



Imagine West Roxbury

A Vision for Centre and Spring Streets
August 2016



Paul M. Derby
Attorney-at-Law
327-6770

John H. Miller, Jr.
Attorney-at-Law



REAL DEAL

WEST ROXBURY
MAY 2016

a project of:



**WEST
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STREETS**



in consultation with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council

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Carl Koebler, Board President
Matthew Gruber, Board Treasurer
Adrienne Vaughan, Board Clerk
Michael Iceland, Former Executive Director
Danielle Joseph, Executive Director
Victoria Maguire
Anthony Melo
Dominic Rebelo
Nancy Reid
Rachel Silbert
Scott Terrien

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A Letter from the WRMS Board



August 2016

Dear West Roxbury Residents, Business Owners, and Visitors:

For over a decade, West Roxbury Main Streets (WRMS) has worked to support and enhance the West Roxbury Business District. At the start of this year, WRMS partnered with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to create a community-backed, long-term vision for our business district. At the core of this exercise was an extensive effort to gather feedback from the community to learn more about what West Roxbury's residents, businesses, and visitors feel are the key qualities that will continue to make West Roxbury's main streets a vibrant, diverse, and inviting commercial destination.

This spring, as the first step in establishing an ongoing dialogue, we hosted an online survey and a public visioning workshop to solicit feedback from the community. Working in partnership with MAPC, we collected and listened to more than a thousand comments, drawing from them themes and priorities, and developed an overall vision statement to guide the future of our business district. This collective vision lends voice to your aspirations and desires for the community in light of new opportunities that are on West Roxbury's horizon. The following report includes that vision and a summary of what we heard from hundreds of people who live in, work in, and visit West Roxbury.

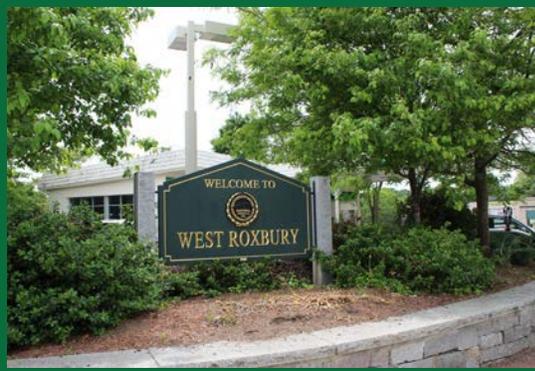
We want to thank all individuals who contributed to this process, whether through input in person, online, or volunteering at WRMS events. This project would not have been possible without the dedication of our planning committee, partners, and the entire WRMS team. Most importantly, we appreciate the community for their insight and dedication to this process.

We look forward to working with you to make this community vision into reality.

The West Roxbury Main
Streets Board



West Roxbury Main Streets Board Members and Volunteers at June Imagine West Roxbury Event



West Roxbury Main Streets is committed to supporting the community in realizing their vision for the business district:

The West Roxbury community envisions the business district to be a vibrant, welcoming village center for people from all walks of life. Centre and Spring Streets serve as the cultural and social center for the community, offering a thriving business mix of unique retailers, dining establishments, entertainment options, as well as housing opportunities for all ages and incomes.

The district has a highly walkable environment that prioritizes the safety of pedestrians and provides strong transit connections to and from downtown Boston. Centre and Spring Streets are dotted with attractive pocket parks and places for people to socialize or serve as setting for perennial festivals to celebrate and honor West Roxbury's heritage.

This vision statement is informed by more than a thousand comments from the West Roxbury community, expressing the challenges, desires, and aspirations for the business district. As WRMS continues to support the economic vitality and enhance the appearance of the district, this vision will serve as the compass for all of its work.



Project Timeline



West Roxbury Today

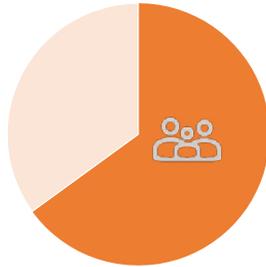
West Roxbury has a suburban, small-town feel, but with many desirable amenities found typically in a big city, such as several transit options and a significant business district. How do West Roxbury's demographics actually compare to Boston as a whole?

