

### MassDOT Newton Corner Long-Term Planning Study

Working Group Meeting #2

Wednesday, September 18, 2024 at 4:00 p.m.

Virtual on Zoom

#### **Summary:**

On Wednesday, September 18, 2024, MassDOT held the second Working Group meeting for the Newton Corner Long-Term Planning Study. At this meeting, the Study Team presented key takeaways from previous planning efforts and existing conditions findings on land use, economic conditions, zoning, demographics, employment, Environmental Justice communities, public health, the environment, and mobility. The team also presented a high-level summary on issues, opportunities, and constraints found from the existing conditions analysis. The schedule and next steps were also discussed. Members of the Working Group and members of the public who attended provided feedback.

#### Attendees:

Name	Title	Affiliation
Benjamin Muller	District Planner for District 6	MassDOT
Bethany Hartman	Multimodal Planning Intern	MassDOT
Drashti Joshi	Civil Engineer	MassDOT
Ethan Britland	Manager of Multimodal Planning	MassDOT
Julia Przesiek	Legislative Analyst	MassDOT
Makaela Niles	Transportation Planner	MassDOT
Dan Fielding	Legislative Liaison	MassDOT Highway Division
Manuel Pires	Traffic Engineer	MassDOT Department of Conservation & Recreation
Sandy Johnston	Deputy Director of Regional Transit Planning	MBTA
Marc Laredo	Councilor at Large, President	Newton City Council (ward 7)
Maria Greenberg	Ward Councilor for Ward 1	Newton City Council (Ward 1)

Alison Leary	Ward Councilor for Ward 1	Newton City Council (Ward 1)
Jonathan Yeo	Chief Operating Officer	City of Newton Mayor's Office

Name	Title	Affiliation
Kay Khan	State Representative	State Representative Kay Khan (11th Middlesex – Watertown)
Meghan Cerino	Legislative Aide	State Representative Kay Khan (11th Middlesex – Watertown)
Steve Owens	State Representative	State Representative Steven Owens (29th Middlesex – Watertown)
Dana Hanson	District Director	U.S. Representative Jake Auchincloss (Massachusetts District 4)
Garrett Casey	Policy Director and Counsel	State Senator Cynthia Creem (Norfolk and Middlesex)
David Koses	Transportation Coordinator	City of Newton Department of Public Works
Isaac Prizant	Transportation Engineer	City of Newton Department of Public Works
Ned Codd	Director of Transportation	City of Newton Department of Public Works
Barney Heath	Director	City of Newton Department of Planning and Development
Jenn Martin	Director of Transportation Planning	City of Newton Department of Planning and Development
Jini Fairley	ADA Coordinator	City of Newton
Joan Belle Isle	Chair	City of Newton Council on Aging/Executive Committee
Michael Halle	Chair	City of Newton Transportation Advisory Group
Ed Olhava	President	Bike Newton
Lucia Dolan	Member	Newton Safe Routes to School
Robin Boger	President	Newton Corner Neighborhood Association
Matt Costas	Chief of Staff to City Councilor Liz Breadon	Boston City Council (District 9)

Wenzheng Wang	Transportation Program Planner	Boston Transportation Department on behalf of City of Boston Mayor's Office
Zeke Mermell	Senior Transportation Planner	City of Watertown on behalf of the City Manager's Office
Sophia Galimore	Director	Watertown TMA
Nate Gibson	Not listed	Attendee
Amy Sangiolo	Not listed	Attendee
Anne Civetta	Not listed	Attendee
Anne McKinnon	Not listed	Attendee

Name	Title	Affiliation
Chris Chiotasso	Not listed	Attendee
Daniel Campbell	Not listed	Attendee
Dennis Duff	Not listed	Attendee
Dennis Rieske	Not listed	Attendee
Elodia Thomas	Not listed	Attendee
Jack Fucci	Not listed	Attendee
Joan Gumbleton	Not listed	Attendee
Joe Zissman	Not listed	Attendee
Linda Scott	Not listed	Attendee
Seth Parker	Not listed	Attendee
Srdjan Nedeljkovic	Not listed	Attendee
Steven Carter	Not listed	Attendee
Patrick Snyder	Study Project Manager	MassDOT
Rachel Kelly	Study Team Member	MassDOT
Christine Trearchis	Study Team Member	VHB
Niki Hastings	Study Team Member	VHB
Matt Duranleau	Study Team Member	VHB
Christine Yi	Study Team Member	FHI Studio

### Presentation

The following sections are copied from the presentation slides. The discussion is noted under the Public Comments section below.

