In November and December 2020, the City of Melrose and MAPC conducted two virtual engagement events as part of the Melrose Housing Production Plan. There was (1) an “online open house” held via the web-based Qualtrics software from November 18 to December 16 and (2) a webinar held via the Zoom and PollEverywhere software on December 2. Both events were held virtually due the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks of viral transmission at large in-person events.

This memo summarizes the high-level insights from data collected during this engagement, particularly the quantitative data. Accompanying appendices provide additional presentation of engagement data, particularly the qualitative data.

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Overview of Activities

The two activities offered different ways to engage the same content, including information on the planning process, data on existing conditions, a vision for Melrose’s housing future, and potential priorities the plan could address.

- The online open house was “asynchronous,” meaning participants could engage at any time while it was open, they could go at their own pace, and information was presented through text and images. Participants gave input through the web-based survey tool Qualtrics (either via multiple choice or text-based responses). Approximately 175 people participated in this activity, with 134 people responding to at least one question. A PDF version of the OOH “survey instrument” is included as an appendix to this memo.

- The webinar was “synchronous,” meaning participants and the planning team all engaged at the same time, and information was given through a live presentation and discussion. Participants could directly interact with the planning team verbally or through the Zoom chat function, and they could answer live polling questions related to the content through Poll Everywhere (via text or the web). Live polling results were also visible to participants as they came in. Approximately 60 people participated in this activity, with 44 people participating in the live poll. A video of the webinar was posted online for viewing afterwards, as well as the webinar’s presentation.

The two events provided different formats to accommodate differing needs in the community. Survey/poll questions were substantively similar in each activity, but they were phrased differently, in order to meet the technical needs of the two activities. For that reason, the response data for these activities are not directly comparable. This memo summarizes the results of each activity separately, but identifies emergent themes found in both activities.

Online Open House Results

Members of the Melrose community had the opportunity to participate in a go-at-your-own-pace online open house (OOH). The OOH presented information and solicited feedback across several sections contained several sections:

- About You: Participants could choose to give demographic and housing information about themselves.
- About the Plan: Participants were presented with information about Housing Production Plans, this process specifically, and the plan for public engagement moving forward.
- Existing conditions data: Participants were presented with data points on Melrose’s population, housing stock, and housing affordability. After each data point, participants could say whether that data was surprising or not and provide
further feedback. Participants were also asked about additional information they think would be important for the plan.

- Vision and priorities: Participants were asked for five words that describe their vision for the future of Melrose and were then asked how housing could play a role in achieving that vision. Participants then rated 20 potential housing priorities that the plan could address. (The list of potential priorities was based on common housing issues experienced across the Greater Boston region.)

Participant Profile
Approximately 175 people participated in the OOH, with 134 answering at least one question. There were more responses for earlier questions than for later ones.

Participants could choose to answer questions about their demographics and housing situation. Their answers were roughly compared to Melrose’s overall population, though these comparisons are not always direct and should be taken only as illustrative. For a complete breakdown of participant demographics see Appendix A. Highlights of this data include the following data points:

- 90% of OOH participants owned their home, compared to approximately 66% of households that own their home in the city.
- 79% of participants lived in single-family homes, while only 55% of housing units in Melrose are single-family homes.
- 30% of participants were age 35-44 and 30% were age 45-54. 17% of participants were age 55-64 and 13% were 65-74. Only 9% were age 25-34 and only 1% were 75 or older. Overall, participants overrepresented middle age groups and underrepresented young adults and seniors.
- Participants were given a list of racial and ethnic categories they could identify with, and they could pick more than one category. 85% of participants identified as White alone. 6% of participants identified with more than one category. 5% identified as Asian alone. 2% (2 participants) identified as Latina, Latino, Latinx or Hispanic alone, with an additional 2% identifying as White and Latinx. 1% (1 participant) identified as Black. 6% identified with more than one racial or ethnic category. Because of the way the Census Bureau treats Latinx identity (and the statistically small number of participants of color in the online open house), it can be difficult to directly compare participants to the general population. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, we can say that the proportion of non-Latinx White participants mirrors that within the general population, but the breakdown of people of color among participants does not mirror that of the general population. Black people, in particular, were underrepresented among participants.
- 35% of participants lived in 4-person households, and 34% lived in 2-person households. Only 4% lived in 1-person households.
- 12% of participants have lived in Melrose for 0-2 years, 31% for 3-10 years, 21% for 11-20 years, and 37% for 21 or more years.
- Participation was split across Melrose neighborhoods, with the most participation from Melrose Highlands (22%), the East Side (20%), and Wyoming (13%).
Overall, participation in the OOH exceeded the typical expectations of an in-person public forum in urban planning processes. The high level of participation is good for the plan, though the composition of participants points to a need for more targeted outreach to renters, specific populations of color, seniors, young people, and single-person households.

