



PTAC Union Square Walk Audit (April 2025)

City of Somerville Responses
November 20, 2025

Union Square – Walk Audit



Thank you for hosting, collaborating, and summarizing the Union Square Walk Audit conducted April 29, 2025:

- Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)
- Somerville Alliance for Safe Streets (SASS)
- Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD)
- The Groundwork Somerville Green Team
- Union Square Main Streets (USMS)

Staff from the following City departments and divisions reviewed the report and responded to the short- and long-term recommendations:

- OSPCD – Mobility
- OSPCD – Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF)
- Engineering
- Department of Public Works (DPW)

Union Square Plaza + Streetscape Project



Background

- City conducted a large-scale community engagement and design development effort between 2021 and 2023.
- Project team published 25% design for this large project area in fall 2023.
- Our 25% design package included preliminary cost estimates to complete the designs, as well as preliminary cost estimates for construction.
- All project materials can be found on web page <https://voice.somervillema.gov/union-square-p-and-s>



USQ Plaza+Streetscape – Phasing

Phase 1 - USQ Plaza + Streetscape

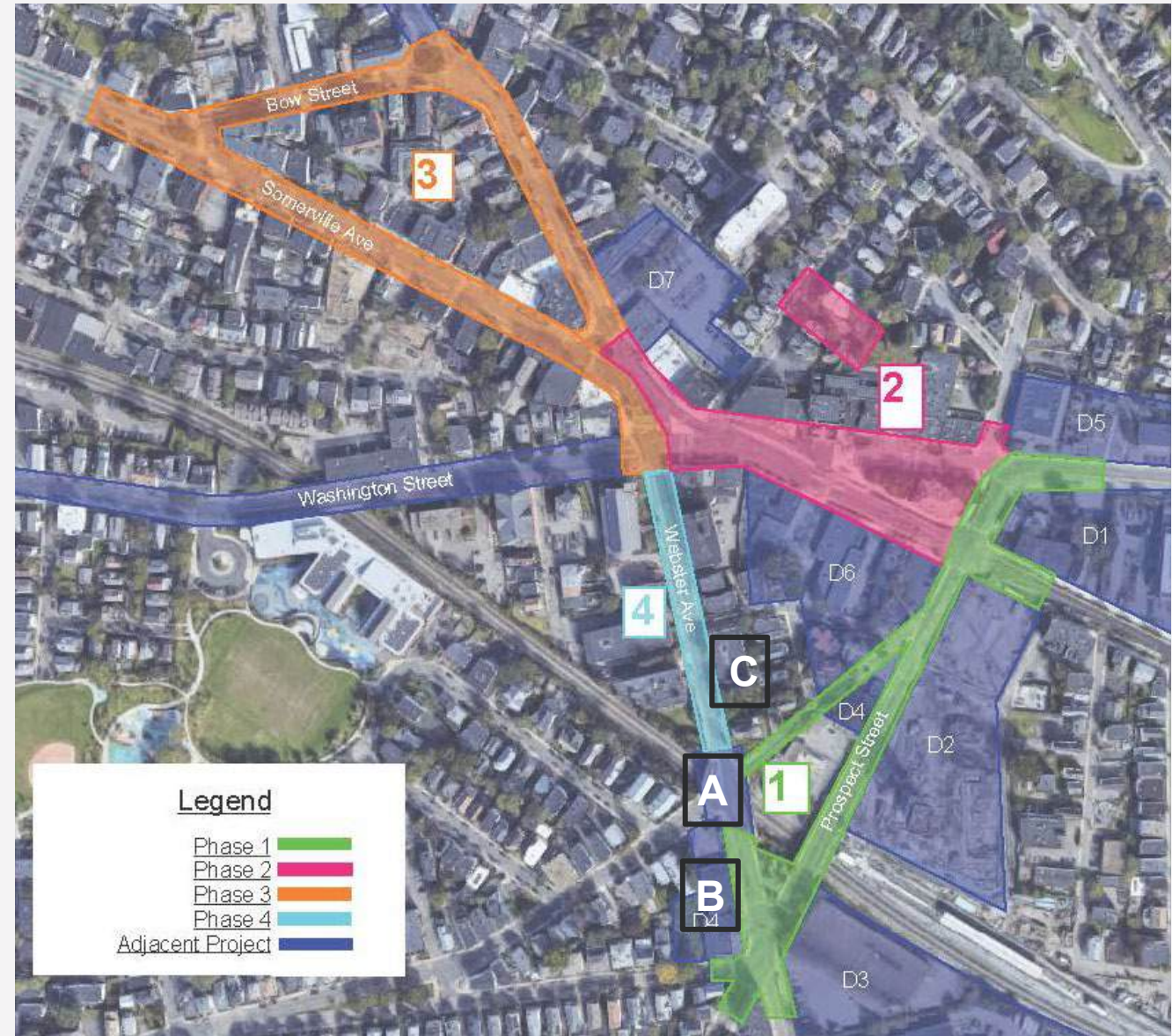
- City developed a phasing strategy for this large project area.
- Phase 1 project area is focused on Prospect Street, including the intersections of Prospect/Webster and Prospect/Somerville.
- We anticipate that we will be able to restart our design effort in 2026, aiming to bring the Phase 1 design from 25% to 100%.