## Agenda

- 1. Welcome
- 2. Study Framework
- 3. Working Group #1 Feedback Summary
- 4. Existing Conditions
  - Planning Context
  - Multimodal Mobility Conditions
- 5. Schedule and Next Steps
- 6. Open Discussion
  - Working Group Discussion
  - Public Comment Period

## Welcome

#### Existing Conditions Review

▶ Previous planning efforts, planning context, and multimodal mobility conditions

### Meeting with You Today

- ► MassDOT Office of Transportation Planning
  - Patrick Snyder (Project Manager), Rachel Kelly
- Study Consultants:
  - Christine Trearchis (VHB), Niki Hastings (VHB), Matt Duranleau (VHB), Christine Yi (FHI Studio)

# Role of Working Group

- ▶ Working Group Purpose
  - Provide local knowledge, perspective, and expertise.
  - Share information with communities and organizations represented.
  - Review information and find feedback.
- Working Group Logistics
  - Meetings are to review approach, analysis, findings, share resources and information, and give feedback.
  - Documents and resources will be periodically posted on the study website and email notifications of meetings and document postings will be sent out.

## Working Group Ground Rules

- ► All participants are requested to listen to the opinions of others in an effort to ensure a constructive and productive discussion.
- Members of the Working Group are asked to make every possible effort to attend the meetings consistently. However, if members are unable to attend, they should let the study team know if an alternate representative will participate on their behalf.
- ► All participants are asked to turn their computer notifications off and mute their cell phones and other electronic devices during meetings.
- ► For virtual meetings, Working Group members are allowed to show video and may keep their video on or off during the meeting. Meeting staff may mute you or turn off your video if the audio/video becomes distracting. All virtual Working Group meetings will be recorded.

## Invited Working Group Members

 Introductions of each member and organization: Federal Elected Officials, State Elected Officials, Local Officials, State Representation, Advocacy Groups, Other Stakeholders

### Study Overview

- ► The Newton Corner Long-Term Planning Study will develop long-term multimodal transportation solutions and safety improvements to the Newton Corner I-90 Exit 127 interchange.
- ► The study areas include the Newton Corner, West Newton, and DCR Roadway areas in Newton, Brighton, and Watertown.
- ► The study will develop and analyze alternatives, present recommendations, and develop an approach for potential implementation.

### Study Framework

### Study Goals

- ► Improve access, safety, and mobility for all
- Reconnect Newton's neighborhoods
- ► Enhance quality of life
- Promote sustainable transportation solutions
- Develop actionable recommendations

### Evaluation Criteria

- Evaluation criteria are the standards by which the goals and objectives will be measured and evaluated.
- Criteria for each goal and objective are currently being developed and will be used to facilitate evaluating the different alternatives.
- ▶ Draft evaluation criteria have been posted on study website for review.
- ▶ Link to Evaluation Criteria:

https://www.mass.gov/doc/newton-corner-long-term-planning-study-draft-evaluation-criteria/download

## Working Group #1 Feedback Summary

#### WG#1 Feedback - Newton Corner Area: Challenges Identified

- ► Inadequate ped/bike infrastructure
  - Concerns for safety and accessibility for children, people with disabilities, transit users, and bikers.
- Merge conflicts
  - Areas with confusing geometry that require difficult maneuvers.
- ▶ Ramp traffic backing up onto I-90
  - Congestion, gridlock, and ramps backing up onto the mainline.

