

Central Square Business Improvement District

ACTION PLAN

2024



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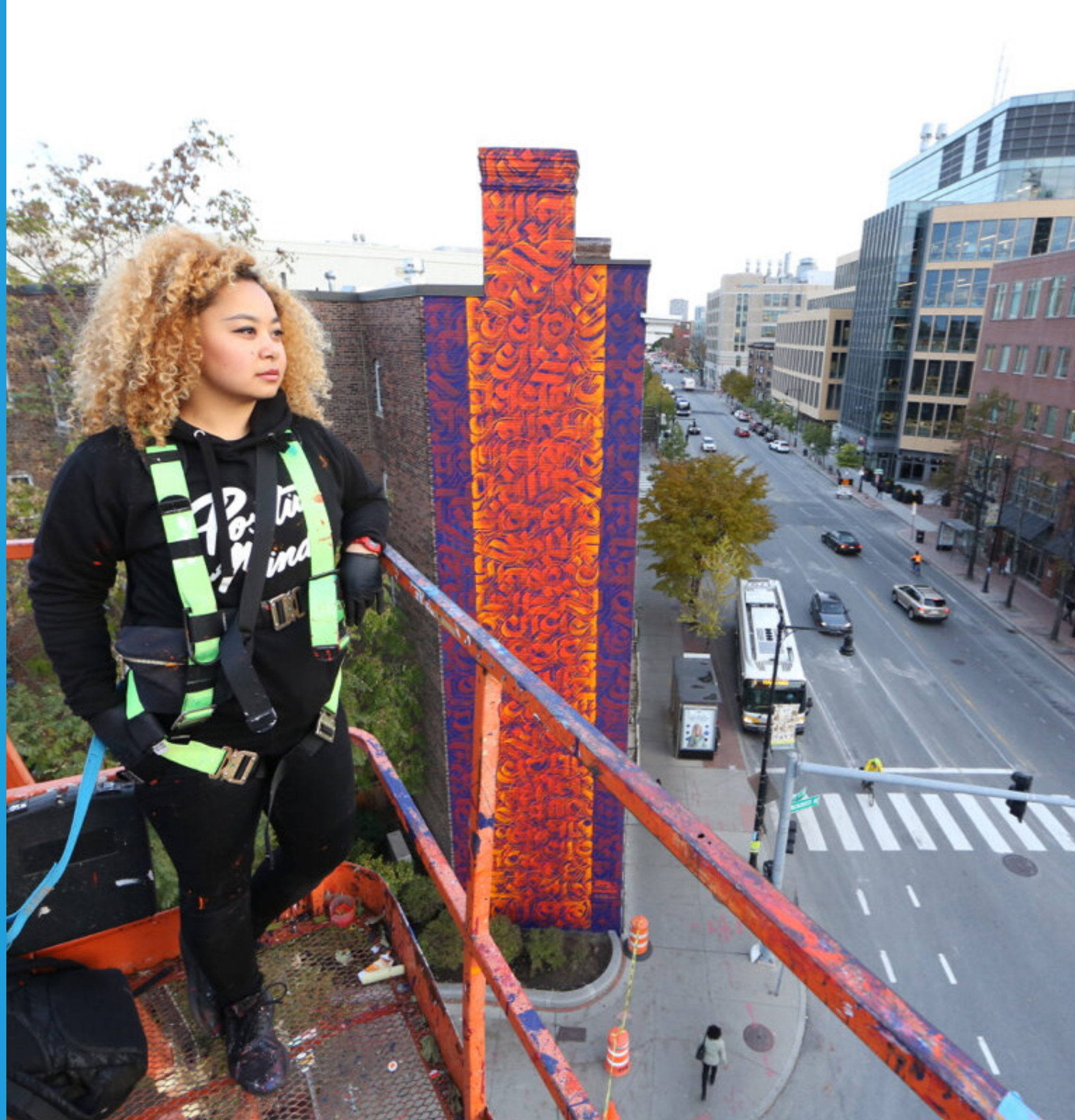


**WAGNER
FOUNDATION**

01

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Organizational Alignment

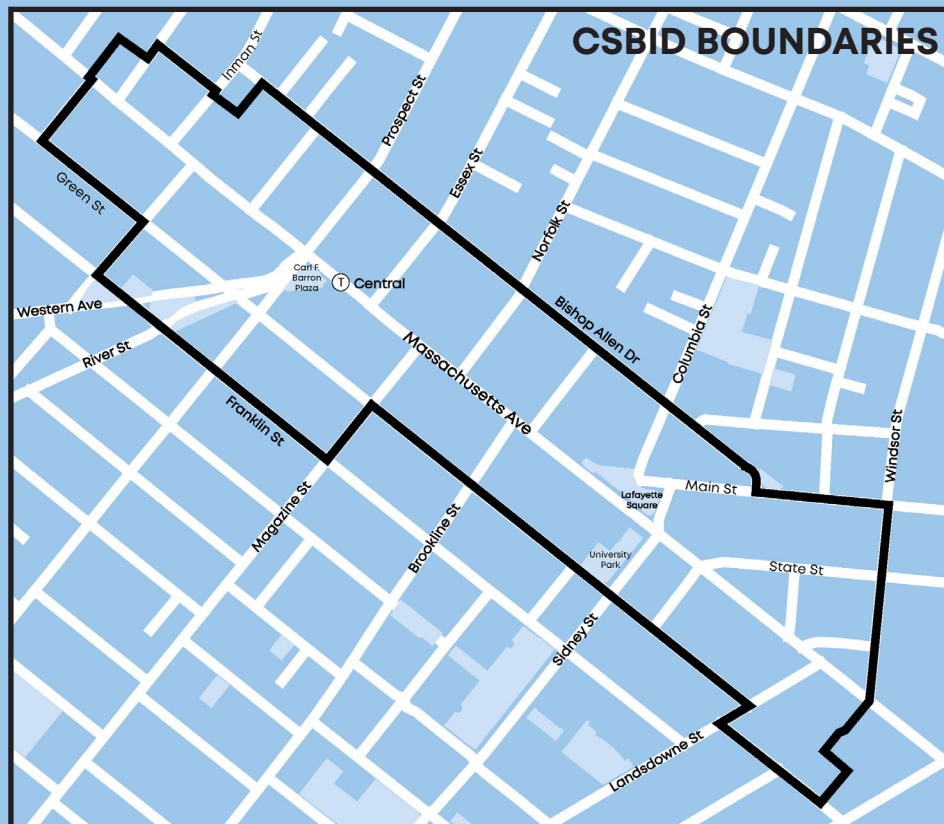


ABOUT CENTRAL SQUARE

Central Square is Cambridge's Downtown — an eclectic, urban neighborhood where cultures mix, mingle, and create on a daily basis. As Cambridge's only designated Cultural District, Central Square is a vibrant destination for dance, theater, music, and visual arts as well as global, ethnic, and innovative cuisines. Central Square is also a multimodal transportation hub, Cambridge's civic center, and a thriving business district with a mix of new and longstanding, cornerstone businesses and entertainment venues. Central Square remains a vibrant urban enclave despite lingering concerns with public safety and challenges arising from rising rents on housing and storefronts that pose a significant threat moving forward.

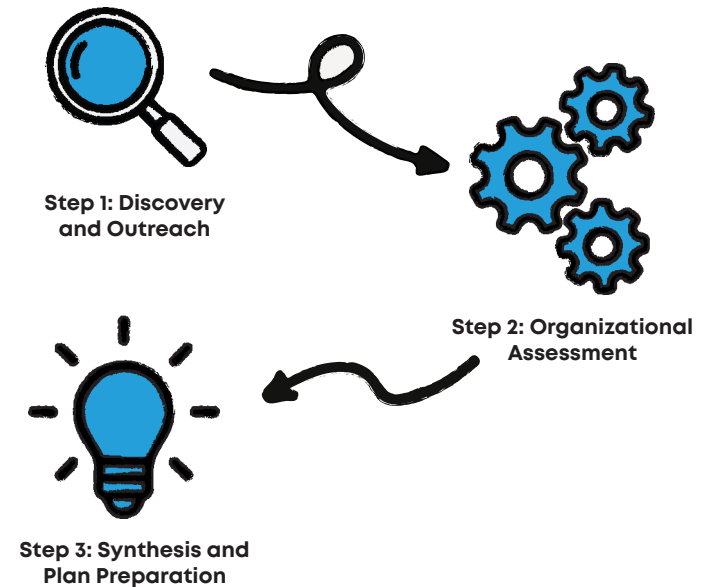
ABOUT THE CENTRAL SQUARE BID (CSBID)

The Central Square Business Improvement District (CSBID) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that was founded in 2019 to energize Cambridge's downtown district by bringing enhanced services and resources to maintain and improve the public realm in Central Square. Encompassing Massachusetts Avenue from Albany to Bigelow Street (see map below), the CSBID's work revolves first and foremost around placekeeping and uplifting what makes Central Square special. In addition to producing programming and pop-ups, the CSBID contracts with a national clean and safe service provider to manage a team of highly visible ambassadors. These ambassadors serve as stewards of the neighborhood, maintaining public spaces, engaging with shop owners, residents, and visitors, checking on at-risk neighbors, and making referrals to social services. The CSBID is funded by a self-imposed tax on commercial property within the district and partnerships with the City of Cambridge, and is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors.



ACTION PLANNING PROCESS

In 2024, the CSBID initiated a strategic planning process to guide the evolution of the organization over the next five years. Expanding on the momentum generated by the CSBID's renewal in early 2024, this Action Plan builds on past planning efforts for the district and is informed by feedback from an array of community members, including the project Working Group, CSBID Board and staff, property owners, business owners and entrepreneurs, residents, local high school students, arts, and cultural organizations, elected officials, community activists, and other individuals invested in Central Square's future. The Action Plan process included a deep dive on the CSBID organization, identified best practices from other BID-based organizations, and evaluated ways to recognize and prevent "mission creep" moving forward.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Inclusive community engagement was key to incorporating diverse voices into the action-planning process. **Over 1,300 inputs** were gathered through small group and roundtable meetings, regular engagement with the CSBID Board and Working Group, and a widely shared online survey.

