



INTRODUCTION

CHELSEA: GATEWAY CITY

Directly across the Mystic River from downtown Boston, the City of Chelsea is home to a diverse community of 35,000 residents. As the second most densely populated city in Massachusetts, the 1.8 square mile area has long been representative of a wide breadth of cultural backgrounds, and it is one of the 26 designated Gateway Cities in the Commonwealth. For Chelsea, the notion of ‘gateway’ is particularly apt: 45% of the city’s residents were born outside the US – 27% above the Greater Boston average. Of these residents, over 65% hail from Central America, including approximately 5,300 from El Salvador and 2,300 from Honduras (ACS, 2013; US Census, 2011). The result is a young and diverse city that places enormous value on – and pride in – sense of community.

These strengths are matched by real challenges. The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC) states that Gateway Cities face “stubborn social and economic challenges” (MassINC, 2011). In Chelsea, this is perceptible in a number of ways. At 23%, Chelsea’s poverty rate is over three times the Greater Boston average; unemployment, at 11.6%, is 3.5% above the metropolitan average; and, finally, in a city where more than a quarter of the population is under 18, the high school dropout rate (8%) is over twice that of Greater Boston (ACS, 2013; MAPC, 2014; US Census, 2011).

The focus then, for both the city and for this report, is the future. The most important characteristic of a Gateway City is that, alongside challenges, there is great “unrealized potential” that can be catalyzed through a strategic, long-term vision for the future. The wave of incoming development and political will

