

Process Begins For New Downtown Plan

 THE BOSTON GUARDIAN · THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2018

by **Dan Atkinson**

Boston officials are embarking on the first major development plan for the Downtown area in decades, but residents say any recommendations must be backed up by actual changes to zoning and preservation requirements.

The Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) kicked off its “PLAN: Downtown” process on Monday, with a call for residents, employees, and others connected to the area to join an advisory group that will help make recommendations for development in the area. Consulting firm NBBJ was hired by BPDA to oversee the process, which will run through spring 2020. NBBJ principal Alex Krieger said the finished plan would give a framework for development as opposed to piecemeal projects shaping the area.

“We can get the development community to rally around a particular set of goals and principles for the Downtown rather than operate at one project at a time,” Krieger said. “Especially when the economy is doing strong, it’s important for planning to take a more considered look.”

The area under review excludes the Leather District and Bay Village but includes the Financial District, Downtown Crossing, and Chinatown. BPDA officials said the area was last studied 30 years ago. The new plan would consider walkability, access to open space, affordability, and the effects of climate change.

BPDA senior planner Kennan Rhyne said NBBJ will lead the overall planning process, starting with a review of past plans and then analyzing existing conditions of the area and creating a public engagement plan. Over the spring and summer of next year, they and the advisory group will develop goals for the area, create subdistricts within it, and look at building massing options and development possibilities in those districts.

“This will be looking at in a fine-grained scale at what are the opportunity sites downtown in terms of development and what is appropriate,” Rhyne said.

But while the process will lead to final zoning guidelines and recommendations in spring 2020, Rhyne said there’s no guarantee they’ll be adopted.

“The intention is to come up with a framework and set of guidelines we can take to zoning, but it’s hard to say right now whether that will absolutely result in zoning at the end of this,” she said.

Residents attending the meeting said clear actions are needed to preserve and properly develop the area. While the guidelines will recommend preservation or zoning restrictions, those recommendations are not required to be acted on or enforced.

Beatrice Nessen, a member of the Friends of the Public Garden and the Boston Preservation Alliance, said she wanted to see Washington Street retain its historic properties and to protect the Common, and that new rules needed to have teeth to prevent individual projects from affecting the area.

“I think development is exciting and necessary but what makes Boston special is its historic character and quality walking experience ... all of that can be lost with development on a case by case basis,” Nessen said. “Unless you have a regulatory way to implement what’s coming out of here, it won’t amount to much.”

Jennie Chang, a member of the Asian Community Development Corporation, said she wanted to make sure the process included all voices in an area hosting financial high-rises, immigrant families, and college students. And she said Chinatown residents were looking for guidelines that enforced affordable housing in the area to prevent them from being priced out.

“The biggest concern is affordable housing ... it’s less concern about building mass from what I’ve seen,” Chang said. “At the end of the day it’s a trade-off. Do I not want big buildings or do I want to make sure people are still having places to live?”

“The Downtown Boston BID will be actively involved and I look forward to a thoughtful process in examining many important topics from transportation, housing needs, infrastructure, new developments, sustainability and climate change to how we deal with every day quality of life issues,” BID president Rosemarie Sansone said in a statement. “This is a significant undertaking and I congratulate the BPDA for bringing so many stakeholders together”.

[Downtown Boston](#) [Downtown Boston Residents' Association](#) [Beacon Hill Civic Association](#) [Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay](#)