



# Bridge Street Neck Neighborhood Revitalization Plan

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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City of Salem, MA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This document summarizes key findings, planning concepts and recommendations developed for the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood of Salem during a five-month planning process, carried out from March to August 2009.

The overall purpose of the study is to generate strategies for the revitalization of the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood, one of the oldest settlements in the City of Salem.

### Goals

Key goals of this study are the following:

- Improve the business climate along Bridge Street.
- Identify measures to reduce foreclosures and stabilize the local housing market.
- Recommend physical improvements that will enhance the quality of living and working in the neighborhood.

### Planning Background

Historically, the Bridge Street Neck grew as a gateway district organized along the main road and bridge that connects Salem to the cities of Beverly and Danvers (Bridge Street/Route 1A). Land use along the road has traditionally been focused on retail and commercial services that cater to residents of Salem and the surrounding communities, and depend on automobile access. Single- and two-family homes are clustered behind commercial properties on both sides of Bridge Street, extending throughout the neck and all the way to the water (represented in *Figure 1*).

A new bridge and bypass road were built in recent years to replace the old bridge and divert through-traffic from the neighborhood. The resulting decrease in heavy traffic, which used to include trucks and large vehicles, has contributed to substantially reduce congestion, noise and pollution in the neighborhood. However, lesser traffic has also affected the local businesses by reducing their visibility and marketing share within the region, which is reflected in a reduced volume of sales.

The residential areas in the neighborhood, traditionally an enclave of workforce and moderate income households, have been impacted by the recent economic downturn and foreclosures together with the rest of the City.

The Bridge Street Neck Neighborhood Revitalization Plan is aimed at providing recommendations and strategies to shape the future of the community during the next five to ten years.

#### Contents Of this Summary

Goals  
 Planning Background  
 Planning Area  
 Planning Process  
 Existing Conditions Summary  
 Recommended Strategies  
 Action Plan

This study has been funded through a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) as part of its Gateway Plus Action Grant program, aimed at improving housing conditions, quality of life, and community engagement with the assistance of local municipalities. It has been prepared for the City of Salem's Department of Planning and Community Development with support provided by a team of professional planners and specialists in economics and housing.



FIGURE 1: PLANNING AREA



### **Planning Area**

The planning area comprises the entire Bridge Street Neck north of Webb Street. South of Webb Street, the study area includes the properties with direct frontage on Bridge Street and all the properties that are located between Bridge Street, the water and the Salem MBTA station to the west (shown in *Figure 1*).

The existing commercial properties along Bridge Street represent a special area of focus for the economic analysis and revitalization strategies. *Figure 1* also shows the location and boundaries of this Focus Area with a separate outline.

### **Planning Process**

The planning process incorporated extensive community participation. A Civic Engagement Program was prepared early on during the process to orchestrate a series of meetings, stakeholder interviews and information outreach. The planning team worked in conjunction with the Bridge Street Neck Working Group, a group of neighborhood members representing local business and residents selected by the City to steer the direction of the planning process. Five meetings and working sessions, and a neighborhood walk were held with the Working Group.

Three public meetings were held with the community, including a planning charrette to generate ideas and share concepts for a variety of housing, commercial and neighborhood improvements. These meetings attracted more than 100 participants, and served to provide direct community input into the plan recommendations.

### **Existing Conditions Summary**

The original Gateway Cities Grant outline of tasks and services associated with this planning study was based on an overarching goal to stabilize and revitalize the mixed use Bridge Street neighborhood, and three specific objectives:

- Act to support neighborhood development and village style housing
- Support and enhance commercial retention and development opportunities
- Maintain and improve the area's pedestrian environment

In order to maintain consistency with these objectives, the assessment of existing conditions and the plan recommendations have been organized to reflect three corresponding main areas of focus: housing, commercial revitalization and physical planning.

### Housing Assessment

The City of Salem has approximately 19,000 total residences, of which 6% or about 1,200 units are located in the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood. The homes in the Bridge Street Neck are characterized by small single-family and two-family detached homes.





