

Somerville, MA Union Square: Where do we go from here?



An Urban Land Institute
Technical Advisory Panel Report

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OVERVIEW

ULI

The Urban Land Institute's (ULI) mission is to provide responsible leadership in the use of land to enhance the total environment through research, education and public outreach initiatives. The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the institute now has more than 22,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service. As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAP)

Consistent with this mission, ULI convenes Technical Assistance Panels to provide pro bono planning and development assistance to public officials and local stakeholders of under-resourced communities and nonprofit organizations who have requested assistance in addressing their land use challenges. Real estate professionals representing the full spectrum of land use and real estate disciplines spend a day analyzing existing build environments and specific planning and development issues and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a fashion consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

TAP PROCESS

The ULI recently convened a TAP in Union Square, an urban crossroads located in Somerville, MA, just minutes north of Boston. Three years ago, the ULI had performed a TAP on the Kiley Barrell Site, a prominent corner piece of underutilized real estate in Union Square. This current TAP was convened in an environment of new City leadership, new market opportunities, and renewed vigor by City and local leadership related to Union Square's revitalization. Prior recommendations had been based on transit proposals to bring the Green Line T to Union Square, and with this project formally committed and firmly on the horizon, the current TAP focused on three strategically located and publicly-owned sites—Kiley Barrel, the Police Station, and the SCAT Building—and explored ways that careful development on these sites could support the City's development objectives for Union Square.



This photo was taken in 1917, of the intersection of Somerville Avenue and Bow Street on the west side of Union Square. This was where the center of Union Square was once focused.

The stated goal for the Union Square TAP was to “ advise on the feasible models for development in the municipally owned parcels on the eastern side of Union Square that could best spur economic revitalization throughout the commercial district and recommend strategies for implementing these models “ (see TAP Application for further details).

The stated vision by city stakeholders for the square is:

- Development of Union Square as a vibrant commercial center with distinctive retail and a character that is international, urban, and culturally rich.
- New growth that increases tax base and includes mixed use development with offices and residential to support street level retail and restaurant / entertainment.
- Clear and consistent attention to innovative urban design and creative reuse of historic and industrial structures that celebrates Union Square’s character and exciting architecture.
- Improved streetscape and pedestrian and vehicular traffic patterns that energize and unite the Central Business District.
- Enhanced pedestrian accessibility and safety through improved traffic flow and access to parking areas.

The Union Square TAP convened on December 5, 2005 in response to an application filed on behalf of the Union Square Main Streets dated October 14, 2005 (See Attachments for copy of Application Form). Reflecting the nature of the square’s complex development issues, the TAP consisted of a cross-section of development, planning, architecture, community development, financing, construction professionals. Panel members included:

- Frederick A. Kramer, President, ADD Inc (Chair)
- Jay Valenta, Morgan Stanley (Co-Chair)
- Sandi Wolchanski, JPI, Development Manager
- David Hancock, Principal, CBT
- Jane Howard, Principal /Transportation Planner, Howard Stein Associates
- Eric Brown, Senior VP, Konover Construction
- Mark Terle, Blue Black Square
- Sue Leff, Senior VP, Key Bank
- Noah Chrismer, Development Associate, Lena Park CDC

The process followed in the TAP was similar to other TAPs held for other communities. Upon the submission of the TAP request and materials by Union Square Mainstreets, additional information sessions were held with ULI members and Mimi Graney, the Executive Director of the Union Square Mainstreets organization. An informal tour of the square was held and the list of professionals above was assembled to best match expertise with the challenge at hand. A package of information was distributed to TAP Panel members for their review in advance of the TAP.

The day's activities were held in the offices of Union Square Mainstreets and included an introduction to the issues by members of the Mainstreets initiative; a tour of the East end and West end of Union Square to assess character and development sites; a meeting and Q&A with Mayor Curtatone, city planning officials (Jim Kostaras and Ezra Glenn for Planning and Lisa LaPour for Traffic) and consultants including Tim Love and Christina Crawford (architecture and urban design) and Jay Wickersham (zoning) for background; panel review of issues as they related to primary questions; a closed door session by TAP Panel members to arrive at a consensus of potential suggestions addressing the City's goals; and a public presentation of recommendations for each site. The presentation and lively follow-up was attended by upwards of 75 community members, public officials, and members of the media. As a follow up to the day long session, this report will be given to Mimi Graney and if so desired, presented in a public forum to discuss the details at a future meeting. ULI would also be pleased to provide continued assistance to the City in implementing the various courses of action.