Phase 1 – Adjacent Projects

A: Webster Street Bridge Reconstruction – MassDOT

B: Planned Housing Development – US2/SCC/POAH

C: Planned Housing Development – Just-A-Start



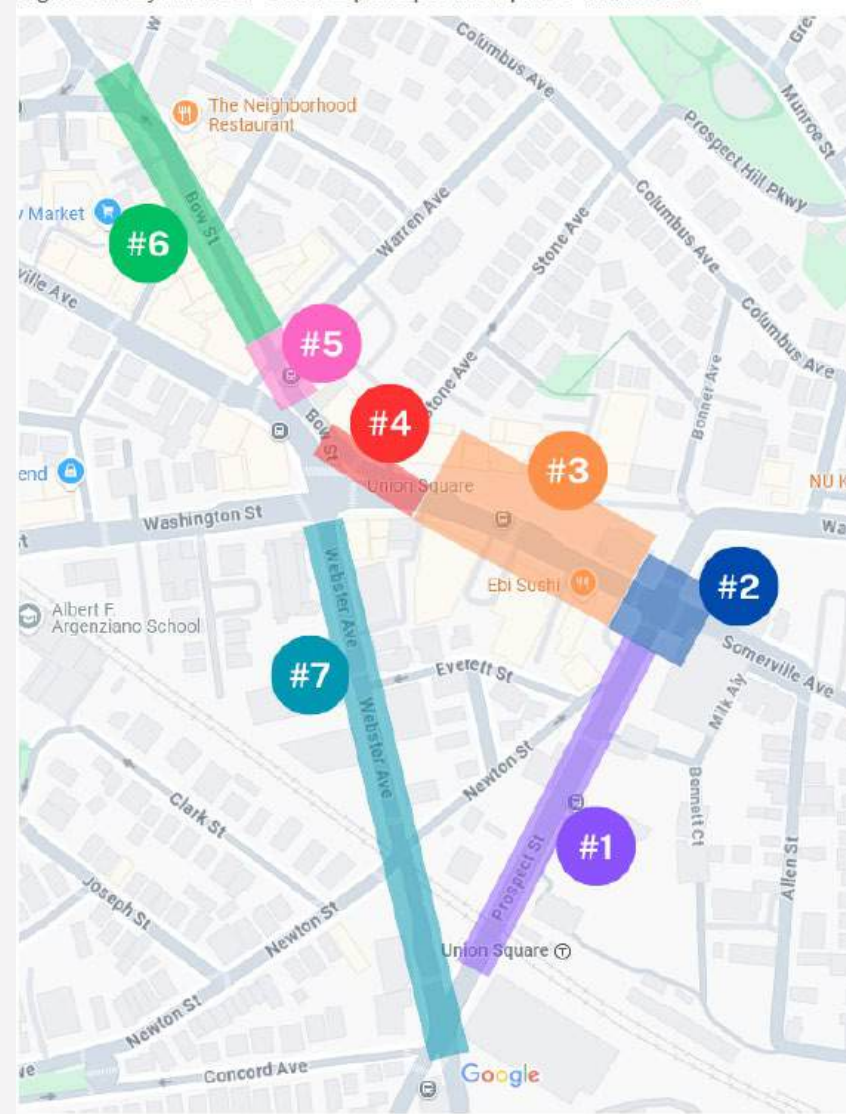
Union Square – PTAC Walk Audit



Key Areas

1. Prospect Street
2. Somerville Avenue/Prospect Street
3. Plaza/Somerville Avenue
4. Somerville Avenue/Stone Avenue
5. Bow Street/Warren Avenue
6. Bow Street
7. Webster Avenue

Figure 1: Key Areas of Union Square per the April 29 Walk Audit



Key Area 1 – Prospect Street

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS



Priority Recommendation:

Create a temporary mid-block crossing across Prospect St, either at the Green Line station elevator or at Bennett Ct, thus restoring the crossing that was present during recent construction in the area.

City Response:

- To place a safe crosswalk in this location we need to consider adequate lighting, accessibility, and proximity to the Somerville Ave intersection.
- Phase 1 of USQ Plaza + Streetscape, which is planned to start with design in 2026, will include this location.
- The City does not recommend a temporary crosswalk.

Replace the narrow tactile pads at Bennett Ct with wider ones.

City Response:

- The City continues to evaluate the design of crosswalks, in particular the width and depth and placement of tactile tiles and the use of directional tiles for at grade and raised crosswalks/intersections.
- The City will work with PTAC and SCPD to develop standards that are safe for all users.
- 24 inches is the national and local standard
 - PROWAG R305.1.4 Surface Size
<https://www.access-board.gov/prowag/technical.html>

Key Area 1 – Prospect Street

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS



