



Watertown City Council

Administration Building
149 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
Phone: 617-972-6470

SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2025, 6:00 P.M. RICHARD E. MASTRANGELO COUNCIL CHAMBER ADMINISTRATION BUILDING, 149 MAIN STREET

MINUTES

ACCESS INFORMATION:

- A. This meeting will be held on September 2, 2025 at 6:00 PM in the Richard E. Mastrangelo Council Chamber
- B. The meeting will be televised through WCATV (Watertown Cable Access Television): <http://vodwcatv.org/CablecastPublicSite/?channel=3>
- C. The Public may join the virtual meeting online: <https://watertown-ma.zoom.us/j/92991331344>
- D. Public may join the virtual meeting audio only by phone: (877) 853-5257 or (888) 475-4499 (Toll Free) and enter Webinar ID: 929 9133 1344
- E. Public may comment through email: vpiccirilli@watertown-ma.gov
- F. Please Visit the City Council Website here: <https://www.watertown-ma.gov/350/City-Council>

1. ROLL CALL

Council President Sideris called to order a special meeting of the City Council at 6:00 p.m. in the Richard E. Mastrangelo Chamber, Administration Building. Those present were Councilors John M. Airasian, Caroline Bays, Lisa J. Feltner, John G. Gannon, Emily Izzo, Anthony Palomba, Vice President Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr., and Council President Mark S. Sideris. Also present were George Proakis, City Manager, Mark Reich, City Attorney, and Doug Newton, Municipal Policy Analyst. Councilor Nicole Gardner was absent.

2. INFORMATIONAL PRESENTATIONS

- A. Informational presentation by our Watertown Square Revitalization Plan Consultants, Innes Land Strategies, to outline the role of a redevelopment authority and to lay the groundwork for the work they will undertake over the next year.

President Sideris stated that the purpose of the meeting is to review a presentation of the Watertown Square Revitalization Plan by the consultants Innes Land Strategies. The presentation will outline the role of a redevelopment authority and lay the groundwork they will undertake over the course of the next year.

City Manager Proakis remarked that there were three major steps to come after the vote that passed the Watertown Square Area Plan. The first was to vote on the zoning from the plan, which occurred in the fall of 2024. The other two steps are the engineering design of the streetscape and the public-private partnerships concerning land.

Concerning streetscapes, requests for proposals have been put out, and finalists are being interviewed. The first action item for that finalist will be to begin surveying work on the ground and begin working with the Innes team. The Innes team is working on the urban revitalization plan.

He then remarked on a redevelopment authority, which the City Council has the statutory right to assume the role of as established in the Home Rule Charter since the 1980's. This means that the City Council, as the elected body, will be making decisions on the revitalization plans.

Emily Keys – Innes Land Strategies Group – remarked that the team is excited to be working in with the City of Watertown and stated that the firm has much experience and expertise in working with urban renewal and revitalization plans over the years. She stated that a redevelopment authority undertakes projects that the private market cannot undertake on its own because the existing conditions are beyond the private market's ability to address. In this case, that's public assets. The redevelopment authority's task takes the plans and principles from conceptual plans and implements them into an actual project. One of the specific roles that the authority has is an operating agency (financial activities including loans and real estate transactions). This comes into play when considering the private/public partnership, which leads to the topic of urban renewal.

She then explained the shift from urban renewal to revitalization. Unlike the federally funded, top-down urban renewal efforts of the mid-20th century—which often involved large-scale clearance—today's approach focuses on catalytic projects that stimulate private investment in areas with potential but facing challenges the private market can't solve alone.

Key points include:

- Revitalization is community-driven, based on existing plans and visions.
- The public sector (e.g., redevelopment authorities) plays a role in enabling projects that the private sector can't do alone.
- Federal and state funding sources for urban renewal no longer exist, so public-

- private partnerships are essential.
- The urban revitalization plan must follow 760 CMR 12, a regulatory framework from the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC).
- The plan requires state approval, often involving MEPA (Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act) review.
- The state must find that:
 - The area can't be developed by private enterprise alone.
 - The plan aligns with local needs and allows for private financing.
 - The area is “decadent, substandard, or blighted.”
 - The financial and relocation plans are sound and complete.
- The plan must include detailed elements like maps, objectives, acquisition plans, site improvements, financials, citizen participation (required since the 1980s), and annual reporting.

