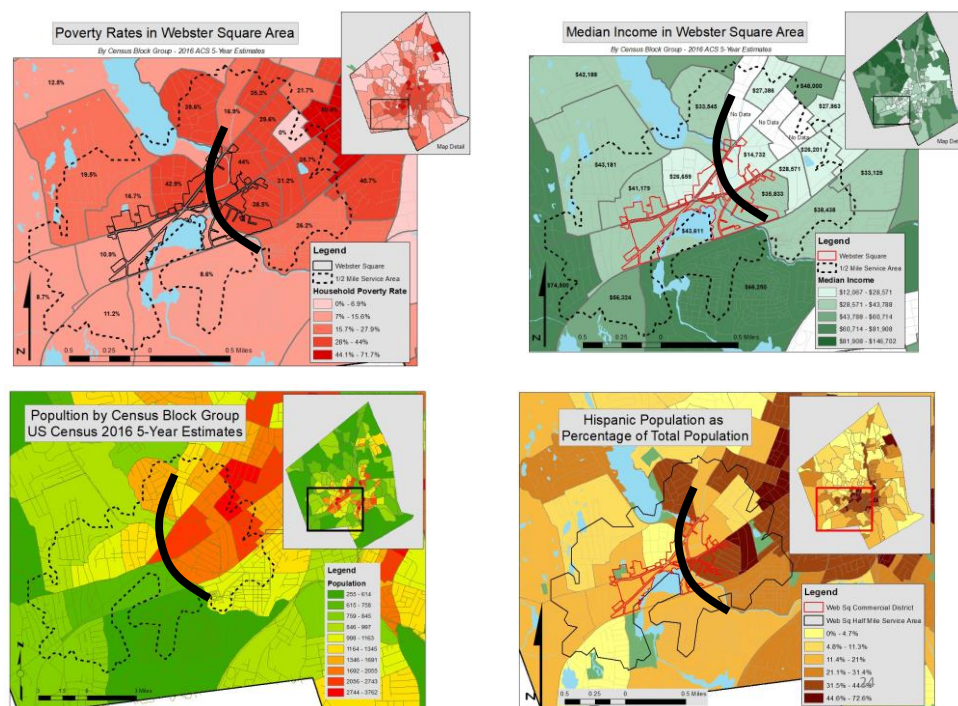


Figure 24 – Demographic maps show similar patterns of an urban/suburban meeting point at the heart of Webster Square.

## Transportation

Transportation in Webster Square is still defined and dominated by the automobile. The streets are designed to move the greatest number of cars through as possible, with little regard for the adverse effects other commuters and the built environment. Wide, long stretches of road and little designated parking makes the commercial corridor feel more like a highway than a neighborhood center. Buildings and businesses were designed to accommodate cars, not

people or bicycles. And while transit is available, it is not frequent or organized well enough to be effective and useful to area residents. The overall condition of the transportation system in Webster Square has been stagnant and does not appear to have grown out of the car-centric condition in which it was built during the last century.

The Webster Square commercial district is made up of six arterial roads, Main Street, Mill Street, Cambridge Street, Webster Street, Stafford Street, and Park Avenue, on 3.1 miles of arterial roadways connect the area to all other parts of the city. The arterial roads intersect with each other five times in the commercial corridor, with a total of nine intersections controlled with traffic lights in Webster Square. These roads connect Webster Square to all parts of the city, including downtown, the airport, I-290, and Route 146. Both Route 9 and Route 12 are major east-west and north-south state highways travel through Webster Square. They are concurrent roads coming from Park Avenue in the north, splitting at the intersection with Mill Street. Route 9 goes west to the Pioneer Valley and Route 12 going south to Webster.

### *Traffic*

As noted by almost all interview participants, traffic is a significant issue in the neighborhood with arterial roads converging in a tangle of intersections. There are thousands of vehicles that travel through the neighborhood to enter the city center, cut across the city, get to the airport, and travel to destinations in Webster Square. MassDOT Transportation Data Management System estimates over 28,000 vehicles travel on Park Avenue, between Main Street and Mill Street on a daily basis – one of the highest volumes in the city (MassDOT, 2018). Data also show that the intersections of Park Avenue, Main Street, and Mill Street also have high volumes. These roads are used as access roads into and around the city. Field observations and participants noted these areas as having consistent traffic backups and gridlock, specifically during commuting hours.





*Figure 25 -As traffic backing up on Mill Street, a barren streetscape is uninviting to pedestrians and cyclists.*

Speeding is another issue that participant identified as a problem in the neighborhood. The speed limit throughout the commercial corridor is 30 MPH, unless otherwise marked. Wide, long stretches of road allow drivers to speed between traffic lights which is both dangerous for all users and makes for an unpleasant experience for pedestrians and cyclists. As one participant noted, “cars are just speeding up to the next red light”.

### *Streetscape*

A major contributing factor to the speed of vehicles in Webster Square and the quality of the street environment is the design and layout of the road (see Figure 25). The National Association of City Transportation Planners says “10 [foot lanes] are appropriate in urban areas and have a positive impact on a street’s safety without impacting traffic operations.” (NACTO, 2018). Aerial measuring of street widths throughout Webster Square finds that almost every road is wider than NACTO recommendations. MassDOT and the City of Worcester currently follow AASHTO guidelines which recommend 10-12-foot-wide lanes, giving flexibility to design

to the needs of the specific street (ASSHTO, 2008). Wider urban roads encourage faster, often unsafe driving, while taking away precious public space for other uses like parking, bike lanes, and sidewalks. Park Avenue and Mill Street are 60 feet wide, four lane roads that can feel more like being on a highway than in a neighborhood. Other arterial roads, while only two lanes, are often 35-45 feet wide, giving a similar affect.

