



Union Square East:

Creating A Community Roadmap



Context

Union Square is a neighborhood of Somerville, located in the southeastern part of the city. Union Square is now the commercial center of a primarily residential neighborhood with many restaurants, bars and neighborhood stores, and community institutions. It is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Somerville, with large Brazilian, Latino, South Asian, and white populations, and a mix of lower-income residents and wealthier homeowners in the Prospect Hill neighborhood. A transportation hub in decades past, Union Square will reemerge as a transit center with the opening of the first new Green Line Extension station on Prospect Street in 2017. The Green Line Extension was initially required by state law to mitigate the environmental impacts of the Big Dig project. From 2006 to 2009, a comprehensive rezoning of Union Square was undertaken, resulting in the adoption of a new zoning ordinance. The Union Square Revitalization Plan is the first major planning effort developed on the foundation of SomerVision, the City of Somerville's first comprehensive plan. Working closely with the MBTA, the City has already begun land takings in the D-1 District in preparation for the new Station, which is scheduled to come online in 2017. In 2013, the City issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) seeking a master developer for Union Square and ultimately selected Union Square Station Associates from Chicago. Planning and urban design efforts are currently underway for this transformative and large scale redevelopment project.

Founded in 1969, Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) is a membership organization with a mission to develop and preserve affordable housing, offer services and programs, and build a collective voice through community organizing and planning in order to realize a stable, diverse, and affordable community. In its 45-year history, SCC has completed over 20 affordable housing projects, resulting in more than 100 ownership units and 184 rental units, and 35 scheduled for construction later this year. We have helped hundreds of adults and young people gain security through counseling, referral and mediation programs. We have mobilized hundreds of residents to win organizing campaigns around affordable housing, jobs, neighborhood equity, and access to city amenities. SCC is recognized by the City, MBTA, regional partners, and the community as a leader in promoting equitable development through community planning and organizing. This includes playing a leading role in advocating for greater affordability in the 2009 zoning and currently advocating for a community benefits agreement with the Union Square master developer.

With funding from the Enterprise grant, SCC seeks to provide community planning and organizing support to help ensure the surrounding neighborhood (including residents of SCC's 42 unit Linden Street apartments) adjacent to the new project opportunity are included and become direct beneficiaries of the new Union Square T-Station. It will also advance an exciting opportunity to potentially acquire and build an equitable, transit oriented development next to the planned Union Square Green Line Extension T-Stop (35 Charlestown Street). SCC will plan and begin implementing a neighborhood and property-specific design that will enhance and protect affordability, sustainability, and new transit access for this compact low-moderate income neighborhood for decades to come. This is a unique opportunity afforded SCC by the combination of real estate opportunities coinciding with the long-anticipated construction of the new MBTA Green Line Extension.

Methodology

SCC's intention is to help residents understand the impact of substantial and transformative changes coming to Union Square. Union Square East is defined as the neighborhood between Prospect, Medford, South, and Washington streets. SCC and our architectural partner Davis Square Architects set out to have three community workshops covering planning efforts in Union Square, a community visioning and mapping session, and a meeting to present back community designs to neighbors and having stakeholders help decide next steps.

Community Planning Process:

1. Targeted engagement of local stakeholders (including residents, SCC tenants, neighboring businesses, city representatives, and elected officials)
2. Utilization of diverse mediums (photos, zoning maps, renderings) to share complex information
3. A participatory approach intersecting grassroots planning, community organizing, and physical space to achieve a community sensible development
4. Group activities to help determine neighborhood priorities and needs
5. Consensus building approach to work towards a collective vision
6. Evaluation on how best to accomplish some suggestions given the reality of financial constraints, project timelines, and existing plans/processes

After discussing important community principles and sharing values neighbors want to see incorporated in train station designs and redevelopment plans, small groups moved from concepts to design and drew their ideas onto proposed zoning maps for the neighborhood.

