



PLAN: Downtown

Advisory Group Meeting - Draft Report Overview

August 16, 2023



**boston planning &
development agency** 1

Meeting Recording

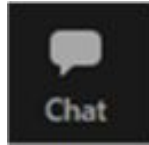
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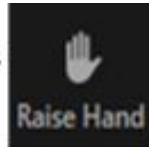
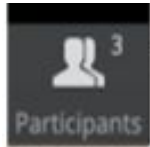
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Zoom Tips

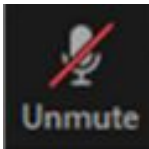
Welcome! Here are some tips for first-time Zoom users.
Your controls are at the bottom of the screen:



Use the **chat** to type a comment or ask a question at any time –
Members of the PLAN: Downtown team will enable the chat at the end.



To **raise your hand**, click on “Participants” at the bottom of your screen, and then choose the “Raise Hand” option in the participant box, or press *9 on your phone



Mute/unmute – Participants will be muted during the presentation – the host will unmute you during discussion if you raise your hand and it is your turn to talk. To mute/unmute on your phone press *6.



Turns your **video on/off**

Zoom Etiquette

- We want to ensure that this conversation is a pleasant experience for all attendees.
- Please remain muted until called on. If you'd like to speak during this time please use the "Raise Hand" function in Zoom so a BPDA moderator can unmute attendees.
- Please be respectful of each other's time.
- We ask that participants limit their questions so that others may participate in the discussion. If you have more questions, please wait until all others attending have an opportunity to ask questions.
- If we are unable to get to your question at this meeting please put them in the Chat at the end or email plandowntown@boston.gov

Agenda

Advisory Group Meeting

- Welcome and timeline updates
- PLAN: Downtown report overview
- **AG meeting focus: Draft zoning and ongoing use analysis**
- Next steps
- AG discussion
- Public discussion

The public meeting on August 24th will give more detailed overview of the full PLAN: Downtown report.



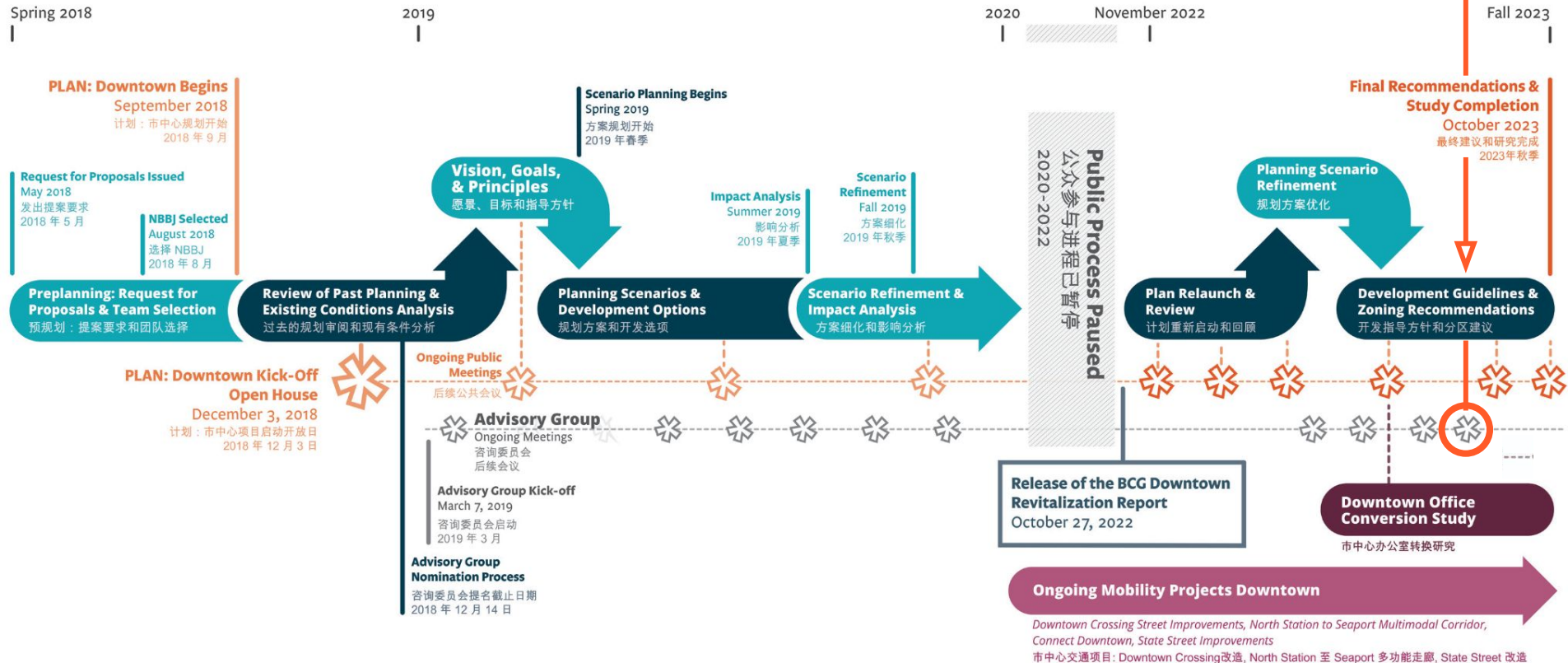
Advisory Group

The Advisory Group (AG) is composed of representatives of Downtown, including people from resident associations, local community groups, institutions, local foundations, preservation advocates, and business and property owners.

The AG met regularly throughout the planning process to review the work of the project team.



Timeline



Vision Statement

Create a new framework for the growth, enhancement, and preservation of Downtown Boston as a place for all, balancing livability, daylight, walkability, climate change preparedness, access to open space, affordability, and a dynamic mix of uses.



Goals



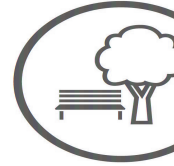
Promote dense, mixed-use development, and grow and diversify active ground-floor uses, especially legacy and small businesses.



Strengthen connections to and throughout Downtown, with a focus on active transportation, transit, and other non-vehicular modes of transportation.



Enhance access to housing and amenities Downtown for all levels of affordability, stages of life, and backgrounds.



Improve existing public spaces and create new ones that invigorate Downtown year-round.