Little consideration has been given to the pedestrian or cyclist within public space. There are no designated bike lanes or marked shoulders in Webster Square, even though two of the city's four bicycle shops are located in the area. The relatively flat topography of Webster Square lends itself well to cycling but riding with traffic in the area is intimidating and dangerous. The pedestrian environment can also be unpleasant. Wide roads and long distances between intersections make crossing the street difficult. The speed and volume of traffic makes sidewalks feel loud, uncomfortable, and dwarfed by the street. There are few amenities for pedestrians on public space in Webster Square. There are few street trees to provide shade, almost no benches, and no dedicated bus stops or shelters.

Pedestrian counts taken at three of the busiest intersections in Webster Square found very little pedestrian activity throughout the commercial district (see Table 4). The observation sites saw on average, about 30 total pedestrian and cyclists travel through the intersection during any given hour. A count was taken at another neighborhood in the city, at the corner of Piedmont and Pleasant Streets, to compare pedestrian activity, where there were nearly triple the number of pedestrians and cyclists. While these counts were not thorough enough to be conclusive, it starts to paint a picture. This was something many participants also noted as a challenge for the neighborhood.

Table 4 – Pedestrian counts saw low levels of pedestrian activity throughout Webster Square, especially when compared to a similar commercial district in the city.

## Pedestrian Counts

| Location                        | Date      | Day of Week | Time              | Pedestrians | Cyclists   | Total       |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Park Ave & Mill St              | 8/16/2018 | Monday      | 11:50am - 12:50pm | 26          | 1          | 27          |
|                                 | 9/13/2018 | Thursday    | 4:30pm - 5:30pm   | 31          | 3          | 34          |
|                                 | 9/18/2018 | Tuesday     | 8:30am - 9:30am   | 24          | 2          | 26          |
|                                 |           |             | <b>Average:</b>   | <b>27</b>   | <b>2</b>   | <b>29</b>   |
| Main St & Mill St               | 8/23/2018 | Tuesday     | 6:00pm - 7:00pm   | 27          | 4          | 31          |
|                                 | 9/9/2018  | Sunday      | 12:30pm - 1:30am  | 34          | 3          | 37          |
|                                 | 9/12/2018 | Wednesday   | 9:00am - 10:00am  | 32          | 3          | 35          |
|                                 |           |             | <b>Average:</b>   | <b>31</b>   | <b>3.6</b> | <b>34.6</b> |
| Main St, Park Ave & Stafford St | 9/17/2018 | Monday      | 8:30am - 9:30am   | 22          | 1          | 23          |
|                                 | 9/24/2018 | Monday      | 12:00pm - 1:00pm  | 26          | 0          | 26          |
|                                 | 9/27/2018 | Thursday    | 5:30pm - 6:30pm   | 28          | 2          | 30          |
|                                 |           |             | <b>Average:</b>   | <b>25.3</b> | <b>1</b>   | <b>26.3</b> |
| Pleasant St & Piedmont St       | 9/17/2018 | Monday      | 12:00pm - 1:00pm  | 74          | 11         | 85          |

A major factor in analyzing the streetscape in Webster Square is not only looking at the built environment of the streets, but also looking at the buildings that line the commercial district. Every participant noted the prevalence of vacant lots in the center of Webster Square and prevalence of parking lots, underutilized buildings, and empty space. Complete Streets and Smart Growth theories both view the streetwall as an important factor in creating the vibrancy and continuity of the public space. Driving or walking down any street in Webster Square, one experiences large gaps, empty spaces, and building setbacks. It creates a desolate feeling where everything seems far away and isolated with storefronts far apart from each other and parking lots lining the sidewalks. Webster Square feels like it was designed exclusively for the automobile. One of the biggest influences on the streetscape in Webster Square is parking in the commercial district. There are no municipal lots and only one area in Webster Square with delineated street parking; one side of Main Street between Mill Street and Stafford Street. These are amenities that are prevalent in the Canal District and Shrewsbury Street in Worcester and commonly found in neighborhood commercial districts in most cities. Zoning requirements have mandated businesses devote significant space to parking. As noted earlier, while some of

the district is within the city's CCOD, there does not appear to be any parcels built to those standards.

A notable difference between Webster Square and other more vibrant neighborhoods is the lack of street parking and municipal lots. These spaces give people easy access to businesses in the neighborhood and the ability to park and walk around. The only area in Webster Square with delineated street parking is on one side of Main Street between Mill Street and Stafford Street. While the roads are easily wide enough to fit parking spaces and travel lanes, people do not seem to use street parking, potentially due to confusion of whether parking is permitted and because spaces are not specifically marked out.

### *Transit*

The WRTA operates four bus routes that travel through the Webster Square commercial district – routes 7, 19, 27, and 33 (see Figure 26). Route 7 travels from downtown via Chandler Street and Park Avenue to housing developments on Mill Street. The latter three travel from the Central Hub downtown via Main Street where they split in Webster Square, terminating at the airport, in Leicester/Spencer, and in Auburn, respectively. Data from the WRTA shows that the section of Main Street going through Main South to Webster Square is the most heavily used corridor in their system in the system (CMRPC, 2016) (see Figure 27). Population density and the income diversity along Main Street certainly contribute the corridor's high usage, even though the WRTA has had ongoing systemwide budgeting, service, and usage issues (Moulton, 2018).