Strengths, challenges, and priority Improvements identified in **roundtable and small group meetings** include:

Stakeholder engagement themes

- STRENGTHS**
- Overall vibe and character
 - Strong sense of community
 - Dining, entertainment, and live music venues
 - Local, independently-owned businesses
 - Central Square BID programs and services
 - Presence of the arts, status as a Cultural District
 - Nonprofit community, including social service providers
 - Transit access
 - Historic, diverse surrounding neighborhoods
 - Anchor institutions

- CHALLENGES**
- Real and perceived safety issues
 - Affordability of both housing and storefronts
 - Open alcohol and drug use, aggressive behaviors, mental illness
 - Lack of parking options
 - Things to do for youth and families
 - Not well known outside of Cambridge
 - Wayfinding signage and gateways
 - Dated infrastructure
 - Lack of central gathering space
 - Concentration of social service providers

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT THEMES CONTINUED

PRIORITIES

- Retain the vibe, diversity, and character that make Central Square unique
- Support and retain existing and attract new businesses to vacant storefronts
- Address real and perceived safety concerns
- Enhance Central's public realm and add community gathering space
- Strengthen marketing and programming



ONLINE SURVEY

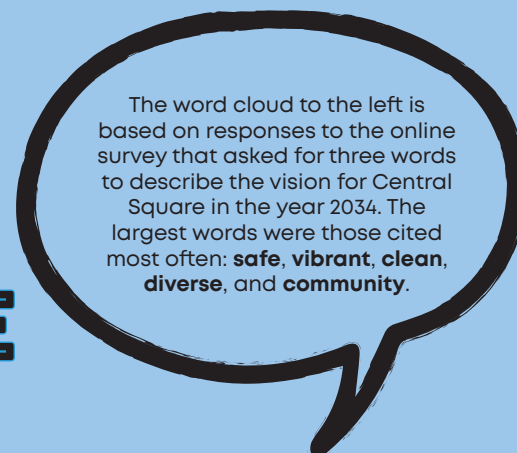
From the **online survey** which recorded more than **1,100 responses**, respondents were asked which service or program will be most important for the CSBID to work on over the next five years. The top three selections were:

- #1 Continue providing services for unhoused neighbors (23%)**
- #2 Improve safety and security (21%)**
- #3 Provide support to small/locally-owned businesses (16%)**

When asked to choose amongst a set of projects and physical improvements, which is most important for the future of Central Square, the three top choices were:

- #1 Fill and activate empty storefronts (20%)**
- #2 Make Central Square more pedestrian-friendly and accessible (20%)**
- #3 Add a community gathering space by making Starlight a permanent venue for enterprise and entertainment (16%)**

VIBRANT
ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY
SAFE WELCOMING
DIVERSE
FUN CLEAN AFFORDABLE



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on feedback received from Central Square stakeholders and external factors impacting the district, this plan identifies four key takeaways that serve as the foundation for setting a course for the CSBID to move Central Square forward.

Central Square is Cambridge's Downtown, reflective of the city's energy, diversity, and creativity.

1

The Central Square BID has made a significant, positive impact over the last five years.

2

While Central Square is a vibrant, distinctive place, it is not without its challenges.

3

There is an opportunity for the CSBID to be more focused, creative, and visionary moving forward.

4

VISION, MISSION, AND CORE VALUES

Community input received through the Central Square BID Action Plan process was also synthesized into a vision for Central Square and a refreshed mission and core values for the CSBID. The vision, mission, and core values guide all subsequent recommendations found in the Action Plan.

VISION

Central Square is Cambridge's Downtown, a diverse and thriving business and Cultural District.

MISSION

To energize Central Square by retaining and embracing the city's diversity and culture, and ensuring the district is a safe, expressive community where everyone is welcome and can thrive together.

CORE VALUES

INCLUSIVE

INNOVATIVE

IMPACTFUL

ACTION PLAN GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Action Plan goals and strategies provide a roadmap for how the CSBID will focus its energy, efforts, and resources over the next five years. Each of the five goals has a set of strategies that drill into more specifics. Goals and strategies have a longer-term time horizon and are intended to be a constant throughout the five-year term of the Action Plan. Specific tactics and actions were also developed for each strategy as part of the planning process, but are adaptable, fluid, and more short-term in nature. These actions will drive the CSBID's annual workplan and will be evaluated and adjusted as-needed on a regular basis by CSBID staff and leadership.

GOAL 1: Ensure Central Square is cared-for, safe, and welcoming.

Strategies:

1. Maintain the Ambassador services as an essential component of the CSBID.
2. Provide a high level of cleaning and maintenance services in Central Square.
3. Coordinate and collaborate with the police department and social service providers on an on-going basis to address safety concerns in the district.

GOAL 2: Connect with, retain, and attract locally-owned, unique, and independent businesses and entrepreneurs.

Strategies:

1. Provide technical assistance and support to existing businesses and entrepreneurs in Central Square.
2. Proactively work to fill vacant storefronts in the district with active uses.
3. Explore creative opportunities for the CSBID to directly control or influence the affordability of storefront spaces in the district.
4. Support businesses and entrepreneurs through current and anticipated streetscape construction along Massachusetts Avenue.



GOAL 3: Strengthen Central Square's unique sense of place and lead cultural placekeeping efforts.

Strategies:

1. Create spaces that showcase artistic expression in the district.
2. Continue to enhance the public realm in Central Square to make it comfortable and welcoming.
3. Establish a community gathering space by making Starlight Square a permanent venue for enterprise and entertainment.

GOAL 4: Tell Central Square's story.

Strategies:

1. Continue to market and promote Central Square as Cambridge's Downtown.
2. Offer events that celebrate Central Square's history and diverse communities.
3. Encourage regular, small-scale programming and activation of public spaces throughout the district.

GOAL 5: Amplify the BID's role as the convener for Central Square.

Strategies:

1. Collaborate with partner institutions to address challenges impacting the district and to advance a shared vision for Central Square.
2. Selectively advocate for policy issues and initiatives impacting the district.
3. Work with artists, musicians, and arts and cultural organizations to further strengthen Central Square's role as a cultural district.
4. Continue meaningful engagement with the Central Square community and adjacent neighborhoods.

ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT

To implement the preceding goals and strategies, organizational recommendations for the CSBID are provided to optimize CSBID governance and resources, and identify guardrails to discourage "mission creep." Key recommendations include:

- Considerations for the future structure of the organization.
- Develop a 'Mission Screen' that guides decision-making around existing and potential new CSBID programs, services, and improvements.
- Add staff capacity to address existing and future gaps.
- Create committees to engage the board and other community members to aid in implementation of Action Plan goals.
- Continue to diversify CSBID revenue sources over time.

02

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Central Square Context
Co-Creation Process
Past Plans and Studies



CENTRAL SQUARE CONTEXT

ABOUT CENTRAL SQUARE

Central Square in the Past

Central Square originated in the late 18th century as a new village within the town of Cambridge. The first colonial settlement in Cambridgeport was near the intersection of today’s Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue and developed into the Central Square business and cultural district. The industrial revolution of the late 19th century led to a surge of development in Central Square, and the area was compared to Detroit and Toledo as an emerging industrial powerhouse. Central Square came to be known as a robust downtown between 1920 and 1950, when several large department stores, movie theatres, and dozens of small retailers served the needs of Cambridge residents and visitors. After World War II, like many American downtowns, Central Square was influenced by post-war suburbanization and disinvestment. However, the early 1990’s brought renewed public investment in infrastructure and residential and commercial development in Central Square.

Central Square Today

Today, Central Square is Cambridge’s Downtown and is the pulse of Cambridge: an eclectic, urban neighborhood where cultures mix, mingle, and create on a daily basis. Day or night, the Square is a vibrant destination for dance, theater, music, and visual arts as well as global, ethnic, and innovative cuisines. Due to this notable presence of arts and culture, the state of Massachusetts designated Central Square as a Cultural District in 2012, the first of fifteen cultural districts in the state.

Central Square is a multi-modal transportation hub with significant bike infrastructure, an MBTA “T” Red Line stop, and several local and regional bus routes. Central Square is also Cambridge’s civic and community core with City Hall, the Central Square Library Branch,

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As we celebrate all that is special and unique about Central Square, it is important to take a moment to pay homage and acknowledge the Massachusett Tribe who are indigenous to the area. They are the original inhabitants of this special place and maintain a presence in the area.

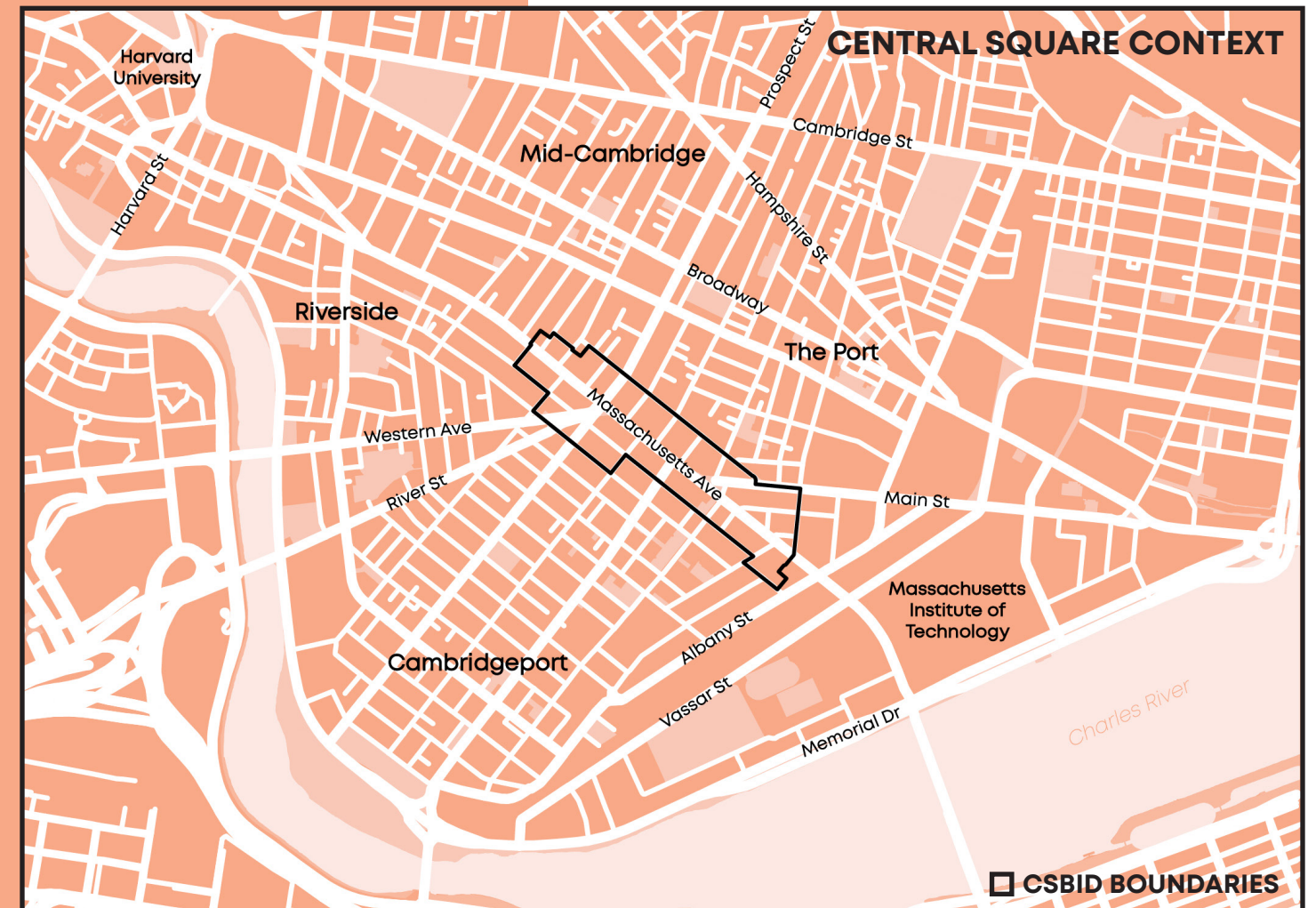


What is a Cultural District?

