



Now | Next

Worcester's Citywide Plan

Executive Summary

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Worcester Now | Next is the City of Worcester's long-range citywide plan. It captures the vision and values of our community and provides a framework to guide the way that we invest and shape our city in the next 10 years, especially in terms of development and infrastructure. By working within this framework, future topic—and area-specific plans will tie together to achieve more than any one plan or initiative could on its own.

You can learn more about the plan at now-next.worcesterma.gov

Process

Over the course of two years, from early 2022 to early 2024, the Worcester Now | Next process engaged a wide variety of community members and stakeholders in the collective creation of a plan that could reflect the aspirations and needs of the Worcester community now, and in the city's next chapter. This process was grounded in the work of a part-time local community organizer and consisted of two phases: a visioning phase in which we listened and learned in order to identify issues and opportunities, and a recommendation development and prioritization phase in which we drilled down into the details of how to achieve the vision and goals that emerged from the visioning phase.

Vision

In Worcester's fourth century, we envision a creative city of neighbors who value inclusion and celebrate diversity. We will uplift our city by investing equitably in our communities, connecting our neighborhoods to opportunity, and prioritizing sustainable growth that supports improved quality of life for all.



Through the foundational work of the local organizer and partnerships with community organizations, this planning process was able to build a robust network to disseminate information and create opportunities to engage people where they were. All aspects of the public engagement effort were bilingual (English and Spanish), key information was shared in the top 6 languages in Worcester (Portuguese, Twi, Vietnamese, Arabic, Albanian, and Swahili), and public workshops were adapted to support hearing and visually impaired participants. This robust foundation enabled us to hear from Worcester community members that are often under-represented in planning processes like this one.

Engagement by the numbers

 **780+** email newsletter subscribers

Phase 1: Visioning

Citywide Online Visioning Survey

 **1,377** Participants

 **1,241** Statements Submitted

Public Visioning Workshops

 **100+** Attendees

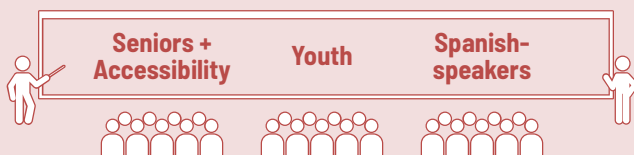
 **755** Comments Submitted

Visioning Listening Tour

 **13** Community Event Pop-ups

 **258+** Vision Cards

3 Focus Groups




Phase 2: Recommendations & Prioritization


Priority Goals Questionnaire

 **1,030** Responses

Public Draft Plan Workshops & Library Exhibit

 **113+** Attendees

 **50+** In-person Attendees

 **63** Virtual Registrations

 **150+** Written Comments

 **2,025+** Recommendation Sticky Dot Votes

Plan Headlines

Three plan headlines emerged from the extensive engagement and analysis conducted through this planning process. These headlines represent the core of what this plan is about, and what it positions the City to act on in the next few years.

A values-centered framework for growth that benefits all Worcester community members.

Equitable and sustained public investment in Worcester's neighborhoods.

A more connected and accessible city for all.

A values-centered framework for growth that benefits all Worcester community members.

Worcester is growing and changing at a rapid pace. Worcester Now | Next provides a roadmap for how to accommodate growth and manage change in a way that reflects the community's collective values and goals. We heard that people want equitable, sustainable, and resilient transit-oriented development; more diverse and affordable housing options that meaningfully address the housing crisis; and vibrant mixed-use neighborhood centers and corridors that are walkable and accessible to people of all ages and abilities. To achieve that and ensure Worcester's continued growth benefits all Worcesterites for generations to come, we need new zoning, an action plan to address mobility gaps, and assessments of what infrastructure improvements are needed to support that growth.

