Note:
This document represents the work of a summer intern and
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Downtown Revitalization Report

A Better City

Introduction:

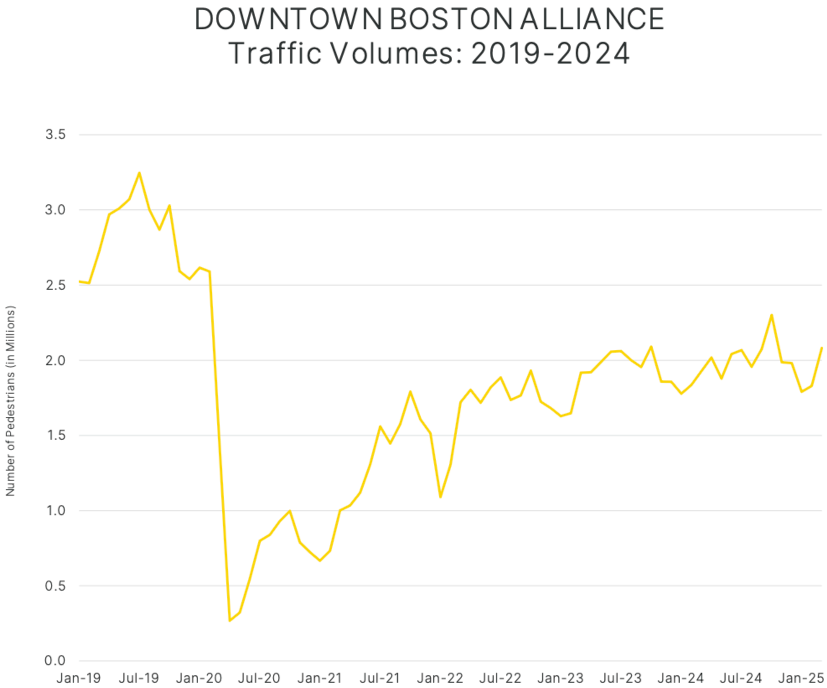
Urban downtowns across the United States have long served as the economic, historic, and cultural centers of cities. Downtowns further solidify their vital roles within a city by yielding substantial tax revenues for the local governments. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have significantly impacted the vibrancy of these downtowns by hindering economic activity and introducing new ways of living and working. For instance, office vacancies on the national level had climbed to nearly 20% in 2023, a record high since 1979, mainly due to the widespread shift to remote work[1]. As fewer people visited and consumed in the Downtown, businesses were forced to close, and the maintenance of the streets and storefronts deteriorated. Citizens began to perceive the Downtown as mismanaged, in disarray, and even unsafe to visit. In response, cities have launched initiatives to revitalize their downtowns in hopes of preventing potential vicious cycles of urban doom loops. These initiatives recognize that efforts to revitalize should go beyond recovering key metrics to pre-pandemic levels, but also reimagining the structures of the downtowns to suit the changing needs and preferences of citizens.

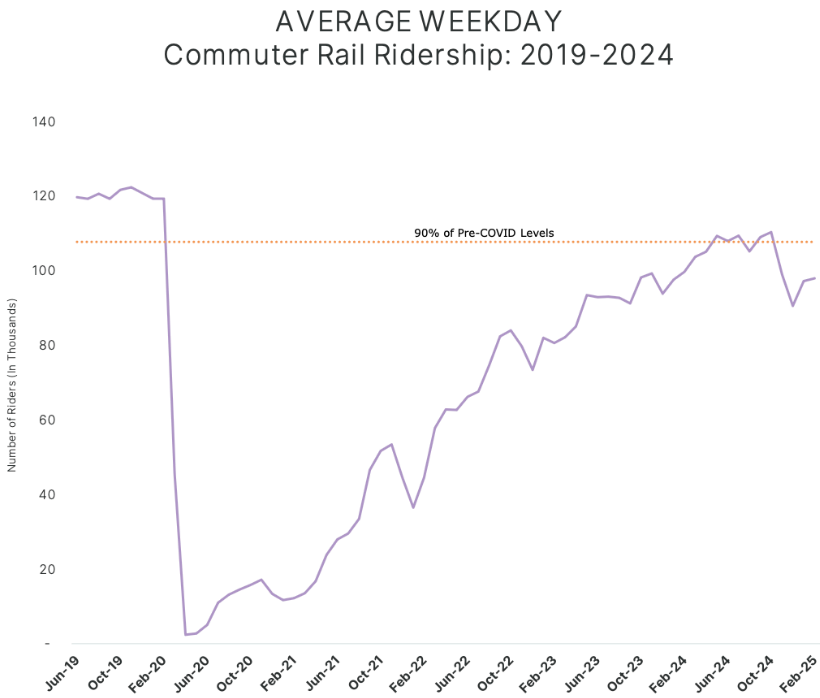
Downtown Boston, characterized by its role as a financial hub, a rich historical fabric, and the many tourist attractions in and around the area, functions as a cultural and economic nexus. However, it is among many American urban downtowns heavily affected by the pandemic and its aftermath, experiencing high rates of office vacancies and significant reductions in foot traffic and consumer spending in the years that followed. Recognizing the dire need to prevent a descent into desolation and to ensure a restored vibrancy, the city released its report on downtown revitalization in October 2022 recognizing existing issues and potential pathways to address them[2]. The city has also implemented a series of initiatives aimed at various aspects of downtown revitalization.

The city has made great strides in its goal, with key metrics recovering at promising rates thus far. For instance, foot traffic, office vacancies, and commuter rail ridership in the Downtown have all improved significantly compared to their 2020 levels. Nevertheless, much work still needs to be done to ensure the revitalization and continued growth of Downtown. Relevant actors could make more substantial efforts to bring more pedestrians and workers back into the Downtown, attract more visitors, encourage mixed-use development, etc. This report aims to buttress existing Downtown revitalization initiatives to achieve the goals mentioned above by providing new suggestions. It will first evaluate the current status of Boston's Downtown, then outline possible solutions and current initiatives, and finally make recommendations. For the purposes of this report, the Downtown refers to the current designation by the City of Boston (primarily the Central Business District), while the Greater Downtown includes the Downtown, Chinatown, and the North-end.