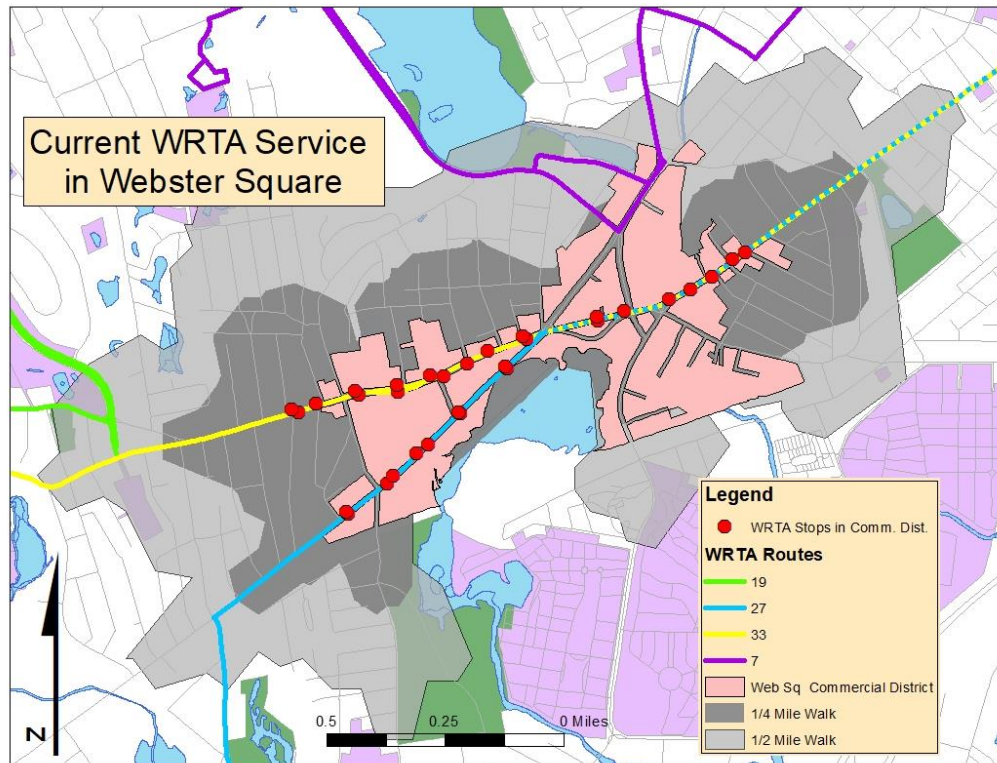


Figure 26 – Current WRTA service to Webster Square includes four routes, three of which share the same path from the Central Hub, splitting in the middle of Webster Square.

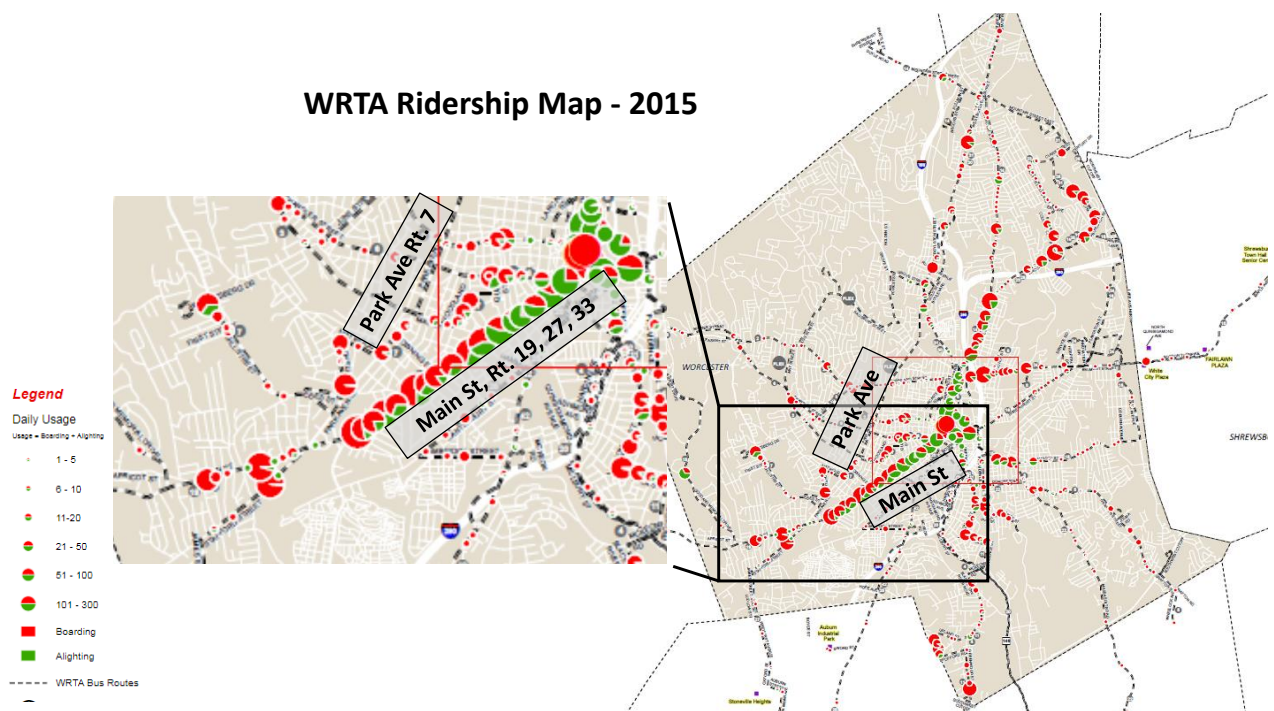


Figure 27 - A WRTA ridership map shows inbound daily usage, showing the Downtown – Webster Square route via Main St as the heaviest used corridor in the system.