West Roxbury Boston

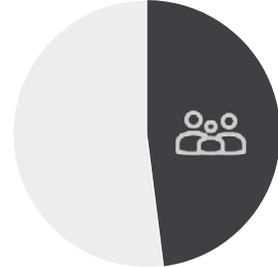
Population & Households

West Roxbury has 4.5% of Boston's total population and households.

Household Types



65% of West Roxbury's households are family households, compared to 48% in Boston.



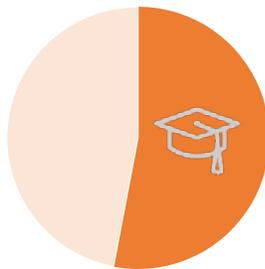
Age



Race & Ethnicity



Educational Attainment

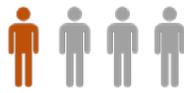


53% of West Roxbury's population age 25 and over hold a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 45% in Boston.



Income & Cost of Living

Median Household Income: West Roxbury
\$86,233



1 in 4 is burdened by housing costs (paying more than 30% of monthly income)

Median Household Income: Boston
\$54,485



1 in 3 is burdened by housing costs (paying more than 30% of monthly income)

Occupations

Top 5 Occupations by percentage of workforce

1. Management
2. Office/Admin support
3. Education and Training
4. Health Practitioners and Technicians
5. Computer and Engineering

1. Office/Admin support
2. Management
3. Sales and related
4. Business and Financial Ops
5. Education and Training

Who We Heard From

A major component of this visioning process was the distribution and promotion of an online survey. The survey had two objectives: let respondents learn about West Roxbury through demographic data, and voice their opinions on the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for Centre and Spring Streets. Their responses to the survey then informed the development of a community vision to guide WRMS' work into the future (pg. 4). The survey was available online for six weeks, from May 9 to June 20. Preliminary results from the survey were presented at the Imagine West Roxbury Visioning Workshop at the Parkway YMCA on Saturday, June 11 to spark conversation among attendees.

Overall, the survey respondent population closely resembles the actual demographics of the neighborhood in terms of housing tenure, income, and race and ethnicity. The majority of age groups, between 30 and 60, were almost equally represented. Many survey respondents noted that West Roxbury feels like a stand-

alone suburban community rather than a neighborhood that is part of the City of Boston. Indeed, WR shares more characteristics with a typical suburban bedroom community than other Boston neighborhoods. There are more residents than jobs in West Roxbury and the vast majority of survey respondents (70%) commute to work outside of WR and own single family homes in WR (79%).

The desirability of WR is positively reflected in the number of residents that choose to "age in place:" living in the same community for as long as they are able, as they age. More than half of the respondents indicate that they have lived in WR for 10 years or more. WR is just as desirable to young couples and families. Census data shows that there are more family households in WR than Boston overall. This group is well represented through the survey: more than half (53%) of survey respondents are between ages 20 and 50.

702

online respondents

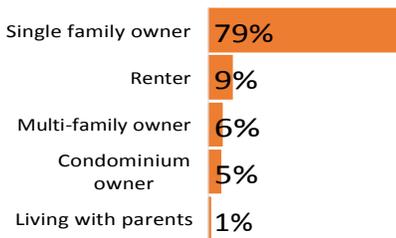
421

drafted a personal vision statement

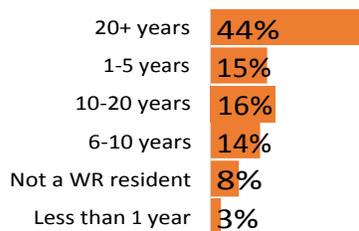
75%

told us who they are:

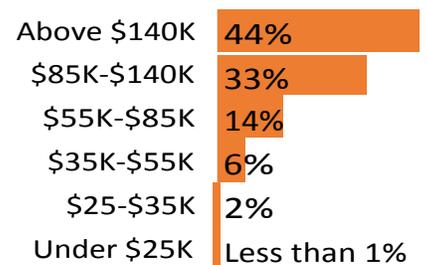
Housing Tenure



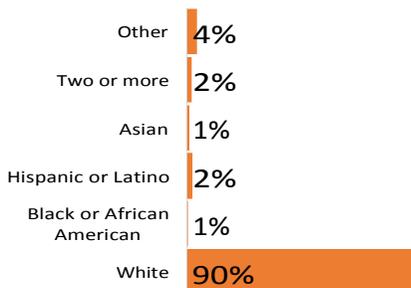
Residency



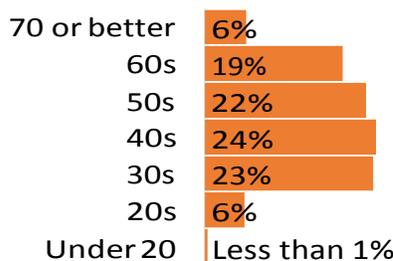
Household Income



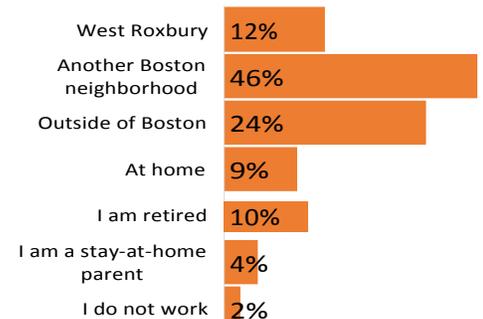
Race and Ethnicity



Age



Place of Work



Visioning Workshop

Months of preparation and community outreach culminated in a half-day community visioning workshop on June 11, 2016. About 100 people joined West Roxbury Main Streets and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council at the Parkway Community YMCA to provide input for what they would like to see within the West Roxbury Business District in the coming years. Through a variety of activities, residents and business owners voiced their opinions for what the neighborhood should look like in terms of business and residential development, streetscape, and more.



When attendees first arrived at the workshop on the morning of the 11th, they were welcomed with breakfast and given the opportunity to mark on boards and maps with where they live, how they heard about the forum, as well as their thoughts about Centre and Spring Streets.



With a full tent of West Roxbury residents and business owners, WRMS and MAPC welcomed attendees and introduced the day's activities.