The Current Conditions of the Downtown:

The City of Boston's ongoing initiatives have been commendable and the existing recovery of the Downtown should not be overlooked. Within the Downtown Boston Alliance jurisdiction area, which includes the most vital retail and office parts of the Downtown, foot traffic has increased by nearly 180% when comparing January 2025 to January 2021. Average weekday commuter rail ridership has also risen 850% in the DBA when comparing February 2025 to January 2021[3], approaching 90% of pre-COVID levels. Office vacancies for the city have improved by four straight quarters by Q3 2025[4], with the Downtown having an office vacancy rate of 22.6%. The improvements in all three metrics signify a trend for return-to-office and the continued role of the Downtown as an economic center for the city.

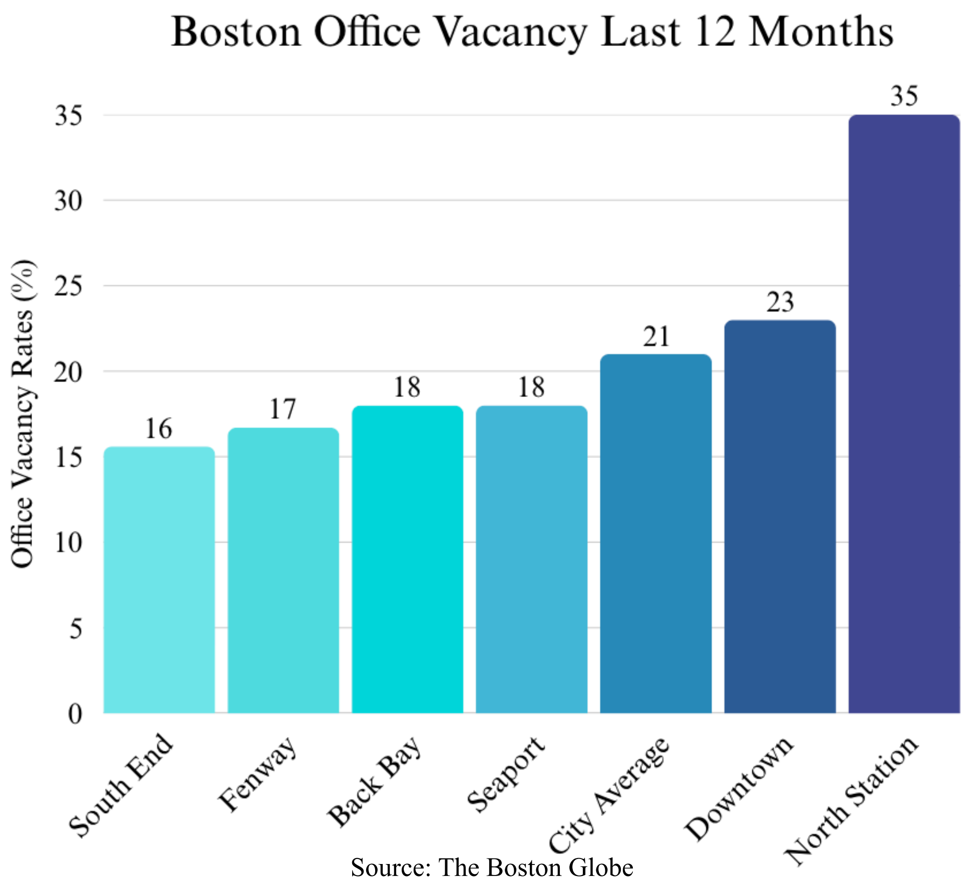




Source: DBA

Despite attaining immense progress in recovering key metrics like foot traffic, commuter rail ridership, and office vacancies, more can still be done to boost the vitality of the region. Downtown Boston's attractiveness to pedestrians and economic performance is still in many aspects below its pre-pandemic levels. While foot traffic did recover significantly compared to 2021 in the Downtown, data from December 2023 suggests that foot traffic is at roughly 85% of pre-pandemic levels. More recent data on just the BID Downtown area highlights that foot traffic is also at about 85% of pre-pandemic levels when comparing January 2025 to January 2019[3, Appendix H]. Although more office workers are choosing to spend fewer days remote, the Downtown still receives 80,000-125,000 fewer daily worker visits than before the pandemic[5]. With fewer people going to the Downtown, retail activity has also lagged behind its pre-pandemic performance. Consumer spending has decreased by more than 10% in the Greater Downtown in Q1 2024. In the BID Downtown, which has a higher concentration of retail stores, consumer spending is more than 20% less than pre-pandemic levels[6]. While commuter rail ridership is nearing total recovery, total MBTA ridership has experienced "staggered" improvements according to the city's Chief of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion Segun Idowu[7, Appendix A].

As mentioned, office vacancy rates in the Downtown have been slowly declining in the previous few quarters, reaching 22.6%. Nevertheless, this is still markedly higher than the downtown office vacancy rate pre-pandemic, which averaged at around 8%[2]. The change in vacancy rates from before to after the pandemic demonstrates the many office workers' persisting preference for working remotely, illustrating that it may not just be a temporary trend, but a structural shift in how people conduct office work. The Downtown also lags behind other neighborhoods with high office inventories, with Seaport and Back Bay both possessing office vacancy rates of around 18%[4]. Taking into account the Greater Downtown, North Station has a 35% office vacancy rate. Thus, office workers are potentially assessing newer and better-quality office buildings in Seaport and Back Bay as more attractive places to return to. Considering the Downtown's high office vacancy rates and that more than 58% of total square footage of buildings in the area is office space[8], the Downtown currently has an excess of office buildings.



Source: The Boston Globe

Compared to the office market, the residential and retail real estate markets in the Greater Downtown now experience relatively low vacancy rates, staying 1-4%[8]. Rent for residential units has also been steadily rising, though for-sale housing prices have remained stagnant[9]. Nevertheless, the low vacancies and rising rent prices for residential units in the Downtown indicate strong demand. Although vacancy rates are low for retail, consumer spending, as stated previously, is markedly lower than before the pandemic. Furthermore, Greater Downtown's share of Boston's retail spending has fallen by more than 3%, indicating the decline in attractiveness of the Downtown for retail consumers. Thus, the City and other relevant actors can be more proactive in boosting the attractiveness of the Downtown as a retail location.