### WG#1 Feedback - Local Study Area: Challenges and Opportunities

- West Newton Area
  - Improve connections to the downtown area
  - Improve ped/bike access
  - Lack of I-90 Eastbound exit
  - Modify tolls to discourage congestion
- Newton Corner Area
  - Safety and congestion
  - Lack of ped/bike connectivity
  - Opportunity to improve transit between Watertown and Green Line
- ▶ Nonantum Rd. at Maple St.
  - Improve pedestrian/bicycle crossing
- ▶ Washington St. between West Newton and Newton Corner
  - Washington Street functions as a frontage road, it should be a complete street.
  - Desire for bike lanes, road diet
- ▶ Washington St. between West Newton and Newton Corner
  - DCR Area/Brighton: underutilized pavement width
  - Underutilized green space
  - As much continuous mixed-use path along river as possible with as many connections as possible
  - North Beacon Street Eastbound to Soldiers Field Road could be safer
  - Consider I-90 interchange

### Existing Conditions

### Previous Planning Efforts: Relevant Documents Timeline

- Mobility Planning Documents
- Previous Planning Efforts: Relevant Documents Key Takeaways
- Mobility
  - Several recommendations were previously made to improve the local and regional study area, including reconfiguring roadways and installing new pedestrian and bicycle accommodations.

- Enhanced pedestrian, bicycle, and transit accommodations needs to be a critical component of all local and statewide infrastructure projects.
- Improving roadway safety and reducing the number of collisions needs to be a key objective of infrastructure projects.
- Environmental
  - Noted that the area could be made more resilient to climate change.
  - Increasing pedestrian, bicycle, and transit networks will be a key component to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to help enhance climate resilience efforts.
- Land Use / Economic
  - Housing supply in Newton is limited with few undeveloped parcels available for new development.

### Land Use / Economic Conditions

- Residential districts are spread throughout the study area, with multi-family in the east and single-family in the west.
- ▶ Commercial and mixed-use areas are focused in village centers and along key corridors.
- ► There is a significant amount of office inventory. Office space has increased by 38% over the past decade, while vacancy rates increased by 10.7%.
- ▶ The largest industrial zone is in Watertown's Arsenal Street area, with smaller zones near I-90.

### Zoning

- ▶ Most of the Study Area is zoned for residential (single or multifamily)
- Business zones concentrated in village centers
- Overlay districts include:
  - Village Center Overlay Districts in West Newton, Newtonville, Auburndale
  - Arsenal Overlay Development District in Watertown
  - Planned Development Areas in Boston for Western Avenue, Guest Street

# Demographics / Population

- ▶ Newton has a lower population and employment density relative to Watertown, Cambridge, and Boston.
- ▶ Newton has a higher youth and senior population relative to neighbors.
- ▶ Minority populations in Newton (27%) and Watertown (26%) are slightly below the statewide average.
- ► Asian and two or more races make up over half of Newton's minority populations, with the most prevalent Asian ethnicities being: Chinese, Asian Indian, and Korean.

# Employment

- ▶ The local study area hosts over 3,000 businesses and nearly 40,000 employees.
- ▶ Approximately 6% of employees in the local study area also live in the local study area
- ► The Boston Landing development is a significant employment hub, housing three of the top employers in the area.
- ▶ Large employers host their own private transit shuttles, providing access to public transit stations.

## Environmental Justice (EJ)

- Environmental justice populations are defined by the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs' Environmental Justice Policy.
- ▶ Numerous block groups meet minority and income thresholds adjacent to and within regional study area.
- ▶ One Watertown block group meets both income and limited English proficiency thresholds.
- ▶ REJ+ expanded definition to be used as an overlay to review regionally based equity.

## Public Health

- Compared to the U.S. and the Boston Metro Area, the local and regional study areas display a lower prevalence of all chronic diseases, except for asthma.
- ► Asthma prevalence in the local study area is higher than the national average and is strongly correlated with airborne particulate matter (PM2.5).
- Study alternatives will consider non-single occupancy vehicle (SOV) modes, access to green space, and incorporate strategies that would otherwise reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

### Environmental

- Natural Resources
  - Charles River, Edmands Brook, Cheesecake Brook, Brunnen Brook, and Dolan Brook; Adjacent Core Habitat and Associated Floodplain
  - Wetland Resources
  - Threatened & Endangered Species
  - Numerous protected and recreational open spaces
- Historic and Archaeological Resources
  - 61 National Register-listed properties, 17 National Register-listed districts, 2,056 inventoried properties, and 64 inventoried areas
  - 23 previously recorded archaeological sites
- Oil and Hazardous Materials
  - 442 state-listed disposal sites and 1 U.S. EPA Superfund Site

### Mobility: Mode Share / Vehicle Ownership

- ▶ 52% of commuters who live in Newton drive alone.
- ▶ Less than 10% of commuters who live in Newton take public transit.
- ► Zero-car households make up less than 6% of the population of Newton.