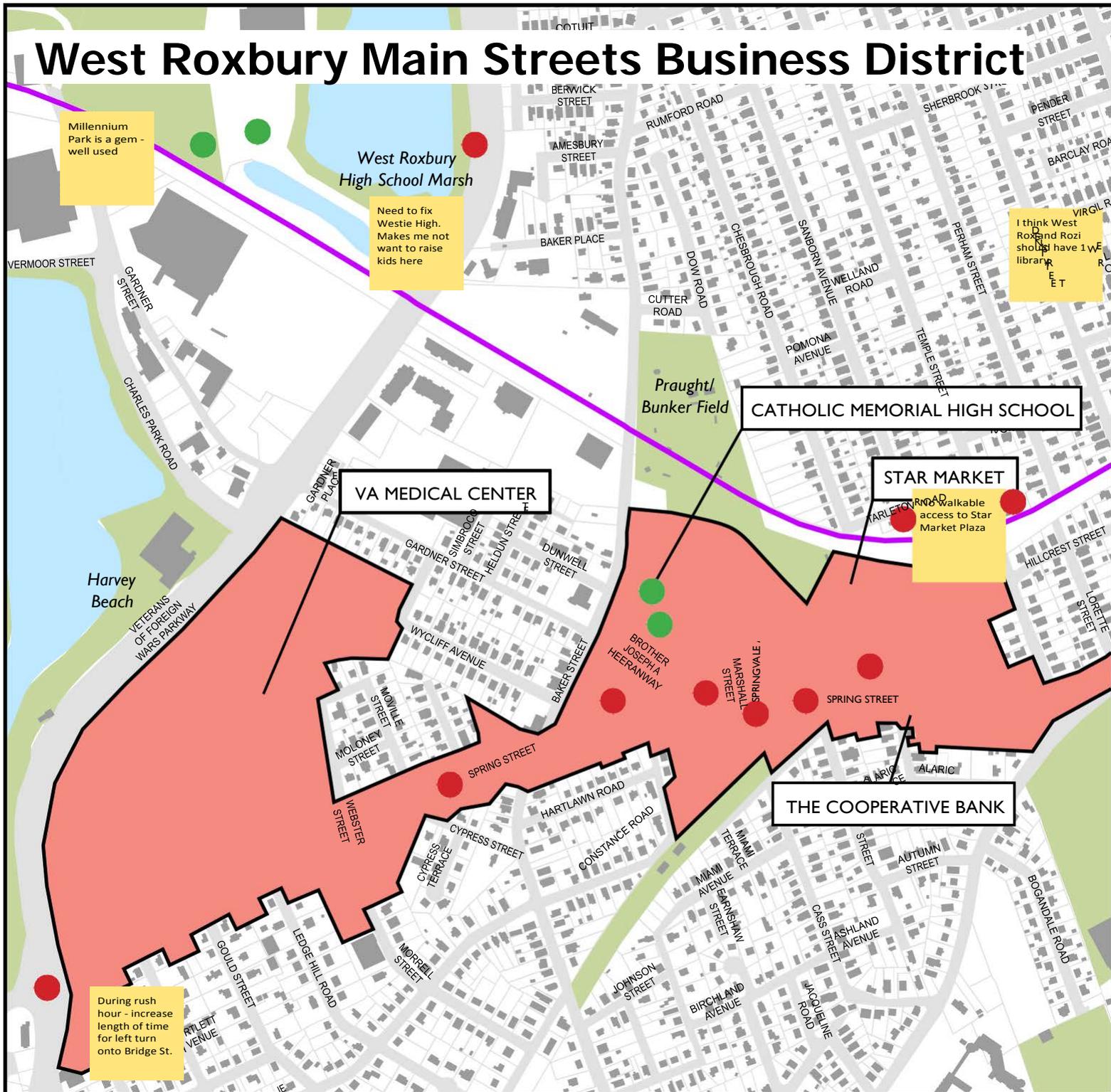


After introductions, attendees broke out into small groups to get to know their fellow community members and hear about why they live in, work in, or visit West Roxbury. They first told their story to one neighbor, and after a bell rang, they created a larger group with another nearby pair. Volunteers then shared their stories with the whole group.