Key Entities & Their Roles

- Redevelopment Authority: Declares necessity and implements the plan.
- EOHLC: Conducts informal review after the declaration.
- MEPA: May begin environmental review depending on project scope.
- Planning Board: Confirms alignment with comprehensive and area-specific plans.
- City Council: Holds a public hearing and approves the plan.
- Massachusetts Historic Commission: Must be notified before the hearing; provides feedback.
- City Solicitor: Reviews final plan for legal compliance before submission to EOHLC and MEPA.
- The plan becomes active only after final approval from EOHLC and, if required, MEPA.

Demonstration Projects (MGL Chapter 128 Section 46)

- Purpose: Test innovative methods to eliminate blight before full revitalization.
- Legal Precedent: *Cobble Hill Center LLC v. Somerville Redevelopment Authority* outlines requirements:
- Must use new or improved methods.
- Should be innovative, unique, and serve as a model for future plans.
- Must align with community goals (e.g., Watertown Square area plan).

Benefits of Demonstration Projects

- Allow testing of feasibility (ownership, zoning, infrastructure).
- Help understand subsurface infrastructure impacts.
- Inform broader revitalization efforts.
- Follow similar municipal processes as full plans (Redevelopment Authority, Planning Board, City Council).

Timeline & Next Steps

- August: Began confirming existing conditions.
- October: Staff review of demonstration project.
- Following: Initial review and discussion by city officials.
- Parallel Process: Use insights from the demonstration project to inform the broader

revitalization plan.

President Sideris shared concerns of this process taking an exceedingly long time, and opened the conversation up for councilor questions.

Councilor Piccirilli asked what is being envisioned for the demonstration project.

City Manager Proakis shared that MEPA and the approval process that the state requires do take a lot of time. Real estate transactions come in waves that do not necessarily align themselves with that process. An advantage of the demonstration project plan is that it does not require state approvals. It enables the City to start working on a portion of the plan while the overall plan is still in the approval process. He then used a possible example of using the parking lot behind CVS to create a parking structure, green space, and housing as a demonstration project of proving validity for the plan overall. He added that a demonstration project approved by the redevelopment authority in a few months can result in a development in a year or two, and an urban revitalization plan put together of the course of the next year provides guidance for the next decade.

Councilor Piccirilli asked how we make sure that what is created in a demonstration project meets the need of what is being planned several years down the road.

Emily Keys replied that that is an advantage of being able to look at the smaller and larger plan in parallel. The entire team looks at each individual aspect of the plan as part of the whole which enables them to anticipate future needs with the plan in mind.

Councilor Piccirilli noted that Watertown Square doesn't meet the language of blighted or derelict conditions, and so he asked how we would get state approval as well as how the intent of the overall project is going to meet the intent for the law.

Emily Keys replied that the conditions of the buildings in the square cannot be declared blighted, but that there is flexibility in the definitions. Specifically, a decadent area is an area on the decline as well as insufficiency of light and air. She then spoke on economic conditions, which includes whether the land was plotted appropriately. They also look at the history of the site to see if it could have been developed better.

Councilor Gannon asked where the Planning Board fits in the process where the City Council is the redevelopment authority.

City Manager Proakis replied that the Planning Board sat and voted along with the City Council through the Watertown Square Area Plan public hearings as well as endorsing the MBTA zoning. The PB will need to provide a statement that the revitalization plan is consistent with the comprehensive plan of the city. There will also be opportunities for the board to participate throughout the process.

Councilor Gannon asked how the City Council will be educated on the process. He also remarked that they should prioritize public participation.

Emily Keys replied that the education of the process is a robust conversation with Innes throughout every step. She remarked that they are committed to participate in many in-person and hybrid meetings with the community.

President Sideris remarked that he envisions that the City Council will interchange between putting on the “redevelopment hat” one night, to their “council hat” the other in a similar fashion as the Watertown Square process.

Councilor Palomba asked if the demonstration project is something that the City would be taken on by itself without much consent from the state, and that that would be a separate project from the revitalization on the whole.