The Central Square Cultural District (“Cultural District”) is a state-designated cultural district by the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) pursuant to G.L. c. 10, § 58A. MCC works to elevate the rich cultural life in Massachusetts by partnering with communities across the Commonwealth to expand access, improve education, promote diversity, and encourage excellence in the arts, humanities, and sciences, and by offering grants to designated Cultural Districts to fund programs that use arts, science, and humanities to build strong, diverse, livable communities.

the Citywide Senior Center, the Cambridge YMCA and YWCA, and many human and social service providers. Central Square is further defined by its mix of new businesses including the Central Square Theater, Hilton’s Tent City, and Althea, and longstanding cornerstone businesses such as The Middle East, Miracle of Science, Pandemonium Books and Games, Central Square Florist, Brookline Lunch, Pill Hardware, and Cheapo Records – all of which add to Central Square’s unique fabric. With support from the business community, property owners, residents and students, Central Square remains a vibrant urban enclave despite gentrification in the region, though affordability pressures on housing and storefront spaces pose a significant threat moving forward.

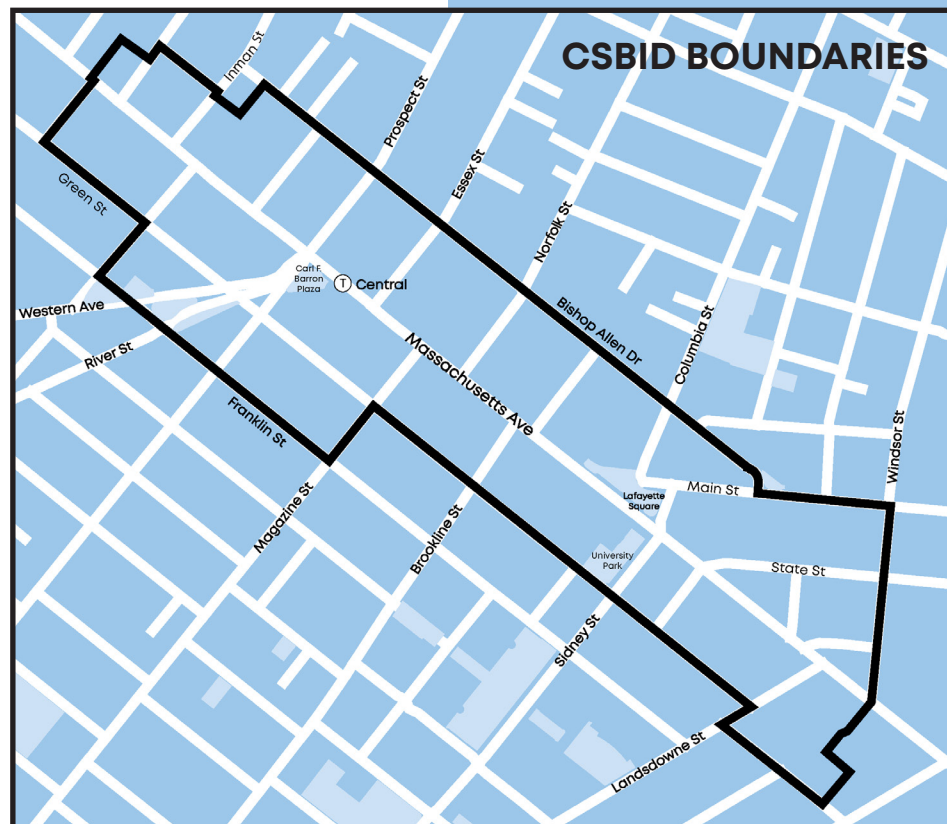
Central Square is surrounded by and connected to historic, diverse neighborhoods in Cambridge, including Mid-Cambridge, The Port, Riverside, and Cambridgeport. It is also situated between the anchor institutions of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).



ABOUT THE CENTRAL SQUARE BID

The Central Square Business Improvement District (CSBID) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that was founded following 30 years of momentum-building, organizing, and advocacy for Central Square. The CSBID was established in 2019 after growing out of the Central Square Business Association and was renewed in early 2024 for another five-year term. The CSBID's primary purpose is to energize Cambridge's Downtown district by bringing additional management and resources to maintain and improve the streetscape and public realm. Encompassing Massachusetts Avenue from Albany to Bigelow Street (see map below), the CSBID's work revolves first and foremost around placekeeping (see callout box to the right for definition). Cities like Cambridge are constantly in flux. To maintain and uplift what makes Central Square special, the CSBID leverages longstanding, intergenerational relationships to create spaces and opportunities for local residents, artists, and entrepreneurs to benefit from the richness of Central Square's Cultural District. In addition to producing programming and pop-ups, the CSBID contracts with a national clean and safe service provider to manage a team of highly visible ambassadors, that are stewards of the neighborhood, offering a welcoming presence in the Square, maintaining shared public spaces, engaging with shop owners, residents, and visitors, checking on at-risk neighbors and making referrals to social services providers.

The CSBID is funded by a self-imposed tax on commercial property located within the district's boundaries and through partnerships with the City of Cambridge. The organization is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors representing a diverse mix of area businesses, property owners, partner institutions, and nonprofit arts and cultural organizations.



What is placekeeping?

The term placekeeping represents an intentional shift away from the term placemaking, a common urban planning term that carries a connotation that public realm enhancements 'make' a place. Placekeeping instead switches focus to retaining and enhancing what makes a place special in the first place. The Central Square BID's fundamental charge of placekeeping is to ensure that culture and the characteristics that make Central Square unique are embraced, preserved, and nurtured. Placekeeping also includes ensuring public spaces are cared for, maintained, and feel safe and welcoming to everyone that lives, works, visits, or simply passes through.

What is a BID?

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are a common financing tool used throughout the country to provide enhanced services above and beyond what a municipality provides within a defined geographical commercial district. A BID does not replace city services, but rather is intended to supplement and enhance existing services and fund improvements in a district. There are more than 1,000 BIDs in the United States and approximately ten in the state of Massachusetts. BIDs are authorized by state and local law and receive funding via a self-imposed assessment on property within its clearly defined boundaries.

BIDs characteristically perform at a high level and are frequently valued in large part due to their effectiveness and ability to be nimble, responding to issues more quickly and in ways that municipal government or other entities cannot. "Mission creep" commonly occurs as BIDs work beyond their scope to respond to immediate needs of the community, and there is evidence that this has been the case during the first five years of the Central Square BID. Below is a basic summary of what BIDs typically do versus what they do not.

BIDs Do:

-  Provide the **supplemental services** unique to Central Square, including general cleaning and maintenance of the area (sweeping, pressure washing, removing trash, graffiti abatement, mitigation of weeds, etc.)
-  Self-imposed and self-governed by those who pay the BID assessment (property owners, businesses, residents)
-  Work collaboratively with local governments
-  Authorized by state statute, and formally adopted by City government

BIDs Do Not:

-  Do not replace **basic government services** (policing, trash pick-up, street sweeping, removal of snow from streets, lighting maintenance, etc.)
-  While local government has fiduciary oversight, BIDs are not considered part of local government
-  Some BIDs are quasi-governmental organizations/entities, while others are managed by a 501(c)(3) or (6) nonprofit organization

CENTRAL SQUARE BID HIGHLIGHTS: 2019- MAY 2024

The Central Square BID has had a tremendous, positive impact on Central Square since it was created in 2019. Highlights of the CSBID's work over the last five years are provided below.

Ambassadors in Action

18,534

stickers removed

145,216

block faces cleaned

10,055

Big Belly's cleaned

6,539

graffiti power washed

7,576

pedestrians assisted

6,864

feces cleaned up

9,030

weeds removed

2,087

social service assists

30,526

bags of trash removed

166,067

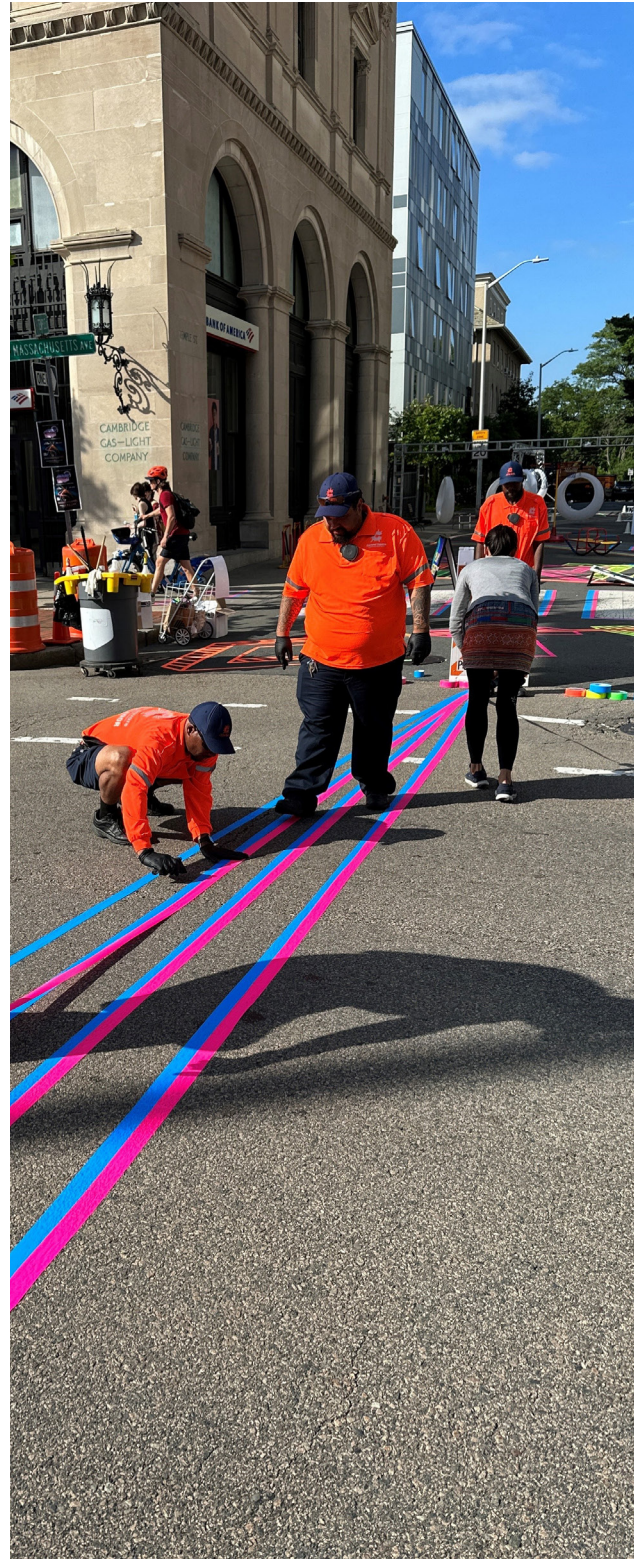
nips collected

87,723

needles picked up

12,232

opened and closed maintenance reports



CSBID Program Highlights

140

local entrepreneurs joining
Popportunity at Starlight

16,400

Instagram Followers

40+

new businesses opening in
the Square

5,800

Facebook Followers

25,000+

Starlight Square attendees

30

new pieces of public art

4

Popportunity placements on
Massachusetts Avenue

3

Celebrated district-wide
campaigns



Pandemic-Inspired Successes

Creation and Four-Year Operation of Starlight Square: Starlight Square was created during the Covid-19 pandemic by the CSBID, Flagg Street Studio, and Boyes-Watson Architects. At Lot 5 located at 84 Bishop Allen Drive, what was once a parking lot for cars was repurposed into a place for people—and a nationally-acclaimed design intervention. In its first four seasons, Starlight Square hosted over 325 events by 200+ local arts and cultural organizations; reinvested \$325,000 in producer stipends for public programming; prioritized economic opportunity for local entrepreneurs; and modeled a youth employment track that empowers young people to be the face of their own community. Starlight demonstrated what’s possible when underutilized land is reclaimed for spatial justice, civic life, and cultural programming. Starlight Square realizes decades’ worth of city planning and participation from the Central Square community, but was decommissioned at the end of June 2024.