An analysis of these routes found that while ridership is high relative to the entire system, the routes are not organized and coordinated effectively. Based on WRTA schedules, the three Main Street routes have total of 75 weekday departures from the Central Hub, averaging a departure every 13.3 minutes. However, the departure times between the three routes are not coordinated. There are many gaps of 20, 30, and 40 minutes. There are also 24 instances of buses leaving five minutes before the previous bus and 10 instances where two buses leave at the same time, even though they are traveling the same route. The lack of coordination makes the bus service unreliable and frustrating to use. As is, even though Webster Square is serviced by four WRTA routes, it does not have an effective, regular, and frequent bus service that residents can rely on.

## VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Webster Square is in need of change. It is too big of a node and commercial center within Worcester, home to too many businesses and residents, and too important of a gateway for people coming into and out of the city to be ignored. Worcester is rapidly changing with dozens of development projects, billions of dollars of investment, and a renewed energy. Webster Square needs to be an active part in that change. As prices and development are going up downtown, it is inevitable that Webster Square will feel those effects. In order to manage the change, there needs to be a vision for what the area should be and can become. This study put together three different visions of the future for Webster Square, focusing on different areas for development, investment, and change. Rather than a blueprint for action, these are alternate scenarios where opportunities are identified to help guide future growth in Webster Square.



## Creating a Neighborhood

Webster Square can become a stronger residential neighborhood with its center as a place for its residents. The character and identity of the neighborhood, especially in what is now the commercial district can be recaptured. Strengthening residents and property owners already in Webster Square and supporting a path for new residents into the neighborhood can dramatically improve the look, shape, and feel of Webster Square. The rehabilitation and maintenance of existing housing, infilling and developing new units, and reviving underutilized properties can bring life back to the area. It will also be important to look at the affordability of the neighborhood as the city moves forward, for its current and future residents.



*Figure 28 – Image from the ‘Union Square Neighborhood Plan’ in Somerville, MA.*

To help create a neighborhood, it will be important to stabilize the existing housing, especially two and three-family buildings. To accomplish this, property owners need to make capital investments into their properties. Absentee landlords are often an issue, while renovation cost is also a major barrier. Capital improvements are expensive and may not be a

good return on investment in a down market. However, with citywide market continuing to heat up, rising prices downtown and throughout the city will highlight the affordability of Webster Square. Even if prices rise and some people see reinvestment as viable, for others there are additional mechanisms to help encourage building owners to invest in their properties. Similar to the State's existing Housing Development Incentive Program, the city can create a program to incentivize owners of two and three-families to make investments in their properties. Support finding contractors and navigating the permitting process, waiving of permitting fees, and a property tax increase exemption if qualified work is completed are all steps that could help revitalize housing in the neighborhood.



*Figure 29 – Looking at WHA's Webster Square Towers from Webster Street, some of the limited affordable housing units in the neighborhood.*

If Worcester's housing market is heating up and the Webster Square neighborhood is an affordable part of the city with great proximity, it is important to also be thinking about maintaining the affordability of the neighborhood for its residents. Webster Square does not have many deeded affordable units, limited public housing, and no dedicated community



development corporation focused just on this area. Getting ahead of the game by developing affordable housing now will help sustain the community in the future. To accomplish this, the Main South CDC or Worcester Common Ground, both of whose coverage area already extends down Main Street to Webster Square, can become more involved or even expand in that part of the neighborhood. With so much open, vacant, and underutilized land, neighborhood leaders and the city can be looking for opportunities to bring in developers to get new units of housing.



*Figure 30 – Empty parking lots and vacant buildings dominate the triangle in the middle of Webster Square.*

The commercial district, the heart and center of Webster Square, is nearly void of any residential units. This is an area that can be targeted for housing development. Part of creating a neighborhood environment includes having a neighborhood center where people can live, visit, and interact. Adding housing can add a sense of place and community in Webster Square and bring back that neighborhood feel. There are many parcels in the commercial district, particularly around the Triangle, that are suitable for redevelopment (see Figure 30). Infilling the parking lots and vacant parcels along the arterial streets and replacing them with housing and people will bring life back to the area. New buildings in the commercial district will also fill

in some of the massive holes in the streetwall to help bring a sense of continuity and appropriate scale. The commercial district would also be an appropriate place for new affordable housing units. The area already has access to key services, transportation and is an affordable part of the city. The financial incentives for building affordable housing might also be the best route to getting new units into the neighborhood as current market rates would not support development costs.



*Figure 31 – The old mill buildings lining Webster Street and bordering Curtis Pond can be redeveloped to bring vibrancy back to Webster Square.*

A particularly interesting area in the commercial district is the collection of old mill buildings along Webster Street, an area already designated by MACRIS as an inventoried historic manufacturing district (MACRIS, 2018). Many of these buildings are only partially occupied and are in a deteriorated condition. With existing parking, access to Curtis Pond, close proximity to the center of Webster Square, redevelopment of these existing properties can help revitalize the area and bring back some of the historic character of the neighborhood (see Figure 31). These buildings would also likely qualify for financial incentives for development,

including state and federal historic tax credits, among others. The city can also designate the area as an Adaptive Reuse Overlay Zone, as they have for similar projects, to allow for more flexible zoning requirements. Multiple participants identified these historic buildings as underutilized assets, key to opening Curtis Pond, and getting more people in the neighborhood. Although located in a flood plain, diligent planning should be able to circumvent potential hazards. With some ground-floor retail already in place, this area of Webster Square can act as a catalyst for the rest of the neighborhood.

More broadly, state and federal historic tax credits, along with state and federal low-income housing tax credits, TIFs, environmental remediation grants, and other public funding tools can be important resources for developing specific properties in Webster Square.