Goals:

- Inform neighbors and SCC tenants about planning/development processes in Union Square
- Create a set of priorities and community guided design for Union Square East
- Plug residents into existing community efforts in Union Square
- Explore affordable housing building opportunities in Union Square

Community Meeting



At the first community meeting in April 2015, more than 20 local residents came together to hear updates about the Green Line Extension, the Union Square Redevelopment Project, the citywide zoning overhaul, and the city's neighborhood planning process. General concerns felt by many neighbors included flooding and sewer issues, access to incoming jobs, connectivity and access to the Union Square T- Station from Allen Street, location of electrical substation, and questions about the proposed new zoning.

We then moved into a general discussion on gentrification, contributing factors to displacement, and values people want to see reflected as the city undergoes major changes, the results of which can be seen below. A shared idea among neighbors was to have a localized version of SomerVision that addresses local needs and includes metrics/targeted development goals for Union Square East.

What is the potential impact of new development?

- Upgrading properties, landscape, and infrastructure; increase in property values
- How we conduct our process and execute projects (example: GLX)
- Multimodal mobility, walkability, and accessibility (positive)
- Displacement (negative)
- Community control (How much power do we have? Will our voices be heard?)
- New buildings might be too tall; shadows over the neighborhood
- New jobs and commercial space
- Traffic mitigation; need for new parking
- Construction noise
- Chain stores

What values and priorities would we like to see represented?

- If there is a library, make sure it has other community amenities
- Community center
- New jobs going to local residents and job training
- New public safety building
- Parking for cars and bikes
- Historic preservation of old post office and SCATV
- Too much residential
- There's a lot of demand, but do we have enough supply?
- Artist and maker spaces
- Open space and parks
- There needs to be a clear process and platform so people's ideas are incorporated

Who needs to be involved?

- City
- Union Square Station Associates, or US2 (master developer for Union Square)
- Community residents
- State and federal agencies
- Local businesses and organizations

Neighborhood Block Party



Outreach

SCC staff took on an extensive outreach campaign to ensure that our workshops were attended by those who do not typically participate in planning conversations, primarily immigrants, lower income households, and renters. This included targeted doorknocking in the Union Square East neighborhood, phone call and email followups with neighbors and stakeholders, and home visits for one on one's with SCC organizers. It was important to cultivate key relationships early and inaugurate neighborhood advocates who could help staff recruit residents for these meetings.

After good attendance at the first workshop, the turnout for the second workshop was very low. SCC staff used the opportunity to strategize with those who came and landed on the idea of having a summer barbeque and block party to inform and involve area residents in local community efforts around the transformation of Union Square. This was a relaxing afternoon of games, fun activities, and food at SCC's Linden Street development. It also served as a chance for SCC to engage with its tenants and neighborhood residents and learn about what is working well and what can be improved on our properties.

SCC followed up by hosting a successful community design workshop, where over 20 residents shared what they want to see in their neighborhood around connectivity, density, and benefits as new development occurs. Many of those who joined the workshop came as a result of attending the block party and word of mouth from neighborhood advocates.

Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

SCC did not have many prior relationships with residents and community leaders, which proved to be a challenge when this initiative first started. With the few points of contact that existed in Union Square East, SCC organizers build key ties with residents who became our "neighborhood advocates." These neighborhood advocates helped plan social events, recruited others in attending meetings, and joined different Union Square planning/design sessions to convey the ideas and concerns of fellow neighbors in Union Square East. The lesson here is to start early - at least two months in advance of the first community meeting - and build key relationships. A memorable moment and success of this process was bringing together renters, new residents (predominantly South Asian immigrants), older homeowners and those who have been in the neighborhood for multiple generations, and city planners working on community plans.

This process highlighted how little residents knew about Union Square's impending transformation. By hosting community meetings and workshops, SCC, Davis Square Architects, city staff, and the area alderman were able to get people up to speed. We also became aware of the importance of being clear about our outcomes upfront so stakeholders know how their engagement achieves community goals.