Possible Solutions and Current Initiatives:
To address the need for increased vitality in the Downtown, potential solutions need to bring more pedestrians and workers back into the Downtown, attract more visitors, and encourage mixed-use development. These goals are currently being pursued by both the City and the DBA through a wide array of initiatives that aim to improve amenities, expand nightlife, improve zoning, and make more efficient use of vacant office spaces.

Improving Amenities
The City of Boston and the DBA have made efforts to improve amenities in the Downtown through neighborhood activation programs, grants targeted at retail, and seasonal public art installations. The City had taken two major actions to stimulate neighborhood activation. Firstly, they have issued the Neighborhood Activation Grant, which has provided $6.2 million to 111 grantees across Boston since the program's launch in 2023. The grant is given to artists and organizations planning to implement small to mid-sized creative activations in Boston, with a priority on creating a sense of community in the neighborhoods. The works of the grantees in the Greater Downtown are primarily concentrated in Chinatown currently. Secondly, the City, along with the DBA, has released the Space for Creative Enterprise Downtown Request for Information in February 2025. The RFI aims to transform vacant office and retail spaces into affordable spaces of artistic production, performance, and community engagement. Some example uses may be studio space for visual artists, recording studios, or art galleries. In doing so, the City aims to create an ecosystem for the arts in the Downtown.

A vibrant Downtown requires a robust retail presence in the area, which generates economic activity. During and after the pandemic, many storefronts in the Downtown became vacant due to decreased visitor presence and consumer spending. To address high rates of retail vacancies, the City issued the SPACE Grant, which aimed to fill vacant storefronts with small businesses and assist them with their operations. Applications for the program ended in May 2024, and the grant has funded 91 businesses, providing up to $200,000 per business, for a total of $10 million given in grants. Grantees continue to receive technical assistance through the program, primarily in rent negotiations, marketing, and building an online presence. As mentioned, retail vacancy rates in the Downtown are at around 1-4%, signaling the potential impact the SPACE Grant has made. However, given that consumer spending is still markedly lower than pre-pandemic levels, it appears that business performance is still an area that future retail programs could improve.

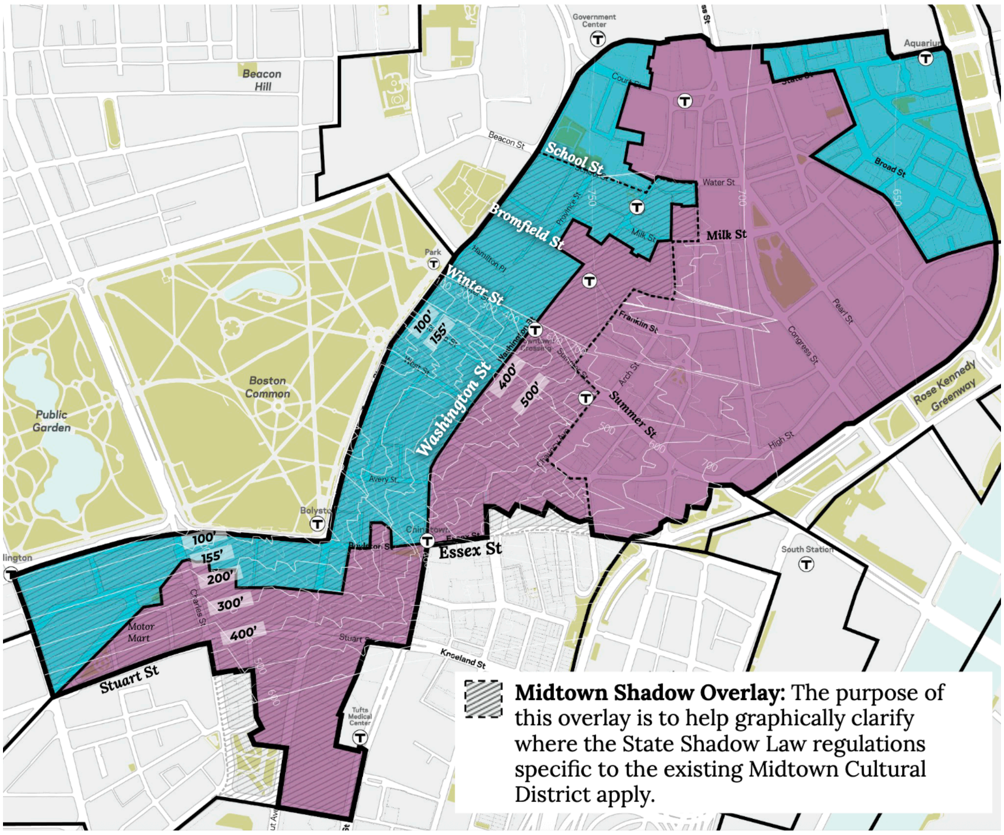
In line with the City's goal to activate public areas in the Downtown, the DBA has organized annual WINTERACTIVE events. Between January and March, public arts displays are shown around sites in the Downtown as a part of the event, making the pedestrian experience more entertaining. The event has attracted more than 650,000 visitors to the Downtown in the winter months of 2024, far surpassing the number of visitors to the Downtown in previous years before the DBA introduced the event. Therefore, the event has served as a major attraction in the Downtown, transforming the streets and public areas into a destination for tourism during months traditionally with low foot traffic. WINTERACTIVE is due to return in 2026.

Expanding Nightlife
Boston has long been perceived as a city that does not offer many options for leisure at night, especially for young professionals and university students. Thus, expanding nightlife could draw more visitors to the Downtown and further encourage spending. The City of Boston has launched three programs to this end. Firstly, the Wake Up the Night Grant Pilot Program has been awarding individuals and organizations up to $10,000 for nighttime activations since its launch in April 2024. Thus far, it has awarded more than 40 grants to individuals and organizations. Secondly, the Late Night Food Truck Program has provided 10 food truck operators the opportunity to operate in public spaces around the city at night. Within the Downtown, the trucks are allowed to operate on

Boylston Street, Faneuil Hall, and the Theatre District. Thirdly, the City has initiated the Drink Covers Distribution program, distributing 33,000 spiking prevention covers to 40 bars and nightclubs in 2024. The City plans to vastly expand the program in 2025, with the goal of distributing more than 100,000 covers 2025.

