On April 14th, over 40 people gathered for a discussion on the future of Needham St. Candace Havens, Director of the Department of Planning and Development, welcomed the group and gave a background presentation on past planning efforts, existing conditions, and the current planning process for Needham Street. Attendees then broke into randomly-assigned groups facilitated by Planning Department staff for discussion of existing conditions and visions for what Needham Street might become over the next 20 years. A representative from each group presented each group’s vision statement; the statements were then posted on a wall and all attendees had the opportunity to allocate votes (in the form of red dot stickers) to statements that particularly spoke to them. Below please find summaries of each groups’ discussions of “likes” and “dislikes” about the current street, followed by summaries of groups’ vision statements (shown by group and by topic).

BREAK-OUT GROUP RESULTS

Meeting attendees divided into seven break-out groups with staff facilitators and discussed two questions: What do you most like about Needham Street and want to conserve? What do you like least about Needham Street and want to change? Other ideas, topics, and specific solutions that were raised were listed in a separate “parking lot” section of the worksheet and tabled for later discussion.

Group 1

Group 1 included a resident and activist around land use and transportation issues; an architect and activist around zoning and transportation issues; an Upper Falls resident and member of the Upper Falls Area Council, and an alderman. The group most liked the mixed-use nature of Needham Street, particularly the mix of businesses and retail (notably, Fresh City, the Greek restaurant, IBC, the Piano Mill Building, New England Book Fair), citing also the green areas on the southeast side of the street (near Starbucks) as a complement to the density, and the chance to be in nature, including near the Charles River and on the abandoned rail line. Finally, they appreciated that there was a good deal of biking and walking activity and that the street lies within a residential area, though they wished to see better connections to the neighborhoods (one member described Needham Street as a “wedge” driven between the Highlands and Upper Falls neighborhoods, and that connections could be improved). Some in the group did not like the industrial uses however, finding them polluting and “not green,” not
pedestrian-friendly, and a poor land use choice for the area. Group members described the appearance of the street as a “mish mash” where it is difficult to tell what businesses are there, and as “one giant mess of congestion” characterized by too much traffic, poor sidewalks, and too many curb cuts, but not enough pedestrian or bike activity (the group mentioned the fact that people drive from nearby neighborhoods when they are close enough to walk). Other concerns included parking in front setbacks, lack of shared parking, the Oak/Christina intersection, and businesses not facing the street (Fresh City) or turning their backs on the street (industrial buildings). Some members of the group did not like the prospect of a four-lane road. Though the group tried to steer away from specific solutions, the “parking lot” included comments like “a prettier, more walkable, bikeable version of Moody Street,” green space requirements for businesses, increased residential use, 4-story structures with retail on ground floor and garages under (though other members mentioned more of a horizontal mixed use approach, with pockets of housing, retail, business as one goes down the street, rather than mixed use in single buildings), undergrounding wires, new transportation venue on the abandoned rail bed, and the need to plan for schools to avoid overcrowding Countryside if development proceeds.

**Group 2**

The group included a local reporter, CORD member and resident, two other residents, and an alderman. Group 2 came to the conclusion that Needham Street is desirable because it offers a good mix of retail shopping opportunities. Small-scale, locally-oriented businesses should continue to be encouraged. The group prefers to see mainly retail uses since they make the street more of a destination. Group 2 would not mind some big box retail provided it reinforces the street as a “destination.” They value the green spaces (although limited) such as the grass in front of Starbucks and the outdoor dining at Fresh City.

The group does not like the pedestrian-vehicle conflicts caused by the abundance of curb cuts on the street. They would like to see consistent sidewalk widths (and location) as well as more greenery. Traffic light cycles do not take pedestrians into consideration. The main goal expressed repeatedly by this group is to provide more recreation space. They are strong proponents of converting the abandoned rail way into a bike path as well as adding pocket parks, tot lots, and recreation space for all ages along Needham Street to provide a destination and resource for people in the neighboring villages. These amenities may also include a community or rec center.

**Group 3**

Table 3 included one resident from Newton Highlands, two residents and CORD members, a representative from an area business, a Needham resident, and a resident from Upper Falls. The group seemed to have consensus that they liked Needham Street as an alternative to the existing village centers (the retail has a more regional draw versus the more local village center retail focus), that there are some family-oriented uses (Plaster Fun-Time) and useful retail stores, and is convenient with a “little bit of everything.” The group also liked that Needham Street is connected to the Upper Falls and Highlands Villages but distinct in that the character differed from village centers (e.g. big box retail is ok). They liked that it was close to natural resources (Charles River, Cutler Park in Needham). They felt the residential uses were good for the street, bringing amenities such as better retail and restaurants,
adding a pedestrian presence, and improving the aesthetics of the street. The group also approved of office uses on the Street as they generally only bring two vehicle trips per day to the street during non-peak hours for local residents; add to the City’s tax base; generate residential, retail and restaurant uses; and could be set back from the street. They were comfortable with the mixed use nature of the street and supportive of green technology (such as Chapman) locating on the street. Some of the things they least liked about the street include the traffic congestion, the poorly organized traffic flow, and the poor connection to Route 9/Boylston Street. The table’s vision for Needham Street included the street as a “destination, where a family can spend the day (park/playground and variety of uses for everyone).” They were interested in better pedestrian connections, particularly interested in using the rail line as a pedestrian route and connecting the area to the Upper Falls Village Center better. They were also interested in the street being a “green tech corridor” and the liked idea of a train stop located between the Highlands and Elliot Street stops (a low cost platform for on/off, not an extension/spur off the line). They table would also like to see more green and pedestrian space.