Preserve cultural heritage, historic building fabric, and embrace distinctive histories to create a unique and cohesive Downtown.



Ensure new and existing spaces and development projects are resilient and mitigate climate change impacts.

PLAN: Downtown

Draft Report Organization



Draft Report Release: *August 18th*

PLAN: DOWNTOWN

DRAFT REPORT



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Contents

1 Introduction

- Goals
- Planning Process
- Character Areas
- Key Demographic & Development Trends

2 Recommendations

Based on existing conditions analysis challenges and opportunities facing Downtown today.

- Growth & Preservation
 - *Development Framework*
- Mobility
 - *Street typologies, key public realm connectors and mobility projects*
- Open Space & Public Realm
 - *Priority improvement projects*
- Climate Resilience & Sustainable Development

3 Implementation

- Policy actions
- Design guidelines
- Zoning updates
- Downtown office conversion

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Focus of today's AG Meeting

1 Introduction

- Goals
- Planning Process
- Character Areas
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Overview

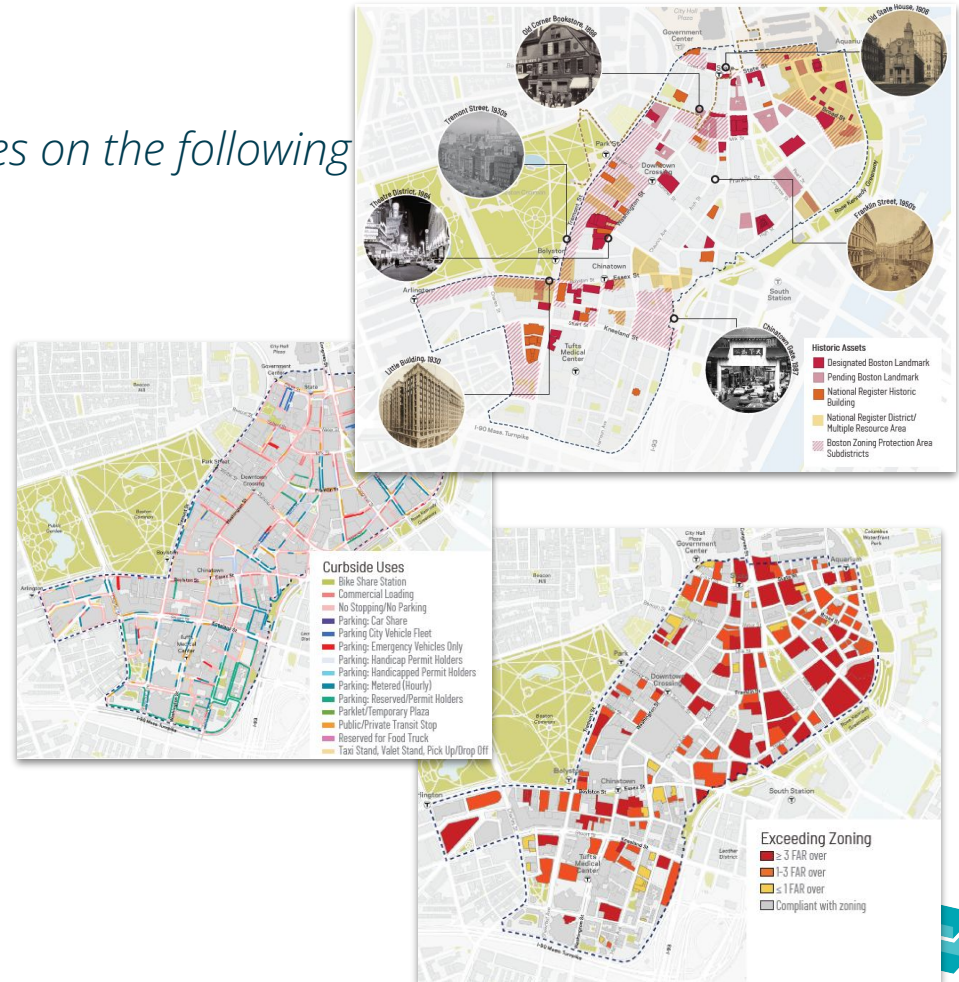
To fulfill community's goals, the report relies on the following components:

- **Existing conditions analysis** of the challenges and opportunities facing Downtown today.
- **Development framework** to guide growth and inform zoning updates.
- **Streetscape and public realm recommendations** for enhanced connectivity and public spaces that support a more vibrant, accessible, and greener Downtown.
- **Priority public realm projects** for new and enhanced public spaces.
- **Policy actions** that establish a coordinated approach across city departments and agencies to fulfill the PLANS goals.
- **Zoning recommendations** to incentivize new growth and public benefits.
- **Design guidelines** to ensure that new development and the public realm respect and enhance Downtown's existing urban fabric.
- **Office conversion recommendations** to support adaptive reuse and residential growth.