Housing will be critical to reviving the Webster Square neighborhood. Supporting property owners and encouraging owner occupancy can provide reinvestment opportunities for older units that will help stabilize existing housing. Keeping the affordability of the neighborhood in mind, new housing developments can look to leverage financial resources and the abundance of available land to create significant new housing in Webster Square for the first time in decades. Locating housing in the center of Webster Square can breathe new life into the commercial district and help bridge the void between the different parts of the neighborhood. Seeking out existing opportunities for housing, such as the historic mill buildings along Webster Street, can retain the character of the neighborhood while repurposing existing buildings to create new, more vibrant, and cohesive Webster Square.

## Transportation Transformation

While transportation, traffic, and transit situation in Webster Square were some of the biggest areas of concern for participants, there are many opportunities to make the area a model for a transportation transformation. Long lines of traffic, difficult intersections, and

confusing roadways in Webster Square can be converted into a more efficient place to drive, cycle, or walk. Changes to the current design can help alleviate some traffic problems while making the area more walkable and pedestrian friendly. Improvements to the transit system can make the bus service useful, efficient and an asset to the neighborhood within a growing city. But most importantly, changes to the transportation system can shift the narrative of Webster Square from being a car-centric collection of arterial roads into a multimodal hub that promotes all modes of transportation, encourages positive development, and makes the neighborhood more livable and accessible.

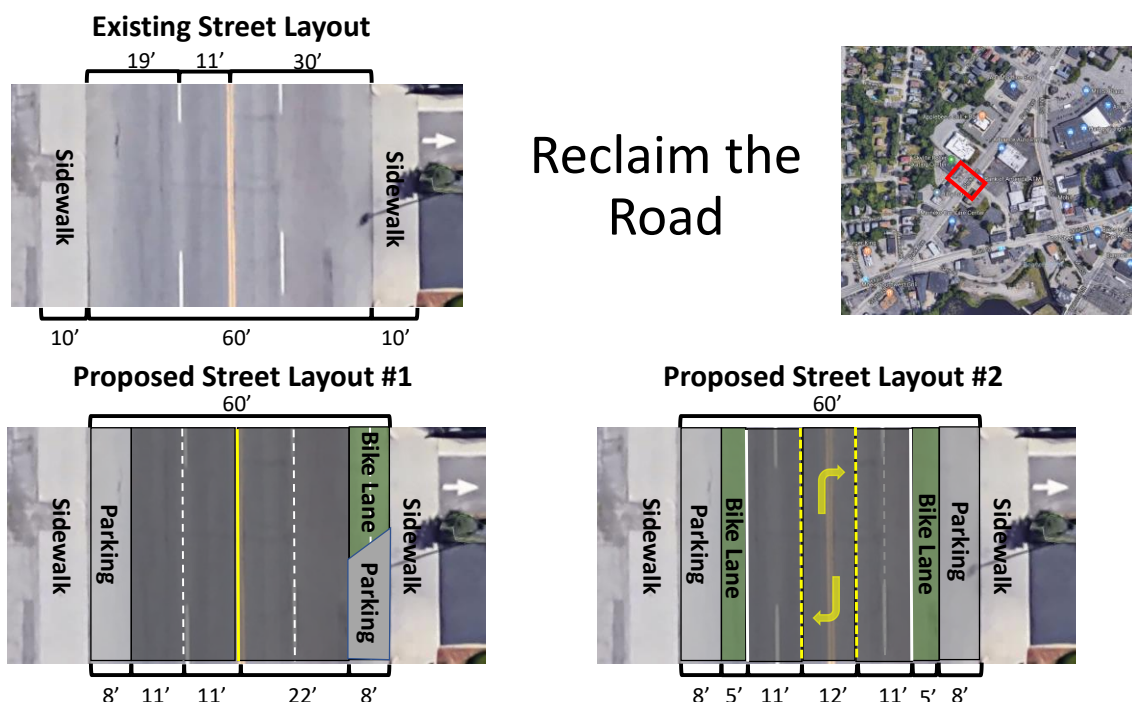


Figure 32 – Reallocating public ways can calm traffic, improve walking and biking conditions, and create a more vibrant and walkable neighborhood

A starting point for improving traffic and transportation in Webster Square might be the reallocation of the width of the street from existing curb to curb (see Figure 32). Unnecessarily wide two- and four-lane roads dominate the commercial district with excessive shoulders on both sides of the street and unclear parking delineations. While the city has adopted a Complete Streets policy, full implementation can only be done through massive overhauls of the



streetscape. This is expensive and may take decades to find funding to redo an area the size of Webster Square. Repainting the street to designate space for on-street parking and bicycle lanes can help slow traffic, give cyclists safe space on the road and provide parking for area businesses. If the streets can provide more parking, that will allow land once devoted to parking lots to fill in with buildings and development. Expanding the CCOD to include the entire Webster Square commercial district can remove heavy parking requirements and promote “flexibility for development initiatives and provide incentives for mixed-use development”.