### Mobility: Existing Travel Patterns (Origin-Destination Data): To/From Points West

- ▶ For all trips that exit I-90 eastbound at Newton Corner:
  - ~40% have destinations in Newton Corner
  - ~40% have destinations in East Watertown / Brighton
  - ~20% have destinations in Other Areas

- ► For all trips that exit I-90 westbound at Newton Corner:
  - ~40% have destinations in Newton Corner
  - ~40% have destinations in Other Areas in Newton
  - ~20% have destinations in Other Areas beyond Newton

## Mobility: Active Transportation

- ▶ Dedicated bicycle facilities are limited and those that exist are disconnected
- ▶ The Charles River pathways are a key east-west bike route, but lack neighborhood connections
- ▶ I-90 serves as a barrier for bicyclists and pedestrians
- Pedestrians and bicyclists traveling on most main roadways in the local study areas experience a high level of traffic stress

### Mobility: Transit

- ▶ Newton Corner area is served by 8 bus routes
- ▶ Washington St @ Bacon St bus stop sees over 600 boardings / alightings per day (busiest in study area)
- ▶ Study area also served by Worcester / Framingham Line with 3 stops in Newton and 1 stop in Brighton
- ▶ Private transit is also provided in study area by local colleges, on-demand services, and TMAs

## Mobility: Interstate-90 Traffic Volumes

- ▶ Existing Average Weekday Hourly Traffic on I-90 West of Newton Corner
- ► Average Weekday Daily Traffic

### Mobility: Intersections

- ▶ Several intersections in the study areas operate at level of service (LOS) E or F
- ▶ High volume demand and limited capacity contribute to poor operations
- At I-90 eastbound Exit 127 Off-Ramp, queues can extend to nearly half a mile due to stop control and limited capacity
- ▶ I-90 eastbound mainline operates at LOS E during weekday morning peak hour

# Safety: Crash Data

- ▶ Existing roadway geometry and congestion linked to safety issues, especially in Newton Corner
- ▶ Between 2017 and 2019, there were 64 rear-end crashes around the I-90 eastbound Exit 127 Off-Ramp
- ▶ 7 of the 48 study area intersections are above the MassDOT district average crash rate

### Safety: High Crash Locations

- ▶ There are several MassDOT-identified High-Crash clusters within the study area
- Road Safety Audits were conducted in Newton Corner and at the DCR Roadway area, identifying safety issues and potential enhancements
- ▶ West Newton village was reconstructed in 2021 with improved pedestrian / bicyclist infrastructure

### Preliminary Existing Conditions Issues, Opportunities & Constraints

- Existing roadway geometry and congestion linked to safety issues.
- ► Transportation infrastructure (MBTA rail line and I-90) is a barrier for north-south pedestrian/bicycle mobility and is a constraint to alternatives development.
- ► The lack of full-service interchanges along I-90 between Route 128 and Boston leads to increased reliance on Exit 127.
- Nearly 60% of Newton residents commute via automobile modes, illustrating a potential for significant mode shift.
- ▶ With 93.5% of the workforce commuting from outside the area, there is a significant reliance on nonresident employees. This could lead to issues such as congestion; increased demand on transportation infrastructure; and higher environmental impacts.
- ► The local study area is home to many natural, historic and archeological resources that may serve as constraints for future alternatives.
- ► The three study area communities have all identified extreme heat as a pressing and significant concern in their climate vulnerability and resiliency plans.

### Schedule and Next Steps

#### Study Schedule

▶ The Study Team reviewed the schedule for the study and noted the first public meeting will be October 8<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 p.m.

#### **Our Next Steps**

- ▶ Incorporate Working Group input on Draft Evaluation Criteria
- ► Finalize Existing Conditions Documentation
- ► Kick-off Future Conditions Analysis
- ▶ Working Group Meeting #3: Future Conditions & Alternative Development (Early Winter 2024)
- ▶ Public Meeting #1 (October 8, 2024, 6:30 p.m.)