ULI and the TAP members would like to extend a sincere thanks to the citizens and public officials of Somerville who provided excellent data, their time at multiple meetings, and coordinated the wonderful experience that we had in Somerville. A special thanks goes to Mimi Graney and her staff for their professional assistance.

Questions to be addressed by the Panel

The Mainstreets team requested that the following questions be considered by the TAP in an effort to help to create a more vibrant Union Square.

- 1.) Weighing Development Options: Mixed use is what we are seeking but a mix of exactly what? What is the best mix of the various options among retail, commercial, cultural (artist housing, studios, etc.) municipal (library, community center) and housing that could attract investment, meet community needs and be viable?
- 2.) Funding: What Private and public financing might be available for these development options?
- 3.) Presenting these Parcels for Development: What aspects of these parcels are of greatest interest to developers? What requirements might developers be willing to accept so that community interests might be met?
- 4.) Strategy: What is the best way to proceed with a vision for these parcels? As we balance risks and rewards upon a shifting future how do we proceed? Should these parcels be considered collectively to create a " big bang " of development with sale to one large developer, or is it wiser to put these parcels out for sale in stages?

THE CHALLENGE

Union Square has three municipal parcels in and abutting the Central Business District that present a once-in-a-generation opportunity for development. Through wise use of this eastern portion of Union Square, we wish to initiate an economic revitalization that could resonate throughout the struggling district. The close relationship of the Public Safety Building, the Old Firehouse (SCAT Building) and the

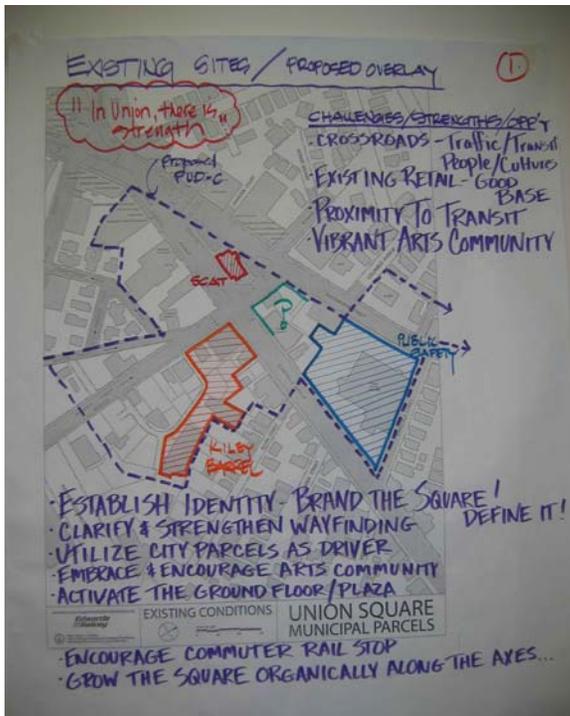
Kiley Barrel sites and the limited owners that control nearby properties provides for “downtown” planning on a scale larger than typically available in our densely populated city.

Existing Problems: (see Application for further details)

- 1.) Union Square is not connected to the MBTA
- 2.) Union Square has an unclear identity and image and needs branding.
- 3.) Union Square has a poor commercial core and business mix
- 4.) Union Square faces strong competition from nearby squares.
- 5.) Union Square faces heavy traffic congestion and confusing traffic patterns
- 6.) Union Square presents a poor pedestrian experience
- 7.) Union Square’s buildings have upper floor vacancy and low assessed values
- 8.) There is a perceived lack of parking in the Square.