Emily Keys replied that the demonstration project does not require state approval or have to go through EOHLC. She clarified that the City isn’t doing the demonstration project themselves, but there would be partnerships, and that the funding itself could also reflect a private public relationship.

Councilor Palmoba asked if the City Council must vote to become the Redevelopment Authority.

City Manager Proakis reiterated that the City Council is already the Redevelopment Authority, but that this is the first instance that they would be exercising that title because it is the first opportunity to establish a demonstration project plan or an urban revitalization plan. He continued to say that the Council isn’t necessarily the best body to specifically design projects of parking, housing, or retail, and so that is where partnerships come into play. By slicing off a small chunk that is the demonstration project plan, the City Council can provide a doable example and gain experience in preparation for taking on the larger plan overall.

President Sideris added that considering the demonstration project will provide an opportunity to see how private landowners may want to partner with the City, as well as shifting out what are feasible tactics and goals going forward.

Councilor Gannon asked for further articulation of some of the powers of the RA in terms of permitting.

Emily Keys replied that RA isn’t the body that approves of the project in terms of permitting, that still applies under the zoning, which falls to the Planning Board. The RA does have some other powers like creating a land disposition agreement with a developer that will have certain controls and specifications.

Councilor Airasian asked if Innes has ever run into a situation where the state doesn’t approve the larger plan after the demonstration project. If so, what would an appeal process to that state decision look like.

Emily Keys replied that she has not experienced a state refusal of a plan, and credited the process they undertake, including with review through HLC, prior to bringing the plan to the state.

City Manager Proakis shared that demonstration projects have not been used very much in the past, but an example of it was in Cobble Hill in Somerville. Somerville decided they wanted to do something unique that included a fire station, police station, and housing. The proposed site was blighted as a result of three entities suing each other over the space and then demolishing buildings on the lot. Somerville came up with a plan to perform an eminent domain taking and develop the lot as a demonstration project. The

three entities then united to refuse the taking, but state's supreme judicial court deemed that they could, and used the demonstration project as a blueprint for standards and specs. The three entities then sued on value of the taking, which they won in a case against Somerville.

He continued to say that eminent domain taking is a tool in the tool kit, but that it is something to be used with extreme care and caution, which is why he likes the fact that the RA comprises of elected officials. He added that, ideally, you never use that tool, and added that it was avoided being used in the Assembly Row project because of the strong partnerships and conversations that developed through the process. The revitalization tool provides a great variety of packages and options.

Emily Keys echoed that eminent domain is one of the powers of the RA, and that it is a tool of last resort. Two ways where it can be useful is that a taking doesn't have to be an entire property, but could be a few square feet that are needed for a specific reason, and another could be navigating title disputes.

Councilor Feltner asked how a demonstration project ties into the engineering streetscape plans on the whole.

City Manager Proakis replied that they connect by identifying underground utilities, what the traffic circulation system is keeping the overarching plan as the guide, and the design of the open space.

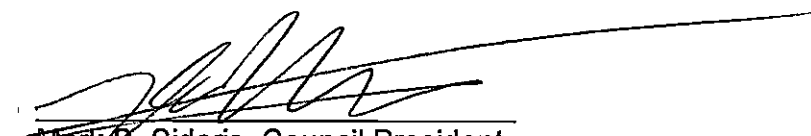
3. RECESS OR ADJOURNMENT

Councilor Piccirilli made a motion to adjourn and Councilor Feltner seconded.

The motion was adopted unanimously in a Roll Call Vote.

The meeting adjourned at 7:23 p.m.

I hereby certify that at a regular meeting of the City Council for which a quorum was present, the above minutes were adopted by a vote of 9 for, 0 against, and 0 present on October 14, 2025.


