



“Be as inclusive & democratic as possible in terms of the planning & implementation process.”
Roxbury resident via text message

Land Use and Planning

Inclusive community-planning processes, predictable and transparent land use regulations that respond to changing needs, and integrated land use and public investment will ensure that Boston’s land is used to the highest benefit of all residents and workers.

As a growing city with limited land area, Boston is making strategic decisions about how land can be used to guide growth and meet citywide policy goals.

Close collaboration with communities and new ways of engaging residents—online, on the street, or through other formats—is informing neighborhood plans that reflect local aspirations. The City is committed to codifying these neighborhood plans through local land use regulation and enforcing them through zoning and the development review process to ensure transparency and predictability.

Land-use regulations are evolving to reflect changing socioeconomic, environmental, technological, and

real estate market conditions. For example, along the waterfront, Boston is balancing the need to prepare for climate change, preserve water-dependent industrial uses, support job and housing growth, and create quality open spaces.

Comprehensive area planning is integrating coordinated land-use regulations, initiatives, and capital investments to meet policy objectives. For example, the use and disposition of City-owned assets, such as land and buildings, is supporting citywide policy goals, such as encouraging the development of permanently affordable housing or providing funding to support park investments and operations.

PLAN Initiatives

The BPDA, in partnership with the community, is developing comprehensive neighborhood plans that guide inclusive growth and create opportunities to live, work, and connect. The PLAN initiatives—JP/ROX, South Boston Dorchester Avenue, Dudley Square, and Glover’s Corner, Dorchester—mark a new approach to community engagement, in which the BPDA and other City departments engage with the community to create a comprehensive vision and set guidelines for future development. Through these PLAN processes, community engagement has included workshops, tours, and open-house sessions designed to encourage learning from one another and sharing of best practices.

Boston Planning and Development Agency Reforms and Organizational Strategy

In 2016, the Boston Redevelopment Authority became the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA). The BPDA is committed to a land use and planning approach that engages communities, implements new solutions, develops partnerships for greater impact, and tracks the progress of projects and initiatives. The BPDA is putting these priorities into action through the PLAN neighborhood-planning initiatives as well as the initiatives in Imagine Boston 2030.

← Plan Dorchester Avenue Walking Tour

This is what inspires us to act.

Growing inclusively in a land-constrained city requires focused government action to guide land use and development. Today a significant share of Boston’s land is occupied by uses that are not likely to undergo significant change, while other areas have potential to evolve to accommodate growth and meet citywide goals. Residential uses make up 30 percent of the city’s area and a significant share of land is occupied by other stable uses, such as institutions, open space, and infrastructure assets like trains or airports. While these areas can accommodate some growth, Boston’s demand for additional places to live and work necessitate the identification of new areas for growth. City-led area plans and zoning can guide the coordinated evolution of uses and investment in critical infrastructure needed to accommodate population and job growth.

While land use can be a powerful tool for achieving City objectives, it needs to be coordinated with other policies and investments.

Land use regulations are critical for protecting important uses—from industrial to residential—but zoning alone is not enough to respond to the evolving needs of Boston’s population and economy. For example, while broad land use regulations developed in the twentieth century have preserved significant areas of the city

for critical economic anchors, such as the port and other industrial uses, reserving land alone has not been a sufficient policy to overcome a nationwide era of industrial decline. To support Boston’s industrial economy and achieve other important objectives, such as producing affordable housing and supporting small business growth, land use will need to be coordinated with housing policies and economic development tools.

Boston’s approach to planning and land use has evolved over past decades.

Since the era of urban renewal in the 1960s, the City’s planning approach has evolved to emphasize neighborhood planning, such as the Brighton/ Guest Street Planning Study, the Harrison-Albany Corridor Strategic Plan, or the Fairmount/ Indigo Planning Initiative. The City has also partnered with the State and federal government on transformative infrastructure investments such as the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, Rose Kennedy Greenway, and Deer Island Wastewater Treatment Plant. As Boston moves forward, the City will combine these types of community-focused neighborhood plans and infrastructure investments with Imagine Boston 2030, the overarching citywide plan to guide growth and ensure that its benefits are felt by all Bostonians.