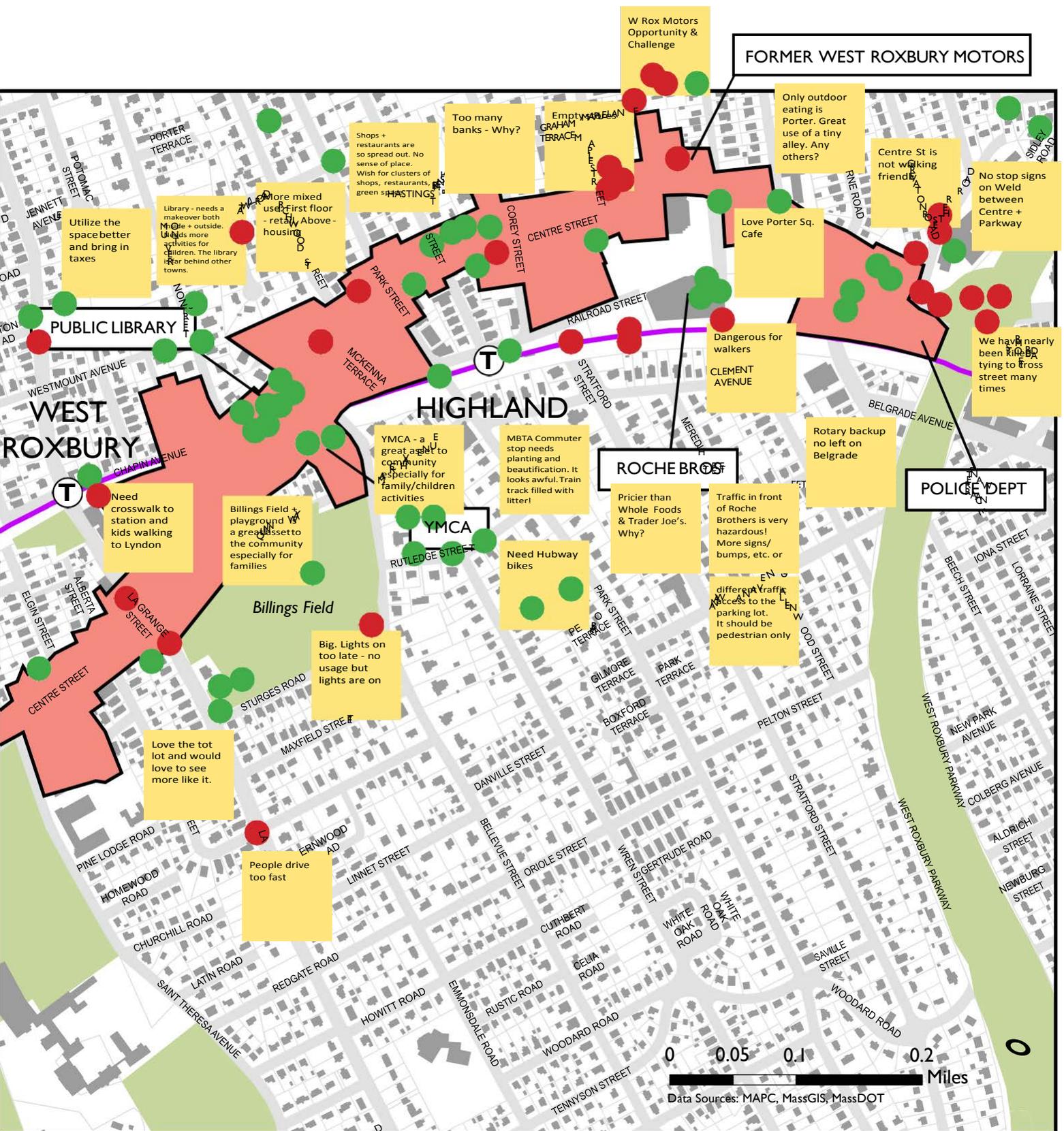


The main portion of the workshop involved an open house format where attendees could visit three stations to learn about/provide feedback on specific topics: streetscape and connectivity, community connections and inclusiveness, and data related to the area's demographics survey responses.

Here's what attendees had to say about what they love about the West Roxbury Main Streets Business District and what could be better.



DISTRICT BOUNDARY **LOVE** **ISSUES/NEEDS IMPROVEMENT**



Content above is as written by attendees, and does not represent the views of West Roxbury Main Streets or the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.

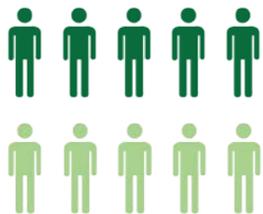
What We Heard

The WRMS online visioning survey offered an opportunity for West Roxbury residents and business owners to learn about the neighborhood's current demographic profile as related to the City of Boston as a whole (see "West Roxbury Today" on page 6). Survey responses revealed that changes in the neighborhood's profile may not be obvious to new and long-time residents alike. Established perceptions have the ability to both inhibit and encourage progress, especially when voices of all stakeholders are not equally heard. The data prompted respondents to assess whether their perceived impressions of West Roxbury matched up with actual Census data from 2014.

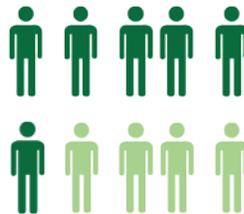
These comments point to the tendency for West Roxbury residents to be open and inclusive, which are attributes that have the strongest

correlation to fostering emotional attachment to one's community. In a 2010 Knight Foundation [study on community attachment](#), Gallup polls found that a high level of attachment is closely associated with positive local GDP growth: when residents love their community, their businesses do well as a result.

In addition to feeling attached, residents also feel well-connected within the neighborhood. According to input gathered at the visioning workshop, most residents do not feel socially isolated. Many get neighborhood news through social media, local papers, and word of mouth. However, many do not feel connected to the City as a whole, expressing that their opinions are often not taken into consideration during the City of Boston's decision-making processes, particular in new development projects.



Half of the respondents were surprised by West Roxbury's current demographic profile.



Two-thirds of respondents were concerned about the current demographic profile of West Roxbury's community.

"Our population is much smaller than I thought."