Moving Forward

SCC and its partners view this process as a comprehensive approach to involve SCC tenants and area residents in broader conversations about the future of Union Square. Our hope is to build trust in the community, help new leaders emerge through intentional leadership development, and create visibility around concerns and ideas expressed by Union Square East stakeholders. Along with neighbors, SCC can be an advocate in helping make the community vision coming out of this process a reality. This includes participating in more formal spaces related to Union Square planning efforts currently underway; sharing results with appropriate decision makers such as MassDOT officials, US2, and city staff; linking neighbors to community groups like Union United, a coalition of stakeholders working to ensure the Union Square redevelopment process results in substantial benefits - not displacement - for the Union Square community; and maintaining relationships with residents by keeping them in the loop around SCC's organizing and planning efforts.

Neighborhood Priorities

With the arrival of the Green Line, Union Square redeveloping, and a neighborhood plan in the works, residents thought of ways to influence the changes that reflect your values and needs.

- Create a new public plaza with parklets and temporary pop-up parks and keep the civic functions, such as a library or a police station, that is connected to the existing neighborhood
- Keep Ricky's Flower Market, a neighborhood retailer in the community for 25+ years
- Make streets more bike friendly with continuous bike lanes
- Have local retail along Somerville Avenue on the ground level with residential above
- Keep central Union Square a walkable neighborhood
- Produce a localized version of SomerVision for Union Square East with measurable performance metrics on affordable housing, local jobs, open space, etc.
- 5 story mixed-use should be considered around residential buildings to protect from shadowing and allow for graduated elevation that is sensitive to the current neighborhood scale
- Build an indoor playground and a multi-purpose park
- Accessibility to the future Union Square train station is important
- Transform Linden and Allen streets into one-way streets
- Have underground parking garages
- Conduct strict environmental testing at individual residences in closest proximity to the future train station and have an appropriate mitigation strategy in place to reduce anticipated threats
- Connect current community path extension as a walkway in Union Square
- Create a service station entrance on Allen Street to access the Green Line and new development
- Ensure that Union Square East is a neighborhood from which through traffic is excluded in anticipation of the Union Square Green Line station
- Construct permeable surfaces and green roofs to prevent flooding and sound barrier walls during the pre-construction phase of the Green Line and Union Square developments