Starlight Square received awards from Boston Magazine, Best of Boston 2021, and Reimagined Outdoor Spaces.



Piloted Heat Lamp Program for Restaurants

Creation of Marquee Dining Block, which added 500 new seats at 10 new outdoor patios along the Massachusetts Avenue corridor

Wrote and Championed ‘Grassroots Relief for Main Streets’ Legislative Agenda City and State level

Creation of and Springboard for Poppportunity:

Poppportunity started by Flagg Street Studio and the CSBID as an outdoor pop-up market in 2020, then evolved into a mini–Main Street of 14 pop-up shops at Starlight Square, and has since grown into a standalone 501(c)(3) that had an ongoing presence at Starlight Square and storefronts on Massachusetts Avenue. Goals of the program are to support the start-up and growth of local entrepreneurs and small businesses through affordable vending opportunities, coaching, and policy advocacy and to create and invest in a central location where residents can shop retail, enjoy delicious food and beverage, and enjoy art and entertainment in a community-focused setting.



ACTION PLAN PURPOSE

In early 2024, the CSBID engaged Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.), a national real estate economics and planning firm that specializes in strategic planning for BID-based organizations, to initiate an Action Plan to guide the evolution of the organization over the next five years. The planning process had the following objectives:

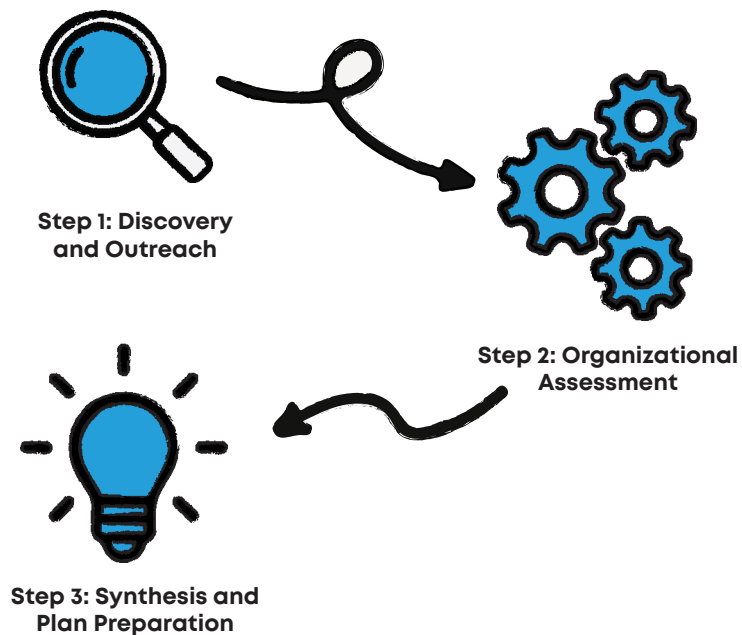
- Engage the CSBID organization’s leadership, ratepayers, businesses and entrepreneurs, residents, civic leaders, arts and cultural organizations, service providers, and other district stakeholders in a participatory process to develop the Plan.
- Understand and develop responses to external factors impacting Central Square and the CSBID.
- Refresh the mission, core values, goals, and program structure of the CSBID.
- In concert with CSBID staff, Board leadership, and the project Working Group, bring more strategic focus to the use of BID resources, aid in identifying and addressing “mission creep,” and develop recommendations to guide the organization’s evolution over the next five years.



CO-CREATION PROCESS

To meet the preceding objectives, the Action Plan was co-created with the Central Square community, and evolved with the invaluable input from past and current residents, business owners and entrepreneurs, property owners, arts and cultural organizations, local high school students, nonprofits and service providers, City staff, and others. The co-creation process included three steps:

- **Step 1: Discovery & Outreach** – This step aimed to engage a variety of community members and to scan the external environment to understand the economic, social, and political forces that are currently influencing Central Square. Specific components of this step involved reviewing relevant planning studies and market reports completed in the last several years; engaging with Central Square stakeholders to discuss opportunities and challenges; and conducting an online survey to gather input from a broad swath of community members to understand perceptions of Central Square and to develop priorities for CSBID services and improvements moving forward.
- **Step 2: Organizational Assessment** – The organizational assessment evaluated the CSBID’s ability to effectively address challenges and capitalize on opportunities impacting Central Square. Specific steps included meeting with the CSBID Board and staff to discuss organizational strengths, challenges, and priorities for improvement; a review of CSBID organizational documents; and a combined work session with the project Working Group, CSBID Board, and staff to evaluate what challenges the CSBID can control versus influence versus refer to partners.
- **Step 3: Synthesis & Plan Preparation** – The planning process concluded with the development of a Strategic Plan “framework” with findings from the external and internal assessments plus recommendations for the Central Square BID, including revisions to the CSBID’s vision, mission, and core values; areas of program and project emphasis for the next 18 months to five years; recommendations on the CSBID organizational structure, staffing, and internal operating policies; and an evaluation of revenue diversification options.

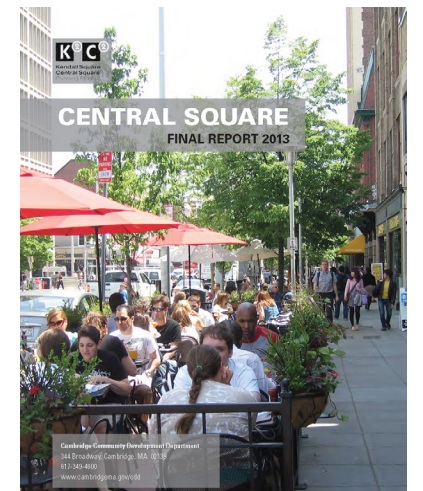


PAST PLANS AND STUDIES

This Action Plan builds on findings and recommendations from several past and current planning initiatives conducted during the past ten years directly impacting the CSBID and the district. High-level summaries of relevant documents can be found below.

KENDALL SQUARE AND CENTRAL SQUARE (K2C2) PLANNING STUDY (2013)

K2C2 was completed to form a cohesive vision for two mixed-use districts in Cambridge: Kendall Square and Central Square, and the area South of Main Street (including the Osborn Triangle) connecting the two squares. The Central Square Final Report was developed by a 21-member Central Square Advisory Committee appointed by the City Manager. The Final Report includes an evaluation of issues and opportunities, goals and recommendations founded on a set of guiding principles, and design guidelines to ensure future development aligns with the Square’s civic identity, supports sustainability, and allows appropriate density. The K2C2 report has served as the foundation for several subsequent planning and implementation efforts, including the River Street Reconstruction Project’s Carl Barron Plaza reconstruction and the Central Square zoning update which are currently underway, and the recently-completed Central Square City Lots Study.¹



CENTRAL SQUARE CAMBRIDGE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT ASSESSMENT (2018)

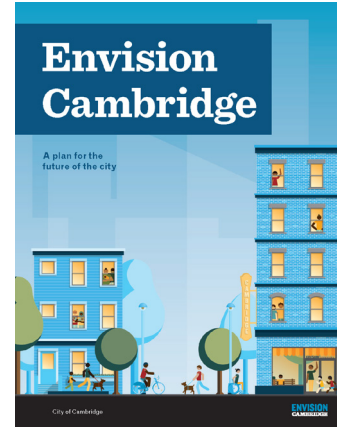
The Central Square Cambridge Commercial District Assessment was initiated with the goal of identifying and providing the City of Cambridge and local business associations with knowledge of how visitors and residents utilize Central Square. The assessment was informed by 500 survey responses from neighborhood merchants, shoppers, workers, and residents on key issues and opportunities and direction on how the district should evolve moving forward. Combined with survey responses, the assessment also incorporated data from the quarter mile surrounding the Square to understand the neighborhood’s existing business landscape and consumer characteristics. Key issues and opportunities identified through this assessment were intended to help the City of Cambridge and local business associations to prioritize policies and initiatives following completion of the report.



1. Kendall Square Central Square Planning Study (K2C2). <https://www.cambridgema.gov/cdd/projects/planning/k2c2>

ENVISION CAMBRIDGE (2019)

Envision Cambridge, the City of Cambridge’s comprehensive plan, provides a roadmap to the year 2030 and is intended to promote inclusive and sustainable growth. The plan is founded on a set of six core values and structures goals and implementation actions around six planning topics: climate and environment, community wellbeing, economy, housing, mobility, and urban form. In general, the plan identifies squares and major mixed-use corridors, like Central Square, as areas that should not experience wholesale redevelopment, but rather an incremental increase in density on underutilized sites. The City of Cambridge maintains an online dashboard where progress on meeting Envision Cambridge goals can be tracked over time: <https://www.cambridgema.gov/envision>



FINAL REPORT OF THE MAYOR’S ARTS TASK FORCE (2019)

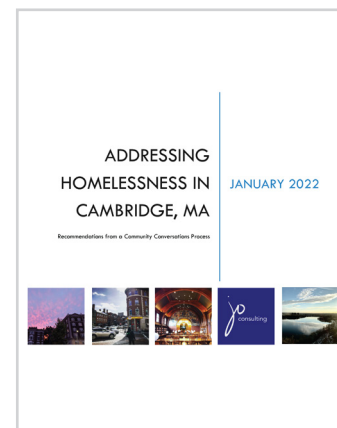
In response to growing displacement pressures on artists and arts and cultural organizations coupled with a lack of focus on protecting and fostering the creative community in Cambridge, the Mayor’s Office convened a 21-member Arts Task Force aimed at identifying and addressing artists’ most pressing concerns. Task Force members included working artists in the disciplines of dance, music, music production, theater, and visual arts, as well as specialists in developing arts spaces like studios and housing. The work of the Task Force was driven by three key themes: policies that will continue to foster and promote arts that are reflective of diverse communities; ensuring a robust funding source for the arts community; and collaboration between the City, the Central Square Business Association, and local artists to strengthen Central Square as a Cultural District.



Through the lens of these three themes, the Task Force developed recommendations intended to help all members of the arts community thrive. These recommendations were action-oriented and organized into several categories: building a consensus, public art, Cultural District, arts economy, licensing and permitting, nonprofit sector support, university responsibility, racial equity, and other ideas.

ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN CAMBRIDGE, MA (2022)

In May 2021, the City of Cambridge engaged a consultant to facilitate a series of community conversations that would result in recommendations for how the city can better work to prevent and end homelessness. This work built on several past efforts to address the homelessness crisis, including a community planning process to identify homelessness prevention strategies and the City Manager’s 2020 Public Safety Task Force that focused on law enforcement’s role in addressing needs of the unhoused population. The 2021 effort included outreach to unhoused individuals, and focused on evaluating current services being offered by non-profit service providers and city-funded programs, best practices and policy directions from across Massachusetts, and national trends in homelessness response. The Addressing Homelessness in Cambridge report includes funding, policy, and programming recommendations to address Cambridge’s unhoused crisis.