How we advance this:

1. Implement selective, targeted zoning updates on special issues such as (but not limited to) enabling Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), reducing parking requirements where appropriate, and establishing tree protection and planting requirements.
2. Initiate a zoning overhaul to align the zoning map with the Growth Framework established through this plan, to address aspects of the current ordinance that perpetuate segregation and inequity or undermine the viability of desired development throughout the city, and to improve the clarity and user-friendliness of the ordinance.
3. Complete and implement the Mobility Action Plan (MAP) to identify and prioritize more specific capital, operational, and programmatic projects to advance safe, equitable, and sustainable transportation in Worcester in support of the Growth Framework.
4. Complete infrastructure capacity and needs assessments to confirm current capacity of electric, stormwater, and sewer infrastructure and identify the investments needed to support the Growth Framework and Future Land Use Vision developed through this plan.

Equitable and sustained investment in Worcester’s neighborhoods.

There was widespread recognition that Downtown and the Canal District should continue to be critical areas of focus for planning, investment, programming, and creative development initiatives that support the vitality of the city’s core. However, community input throughout this planning process highlighted strong interest in a renewed focus on Worcester’s diverse neighborhoods through more coordinated land use and infrastructure planning and strategic investment in neighborhoods, corridors, and districts beyond the downtown core. With the support of community partners, the City is committed to pursuing coordinated, equity-centered local planning, policies, and public investment that will collectively reinforce the vitality of mixed-use neighborhood centers that support resident quality of life and small business health.

How we advance this:

1. Neighborhood and corridor planning that integrates land use, transportation, and infrastructure investment strategies to

holistically support neighborhood opportunity and quality of life.

2. Rezoning to align regulatory requirements with the vision and recommendations that emerge from neighborhood and corridor planning.
3. Prioritizing investment in infrastructure and economic development in neighborhood centers and corridors in alignment with the Growth Framework.
4. Continue and expand anti-displacement support for both residential and non-residential uses.
5. Improve and expand resources for code enforcement to proactively address accessibility, health and safety issues in both rental and owner-occupied units in order to improve housing quality without triggering displacement.
6. Implement process changes to increase community participation and accountability in development processes through technological and procedural changes that improve transparency and inclusivity.

A more connected and accessible city for all.

Worcester is rich in assets, amenities, and community anchors. However, access to those things is uneven and largely automobile dependent. Worcester’s existing auto-dominant transportation infrastructure and associated investment gaps in other infrastructure, facilities, and services reinforce inequities in access and exacerbate public health and environmental justice concerns. This plan marks a turning point to begin creating a more connected city where economic opportunities, services, and amenities are accessible to all through coordinated land use and mobility planning. Specifically, through the subsequent MAP planning process, the City will identify a coordinated, multimodal approach to transportation that prioritizes safety, equity and sustainability while fostering community development and supporting the densities and land use mix envisioned in the Growth Framework (see next page).

How we advance this:

1. Standardize and enforce best management practices in City specifications and regulations that impact the design, operations, and

experience of public streets, sidewalks, and public spaces.

2. Implement a coordinated program of projects to improve walkability and accessibility, prioritizing locations such as schools, mixed-use corridors, and community gathering places.
3. Work with WRTA to expand and improve reliability, frequency, and coverage of transit service, especially along priority corridors and in underserved areas.
4. Work with MBTA to provide frequent, reliable commuter rail service in both directions, including multiple express service trains under one hour in duration between Boston and Worcester during peak periods.
5. Develop a comprehensive bicycle and micromobility network connecting all areas of the city.
6. Retrofit and reconfigure streets to operate safely and have characteristics appropriate for their urban context.
7. Link land use and transportation via zoning and coordinated neighborhood-scale planning efforts.

Growth Framework

Worcester gained over 25,000 people in the last 10 years. This represents a 14% increase and surpasses Worcester's previous peak population in the 1950s. While it cannot be known whether growth will continue at the same rate in the future, if we look ahead to 2040, the high end of projected population growth for Worcester could be 60,000 or more new residents. For Worcester to house this many people, 20,000 or more new units of multifamily housing would be needed.

The place-based Growth Framework developed through this planning process not only accommodates the growth Worcester is likely to see over the next 20 years, it steers that growth where it has the greatest potential to meet community goals. By steering growth to places that are (or have the potential to be) well served by transit and encouraging clusters of complementary amenities, services, and infrastructure in those places, we can create a more accessible, equitable, sustainable, resilient, and vibrant Worcester.

