



INTRODUCTION

AT THE END OF JANUARY 2024, the Worcester Now | Next citywide long-range plan draft was released to the public. It is open for public comment until **February 25**.

WHAT IS WORCESTER NOW | NEXT?

Worcester Now | Next is the City of Worcester's current master planning process. The City has not written or adopted a new citywide long-range plan in nearly 40 years; the last plan was adopted in 1987. Since then, Worcester has grown tremendously – as can be seen in The Research Bureau's [Reinventing Worcester](#) report from August 2023. Even so, many Worcester residents have become increasingly cost-burdened by housing, indicating that, although new housing has come online in the last few years, much more housing of all kinds needs to be built in the next few decades to accommodate more growth (see [Static Income, Rising Costs: Renting in the Heart of the Commonwealth](#) from December 2022). Building more housing will require substantial investment

in infrastructure and transportation, making now an important inflection point for Worcester's next few decades. A citywide long-range plan like Worcester Now | Next, then, is necessary to plan for growth over the following decades and to ensure that Worcester can accept, accommodate, and advance the interests of all of its current and future residents.

Worcester Now | Next was written with input from City staff, several consultancy firms, a community advisory board, and with extensive public input over the course of two years. The Research Bureau previously hosted a Now | Next forum during Jane Week in the Woo in May 2023.

Worcester Now | Next officially kicked off in 2022, and aims to be finished and adopted in spring 2024. The draft plan, currently public, is **open to public comment until February 25th**. Interested readers can find the draft plan, an executive summary, and other information [about the plan here](#).

NOW | NEXT OVERVIEW

Worcester Now | Next has an extensive executive summary, so this Brief will only provide a short overview of the Now | Next plan. Interested readers should look at the plan themselves and offer comments on the draft by **February 25th**. [Residents can share their feedback online, and the link can be found here](#).

Now | Next is focused on growth. Worcester has grown over the last few decades, reversing its mid-20th century decline. There is currently no reason to think that growth will end anytime soon; planning to accommodate that growth *now* will allow various city departments and community stakeholders to align their plans for the city in the coming decades. **The plan is centered around three "headlines" that inform its goals:**

1. A values-centered framework for growth that benefits all of Worcester's community members
2. Equitable and sustained public investment in Worcester's neighborhoods
3. A more connected and accessible city for all

Supporting these "headlines" is the "Growth Framework," which identifies areas of the city where Worcester is likely to see growth in the coming decades, and to steer growth to areas that are especially accessible to transit and amenable to growth. The plan's "Growth Framework" identifies these areas as **"Managed Growth Areas," "Infill Growth Areas,"** and **"Transformative Growth Areas,"** and further identifies the opportunity for baseline citywide growth outside of them. Each of the three are identified partly by their accessibility to current and potential transit corridors and walkability. Furthermore, the plan envisions

the potential for future land use in infill and transformative growth areas, and specifies where it thinks mixed use, "artisan," life science, and industrial growth can occur. These maps, and more information about them, can be found on pages 12-14 and 86-90 of the draft, and for convenience are copied at the end of this brief. Focusing on growth in these areas will necessitate some infrastructure improvements and overhauling the City's current zoning policies to accommodate it.

Now | Next includes **six short-term steps to implement its vision (over 3-5 years):**

1. Complete and implement a citywide Mobility Action Plan (planning already underway)
2. Implement pre-overhaul zoning changes (including legalizing accessory dwelling units, a step the City has already taken)
3. Develop a Housing Production Plan (which has recently started)
4. Advocate for increasing Departmental Implementation Capacity (i.e., increase City Department staffing)
5. Conduct infrastructure capacity and need assessments (in other words, what needs to be improved in terms of sewer, electric service, and the like to support a growing population?)
6. Initiate a Comprehensive Citywide Zoning Overhaul (the City has updated its zoning code periodically, but has not overhauled it in decades; zoning should be updated to allow for new growth of all kinds)

After these short-term steps have been taken, Now | Next should serve as a guide to future city and community stakeholder planning efforts, ensuring that different



efforts remain compatible with each other and the goals set by it. Now | Next as a “citywide long-range plan” is meant to undergird and support future planning efforts, outlining the goals that other efforts by the City are meant to accomplish. However, its comprehensive vision and status does lead to some natural questions about it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The plan’s aim to guide policy-making in Worcester over the next two decades means that it cannot cover every exigency. Still, The Research Bureau has some questions that those implementing the plan should consider as the plan goes into effect. These questions are focused on funding, zoning, and regional partnerships.