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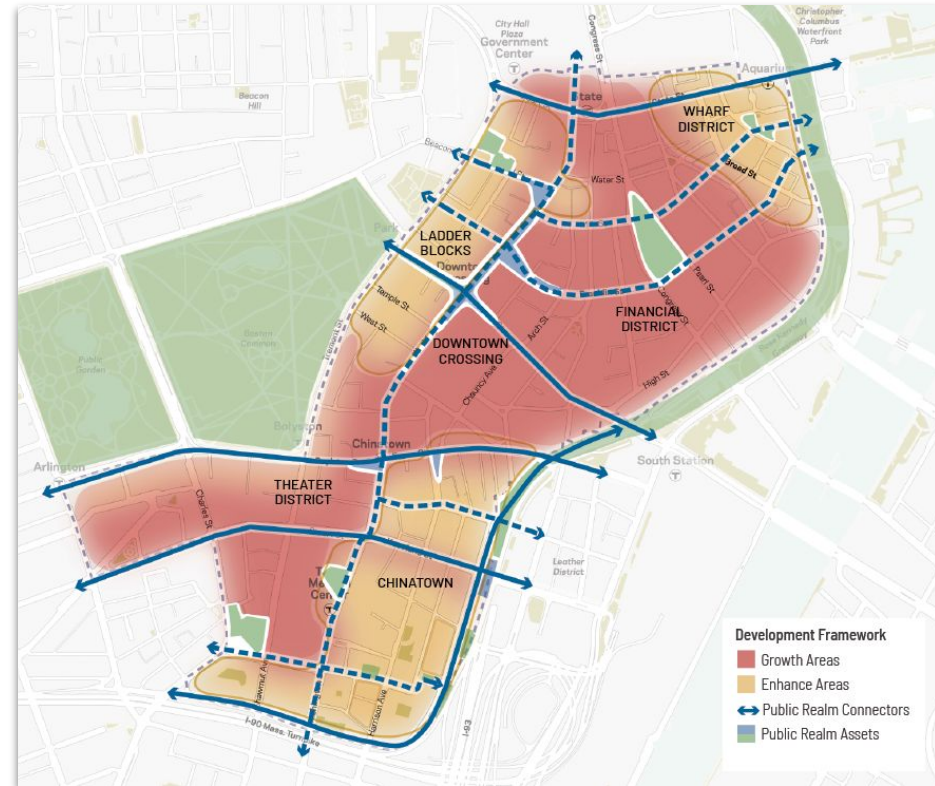
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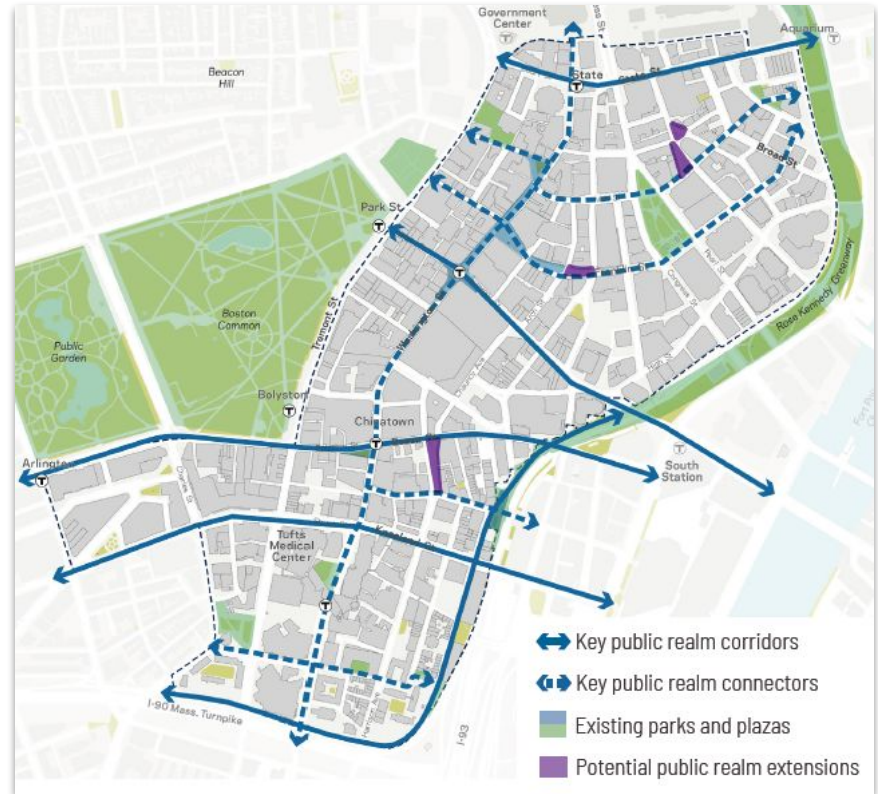
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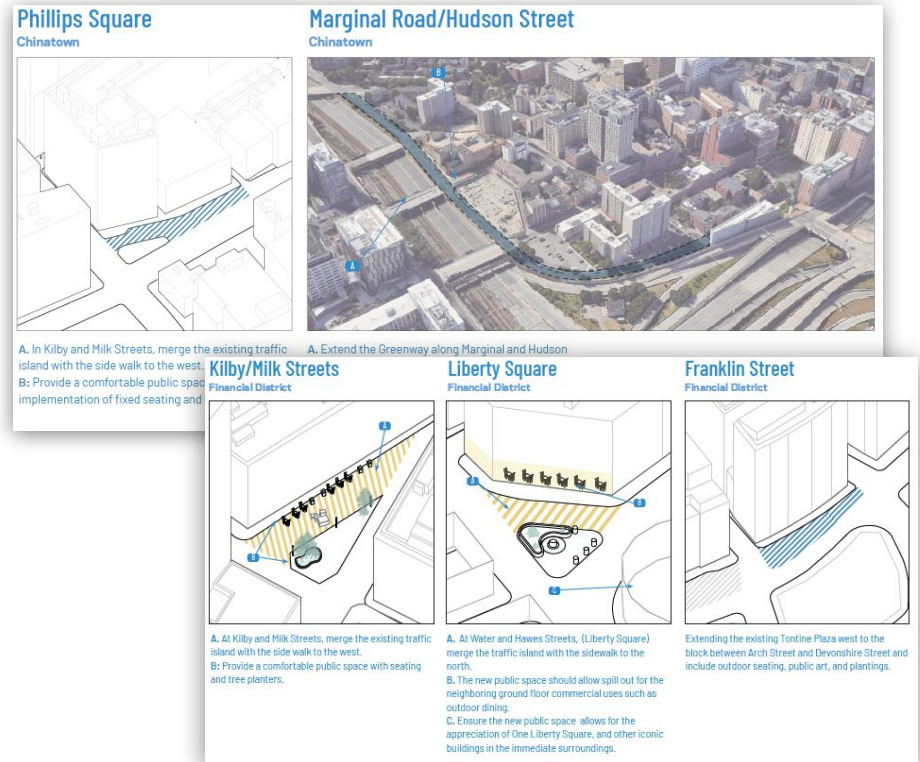
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Promote dense, mixed-use development, and grow and diversify active ground-floor uses, especially legacy and small businesses.