### Redesigning the Webster Square Intersection

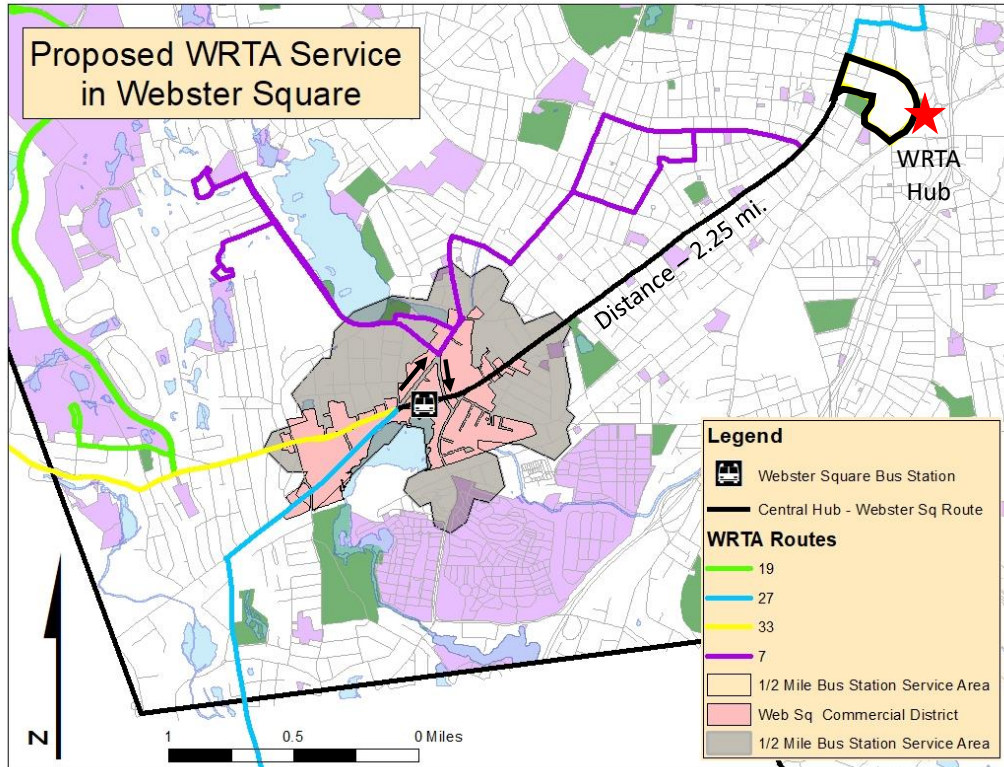


Figure 33 – Two scenarios for redesigning the Webster Square intersection to alleviate congestions and reduce confusion.

The web of intersections in Webster Square is confusing for many users and creates traffic jams that are frustrating for drivers and business owners, and a deterrent to people from coming to the neighborhood. The intersection of Webster Street, Main Street and Cambridge Street, for which the neighborhood is named after, was noted by participants as the hardest to navigate and biggest contributor to traffic backups. It can be reimagined to move cars more efficiently (see Figure 33). A rotary can simplify and replace a complicated set of traffic lights at the intersection. Alternatively, the intersection can be simplified by partially closing Webster

Street between Webster Square and Mill Street. MassDOT traffic data shows that the vast majority of traffic coming south from Webster Street makes a left at Mill Street rather than continuing to Webster Square (MassDOT, 2018). That section of Webster Street can be converted to parking, while still allowing local access to existing businesses. This can simplify the intersection, create needed parking in the core of the commercial district, and improve traffic flow.

Improving transit access in Webster Square can help transform the neighborhood into hub within the City. The three routes that service Webster Square from downtown, via Main Street, can be combined into one dedicated bus route between the Central Hub and Webster Square (see Figure 34). By coordinating buses better, the busiest transit corridor in the City can have buses coming and going every ten minutes, making a reliable service for users and an opportunity for transit-oriented growth along the route.



*Figure 34 – Dedicated bus service from downtown to Webster Square can make the route reliable and provides opportunity for development along the route.*

From Webster Square, transfers can be made onward to existing routes to the airport, Leicester, and Auburn. An actual transit hub in Webster Square, not just a bus shelter, can give buses a place to queue and customers a central location for service. Additionally, extending the 7 line on Park Avenue to connect into a bus station in Webster Square would give the neighborhood better connection to all parts of the city. The development of a proper bus station, with plenty of services already available in the neighborhood and reliable service to downtown, would allow for transit-oriented development around the station. There is also the opportunity to create a park-and-ride system in Webster Square where people coming into the city can park in Webster Square and take the bus to their final destination downtown. This could take cars off downtown streets, relieve parking demand downtown, and get more people out on the street. This can also further make Webster Square a hub of activity if commuters are coming, going, and stopping through the center of the neighborhood every day.