Mark S. Sideris, Council President
s:/BTM

ELECTED OFFICIALS

Mark S. Sideris,
Council President

Caroline Bays,
Councilor At Large

Nicole Gardner,
District A Councilor

Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr.,
Vice President &
District C Councilor

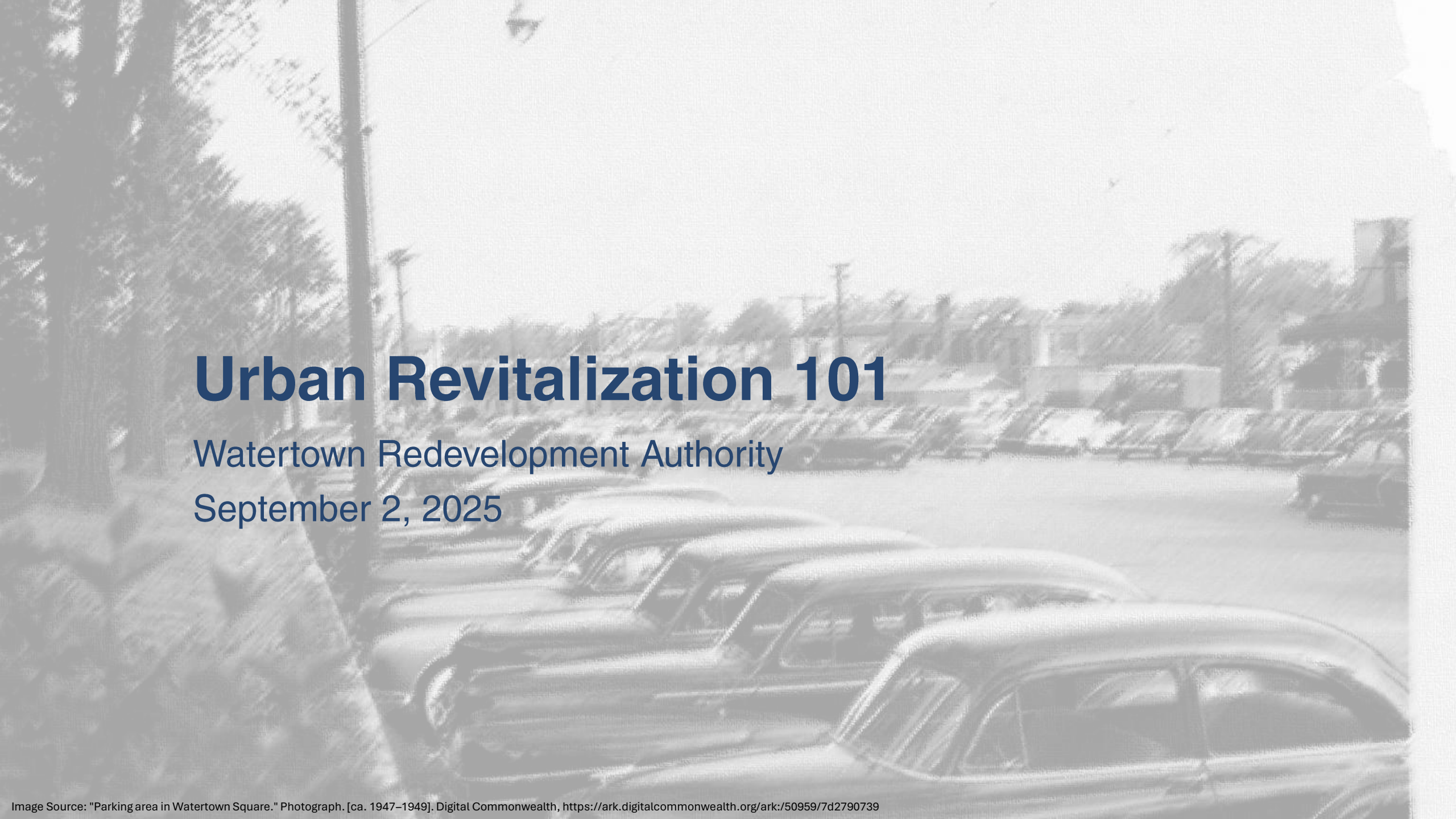
John G. Gannon,
Councilor At Large

Lisa J. Feltner,
District B Councilor

John M. Airasian,
Councilor At Large

Anthony Palomba,
Councilor At Large

Emily Izzo,
District D Councilor



Urban Revitalization 101

Watertown Redevelopment Authority

September 2, 2025

Introductions



Emily Keys Innes,
AICP, LEED AP ND
Project Director



Ewan Innes,
CTO / Data Scientist
Project Manager



**Paula Ramos
Martinez,**
Chief Resilience Officer
Project Designer



Eric Halvorsen, AICP
Vice President and
Principal



Briony Angus, AICP
Vice President

A Redevelopment Authority undertakes redevelopment projects that the private market cannot undertake because the existing conditions (physical or economic) are beyond the private market's ability to address.