Actions

- Incentivize the growth of a small business support program that is funded by new development and redevelopment. [BOPA](#), [OED](#)
- Create low- or rent-free spaces in vacant upperfloor office spaces, both temporarily and permanently, for startups, nonprofits, and small businesses. [BOPA](#), [OED](#)
- Expedite/streamline inspection services for first-time brick-and-mortar retail businesses. [BOPA](#), [ISO](#), [OED](#)
- Facilitate the location of short-term and temporary uses in vacant ground floor retail spaces by streamlining the permitting process for short-term of
- Develop a new process for licensing Beverage businesses to improve access to time brick-and-mortar businesses, a state-level regulations as needed.
- Proactively engage communities the informing them of economic development Downtown, via OED and local non-profit [BOPA](#), [OED](#)

Inventory vacant ground floor spaces at semi-annual intervals to track trends and help connect potential tenants with landlords. [OED](#)

- Incentivize new uses for underutilized parking garages that create opportunities for public amenities and spaces. [BOPA](#)
- Encourage a diversity of uses in the Financial District by incentivizing small business. [BOPA](#)
- Reserve space in new projects or on publicly owned parcels for rotating artists' spaces; spaces should include necessary infrastructure (water, electric, data) and a public-facing



Enhance access to housing and amenities Downtown for all levels of affordability, stages of life, and backgrounds.

Actions

- Accelerate the permitting of income-restricted housing by prioritizing and simplifying the review and approvals of income restricted housing including establishing streamlined procedures in Article 80 of Boston's Zoning code for the review of Affordable Housing Developments. [BOPA](#)
- Offer tax and fee incentives to start construction of residential projects that meet PLAN: Downtown and the City's goals. [BOPA](#)
- Continue devoting underutilized public land to the production of new affordable housing following the guidance of the Citywide Land Audit, 2022. [BOPA](#)
- Seek opportunities to create new housing models for middle-income seniors, those with incomes and/or assets above the traditional income-restricted housing framework but with limited quality choices on the market. [BOPA](#), [MCH](#)
- Continue to explore increasing the number and range of housing options with a priority on low- and middle-income family housing in accordance with the Chinatown Neighborhood Master Plan 2020. [BOPA](#), [MCH](#)

- Seek opportunities to create new housing models for middle-income seniors, those with incomes and/or assets above the traditional income-restricted housing framework but with limited quality choices on the market. [BOPA](#), [MCH](#)
- Apply Acquisition Opportunity (loans to help affordable housing investor-owners buy occupied, multi-family rental properties – they are able to pre-qualify for a set amount of funding) program to Class C office and other lower-rent or higher-vacancy spaces. [BOPA](#), [MCH](#)
- Further study alternative development models that make housing more affordable - i.e. co-housing, custom build housing, community land trusts - and their viability and feasibility in Downtown. [BOPA](#), [MCH](#)
- Explore a vacancy tax on those who buy housing without occupying or leasing the unit. [BOPA](#), [MCH](#)

Agencies responsible are highlighted

- **Policy actions** that establish a coordinated approach across city departments and agencies to fulfill the PLAN's goals.
- **Design guidelines** to ensure that new development and the public realm respect and enhance Downtown's existing urban fabric.
- **Office conversion recommendations** to support adaptive reuse and residential growth.
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Overview

To fulfill community's goals, the report relies on the following components:

Design Guidelines
1. Scale, Massing, & Articulation

1.1 Block Size

Reduce the scale of large blocks wherever possible to maintain permeability and shape sites and buildings to respond to the prevailing scale of the area.

a. When possible, preserve the width of existing storefronts and retain existing buildings, or building frontages in the case where existing buildings are in poor condition.

b. Provide new streets, mid-block alleys, pedestrian paths, courtyards, and plazas that connect with other streets and public or common open spaces.

Downtown and Theater District: In the case of re-development, find long-term opportunities for new mid-block connections and exterior pedestrian routes with respect to Lafayette Place and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation building.

City block with different sized storefronts ✓

Large city block without interior public passages X

1.2 Building Massing

Shape buildings to respect the scale of the surrounding context and mitigate impacts on nearby buildings and the public realm.

a. Reference and respond to the height, massing, and important architectural lines of abutting buildings. Particular attention should be paid to the base or first 5 to 6 stories of abutting buildings in the Ladder Blocks, Wharf District, and Chinatown.

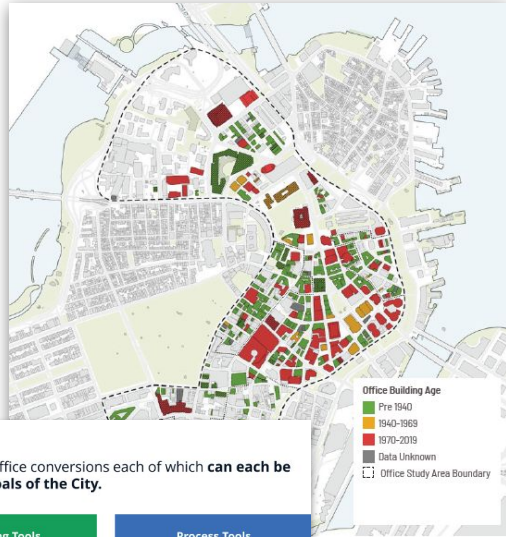
public passage
public realm to downtown's historic
mid-block open
existing surface

Range of block sizes in the study area

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Policy Analysis | Key Takeaways

There are a **variety of tools** to enable more office conversions each of which **can each be used in different ways depending on the goals of the City.**

Tax Tools

- **Eliminating/Reducing property taxes** for a period following the conversion can **allow more buildings to feasibly convert.**
- Tax abatements have frequently been used to enable conversion feasibility, often in exchange for the inclusion of affordable housing units, by reducing the tax bill of the converted building.
- **The 421-g program in New York City** offered a 100% abatement on the increase in property tax for 8 years, followed by a four-year phase-out. The program resulted in the conversion of 13M SF of office space in Lower Manhattan between 1995 and 2006 (13% of Lower Manhattan's office market).

Financing Tools

- Historic tax credits and TIF financing could **potentially have the greatest impact on the financial feasibility** of conversion, especially as construction costs increase and developers seek gap financing.
- **Through the LaSalle Street Reimagined Initiative, the City of Chicago** issued an RFP for the conversion of underutilized commercial spaces in the LaSalle Street corridor. The City will provide funding through TIF and the \$300K Small Business Improvement Fund. The selected projects are expected to create > 1,000 units with 300 of them being affordable units.