CRITICAL ISSUES

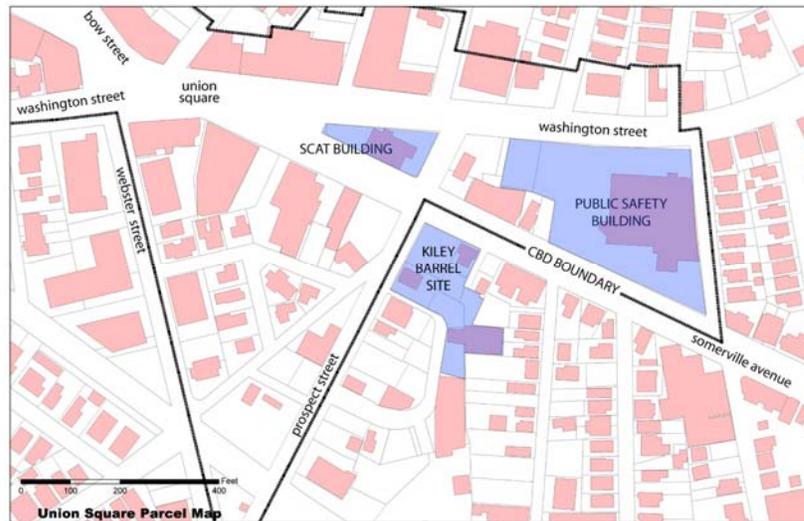
Throughout the walkthrough and Q&A session, panelists heard three consistent themes: (1) traffic patterns must be addressed if the square is to function properly as an inviting and vibrant public space; and (2) innovative and coordinated mixed-use development was necessary to generate economic and social returns from the three, publicly-owned sites in question and (3) The revitalization of the square was critical to Somerville’s comeback as a vibrant destination place.



Union Square was once a vibrant industrial crossroads. Over the past hundred years however, the Square has deteriorated and now is marred by poor traffic patterns, vacant land and office space, and a lack of cohesive identity. In recent years, the City has been proactive in initiating a review of and visioning for the Square and has built the institutional infrastructure necessary to advance a forward development agenda. The City has hired experienced planning professionals and has funded a Mainstreets initiative to focus on the square. In addition, City leadership has commissioned a number of studies addressing revisions to traffic patterns, mixed use development proformas, site studies for publicly-owned sites, and proposed zoning changes to enable suitable mixed use and development density.

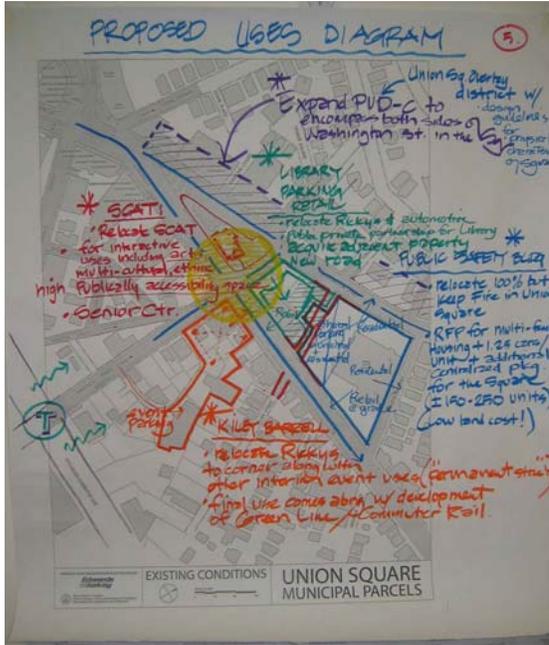
The theme of traffic patterns, though not originally a main focus of the TAP, was on everyone’s mind. Union Square’s main arterial, Washington Street, was diverted years ago, and now meanders through a confusing “S” curve as it makes its way through the Square. The Square is also the confluence of a number of one-way streets including Somerville Avenue, a State Highway, and Prospect Street. This jumbled traffic pattern is confusing and makes for unclear and unsafe movements and a very frustrating rush hour. Further, the traffic unnaturally divides the Square and discourages pedestrian traffic to local businesses. The sheer mass of pavement and vehicles leads to a sense of desolation and the lack of street trees and active ground floor retail uses makes for lack of pedestrian comfort.

The second theme of the day revolved around the redevelopment of three publicly-owned sites—Kiley Barrel, the Police Station, and the SCAT building. The Kiley Barrel site is located on the southeastern side of the Square and is currently an abandoned piece of land, used half-heartedly as a public parking lot. The Police Station looms on Washington Street, on the eastern side of the Square, has long been considered a “sick-building.” The SCAT building, the only iconic structure in the square, once housed the local fire station and now is home to Somerville Community Access Television. It sits centrally and very visibly in the middle of the square tucked into Washington Street’s “S” curve surrounded by inefficient municipal parking and major traffic thoroughfares, a very clear indication of the collision of uncontrolled traffic patterns and potential land-use/development opportunities.