Add a clearly visible wayfinding sign or banner to the fence on the west side of Prospect St opposite the Green Line station elevator (see Figure 2 for a rough mockup), as well as to the interior of the elevator.

City Response:

- The City will incorporate this recommendation in the design for Phase 1 of USQ Plaza + Streetscape and will work with MassDOT, MBTA, and US2 to install wayfinding along Prospect Street as soon as possible.

Add planters, more tables/seating, and temporary art installations to break up the wide open space next to the Green Line station and make the area more inviting

City Response:

- US2 manages the public space next to the Green Line station.
- The City will share the desire to activate the plaza with US2.

Key Area 1 – Prospect Street

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS



Put the utilities on Prospect St near Webster Ave underground to free up additional room on sidewalks

City Response:

- Some of the current sidewalk widths are constrained by the width of the bridge.
- The sidewalks at the Webster Avenue intersection will be widened with new development on the east side and with Phase 1 implementation on the west side.
- Phase 1 design will ensure that placement of utility poles on Webster Avenue and Prospect Street meet minimum ADA accessible sidewalks widths.

Add a wayfinding pillar similar to the ones recently installed throughout Union Square between the Green Line station elevator and stairs

City Response:

- Recent wayfinding pillars around Union Square were installed by Union Square Main Streets using American Rescue Plan Act funding.
- Around the Green Line station US2 installed wayfinding signs.
- In Phase 1 the City will work with US2, USMS, and PTAC on potential locations and design of wayfinding along Prospect Street.