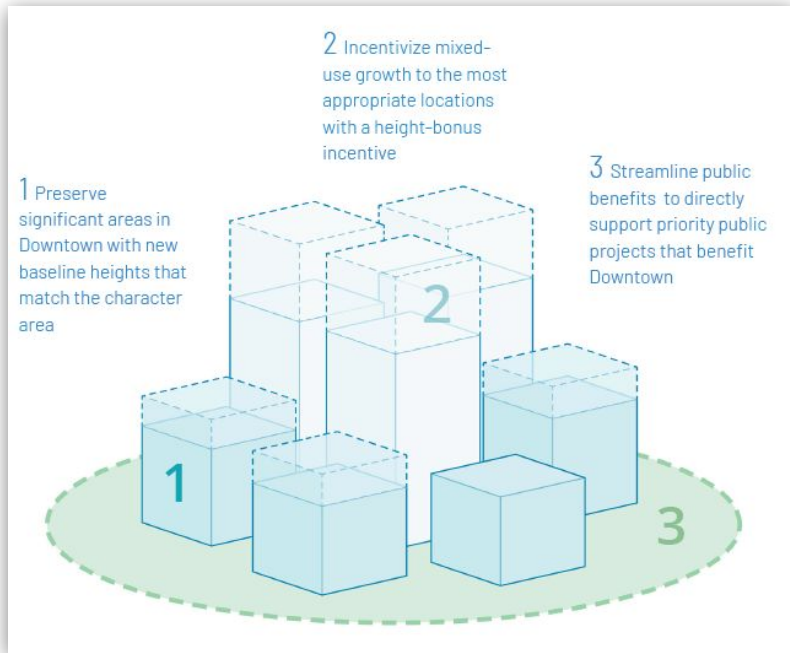
Process Tools

- Process tools **can encourage developers** to pursue conversions by **lowering the perceived level of difficulty.**
- These tools have **less of an impact on financial feasibility** compared to tax abatements or direct financing but can lower barriers for developers.
- **The City of Los Angeles' Adaptive Reuse Ordinance** provides an expedited approval process and ensures that historic buildings are not subject to the same zoning and code requirements as new construction. The program resulted in the addition of 7,200 housing units to downtown LA between 1998 and 2008 (after adding only 4,000 units in the 30 years prior).



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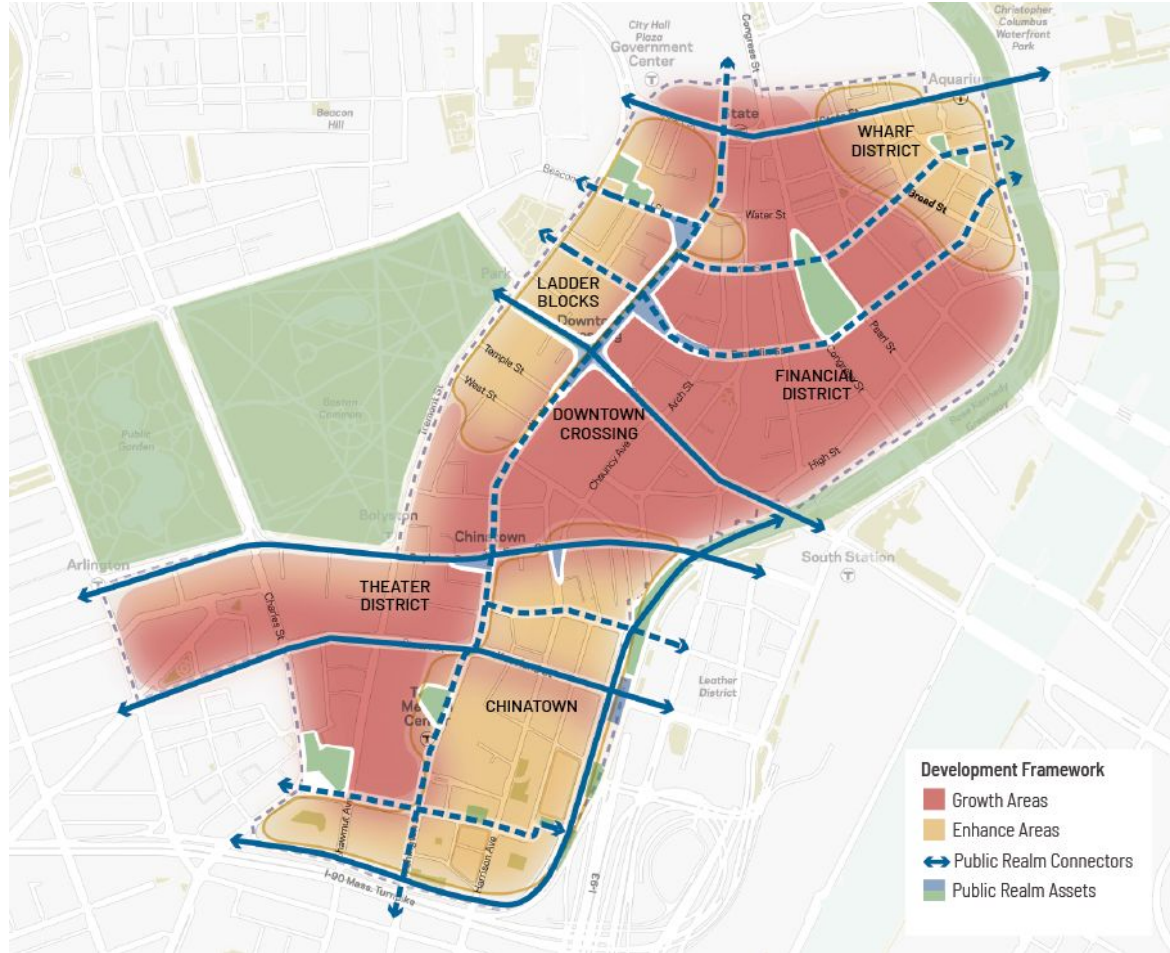
Draft Zoning Recommendations & Ongoing Analysis



Development Framework

Spatial components to guide the growth of Downtown:

- Growth Areas**
Encourage large-scale mixed-use development opportunities that provide benefits for all of Downtown.
- Enhance Areas**
Find opportunities to improve and elevate the area while affirming its distinct historic and cultural identity.
- Public Realm Connectors**
Strengthen key public realm routes that connect existing public open spaces.
- Public Realm Assets**
Improve existing public realm spaces and identify opportunities for new permanent and tactical public space Downtown.



