

Council of Economic Advisors
May 9, 2025
Meeting Minutes
Minutes Approved at the August 8, 2025 CEA Meeting

Chair Heidi Frail called the meeting to order at 8:00 AM. Adam Block, Matt Talcoff, Bill Mahoney, Bob Henschel, Lise Elcock, Mike Wilcox, Bob Henschell, Rick Putprush in attendance.

Staff Present: JP Cacciaglia, Economic Development Manager

Guest: Carys Lustig, Director of DPW

Carys Lustig provided an update and history on the Envision Needham Project.

Project originated over 20 years ago to address failing signalization at key intersections and broader revitalization goals.

Originally Town looked at a five-phase 25-year plan, with construction happening every 5 years and the projects funded via Chapter 90 state funds.

Early phase improved the inner downtown with the traffic signals and lane drops at Dedham/Great Plain/Chestnut/Chapel, which was completed in 2018. Subsequent phases were delayed due to COVID-19. Since 2020, focus shifted toward pedestrian safety, multimodal use, and flexibility in use of public space.

Seeing how COVID changed the use of space the Select Board called for updated priorities in 2021, leading to a fresh conceptual design process launched in 2023.

Selected Apex for design, as they emphasize a bold idea with flexibility to scale down if necessary.

Outreach efforts included Harvest Fair, guided walkthroughs, placard signage downtown, and stakeholder sessions with the Charles River Chamber. Public attention recently surged due to social media display of concept plan and subsequent discussions.

The projects addresses pedestrian and vehicular conflicts, particularly at dangerous intersections including Pickering and Maple. Addresses downtown flooding and incorporates stormwater infrastructure improvements. Goal is to enhance vibrancy and economic vitality by encouraging lingering and shopping at multiple destinations.

Two major alternatives presented:

Alternative 1: Maintains current parking levels, adds wider sidewalks, protected raised bike lanes, shade trees, and dining spaces.

Alternative 2: Reduces parking increase green space, traffic calming bump-outs, and stormwater retention features.

Bike lanes are required for grant due to >10,000 vehicle trips/day. When the select board gave priorities for the project, bike lanes were one of them. The raised bike lanes are designed for flexibility—if unused, could be repurposed as wider sidewalks or dining areas. Also allows for street trees for much needed shade.

Parking in the Alternative plan has more parking spaces than currently exists.

There are no capacity changes with this project. Great Plain is two lanes coming into downtown and widens at the intersections for storage capacity so traffic will store outside of downtown. The bump outs provide safety and slow traffic as they move through town.

Traffic proposals will be reviewed by another engineering firm to provide a check and to validate.

Parking Discussions: Studies show parking demand peaks when some retail is closed, indicating potential for better allocation and signage to underutilized private lots (e.g., banks) present opportunities for shared-use agreements.

Additional and more effective wayfinding and signage is needed.

Pilot Program Status:

Initially planned to demonstrate concept viability and due to public concern, Select Board voted to delay implementation by at least 6 months to earliest start date of January 2026. Additional traffic studies and economic impact analysis are under consideration.

Carys Lustig concluded the project history and update and asked for questions

Adam Block emphasized the need to align infrastructure goals with business needs and recommended zoning reform to allow higher density by special permit. Expressed concerns about combining too many goals into one project. Shared personal safety concerns regarding bike lanes and driver behavior.

Heidi Frail spoke that this is still in the concept phase right now

Bob Hentschel advocated for parking retention or expansion as the baseline for all plans, shared successful example from his property (Frisco/FedEx) where widened sidewalks enhanced property value and tenant experience—but only because parking was preserved. Supported improved curb use for short trips and deliveries.

Bob Hentschel urged the committee to consider business feedback from similar projects in denser communities like Brookline and Somerville, where results have been mixed. Supported the pilot delay for further evaluation and outreach.

Bill Mahoney said parking is important and does not feel it would be good to force people to walk across town if just dropping something off; focus on balance of type of parking short/long term depending on the purpose of the trip into town.

JP Cacciaglia suggested the CEA help solicit structured business feedback through listening ~~to~~ tours or surveys, integrating real economic data to support the project's assumptions on increased walkability and commerce.

Carys Lustig stated that traffic changes are not experimental; pilot is to assess public comfort and reception. Curb line decisions are long-term; flexibility within that line allows adaptive future use. Envision project's goal is to revitalize downtown for all—balancing safety, sustainability, and economic activity.

Heidi Frail shared that the next public feedback opportunity is May 13th at Powers Hall, members encouraged to attend and bring feedback from residents and businesses, needs to be for everyone as well as gather input from people you talk to in the community. Envision isn't the only project in town and there will be others and gathering feedback from everyone is very important.

Motion to Adjourn from Bob Hentschel, Rick Putprush Seconded: Made and seconded.

Meeting was adjourned at 9:00 AM.