**Group 4**

The table included two Ward 5 Aldermen, two residents of Winchester Street and representatives of CORD, one Lower Falls resident and Mayor’s Mixed-Use Task Force member, and one MIT graduate student. All of the group members liked that Needham Street currently has a diverse, unique set of businesses that serve daily needs and niche markets – a mix of restaurants, small businesses, and large businesses, combined with destination businesses like New England Mobile Book Fair. They also appreciated the historic elements of the corridor, including the Piano Factory in the south and the South Burial Ground in the north (which dates to the Revolutionary War). The group would like to see specific shops, historic sites, and small bits of green space preserved and enhanced. The least-liked feature of Needham Street is the traffic and character of the street, described as: abysmal, too many left turns, cacophony, confusing, sensory overload yet not a lot there, discontinuous street edge, undefined pedestrian realm, lack of crosswalks, lack of boundaries, lack of order. Group members noted that the street is not comfortable for people and that today one “deals with” Needham Street, but does not experience it. A hodge-podge of buildings and land uses and the negative appearance of utility poles and overhead wires further contribute to this feeling. The South Meadow Brook, which is partially covered in culverts, should be an environmental focus. Finally, group members noted that Needham Street is isolated and should be better connected to Upper Falls and other parts of the City.

[Parking Lot] Group 4 discussed the relationship between building setbacks and green space; the contrast between the northern and southern sections of the corridor; the point that the Oak/Christina intersection is very difficult to navigate; the desire for parks and open space destinations (citing the green space in from of Avalon Bay as a good example of a sort of pocket park on Needham Street); and the old fireworks factory and pond (on the Northland site).

**Group 5**

Group 5 consisted of a representative of a major property owner, a local doctor and activist, a member of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Task Force, an MIT graduate student, and a board member for Newton
Villages. The group noted a number of positive things about Needham Street including the diversity of business and things to buy, the large employers (who like Needham Street because of the amenities it offers to employees), and the historic and natural resources. However, the group felt that Needham Street is greatly in need of improvement and identified the following concerns as paramount problems: traffic and mobility (“too and through”), the appearance of the street (overhead wires, curb cuts, landscaping, architecture), and concern over retaining major businesses (including the need to modernize to compete). Overall the group envisioned a future Needham Street that is: a) a gateway to Newton with great potential for higher density, transit oriented mixed-use development; b) a safe and attractive place; and c) an economic engine.

Group 6

The group of six individuals at this table was comprised five Newton residents and one non-resident, and included an Alderman, an Aldermanic candidate, an employee of a local business, an MIT graduate student, and a local activist. Overall, the group liked and wanted to conserve the retail variety of the street, particularly stores such as National Lumber, the Mobile Book Fair and the assortment of restaurants. The group wants to conserve the retail and manufacturing mix of the corridor along with the revenue value that these businesses bring to the City, the residential uses, the possibility of using the abandoned rail corridor, as well as the current convenient access to 128 and Route 9.

The group wants to change the image of Needham Street (“it is not as bad as people say”), and improve, to some extent, the attractiveness of the street. However, several noted that they travel to Needham Street because of specific destinations, and improvements to the aesthetics of the street would not increase the number of trips that they would make to businesses along Needham Street. Nevertheless, group members supported turning Needham Street into more of a complete street, where possible, given its limitations. The group supported more shared parking, means of making it easier to cross the street, and reducing the number of curb cuts. There was strong support for investing in transit improvements along the corridor, and for redeveloping a section of the corridor into an area with more of a “village feel”. It was noted that while the street is highly congested at certain times of day, street widening would make it more difficult for pedestrians to cross.

Group 7

Group 7 included two Aldermen, one EDC member, one CORD representative, and one City engineer. The members of Group 7 agreed that there is a lot of potential for the future of Needham Street. There is already a good mix of stores, restaurants and even residential. It could be a vibrant place where people could come, park in one spot, and walk to a variety of different activities. The major impediment to this “vision” is the existing traffic volumes and patterns. A few of the intersections are misaligned and cannot handle the existing volume during the evening rush hour. In addition, the corridor itself is ugly with a mishmash of utility wires and signage.
BREAK-OUT GROUP VISIONING

Each break-out group was asked to record a list of ideas to complete the phrase: In 20 years, we would like Needham Street to be ________. A representative of each break-out group reported back to the whole group. These sheets were then hung on the wall and all meeting participants were given 4 “red dot” stickers with which to vote for the ideas about which they were most excited or most in agreement. The results of the “red dot voting” are below, first organized by break-out group and then the concepts with red dots reorganized by topic.