Key Area 2 – Somerville Avenue/Prospect Street

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority Recommendation: Implement a pedestrian-only phase to enable people to cross once diagonally. If the above is not possible, add wayfinding indicating to pedestrians coming from the Green Line station that they can save time by crossing Prospect St first and then using the mid-block crossing at the 87/109/91 bus stop to continue traveling through the square. Ensure any pedestrian-only phase offers enough time to cross comfortably, especially for older individuals or those with mobility impairments.

City Response:

- We have been working with the MBTA on a project that will improve signal operations at this intersection. Right now, pedestrians may wait up to 3 minutes before getting the walk sign. The new project will ensure that the wait for any given crosswalk is no longer than 2 minutes.
- We have evaluated a pedestrian-only phase and determined that it is not feasible at this time. Given the volume of traffic at this intersection, a pedestrian-only phase would likely increase traffic congestion (and bus delay) to the point of creating gridlock and therefore safety concerns at nearby intersections.
- Our pedestrian-only phases are currently designed for the majority of pedestrians, including older adults or those with mobility impairments, to have enough time to cross the longest crosswalk at a signalized intersection. At this time, we do not design our pedestrian-only signal phases for diagonal crossings.
- We are reluctant to add more signs in this area without a more comprehensive wayfinding strategy.



Key Area 2 – Somerville Avenue/Prospect Street

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority Recommendation: Implement transit signal priority.

City Response:

- Earlier this year, we began a joint project with the MBTA to redesign signal operations at the 3 main intersections in Union Square.
- In addition to updating signal timing and phasing, this project will include the following:
 - Transit signal priority
 - Camera detection
 - Signal coordination
 - Remote communications
 - Permanent traffic counters

Add street identification to the audible crossing prompts.

City Response:

- We have designed a new standard sign that's been installed above push buttons that identifies which street is being crossed and includes raised text and Braille for visually impaired individuals. These signs are currently being deployed throughout the city and have been installed at this intersection.

Key Area 2 – Somerville Avenue/Prospect Street

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS



Add a painted bike box at the northwest corner of this intersection to facilitate a left turn from Somerville Ave onto Prospect St for people biking.

City Response:

- This intersection was designed for a person on a bike to take this turn in two stages, as shown in the image on the right.
- Since this allows the person on the bike to be in a more protected area while waiting to make the second stage of the movement, we do not recommend painting a bike box in front of the southbound Washington Street travel lane.





Key Area 2 – Somerville Avenue/Prospect Street

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Holistically rethink how streets fit together at this intersection so as to avoid delays and confusion for people walking and taking the bus.

City Response:

- The conceptual design of the USQ Plaza + Streetscape project is intended to reduce delays and improve user experience for transit riders and pedestrians. We intend to advance this design in 2026.
- In the interim, we intend to make improvements through the joint signals project that we are working on with the MBTA.

Key Area 3 – Plaza/Somerville Avenue

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority Recommendations: Cover the roots of the five Honey Locust trees in front of El Potro with pervious material.

City Response:

- PSUF and DPW will review and consider potential installation of flexi-pave material at this location.



Priority Recommendations: Activate the plaza with a variety of seating options, tables, and temporary public art – similar to the Gilman Square Pop-Up.

City Response:

- Continued activations are funding-dependent, and we will need to weigh options of short-term activation versus long-term site renovations.
- This work is included in Phase 2 of the Union Square Plaza work, and while there is not yet a confirmed time commitment, it is part of the long-term planning efforts.



Key Area 3 – Plaza/Somerville Avenue SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Add a signal activation button to the pedestrian refuge in the middle of the mid-block crossing, adding to the two buttons on either side of the crossing. (Problem identified for folks with mobility impairments or difficulty walking getting stuck in the middle.)

City Response:

- Mobility and Engineering will investigate the feasibility of adding an additional button to this mid-block crossing.

Add paint and tactical markings to the sidewalk and wayfinding signage to distinguish between the bus stop waiting area and the plaza, and to offer pedestrians a clear path through the plaza.