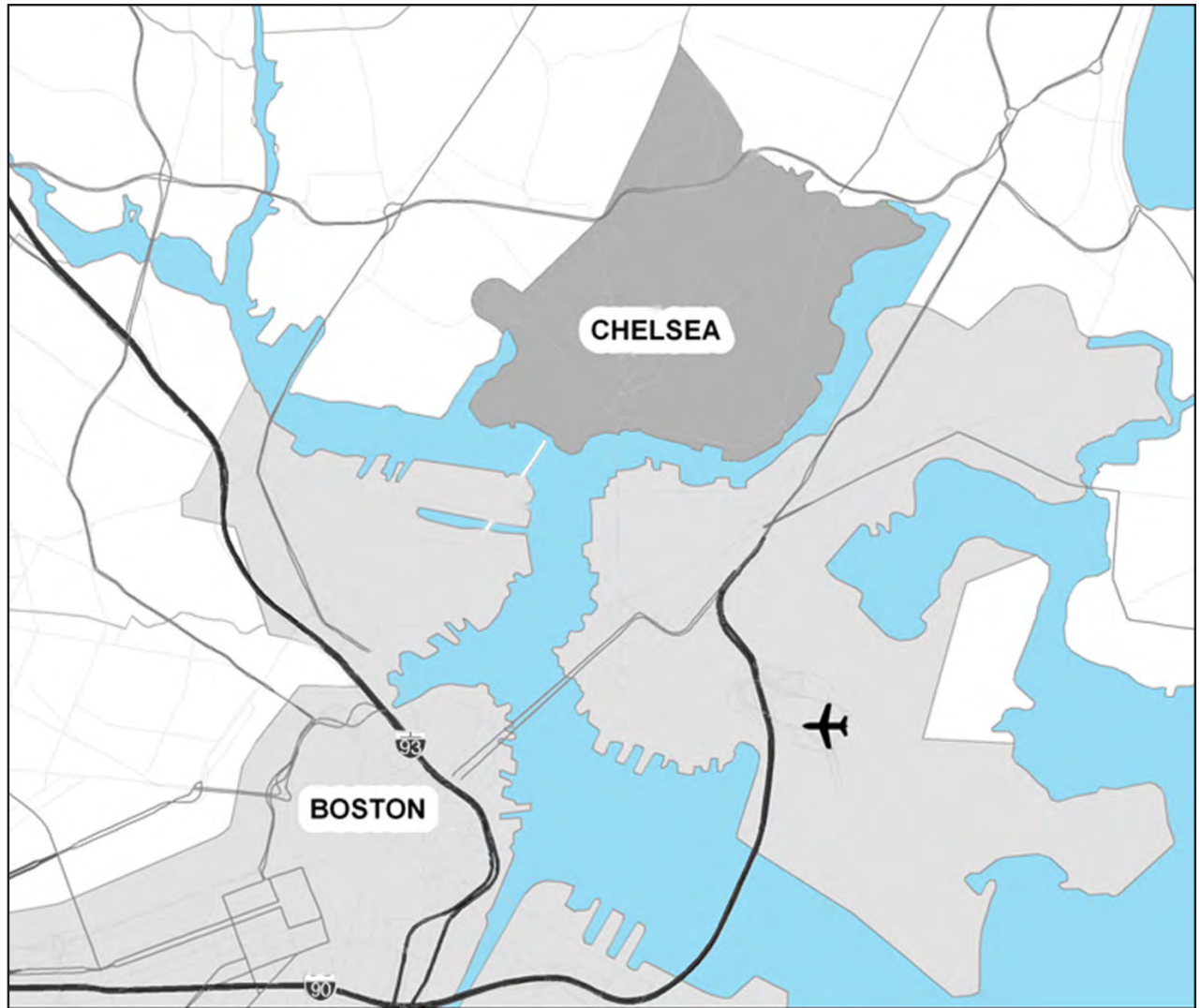


Figure 2 – Chelsea’s location in the Boston metropolitan region Located on the north bank of the Mystic River, Chelsea is closer to downtown Boston than many of the city’s own neighborhoods. The 1.8 square mile city is surrounded by Charlestown to the southwest, and counter-clockwise by Everett, Revere, and East Boston (MassGIS).

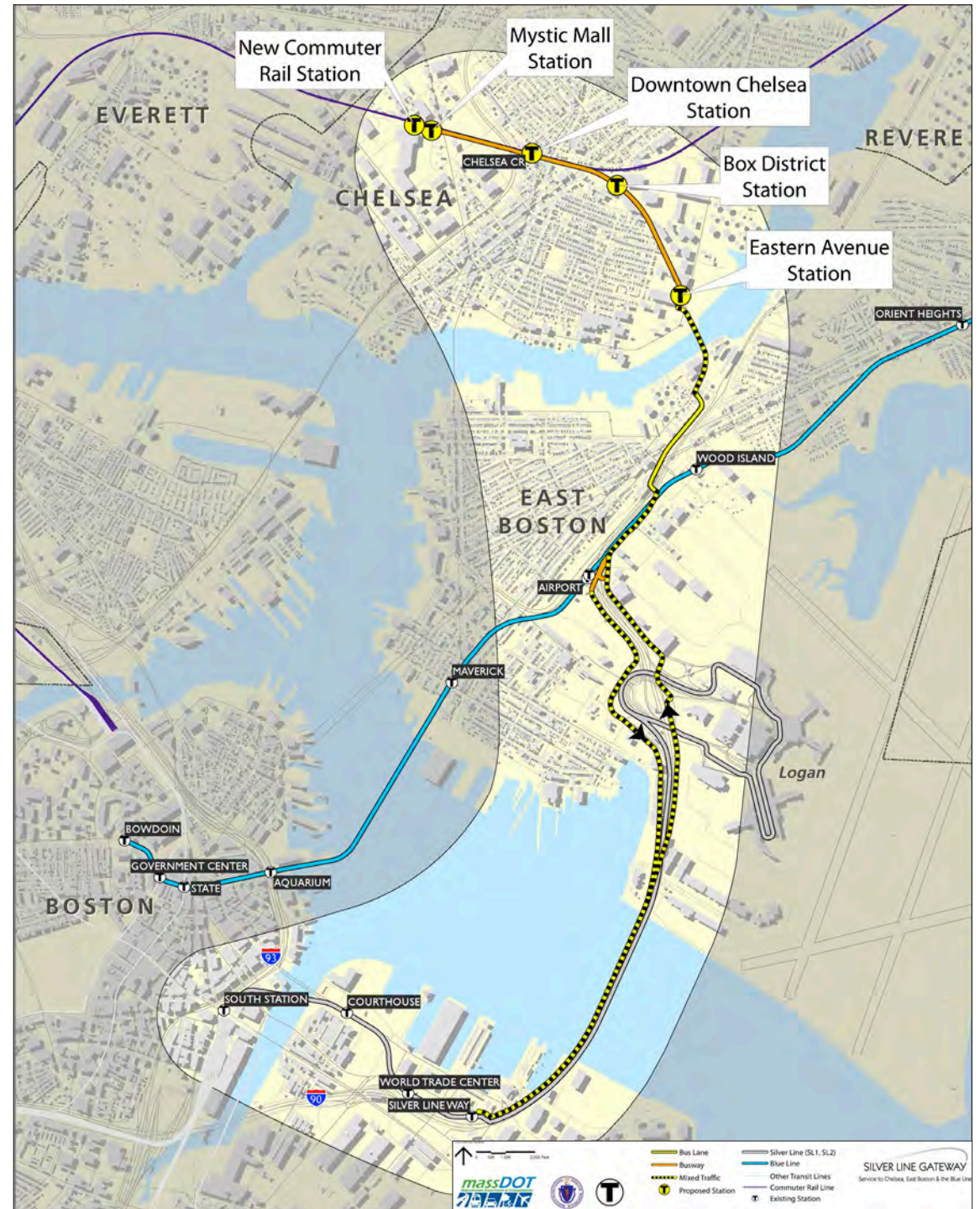
surrounding the Silver Line extension puts Chelsea and its residents in a prime position to ensure that the area designated as the “Everett Avenue Urban Renewal District” is integrated into the existing

context in a way that reaffirms Chelsea as an inclusive, diverse, and attractive place to live.

