

ULI District Council of Boston Technical Assistance Panel: Revitalizing Mattapan Square

Consistent with the Urban Land Institute's mission to foster responsible land use, ULI's Boston District Council periodically convenes Technical Assistance Panels to assist public officials or non-profit groups in the redevelopment or revitalization of their community. Real estate experts spend a day tackling specific land use, planning and development issues, and formulating realistic options to move revitalization projects forward.

ULI recently focused on Mattapan Square, a major focal point of the Mattapan community. The Square is located on the south central city limits of Boston, adjacent to the Neponset River and abutting the town of Milton. Mattapan Square has long served as a major gateway to Boston and is bisected by Blue Hill Avenue, River Road and Cummins Highway. The Square also serves as an origination point for the MBTA Red Line.

Mattapan features a culture-rich community; approximately 90 percent of its population consists of residents with Caribbean or African heritage. Despite its Gateway location and diversity, Mattapan's future remains dampened by a neighborhood commercial square that lacks the viable residential and commercial options needed for a vibrant urban community.

In an effort to foster positive change, the Mattapan Community Development Corporation (CDC) asked the ULI Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) for insights that would increase Mattapan's housing stock and revitalize the Square's commercial district. The TAP convened on April 26, 2004 and consisted of nine ULI members with relevant experience in development, urban planning and financing. Panel members included:

Glenn Burdick (chair), President, UBJ Ventures LLC
Kevin Boyle, Senior Vice President, Citizens Bank
John Civilinski, Director Real Estate Planning & Investment, Gravestar
Mark Hunsberger, Economic Development Specialist, MAPC
Allen Kieslich, President, KDC
Bob Maloney, ULI Board member and private developer
Maureen McAvey, Senior ULI Fellow, urban development
Stephen Senna, Project Manager, Development, Spaulding & Slye
Dennis Swinford, Senior Planner, Goody Clancy

Panel activities consisted of an informational session with Mattapan CDC representatives, a walking tour of the Square, discussions with

representatives of various public officials and local merchant groups, internal TAP deliberations, and a TAP presentation to the CDC on critical issues and next steps.

Summary findings

The Panel concluded that Mattapan Square has real potential to enhance the vibrancy of Mattapan, the city of Boston and surrounding communities such as Milton. The key to realizing this potential will be to create a synergistic critical mass of commercial, entertainment and residential uses that can capitalize upon the Square's:

- High current volume of automobile and public transportation usage (estimated at over eighty thousand trips daily), as well as the potential to further modernize/expand public transportation options.
- Adjacency to substantial, yet untapped, population density and "buying power" in surrounding communities.
- Significant amounts of under utilized land, including 20 acres owned by the MBTA, which could become a significant air-rights development project for Mattapan and the MBTA.
- Proximity to potentially attractive natural features such as the Neponset River that could link to the other open space assets that exist in southern Boston neighborhoods.

Creating a vibrant Mattapan Square first requires the development of a conceptual Vision that has strong support from stakeholders within the local Mattapan community, the city of Boston, adjacent communities such as Milton and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Further, this Vision must have sufficient financial viability that it will attract the requisite private and public sector capital to make it a reality. To foster additional focus on developing such a Vision, a preliminary schematic of potential uses and activities is included as Attachment A. Key elements include a new, mixed-income residential base, a revived commercial district anchored by a large format retail operation that will serve local and surrounding communities, entertainment options such as dining options and a movie theater, expanded parking availability, and a highly accessible greenway along the Neponset River. Sufficient critical mass should be achievable through the use of moderate vertical density.

In sum, the Square has outstanding potential but will require strong, broad based, leadership from community organizations such as the Mattapan CDC, as well as public agencies such as the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the MBTA and the state Office of Commonwealth Development to make this potential vision a reality.

Details of ULI TAP Analysis

In establishing its insights, the TAP developed a broad based assessment of the location. Highlights of this assessment are as follows:

Mattapan Square's Strengths:

Community trade area. The Square is centrally located in a highly populated area that could provide a solid customer base for new restaurants, stores and a movie theater. This area includes not only Mattapan and surrounding Boston communities but also Milton, as this town can play an important role in the success of Mattapan Square's businesses. As such, the CDC and public officials must work to reduce barriers between the two communities and begin discussions with Milton's public officials/community leaders about the benefits of a revised Mattapan Square.

Transportation access. Blue Hill Avenue, the old Post Road, runs through the center of the Square. The CDC estimates that 60,000 drivers pass through the Square each day – the challenge for the CDC has been finding a way to get these riders to stop. Further, the existing MBTA Mattapan Station provides transportation to 22,000 riders each day, a number that could be expanded with modernized equipment and enhanced rationale for commuters to park at the Station. Finally, the proposed Blue Hill commuter station is close to the Square and could provide excellent access to downtown Boston (six miles distant) for future Square residents and commuters.

Development potential on under utilized land. Substantive potential development sites include a 20-acre MBTA lot adjacent to the Square, a tow lot behind the CDC office at 1598 Blue Hill Ave, a Sovereign Bank lot along Blue Hill Avenue and the former Cote Ford site on Cummins Highway.