"West Roxbury is younger than I thought. I'm also surprised there are more family households in WR than Boston."

"With the high cost of real estate in WR, I expected the median income to be much higher."

"I am surprised so many tech and healthcare professionals live here."

"I'm very concerned about our lack of racial and ethnic diversity."

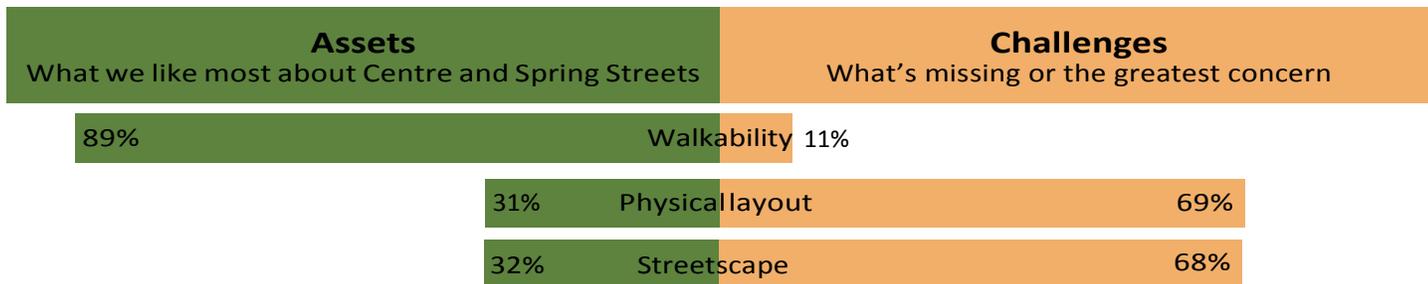
"Our population is getting older. Attracting more young families will keep WR vibrant and energetic. But they cannot afford WR's housing prices!"

"Housing cost burden is such a concern. Many people who have lived here for decades cannot afford to stay here."

Next, the survey asked residents to provide input on what they love, what’s missing, and areas of opportunity, beginning with selecting the business district’s assets and challenges from a list of community attributes. These were the

themes that were identified from more than a thousand comments submitted by 702 online respondents and nearly 100 visioning workshop attendees.

Streetscape & Walkability

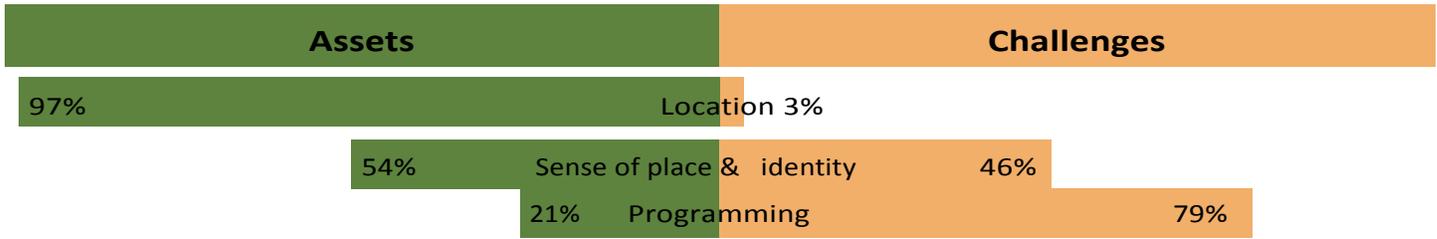


An overwhelming majority of the 702 survey respondents agree that walkability is a top asset of the District, despite many critical comments on its long layout, unattractive streetscape, and safety of its pedestrian crossings. These suggest that while Centre and Spring Streets can be easily covered end to end by foot, the pedestrian experience can be improved upon to make it more engaging, attractive, and safe. Empty storefronts and parking lots between buildings along the corridor create gaps that make Centre and Spring feel uninviting and

discourage walking. The wideness of the streets – enough to accommodate two-lane traffic and curbside parking on both directions – implies that automobile traffic is prioritized over pedestrian activity. The width of the streets also makes the corridor’s landscape feel barren, further contributing to the vulnerability that pedestrians feel during crossings. Many residents would like to see steps taken to calm traffic and install bicycle infrastructure along Centre and Spring Streets.