The Silver Line: An Opportunity for Chelsea

On October 30, 2013, Governor Deval Patrick announced the extension of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Silver Line bus rapid transit to Chelsea. Serving an estimated daily ridership of 9,000 people, the extension will connect the city to the Blue Line's Airport station in 8 minutes, the World Trade Center in the Seaport District in 19 minutes, and to South Station in the heart of downtown Boston in 23 minutes (Governor Patrick's Office, 2013). With construction expected to begin in late 2014, the Silver Line will be a transformative force for Chelsea. The line will bring people, development, and investment, while also providing a much needed transit improvement to an area that has the greatest proportion of transportation-dependent residents in Greater Boston.

Figure 3 – The Silver Line extension *Chelsea will be further connected to downtown Boston by bus rapid transport, taking only 23 minutes from Chelsea to South Station. The final station of the Silver Line will be located in the heart of the “Everett Avenue Urban Renewal District” (MassDOT).*



Western Chelsea

The extension of the Silver Line marks the beginning of a new chapter in the city's history, particularly for the "Everett Avenue Urban Renewal District," an area designated by the City for targeted development. For the purposes of this report, the planning focus is broadened to the area west of Route 1, referred to here as western Chelsea. In 1973, a tragic fire resulted in the destruction of eighteen blocks – almost one-fifth of the city – profoundly impacting the neighborhood's shape and form. A once thriving industrial district, framed by a grid network of streets, was completely razed. Gradually redeveloped over the past 40 years, the character of the area continues to reflect the impact of the fire. It is dominated by surface parking, large parcel industrial functions, big box retail, and vacant lots. Often cited as an area little known by many of the city's residents, it contrasts starkly with the vibrant, densely populated neighborhoods of Bellingham Square, the Broadway Corridor, and Addison-Orange to the east of Route 1.



Figure 4 – The 1973 Fire *The fire of 1973 tragically destroyed almost one-fifth of the city, razing much of a thriving industrial area and destroying western Chelsea's grid network of roads (Grant).*



Figure 5 – Contemporary western Chelsea *Large parcels, big box retail, and vacant lots dominate the area today (Viguri).*



Figure 6 – Brownfield Sites in western Chelsea *Western Chelsea's industrial uses present planning challenges when developing land contaminated by petroleum and other hazardous materials (Viguri).*

Two important physical conditions in western Chelsea impact possibilities for development in the area, both of which have strongly informed the visions outlined here. The first is the potential for land contamination, a result of Chelsea's past and present industrial character. The owners of brownfield sites can incur substantial costs during development, while also taking on legal liabilities. Though Chelsea has not undertaken a comprehensive contamination inventory, there are indications of petroleum and other hazardous materials. MassGIS has classified four "Tier II" sites within western Chelsea, meaning that the land poses a small risk. A further 18 sites have been designated with 'activity and use limitations' (AULs), which place legal restrictions on uses for the site, such as residential or day care, in order to protect health and the environment (MassDEP, 2014)

The second feature is a product of Chelsea's location on the Mystic and Island End Rivers. Although the abundance of waterfront is one of the city's greatest assets, it presents significant risks of flooding, storm surge, and sea level rise. Surrounded by three hills, western Chelsea's relatively low elevation creates a natural drainage basin. The area is almost entirely within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) floodplain. Existing conditions, including the predominance of poorly draining impervious surfaces and the threat of sea level rise – estimated to be between two and six feet by the end of the twenty-first century – have serious implications both for the developable potential of the land and for the safety of individuals who might live or work in the area. While these pre-existing conditions might discourage development, the large parcels and relatively flexible economic activity in the area create an unprecedented opportunity for strategically implemented transit-oriented development.