Through interviews and an extensive Q&A session, the Panel learned that a number of traffic amelioration plans had been proposed, including running Washington Street straight through the Square, as it initially had. The Panel also learned of the City’s desire to realize an economic return on the potential disposition of the three properties in question, of plans to relocate the Police Department and demolish the Police Station building, and of the City’s and Mainstreets’ priorities to create, through the redevelopment of the Square, a vibrant hub of business and public activity.

ULI TAP FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS



Zoning

The City has been developing a change to the Zoning bylaws that would create a PUD-C area as an overlay to Union Square. Its intention is to provide guidelines for density and use and to create an environment where additional density can be gained in a fashion consistent with the overall design goals and objectives for the area. The panel recommended strongly that the boundary of the proposed PUD-C area be expanded to include the built block along the north side of Washington Street between Maria’s market and the funeral home. The current boundary does not include this critical edge and the panel felt that it was very important to include it in the proposed zoning bylaw.

With regard to RFP’s that might go to the development community for some of the critical parcels, the panel encouraged the City to make them very clear about use and density expectations as well as identify a clear and predictable process for submission and approval. An overly complex permitting and approval process will be counterproductive to attracting the right developers to invest in the opportunities presented in the Square.

Transportation Initiatives

The panel identified the following priorities for improving access to public transportation in the square:

- 1.) Immediately improve and clarify transportation signage way-finding for access to bus routes and connections. Signage could be improved immediately to provide significant benefits to residents in the near term. Where possible, bus pickup and drop off should be consolidated rather than spread out as is the existing condition.
- 2.) Establish a commuter rail stop accessible to Union Square. This is an intermediate term goal. Commuter service into North Station could be accessed through construction of a platform on the existing railroad right-of-way. This is a strategy that is independent of whether the MBTA’s Green Line is extended to Union Square.
- 3.) Actively promote the critical importance of a T station within easy access from Union Square. State government and MBTA officials have committed to providing T access to Union Square. This would clearly be the best of all outcomes to catalyze future development of the square, and will have a significant impact on the Kiley Barrel site as it develops as a transition zone between transit node and the Square along Prospect Street.

Land Use Initiatives

- 1.) SCAT building. Due to its architectural prominence and potential to become a centerpiece in the square, the panel recommends that the city maintain ownership of the SCAT building as a proud symbol of the cultural, artistic and community life of the square. Uses such as an art or craft gallery, café, or small bookstore (highly public and interactive with the street) could serve as a cultural destination place, energize the square, and reinforce Union Square’s identity. The second floor of the building could be used as office space for important multi-cultural organizations. The community access television station, which currently occupies the space could thrive in a much less prominent location where less active street frontage is appropriate, perhaps even on an underutilized second floor in a prominent location in the square.
- 2.) Public Safety Building. Due to its proximity and size, this parcel was viewed to have the greatest potential to attract private investment and catalyze future development within the square. The panel recommends issuing a “Request for Proposals” to qualified developers to create up to 200 housing units with parking for the residential units as well as for businesses in the square. The panel recommended relocation of all current occupants in the public safety building with exception of the fire department, and that if at all possible, the land cost be kept low in an additional effort to attract development interest given the Square’s transitional character. Residential uses could face Merriam Street and there could be supporting retail at grade on Somerville Avenue, supporting the ground floor retail character objectives in the Square and along Somerville Avenue.
- 3.) Kiley Barrell Site. In order to develop the site where Ricky’s Flower Shop is located for public use, the panel strongly recommends relocating Ricky’s to the southern corner of Somerville and Prospect Streets, otherwise known as the Kiley Barrell Site. The Panel recommended that the Kiley site be retained by the city and utilized for flexible and temporary uses until such time as its value increases with the arrival of mass transit to the square. At that time, it may be appropriate to put the site up for sale and strategic development that connects the square to the new transit node.
- 4.) Ricky’s Flower Site. If the city is able to create a win-win situation for relocating Ricky’s to the Kiley Barrel site, the panel views the present location of Ricky’s Flower Shop as an ideal location for a public building such as a library, that can be connected to public parking that shares spaces with the residential development at the Public Safety Building
- 5.) Prospect Street sites. The panel noted the long term strategic value of those parcels located to the south of Prospect Street to the city and community of Union Square. Should an MBTA station develop as expected along the Fitchburg Commuter Line right-of-way, Prospect Street will be a primary pedestrian route between Union Square and the station.