Sense of Place & Identity



A person's connection to place is rooted in their own experiences and those of their family and community. A sense of place can be strengthened through programming and events that celebrate local heritage, allow residents to collectively experience the amenities of their neighborhood, and provide space for neighbors to make informal social connections. West Roxbury already has many of these: the Spring Festival, Corrib Road Race, and Taste of West Roxbury, to name a few. Furthermore, a sense of place can benefit a community's residents and economy by encouraging people to linger. Availability of places to sit and the presence of other people are essential to encourage lingering. The longer people choose to stay, the more businesses they will visit, thereby providing an economic benefit.

Survey respondents feel that West Roxbury's proximity to Boston and the area's amenities are assets, but showed ambivalence towards the District's sense of place and identity. Although West Roxbury is a neighborhood of Boston, several survey comments likened it to a suburban "town" with the Business District as its "downtown". In fact, many were surprised that West Roxbury only made up 4.5% of Boston's

total population. While the neighborhood has a population almost the size of a suburban town like Dedham, it is twice the size of nearby Westwood. Despite residents' evident bond to the neighborhood and strong desire to define a physical center that reflects who they are, the perceived suburban/urban conflict is a challenge in determining West Roxbury's identity.

Residents have strong emotional attachment to West Roxbury – most have lived in the neighborhood for 10+ years, have no plans to leave, and many have children that are returning as adults starting families of their own. However, the District's identity has not evolved to reflect the experiences of the community's changing demographic profile. Some buildings and structures along Centre and Spring Streets still evoke strong memories for long time residents. Decelle's Department Store was mentioned numerous times in the survey. A business like Decelle's was more than a store; it was also a place where people can linger, run into neighbors and catch up on news in the community. What kinds of places will satisfy both economic and social needs of today and tomorrow's West Roxbury residents?



Economic Vitality

Assets		Challenges	
30%	Business variety	70%	
33%	Business quality	67%	
30%	Housing options	70%	

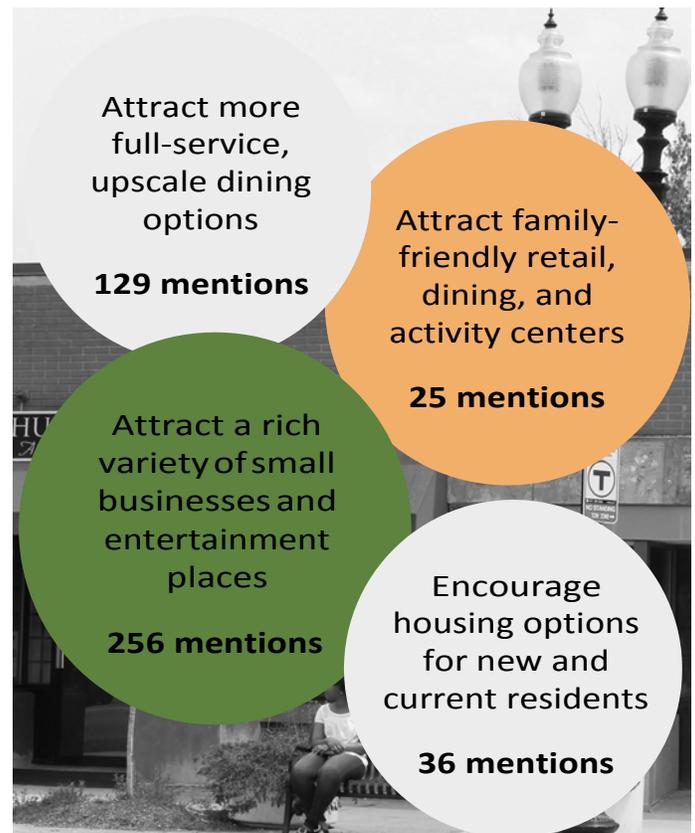
According to Finepoint Associates' 2016 West Roxbury Main Streets Market Profile, Centre and Spring Streets are not lacking in business variety. The existing collection of small take-out restaurants from a mix of cultures speaks to changing preferences in the neighborhood. However, the existing business mix does not provide a range of functions (shopping, dining, entertainment, employment, services, worship, etc.) that is uniquely West Roxbury and not found anywhere else in the region. Therefore, many residents leave West Roxbury to satisfy those needs.