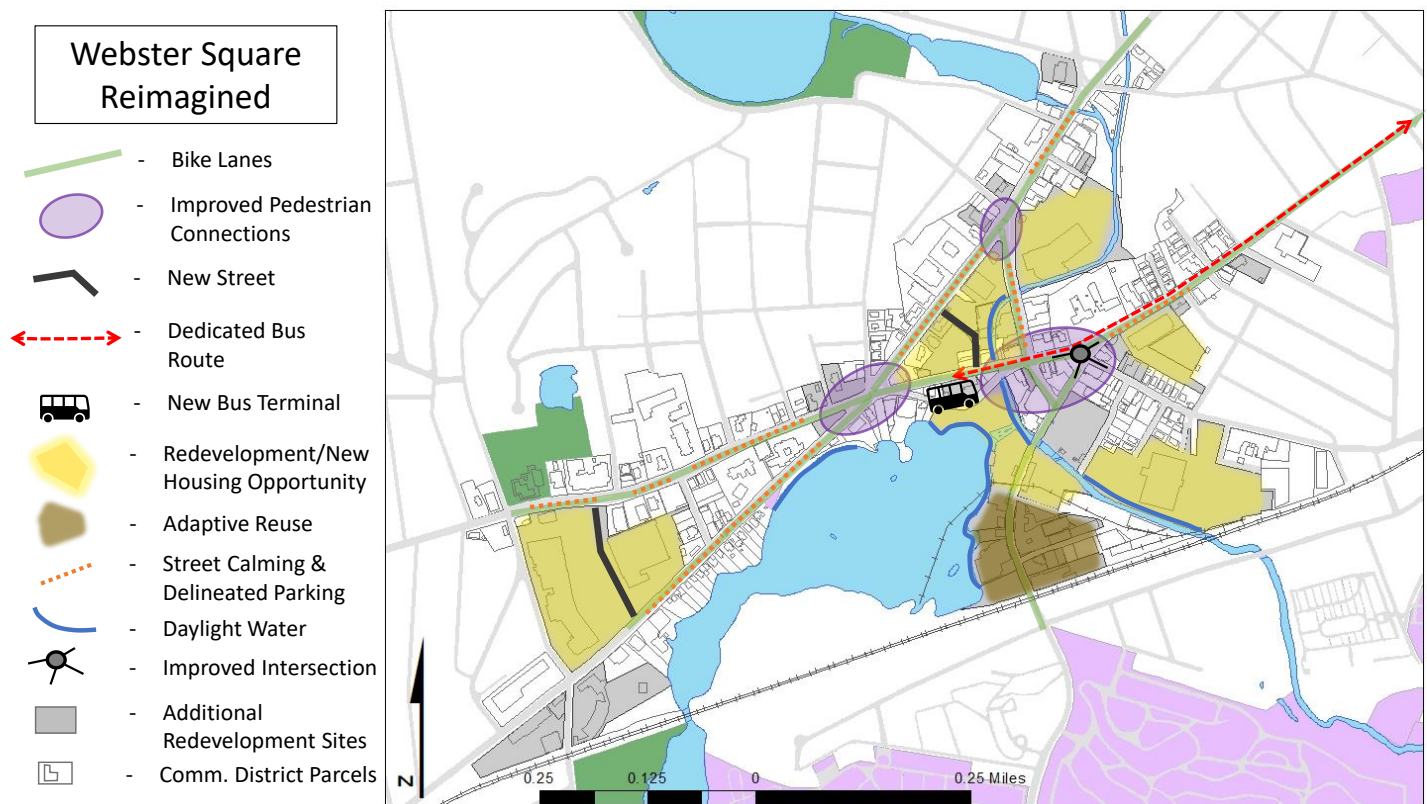


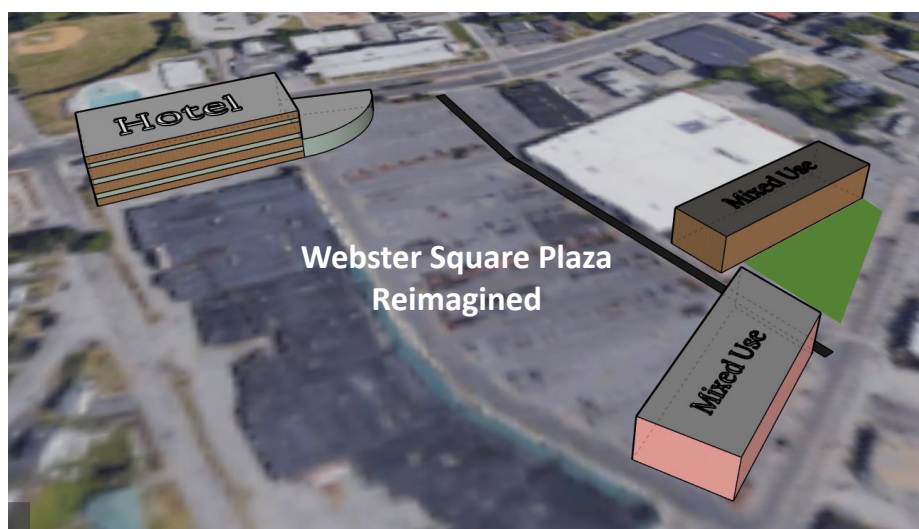
Figure 35 – A diagram of Webster Square showing areas to focus reinvestment and development in the neighborhood.



## The “New Worcester”

The idea of a “New Worcester” comes out of the area’s own history as a new, industrious, and contemporary part of the City during its manufacturing heyday. To recapture that idea, the existing assets in Webster Square can be strengthened to bring energy and new life into the neighborhood. Its proximity, its prices relative to the rest of Worcester, an abundance of developable land, blue and green spaces ready to be rediscovered, and an existing foundation of businesses and services provide the formula to move Webster Square forward as an important commercial node within the City (see Figure 35).