Improving Zoning

Encouraging mixed-use development in Downtown Boston necessitates that zoning be simplified and changed to suit the development of new buildings. Downtown rezoning is therefore a priority in the Planning Department's PLAN: Downtown, a framework for Downtown revitalization. The Downtown Zoning Amendment Final Draft of PLAN: Downtown aims to lay the groundwork for adaptive reuse of existing buildings, promote mixed-use density, and preserve historic and cultural assets in the region. To these ends, the amendment proposes to create two zones in the Downtown: The SKY-LOW-D (the area shaded in blue below) district and the SKY district (the area shaded in purple below). The SKY-LOW-D district aims to preserve existing structures within the district, setting height regulations to 155' or the State Shadow Law, whichever is lesser. The district also limits the eligibility for PDAs, where 1-acre PDAs must include a landmark, preserve historical buildings/landmarks, and be primarily residential. The SKY district more strongly encourages mixed-use and high-density development, allowing for high-rises to be built with height limits determined only by State Shadow Regulations and Critical Airspace height limits. The amendment adheres to the City's Inclusionary Zoning requirements and mandates that all residential projects must have 20% of their units be affordable housing units.



Source: City of Boston Planning Department

The BPDA board was initially set to discuss the amendment in July 2025. However, the plan was left out of the board's discussions when it came time to discuss. Instead, Boston's Chief of Planning Kairos Shen has expressed the need to further work on the amendment to ensure feasibility and accommodate public opinion[10]. The amendment is now due to be discussed in September 2025.

Office to Residential Conversions

The Office to Residential Conversion program allows owners who wish to convert their properties or developers who had signed agreements with owners to do so. The program aims to bring much needed new housing units to the city by repurposing vacant office spaces, especially as many class-B and class-C buildings no longer attractive and useful as offices. The program also serves to give a building new life while preserving its history. Developers in the program will enjoy a fast-tracked Article 80 and permitting process, saving time and money. They may also receive tax abatements for up to 75% of the market value of the converted properties for up to 29 years. Newly developed projects are subject to the affordable housing requirements of Boston. Currently, the City has received 15 applications to create 762 units of housing across 20 buildings, converting over 606,000 square foot of vacant office space. With the affordable housing requirements, the converted projects have created 139 new affordable housing units. In 2025, the City has opened the program to receive applications from all over Boston, not just the Downtown, and also for projects converting office spaces to student/workforce housing. According to the head of the program, John Weil, him and his team are further looking into the possibility of converting vacant lab spaces into residential units[11, Appendix B].

Obstacles

Retail - Though retail vacancies in the Downtown are low, performance, as mentioned, still markedly lags behind pre-pandemic levels, indicating space for improvement. However, according to Michael Nichols, the President of the DBA, there still exist high barriers for vendors and small businesses to obtain outdoor permits, inhibiting the ease of business[12, Appendix C]. It is also difficult for businesses to organize pop-up events, limiting potential channels to boost retail performance. Furthermore, Boston has experienced drops in visitors, particularly from international tourism. This has resulted in lower overall tourist spending in the Downtown.

Rezoning - Many factors have inhibited the Planning Department's ability to rezone the Downtown efficiently. Public opinions on rezoning have been mixed, with heavy pushback from the public being a significant point of consideration for planners. Vocal opposition groups have expressed immense concerns regarding historical preservation and height regulations. The Planning Department has found it challenging to balance public wishes with its existing goals for rezoning, resulting in many redrafts to its amendment and continual delays for further discussion.

Conversions - Thus far, only 2% of the total SF in the Downtown is due to being converted into residential units. The major obstacle for more conversions to occur is the cost of conversions. Due to high interest rates nationally, real investments across the US have declined. Additionally, building and construction costs are up in Boston by 20-30% when comparing 2020 to 2025[5]. Furthermore, many developers assess that the office market will rebound, even for class-B and class-C buildings. The combination of these factors makes conversions appear financially unattractive for developers, with many deeming the tax abatement packages to be insufficient.

Opportunities

Robust Transit Network - The hub of Boston's existing transit network is in the Downtown, with commuter rail stations, bus stations, and now bike lanes easily accessible from within the area. As mentioned, average weekday commuter rail ridership in the Downtown rebounded to about 90% of pre-COVID levels in 2025, indicating the continued utility of the transit network for citizens. The robust transit network also entails that efforts to generate more foot traffic and visits to the Downtown act in synergy with the Downtown's ease of access, improving their efficacy.

Strong Historic Fabric - Boston, being one of the oldest cities in the United States, holds immense historical significance for the nation. This is reflected by the many monuments around the Downtown, such as the Boston Massacre Site, the Paul Revere House, the Old State House, and more. These sites could serve as points of tourist attraction as they possess a strong allure to domestic tourists.

Vibrant Academic Institutions - Boston has a vibrant selection of academic institutions, being home to some of the most renowned universities in the world. As a result, a massive student and young professionals community lives in the city. This presents a great demand and opportunity to expand leisure options in Boston.

Winter Street Activation - As mentioned, retail vacancy rates in the Downtown are generally low and nearing pre-pandemic levels. However, the same cannot be said for Winter Street, where many storefronts continue to be vacant due to high levels of rent. According to Chief Idowu[7], the City is currently planning to invest $600,000 to activate Winter Street, improving programming and pop-ups on the street. This presents an opportunity for more support to be given to business owners looking to occupy Winter Street storefronts, especially in rent negotiations.

Experiential Retail - According to Alia Forrest[13, Appendix E], the Director of Business Strategy for the Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion, the changing nature of work in Boston is resulting in different types of retail businesses moving to the Downtown[13]. Increasingly, incoming businesses are providing experiential retail experiences, making their stores destinations in themselves. Such a trend can be identified by the establishment of the WNDR museum and Five Iron Golf in the Downtown. In light of the large student and young professionals population in Boston, the Downtown could continue to transform and improve its appeal to visitors.