A Redevelopment Authority takes a vision from plan....



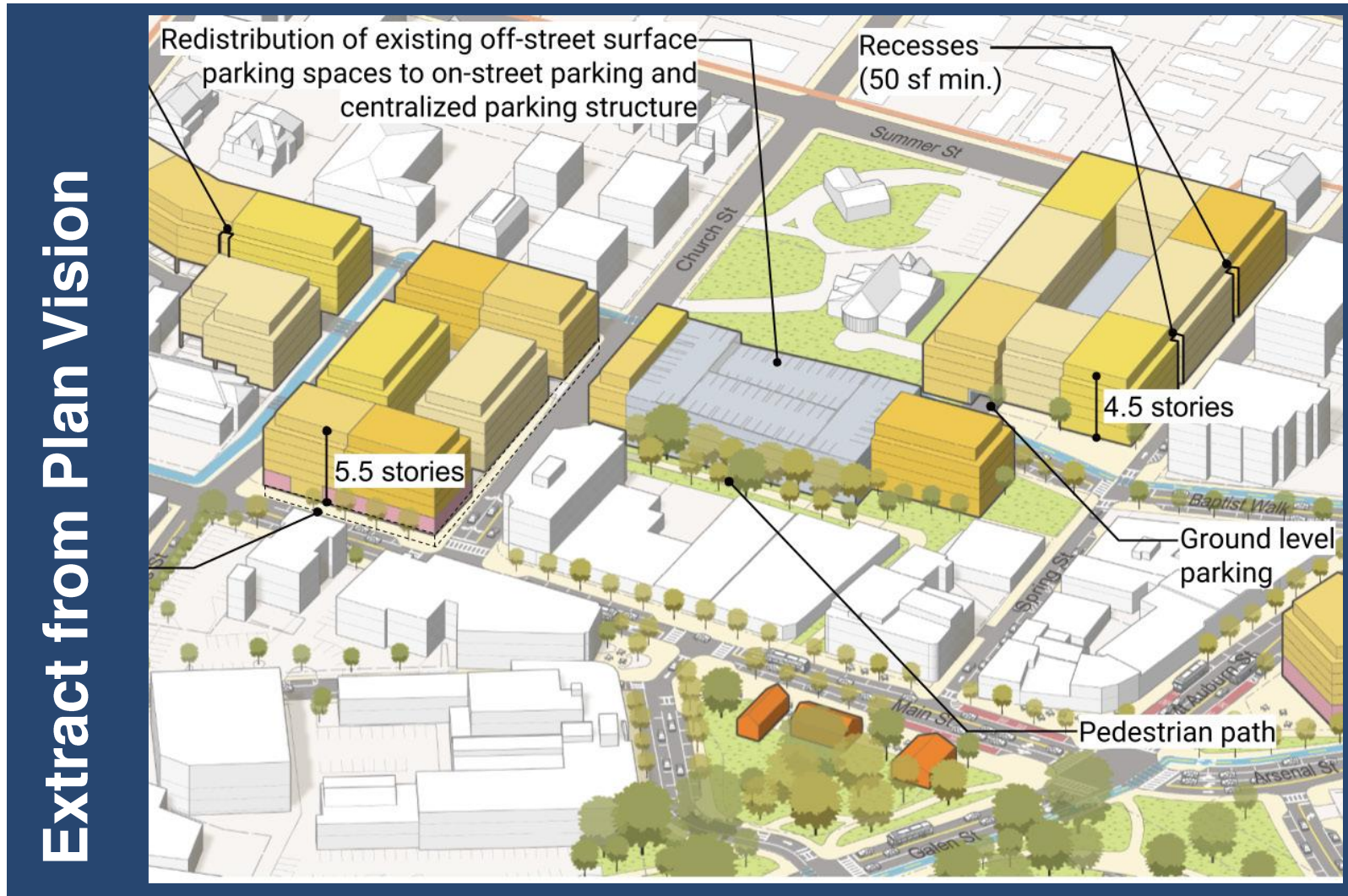
City of Watertown, Utile, et.al. Watertown Square Area Plan, August 2024

Watertown Square Area Plan

Sustainable Watertown Square



Watertown Square Area Plan



City of Watertown, Utile, et.al. Watertown Square Area Plan, August 2024, p. 37

...to a project.