#### Future Conditions Analysis (For Next Meeting)

- Study Team has kicked off Future Conditions analysis and summary of Issues, Opportunities, and Constraints
- ▶ Once Future Conditions are complete, Study Team will begin initial alternatives development phase
- ▶ Next Working Group Meeting will present:
  - Public Informational Meeting #1 (scheduled for October 8, 2024)
  - Overview of Future Conditions
  - Issues / Opportunities / Constraints
  - Initial Alternatives Development

## Working Group Questions and Discussion

#### Discussion Pause

- ▶ How does this summary align with your experience in Newton Corner?
- ▶ Do you have ideas about how this information relates to potential long-term solutions?

### Public Comment Period

#### The below comments and questions include those from both Working Group members and attendees.

- Representative Kay Khan stated that the Brockton/Plymouth bus line expressed interest in providing a roundtrip bus service from Riverside to Logan Airport ten times a day and suggested this be noted for future considerations. She also expressed her interest in emphasizing the importance of the Commuter Rail stations in the area and noted ongoing grant applications. She noted she heard there will be a four-year closure of a lane at the I-90 entrance at exit 15 due to bridge work, which could be exacerbated when additional lanes are closed for work in Allston/Brighton.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Representative Khan for her comments.
- Robin Boger stated that she understands that the traffic models will provide a vision through 2050 but wants to point out that quality of life for Newton residents was not considered in the study.
  - Patrick Snyder responded stating that this is included in the goals and objectives, which are available on the study website. He also stated that going into the public meeting, this will be made clearer and thanked Robin for her comment.
- ► Wenzheng Wang first asked whether the MassDOT team and MBTA are exploring a new MBTA Commuter Rail station at Newton Corner, studying transit feasibility. Secondly, he pointed out the need to examine opportunities from what could be operating well in the current configuration and suggested the study team consider these in building the model and developing alternatives. To conclude his remarks, he asked what additional ways of engagement are available for the Working Group members.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Wenzheng for the comments. Regarding the MBTA Commuter Rail station, MassDOT is unable to speak to this, but a representative from the MBTA is on the call is noting these comments. Regarding the current conditions and their operations, Patrick stated that this is something the study team considers in their review of Opportunities, Challenges, and Constraints stage of the study, which will follow the upcoming public meeting. At this stage, they are waiting to gather feedback and finish the Existing Conditions report. In terms of other ways to engage, people are welcome to reach out to Patrick via email. Working Group members are also welcome to attend all four Public Information Meetings.
- Zeke Mermell conveyed feedback provided from Watertown residents and commuters who use Newton Corner: Watertown bus commuters hope future iterations of bus routing incorporate quick and straightforward access to and from Watertown Yard, especially transfers at Newton Corner. They also hope for safer pedestrian and bicycle connections from one side of the Newton Corner I-90 pike to the other. Zeke also mentioned additional Bluebikes stations will be added in Watertown immediately north of Newton Corner and hopes that this addition will help Newton Corner residents and commuters.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Zeke for his attendance and comments brought from Watertown constituents.
- David Koses asked if there was an opportunity to have an MBTA Commuter Rail station in Newton Corner, and if the interim improvements could be made to other modes.