INDIVIDUAL GROUP RESPONSES

**Group 1**

- Complete street ●
- A series of zones that include more residential, traditional mixed use, more offices and existing uses ● ● ● (not first floor retail with residential above end-to-end, but pockets of uses ●)
- Commercial, residential and educational
- A destination – a place you can go to spend time ●
- An asset to the City, not an eyesore ●
- Shining example of a well-planned mixed use part of the City that we can all take pride in ●
- An economic stimulus corridor ●
- A neighborhood people are attracted to, a safe place for teens to walk, a resource for the two communities primarily ● ●
- A good solid mix of businesses
- A new transportation venue on abandoned rail yard ● ● ● ● ●

**GROUP 2**

- A quality place for a quality time
- Green, well-landscaped ● ● ● ● ● ●
- Bike/pedestrian friendly ● ●
- Youth-friendly ● ● ●
- Quaint
- Diverse
GROUP 3

Group Walkable

Attractive

“Greenway” ● ● ●

Accessible

Integrated mixed uses to neighborhoods

Asset to upper Falls Center and Highlands ● ● ● ● ●

A destination ● ●

GROUP 4

A place where people want to be

A pedestrian-friendly network of pathways both on Needham Street and connected to surrounding neighborhoods ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

A place that allows for higher heights on certain strategic sites/parcels in order to achieve balance of land uses and open space ● ● ● ● ●

A network of environmental and historic spaces ● ● ●

The ability to travel a parallel roadway/network ●

A location for “orphan businesses” to do not fit elsewhere in the City (incl. retail uses, office, R&D) ● ●

GROUP 5

Pedestrian, bike and transit-oriented destination ●

An attractive “place” to be

Do more than one thing at a time ●

Outdoor, landscaped, civic socializing space

A mixture of shops, homes, offices entertainment next to each other ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Amenity-rich, business-friendly commercial area ●

Integrated with villages and internally connect to the City ● \
GROUP 6

Complete Street (as much as possible given limitations) ●●

Improved public transit corridor (Green Line) ●●●●●

Mixed-Use Corridor (incl. housing) ●●

More pedestrian friendly

More village-like (at least along a portion) ●●

To have one large mixed-use center that generates revenue

GROUP 7

A better pedestrian environment ●●

More aesthetically pleasing ●●

A street that need not be avoided at certain times of the day/week

A place with improved traffic flow ●●

More like Newbury Street atmosphere with small businesses, restaurants, and residential and pocket parks ●●●●●
VOTES BY CATEGORY – (ideas from above list that received red dots, organized by topic)

Transportation - improve all modes of transportation and consider use of rail right-of-way for travel – 22 votes

- Improved public transit corridor (Green Line)
- A new transportation venue on abandoned rail yard
- A place with improved traffic flow
- A better pedestrian environment
- Bike/pedestrian friendly
- Complete Street (as much as possible given limitations)
- Complete street
- Pedestrian, bike and transit-oriented destination

Mixed-Use – a mix of land uses and open space that create interest and diversity – 20 votes

- A mixture of shops, homes, offices entertainment next to each other
- More like Newbury Street atmosphere with small businesses, restaurants, residential and pocket parks
- A series of zones that include more residential, traditional mixed use, more offices and existing uses (not first floor retail with residential above end-to-end, but pockets of uses)
- Mixed-Use Corridor (incl. housing)
- More village-like (at least along a portion)
- Do more than one thing at a time

Connections – 17 votes

- A pedestrian-friendly network of pathways both on Needham Street and connected to surrounding neighborhoods
- Asset to upper Falls Center and Highlands
- The ability to travel a parallel roadway/network
- Integrated with villages and internally connect to the City
Green space – 11 votes

Green, well-landscaped●●●●

“Greenway” ●●●

A network of environmental and historic spaces●●●

Needham Street as a neighborhood, a place, and a destination for people – 8 votes

Youth-friendly ●●●

A neighborhood people are attracted to, a safe place for teens to walk, a resource for the two communities primarily●●

A destination ●●

A destination – a place you can go to spend time ●

Economic Development and Business Community- 4 votes

A location for “orphan businesses” to do not fit elsewhere in the City (incl. retail uses, office, R&D)●●

An economic stimulus corridor ●

Amenity-rich, business-friendly commercial area●

Building Form – allow building height in exchange for more open space – 4 votes

A place that allows for higher heights on certain strategic sites/parcels in order to achieve balance of land uses and open space●●●●

Aesthetics – 3 votes

More aesthetically pleasing●●

An asset to the City, not an eyesore ●