A Redevelopment Authority is...

An Operating Agency

MGL c.128B, Sections 1 and 11

- Powers of a corporate body
- Financing activities
- Acquisition and disposition of real property
- Development activities
- Joint partnerships

An Urban Renewal Agency

MGL c.128B, Sections 9 (45-57) and 10 (58-59)

- Determine need for urban renewal “determination of necessity”
 - Define an area as decadent, substandard, or blighted
- Develop plan for the clearance, conservation, and rehabilitation of the area
- Engage in renewal projects
- Enforce restrictions and controls in the urban renewal plan and any other contract or covenant
- Receive gifts, grants, loans or other financial assistance

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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY URBAN RENEWAL **REVITALIZATION**

- Declaration of necessity still required
- Goal is the revitalization of an area – incorporating community-derived goals for housing, economic development, and the environment
- Goal is to address conditions that the private market cannot
- Focus is on catalytic projects
- Federal and state funding sources for urban renewal are no longer available

What is an Urban Revitalization Plan?

760 CMR 12.00

- The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities' regulations for the preparation of the plan
- EOHLC must make certain findings; the plan must provide the evidence for those findings.
- The plan is not active until EOHLC issues its approval; that approval is conditional upon MEPA review

Massachusetts Environmental Protection Act

- The MEPA Office is required to review a plan under 760 CMR 12.00.

FINDINGS

- The project area would not be developed by private enterprise alone and without either government subsidy or the exercise of governmental powers be made available for urban renewal.
- The proposed land uses and building requirements in the project area will afford maximum opportunity to privately financed urban renewal consistent with the needs of the locality as a whole.
- The financial plan is sound.
- The project area is a decadent, substandard or blighted open area. (See M.G.L. Chapter 121B, Section 1 Definitions.)
- The urban renewal plan is sufficiently complete, as required by M.G.L. Chapter 121B, Section 1.
- The relocation plan has been approved under M.G.L. Chapter 79A.

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760 CMR 12.00

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| • Acquisitions | • MEPA |
| • Relocation | |
| • Site Preparation | |
| • Public Improvements | • Plan Changes |
| • Disposition | • Land Acquisition |
| • Redeveloper's Obligation | • Land Disposition |
| | • Reports |

Municipal Roles in an Urban Revitalization Plan



What is a Demonstration Project?

MGL c.128 Section 46:

“...develop, test and report methods and techniques and carry out **demonstrations** for the prevention and elimination of slums and urban blight...”

COBBLE HILL CENTER LLC vs. SOMERVILLE REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Demonstration requires a different, new, or improved means or method of accomplishing the elimination of blight

Demonstration project as a means of testing and developing such new or improved means or methods

Focus on innovation and uniqueness of project

Eliminate blight and meet community objectives

Improvement of the means used

Serve as a model for future plans

Why does Watertown need a Demonstration Project first?

- The Demonstration Project allows the City to test the feasibility of development in Watertown Square.
- The conceptual plan illustrates the community's vision.
- The Demonstration Project delves into what is feasible given the underlying conditions: ownership, zoning, subsurface infrastructure, and other site conditions.
- Lessons learned in the Demonstration Project will inform the Urban Revitalization Plan.



Who is Involved in the Process?

Redevelopment Authority (City Council)

Declaration of
Necessity

Planning Board

Conformance with
Comprehensive Plan
and Watertown Square
Area Plan

City Council

Public Hearing and
Approval

We recommend a similar municipal process and address the appropriate components of 760 CMR 12.00 in the Demonstration Project report.

How Long is the Process?