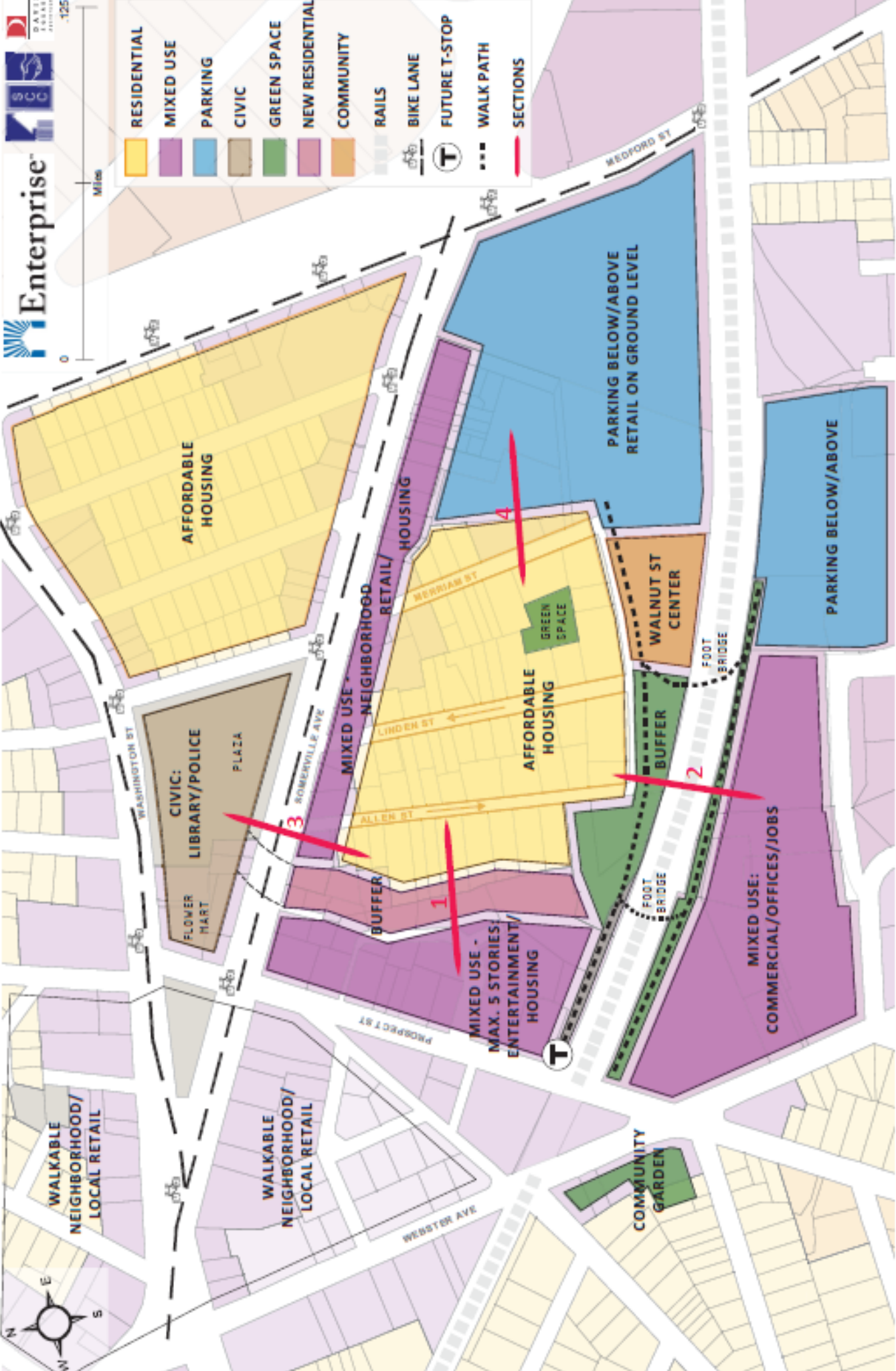


Design Workshop



LEGEND

- RESIDENTIAL
- MIXED USE
- PARKING
- CIVIC
- GREEN SPACE
- NEW RESIDENTIAL
- COMMUNITY