Recommendations:

Improving Amenities, Nightlife, and Tourism

Current plans for conversion focus on converting vacant spaces into residential units. Meanwhile, initiatives in place to support small businesses and retail aim to fill in vacant spaces and bring performance back to a pre-pandemic level. To promote economic recovery, long-term growth, and a vibrant mixed-use environment in the Downtown, there needs to be more intentional efforts to bring more retail and entertainment than before. Furthermore, to support a sustained recovery of foot traffic and to suit the goals of developing a vibrant mixed-use environment in the Downtown, the city needs to improve upon the public realm. A greater push to improve amenities, nightlife, and tourism in the Downtown can ensure its attractiveness as a place to work and to live. This will be especially so if the Downtown houses a proper balance of experiential retail, local-serving retail, and services for tourists. The following are some suggestions that could be beneficial:

Allowing for upper-floor experiential retail in buildings due for conversion - To bring more experiential retail in the Downtown, the City should consider allowing for conversions of vacant office spaces into retail. Upper-floor experiential retail stores can be seen in places such as New York City, and serves to make better use of existing spaces, falling in line with sustainability goals.

Increasing initiatives to boost night life: introducing a late night transit pilot program - Existing nightlife programs by the City aim to make the Downtown a more attractive place for visitors at night. However, one major factor deterring visitors from visiting late at night is the lack of cheap public transportation options available. They would often have to use more expensive ride-hailing services to return home. Thus, the City should consider introducing a late-night transit pilot program to test the viability of running public transport at night to improve ease of commute.

Stronger marketing efforts to highlight the destination retail options available Downtown - As mentioned, the retail market in the Downtown continues to perform markedly below its pre-pandemic levels. With the influx of new types of retail options in the Downtown that better suit consumer tastes, it could be possible that a lack of consumer awareness causes the relatively poor performance. Therefore, the City should further support destination retail businesses in the Downtown by assisting them with marketing.

Outreach to local-serving retailers to highlight market opportunities Downtown - To facilitate long-term goals to establish a mixed-use community in the Downtown, there needs to be more local-serving retailers catering to residents to make it a more attractive place to live and form families. Thus, the DBA and the City should conduct more proactive outreach to local-serving retailers to highlight market opportunities in the area.

Support for businesses looking to occupy Winter Street store fronts, particularly on rent - Retail vacancies in Winter Street are far more severe than other areas of the Downtown, mainly due to persistent high levels of rent. The storefronts are too expensive for most businesses to occupy, hindering the vibrancy of the street. Thus, the City should provide more assistance to businesses wishing to occupy Winter Street, particularly in rent negotiations.

Organizing more public events in the Downtown - As WINTERACTIVE displays, utilizing public spaces for events can function as an effective way to generate more foot traffic and visits to the Downtown. This could entail hosting more public events in the Downtown for all four seasons and making more use of the Boston Common. For instance, the City should consider issuing permits to food vendors and organizing an open food festival in the Downtown that celebrates the different cultural groups living in the area.

Improving tourist navigation clarity in the Downtown - Improving the ease of tourist navigation in the Downtown could buttress the attractiveness of the area as a tourist destination. Therefore, the City should consider establishing tourist information centers and installing more guiding street signs in the Downtown.

Nuit Blanche Toronto/Montreal:
To improve nightlife and draw more visitors to the Downtown, the City of Boston could reference the Nuit Blanche festivals hosted annually in Toronto, Montreal, and cities around the world. Nuit Blanche are all-night arts and cultural festivals hosted in the city centers that last only for the night, mostly showcasing artworks by local artists. A great portion of the exhibits are interactive, and most of the attractions are free of charge. In Toronto, a city with a population of 3 million people, the Nuit Blanche festival attracts more than 1 million visitors per year. In Montreal, a city with 1.8 million people, the Nuit Blanche, being the centerpiece of the larger En Lumière winter festival, which lasts for two weeks, attracts more than 800,000 annual visitors. While both cities are much larger than Boston, the successes of the Nuit Blanche festivals in them demonstrate the ability for large public events to draw people into the Downtown. If the City is concerned about prolonged disturbances to the Downtown, it should consider making the public events a short ordeal like the Nuit Blanche festival in Toronto.

Park Festivals and Markets:
The City of Boston should also consider utilizing the Boston Common more to host public events to attract more visitors to the Downtown. To this end, the City could begin by considering how other cities have utilized their public parks. The Piedmont Park of Atlanta, GA, has about 50-100 acres, comparable to Boston Common's 50 acres. The Atlanta Jazz Festival is hosted annually in the park, spanning three days and bringing more than 200,000 visitors each year. Bryant Park in New York City has about 10 acres of usable space and hosts seasonal markets for local vendors. It's Spring Makers Market, for instance, opens on the weekends and lasts for seven weeks, allowing more than 170 vendors to operate. Open markets like this can champion local small businesses and boost retail activity, serving as a potential method to address lower levels of economic activity in the Downtown. Parker's Piece in Cambridge, UK, has 25 acres of space and hosts the annual Christmas in Cambridge event. The event, lasting for two months, includes a festive market and various attractions such as a Ferris wheel and an ice-skating rink. It has attracted visitors to the park during the holiday season and has stimulated more spending, effects that could be potentially replicated in the Boston Common.

Incentivizing More Conversions
Despite benefits such as significant tax abatements provided to developers, cost is the biggest obstacle to more conversion projects being undertaken. With unfavorable conditions in the construction market, developers determine that many potential projects would yield insufficient earnings to justify the costs incurred. Coinciding with recent office vacancy data suggesting a stronger movement towards a return to the office, developers may conclude that it is more financially sound to hold on to their existing properties without changing them. In turn, many vacant type-B and type-C buildings that would be fit for conversion remain as office buildings. Therefore, to attain long-term vibrancy in the Downtown by promoting mixed-use development, the City should further incentivize conversion projects. Below are some ways the City may pursue the goal of lowering costs for conversions.

Increasing the extensiveness and generosity of tax incentive packages provided to property developers for conversion projects - The current tax abatement package provided by the City is already quite generous and extensive. However, many developers still conclude that it is insufficient to cover the costs of potential conversion projects, demonstrating the suboptimal market conditions for new real estate projects right now. Nevertheless, the City should still attempt to encourage more conversions to encourage mixed-use development and address its housing crisis. The most straightforward mechanism the City can employ is still tax mechanisms. Therefore, it should consider making the tax incentives even more generous and extensive than they currently are.