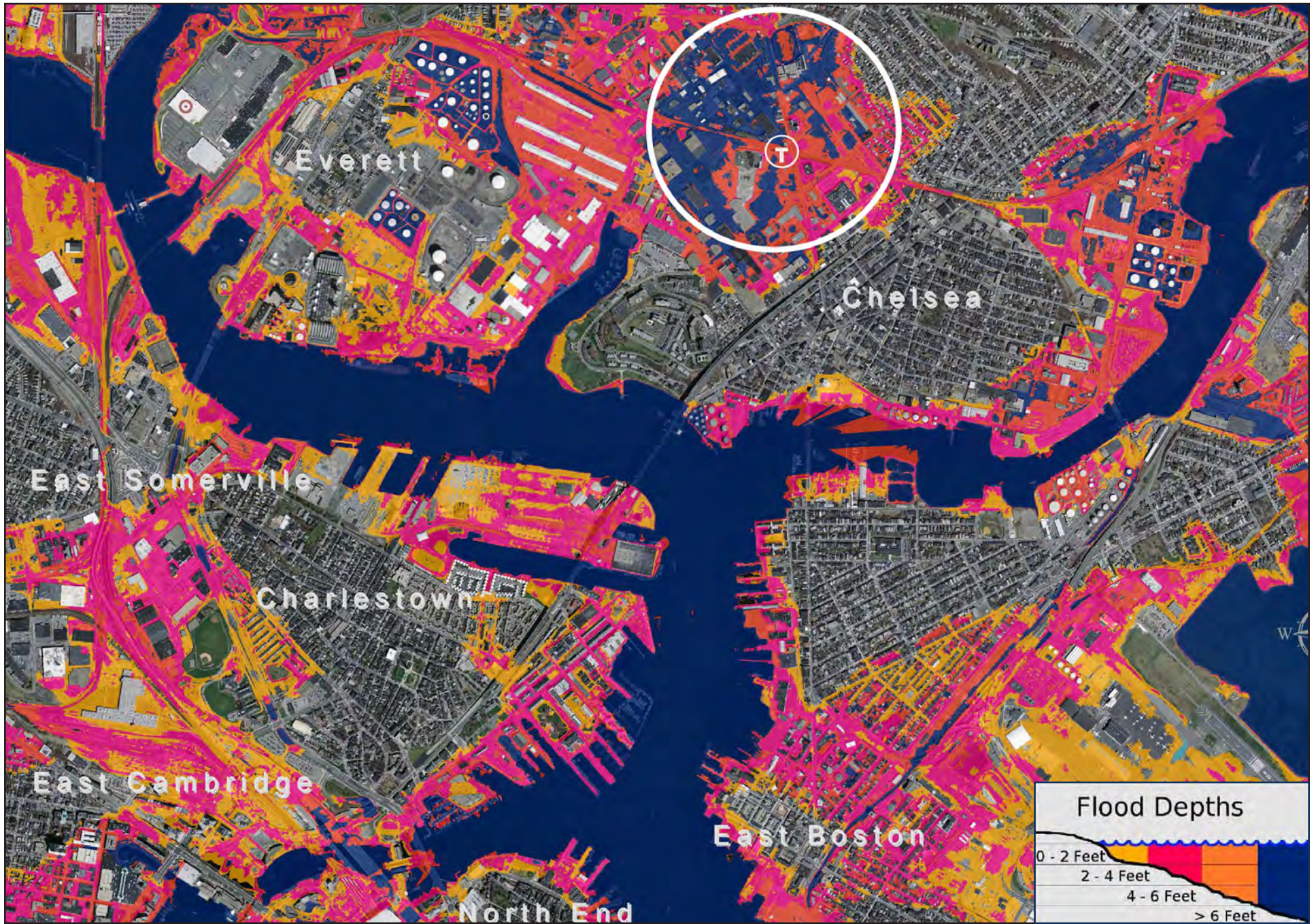


Figure 7 – The Boston Harbor Association’s Flood Map (5ft) *The area of western Chelsea is particularly susceptible to flooding, whether from sea level rise or poor storm water drainage conditions; this vulnerability must be addressed with responsibility in future plans for the city (Boston Harbor Association).*

STUDIO GOALS

In the context of this set of challenges and opportunities, the Spring 2014 Core Urban Planning Studio at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design has developed three planning scenarios for western Chelsea. Each imagines an alternative vision for how the city might develop over the next 30 years. The first, Leveraging Local Strengths, outlines a low-cost, locally-focused plan that draws on Chelsea's existing strengths; the second, A Network of Neighborhoods proposes that the city's walkable grid and mixed-use character be extended into western Chelsea; the third, Building for the Workforce, envisions Chelsea as a regional workforce hub, providing strategies for how the Silver Line can be used to strengthen the city. Though unique, all three of the plans address the same core objectives:

- Strengthen the identity of the city based on its existing assets while setting forth a clear vision for the future
- Develop urban design concepts to enhance a sense of place in western Chelsea, connecting it with the rest of the city
- Identify economic development strategies for the existing industrial areas, balancing retention of existing companies with redevelopment and recruitment of new industries
- Create an optimized network of transportation infrastructure, including traffic and parking improvements
- Identify opportunities to develop mixed-income housing and improve the existing housing stock
- Connect open space systems along the Silver Line corridor and the nearby waterfront areas
- Engage citizens and stakeholder groups in planning for future change



Figure 8 - Engaging the City During February 2014, over 600 residents, workers, business owners, and visitors to Chelsea contributed input through online platforms, written “intercept” surveys, in-person interviews, and workshops. Their views were the touchstone for developing the three planning scenarios posed in this report (Cantu).

Overall, the plans reflect the diversity of Chelsea and offer a sense of the various options available for its growth. As such, each plan is designed to exist either independently or collectively, and the strategies outlined in each are designed to be both adapted and combined. Above all, it is hoped that the visions outlined here will both reflect and stimulate conversation among Chelsea residents about the future that they desire for their city.

THE PROCESS

The three outlined scenarios are founded upon a period of research, analysis, and consultation undertaken by the studio as a whole over the course of three months. In early February 2014, the group met with the Chelsea City Manager, the Director of Planning and Development, and the Silver Line Project Manager at MassDOT. Throughout the process, the City Manager continued to stay abreast of the work during the studio.

The first three weeks of the studio were spent performing qualitative, on-site observations along western Chelsea's main corridors and undertaking a comprehensive analysis of existing data sources. This process allowed students to form preliminary assessments of planning issues in the city and greatly informed the community engagement process. Throughout February 2014, over 600 residents, workers, business owners, city officials, developers, non-profit organizations, and visitors to Chelsea voiced their opinions through online platforms, written "intercept" surveys, in-person interviews, and workshops. Outreach helped raise awareness about upcoming changes in Chelsea and enabled the student team to receive valuable insights from the following targeted populations:

Residents, Workers, and Transit Riders

A total of 547 surveys, including 183 completed online, captured opinions on numerous topics, including: available amenities, needed development, and awareness about the Silver Line. The greatest number of surveys was collected in Market Basket, MGH, and the Route 111 bus.