- RAILS
- BIKE LANE
- FUTURE T-STOP
- WALK PATH
- SECTIONS



Miles



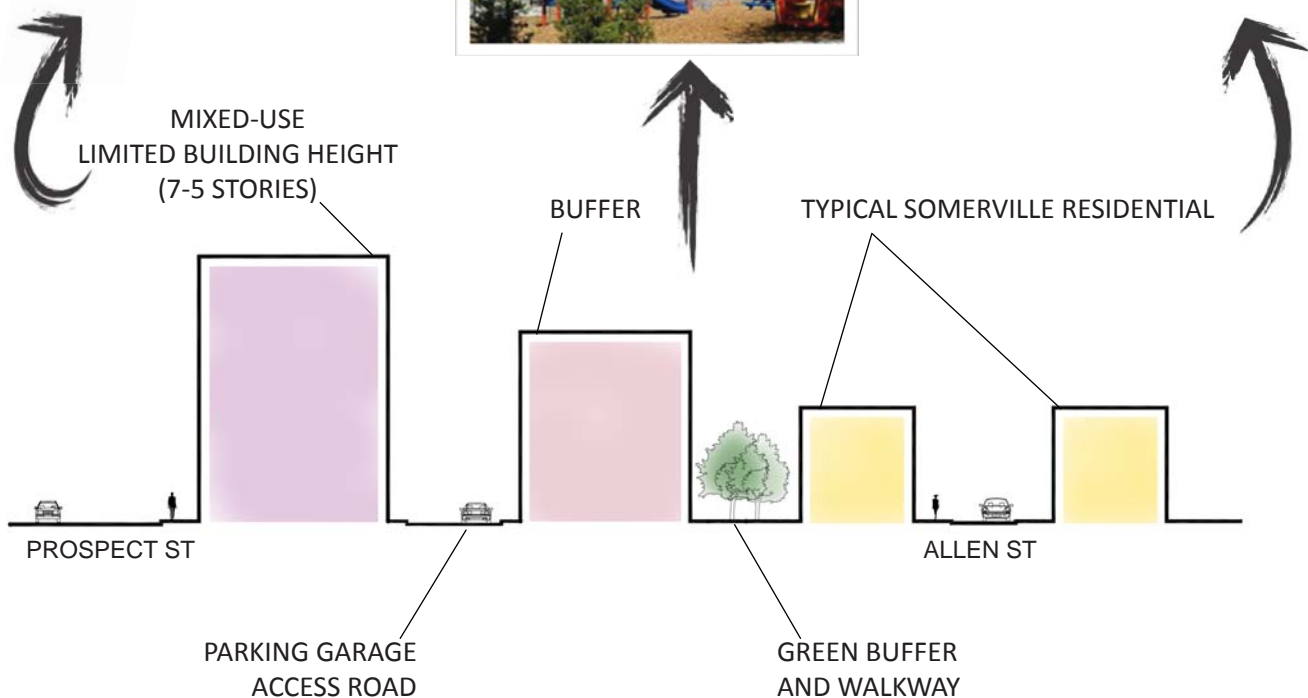
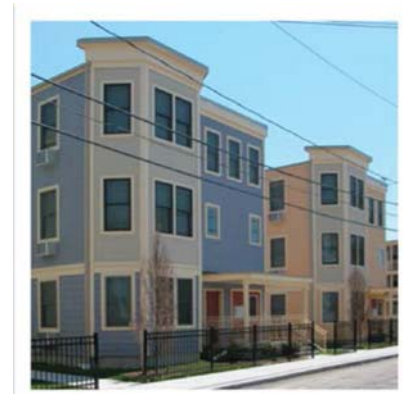
SECTION 1