The Growth Framework, as shown in the map on the facing page, includes four categories or types of growth that will collectively help to establish a more transit-oriented and walkable development pattern that can support a high quality of life while accommodating significant growth:

Baseline Citywide Growth

Allow for incremental, gentle growth everywhere in the city.

Managed Growth Areas

Allow moderate increases in housing density within a ¼ mile walk of existing and potential future transit corridors.

Infill Growth Areas

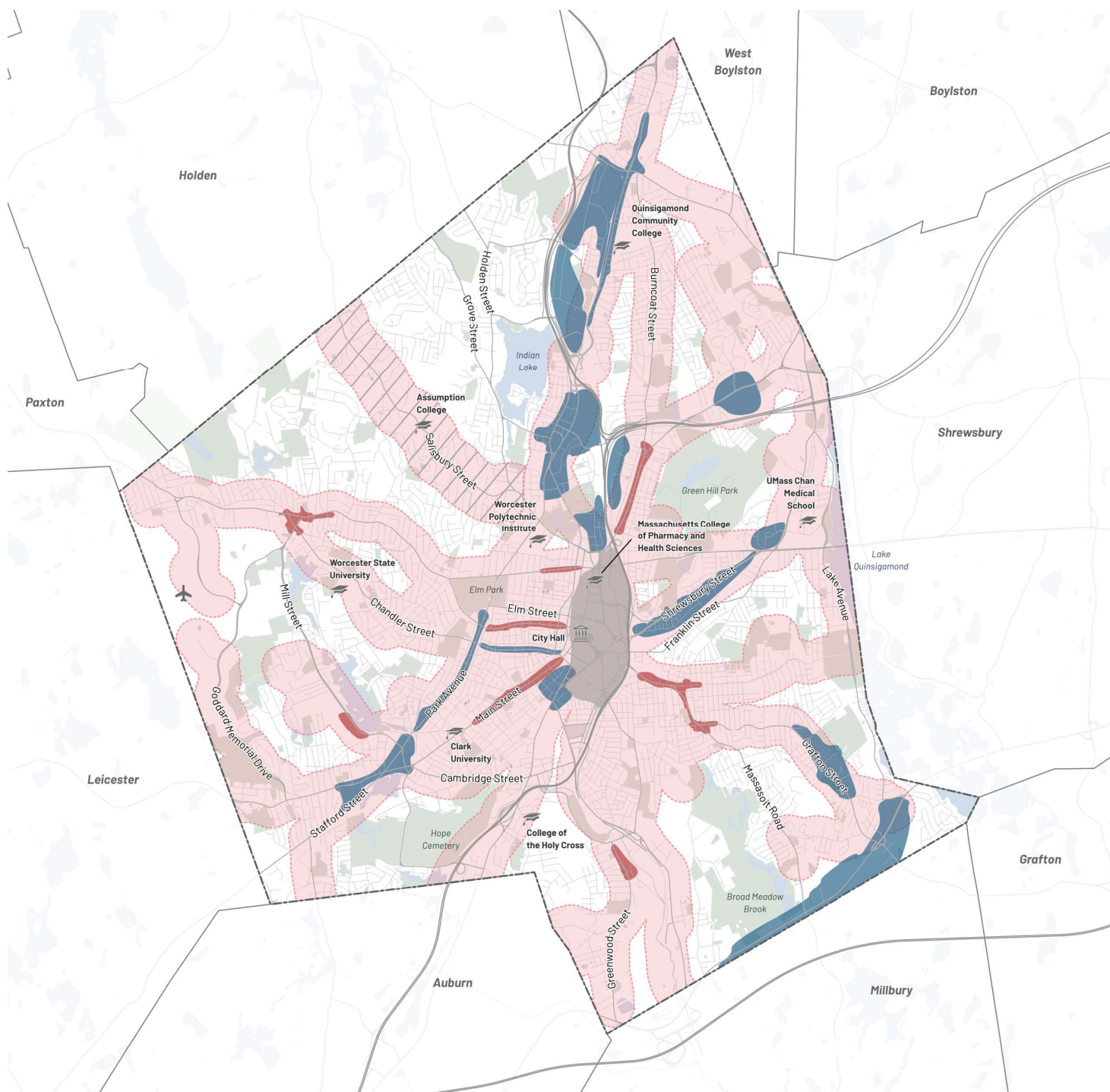
Encourage additional mixed-use development on vacant or underutilized properties in existing areas with high walkability and transit access.