Online Community

A "Plan West Chelsea" Facebook page was created

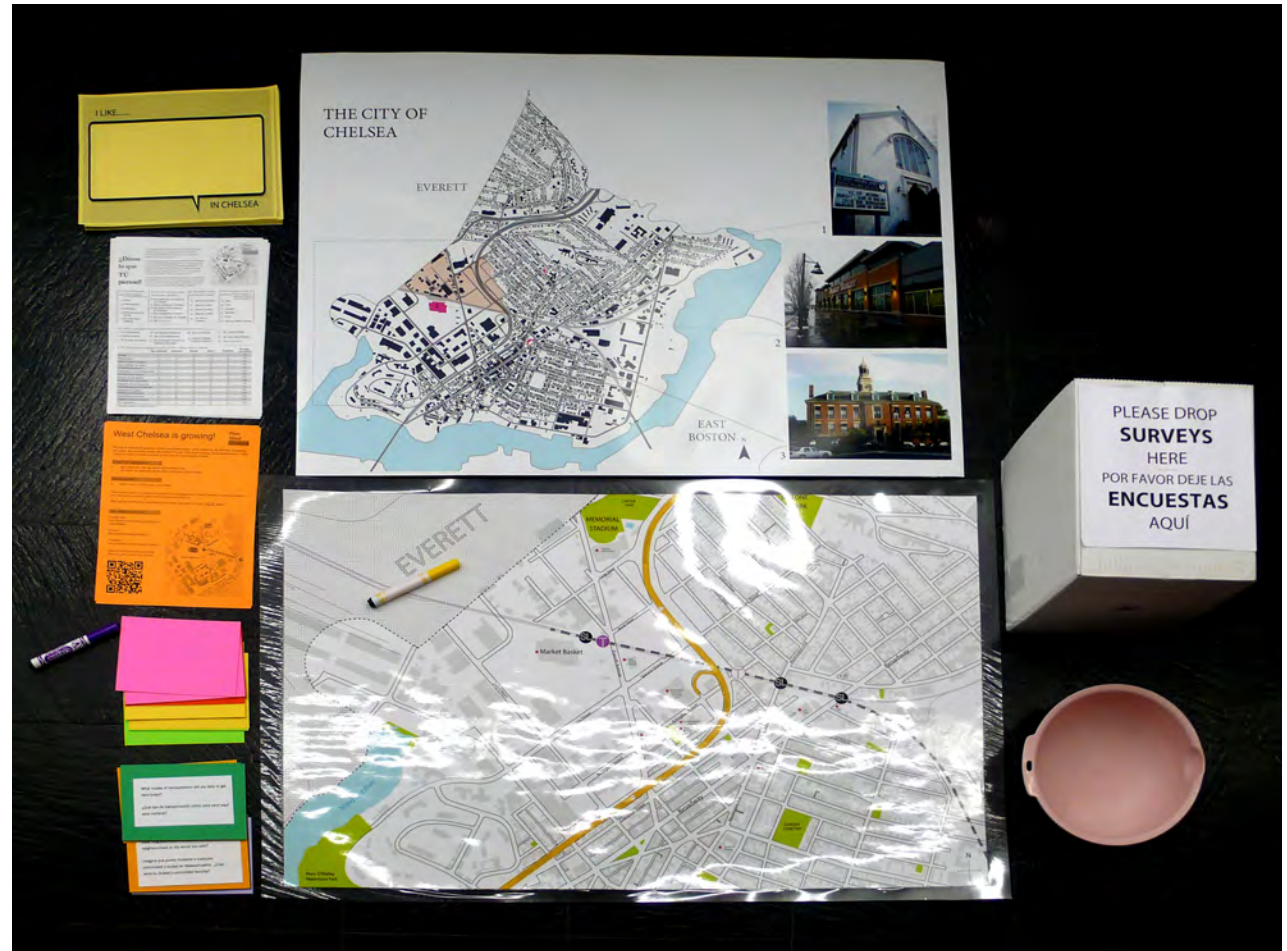


Figure 9 - Workshop Materials *Engagement activities sought to gain insight on the way space is used by residents and visitors in Chelsea, while also mapping sites in which they would like to see changes occur (Figueroa).*

as a platform for discussion and publicity regarding the Silver Line extension, area development, and the student project, reaching 2,340 views at its peak. The page received endorsement by local newspapers, community groups, and other local social media.

Government and Community Organizations

In-depth interviews and "ride-alongs" with seven city officials and two community leaders provided insight on the city's challenges, the vision for overall urban growth, and plans for incoming development.

Interviewees were asked to perform a SWOT analysis and also evaluated public services.

Business Community

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the managers and owners of 35 establishments in western Chelsea, including both large and small enterprises. Both old and new establishments were reached. Questions addressed the evolution of their businesses, their relationships with the community and the city, and their views on expected development.

Real Estate Developers

In-depth interviews with six of the 12 active developers of affordable and market-rate housing and hotels in Chelsea covered major challenges, milestones, and trends in Chelsea's real estate market.

Community Organizations

Informal workshops were held with over 60 attendees at Saint Luke's Episcopal Church Community Dining Room and Post-Worship Coffee Hour. Participants reflected on what they appreciate or would change about Chelsea. A second activity featured a focus group on incoming development with ten staff members of the Chelsea Collaborative. Lastly, 13 residents and workers participated in a two-hour bilingual workshop held at The Neighborhood Developers. Using maps of the study area, participants performed SWOT analysis and discussed their expectations for new development.

Teenagers

Eight members of the Boys and Girls Club participated in an interactive workshop to discuss the activities and amenities available for youth in Chelsea, including frequently visited sites, sites where they feel insecure, and amenities needed for young people.

Local Events

Beyond the activities organized formally through the studio course, students established an ongoing dialogue with the community by attending "Chel-Yea" gatherings and organizing a canned-food drive for Saint Luke's Church.

Community-Wide Event

A concluding participatory workshop was held on the afternoon of Tuesday April 29 at Market Basket. Over 100 attendees participated including Chelsea residents, employees, high school students, children and government officials. The GSD team presented the planning proposals for each of the three scenarios and asked attendees to select the initiatives they liked most for Chelsea, which were collectively displayed through the use of cards.

Overall, the breadth of audiences and engagement techniques provided a rich set of recommendations to address the complex set of development challenges facing Chelsea. Community engagement revealed the centrality of institutions and organizations and allowed students to develop a deeper understanding of the forces shaping Chelsea's future. Outlined in the following pages are divergent views revealed during the engagement process, key takeaways and recommendations that directly informed the planning scenarios, and a summary of the community feedback pertaining to each planning scenario.

COMPETING VIEWS

While recommendations were generally consistent across community groups, four cross-cutting topics generated mixed opinions and revealed enduring challenges for the planning process.