Reducing building and construction costs for property developers through sales tax exemptions or reductions on construction materials - Another way the City may reduce costs for developers, other than providing tax abatement or exemption packages, is to target the costs of inputs for developers. As mentioned, building and construction material costs have drastically increased over the years, making it even more expensive to take on new development projects. Therefore, the City should consider providing sales tax exemptions or reductions on construction materials to reduce costs for developers. It is worth noting that Massachusetts Senate President Karen Spilka is already exploring these exemptions. Therefore, city officials need to keep close notice on the eventual results of the Legislature's study.

Increasing workforce development grants in partnership with developers to expand the construction workforce and reduce labor costs - Cost of labor is also a major concern for developers when deliberating whether or not to engage in new projects. To further lower costs for developers, the City should increase workforce development grants to boost construction workforce availability. Furthermore, it should partner with developers to ensure that the workforce developed suits the needs of developers. In doing so, the City could reduce labor costs for developers, making new conversion projects more likely.

New York City Midtown South Mixed-Used Plan:
The NYC MSMX Plan aims to rezone 42 blocks and create around 9,700 new homes in the city's Midtown region. To support this plan, the city government has passed the 485-x Affordable Neighborhoods for New Yorkers program in 2025. This tax incentive package is the successor to NYC's 421a program and provides a 10 to 40-year exemption for projects that meet the city's affordable housing requirements. NYC's program is thereby an example of a more extensive (offering up to 40 years of tax exemptions instead of Boston's 29) and more generous (offering full exemptions instead of Boston's 75%) tax incentive package.

San Francisco 30 x 30 Plan:
The San Francisco 30 x 30 is a comprehensive plan to revitalize the city's Downtown. Included are proposals to convert vacant office spaces into residential units, much like Boston's plan, with added elements of developing University housing in the Downtown. There are two primary tax measures associated with the plan. Firstly, the Proposition C ballot measure waives the city's 6% transfer tax on up to 5 million square feet of commercial-to-housing conversion projects downtown. Secondly, the Budget and Finance Committee of SFO is waiting to vote on a resolution that would create a special district in the Downtown where all extra property taxes generated by converted properties would be disbursed back to the developers. Boston officials may want to look at both instruments when considering what other tax incentives they may wish to provide to developers.

Seattle Office to Residential Conversion Program:
The Seattle Office to Residential Conversion Program has near identical goals to the program in Boston, with the city predicting that 1,000–2,000 housing units will be produced in a 7-year time frame. Seattle is currently providing two primary tax incentives for developers. The city fully exempts sales taxes on construction costs for eligible conversion projects. Furthermore, the Multifamily Tax Exemption program provides exemptions on eligible multifamily housing that adheres to affordable housing requirements.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

Though making great strides in recovering from the effects of the pandemic, many measures can still be taken to encourage the revitalization of Downtown Boston. Most importantly, the City needs to improve amenities and retail, activate the public realm, support tourism, and promote mixed-use development. The Downtown still suffers from lower foot traffic, reduced consumer spending, and high rates of office vacancies, among other issues. Therefore, solutions need to take comprehensive action and consider both short-term effects and long-term development. The City already has in place an extensive set of programs to address the issues listed above. Nevertheless, Boston could more comprehensively expand upon many of these programs. Furthermore, measures currently not explored by the City, such as making more use of Boston Common or introducing new tax instruments, should be given more consideration.

This report provides a cursory overview of the status quo of the Boston Downtown, major current initiatives for Downtown revitalization, and provides some rough suggestions. A more in-depth study could analyze the breakdown of the statistics provided regarding the status quo and ensure that the data are more up-to-date. Moving forward, stakeholders should closely monitor the initiatives forwarded in comparable cities. Once the data are available, more analysis should be done on the effects of programs instituted in both Boston and other cities. Furthermore, relevant stakeholders could explore the recommendations in this paper in greater detail. This could be achieved if City officials or stakeholders, such as the DBA, run more pilot programs adopting some of the recommendations.

Endnotes:
1. Emily Perk, Axios, “Charted: Office vacancies hit a new record high,” January 9th, 2024
2. City of Boston, *Revive and Reimagine: A Strategy to Revitalize Boston’s Downtown*, October 2022
3. Downtown Boston Alliance, *Downtown Boston Alliance Office Report*, Q1 2025
4. Grant Welker, Boston Business Journal, “Promising signs: Boston office vacancy rates down, absorption hits a high,” July 9th, 2025
5. Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, *The Future of Downtown Boston & Commercial Real Estate: Post-Covid Changes in Work-Life Patterns*, February 2025
6. Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, *The Real Estate Market of Downtown Boston: The Impacts of Changing Work & Life Patterns*, June 2024
7. Interview with Segun Idowu and Andrew Grace, July 14th, 2025
8. Boston Planning and Development Agency, *Office-to-Resi Conversion Program Presentation*, Q2 2025
9. Kara Miller, The Boston Globe, “As housing prices in Mass. soar, they’ve remained stagnant in downtown Boston. Here’s what that means for the city,” July 30th, 2025
10. Catherine Carlock, The Boston Globe, “Rules for 700-foot skyscrapers across downtown will have to wait,” July 16th, 2025
11. Interview with John Weil, June 23rd, 2025
12. Interview with Michael Nichols, June 10th, 2025
13. Interview with Alia Forrest, July 10th, 2025

Appendix A - Interview Notes with Chief of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion Segun Idowu and Director of Economic and Strategic Planning Andrew Grace, City of Boston:
How has the Downtown recovered from the pandemic overall? Which area has recovered the most and which the least?
- foot traffic almost at 2019 levels, more people have started going back to work, more renewals and expansions of office space
- MBTA ridership has seen staggered process, but virtually all metrics has seen positive improvements
- DBA shared that all major retail vacancies along Washington Street either have leases signed or have interest in them
- challenges around Winter Street, city investing $600,000 for programming activation, pop-ups, still in planning phase
- substantial increases to Monday office use, increases in Friday visitor-ship is tourist

What is the precise retail vacancy rate downtown? What are the implications of rent values falling?
- retail is there to support the office, so performance is linked to the amount of people working
- not necessarily a bad thing for rent prices to drop, bad for property owners but good for businesses
- vacant spaces in Winter Street actually not seeing a drop in rent prices