CENTRAL SQUARE CITY LOTS STUDY (2024)

Building on years of past work, planning, and community input in Central Square, the Central Square City Lots Study evaluates ten municipally-owned parking lots and buildings located in Central Square for their potential to support the City in using its own assets to realize community goals and support City operations. The process reaffirmed community needs identified through prior planning processes, included technical site assessments and a parking analysis, and developed ‘test fits’ for the future reuse of each site that evaluated variables including building and lot size, existing structures and utilities, market feasibility, and zoning. The Study then provides preferred options for site uses, priority actions, and phasing. Two early action items that emerged include initiating a community process to determine priorities for 105 Windsor Street and beginning a process to seek proposals from interested parties for mixed-use developments at 84 and 96 Bishop Allen Drive.²



CENTRAL SQUARE REZONING (CURRENTLY UNDERWAY)

The City of Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD) is currently leading a community process to update zoning in Central Square. Guided by community goals identified in prior planning efforts, the recommendations will focus on increasing housing, creating public spaces to build community, and supporting the retail, cultural, and nonprofit communities. It is anticipated the zoning update will be completed in September 2025.



RIVER STREET RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT (CURRENTLY UNDERWAY)

The River Street Reconstruction project, which kicked off in 2019, was initiated to address the area’s aging infrastructure. While much of the underground utility infrastructure needs repair, updates, or full replacement, this project also provides an opportunity to redesign the surface of the street with the goal of making it safer and more accessible. Because of the complexity of the project, it was divided into two major design segments:

- **The Corridor:** The City of Cambridge is redesigning and reconstructing the River Street Corridor between Memorial Drive near the Charles River and Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square. Key features of the redesign include a bus-only lane, one general travel lane, a separated bike lane, and a ‘flex zone’ in the space between the travel lane and the sidewalk that can accommodate landscaping, crosswalks, or parking.
- **Carl Barron Plaza:** Carl Barron Plaza, located at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and River Street, is one of the most significant public open spaces in Central Square. The redesign and reconstruction of the Plaza, and the adjacent MBTA bus terminal at Green and Magazine Streets, is a key component of the River Street Reconstruction project. During the planning and design of the project, City staff and consultants worked closely with a project Working Group and key stakeholders including the CSBID to develop goals and a vision for Carl Barron Plaza. These goals include providing a Plaza that is welcoming and safe for all users and more fully integrated into the daily life and cultural activities of Central Square. The resulting design was shared with the public in 2021 and 2022, and reconstruction of the Plaza was initiated in December 2023 with an anticipated duration of two years.³

2. City of Cambridge City Lots Study. <https://www.cambridgema.gov/Departments/communitydevelopment/centralsquarelots>

3. City of Cambridge River Street Reconstruction Project StoryMap. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/239734a5042d45d693c18bab6f7f60b6>

03

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Overview

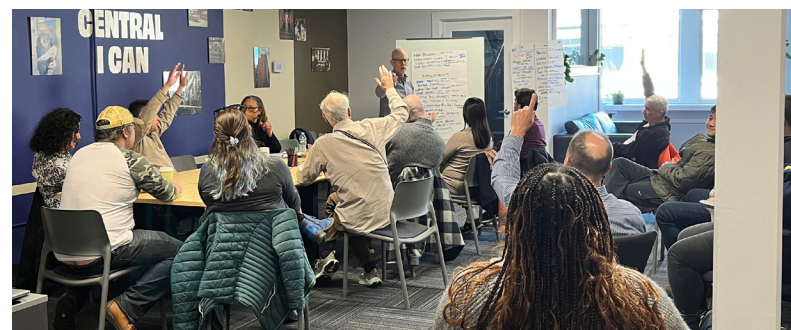
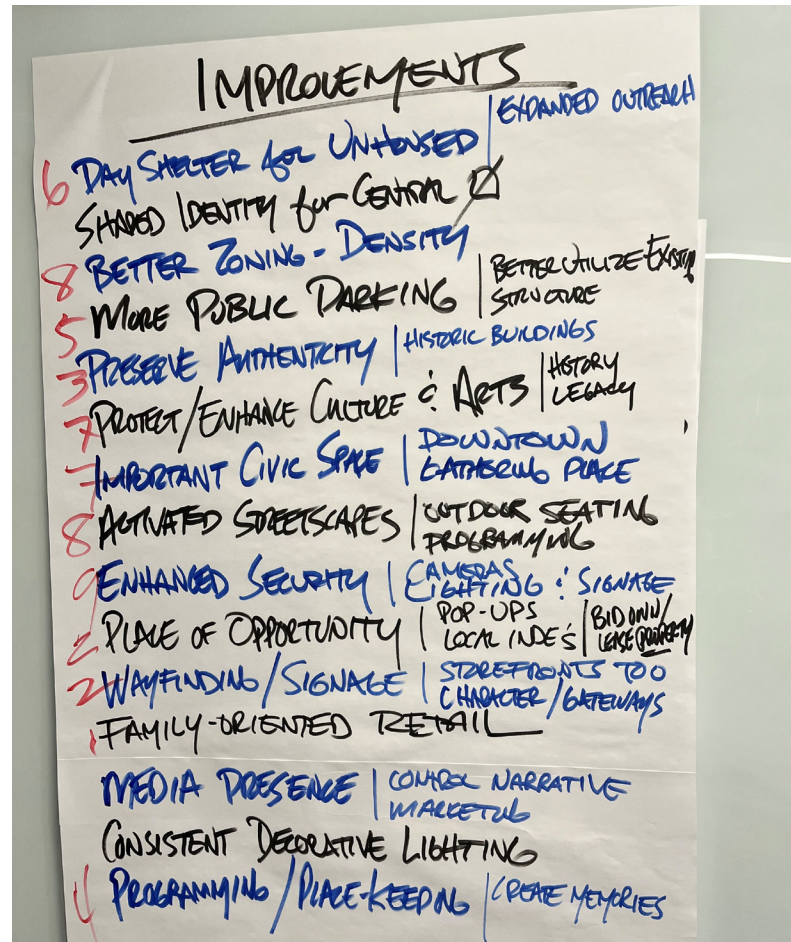
Interviews & Roundtable Themes

Online Survey Highlights



OVERVIEW

Inclusive community engagement was critical to ensure a diverse array of voices were incorporated into the CSBID action planning process. In total, **over 1,300 inputs** were gathered. Several methods were used to collect opinions and priorities from members of the Central Square community, residents of Central Square and adjacent neighborhoods, property owners, business owners and entrepreneurs, elected officials, youth, institutional and nonprofit partners, members of the arts community, and others representing a cross-section of Central Square stakeholders. Outreach methods included regular touchpoints with the project Working Group, CSBID Board, and Executive Committee, small group meetings, topic-based roundtables, and a widely-distributed online survey. A summary of each outreach method is provided on the following page.



OUTREACH METHOD	OVERVIEW	COMMUNITY MEMBERS REPRESENTED	# ENGAGED
WORKING GROUP	To create alignment and consensus among a diverse array of district stakeholders and shape expectations, design, and execution of the Action Plan, a project Working Group was convened and met five times (virtually and in-person) to provide creative input and direction throughout the planning process.	Business owners and entrepreneurs, educational institutions, employers, arts and cultural organizations, nonprofits, property owners and developers, City of Cambridge, faith community leaders, and social service providers	15
CSBID BOARD & EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	The CSBID Board of Directors and Executive Committee were engaged six times (virtually and in-person) throughout the action planning process to provide input and direction on development of the Plan along with the Working Group.	Business owners and entrepreneurs, educational institutions, employers, arts and cultural organizations, nonprofits, property owners and developers, City of Cambridge, and faith community leaders	21
ROUNDTABLE MEETINGS & SMALL GROUP MEETINGS	To understand existing conditions in Central Square and priorities for its future, small group, and topic-based roundtable meetings (organized by economic segment) were convened in-person in Central Square in March and April 2024.	Property owners, high school students, retail, service, food and beverage businesses, elected officials, City of Cambridge leaders (City Manager's Office, CPD, CARE Team, Public Works, Community Development, Finance, Human Rights, Traffic, Parking, Transportation), residents of Central Square and surrounding neighborhoods, arts and cultural organizations and community members, and community activists	Approx. 200
ONLINE SURVEY	An online survey was broadly distributed to community members and stakeholders in Central Square and the broader Cambridge community. The online survey further helped to identify the district's strengths and weaknesses and determine priorities for improvements. Responses were collected from April 9th to June 30th, 2024.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who live within walking distance of Central Square (51%) or in the district (22%) • Employees (23%) • Female (59%) • Well-distributed by age and income 	1,152

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT THEMES

This section summarizes key findings from engagement with **over 200** Central Square stakeholders in roundtable and small group meetings that took place in the early stages of the action planning process. During these meetings, community members were taken through an exercise where they were asked to identify current strengths and challenges for Central Square and the CSBID, and determine priorities for improvements moving forward. These themes and priorities helped inform the online survey that was then distributed to the broader community, and helped establish the foundation for this Plan's recommendations. Common themes and priorities for improving Central Square according to community members are outlined below.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

STRENGTHS

- **Unique, diverse**, and has a **distinct character** and **sense of place**
- Strong sense of community, **welcoming to most**
- **Cambridge's downtown**
- **Nightlife**, including **dining, entertainment** options, and **live music venues**
- **Local, independently-owned new and legacy businesses**
- **CSBID has overwhelmingly positive perception** and has improved Central Square over the last five years, programs including Starlight Square, Poppportunity, and outdoor dining on Massachusetts Avenue
- **Arts and culture**, including public art, artists, and status as a **Cultural District**
- **Nonprofit community**, including organizations representing the arts, community-based organizations, and social service providers
- **Transit access**, including the "T" and local and regional bus lines
- **Historic, diverse neighborhoods** surrounding the district, including The Port, Mid-Cambridge, Riverside, and Cambridgeport
- **Anchor institutions** and employers, including Harvard University, MIT, Navartis, and others

CHALLENGES

- Real and perceived **safety issues**
- **Affordability** of both housing and storefronts, threat of involuntary displacement
- **Quality of life issues** including open alcohol and drug use, aggressive behaviors, mental illness
- **Parking**, including management of existing supply, cost, and overall shortage of supply
- Lack of **things to do for families and youth**
- Central Square is **not well known** outside of Cambridge
- Lack of **wayfinding signs and gateways** in and out of the district
- Quality of street and sidewalk **infrastructure**
- Lack of a **central gathering space** for the community
- Lots of planning, lack of **implementation**
- **Reliability of transit service**
- **Concentration of social service providers**

PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Retain the vibe, diversity, and character that make Central Square unique, including:

- Lean into Central Square's status as a Cultural District.
- Support the arts and artists, including visual and performing arts, musicians, theatres, and other cultural and creative expressions.
- Balance zoning to allow additional density and vertical development while retaining the physical character of the district.

Support and retain existing and attract new businesses to vacant storefronts, including:

- Provide support to existing small, locally-owned businesses.
- Fill and activate vacant storefronts with new businesses or other creative uses.
- Make the outdoor dining spaces along Massachusetts Avenue permanent.

Address real and perceived safety concerns, including:

- Develop a unified approach to safety and security, in coordination with the Cambridge Police Department (CPD), the Community Assistance Response and Engagement (CARE) team, and other partners.
- Continue coordinating with social service providers in Central Square to connect those in need with services.
- Continue to address real and perceived safety concerns with empathy.