Trust in the city government

Generally, developers and several business owners commended local government for clear leadership, a vision of Chelsea “both as a city and a market,” and support in attracting investment and public funding. Some community organizations and local business owners expressed an opposing view, however, voicing concern over infrastructure improvements exclusively around new development or the failure of the city to act sufficiently on behalf of current residents. While new development is largely seen as a way to stimulate economic growth, many community members believe that investment should be prioritized in existing neighborhoods.

Uncertainties over the impacts of the Silver Line

Although survey results indicate positive expectations about the Silver Line extension, there is no clear understanding of how affordability or accessibility may be affected. While most business owners expressed satisfaction, some stakeholders worry that the Silver Line station will further limit parking and create more congestion, as it will serve as the end of the line. Others suggested maintenance of the current Route 111 bus as a higher priority, while teen participants questioned whether the new line could be divisive between the north and south of the city. More broadly, community organizations expressed concern over possible gentrification spurred by transit accessibility, while private and non-profit developers cautioned against overestimating the changes induced by a new bus station. Overall, survey results revealed that a higher percentage of young, minority, and low-income respondents were unaware of the future Silver Line extension.



Figure 10 - The Connectedness of Chelsea's Local Business *Chelsea has a strong business fabric, which is often based on personal relationships, and facilitated by professional and service organizations to maintain close connections (Nguyen).*

Chelsea's industrial base and the shift towards the service economy

Chelsea's light industry is widely valued as a source of blue-collar jobs. With new development arriving, the community recognizes the likely shift in land use to residential or commercial purposes. Some business owners acknowledge and welcome this trend, so long as it confers benefits such as higher property values. Other stakeholders expressed concern about rising rents and argue that Chelsea should proactively protect its industrial character and economy.

Housing needs

Survey results indicate that housing is a development priority for those who identified in the lowest income bracket (annual household income less than \$15,000). This demand is echoed by the Chelsea Collaborative, whose staff members noted that residents too frequently cannot qualify for affordable housing, as they do not meet minimum income levels. At the same time, however, other stakeholders showed little interest in housing or opposed public and multifamily housing due to perceived impacts on community character.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the engagement process, the community expressed a series of shared concerns that have informed the distinct scenarios outlined throughout the report. Concerns are grouped here in the same categories utilized in each of the individual plans: urban design, transportation, open space and natural systems, economic development, and housing.

Urban Design Principles

In spite of Chelsea's walkability, businesses and residents repeatedly noted the need to enhance the pedestrian experience to increase foot traffic and street safety. Community engagement indicated a need for street improvements, suggesting that relatively simple and immediate maintenance could impact how people view the city. Stakeholders envision active building frontages and "eyes on the street" as part of a community effort to develop a healthier local economy and reduce crime. Respondents expressed a desire for more ground floor retail with housing above, as modeled in nearby Davis Square. While the community is open to mid-rise dense development (5-6 story buildings), results indicate resistance to high-rise development, particularly given new hotel development. Lastly, litter was frequently discussed as a problem that undermines street life. Bolstered neighborhood-cleaning efforts represent an opportunity to encourage community engagement and civic pride.

Transportation

On the whole, the community is largely supportive of the incoming Silver Line and cited appreciation for Chelsea's connectivity to Boston and surrounding cities. Nonetheless, there is a general dissatisfaction with the quality of bus services (overcrowding, lack of evening service), street safety, accessibility for people with disabilities, and a lack of bicycle lanes.

Railway at-grade crossings are considered dangerous, and participants suggested that wayfinding could be improved by revising the configuration of one-way streets. Managers of industrial businesses (freight, food distribution, scrap metal) underscored the need for road maintenance to reduce wear on trucks, equipment, and products. Restricted parking and permitting emerged as a key concern for businesses who believe this may limit commercial activity.

Natural Systems and Open Space

Community members emphasized the need for centrally located, accessible, and safe recreation space, often linking recreational programming with the desire for youth enrichment and crime prevention. Teenagers in particular expressed interest in spaces to meet friends, picnic, or play sports. Youth recreational space is largely limited to institutional facilities (such as the High School). Concrete recommendations reflect these limitations and opportunities, including: a) enhancing connections to parks and the waterfront; b) creating alternative spaces such as skate parks and cinemas; c) using open spaces to promote Chelsea's historical and cultural heritage; d) utilizing space underneath the Route 1 overpass for park space or public events.