City Response:

- The City has determined that this is not a short-term project but have noted this as a point for consideration as part of the Phase 2 plaza project.
- At this time, the bus stop waiting area on the bus shelter side of the bike lane is not distinct from the plaza and bus riders are free to wait anywhere in the plaza.



Key Area 3 – Plaza/Somerville Avenue

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Move the bus shelter closer to the roadway to ease access for riders and route the protected bike lane behind it.

City Response:

- At this time, the bus stop boarding island is not wide enough to fit a bus shelter and remain compliant with MBTA accessibility standards. It was designed and constructed before this type of treatment was more common. Given the narrow width of the island, seating/waiting options are provided on both sides of the bicycle facility.
- The redesign of the Plaza and this section of Somerville Avenue in Phase 2 will address separation of people walking, waiting, and biking.

Offer a robust variety of seating options – from the secluded and personal to the wide and open – interspersed with trees, plants, and public art throughout the square to invite teens and others to linger comfortably.

City Response:

This feedback will be incorporated in Phase 2 with a full redesign of Union Square Plaza.

Key Area 4 – Somerville Avenue/Stone Avenue

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS



Implement a pilot project to close the Bow St slip lane using temporary materials like jersey barriers, similar to how the City handled the Highland Ave slip lane in Davis Square. We recommend implementing temporary traffic-calming features at Stone Ave as part of this pilot, to mitigate any hasty driver behavior that might result as people become familiar with the changes.

City Response:

- Closing the slip lane in this location would route the entire northbound Somerville Ave traffic to the intersection at Washington Street.
- The current geometry of that intersection does not allow for right turn movements of buses, fire trucks, and other larger vehicles.
- The intersection will be changed with Phase 2 of the USQ Plaza+Streetscape project.

*Priority Recommendation:
Make the audible crossing prompts louder and add street identification to them*

City Response:

- We have designed a new standard sign installed above push buttons that identify which street is being crossed and includes raised text and Braille for visually impaired individuals.
- However, due to the existing sign sizes at the Stone Avenue intersection, these new signs could not be installed in this location.
- The City has not yet developed a policy around push button volumes. When considering volumes, we often have to think about sound experience throughout the day as well as impacts to nearby residents. We do not anticipate making changes to this signal until we have developed a policy.

Key Area 5 – Bow Street/Warren Avenue

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority recommendation: Replace the mixed signals and signs with all-way stop signs.

City Response:

- This change would likely have significant impacts to all street users and would require extensive evaluation and coordination.
- We recommend waiting until Phase 2 of the USQ Plaza + Streetscape project which will significantly change this intersection.



Key Area 6 – Bow Street (Walnut Street Intersection)