A profile of the market rents in Salem was reviewed for analysis. For three important rental properties in the market, rents are approximately \$1,000-\$1,400 for a one bedroom and \$1,600 for a two bedroom unit on the higher end of the rent market. Anecdotal evidence gathered through interviews with individuals in the planning area suggest that one and two bedroom units in multi-family residences in the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood are currently renting in the \$800-\$900 per month range.

Housing values in Salem are clustered between \$250,000 and \$400,000. For the Bridge Street Neck, median prices for a single-family home in 2009 have been \$261,000 and \$231,000 for a condominium. The neighborhood has a relatively large percentage of owner occupied homes in the \$200,000 to \$250,000 range: 32% versus 15% in the entire city.

The Bridge Street Neck neighborhood stands out because within a well priced city it represents a lower price option. This neighborhood also has a relatively good “gateway” housing relationship for the City, with the rental stock close to the commuter rail station. The neighborhood is well positioned to pick up new residents who like Salem, but would prefer a well priced home instead of a rental unit.

#### *Foreclosure Assessment*

From January 1, 2007 to March 15, 2009 in the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood there were 20 properties in various stages of foreclosure, as reported by the Warren Group. Of these foreclosures, 15 were initial petitions to foreclose and 4 were foreclosure auctions. The foreclosed properties in the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood are almost all owner occupied.

One important common observation can be made: many of the foreclosed properties were acquired between 2005 and 2007. The year 2005 was the peak time for real estate values in Salem and many other communities. Buyers who bought recently have witnessed a significant decline in the values of their homes. In contrast, those who have owned their homes since the year 2000 are still ahead in terms of home appreciation.

The Salem Department of Planning and Community Development offers a number of programs that can assist residents dealing with foreclosure and also help the neighborhood with renovation programs, first time homebuyer assistance and other forms of support.

Salem has been proactive in dealing with foreclosures. The Mayor has appointed a property team that makes sure buildings are boarded up, neighbors are notified and other actions are taken to provide some stability. The City provides counseling services through North Shore Community Action Program and other organizations. Salem has a

very useful website listing numerous sources for foreclosure prevention and legal resources.

### Commercial Assessment

In August 2008, a new bridge and bypass road opened in order to alleviate the bottleneck traffic on Bridge Street. This bypass connects Route 1A in Beverly directly to downtown Salem along the western coast of the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood, with limited access road entries located only at either end. The highway signage that was installed at the entrances to the bypass road gives no indication that Bridge Street is an alternative route to or from downtown Salem. While Bridge Street is still listed on maps as Route 1A, tourist traffic from the north is likely to take the direct route via the bypass and commuter traffic will typically opt for this faster route as well. From the tourist and visitor point of view, the Bridge Street Neck commercial area is barely on the map.

The Bridge Street commercial area has been in a downward transition over the past year, possibly due to the major changes in traffic in addition to the current economic downturn. Interviews with business owners indicate that businesses dependent on through traffic have lost significant sales over the last year. On the other hand, businesses with a loyal customer base have remained stable over the last year because their customers no longer need to wait in heavy traffic to get to Bridge Street. These businesses have expressed concern, however, that new customers are no longer being drawn to the area.

A review of the properties along Bridge Street was conducted by going building to building, identifying uses for buildings with retail frontage and using the City's GIS data to complete floor area take-offs of the different buildings, assuming a 15% loss ratio from gross to leasable floor areas.

Using this approach, an estimate of approximately 174,000 gross sf of space dedicated to ground floor commercial uses was established. The median space was approximately 3,250 gross sf in area.

The following conclusions can be made about the condition of Bridge Street Neck commercial areas:



- Reduction of traffic has alleviated delays, but removed a portion of the customer base and reduced exposure to through traffic.
- There is a mix of retail and residential uses on Bridge Street.
- The neighborhood residential population is too small to support existing retail by itself.
- Very few businesses serve as a draw or anchor at present.
- The character of Bridge Street is influenced by its immediate surroundings (the positive presence of water views, the negative visual

impact of gas storage tanks and electric lines, and the proximity of residential areas).

- The quality of the appearance of retail buildings has deteriorated in recent years.
- The streetscape appearance and infrastructure need improvements, and are awaiting planned reconstruction.