Zoning Recommendations

New District Boundaries

- Create new sub-districts that more closely reflect Downtown character area boundaries as defined by the community.
- Continue the Chinatown zoning process, building on the findings of PLAN: Downtown and the Chinatown Cultural Plan.

Height and density

- Change as-of-right heights to match the scale of Downtown's character areas and planned-for growth.
- Allow taller bonus-heights where density is most appropriate and transitions from high to low areas.
- Require a floor plate reduction for buildings exceeding the height of the surrounding context to reduce the visual impact of taller buildings on the public realm.

Uses

- Create zoning pathways to streamline residential development, particularly affordable residential development, within Downtown through the office conversion program, the height-bonus program, and base zoning changes.
- Refine inconsistent and prohibitive use definitions and tables in the zoning code to lower barriers for existing and new retail and services, especially on ground floors, and encourage new and diverse businesses and entertainment uses to thrive and expand.
- Ensure existing theaters continue to be prioritized in zoning and development review.

Height-bonus program

- Implement a height-bonus program and public benefit system that streamlines project mitigation, incentivizes mixed-use development where it is most appropriate, and directly funds priority public projects outlined in PLAN: Downtown.

Zoning Recommendations

Focus of today's AG Meeting

New District Boundaries

- Create new sub-districts that more closely reflect Downtown character area boundaries as defined by the community.
- Continue the Chinatown zoning process that builds on the findings of PLAN: Downtown and continues its community engagement process.

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Chinatown zoning process

Continue the process started by PLAN: Downtown

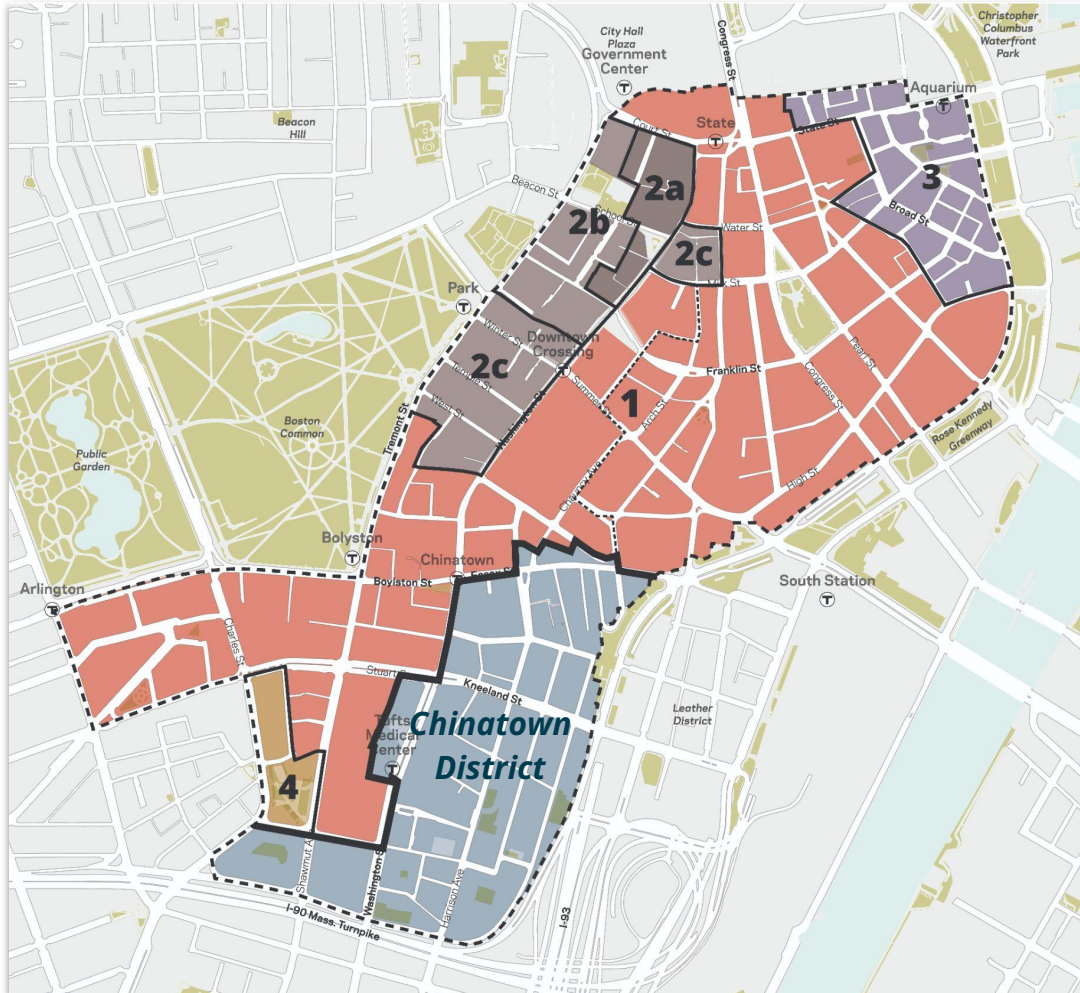
This process will refine the recommendations developed with the community throughout the PLAN: Downtown planning process and align them with the ongoing Chinatown Cultural Plan.

Zoning updates will include:

- **Updated height and density regulations** that leverage opportunity areas for new development and redevelopment while protecting key historic and cultural areas identified by the community and the ongoing Chinatown Cultural Plan
- **Updated uses regulations** to lower barriers for existing and new retail, services, and cultural uses
- **Height-bonus approach** to incentivize growth that supports community benefits such as affordable housing, historic preservation, and cultural uses



New zoning district boundaries



- **New Downtown sub-districts:**
 1. **Downtown Crossing, Theatre District, and Financial District**
 2. **Ladder Blocks**
 3. **Wharf District**
 4. **Bay Village**
- **Chinatown District:** Continue the zoning process to align with the Chinatown Cultural Plan and address complex use questions in the zoning code