Now that the SPACE Grant Program is over, how is the city continuing to support them?
- the technical assistances will continue long after grant is over, legal assistance, site identification, general technical assistance: business assistance, marketing

What are some major obstacles to current goals set by your department?
- capital, need banks to be better lenders - interest rates
- cannot do anything on the restrictions on tourism - tourism was a major driver of revitalization with the influx of Canadian tourists
- uncertainty in the financial markets due to the federal administration

How is your office currently working with the business community, especially the DBA? In what areas do you wish to see more coordination in?
- working with them to push programs to attract new businesses to the Downtown
- SPACE program, nighttime food trucks, activation of Winter Street
- making strides in permitting and licensing for Downtown block parties and closing of streets

Recent data have shown that office vacancies in Boston are steadily on the decline. To what extent do you think this is reinforcing beliefs that office conversions are not urgent?
- the need to diversify the stakeholders of Downtown, relative to the rest of the country the Boston Downtown was disproportionately reliant on office spaces
- never expected that conversion will be a major program

What is your office doing to boost domestic tourism?
- more dependent on Meet Boston and Mass Convention Visitors Bureau to attract domestic tourists
- incremental and intentional shift to annual and regular-occurring destination events to attract people to the Downtown in alliance with the DBA, targeting particular groups such as young professionals

Appendix B - Interview Notes with Sr. Program Manager for Downtown Conversions John Weil, Planning Department:

Why is there especially a need to engage in office-to-residential conversion in the downtown? Why is it not enough to encourage the building of new properties in other areas?

- looking at other cities, office-to-residential conversion has existed for decades
- offices are not longer the highest-and-best use, meaning that a pivot is needed
- office-to-residential would have occurred earlier in Boston if not for Seaport, now happening as Seaport is becoming fully developed
- many class-B and class-C buildings are no longer useful as office buildings
- take a building, give it new life, also preserve historic buildings, more eco-friendly

What are the biggest considerations in determining which buildings are best suited for conversion?

- new-ground-up and office-to-residential conversion do not overlap, land used for one is not necessarily needed for the other
- windows are in good shape, residential buildings require open windows
- multiple elevators that is fairly recent and in good condition, two staircases, sprinkles - fire code
- meeting the fire code and ADA for disabilities

What are the next steps for PLAN: Downtown and office-to-residential conversion?

- programmed evolved since 2023, expanded from just focusing on just the downtown to the whole of Boston
- now considering lab-to-residential conversion, office-to-student housing, office-to-workforce housing
- now beginning to see bigger and bigger buildings, expect to see high-rise applications in the program
- no tax abatement for office-to-hotel, feel that the industry is strong enough and can develop by itself
- require ground-floor retail in place, no current plans for office-to-life style but believe that as larger buildings come the first few floors of big buildings will include those lifestyle spaces
- hoping to create a 24-hour community

What are some of the main challenges that still need to be addressed?

- city made a very generous tax-abatement, but may not be enough to make a deal profitable, looking at state or federal government if they may give tax-breaks
- still many who believe that the office market market will rebound even in class-B and class-C, explaining to people its not about how long they can hang on for, need to make them face the reality that change is needed

How is the city currently coordinating with the private sector? What areas do you think there needs to be more cooperation and conversation in?

- Weil has reached out to all the neighborhood associations and groups and all the arthecechual commissions, reached out to a lot of developers and property owners
- just a matter of keeping up the effort they have started, keeping an open door to listen

During the public meeting, some community members raised concerns over affordable housing in the downtown. How do the current plans made by the city in office to residential conversion respond to these concerns?

- require that developers that come to the program adhere to the inclusionary zoning initiative

Appendix C - Interview Notes with President Michael Nichols, Downtown Boston Alliance:
What is the DBA currently doing on downtown revitalization?

- neighborhood rezoning effort (PLAN Downtown), most consistent voice in support of that plan
- changed own strategy about how to activate the downtown:
    - pre-COVID: entertain the people already in the area - office workers, tourists
    - post-COVID: larger profile neighborhood festivals and exhibitions to bring people in
- economic development - instituted programs to recruit retailers to occupy stores, now looking to recruit more businesses to occupy the offices

What are your views on the city's current plans and initiatives in this area?

- very positive view, but believes that city can do more to address the conditions of the streets and sidewalks of the downtown
- hopes the city makes it easier to have pop-up events, small businesses, make permits (in-door and out-door) more accessible

How is your organization coordinating with the city and the private sector? What areas do you wish to see more coordination in?

- safety - staffing that works with the mayor's office and the police, make it feel safer to attract more people
    - camera program that purchases police cameras for the police department to place across downtown
- work to recruit retail businesses significantly helped by the city through grants coming from the city for retailers, working with the city on permits
- worked with city to push forward tech

Appendix D - Interview Notes with Senior Planner Andrew Nahmias, Planning Department:
What is the city currently doing on downtown revitalization other than office to residential conversion? What needs of Boston is the city addressing with these initiatives?
- PLAN: Downtown started in 2018 - public realm and open space improvement, mobility and transportation improvement, open space and attracting businesses
- variance process, rezoning: heavily outdated, escape rooms and fitness studios for example are not allowed, restrictive of play areas

How is the city currently coordinating with the private sector? What areas do you think there needs to be more cooperation and conversation in?
- listening to small business and business organizations, engaging with property owners and developers on what is feasible and what current challenges are - tax abatement

What is unique to Boston?
- downtown is unique for having a great historic fabric, older smaller scale fabric still in place - lends itself to conversion to residential spaces more so
- existing transit network with the downtown as its hub, existing infrastructure and amenities (North and South Station, Green Way and Boston Common) for more growth
- vibrant medical and academic institutions

What are the next steps for PLAN: Downtown? Will Planning make anymore significant changes to the amendment?
- bring this to the BPDA Board next month, final draft no more changes, a stronger balance of the goals and concerns

During the public meeting, some community members raised concerns over affordable housing in the downtown. Does the city plan to mandate a quota for affordable housing for new development projects in the downtown going forward?
- there exists requirements for affordable housing for the inclusionary zoning in the city, 20% affordable housing units for all new developments

Another concern raised was the lack of tangible modeling over what new buildings will look like. Understanding while the future landscape of the downtown is near impossible for the city to predict as it will depend on the projects that occur, would the city consider making some 3D models of potential outcomes for the public to see?
- to show any buildout on a site could be triggering or misleading, only expect two or three large projects downtown for the next market cycles
- setting up a more flexible framework with clearer controls for growth, not about a concrete plan

What about amenities?
- looking at redundant streets - Phillips Square in Chinatown, plans to make temporarily plaza more permanent
- zoning requires that new large scale development to include public use amenities spaces

Appendix E - Interview Notes with Director of Business Strategy Alia Forrest, City of Boston:
How much space is retail space is currently available in the downtown? Is the key concern about bringing more stores in, making sure there is more spaces for stores, or supporting existing businesses?