- Buffer between taller new buildings and smaller-scale neighborhoods

IDEAS and PRIORITIES

- Limit the proposed multilevel mixed-use buildings on Prospect Street to 5 stories if possible.
- Create a buffer between the new development on Prospect Street and the typical existing Somerville residential 2-3 story buildings. The buffer can be made both of trees and new buildings.
- Change Allen Street to a one-way-street, because of its narrowness.

VIGNETTES



SCHEMATIC CROSS SECTION

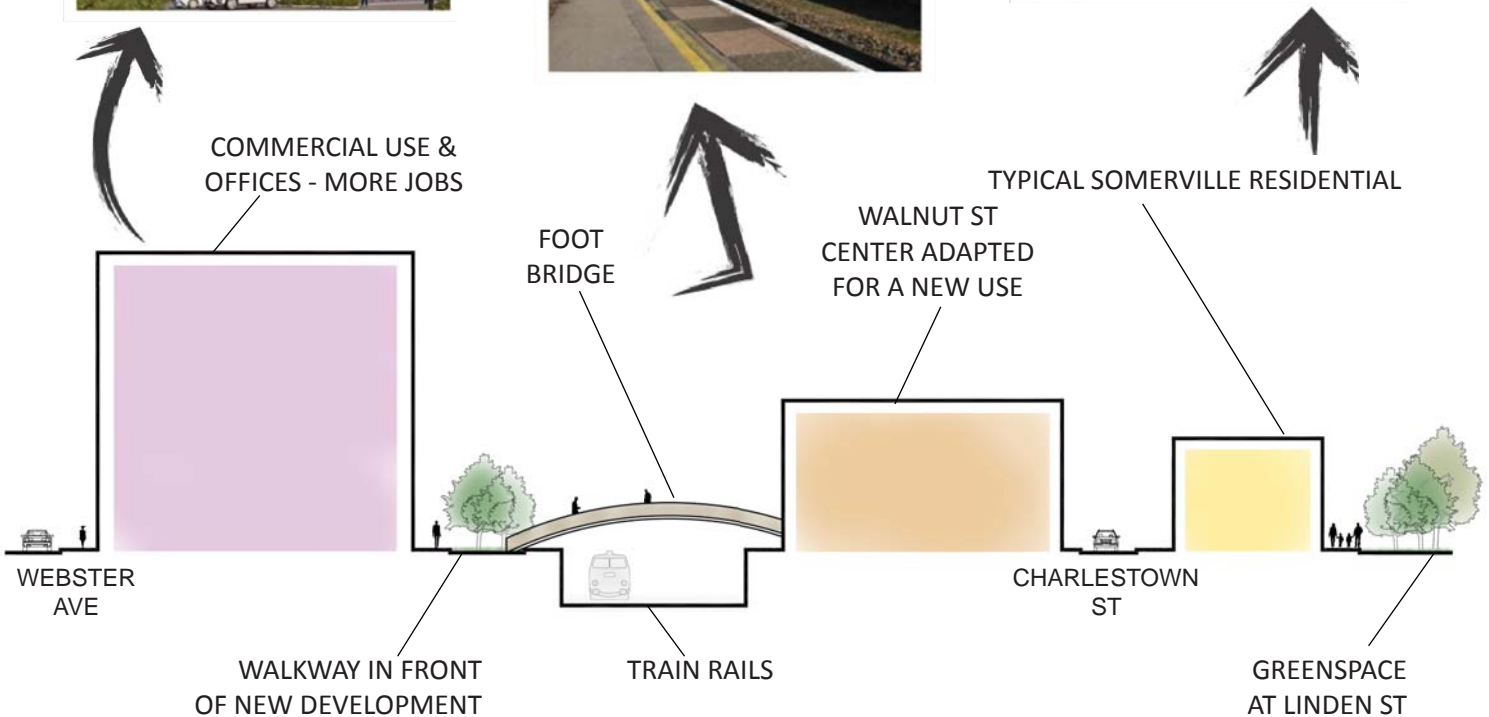
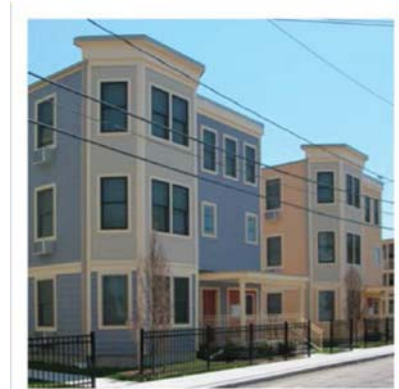
SECTION 2

- Footbridges over the rails connecting the EXISTING with the NEW

IDEAS & PRIORITIES

- Create new commercial and office space along the railway. This should create more local jobs for the area.
- Build two footbridges crossing the rails to connect the new development on Webster Ave/ Prospect St with the existing residential area on Allen, Linden and Merriam Streets.
- Salvage the Walnut Street Center for a new residential use.
- Provide a buffer, like a greenspace or a wall, between the rails and the existing housing on Allen, Linden and Merriam Street.
- Create a walkway to connect the existing residential area, future parking areas, the new developments and the upcoming T-station.