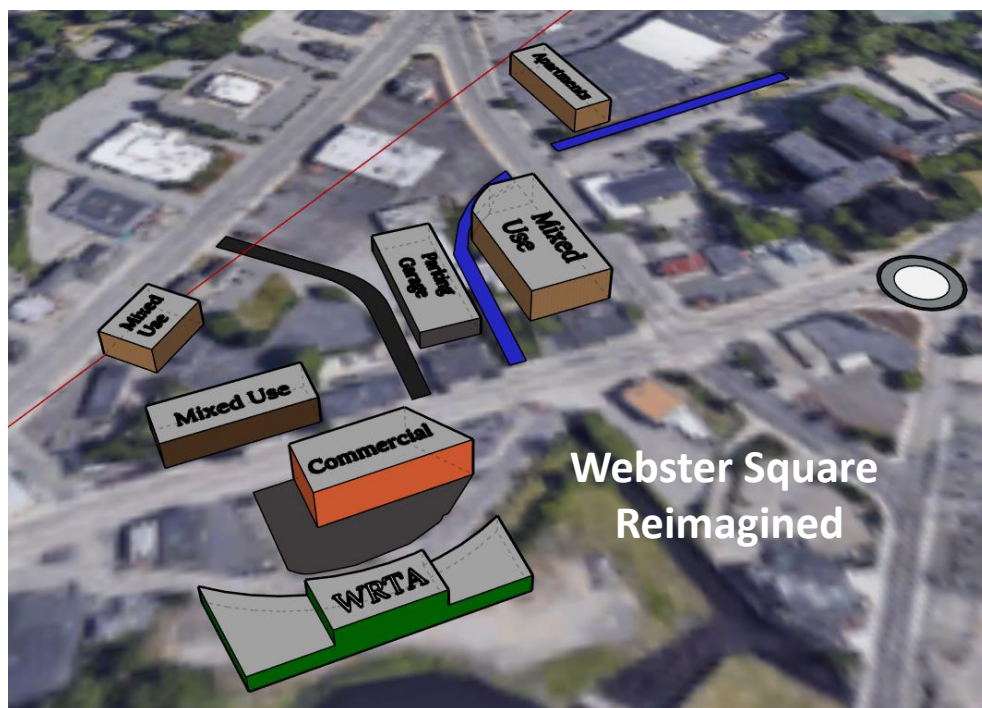
With a third major airline set to operate out of the Worcester Regional Airport next spring, there is an opportunity for Webster Square to capture some of the business and people that have to travel through the neighborhood to access the airport. Goddard Memorial Drive, via Webster Square, is the most direct route to the airport from downtown, I-290, I-90, and many other parts of the region. With little services or retail options on Airport Hill, businesses in Webster Square can take advantage of passing traffic and build an identity as the commercial center for the airport. A hotel in the neighborhood may even be a logical development as travelers need places to stay and the closest hotels are currently downtown (see Figure 36).



*Figure 36 – Webster Square Plaza has a massive amount of room for redevelopment and could better serve the needs of the community and support area business, such as an expanding Worcester Regional Airport.*

The neighborhood is in a central location with available and open land. As empty parcels in downtown and near UMass are starting fill up, the City and neighborhood business association can market the area as the next place for development in Worcester. Given the range of existing businesses, many participants mentioned healthcare facilities being noticeably absent in the neighborhood. An urgent care clinic or a significant medical office facility might be the anchor institution that can catalyze Webster Square as the City's next business center.

The amount of available and developable land in Webster Square is likely unmatched in any other commercial center in the City. With some much of the land being devoted to parking and so many parcels with low FARs, the low-rise commercial center of the neighborhood has plenty of room to grow (see Figure 37). Some parcels and older existing buildings likely have significant environmental contamination that will have to be addressed in order to develop. There is also a flood plain surrounding the historic buildings on Webster Street and along Cambridge Street that can be a complication for development.



*Figure 37 – The heart of Webster Square can be the center of its transformation into a more diverse, walkable, vibrant, and livable neighborhood.*



To develop a neighborhood as a destination, one needs more than just new businesses. Making the neighborhood into a cultural and recreational attraction is also important. Every participant mentioned that the neighborhood's blue spaces are severely underutilized. Curtis Pond sits adjacent to the commercial district, yet the casual passerby would be hard pressed to find it. Additionally, Beaver Brook runs through the heart of Webster Square, tucked behind and in between buildings. While there are likely significant environmental considerations to daylighting the waterways, property owners can start to orient their buildings to take advantage of blue space (see Figure 38). Curtis Pond and Beaver Brook are assets that make Webster Square unique within Worcester, and can help make the commercial district a destination.



*Figure 38 – A daylighted Beaver Brook can serve as an attraction to the area.*

A “New Worcester” has the potential to emerge from the old Webster Square. It needs to shake its old identity as a passthrough neighborhood and become a place to go to. For Webster Square to become a destination, it can lean on the assets outlined to start to get people excited and interested in the area. If enthusiasm of the city's future is to be believed, there is a place for Webster Square at the table. A bold vision for the area can become the

catalyst for an entire neighborhood. Shrewsbury Street and the Canal District needed individuals with a vision to see potential in their neighborhoods. Millions of dollars of private and public money have since flowed into those areas. Webster Square is in a position to follow suit but can do so with a unique vision for a complex and fascinating neighborhood.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to understand a crucially important neighborhood and commercial center in Worcester that has taken a backseat to development elsewhere in the city for too long. Worcester is a city of neighborhoods, and Webster Square is one of its largest and most critical. It is time that attention be paid, and efforts made to ensure neighborhoods like Webster Square are keeping up with the rest of the city. Neighborhood planning and a vision for Worcester beyond downtown has been lacking for too long. If Worcester is truly a city on the rise, it needs to recognize that some 185,000 people live in every corner of the City, and their neighborhoods need attention and investment. Webster Square is just one of dozens of neighborhoods in the city, but it is a neighborhood whose size, commercial district, and position as a gateway to the city make it a specifically important neighborhood to pay attention to. While the area has some challenges, this analysis showed there is much more opportunity.

Deep dives into the data, creating maps, and shiny graphics can only move the needle toward action so much. This study is intended to provide information about Webster Square and present areas of opportunity for the future so that other can take the lead to create the area into a vibrant and successful neighborhood. Progress often comes down to a few important players who have the ability to enact change and move a vision to reality. The City, property owners, neighborhood groups, institutions, and most importantly, the residents have

to be willing to see what Webster Square can become and put their feet forward to make change happen.

Webster Square is an integral part of Worcester as a multi-nodal city. It is a gateway into the city, home to one of the City's biggest commercial hubs, an affordable neighborhood in an increasingly expensive city, and, in many ways, a blank slate for the future of Worcester. Rivers, a pond, mill buildings, the airport, two grocery stores, major city streets, and plenty of developable land are just some of the qualities that make Webster Square an important and obvious place to focus planning efforts. The time seems ripe to find the leaders with the vision to create a vibrant, walkable, and prosperous Webster Square that is great place for current and new residents, commuters, and is a thriving destination for everyone else.

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