

Emphasize Social Spaces During RE Project Public Review

By **David Linhart** (February 11, 2025, 6:33 PM EST)

As Boston continues to work through revisions to its public review process for real estate projects, a key concern is how to determine the appropriate mix of required mitigation and community benefits.

Some items are formulaic, such as fund contributions for affordable housing and workforce training based on standing linkage fee rates multiplied by a project's nonresidential square footage after a standard exemption.

Other items are negotiated case-by-case, such as reconfigured, multimodal travel lanes within adjacent streets based on neighborhood transportation goals and traffic patterns expected to arise from a project.

To bring predictability to these latter items, Boston is considering using factors such as the estimated total development cost to set a project-specific community benefits cap, with a menu of options that can be mixed and matched to fill the cap.

To populate the menu, Boston intends to conduct a citywide land use needs assessment to tie project offerings with neighborhood planning. Few think those ties exist today — in 2024, the Planning Department reported that only 9% of community members agreed that "community benefit requests were consistent with citywide or neighborhood planning priorities."

Fortunately, developers are not on hold until mitigation and community benefits are standardized. Developers advancing proposed projects can lead with an emphasis on enhancements to the surrounding neighborhood.

Communities often learn about proposed projects through the narrow lens of traditional zoning that reduces development to the location, use (e.g., multifamily, office), and size (e.g., height, square footage). What may appear out of place through that narrow lens might suddenly make more sense once project elements that involve shared spaces are understood.

Shared spaces include publicly accessible open space, widened sidewalks and bike lanes, covered waiting areas for buses, civic space within buildings, and the like.

Even transactional space, e.g., retail stores and restaurants, which may involve payment without rising



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to a level of exclusivity as might be associated with a private club, can facilitate open social exchange and add to social infrastructure — described by sociologist Eric Klinenberg in a 2018 The Atlantic article as "the shared spaces that shape our interactions."^[1]

Appropriate social infrastructure weaves a proposed land use into the neighborhood fabric. In contrast, zoning was invented in part to separate, not connect, land uses.

For example, the oft-quoted U.S. Supreme Court decision that affirmed zoning in 1926, *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.*, clarified that zoning enables neighborhoods of single-family homes to keep other land uses out, including other types of housing.

Back then, apartments were seen as a slippery slope to residential decline. With their coming, according to the Supreme Court decision, "the residential character of the neighborhood and its desirability as a place of detached residences are utterly destroyed."

This sentiment survived the following 100 years into our time. A recent example I worked on involved a multifamily project within an otherwise industrial strip next to open space and one- to two-family residential areas. Local resident opposition to apartments, and even homeownership units at significant density, was formidable and predictable. There were concerns about urban creep into the suburbs.

Building consensus took time. Not all local residents, but many, were won over by the developer committing to add (1) a new sidewalk connecting an adjacent street intersection to a protected natural area with limited existing pedestrian access, (2) a pocket park along the way and (3) a ground floor community room that could be reserved by local residents at no cost.

Communities need, and developers can create, spaces that facilitate open social exchange, which is what these types of project elements deliver.

What does open social exchange look like?

Klinenberg puts it in simple terms: "where people linger and talk to strangers." Social infrastructure deficiencies limit "contact, mutual support, and collaboration," instead "leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves."

People congregate when there are places for it — even more so where there are signals that everyone is welcome, from attention-getting sculptures like *The Embrace* on the Boston Common, to background details like sidewalk widths that accommodate wheelchairs passing by each other in opposite directions.

Social infrastructure aside, the need for varied residential tenures and formats is great. We're long past the time when generally affordable purchase prices for single-family houses were a given.

In the 1960s, what we now call affordable housing was then just called housing. Houses cost about 2 times the national median income. According to a January 2024 report by the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, houses are now about 5.6 times the national median income.

As for specific metro areas, Boston is up to 6.5, New York City 7.1, Miami 8.7, San Francisco 11.3, and Honolulu 12.1 times the median income within each respective market.

To give those numbers context, the rule of thumb is that a household can afford a house that is 2 to 3 times the household's income. From a buyer's perspective, is there much room for appreciation after buying at a double-digit multiple of the income of area households? From a seller's perspective, does realizing appreciation depend on unloading unaffordable housing?

Apartments address the reality that not every household will be a homeownership household. Even still, pitching 250 apartments in a six-story building can dial up community anxiety. As an alternative approach, centering public engagement on achievable social infrastructure scaled with the project might help.

How do communities come to know about project proposals to begin with? For large projects in Boston, the first community meeting hosted by the Planning Department as part of the required public review process follows the proponent's filing of a project notification form, or PNF.

A PNF frequently is in the range of 500 pages, providing project details and studies of potential impacts. Typically, it's not silent on shared spaces, although it doesn't lead with shared spaces either.

In some instances, attendees at community meetings are familiar with the full PNF. Often, at top of mind is a trimmed description akin to the published notice of the Planning Department's receipt of a PNF: the location, use and size, "together with other site and public realm improvements."

Terse treatment of social infrastructure in this way shrinks the project's value proposition. That catch-all addendum to the project description is where the project and neighborhood meet.

Returning to the need for varied residential tenures and formats, single-family homeownership has an affordability problem, yet so does renting. For example, about a quarter of Boston's renters spend half or more of their household income on housing costs. Why rent?

It could be as simple as this: If a family with young children buys a fixer-upper, the children may be off to college by the time the house is fixed in the way that the parents would have wanted for raising kids.

Instead, an urban apartment building may have a pool, courtyards, multimodal transit options, and proximity to parks, cafes and museums — all of this now when kids are young and not later when empty-nesting sets in.

Shared spaces delivered by developers position users of the finished product within a broader continuum of social infrastructure. Examples of shared spaces will help populate the Planning Department's community benefits menu as well.

Public comments on proposed real estate projects can veer toward, and get mired in, closed-ended questions: Does the use make sense here? Is it too big?

But a project is more than its location, use and size. Public engagement could invite collaboration with open-ended questions: What are the social infrastructure deficiencies here? How will this project enhance the shared space ecosystem? When it comes to spreading the word about new development, perhaps new shared spaces should be the headline.

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[1] <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/worry-less-about-crumbling-roads-more-about-crumbling-libraries/570721/>.