VIGNETTES



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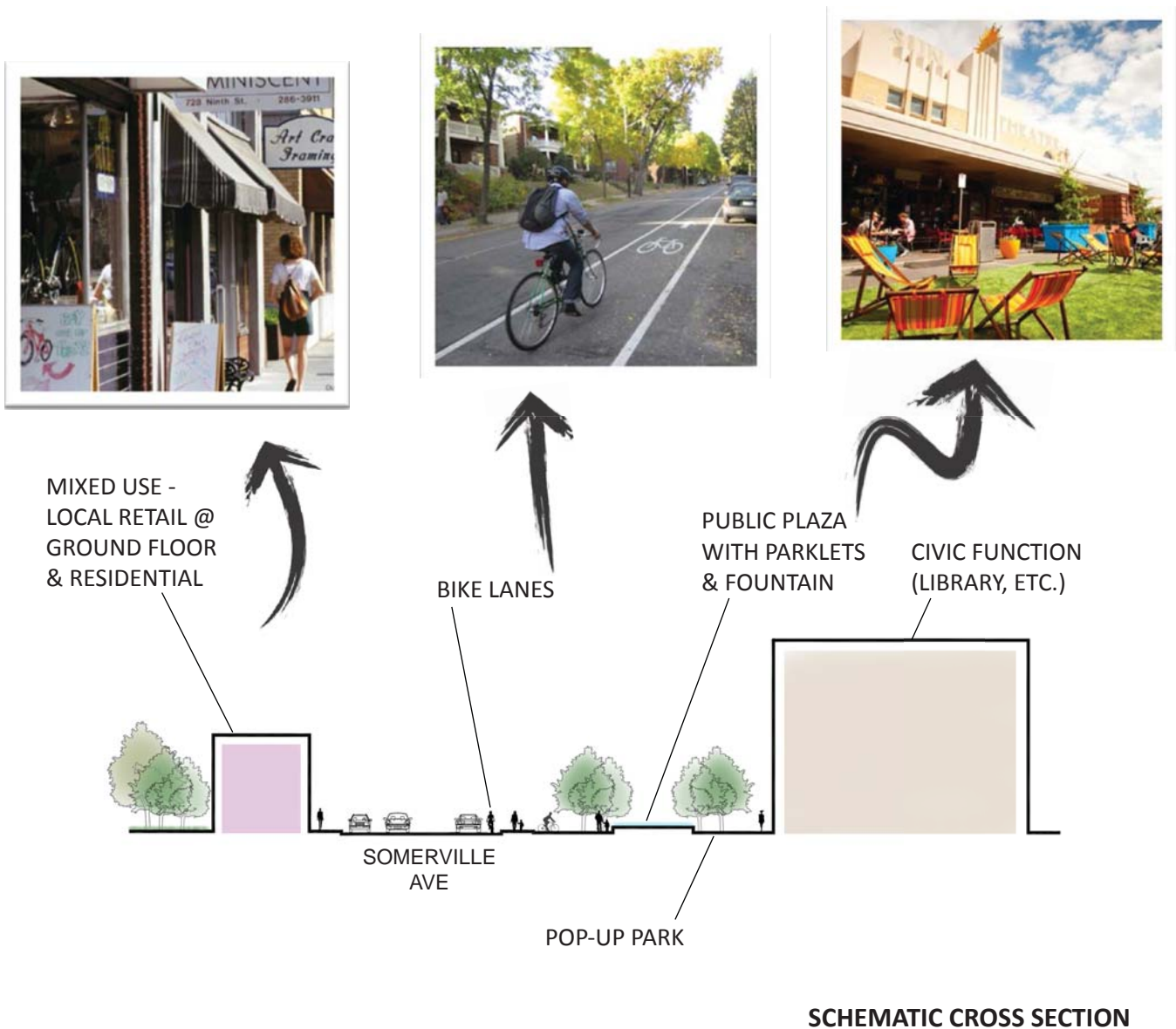
SECTION 3

- A new public plaza with a connection to the neighborhood

IDEAS & PRIORITIES

- Create a new public plaza with parklets and temporary pop-up parks and keeping the civic function, such as a library or a police station.
- Make the streets more bike friendly with continuous bike lanes.
- Have local retail along Somerville Avenue on the ground level and residential above.
- Keep the central Union Square a walkable neighborhood.