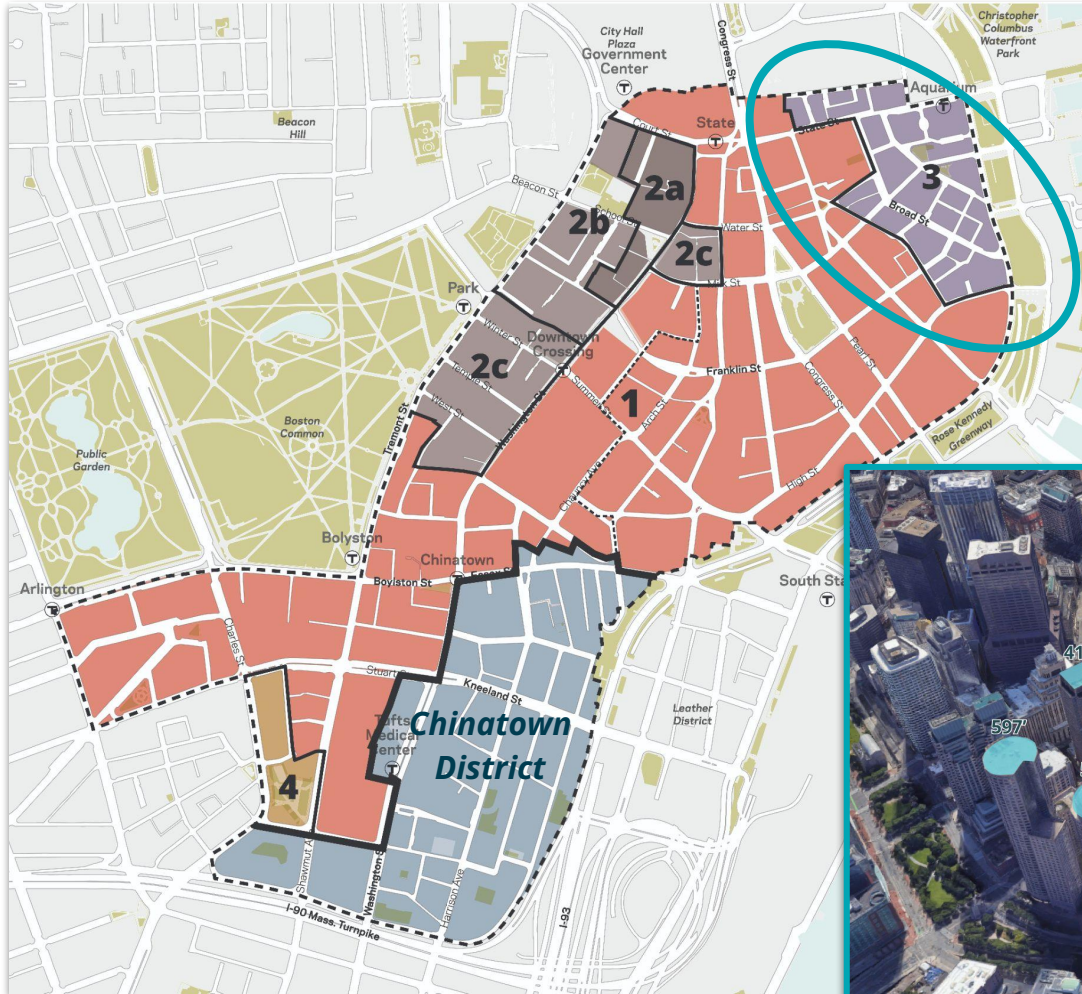


Heights

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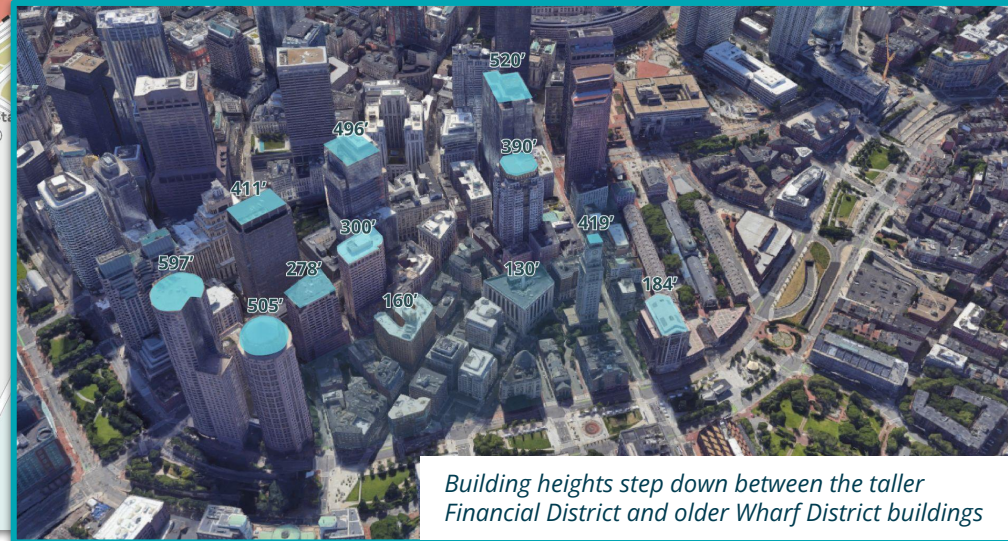


Building heights step down noticeably from taller buildings on the northern end of Washington St down to the Common