### Physical Planning Assessment

The Bridge Street Neck neighborhood is comprised of relatively small parcels, with Bridge Street serving as a central “spine” that has connecting roads and blocks extending to the east and west.

### *Land Use*

The dominant land use in the neighborhood is residential, with a substantial proportion of residential land zoned for two-family houses. There are commercial uses located along Bridge Street and industrial uses located at the northeast section of the planning area. The commercial uses include a bakery, restaurants, lodging, automotive services, and boat sales. The industrial uses include facilities of the regional gas and electric utility companies (National Grid). The neighborhood also has a church and an elementary school.

There are three public open space areas: Gonyea Park, Collins Cove Playground, and Curtis Park/March Street Playground. There are also two unconnected sections of a bicycle network located within the planning area. Additionally there is a park planned for the north end of Bridge Street, on the remaining portion of the former bridge connection to Beverly.

The majority of the parcels in the Bridge Street Neck neighborhood are less than 0.5 acres in area.

### *Parking and Circulation*

The neighborhood has limited parking for residences and businesses due to its dense street network and built environment. Additionally, there are no curbside areas monitored for short term parking in the commercial area.

### *Historic Resources*

The neighborhood is rich with historic resources. There are two National Register Districts and a building on the National Register of Historic Places located within the planning area, and a Local Historic District is located nearby.



### *Pedestrian Routes*

Although the neighborhood has a comprehensive network of street sidewalks, the historical nature of the sidewalks (narrow and close to street level in many locations) reduces their effectiveness in establishing a safe and friendly pedestrian environment. The reconstruction of the sidewalks along Bridge Street is planned as part of the Bridge Street reconstruction project. This project includes landscaping and period lighting that will enhance the pedestrian environment in the commercial areas.

### *Zoning*

The Bridge Street Neck neighborhood has nine different zoning districts and one overlay district. This is a significant number of different zoning districts for the size of the planning area. A comprehensive review of the manner in which the various zoning districts complement each other and the identified goals of the neighborhood should be conducted. While the existing zoning appears to be reflective of historical uses associated with the Bridge Street Neck, its specific mix and allotment may not be appropriate for the future and needs to be reviewed.

### **Revitalization Vision**

A neighborhood vision has emerged throughout the planning process that is aimed at maintaining the residential character and scale of the neighborhood, and attracting more business and visitors to its commercial areas. The historical character of the neighborhood should also be reflected in its well maintained buildings and streets. Homeownership should be encouraged.

The physical appearance of the commercial areas should be enhanced through building and signage improvements. The few existing vacant properties should be rehabilitated in ways that contribute to improve the overall quality of the commercial district.

Neighborhood-scale businesses and restaurants would be desirable, especially at the end of Bridge Street where a restaurant “cluster” could be developed by enhancing the existing businesses. Public access and amenities, such as a waterfront walk with access to the existing small beach and the new park that is being designed for the site of the old bridge, would contribute to create a local destination for families and visitors alike.

Future residential development should be complemented with the creation of new open space, bicycle and pedestrian connections through the neighborhood. These could be designed and constructed in conjunction with the redevelopment of large sites, and would link Bridge Street to the surrounding residential areas and waterfront. An ultimate goal for physical improvements would be the creation of an interconnected network of pedestrian and bicycle paths leading to the water and extending along the waterfront length. These ideas are illustrated in *Figure 2*.

### **Recommended Strategies**

The recommended planning strategies have been organized in a manner similar to the arrangement of the assessment of existing conditions; they are organized to reflect the three main areas of focus that correspond to the basic plan objectives: housing, commercial revitalization and physical planning.



FIGURE 2: PREFERRED PLAN SCENARIO



### Housing Revitalization

The recommended housing revitalization strategies consist of the following:

- Stabilize the local housing market through a coordinated homeowner assistance and marketing effort.
- Support a healthy real estate market that has a diverse mix of housing prices, housing types and low vacancies.
- Support the development of neighborhood-scale new housing.
- Mitigate unsightly housing conditions that impact the overall appearance of the neighborhood.

The Bridge Street Neck neighborhood offers opportunities and great value to buyers who are making the commitment to buy a new home. The housing market is functioning, although at a slower pace than in the recent past: sales are taking place, home prices are down, interest rates are low, and financing is available.