South End and Back Bay →



“I would love to see greater planning around housing that is affordable for moderate income folks, young families, seniors. The city can help by assessing need, setting goals and providing incentives to developers. Instead of “luxury” condos I’d love to see “condos for regular folks” with moderate incomes - teachers, retirees, public service workers, tradespeople. It will help keep our community diverse and strong.”
Dorchester resident via online survey

“Produce, preserve, plan! Help make our city more affordable to low and middle income residents by producing more affordable and middle-income housing, preserving our existing housing stock, and planning for more of the housing people want (multi-family units close to transportation and city amenities). This needs to happen in the city AND in the surrounding cities and towns to be effective.”

Brighton resident via online survey

We will:

Preserve, enhance, and grow through area-level plans

In collaboration with the community, we will develop area plans for neighborhoods or districts where growth or investment is anticipated. A successful area plan will use the lenses of “preserve, enhance, and grow” to develop an area-wide vision including appropriate land uses and densities. Area planning will leverage existing planning tools—including strategic planning areas, such as PLAN: South Boston Dorchester Avenue, and institutional master plans—to ensure that neighborhood objectives are aligned with broader citywide goals.

Integrate planning and zoning with capital investments

Planning will coordinate geographically-specific investments with land use and zoning. For example, new development guided by an area plan will be integrated with priority investment in open space, transit, or flood-protection mechanisms. As appropriate, this coordination will work to ensure that value generated by new development supports critical infrastructure investment in the area.

Leverage publicly-owned land to achieve community objectives

We will explore opportunities to dispose of publicly-owned parcels strategically to support policy objectives, such as creating housing and spaces to work that are affordable or attracting economic development in an area. These types of strategic land use dispositions will be coordinated with larger neighborhood or citywide plans to ensure that decisions about individual parcels support broader policy objectives. As appropriate, we will work closely with state and federal partners to accomplish these efforts.

Deploy land use incentives to support citywide objectives

Guided by citywide and neighborhood plans, we will deploy land use incentives, such as density bonuses or air-rights transfers, to achieve policy objectives. We will identify opportunities to create density bonuses for buildings that include beneficial uses, such as affordable housing or industrial spaces, and leverage the sale of unused air rights to fund new, catalytic infrastructure. We will also institute programs to encourage new real-estate models such as space-sharing and sub-leasing that support a healthy mix of uses, particularly in evolving industrial areas.

Ensure that development contributes to public benefits

A predictable regulatory and review process for new development is critical to the consistent assessment of community benefits—from affordable housing, to open space, to critical infrastructure. A predictable review and public-benefits process also has the potential to make development of large-scale projects more efficient in Boston by reducing permitting time and development costs.

Update zoning to respond to Boston’s changing needs

We will adopt new best practices and explore new zoning typologies to ensure that Boston’s zoning prepares the city for new challenges and changes. This will include developing zoning that is climate-ready, supports mixed-income and mixed-use neighborhoods, and responds to changing transportation patterns and shifting parking demands.

Make the zoning code more consistent and accessible

We will work to make zoning language and use tables consistent between neighborhoods. This will increase transparency and predictability and give residents, communities, and businesses greater agency and insight into the regulations that govern land use. We will revisit zoning on a regular basis to ensure that it responds to evolving community and citywide needs.

Work to make the regulatory review process more efficient and predictable

In conjunction with efforts to update zoning and develop new zoning that reflects area plans, we will work to enforce this zoning predictably and implement planning priorities through Boston’s development-review process. As relevant, we will explore tools that support predictability, such as the use of planned development areas and zoning overlays.

Engage communities

Through tools like the PLAN community planning initiatives, we will engage with a broader, more diverse group of residents, businesses, and other stakeholders. To continue to provide more context and clarity, we will create a redesigned community-meeting format to provide more context and more clarity and an online platform for neighborhood-specific updates and feedback. We will also utilize new, more accessible tools for communication and participation.

Track progress

To build trust, maintain transparency, and advance positive community benefits, we will identify the appropriate measures for tracking and communicating progress, results, and impacts of planning initiatives.

Partner for greater impact

We will collaborate with cities, governments, and institutions around the globe. For example, the BPDA will launch BPDA+— a program to forge collaborations with nonprofits, businesses, universities, and start-ups—and host innovation fellowships for leading global experts.

“Rezoning the city to allow for more density and more height in appropriate areas. There’s no reason that our city can’t handle more height and density in specific areas (downtown, along transit lines, in areas of the city that haven’t been as developed and present an opportunity to allow for growth). This will allow for more housing in these areas, which can assist in keeping people in the city and allowing them better access to transit.”

Dorchester resident via text message