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.

In order to meet their full potential as the thriving mixed-use hubs envisioned through Worcester Now | Next, Transformative Growth Areas will be prioritized for:

- District-scale planning to define more detailed goals and community needs in each area relative to land use regulations, capital investments, and programmatic or operational needs. This planning should help to articulate a strong urban design vision that is aligned with anticipated infrastructure investments and land use parameters.
- Focused investments in pedestrian safety and comfort, accessibility, multi-modal transportation infrastructure, and improved transit service as identified through MAP.
- Coordinated capital investments in infrastructure, services, and facilities, including necessary proactive private utility provider investments (e.g. National Grid/Eversource).



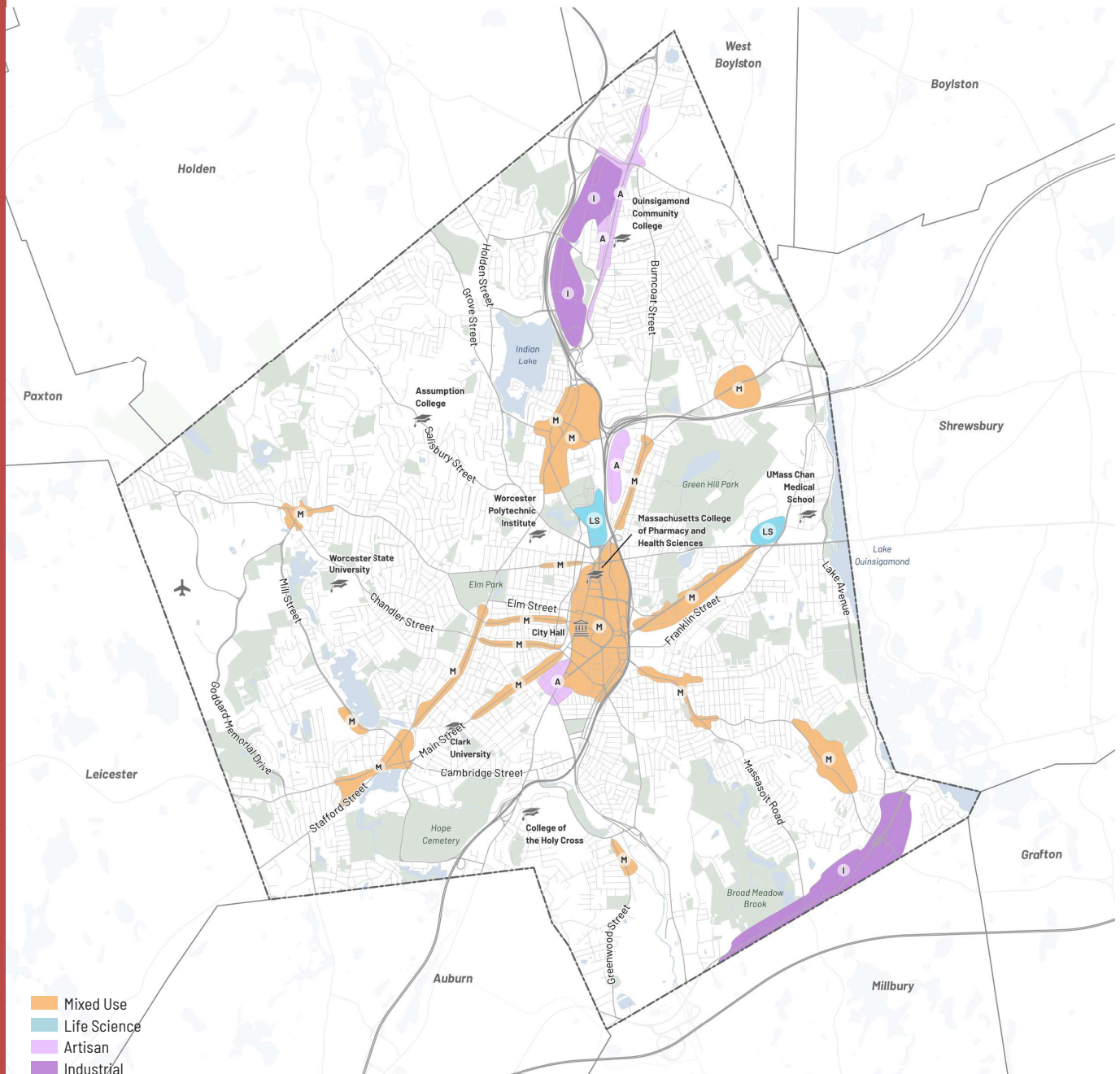
The **Growth Framework** will be the foundation for future citywide rezoning as well as focused area planning efforts, starting in the Transformative Growth Areas.