Responses to Existing Conditions Data

Participants were asked if each data point given was surprising or not surprising. The majority of participants found each data point not surprising. The most surprising data points were the breakdown of households by income status (low-income, moderate-income, etc.), the amount and location of Melrose’s Affordable Housing, and the breakdown of households by housing cost burden.

![Surprising Data Points (Online Open House)]

Participants could also suggest further research directions for the planning process, including:

- Specific strategies that could advance affordability
- Development opportunities (including transit-oriented mixed-use development, accessory dwellings, and small infill development)
- Opportunities for seniors
- Opportunities for people with disabilities
- The impact of short-term rentals
- How technology is changing development
- The reasons driving segregation (including the legacy of redlining)
Visioning

Participants were asked to write five words describing their future vision of housing. Words related to affordability were the most common words in the visioning exercise, followed by words related to diversity and inclusion (often specifically relating to race) and words related to community. Words related to walkability, sustainability and the environment, vibrancy, and green spaces were also common.

Word cloud open house visioning responses
### Potential Priorities

Participants were given a list of 20 potential housing priorities based on common housing needs and desires in the Greater Boston Region. Participants could then rate each item as a low-, medium-, or high-priority, and leave additional comments on each if necessary.

#### Priority Ratings (Online Open House)

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<tr>
<th>Priority Rating</th>
<th>Percent of respondent ratings</th>
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<tr>
<td>Racial and ethnic integration in housing</td>
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<td>Housing near transportation options</td>
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<td>Housing affordable to low-income households</td>
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<td>Housing near amenities</td>
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<td>A range of housing types</td>
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<td>Housing affordable to moderate-income households</td>
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<td>Housing accessible to people with disabilities</td>
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<td>Smaller housing options</td>
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<td>Housing for new families</td>
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<td>More mixed-use development</td>
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<td>Housing for extremely low-income households</td>
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<td>More or better rental options</td>
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<td>Choices for downsizing</td>
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<td>Support for seniors to stay in their homes</td>
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<tr>
<td>More or better homeownership options</td>
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<td>Multi-generational housing options</td>
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<td>Housing near jobs</td>
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<td>Co-housing, co-living, or home-sharing options</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing for single people</td>
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<td>Age-restricted senior housing</td>
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50% or more of respondents rated each of the following as a high priority for the plan:

- Racial and ethnic integration in housing (65%)
- Housing near transportation options (64%)
- Housing affordable to low-income households (up to about $67,000 for a single person or $97,500 for a family of four) (61%)
- Housing near amenities (local retail, parks, etc.) (51%)
- A range of housing types (such as single family homes, duplexes, small multifamily buildings, and/or large multifamily buildings) (50%)
• Housing affordable to moderate-income households (up to about $83,000 for a single person or $119,000 for a family of four) (50%)

Participants also suggested numerous other priorities the plan could address. Common themes included:
• Homeownership
• Energy efficiency of housing
• Architectural and/or aesthetic priorities
• Funding issues
• Issues related to infrastructure impacted by housing

Webinar Results
Members of the Melrose community were invited to participate in a live webinar on December 2, 2020. During that event (held on Zoom), MAPC and City staff presented on the planning process, existing conditions data, and they asked about the community’s vision and housing priorities. Participants asked questions and gave comments through the Zoom chat function, through verbal discussion, and via a live poll. The content of the webinar was substantively similar to the online open house, but the event itself allowed for more interactivity between staff and community. Approximately 60 people attended the webinar, with 44 people answering at least one question through the live poll.