Proximity to Neponset River. This natural feature represents a potential recreational and visual amenity that currently is ignored in the Square's utilization. Enhanced access to this feature, as well as the use of moderate height in new development (particularly at the MBTA site) could capitalize materially on this amenity. Efforts to develop and continue a multi-use trail along the Neponset River will add significantly to the recreational value of this natural amenity. **Urban Character.** Within and around the square there are several buildings that have significant architectural character. The square has a good foundation of unique urban character that should be enhanced during the redevelopment process, perhaps including the installation of new gateway statues at its southern entry.

Mattapan Square's Challenges:

Limited critical mass and synergy of uses. The Square's current commercial and residential options lack the requisite density/vitality to "draw" the substantive, surrounding population into the Square.

Shortage of affordable housing. At current prices, Mattapan's younger generation is being displaced into other neighborhoods. While the CDC has rehabilitated 24 units of multi-family buildings and purchased almost 6,800 square feet of vacant land for homeownership opportunities, many more affordable options are needed in the Mattapan Square neighborhood.

Challenge of raising requisite development capital. The uses described herein will require substantial private and public sector capital. The CDC and other concerned entities need help in determining revenue sources for their revitalization plans.

Perceptions. Mattapan faces a challenge in eliminating the perception that the community is plagued by high crime rates. The CDC continues to work with reporters and police to enhance the Square's image and the customer base for potential stores and entertainment complexes depends on the elimination of these stereotypes. Further, the CDC hopes to rid the stores of the imposing steel grates that line the storefronts.

Critical Issues to resolve:

Leadership/ Stakeholders. Mattapan Square will need multiple champions for a revitalized downtown center. For its part, the CDC will need a substantive public relations campaign to express its priorities and attract support from other community leaders, city government, state government and capital sources.

Connections to Milton. While Mattapan and Milton are distinct communities, it is critical for leaders/stakeholders to think expansively about how to enhance connections. Some are as simple as providing viewpoints across the river. Others will involve active participation in creating a Vision which has common benefits for all involved. In sum, lessening the barriers will help foster the customer base that the Square will need for a lively commercial district.

Improved River Access. The Neponset River, one of the area's strengths, is virtually cut-off from resident access. As expressed in Attachment A, the panel envisions a substantive Greenway along the river. Bike paths would also be a needed improvement for the proposed residential component.

Parking. The CDC must deal with its parking issues as a means of building a solid foundation for a revived commercial district. The amount of under utilized land should provide ample opportunity to add requisite parking in concert with commercial and residential development.

Long term vision on land assembly. It is important that parcels are developed in close conjunction with whatever form and sequence taken in the conceptual Vision.

Creative and broad based financing strategy. Mattapan Square's revitalization strategy will involve substantive private and public sector capital commitments. These commitments will require creating attractive opportunities for private investment, as well as judicious use of public tax credits, abatements and subsidies. Fortunately, there appears to be sufficient land mass, trade area dynamics and traffic volume to make such efforts appropriate.

Summation of Master Plan and Desired Outcomes:

Foster a viable commercial and entertainment component. The Panel suggested entertainment concepts such as a downtown movie theater to compliment new restaurants or a urban format "big box" store such as Target or Bed Bath & Beyond that would blend with the Square's character.

Provide housing choices. Market rate condos, combined with a segment of affordable housing units, will provide a blended community to materially support a commercial base. Providing these options on newly developed upper floors along Blue Hill Avenue will also minimize the impact on Mattapan's open space. Residential buildings along the river greenway also can provide city amenities out the front door, and country aspects in the backyard.

Create a safe/ fun streetscape. The Panel suggested an active street patrol or hosts that would help visitors find a restaurant or shop in the square. The extra foot traffic would also deter any potential crime along the street.

Improve parking and mass transit. The Red Line's trolley, which extends the route into Mattapan Square, is outdated -- the CDC is pushing for a high-speed connector. The Panel also envisions a parking structure as the foundation of a mixed-use complex on the MBTA site.

Enhance "green" connections. The Square apparently does not meet federal or state standards for open space. The Panel would like to see the CDC replace large expanses of asphalt with green traffic islands or create small gardens in housing developments. Low density single story, surfaced parked development should be replaced with well planned higher density development with structured parking and carefully designed open space.

In sum, the MBTA site should be transformed into a mixed-use development with movies, parking, commercial and residential options. The footpath that exists today behind Blue Hill Avenue should be expanded into a new street dedicated to small retailers, restaurants and entertainment. Blue Hill Avenue will feature gateway housing at each end, along with mixed-use.

The street's main tenant will be an operator that truly serves the community but also serves as a draw. The urban concepts of Target and Bed Batch & Beyond were suggested as relevant examples. Parking would be located inside, preserving the street front.

By accomplishing the stated goals and vision, the CDC will create new affordable housing opportunities within Mattapan, develop a 24/7 community, create a new customer base of Mattapan Square residents that will patronize downtown shops and provide a more vibrant commercial district that serves not only Mattapan but its surrounding communities as well.