Many survey respondents expressed desire for West Roxbury to emulate the success and vibrancy of Jamaica Plain's main commercial strip along Centre and South Streets. JP and WR's business districts share many qualities: both have long, physical layouts that are walkable, have similar densities of single-story buildings, and in close proximity of transit stations. Moreover, according to the Boston Redevelopment Authority's 2016 Neighborhood Business Patterns report, both WR and JP have comparable shares in retail and professional services in their business mixes, as well as similar number of businesses per capita (60 for WR, 55 for JP). However, the two districts differ drastically in streetscape, neighborhood demographics, and the types of housing density and options surrounding them. JP's main thoroughfare has single-lane traffic and bike lanes on both directions, making it feel more intimate. The business district itself is embedded in a dense, multifamily housing neighborhood occupied by residents in diverse household types who take immense pride in and are committed patrons of its small businesses. Additionally, unlike WR, the majority of ground-level storefronts in JP are occupied by a range of businesses that have diverse hours that keep the streets activated throughout the day and evening with patrons.

A significant number of survey respondents and

workshop participants indicate that business quality, business variety, and housing options are major concerns along the district. They also understand and acknowledge that these issues go hand in hand: the small businesses and dining establishments they desire need a strong, local customer base comprising of households of varied ages, sizes, and incomes in order to survive. Respondents recognize that one of the ways to foster that household diversity is to encourage development of a variety of housing types.

The desirability of West Roxbury will continue to put the neighborhood under development pressure. While change is inevitable, this visioning process is a first step in allowing residents to have a say in steering what types of development comes to West Roxbury.



Priorities & Next Steps

The visioning process identified four key priorities for West Roxbury Main Street's work in the coming years.

Priority

Recommended Actions

Improve business mix

- Engage landlords of vacant properties
- Advocate for changes to permitting and licensing processes
- Hold regular "office hours" for businesses to provide technical assistance
- Market the District to recruit new businesses
- Continue to host business directory and update property opportunities on WRMS.org
- Host pop-up stores or restaurants to test market demand

Strengthen sense of place and identity and unify the streetscape of Centre and Spring Streets

- Activate public space through public art installations
- Install temporary art in vacant storefronts
- Engage with business owners on using parking lots for festivals
- Start a District-wide beautification project to install planters, flower baskets, and banners throughout the corridor
- Engage with the City of Boston on signage design and permitting process
- Host seasonal outdoor music festivals
- Consider closing off a side street to automobile traffic for or block parties

Create a pedestrian and bicyclist-friendly environment

- Encourage and seek opportunities to place outdoor seating or installation of sidewalk benches
- Conduct a parking analysis to assess parking demand
- Improve wayfinding signage for public parking lots to increase lot usage
- Improve signage to transit stations
- Install temporary parklets
- Advocate for multi-modal street design

Foster an inclusive community

- Facilitate community outreach around plans for new developments
- Advocate for well-designed mixed-use development along the corridor
- Schedule regular office hours between residents and WRMS staff
- Serve as community's source of information, especially regarding events and public meetings in and around the neighborhood
- Create and host an open community calendar on WRMS.org

Stay in Touch

This document is just one step towards creating a unified vision for West Roxbury's residents, business owners, and visitors. It is a part of a long-term effort to ensure that all voices in the community are heard. We hope that you will stay in touch and continue to provide feedback following this visioning exercise.

There are multiple ways that you can get involved with West Roxbury Main Streets! From becoming a business or resident member to donating or volunteering, we welcome any level of involvement.

Thank you for your continued support of West Roxbury Main Streets and for being a part of this valuable process. We hope to hear from you soon!

West Roxbury Main Streets
1842 Centre Street,
West Roxbury, MA 02132



(617) 325-6400



[www.facebook.com/
westroxburymainstreets](http://www.facebook.com/westroxburymainstreets)



info@wrms.org



West Roxbury Main Streets
1842 Centre Street
West Roxbury, MA 02132

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Imagine West Roxbury

A Vision for Centre and Spring Streets