- Patrick Snyder stated the study team would look into this further and that he could connect David with someone at the MBTA.
- Councilor Alison Leary agreed with the need for better transit long-term but emphasized the need to be more multimodal moving forward. She liked the consideration of a bus-only lane on the Mass Pike (I-90) as well as a Commuter Rail stop in Newton Corner. The councilor also noted concerns about safety for bicyclists and pedestrians. She noted an ongoing effort to introduce ferry service nearby on the Charles River.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Councilor Leary for her comments and stated that it will be kept in mind as the study progresses.
- ► An anonymous participant asked about decking over portions of the Pike (I-90) before and after the hotel to create more space for transportation lanes.
  - Patrick Snyder responded stating that this pertains more to the alternatives development phase, which comes later in the process, but thanked the participant for this point and noted it will be considered.
- Another anonymous participant asked whether the study would estimate how much impact a Commuter Rail station in Newton Corner would have on automobile traffic and those from new express buses, including Route 57.
  - Patrick Snyder reiterated that a new Commuter Rail station is not currently in the purview of the study, but a representative from the MBTA is on the call who is hearing these points. He also noted that the study team is considering the proposed bus route changes under the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign.
- ▶ Nate Gibson mentioned that while a new Commuter Rail station itself is out of purview, he wondered if the on-ramp could be reconfigured to enter I-90 eastbound at Church Street and a Commuter Rail station built in place of it at Newton Corner. Additionally, he shared concern that the traffic data on pedestrians was not measured and that the more focus was on traffic and vehicles rather than reconnecting neighborhoods.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Nate for his comments.
- Sandy Johnston thanked Working Group members for expressing their concerns and stated that he would bring the comments and feedback from this meeting back to the MBTA to facilitate more conversations in the future.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Sandy for his comments.
- ► Jini Farley questioned the statistic of 10% of people with disabilities in Newton and expressed a desire for this statistic to be reviewed. She also stated that all three existing Commuter Rail stations in Newton are inaccessible. She also asked about the crash statistics were for pedestrians, cyclists, or cars and stressed the need to add the pedestrian aspect back into the Existing Conditions report.
  - Patrick Snyder appreciated these points and stated that he will look more into the disability statistics. Patrick will also speak to the study team to find out how the crash statistics could be made clearer.
- An anonymous participant had asked how the road diet planned for Watertown Square will affect traffic on nearby streets.
  - Patrick Snyder stated that he could not speak to that and deferred to Zeke Mermell.
  - Zeke Mermell stated that the Watertown Square improvements concept is expected to accommodate the projected amount of traffic.
- ► An anonymous participant asked how far west any Newton Corner will take place.

- Patrick Snyder stated that the ongoing Highway Division work is on Exit 127 and intersecting roads. He noted the upcoming Highway Division public meeting for immediate improvements to be held Wednesday, September 25. He stated that the study area for the long-term study is larger and includes Newton Corner, Soldiers Field Road/North Beacon Street, and West Newton.
- ► Seth Parker expressed that there may have been too much data in the presentation and suggested next iterations to focus on the key takeaways. He also suggested viewing Newton Corner as a transportation hub with enhanced mobility options and stated that a pedestrian bridge from Washington Street to Centre Street would be helpful for connectivity. He also encouraged the project team to think about multilevel solutions to separate traffic going in different directions.
  - Patrick Snyder thanked Seth for his comment.
- ► Srdjan Nedeljkovic stated the importance to view this project not as simply a roadway project, but as an exercise in urban planning with a goal to reinstate pedestrian-based human-scale design that had previously existed before the turnpike. Additionally, he stressed the need for a more qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach to this project and asked how the study group is considering qualitative thoughts.
  - Patrick Snyder stated that one of the reasons for looking at a variety of themes (such as public health) was to be holistic and think beyond numbers. He said the study team would be clearer moving forward but would point in the direction of the study website, which includes more detailed information on the study's goals and objectives. The team is not considering traffic above all else but thinking of it in conjunction with topics such as pedestrians, bicyclists, and climate change.
- ▶ Ned Codd agreed with prior comments on the importance of thinking about local traffic as a holistic view of pedestrian, bike, and transit use compared to highway traffic. He also stated that the study scope appears to include the consideration of MBTA Commuter Rail and that the Office of Transportation Planning has a history of conducting studies that encompass MBTA assets in research. He would request that this be considered among alternatives.
  - Patrick Snyder clarified that the Commuter Rail is being considered as part of the study. However, in the Office of Transportation, they cannot make the decision to build a Commuter Rail station in Newton Corner. Patrick Snyder also welcomed Ned Codd to reach out separately on this concern.

# How to Reach Us

- ► Study Website / Contact Information:
  - <u>https://www.mass.gov/newton-corner-long-term-planning-study</u>
- Virtual Meeting Room:
  - <u>https://vmr.vhb.com/v/El18wZWNqOB</u>
- Patrick Snyder, Project Manager
  - <u>patrick.l.snyder@dot.state.ma.us</u>

The meeting adjourned at 5:33 p.m.