- Downtown / Canal District
- Transformative Growth Area
- Infill Growth Area
- Managed Growth Area—Existing Transit Corridor
- Managed Growth Area—Potential Future Transit Corridor

Future Land Use Vision

Not all development is the same. Some uses are compatible and complementary with one another (like housing and retail uses) and others need more distance and buffering from one another (like housing and higher impact industrial uses). By articulating what use mix each Infill and Transformative Growth Area is best suited to, Worcester can help steer development to create mutually beneficial mixes and reinforce protections and separation where it is needed.

All future land use categories allow for mixed use, but with different anchor uses and complementary uses. These categories generally describe a use mix anchored by the use highlighted in the category name and supported by a complementary mix of uses. In many cases, there is a strong existing use mix that differs from the identified land use vision; this vision is inclusive of those existing uses and envisions how that use mix can evolve over time to better take advantage of the unique patterns, adjacencies, and potential of each growth area.



- **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.

Implementation Priorities

For the next 3 – 5 years, the following six top-priority early action items will be the primary focus of the Planning & Regulatory Services Division within the City of Worcester’s Executive Office of Economic Development. These top-priority City-led early action items are listed roughly in order of the expected sequence of implementation. Most are already underway in some form:

1. Complete and implement the MAP, which will be led by the Department of Transportation & Mobility
2. Implement the following pre-overhaul zoning changes
 - a. Legalize Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) by-right citywide
 - b. Reduce or eliminate off-street minimum parking requirements for most uses
 - c. Reform tree protection requirements
3. Develop a Housing Production Plan to identify the types of housing that are most needed and should be prioritized based on demographic trends and projections
4. Advocate for and secure resources for departmental implementation capacity within the Executive Office of Economic Development and the Inspectional Services Department to lead efforts identified through this process
5. Conduct infrastructure capacity and need assessments
6. Initiate a comprehensive citywide zoning overhaul

Once these six top actions have been completed, the Now | Next plan should be revisited and the remaining recommendations should be prioritized for implementation. In the meantime,

other departments and community partners should use the plan framework, headlines, and topic-specific policy guides as a resource to ensure alignment with Now | Next for parallel and coordinated implementation efforts. Here are some of the ways that residents and partners can play a role in implementing this plan:

Support an increase in departmental capacity within both the Executive Office of Economic Development and within the Inspectional Services Department to implement changes and enforce compliance.

Stay engaged and guide others by reminding them that Now | Next recommendations are grounded in two years of analysis and community process. Help keep conversations focused and constructive as the City advances to the next level of detail and begins to grapple with trade-offs and tensions in more tangible and relatable ways.

Pick goals and recommendations you can chip in on that you are aligned with and invested in, reach out to the relevant City department, and use this plan as a guide to push that aspect of the plan forward using the perspective, skills, capacity, and leverage that you have to offer.

With the advocacy, leadership, initiative, and work of community members and partner institutions and organizations that share the vision of Worcester Now | Next, we can collectively push implementation forward from every corner of Worcester.