1. **In what ways would the City prioritize spending to hire and retain new and existing staff to implement the plan?** Although this is outside of the scope of the plan, the question of funding is naturally going to occur. The City has limited resources. Importantly, implementing the plan is going to require hiring more City staff. Besides prioritizing spending to hire and retain staff, how does the City plan to meet these hiring goals and/or change hiring processes in order to do so?
2. **How will the City approach community feedback, while still executing a zoning code update that fulfills the goals of Now | Next?** Zoning needs to be updated to account for population growth in the city. Indeed, without zoning to allow for more density and more transit-oriented development, there is always the chance that (1) more residents will be priced out of the city and (2) growth can reverse into decline. In addition, as the plan itself points out, there are areas in Worcester where zoning requirements are simply outdated (like industrial areas that are no longer truly industrial; or areas where current zoning is at odds with the qualities the neighborhood possessed prior to zoning). Now | Next includes a series of important questions at the end of its draft meant to guide those working on overhauling zoning for the City. However, zoning can be a controversial topic, and the City will likely face pushback. Although any zoning overhaul is several years out, how will the City approach community feedback? How will the City ensure that new zoning accomplishes the goals of Now | Next?
3. **How will the City work with its neighbors to implement the transit goals of Now | Next, especially as many Worcester residents work in neighboring communities?** Though Now | Next is focused on Worcester, it may have regional consequences; will the City’s neighbors take into

account Worcester’s new plan? How will the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) be involved in these conversations? This is especially important for transportation. The plan addresses this in Goal 5 of the transportation section (“Expand and Enhance Regional Transportation Alternatives to Private Vehicle Use,” p. 123).

The plan envisions working closely with the WRTA to make more accessible and available transit throughout the City. However, while most of the WRTA routes and trips are in Worcester, the WRTA is also regional. Indeed, as the plan itself acknowledges, “Worcester is both a major origin and destination of regional trips. Currently, visitors and commuters arriving in Worcester have few choices besides driving directly to their destinations” (Draft Plan, 114). In other words, while the plan envisions strengthening the WRTA to make more walkable and transit-oriented development possible *in the City*, how can it work with surrounding towns and CMRPC to better integrate the region through the WRTA, reducing automobile dependence from visitors or commuters)?

Many Worcester residents work outside of the City in Auburn, Shrewsbury, Boston, and along Route 9 and I-90. The plan recognizes that working with the MBTA to bring and maintain express commuter rail service to Boston is a priority. How will the City work with the MBTA and neighboring commuter rail communities to ensure that it can maintain express service? To further decrease car dependence, how will the City work with the WRTA and the communities closest to Worcester with WRTA service to ensure that residents can effectively make it to their work destinations? How will the City work with its neighbors to implement Goal 5 listed above?