VIGNETTES



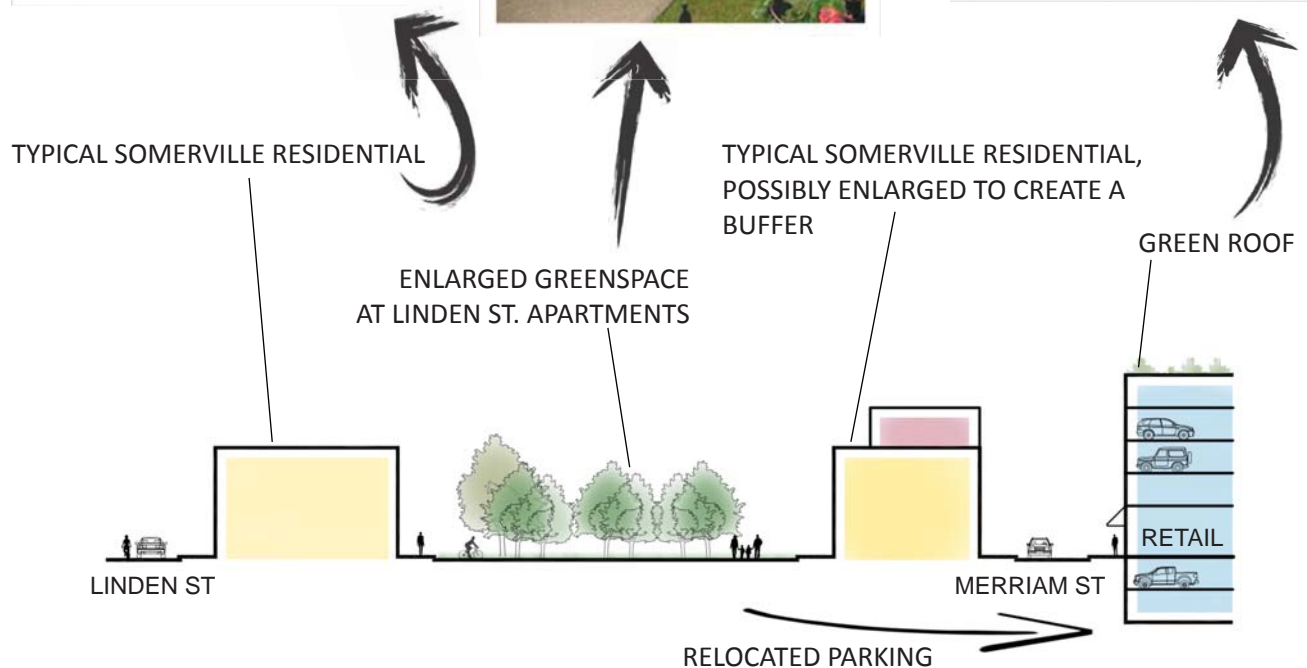
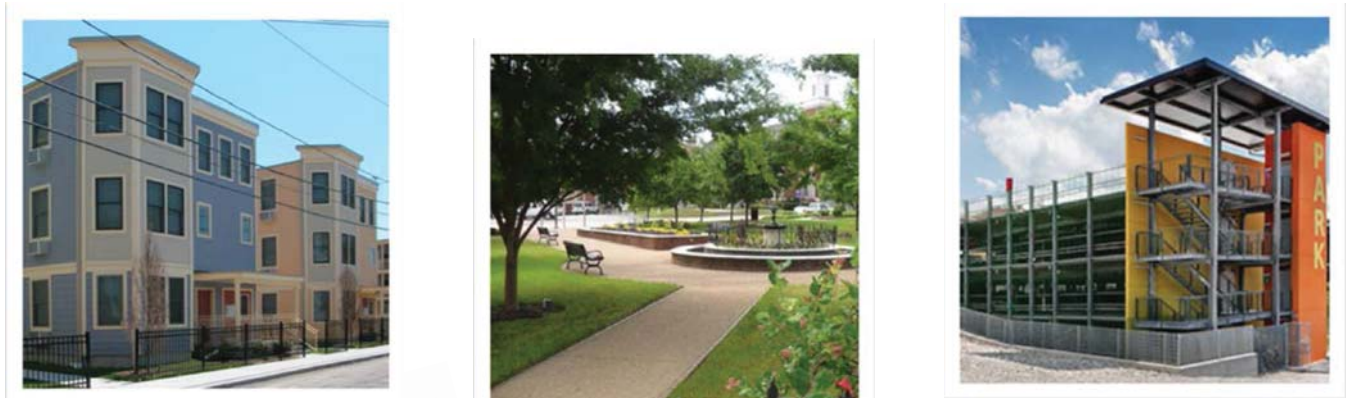
SECTION 4

Relocate the parking lot from the existing neighborhood to gain more green space

IDEAS & PRIORITIES

- Relocate the parking lot between Linden and Merriam Street to create a bigger green space in-between.
- Create new parking above and below ground-level retail close to McGrath Highway.
- Develop green roofs on buildings.
- Limit Linden Street to a one-way-street, because of its narrowness.

VIGNETTES



SCHEMATIC CROSS SECTION