



PLAN: Downtown
Roundtable Discussions: Institutions
Tuesday, February 19, 2019 2:00–3:00 PM
Location: NBBJ, One Beacon Street, Boston, MA

Attendees:

- Chuck Labins, Director of Planning, Design and Construction, Real Estate and Facilities, Tufts Medical Center
- Margaret Ings, Vice President for Government and Community Relations, Emerson College

PLAN: Downtown Consultant Team:

- Kathryn Firth, NBBJ
- Chris Herlich, NBBJ
- John Harlow, Engagement Lab

PLAN: Downtown Website: bit.ly/plandowntownboston

Roundtable Summary:

Each roundtable discussion was hosted by the PLAN: Downtown planning consultant, NBBJ. BPDA and City of Boston staff assigned to PLAN: Downtown did not attend. The roundtable discussions supplement the broader conversations that occur within PLAN: Downtown public meetings and the PLAN: Downtown Advisory Group with targeted input from community members well versed in each topic. Roundtable topics include Preservation & Conservation, the Chinatown Community Master Plan, the Institutional Master Plans, Development & Land Ownership, and Ground-floor Business Owners. Shorter follow-up sessions occurred as needed to supplement the conversation.

Meeting Summary:

A short project overview & presentation was provided by NBBJ to outline the intent of PLAN: Downtown and to frame the conversation.

Roundtable Discussion Notes:

The notes below were expressed by discussion participants and do not reflect the opinion of the BPDA or its planning consultants.

Emerson's Local History

- It was considered a big risk to bring 750 Emerson students downtown some 20 years ago when the Combat Zone was still active, but it has paid off.
- Residential nearby has increased and more would be welcome but there is a need for more infrastructure to support this. The college is willing to continue to provide amenities for the public, too, but public investment hasn't kept pace with the new residents.

- Emerson's position is that the more it can contribute positively to the surrounding urban environment the better it will be for everyone.
- Steve Samuels sits on the Board of Trustees – he is very instrumental in setting the course when it comes to Emerson's plans for the built environment.
- Tremont has become the front door to the campus, especially at Boylston St.

Development Focus at Emerson

- The Little Building at Boylston and Tremont has taken up most of Emerson's energy in the last several years. There will be 1,044 students living in the renovated building.
- Emerson's aim is to make the immediate area less college-centric and entice people to stay deeper into the evening. Emerson already leads a lot of nighttime programming but it's not clear if students, faculty, staff are inclined to stick around for it.
 - Destination uses, retail or other interest uses would introduce non-students to what the college/campus offers.
- In general there is a lot of concern about the pedestrian experience along Boylston. One option worth considering is to remove the parking lane on Boylston to widen sidewalks and introduce planters that protect spill out from ground floor.
- Emerson would like to see improvements to the intersection where 4,000 cars turn right from Tremont onto Boylston. One study showed 1,900 people cross midblock, which creates significant conflicts.
- Working to improve safety and accessibility by fixing non-compliant ramps; repainting intersections.
- Universities and colleges are getting pushed by the City to build more student housing. Small colleges would probably need to rely on partnerships with the development community to provide more housing.

Other Initiatives at Emerson

- A master signage plan/program is in the works, which would include an information kiosk.
- Emerson is particularly proud of Arts Emerson and its impact on the way people engage with the college. It has led to Emerson becoming the largest owner of theater seats in the City.
- Would like to bring back the café that was in the Boston Common near entrance to Boylston Station. It provided a consistent level of human activity that discouraged antisocial behavior.
- 171 Tremont will become a student center in the future, which means a new hub of activity on the site.
- The Transportation Building should seriously be considered as an opportunity on the site.
- Always looking for places to interact with the general public such as Continuing Education as a ground floor use, WRES, and Arts Emerson –The Colonial, The Paramount, The Cutler.
- Emerson sees itself as central to helping improve Washington Street.

- The College has a partnership with the City's Parks & Recreation department with respect to Rotch Field in the South End. Emerson remediated the field and added a field house.

Planning at Tufts

- "We're always battling the 'change is bad' mentality" and want to improve care provision in a way that serves the wider neighborhood.
- Tufts has a high clinical care ranking but it needs to be able to accommodate contemporary healthcare facilities.
- There is a strong desire to improve the bicycle facilities, particularly for staff.

Relationship to Downtown

- Downtown has been a very positive recruiting tool for new students. It's a draw for a lot of people, and Emerson values its role as an anchor institution in the neighborhood.
- A marijuana dispensary is proposed on Boylston near Emerson (need a 2,500 foot radius between catchments)
- There are 200 Emerson students living in the Fenway hostel and approximately 100 in Piano Row suites.
- The Paramount Theatre also includes student housing, in addition to performing arts spaces.
- Downtown is a significant institutional hub. People come from all over the city and region for services.
- Public transportation access is good compared to some other institutions. Tufts values that highly because it means there are many ways people can get to us.
- People also walk and cycle (some people cycle to work but bicycle parking is not provided).
- Tufts staff and visitors use local restaurants, but not as much as one would expect.
- There is an appreciation for Elliot Norton Park by the Tufts community.
- Tufts brought a landscape architect in to see if the institution might provide more high quality open space. It's something we want to consider in our future planning.
- Tufts regularly participates on neighborhood advisory groups.
- There's a belief that what is good for the institution can and should be good for the community.

Plan Outcomes & Role of the City

- We need consistency in how projects get done, and a clear way forward.
- More high quality public open spaces are needed and private sector funding should be considered for this.
- There is a parking shortage and its difficult to raise the issue of subsidized parking while trying to promote alternative modes.
- Downtown is very suddenly becoming more of a residential center compared to its past as a retail center.

- The plan should address Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) and designate pick-up/drop-off places because TNCs creates significant operational and safety challenges.
- Vehicle loading in general is a concern because there's too much double-parking.
- We need more green throughout Downtown. Boston Common and the Public Garden are great, but don't make up for a lack of trees everywhere else.
- Downtown needs more lighting on streets and buildings taking a creative approach to add variety and activity.
 - There is strong support for temporary art exhibitions and installations, possibly combined with lighting, e.g. projection-based artwork.
- More amenities in Boston Common could bring families Downtown.
- There are significant safety/perception concerns along Tremont, especially between Park and Winter. Groups of people congregating there contribute to an unfriendly environment for visitors.
- Downtown should serve everyone, including families and students.
- "How do we make sure the plan's recommendations get actual, meaningful teeth?"