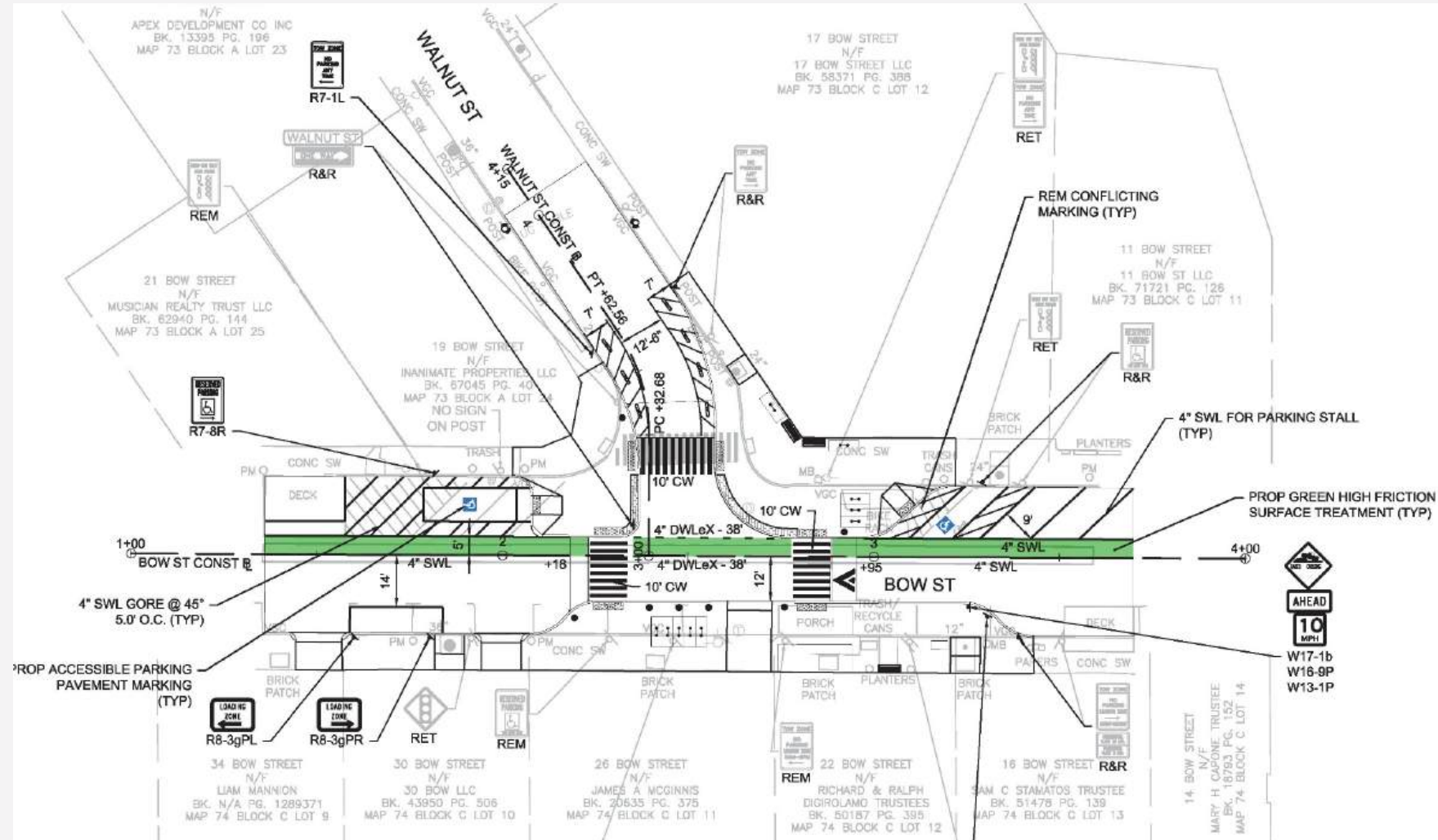
LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS



*Install tactile pads at the crossing where missing.
Repaint crosswalk markings were faded.*

City Response:

- The Walnut Street/Bow Street intersection will be reconstructed to a fully raised intersection including all new tactile pads, curb extension to shorten crossing distance, and newly painted crosswalks (project is scheduled for construction start Spring 2026).



Key Area 6 – Bow Street

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that if the small park on Bow St near Wesley Park is no longer accessible because of the planned roundabout, it is replaced with another nearby green space of equal or better quality.

City Response:

- Phase 4 of the USQ Plaza + Streetscape project will pedestrianize the eastern section of Bow Street creating open space with seating, trees, and planted areas.
- The remaining roundabout is intended to be planted.





Key Area 7 – Webster Avenue

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority Recommendation: Increase the length of the pedestrian phase at Webster Ave and Prospect St to allow pedestrians to cross comfortably, including diagonally.

City Response:

- We have confirmed that the length of the pedestrian phase at this intersection meets our current policy, which allows a pedestrian walking at 3 feet per second to cross the longest leg of the intersection.
- As noted in a prior comment, we do not design pedestrian-only signal phases for diagonal crossings at this time.

Priority Recommendation: Increase the frequency of the pedestrian phase at Webster Ave and Prospect St.