Enhance Central Square's public realm and add more community gathering space, including:

- Continue adding public art to Central Square.
- Enhance the public realm by adding more landscaping, lighting, and gateway and wayfinding signs.
- Add more public space where community members can gather without having to spend money, including making Starlight Square permanent.
- Address parking challenges by building an additional parking garage and improving management of existing parking supply.

Strengthen marketing of and programming in Central Square, including:

- Market and promote Central Square to the region and beyond.
- Continue and cultivate more events and programming that are reflective of the diverse communities in and around Central Square.
- Create more activities, amenities, and spaces for youth and families.

ONLINE SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

An online survey was created as part of the CSBID Action Plan’s public engagement process. Building on key themes from individual interviews and roundtable meetings, online survey questions were designed to help understand participants’ perceptions of Central Square today and identify priorities for future program and service offerings as well as physical improvements to the CSBID’s built environment. This survey was open to the broader community with the goal of gathering information from a wide audience about their experience and desires for Central Square’s future. The survey, which collected 1,152 responses, ran from April 9th to June 30th, 2024.

Demographics: As detailed below, survey respondents represented a cross-section of Central Square community members:

- A majority of respondents were people who live within walking distance of the district (52%), while large proportions work in the district (23%) and live in the district (22%).
- Most survey participants were between the ages of 25 and 44 (44%).
- There were almost twice as many female (59%) than male participants (32%), and 3% of respondents answered that they were non-binary or non-conforming.
- A majority of respondents described themselves as White or Caucasian (61%), followed by Black or African American (11%), Asian or Pacific Islander (7%), and Hispanic or Latino (5%).
- Survey participants were well-distributed by income, with the largest representation from those with an annual household income of \$50,000 - \$99,999

(22%) and \$200,000 or more (21%).

Cross-Tabulations: Survey results were cross-tabulated by interest in the CSBID, age, gender, race and ethnicity, and annual household income for select questions to see if responses differed based on respondent characteristics. While there was consensus around top priorities for Central Square, notable differences can be found in the Appendix.

KEY FINDINGS

Central Square Today

Survey respondents tend to visit Central Square frequently. The top responses were daily (49%), once a week or more (29%), and approximately once or twice a month (13%). The top three amenities that attract respondents to Central Square were **restaurants and cafes** (79%), **shopping** (56%), and **personal services** (36%). The most common method that survey respondents travel to Central Square is to walk (48%), followed by drive (22%), take the “T” (14%), and bike (12%).

Respondents’ perceptions of whether certain Central Square conditions have become better or worse over the past five years include:

- Pedestrian and bicycle friendliness (61%), appearance (60%), dining options (55%), cleanliness (54%), and arts, cultural, and music activities (50%) were rated as slightly better or much better.
- Parking options (36%) received the highest percentage of respondents rating it slightly worse or much worse.
- Many participants didn’t know if job opportunities and new businesses (53%) and housing options (43%) had become

better or worse.

Respondents’ perceptions of current CSBID services were mostly positive. The top three programs or services participants rated as good or very good were planning and producing events and festivals (65%); street/sidewalk cleanup, removing undesirable graffiti (62%); and maintenance of trees, flowers, etc. (60%). The programs and services that a majority of respondents did not rate as good or very good received a high percentage of don’t know responses. These were building community and partnerships (45%), Central Square BID Ambassadors (44%), and support for small businesses and filling vacant storefronts (32%).

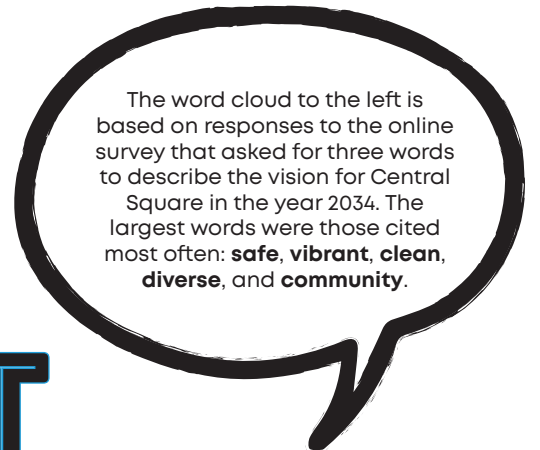
Central Square Tomorrow

The top five words that captured respondents’ vision for Central Square in 2034 were, **safe** (300 responses), **vibrant** (153 responses), **clean** (126 responses), **diverse** (109 responses), and **community** (99 responses). Responses to this question are sorted in the word cloud below, with the larger words being the most frequently mentioned.

The top programs and services participants considered to be very important are: continue improving services for unhoused neighbors (72%), provide support to small/locally-owned businesses (66%), and retain existing and

attract more arts and cultural venues (60%). When asked to select the one most important **program and service**, respondents’ top choices were: **continue improving services for unhoused neighbors** (24%), **improve security and safety** (21%), and **provide support to small/locally-owned businesses** (17%).

The physical improvements respondents considered to be very important to achieve their vision for Central Square were: fill and activate empty storefronts (63%) and make Central Square more pedestrian-friendly and accessible (59%). The options that received a high percentage of not important ratings include: improve the parking experience (31%) and improve directional signage (19%). When participants had to select the one physical improvement they thought most important, their top choices were: **fill and activate empty storefronts** (20%), **make Central Square more pedestrian-friendly and accessible** (20%), and **add a community gathering space by making Starlight a permanent venue for enterprise and entertainment** (16%).



04

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Key Takeaway #1
- Key Takeaway #2
- Key Takeaway #3
- Key Takeaway #4



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on feedback received from Central Square community members, this Plan identifies four key takeaways that serve as the foundation for setting a course for the CSBID to move Central Square forward over the next five years.

1 CENTRAL SQUARE IS CAMBRIDGE'S DOWNTOWN, REFLECTIVE OF THE CITY'S ENERGY, DIVERSITY, AND CREATIVITY.

Central Square has a distinct character and identity as the city's Downtown, which distinguishes it from other squares in Cambridge. Community members engaged in the Action Plan process praised the mix of businesses, presence of the arts and the creative community, live music and entertainment venues, the nonprofit community, social service providers, and the historic, textured physical character as contributing factors to what makes Central Square so special and unique.

Central Square was further described as a place for the people of Cambridge, as it is welcoming to and inclusive of all members of the community. Central Square reflects the community through public art and by making improvements and sustaining businesses and organizations that increase vibrancy, including the outdoor dining along Massachusetts Avenue, live music venues, and visual and performing arts organizations. Events and programming offered in Central Square also embrace the diversity that exists in Cambridge, creating opportunities for people from all walks of life to engage with the district.

“

The eclectic mix of everything creates a vibrancy I hope always remains.

- Online Survey Participant



“

Have always thought of Central Square as a global village and don't want it to lose its flavor.

- Online Survey Participant

2 THE CENTRAL SQUARE BID HAS MADE A SIGNIFICANT, POSITIVE IMPACT OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS.

As evidenced by the BID renewal rate achieved in early 2024, community members and BID ratepayers alike appreciate the services provided by the CSBID and understand its value proposition. The CSBID is viewed as a problem-solver and the protector of place focused on retaining Central Square's unique fabric, identity, and accessibility. Community members appreciate the CSBID's role in amplifying Central Square as a Cultural District, and highlighted that the CSBID provides a great deal of creative energy to produce events that respond to the needs and desires of the community and celebrate the area's varied cultures.

Participants engaged in the action planning process highlighted the CSBID's foundational clean and safe services as having improved the district over the last five years, with 59% of online survey participants indicating Central Square's appearance (landscaping, lighting, public art) has gotten much or slightly better and 54% rating cleanliness (trash, snow removal, undesirable graffiti), as much or slightly better.

“

Central Square is one of the last square's in Cambridge where stores and restaurants that have have been there for years still remain. It creates community amongst residents through Starlight Square and other BID activities, and neighbors all know each other. We are engaged with one another. And it feels like one of the more diverse and inclusive spaces in the City.

- Online Survey Participant

“

Central Square was always a hub for diversity and community. That has been lost over the years but the BID is bringing it back!

- Online Survey Participant



3 WHILE CENTRAL SQUARE IS A VIBRANT, DISTINCTIVE PLACE, IT IS NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES.

While Central Square is beloved by a majority of community members engaged through the action planning process, it faces notable challenges presently and over the next five years. Today, community members are concerned about safety (both real and perceived), cleanliness and maintenance beyond grittiness (human waste, drug paraphernalia, etc.), the risk of involuntary displacement of residents and small businesses due to rising costs, pedestrian and bicycle safety, and a lack of welcoming public space where community members can gather. Starlight Square filled this role but has gone away, and other outdoor spaces are transactional, in the sense that they cost money to access.

There will be an added challenge as Massachusetts Avenue will undergo major streetscape reconstruction over the next several years. It is likely that businesses in the district, particularly food, beverage, and retail that rely on foot traffic, will suffer reduced sales during construction. Safety issues may also arise in the short-term due to reduced visibility, lack of foot traffic, and crimes of opportunity associated with construction sites. After construction is completed, the CSBID can expect improved business activity and, most impactful, elevated property values resulting from improvements to Massachusetts Avenue; however, these impacts can also increase displacement pressures on existing businesses and spur redevelopment that may endanger Central Square’s unique character and charm. Balancing and preserving the qualities that make Central Square unique, while improving the overall experience and environment, will be an ongoing challenge.



“

Living in Central Square has to be made more affordable and safer.
- Online Survey Participant

“

I worry about the people who live in Central being pushed out, about unhoused people being pushed out under the guise of “safety,” about lack of accessibility on the T and due to COVID-19 in removing outdoor dining and event spaces like Starlight, and lack of inclusivity in the expulsion of local small businesses due to gentrification.
- Online Survey Participant

4 THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CSBID TO BE MORE FOCUSED, CREATIVE, AND VISIONARY MOVING FORWARD.

As evidenced by the BID renewal rate achieved in early 2024, community members and BID ratepayers alike appreciate the services provided by the CSBID and understand its value proposition. The CSBID is viewed as a problem-solver and the protector of place focused on retaining Central Square’s unique fabric, identity, and accessibility. Community members appreciate the CSBID’s role in amplifying Central Square as a Cultural District, and highlighted that the CSBID provides a great deal of creative energy to produce events that respond to the needs and desires of the community and celebrate the area’s varied cultures.

Participants engaged in the action planning process highlighted the CSBID’s foundational clean and safe services as having improved the district over the last five years, with 59% of online survey participants indicating Central Square’s appearance (landscaping, lighting, public art) has gotten much or slightly better and 54% rating cleanliness (trash, snow removal, undesirable graffiti) as much or slightly better. Key stakeholders were taken through an exercise where they were asked to determine what external challenges the CSBID should try to control versus influence, versus refer to partners over the next five years. Results are summarized in the table below and inform subsequent Action Plan recommendations.