Participant Profile
At the beginning of the webinar, participants had the option of entering their demographic information into the live poll (though the live results were not shown to participants). Only 25 people entered their demographic details, just more than half of the 44 people who answered poll questions overall. Because of this disparity in participation, the profile of those who answered these questions does not necessarily reflect the profile of those responding to the webinar’s poll questions, or webinar participants generally. With that caveat in mind, the respondents to demographic questions had the following profile:
• 84% of respondents were homeowners, more than the proportion of homeowners in the general population.
• 72% of respondents lived in single-family homes, more than the proportion of households in single-family homes in the population generally.
• 16% of respondents were age 25-34, 28% of respondents were 35-44, 12% were 45-54, 24% were 55-64, and 16% were 65-74. Only 1 respondent (4%) was age 18-24. No respondents were under 18, nor were any 85 or older.
• 84% of respondents identified as White alone, slightly less than the proportion of non-Latinx White people in Melrose (85%). The remaining respondents were either Asian, multiracial (exclusively White and Asian), or some other race/ethnicity. There were no Black, Latinx, or indigenous respondents.
• Almost half (48%) of respondents lived in 4-person households, while 28% lived in 2-person households. Single-person households, 3-person households, and households with five or more people had 8% of respondents each.
• There was a range of amounts of time that respondents have lived in Melrose. 8% had lived in Melrose for 0 to 2 years, 33% for 3-10 years, 17% for 11-20 years, and 42% for 21 or more years.

• Nearly one third (32%) of respondents lived on the East Side, 16% lived in Melrose Highlands, and 12% each lived Downtown and Cedar Park. One respondent did not live in Melrose.

Again, we have this demographic information for just over half of webinar live poll respondents, so this demographic profile cannot be confidently applied to all live poll respondents or all webinar participants.

Responses to Existing Conditions Data
Webinar participants were asked if each data point given was surprising. A slim majority of respondents (53%) found Melrose’s housing units by housing tenure (the homeowner and renter breakdown) to be surprising and half found the housing units by number of bedrooms surprising. 44% of respondents found the households by income status and the households by housing cost burden to be surprising. Less than 30% of respondents found other data points surprising.

Participants could also suggest data points the planning process should investigate further, including the following:

• Specific policies the City could pursue (including zoning and tax policies)
• Specific locations of potential housing development
• Melrose’s affordability in a regional context (comparing Melrose to other communities)
• The impact of short-term rentals

**Visioning**
Participants were asked to write five words describing their future vision of housing. Words related to diversity and inclusion were the most common words given by participants, followed by words related to affordability. Words related to walkability, accessibility, sustainability, and vibrancy were also common.

*Word cloud webinar visioning responses*
Potential Priorities

Participants were shown lists of potential housing priorities based on common housing needs and desires in the Greater Boston region. They then rated which items should be a high priority for the planning process. (Unlike the online open house, participants did not have the ability to rate items as low or medium priority due to technical limitations in the live poll.)

An overwhelming majority (81%) of respondents felt that a range of housing types (such as single family homes, duplexes, small multifamily buildings, and/or large multifamily buildings) should be a high priority of the plan. A strong majority (61-65%) felt that the plan’s high priorities should also include more mixed-use development (residential over ground-floor commercial), housing near transportation options, and housing for low-income households (up to $66,650 for a 1-person household or $95,200 for a 4-person household). Significant minorities (35-48%) of respondents felt high priorities should also include choices for downsizing, racial and ethnic integration in housing, smaller housing options, housing affordable to moderate-income households (up to $83,300 for a 1-person household or $119,000 for a 4-person household), and housing near amenities (local retail, parks, etc.).
Discussion

The fall engagement data will provide an important basis for further discussion about the future of Melrose’s housing. These activities gave insight into the needs and desires of the Melrose community, and this section articulates some of those insights that will help guide future engagement and analysis.