Economic Development

Stakeholders generally agreed on the need to preserve business diversity and suggested strengthening the network of resources (such as the Chamber of Commerce) for resident-owned businesses, particularly those that are run or staffed by the foreign-born population. Businesses cited mentorship programs or an official policy to encourage larger or chain businesses to utilize local goods and services as promising ideas. Stakeholders underscored that new commercial activity should complement current retail activity on Broadway in downtown Chelsea. Upgrades in physical infrastructure (streetscaping, parking, litter removal) were highlighted as methods to strengthen the local

economy and discourage crime. Developers pointed out that the emerging collaborative economy, such as Zipcar, Hubway, or shared workspaces, could be well suited for development in Chelsea.

Housing Balance

Chelsea has long been considered an affordable community, a foundation of its identity as a Gateway City. As such, community organizations stressed the need for expanded affordable housing, particularly as market-rate rentals in Chelsea grow. To achieve this end, non-profit housing developers mentioned that they hope to see a housing trust fund established by the City. Developers also emphasized mixed-income housing as a practical and sustainable development pattern, while still considering the need to maintain a balance with employment opportunities. The challenges of industrial contamination were also discussed and developers commended the city for its efforts to capture state and federal funding for remediation.

Community

Participants in engagement activities underscored the need to foster a stronger sense of community in Chelsea with neighborhood boards, community watches, and afterschool activities for youth. Residents are eager for events to celebrate Chelsea's cultural diversity and encourage integration. Teenagers expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship between local police and youth and cited many areas throughout the city where they feel unsafe.

Through the community engagement process, there was a clear message of confidence in Chelsea's future and a commitment to strengthening the Chelsea community. Residents and stakeholders are open to new development and hopeful that investments will continue to be made in existing infrastructure. Chelsea's affordability, diversity, and accessibility resonated as key strengths and set the tone for the proposed plans.



Figure 11 - Mapping Chelsea by Category Mapping activities with teenagers revealed the places they like most to hang out (green), the sites they like (yellow) and dislike (pink), as well as those places they avoid (orange) (Pym).

COMMUNITY-INFORMED PLANNING SCENARIOS

The outcomes of the engagement processes form the foundation from which the three planning scenarios developed. The first vision, Leveraging Local Strengths, addresses tensions between the city's light industry and growing service economy, while acknowledging and nurturing the assets people love about Chelsea: its social diversity, affordability, and the small town feel of the built environment. The second vision, A Network of Neighborhoods, prioritizes the concerns caused by the disconnected and vacant areas west of Route 1. The plan views the community's desire for housing, civic spaces, and an improved pedestrian experience as an opportunity to provide a cohesive, inviting street environment. The third and last vision, Building for the Workforce, responds to housing demands articulated by the low-income population, while also addressing the overarching desire for places for youth and families to enjoy. It deliberately avoids "bedroom community" development.

Throughout the report, the reader will find that overlaps between the three visions for the city are inevitable, as they all strive toward the common goal of realizing a safe, affordable, and inclusive Chelsea. For this reason, an essential component of this report is captured in the final section entitled Implementation, where it is made clear that a wide range of stakeholders have the tools, resources, and leadership needed to champion the initiatives that resound most strongly with a communal vision of Chelsea.



Figure 12 - The Voices that Shape Chelsea's Future *The engagement process collected the main concerns of the community and expectations for incoming development; it also revealed the centrality of institutions and organizations, allowing a deeper understanding of the forces shaping Chelsea's future (Blonde).*

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

On April 29, the GSD group prepared a community outreach activity in order to gather people's reactions to the most distinctive strategies put forward by each of the three plans. The event took place outside the main entrance of Market Basket (170 Everett Avenue), one of the main shopping destinations in the city for residents and visitors alike. Through posters and flyers, the general public was informed about the Silver Line extension and introduced to the work developed by the Core Studio. They were then invited to select the initiatives that resounded most strongly with what they consider to be necessary and desirable for Chelsea's development.

Overall, the public responded with a very positive attitude towards new development in Chelsea; even those unaware of the Silver Line extension expressed the city will benefit from greater exposure. Efforts to imagine different futures were met with excitement; this constituency was particularly inclined towards new civic space and community centers, as well as increased connectivity to the waterfront. In contrast to previous engagement activities, there was a much more active conversation about the need for affordable housing and retail, so as to preserve Chelsea's emblematic diversity. A possible explanation for this was the presence of stronger visuals, which better communicated the form this development might take.

People touched upon a great variety of topics, with the need for employment opportunities came across strongly. A crosscutting sentiment is that Chelsea should do more to retain its thriving population, so that a stronger sense of long-term commitment emerges: "We want to evolve from 'Chelsea is a great place to be from' towards 'Chelsea is a great place to be.'"



Figure 13 - Community Feedback Activity *After three months working on three visions for Chelsea, the student group presented planning proposals to the community and encouraged people to create their own version for the future (Lee).*