- DBA has vacancy data and so does the Planning Department
- types of businesses coming to downtown has changed due to changing nature of work
    - experiential retail (WNDR museum, F1 racing, theatre…) or experiential restaurants coming to the downtown: more short-term leases in Fanuel Hall - trendy, fast-casual dining and upscale bars, food courts

What are some key initiatives in supporting small businesses in the downtown?

- posting a website soon about all the progress done by PLAN: Downtown and progress in general
- SPACE grant program - filling vacant store fronts with small businesses primarily in the downtown, $200,000 for these businesses and paired with technical assistance providers
    - 91 businesses, and totaling $10 million provided for the small businesses
    - success of the program is still pending, have to see how stores are impacted after federal funding is over
    - after American Rescue Funding act dulled out, SPACE grant no longer in place, 7-8 businesses have not signed a lease
    - follow-up studies by Harvard Kennedy school students - suggestions are day-to-day managers and fund-raising again for the program, funds organized by external organization, focusing on a cluster of spaces instead of city-wide

What are some key obstacles to promoting a vibrant retail community in the downtown, if any?

- need more companies to land in the downtown and open an office
- how to utilize the office space in a different way, day-to-day foot traffic not the same
- Alia's team: business attraction and retention: recruiting companies to come to Boston
- it is difficult to search for what spaces are available and good deals for store-fronts

How is your department currently coordinating with businesses in the area and the DBA, and where do you think there needs to be further coordination in?

- DBA gives them their real estate data, working with the DBA to work on promotional material to attract businesses
- DBA hired someone specifically for filling spaces, works with Alia frequently, promoting the downtown

Appendix F - Interview Notes with Senior Neighborhood Business Manager of Charlestown, Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and West Roxbury Emily Patrick, City of Boston:

How has small businesses around Boston and in the Downtown recovered since the pandemic?

- issues small businesses have to deal with is more about their present operations, pandemic not as relevant as an issue

What are the biggest challenges small businesses currently face and how is the city supporting them to overcome them?

- customers are spending less on services that are not deemed as necessary, bottom lines are hurt
- businesses now more aware of the necessity to build an online presence
- technical assistance program - hiring outside consultants or professionals who can help address the needs of business owners
- government team meets with the business to assess the scope of issue

How can the commercial districts around Boston be improved in order to boost their attractiveness to consumers?

- density and variety, the attractiveness of a district to those outside the community has to do with how much choice they have and how accessible one type of service is proximate to others
- youth gatherings, coffee hours, greening, murals and street art, parklets, outdoor dinings has become a huge trend since the pandemic

How to attract more businesses into commercial districts?

- Boston has low vacancy rates all around, large consumer demand

Appendix G - Interview Notes with Chris Leinberger, Founding Partner and Managing Director of Places Platform LLC and Professor at the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at GWU:

Can we be sure that the impact of the pandemic on WalkUPs is episodic rather than structural? Is it not a possibility that the proliferation of remote work could permanently push people away from the urban core?

- cities constantly change, constant outward migration or reinventing cities over cycles in history
- urbanization of the suburbs will be the key driver of walkable urban growth, 70-80% of people in the metropolitan area live in the suburbs, people want urbanizing suburbs
- if the downtown does not change anything, it will crash due to unbalanced portfolios, cities more so converting into residential areas than play

In the report, it is mentioned that downtown WalkUPs have a disproportionately large amount of office real estate compared to other WalkUPs types, with a byproduct of that being a low percentage of foot traffic in the areas coming from residents. Would portfolio rebalancing to include more residential real estate drastically change this and what are the implications of said changes?

- it will, Boston like Philadelphia (a good comparable), have no choice but to lower its office inventory, drive rents up and induce more residential development
- downtowns that were doing better had closer in residential districts within two miles of the CBD, increased resident and foot traffic

Could rebalancing impact the tourism coming into the downtown? For instance, if the downtown becomes more residential, would it be possible that there would be more resistance from residents to a heavy tourist presence?

- the opposite, tourists want to go to real places, increased residential areas promote walkable urbanism
- 50-60% of tourism is walkable urban tourism, Boston need not worry about over-tourism right now, need more tourist things to do, which will bring more residents into the downtown

Currently, the Boston city government is trying to implement an amendment that rezones the downtown to make it easier for developers to engage in office to residential conversion. However, this is received by heavy pushback from downtown communities. In your research, have you seen effective strategies that local governments engaged in to overcome community opposition, particularly NIMBYs?

- demonstrate to them that they are shooting themselves in the foot, demonstrate to them that their quality of life is going to continue to decrease and taxes will continue to rise

What can the Business Improvement District in Boston do to support efforts by the government and the private sector to increase the provision of housing in the downtown?

- goes back to zoning reform, leaders in BIDs need to leverage their voice to support changes in zoning

Of the cities that you looked at, which ones have been the most successful in recovering their real estate values after the pandemic, particularly in the downtown? What are some of the strategies the governments have taken to achieve this? How was the private sector involved?

- San Francisco: went so far down, elected someone who knows how to run a city, addressing homelessness, portfolio problem
- New York: midtown, Fi-Di, Hudson Yards, most office to residential conversion

Appendix H - More Recent Foot Traffic Data From the DBA:
In August 2025, the DBA released its Downtown Boston Alliance Area Monthly Visitation Tracking graphic report, providing more foot traffic data for 2025. The data provided show that foot traffic in the DBA area in July 2025 is at around 2.7 million compared to July 2019's 3.8 million, indicating a nearly 29% decrease. This is a marked difference from the 15% decrease comparing January 2025 to January 2019, which may suggest a strong correlation between recovery in foot traffic and seasonal factors.