Gaps in participation

Participation in the fall public engagement activities was different than that of typical urban planning processes. This is likely due to the high level of civic engagement within the Melrose community and the virtual nature of engagement during a pandemic. Some of the notable takeaways from engagement in both activities include:

- Across these activities, the proportion of non-Latinx White people was similar to that in the general population. This is encouraging, since typically this demographic is overrepresented in planning processes.
- Black and Latinx people were still underrepresented in the Fall outreach. The HPP process will need to address this gap with additional targeted outreach through existing networks of these communities.
- Seniors were underrepresented in the fall outreach. Typically, seniors are overrepresented in urban planning engagement activities. While it is encouraging to see more participation from other age groups, underrepresentation of seniors is not good either, especially since many housing issues directly affect and are affected by the senior population. The change in senior participation is likely driven by the online format of engagement. Working through this engagement gap during the pandemic will require targeted, more phone-based outreach through existing networks in the senior community and through organizations that serve seniors.
- Young people (including young adults age 18-34) were underrepresented in these activities. While this is typical for many urban planning processes, their lack of representation must be addressed through targeted outreach through networks of young residents and through organizations that serve young people.
- Renters were underrepresented in these activities. Like with young people, this is typical in urban planning processes, but especially problematic in Melrose, where the proportion of renter households is relatively high. Renters may best be reached through place-based outreach or through informal social networks.
- People living in single-family homes were overrepresented in these activities. Like with renters, place-based outreach and informal social networks will likely be the best ways to target people living in other types of housing.
- Single-person households were underrepresented in these activities. This gap is likely due (in part) to low participation of seniors, who are more likely to live in single-person households than other age groups. Outreach to seniors may resolve this issue.
Addressing Housing Misconceptions

Responses to the existing conditions data varied across the activities. Webinar participants were generally more surprised by the data than open house participants, with one data point, households by tenure (homeowner/renter breakdown), rated as surprising by more than half of webinar live poll respondents. By contrast, no data point was rated as surprising by more than a third of open house participants. Which data points were surprising also varied between the two activities, though there was some overlap. The following six data points were rated by surprising by more than 20% of participants in both activities:

- Households by income status
- Households by housing cost-burden
- Household types (family/non-family)
- Households by tenure (homeowner/renter)
- Population growth
- Housing units by number of bedrooms

This list of surprising data points could point to some relatively widespread misconceptions or “myths” about housing in Melrose. Moving forward, the plan can look to addressing these myths through further education and public discussion.

Visioning

This plan will eventually state a vision for Melrose’s housing future. This broad statement of values will provide overall direction to the plan, and will attempt to translate that statement into more specific policy. The fall engagement activities asked participants to describe their general vision for Melrose’s future in five words. Popular themes emerging from this exercise included:

- Affordability
- Diversity and inclusion (often specifically racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion)
- Community
- Sustainability
- Walkability
- Vibrancy

These popular themes provide an important direction for this process as it begins to define a vision statement, though the process must closely consider less popular themes as well.

Priorities

The two activities varied slightly in which potential priorities received the most support as high-priority items for the plan. (The framing of the activities was slightly different, which may account for some of the response variation; webinar participants could only rate an item as high-priority or not high-priority, while open house participants could rate an item high-, medium-, or low-priority.)

To compare the results of the two activities, we ranked the list of items by the percent of respondents that rated each item as high-priority. Eight items were in the top 10 high-priority items for both activities. These items were:
• Racial and ethnic integration in housing
• Housing near transportation options
• Housing affordable to low-income households (up to about $67,000 for a single person or $97,500 for a family of four)
• Housing near amenities (local retail, parks, etc.)
• A range of housing types (such as single-family homes, duplexes, small multifamily buildings, and/or large multifamily buildings)
• Housing affordable to moderate-income households (up to about $83,000 for a single person or $119,000 for a family of four)
• Smaller housing options (such as accessory apartments, cottage housing, and other options of 1500 square feet or less)
• More mixed-use development (residential over ground-floor commercial)

A majority of open house participants rated these eight items as high-priority. Only four of the items received high-priority ratings from a majority of webinar participants, who generally rated fewer items as high-priority.

While it will be crucial to respond to high-priority concerns in the rest of this planning process, many items left off the above list will be important to consider in order to pursue the community’s vision for its future.

**Disagreement and consensus**

This memo honed in on common themes and responses in the engagement data, in order to identify actionable insights. These commonalities should not be mistaken for consensus, however. There was disagreement in the community’s vision for the future and on specific priorities. It is important to understand what opinions are popular in the Melrose community, but it is equally important to consider that not all respondents felt the same way. Disagreement is good, as it highlights the diversity of needs experienced in any community. Moving forward, this process will work to accommodate the many voices and views found in Melrose, and ultimately to meet housing needs in line with the community’s vision for its housing future.
Appendices

See the accompanying appendices at www.mapc.org/melrose-housing.