City Response:

- As noted in prior comments, we are working with the MBTA to improve signal operations at these intersections.
- Our goal is to keep pedestrian wait times to a minimum by keeping the overall signal cycle as short as possible.



Key Area 7 – Webster Avenue

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority Recommendation: Install “No Turn on Red” signs at Webster Ave and Prospect St.

City Response:

- No Turn on Red signs are currently present on 3 of the 4 legs of this intersection.
- The City is currently reviewing its No Turn on Red policy. Signage at this intersection will be addressed as part of that review.

Replace the soft plastic tactile pads at Webster Ave and Prospect St with metal ones to increase durability.

City Response:

- We do not currently have a process set up to replace all plastic pads with metal ones.
- DPW will replace broken pads with metal pads. Please, enter 311 calls if you see any.
- We will install metal pads when these ramps are fully reconstructed as part of the USQ Plaza + Streetscape project.



Key Area 7 – Webster Avenue

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Combine the two light cycles across Somerville Ave and Bow St into a single cycle of the same length.

City Response:

- The signal across Somerville Avenue, or eastbound, portion of the Warren Ave intersection is currently timed with the main intersection at Webster Avenue and Washington Street to keep traffic flowing between those two signals. The walk sign for the crosswalk across Somerville Avenue at Warren Avenue is on whenever Somerville Avenue at Webster Avenue has a red signal, which maximizes the amount of time that pedestrians can cross.
- On the westbound side of the intersection, across Bow Street, the signal rests in green for Bow Street traffic and goes red when a pedestrian pushes the button to cross the street. Since there is more overall time that vehicles can be exiting the intersection in the westbound direction, the pedestrian phase would be much shorter on this side if it were timed with the main intersection instead of on-demand.
- While it does result in two different setups, we recommend maintaining the existing pattern as it maximizes the amount of walk time for pedestrians.

Add an audible prompt to the southbound crossing at Webster Ave and Washington St, from Gracie's to Saint Joseph's Church.

City Response:

- As noted in a prior comment, we have designed a new standard sign to improve accessible wayfinding at signalized crossings.
- While we don't include street names as part of our standard for the audible component of these systems at this time, we will keep this feedback in mind as a way to reinforce the new signs.



Key Area 7 – Webster Avenue

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Install a designated pick-up/drop-off area in front of Prospect Hill Academy to reserve parking spaces in the morning and afternoon so cars don't block the bike lanes.

City Response:

- Currently, there are time limited dedicated pick-up and drop-off spots for Prospect Hill Academy on the westside Webster Avenue.
- Webster Avenue will be reconstructed in the last phase of the USQ Plaza + Streetscape project .
- As part of that phase, the City will continue to work with Prospect Hill Academy and residents in this area to incorporate better pick-up/drop-off while incorporating improved sidewalks and adding bicycle lanes.

Replace the metal guardrail with a green buffer or another pedestrian-centric separator.

City Response:

- MassDOT's new Webster Avenue bridge will include wider sidewalks, delineators to separate bicycle lanes, and removal of the guardrails.
- Where guardrails are still needed, the City is working with MassDOT to set them back as much as possible.
- New development around Webster Avenue will include trees and planted areas where possible.

Key Area 7 – Webster Avenue

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

*Widen and reconstruct all sidewalks on Webster Ave, including at the Prospect St intersection.
Put utility poles underground.*

City Response:

- The Prospect Street intersection will be reconstructed in Phase 1 and will include widened sidewalks.
- The City worked with MassDOT to ensure that the new Webster Avenue bridge has wider sidewalks.
- In Phase 4, we aim to improve and upgrade Webster Avenue sidewalks. However, due to the overall width of the street and the addition of bicycle lanes in both directions, wider sidewalks might not be possible.
- All street improvement projects will have a minimum accessible sidewalk width around utility poles, streetlights, and traffic signals.