“

I would like to continue to see the great music, theater, art, and businesses that the BID has highlighted - it showcases the true beauty of the people of Central Square.
- Online Survey Participant



EXTERNAL CHALLENGES	CONTROL	INFLUENCE	REFER TO PARTNERS
Services for unhoused neighbors			●
Safety/security		●	
Support for small/locally-owned businesses		●	
Protect and promote the unique vibe and diversity of Central Square	●		
Retain existing and attract more arts and cultural venues	●		
Fill and activate empty storefronts		●	
Make Central Square more pedestrian-friendly and accessible		●	
Add a community gathering space by making Starlight permanent	●		
Improve the parking experience		●	
Encourage development on underutilized land and surface parking lots		●	

05

ACTION PLAN FRAMEWORK

Action Plan Foundation
Goals and Strategies



ACTION PLAN FOUNDATION

The Central Square BID Action Plan will serve as a roadmap guiding the organization over the next five years and beyond. Overarching and foundational to the Action Plan are the CSBID's vision for Central Square, a mission statement that defines the CSBID's role in achieving that vision, and core values that will permeate throughout everything the CSBID does moving forward.

The five Action Plan goals align with areas where the CSBID will focus its energy, efforts, and resources over the next five years, and each goal has a set of strategies that drill into more specifics. Goals and strategies have a longer-term time horizon and are intended to be a constant throughout the five-year term of the Action Plan. Specific tactics and actions were also developed for each strategy as part of the planning process, but are adaptable, fluid, and more short-term in nature. These actions serve as the CSBID's annual workplan and will be evaluated and adjusted as-needed on a regular basis by CSBID staff and leadership; they are not included in this document.

VISION

Community engagement conducted as part of the Action Plan process was synthesized into the community's vision for Central Square:

Central Square is Cambridge's downtown, a diverse and thriving business and cultural district.

MISSION

A refreshed mission statement for the CSBID is provided below. This mission statement aligns with feedback and themes that arose through engagement with Central Square stakeholders, and is intended to clarify the CSBID's role in achieving the community's vision for Central Square.

To energize Central Square by retaining and embracing the city's diversity and culture, and ensuring the district is a safe, expressive community where everyone is welcome and can thrive together.



CORE VALUES

A foundational element of this Action Plan is a set of core values that guide the Plan's recommendations and are embodied through everything the CSBID will do moving forward. The core values are:

INCLUSIVE

One of Central Square's greatest strengths is its identity as Cambridge's Downtown and a place that is welcoming and accepting to all. The CSBID will embrace and build upon that strength by ensuring Central Square offers programming and initiatives that reflect the diversity of the broader community and cultivate a sense of belonging in the district. A core tenant of CSBID's work will be to continue proactively engaging and building relationships between the organization and an array of community members to invoke a strong spirit of collaboration. The CSBID organization will continue to be reflective of the Central Square community, inviting diverse voices to the table and listening and responding to the community's desires for Central Square.

INNOVATIVE

In its first five years of existence, the CSBID was exceptionally nimble and innovative due to the unforeseen circumstances associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. From that set of challenges, plus exceptional leadership on the staff and Board levels, the CSBID has emerged as the driver of innovation in Central Square. The Central Square BID exemplifies service and best practices in place management through initiatives such as Starlight Square (public space activation and small business incubation), placekeeping that is reflective of and amplifies the community (murals, Graffiti Alley, In Central I Can campaign), free events and programming that welcome the broader Cambridge community to Central Square (Citywide Dance Party), and exceptional clean and safe operations. Moving forward, innovation will remain a core component of everything the CSBID does, and the organization will continue to pilot new initiatives as opportunities arise.

IMPACTFUL

The Central Square BID is uniquely positioned and resourced to be the leading champion and advocate for Central Square. The community already views the CSBID in that light, and the organization, in collaboration with the City of Cambridge and other key partners, has made a significant, positive impact on Central Square over the last five years. The CSBID will continue to convene and lead on issues and policies impacting the district directly, and will be a partner at the table on citywide and regional initiatives and policies that also impact Central Square.



GOAL 1

Ensure Central Square is cared-for, safe, and welcoming.

WHY IT MATTERS

Ensuring Central Square is safe and well-maintained is one of the top community priorities that emerged through the action planning process, and is fundamental to sustaining a welcoming and vibrant district. The CSBID's Ambassador program is critical to ensuring Central Square is cared for and safe, providing services above and beyond those rendered by the City of Cambridge. Many stakeholders expressed concerns about the open use of drugs, alcohol, and other substances, along with a recognition that an individual's behavior can be directly influenced by these substances.

While there was a great deal of empathy shown by community members toward Central Square's unhoused population, there was a distinction made regarding people that may have been on the streets, yet recognized as part of the Central Square community for many years, and some newcomers that seem to have a different temperament, often more aggressive and disruptive. Furthermore, while there is a genuine appreciation for the services provided by the multiple nonprofits serving the unhoused population located in Central Square, there was an acknowledgement that the concentration of social service providers is likely a contributing factor to some of the challenges that persist. Safety and maintenance programs are often the most visible services urban place management organizations like the CSBID provide. Moving forward, ensuring the district is safe and cared-for will continue to be a primary focus of the CSBID organization.

STRATEGIES

- A. Maintain the Ambassador services as an essential component of the CSBID.
- B. Provide a high level of cleaning and maintenance services in Central Square.
- C. Coordinate and collaborate with the police department and social service providers on an on-going basis to address safety concerns in the district.

CASE STUDY: SUPPORTING UNHOUSED NEIGHBORS

The Village of Love Foundation – Suppers and Showers, Oakland, CA

Since 2019 the Village of Love Foundation has operated the quarterly pop-up event, 'Suppers and Showers,' which offers hot meals, hot showers, clean clothes, and information on available resources to unhoused individuals. Volunteers from the surrounding Temescal neighborhood staff the event, which has helped to build a sense community. CEO and Founder Joey Harrison is also the Block by Block Operations Manager for the Temescal BID's maintenance services, highlighting the Foundation's strength at connecting organizations doing similar work across the area. Since starting, the organization has increased their unhoused services to involve de-escalation training, unsheltered support groups, community outreach, counseling services, mobile showers, laundry, and more.



GOAL 2

Connect with, retain, and attract locally-owned, unique, and independent businesses and entrepreneurs.

WHY IT MATTERS

In most U.S. cities, the storefront economy was one of the sectors most heavily impacted by the pandemic, and remains the focus of ongoing recovery efforts. The mix of small, locally-owned businesses, live music and entertainment venues, non-profit organizations serving diverse audiences, and arts and cultural venues are what define Central Square's character and draw. The CSBID, and the Central Square Business Association before the BID was formed, have been proactively supporting small business and entrepreneurs in Central Square by aiding existing and prospective new businesses, piloting small business incubation and supporting efforts through Popportunity, and marketing the Central Square brand through social media, events, and promotions.

Moving forward, there is an opportunity for the CSBID to place greater emphasis on this program area, exploring opportunities to more directly control storefront affordability and responding to anticipated challenges businesses will face through Massachusetts Avenue construction over the next five years. BIDs can be particularly impactful during major infrastructure projects by providing direct financial assistance to businesses, offering technical assistance including business planning and legal aid, creating dedicated staff liaisons to lead construction mitigation efforts, holding events and promotions that draw customers to the district during construction, and advocating for and implementing temporary wayfinding signage.

STRATEGIES

- Provide technical assistance and support to existing businesses and entrepreneurs in Central Square.
- Proactively work to fill vacant storefronts in the district with active uses.
- Explore creative opportunities for the CSBID to directly control or influence the affordability of storefront spaces in the district.
- Support businesses and entrepreneurs through current and anticipated streetscape construction along Massachusetts Avenue.

66%

of online survey participants rated 'provide support to small/locally-owned businesses' as very important to improving Central Square over the next five years.

CASE STUDY: BUSINESS SUPPORT THROUGH CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Hartford Business Improvement District (HBID), Hartford, CT

The Hartford Business Improvement District (HBID) demonstrated how compelling wayfinding signage can be a low-cost, high-impact way to aid local businesses affected by major construction projects. Costing less than \$1,000 in a three-year span, the HBID's wayfinding program was able to reframe the local narrative around construction from an inconvenience to a mark of downtown's progress. Instead of relying on bland, traditional construction signs, the HBID used colorful, clever, and humorous signage. This was especially important during an eight-month capital improvement project on historic Pratt Street, which was closed to vehicles while leaving the sidewalks open. The signs were able to draw people in that normally would have assumed the entire street was closed and helped maintain a customer base for small businesses. The signage was also eye-catching enough to be picked up on social media, and had the effect of driving up traffic on Hartford.com. In 2018, HBID's program won a Pinnacle award from the International Downtown Association (IDA).⁵

CASE STUDY: COMMERCIAL LAND BANKING

Kensington Corridor Trust (KCT), Philadelphia, PA

The Kensington Corridor Trust (KCT) is a Neighborhood Trust that was established in 2019 to create an opportunity for collective ownership of real estate assets for neighborhood benefit. Key goals of KCT include fostering equitable economic revitalization of Kensington Avenue, de-commodifying real estate assets through community ownership, retaining affordable commercial spaces, preventing involuntary displacement, building neighborhood power, and growing generational wealth for historically marginalized community members. KCT is 501(c)(3) organization that is primarily funded by grants and donations. The KCT's vision is that Kensington Avenue is a safe, healthy, and socioeconomically diverse commercial corridor with accessible opportunities for the existing and future residents of Kensington. Other activities of the KCT include restoring cleanliness and safety, attracting and accelerating businesses to provide goods and services that meet local needs, and increasing job opportunities for community members.⁶

5. <https://downtown.org/innovative-projects/gettin-diggy-with-it/>

6. <https://kctphilly.org/>

GOAL 3

Strengthen Central Square's unique sense of place and lead cultural placekeeping efforts.

WHY IT MATTERS

Great downtowns are often defined by their memorable public spaces, streets, and parks. While the CSBID has contributed to placekeeping efforts in Central Square by adding public art and murals and streetscape amenities, a common theme shared by community members was that Central Square lacks comfortable, welcoming public spaces where people can gather without having to make a purchase. In particular, youth engaged in this process expressed that the lack of public gathering space is a key impediment to them spending time in Central Square, and they instead venture to parks and public spaces outside of the district. Stakeholders shared that Starlight Square helped fill this gap, but given its uncertain future, identified adding more public gathering space to Central Square as a top priority.

Many community members also expressed that the outdoor dining spaces that were constructed in response to the pandemic have added a new dimension of vibrancy to Massachusetts Avenue, and that they would like to see those spaces made permanent. Moving forward, CSBID placekeeping efforts will continue to focus on public realm enhancements, creating comfortable spaces for community members to gather, including exploring making Starlight Square a permanent fixture of Central Square and exploring opportunities to create spaces for the community to gather in the district through property ownership.

STRATEGIES

- Create spaces that showcase artistic expression in the district.
- Continue to enhance the public realm in Central Square to make it comfortable and welcoming.
- Establish a community gathering space by making Starlight Square a permanent venue for enterprise and entertainment.

CASE STUDY: NONPROFIT LAND OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Business and Cultural District West Development Association (BuCu West), Denver, CO

BuCu West is a 501(c)(3) focused on Morrison Road, the main commercial corridor in a predominately Latino neighborhood of Denver. The mission of BuCu West is to empower marginalized individuals by supporting them in establishing and running their own businesses in the adjacent neighborhood and beyond. The organization formed in 1987 as a business association and has since evolved into an organization that supports local business owners and entrepreneurs through business incubators, consultation, corridor activation and public art, and collaboration with the City of Denver and other community organizations.