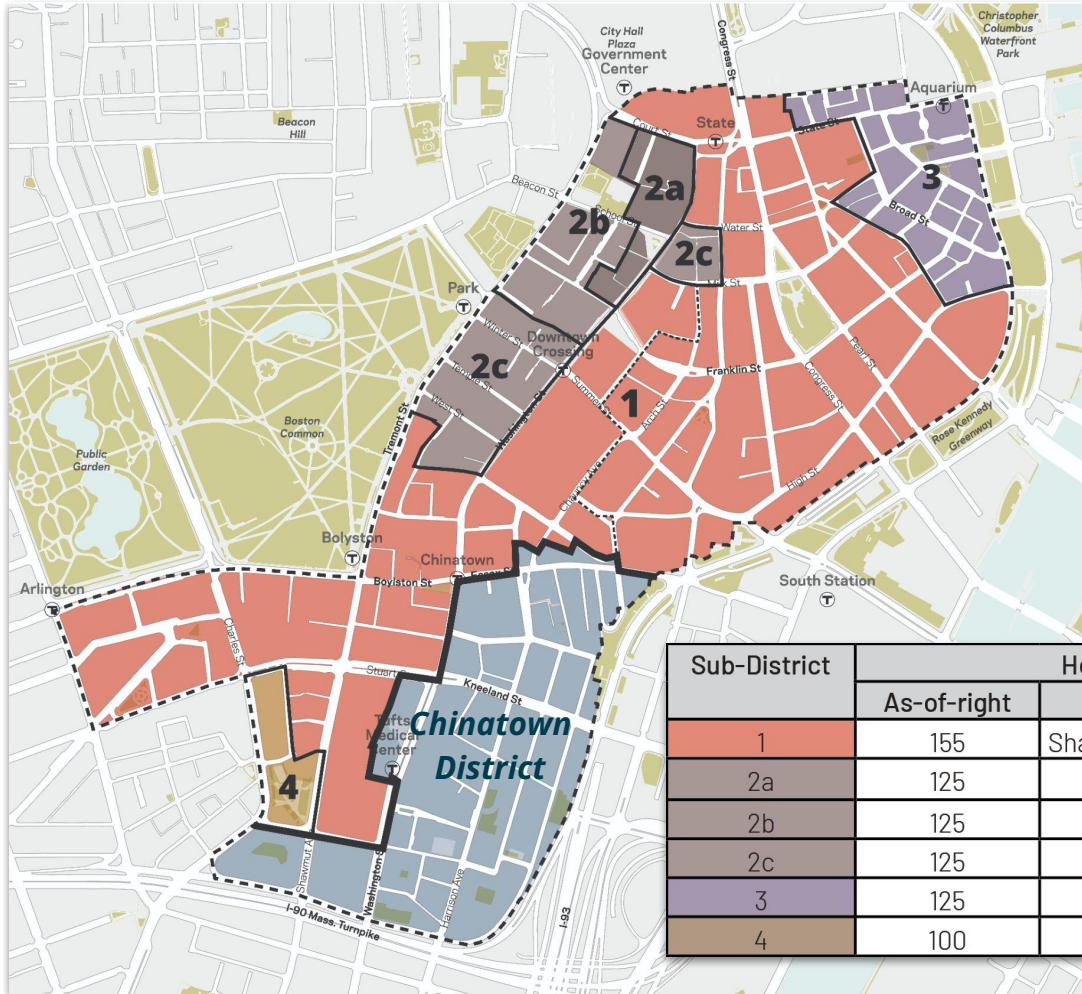


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Building heights step down between the taller Financial District and older Wharf District buildings



Heights

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Sub-District	Height	
	As-of-right	Density Bonus
1	155	Shadow Regulations / FAA
2a	125	400
2b	125	180
2c	125	155
3	125	155
4	100	N/A

Use recommendations

Existing use definitions and categories in the zoning code are often inconsistent and prohibitive, creating obstacles for retail and entertainment businesses that could help revitalize and activate Downtown.

Use changes will:

- Consolidate and simplify uses so we do not restrict innovative uses
- Allow more uses, particularly entertainment, retail, and cultural uses
- Streamline the code to make it more user friendly

4 main use categories

- **Allowed:**
 - Ex: Residential Uses; Restaurant and Entertainment Uses; Office ; Hotel or Motel...
 - *Ground Level and Cultural Uses:* Bakeries and pastry shops; Clock sales or repair shops...
- **Conditional:**
 - Ex: Residential; Fast food restaurants; Transportation uses...
- **Forbidden:**
 - Any use not included in "Allowed uses"

Existing Use Restrictions

Example of specific use limitations

“Limited to” 25 Very Specific Uses

Service Use

(h) **Service Uses.** Limited to video or film production studio; barber shop; beauty shop; shoe repair shop; self-service laundry; pick-up and delivery station of laundry or dry-cleaner; tailor shop; hand laundry; dry-cleaning shop; framer's studio; caterer's establishment; photographer's studio; printing plant; taxidermist's shop; upholster's shop; carpenter's shop; electrician's shop; plumber's shop; radio and television repair shop; funeral home; undertaker's establishment; mortuary; research laboratory; radio or television studio; or similar use provided that in laundries and cleaning establishments, only nonflammable solvents are used for cleaning; animal hospital or clinic.

Existing Use Restrictions

200+ Allowed Uses

&

112 Ground Floor Uses

and YET...

Uses like yoga studios are still forbidden

Allowed Ground Floor Uses:

- Carpet, rug, linoleum, or other floor covering stores
- Fishing tackle or equipment sales, or rental establishments
- Lamp shops
- Millinery shops

Conditional

- Take-out (like ice cream)

Forbidden Ground Floor Uses:

- Gym
- Escape room
- Yoga studio
- Brewery/Distillery
- ...



Existing Use Restrictions

24 small businesses were selected for the first round of S.P.A.C.E. Grants:

- (4) Fitness/Wellness
- (4) Creative Economy

1/3 of S.P.A.C.E. grantees might need zoning variances.

S.P.A.C.E. GRANTS

The City is working to identify creative ways to bring people back to commercial districts to revitalize our local economy. We are seeking to fill vacant storefronts and help small business owners secure new storefront space or expand to a space by subsidizing the costs associated with operating expenses.

Ongoing Zoning Work & Analysis

The following key elements will be incorporated into a draft zoning amendment that will be introduced this fall

- Creation of one Downtown zoning district combining the four existing zoning districts: Midtown Cultural District: Article 38, Government Center/Markets: Article 45, Base Code, South Station Economic Development Area
- Updated and consistent use definitions and restrictions
- Height-density program: inclusion of a residential and office-conversion incentive, governance model public benefit fund, allocation method for public benefit funds, and an approach towards onsite vs. offsite mitigation
- Approach for existing *Planned Development Areas (PDAs)* and *PDA allowed areas* within the new Downtown zoning district

Next Steps



Next Steps

- **Draft PLAN: Downtown release:** *August 21, 2023*
- **Public Meeting:** Draft Plan Overview - *August 24, 2023*
- *Public comment period: September 18, 2023*
- **Public Meeting:** Final Plan Release & Draft Zoning - *Early October 2023*

Questions and Comments: plandowntown@boston.gov



Advisory Group Discussion

Public Discussion