The most cost effective way to spur neighborhood revitalization is to spur the housing market. Most critically this needs to be done in a multifaceted way as part of coordinated homeowner assistance and marketing efforts. A basic marketing model could follow what MassHousing now calls its *Buy Cities Program*, which is modeled after the very successful Worcester program called *“Buy Worcester NOW—Take a closer Look—There has never been a Better Time to Purchase a Home in Worcester”*.

The fundamentals that are already in place for housing revitalization include amenity values, market values and available financing.

### Commercial Revitalization

The recommended commercial revitalization strategies are the following:

- Promote the improvement and commercial redevelopment of sites with location advantages such as visibility, size and proximity to the water.
- Enhance the attractiveness and success of the waterfront area through new investment and reinvestment in a cluster of restaurants and destination uses.
- Improve the appearance of existing business properties.
- Attract new small businesses and reinvestment in existing businesses.
- Provide adequate and convenient parking for commercial uses.
- Enhance amenities to attract visitors to the Bridge Street Neck area.
- Enhance commercial identity and wayfinding signage.
- Promote and facilitate neighborhood business stewardship.
- Work with businesses that could benefit from moving from less compatible to more compatible sites, either within the neighborhood or to other areas of Salem.





For the Bridge Street commercial district to thrive again, it needs to give potential customers a better reason to come to Bridge Street, create a more visible and identifiable character capitalizing on its proximity to the water and downtown Salem, and tie together the retail and residential uses in a way that will help younger people see this neighborhood as an attractive residential option.

The City and local stakeholders are limited in their ability to bring about desirable changes in the retail mix and offerings that characterize the

neighborhood commercial areas. But they can restrict to some extent undesirable uses, remove restrictions that currently impede desirable development, improve the environment through improvements to infrastructure, and support desired development.

One opportunity for improvement in the shorter-term is signage, including better business signs and pedestrian directional signage. In addition to the existing highway signs directing access to the Bridge Neck waterfront businesses, a controlled wayfinding signage program would help to improve the image of the commercial area while orienting visitors.

### Neighborhood Improvements

The recommended neighborhood improvement strategies consist of the following:

- Expand streetscape improvements along side streets, once the Bridge Street improvements are completed.
- Expand and improve open space connections and amenities.
- Extend pedestrian and bicycle access.
- Promote neighborhood stewardship.
- Support new development and renovations at key locations which could change because of their size, location, potential value and relationship to the surrounding neighborhood.

Future infrastructure projects could include extending the Bridge Street renovation and reconstruction to key side streets, in order to extend vehicular and pedestrian improvements throughout the neighborhood. Increasing the Bridge Street Neck connection to the waterfront through public access, open space connections, bike paths and preservation of views can significantly enhance real estate values, civic life and commercial activities in the neighborhood.

### *Potential Redevelopment Sites*

There are a couple of large properties on Bridge Street which could be reused in ways that would benefit both the owner and the neighborhood. There are also some smaller properties that contain vacant, run-down buildings which detract from the overall



image and quality of living in the neighborhood. Conceptual development feasibility tests were conducted for these parcels, which indicate that the redevelopment of these properties would not make economic sense in today's economic climate but conceivably could be feasible in the future. Potential reuse concepts could include an enhanced motel, a neighborhood-scale destination business, and a moderate-scale residential development.

### **Action Plan**

The implementation of the proposed revitalization vision and strategies will require a multipronged effort including efforts and participation from all interested parties.

A detailed action plan is included in the plan document, which lists existing programs and available tools for implementation, as well as initial steps. The following is a list of the key programs and mechanisms recommended:

- Assistance programs to homeowners facing risk of foreclosure.
- Business loans, façade and storefront improvement programs.
- Local neighborhood business and resident associations.
- Shared marketing and promotion initiatives.
- Technical and feasibility studies to initiate improvement projects.
- Zoning changes to support mixed use development and neighborhood businesses.
- Zoning mechanisms to allow for the redevelopment of large properties.
- Relocation tools to assist businesses interested in moving to a more advantageous location.
- Design guidelines aimed at maintaining the historical character, and improving the overall design and image quality of the district.



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