BuCu West has been partnering with Elevation Community Land Trust (ECLT) since 2022 to develop a three-story, mixed-use building on Morrison Road that would provide affordable condos and commercial spaces. ECLT purchased five residential spaces and six commercial units utilizing a \$1,800,000 loan from the City of Denver's Department of Housing and Stability, with the stipulation that ECLT provide a minimum of 36 bedrooms and no studios. While ECLT will manage the residential units, BuCu West will oversee transferring the commercial spaces to local legacy businesses at affordable rates in perpetuity. Construction is slated to begin in 2026.

#3

Add a community gathering space by making Starlight a permanent venue for enterprise and entertainment was the #3 top physical improvement priority for online survey participants.



GOAL 4

Tell Central Square's Story.

WHY IT MATTERS

While the CSBID can influence many external factors shaping the district, protecting, supporting, and communicating about the unique vibe, character, and diversity of Central Square is one of the few things the Central Square BID can comfortably control moving forward. This involves communicating and marketing the attributes that make the district extraordinary and special, producing small-scale activations and programming that celebrate the diverse communities in and surrounding Central Square, and offering information about the district in a variety of formats to reach multiple audiences. Stakeholders engaged in the action planning process expressed that the CSBID already does a fantastic job of telling Central Square's story, and should continue to focus on this over the next five years.

STRATEGIES

- Continue to market and promote Central Square as Cambridge's downtown.
- Offer events that celebrate Central Square's history and diverse communities.
- Encourage regular, small-scale programming and activation of public spaces throughout the district.

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Cultural diversity was one of the things I appreciated most about growing up in Cambridge. Almost everywhere else in Cambridge, it feels like the socio-economic structures sustaining that diversity have been eroded. Central Square, with support of the BID, has an opportunity to not only mend that social fabric, but create something that is truly, beautifully new.

-Online Survey Participant



GOAL 5

Amplify the BID's role as the convener for Central Square.

WHY IT MATTERS

The Central Square BID is viewed as a problem-solver, collaborator, and convener by members of the Central Square community. While there are several community priorities that are not issues the CSBID can directly control, such as pedestrian safety and accessibility, providing services for unhoused neighbors, and parking management, the organization can influence movement on those priorities by advocating and collaborating with the City and other partners. Moving forward, the CSBID should continue to strengthen its role and voice as the champion for improving Central Square, continuing to work with partner organizations and the City of Cambridge to solve current, ongoing, and future challenges in innovative, creative, and tangible ways. The most impactful way the CSBID can strengthen its influence on initiatives impacting the district is by continuing to demonstrate and communicate its value proposition, reflect the diverse community the district represents, and reinforce partnerships with civic, non-profit, educational, and arts and cultural institutions in and around Central Square.

STRATEGIES

- A. Collaborate with partner institutions to address challenges impacting the district and to advance a shared vision for Central Square.
- B. Selectively advocate for policy issues and initiatives impacting the district.
- C. Work with artists, musicians, and arts and cultural organizations to further strengthen Central Square's role as a cultural district.
- D. Continue meaningful engagement with the Central Square community and adjacent neighborhoods.



Central Square has continued to grow and develop over the years. I see so many opportunities that have allowed small businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive. I think that the BID is so supportive and aims to provide guidance and opportunity to a diverse array of people, which is so important in a community like this, which has so many folks from different backgrounds and with different identities.

-Online Survey Participant



06

ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT

Organization Structure
Mission Screen
Governance
Revenue Diversification



OVERVIEW

The following section discusses organizational implications of this Action Plan for the CSBID – and recommendations for the CSBID’s structure, guardrails to address “mission creep,” governance, and funding enhancement and diversification options.

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE

The CSBID is currently structured as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is the managing entity for the Central Square BID. It is common for BIDs to contract for service through a non-profit organization, as the CSBID does currently.

Nationally, however, the umbrella organization of comparable, business-based organizations in other cities is often a 501(c)(6) nonprofit, which allows for a degree of advocacy and leadership that is constrained with a 501(c)(3). If the umbrella organization is a (c)(6), the family of organizations frequently includes a (c)(3) affiliate, which is better suited for seeking charitable donations, grants, and sponsorships. This “best practice” structure from other mature downtown management organizations could make sense for the CSBID as the organization continues to evolve over time.

MISSION SCREEN

Because the CSBID is perceived as a problem-solver, the organization is constantly being pulled in many different directions. To ensure the organization does not lose focus, efficiency, and optimization of resources to benefit Central Square, the CSBID should develop a mission screen to create clear parameters and expectations highlighting what the CSBID does and does not do, both internally and externally. This set of criteria can then guide everything the CSBID does and decision-making on prospective new initiatives (plus creates boundaries to say no). Examples of mission screen criteria include:

1. Does this project or initiative align with the CSBID’s core values of inclusive, innovative, and impactful?
2. Does this align with the CSBID’s mission and vision for Central Square?
3. Does this align with one or more of the CSBID’s Action Plan goals?
4. Will this effectively engage the Central Square community or engage currently underserved or marginalized community members?
5. Is this accessible (physically, monetarily, etc.) to a diverse array of Central Square stakeholders?
6. Will this positively impact businesses in the district?
7. What is the CSBID’s financial and time investment into this project or venture?
8. Does the potential positive impact justify the cost?
9. Does the CSBID’s staff have the capacity and financial resources to implement this?
10. Will this increase awareness of Central Square and the CSBID?
11. Is this supported by partners?

GOVERNANCE

The following section discusses organizational implications of this Action Plan for the CSBID – and recommendations for the CSBID’s structure, guardrails to address “mission creep,” governance, and funding enhancement and diversification options.

STAFFING

To address current staffing stress points and align with the CSBID’s redefined program areas, the CSBID should consider adding one new staff member and redefine the operations director position:

- A senior-level **deputy director or vice president with an operations focus** who can oversee the CSBID’s clean and safe contract, and responsibilities related to ensuring that Central Square remains clean and safe, plus allow for the President to delegate some day-to-day management responsibilities, and create more depth in the organization. Since the CSBID was established, the President’s role and responsibilities have rapidly expanded with little direct staff support to help alleviate the additional workload. Adding a deputy director position could help create capacity for the President and, by extension, the organization.
- A **mid-level small business support or economic development specialist** who can aid in implementing Goal 2 strategies and actions. Retaining existing businesses and filling vacant storefronts emerged as top community priorities during the action planning process, and this function is currently divided among all members of the CSBID team. Moving forward, the CSBID organization could benefit from a dedicated staff position in this role, particularly to support businesses through Massachusetts Avenue streetscape construction over the next five years.

Additional staffing adjustments will be made by the CSBID Executive Director and Board leadership as needed.

BOARD

The CSBID Board composition is dictated by its by-laws, which state that the Board must have between 15 and 23 members who serve three-year terms, with a three-term maximum. The by-laws further specify the required interests of Board members, including representatives from a college or university, property owners of various sizes, a non-profit/institutional property owner, two commercial tenants representing retail, restaurants, or entertainment, a performing arts institution, a commercial office tenant, a district resident, three at-large participants, two Central Square community stakeholders, and a City Manager appointee. Moving forward, it is recommended that the CSBID continue seeking opportunities to diversify the Board by age, experience, gender identity, race and/or ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, workplace, industry, and background. Dialogue and ideas are enriched when varied perspectives are brought to the table.



COMMITTEES

Many place management organizations have committees, task forces, or similar, to support staff in making progress on the organization's program areas or specific projects. Currently, the CSBID has an Executive Committee, an Audit Committee, and a Finance Committee, which are all focused on the administrative functions of the CSBID. As a relatively new organization, the CSBID does not currently have programmatic committees, but should consider establishing them to support the goals articulated in this Action Plan. As committees do not have the same constraints as the CSBID Board, committees could help to support the CSBID's redefined program areas, and offer an opportunity to engage additional,

diverse voices in the CSBID organization, and provide pathways for future board leaders. Example program area committees include:

- **Safety** (aligned with Goal 1)
- **Small business support, retention, and attraction** (aligned with Goal 2)
- **Storytelling and placekeeping** (aligned with Goals 3 and 4)

It is important to be mindful of the staffing and time commitment pressures placed on the CSBID to manage committees, as too many committees can create an ongoing drain on staff time and resources. To avoid placing the administrative burden on the CSBID staff, committees could be managed by the CSBID Board with oversight from a CSBID staff member.

REVENUE DIVERSIFICATION

Currently, CSBID revenue is heavily reliant on BID assessments and City of Cambridge grants. Moving forward, there are opportunities to explore diversifying CSBID's funding sources, as outlined below.

PHILANTHROPIC DONATIONS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Central Square is fortunate to have several anchor institutions, large employers, and property owners who are invested in the success of the Square. Due to its status as a 501(c)(3), the CSBID organization is well positioned to seek philanthropic donations and sponsorships from vested institutions and stakeholders in and adjacent to the district. Philanthropic donations could support specific CSBID programs such as small business support, or could help fund large capital improvements like identifying and purchasing or leasing a permanent venue for Starlight Square.

Place management organizations are often able to raise substantial revenue in the form of sponsorships for a menu of event options offered throughout the year. For example, different tiers of sponsorships could be established and employed for all CSBID events, with sponsors accruing greater benefits at higher levels. Marketing and communication could also become part of the bundling structure, with sponsor visibility offered throughout the year in various CSBID marketing materials, social media, etc.

Sponsorships and philanthropic donations could be used to enhance existing events, to provide seed funds to test new programming concepts, or to provide general support for all CSBID events, activities, projects, and programs.

PARKING REVENUE SHARE

Because it is such a fundamental component of an urban district like Central Square that has a mix of retail, restaurants, and service businesses, parking is often an important component of the district's ecosystem. In particular, business owners engaged in the Action Plan process expressed concerns about the availability of parking in Central Square for their customers. To address parking in a holistic way, it is not uncommon for BIDs to enter into a parking revenue share agreement with their municipalities, as BIDs often have a stronger pulse on challenges with parking since they are directly interfacing with people in the district every day. If the CSBID were to enter into a revenue sharing agreement with the City of Cambridge, the CSBID could use those funds to address frequent parking concerns including physical place enhancements like better lighting, plus services such as providing businesses and office tenants located in Central Square with streamlined information about the parking system and multi-modal alternatives.

EARNED INCOME FROM EVENTS

A core component to most of the CSBID's events and programming to-date has been that they are free and open to any community member who wants to attend. This creates an equitable, accessible, and inclusive environment at CSBID events and should continue moving forward. However, the CSBID could also consider opportunities for earning income at events through optional offerings, such as alcohol, food, or CSBID merchandise.

PROJECT-SPECIFIC PARTNERSHIPS

As the CSBID continues exploring options for making Starlight Square a permanent fixture in Central Square, the organization can seek an opportunity to enter into a public/private partnership. For example, if the City of Cambridge seeks RFP responses for the land under Starlight, the CSBID could join with a private- or nonprofit-sector partner to optimize community benefits that could include affordable housing, retail suited for small businesses, and/or a public space that can accommodate year-round programming. The CSBID provides hyper-local market knowledge and relationships that could enhance the development of remaining infill sites, and/or redevelopment of obsolete structures.





Learn more about the
Central Square BID:
[www.centralsq.org](http://www centralsq.org)
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