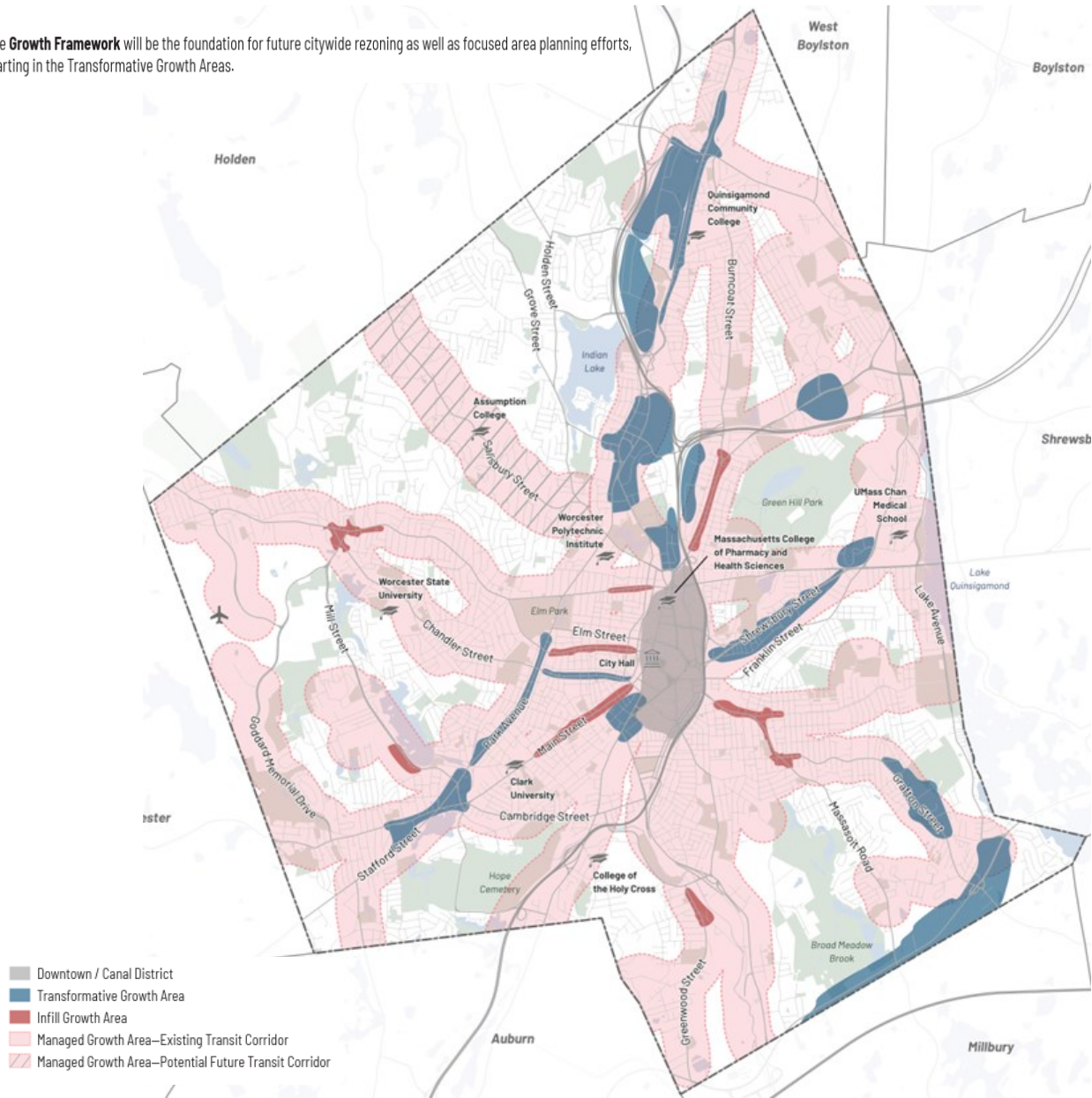
CONCLUSION

Worcester Now | Next, written with extensive public engagement over the last two years, is full of ideas to accommodate projected growth in Worcester’s population in the next few decades. Some of its goals may be difficult to implement if they do not get enough support. However, many of its goals, like building and maintaining more housing, expanding transportation, and improving outdated and insufficient infrastructure, are necessary if Worcester is to continue to expand, rather than decline – supporting its growing population, economic health, culture, and resilience to climate change are all serious questions that need to be addressed by a contemporary citywide long-range plan that is not 40 years old.



Worcester Now | Next Growth Framework

The **Growth Framework** will be the foundation for future citywide rezoning as well as focused area planning efforts, starting in the Transformative Growth Areas.



Source: Worcester Now | Next Draft, Page 13. Legend adjusted to fit on page.

The “Growth Framework” map includes different areas of the city identified as areas where growth “has the greatest potential to meet community goals” and is focused on areas of the city that are or have the potential to be “well served by transit” while “encouraging clusters of complementary amenities, services, and infrastructure” (Now | Next, 12). Growth areas are focus area with potential to be targeted by specific infrastructure and transit improvements, as well as some zoning changes, with community input. The Future Land Use Vision map (next page) shows some of the potential uses of these areas. See below for each area description, directly from the Now | Next planning document:

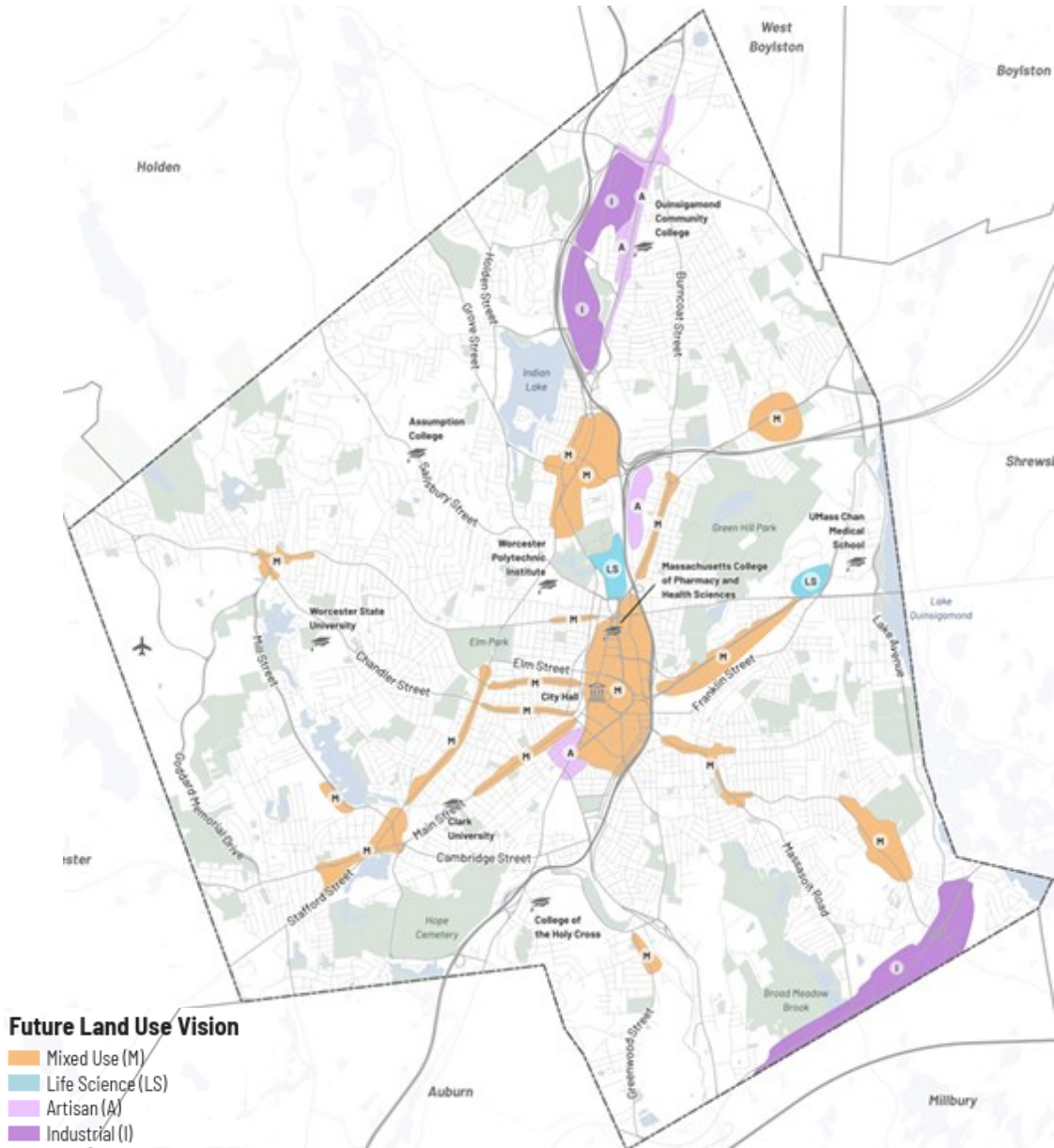
Managed Growth Areas: Allow moderate increases in housing density within a 1/4 mile walk of existing and potential future transit corridors.

Infill Growth Areas: Encourage additional mixed-use development on vacant or underutilized properties in existing areas with high walkability and transit access.

Transformative Growth Areas: Facilitate significant reinvestment and physical transformation in areas with unmet potential for high walkability and transit access that can support substantial job growth and/or higher density housing with complementary commercial uses.



Worcester Now | Next Future Land Use Vision



Source: Worcester Now | Next Draft, Page 14. Legend adjusted to fit on page.

The “Future Land Use Vision” map envisions what could be possible in the infill and transformative growth areas identified in the previous map. Different areas may be suited to different kinds of development, though mixed use is envisioned in all areas. Many areas already have a pre-existing use; this does not eliminate those uses, but rather integrates them into a future vision of development in that area. The following descriptions are from the Now | Next draft, page 15:

Mixed Use: Typically anchored by active commercial ground floors (e.g., retail, entertainment, and services like banking, barbers, or dry cleaning), with complementary residential and office upper floors.

Life Science: Typically anchored by healthcare providers, scientific research, and development lab uses, with complementary retail, commercial, hotels, educational institutions, and limited residential.

Artisan: Typically anchored by small, low-impact creative producers (e.g., fashion, furniture, food and beverage), with complementary retail, commercial, hotels, and residential.

Industrial: Typically anchored by larger producers and distributors that are dependent on larger trucks, highways, and rail, with complementary limited retail and commercial serving area businesses and employees.