Traffic and Street Patterns

- 1.) The panel observed that significant amounts traffic travel north through the square in order to turn left on Webster Street and access western Cambridge. Webster Street should be turned into a two way street. If Prospect Street were widened and made to be a two-way street, this

- portion of traffic would not have to enter the square. This would make through traffic patterns clearer for those passing through this portion of Somerville.
- 2.) The panel also recommends that two-way traffic be re-established on Washington Street and that it cut through the existing parking area by the SCAT building. This will allow for clear and heavy traffic flow through the Square to Rt. 93.
 - 3.) Somerville Avenue between Webster Avenue to the north and Prospect Street to the South could be made one-way toward the east to allow the sidewalks along Somerville Avenue to be widened and improve the pedestrian environment. Parallel parking should be maintained on Somerville Avenue on both sides of the one way street.
 - 4.) Finally, the group recommended that a connector street (Allen Street Extension) be added between Washington Street and Somerville Avenue as an extension of Columbus Avenue. This would reduce the “mega-block” feel of the public Safety Building block, increase valuable street frontage, and generally enhance traffic flow around the square.
 - 5.) Bennet street should be opened and allowed to loop onto Prospect Street
 - 6.) Sidewalks should be widened around the SCAT site to emphasize the public space potentially, particularly on the south side and out to the western point at the expense of Somerville Avenue’s width given its proposed change to one way to the east.

FUNDING SOURCES

SCAT building: City should retain Ownership and seek to lease space to gallery, performing arts, or multicultural users. Destination retail uses such as coffee shops that would be a publicly accessible facility and activate the square would be preferred. Potential funding sources would be Public and quasi-public sources such as Mass Development Grants, lease revenue from tenants, potential revenue from the expansion of outdoor amenities created around the center of vitality created by the change in SCAT building uses. A potential structure for funding would be to Partner with a CDC or an arts organization whose presence would blend cultural and vitality objectives with image of the square.

Public Safety Building: Primary use objectives were for market rate development of multi-family housing of a mix of rental and condominium. Funding sources for equity through developers, Institutional Lenders, Tax credits, and other partnerships. Funding sources on the Debt side might be MHFA loans of other quasi public lending such as HUD, I08, CDBG, FNMA, Freddie Mac, transit oriented development such as 40R. Funding structures might be ground lease with suitable environmental indemnification, clear process for zoning and permits approval to ease incent development interest in the parcel.

Kiley Barrel: The Kiley Barrel site should be retained in ownership by the City and used for temporary uses such as market and food orientation, perhaps arts orientation in alignment with the emerging Union Square brand. Perhaps Ricky’s flower Shop relocates to this corner of the square as a familiar icon of sorts and executes a 10 year lease with the City with relocation potential built in this would open up the site vacated by Ricky’s for potential municipal use such as a library that could share parking between it and the proposed multi family housing on the Public Safety Building.

RECOMMENDED PHASING

The Panel suggested the following general timeline for critical planning elements.

Street Improvements and Branding:

- 1.) Complete the already funded improvements of Somerville Avenue to the west of the square and into the square as deep as possible in 2006- 2007.
- 2.) Create a two way Prospect Street in 2006- 2007
- 3.) Alter Washington Street to delete the “ S “ curve travel through the square in 2008-2009.

Building Parcels:

- 1.) Change the use of the SCAT building in 2006-2007
- 2.) Create an RFP, Select a developer, and Approve a design for construction for the Public Safety Building in 2007- 2009
- 3.) Relocate Ricky’s and Fred M. Susan between 2007 and 2010
- 4.) Activate Kiley Barrel site in 2007-2008

Commuter Rail Stop:

- 1.) Engage transit to establish a commuter rail stop in 2008-2009

Green Line Extension:

- 1.) Work with MBTA to establish Green Line extension and intermodal station in 2009-2010

SUMMARY

Union Square in Somerville is a desirable mixed use and cultural destination with exceptional access to transit, goods and services. With strategic development of underutilized property, this location can regain its status as a vital urban crossroad that is pleasant to be in, to travel to, and easy to pass through.