

‘A 24-hour neighborhood’: Wu outlines plans to bring downtown Boston back to life

The city has rolled out a lengthy plan aimed at boosting a beleaguered downtown, though concrete steps remain a work in progress.

By [Jon Chesto](#) and [Catherine Carlock](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 27, 2022, 6:29 a.m.



A pedestrian walked beneath the lights of the Paramount Theater in Downtown Crossing earlier this month. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Mayor Michelle Wu unveiled a plan Thursday to revive a downtown hammered by the pandemic by making it less reliant on office workers, with ideas that include helping convert office buildings to housing, encouraging a wider variety of retail uses, and turning some city streets into pedestrian ways.

“This report ... reflects what we want downtown to be: a 24-hour neighborhood that is open to everybody,” said Segun Idowu, Wu’s chief of economic opportunity and inclusion.

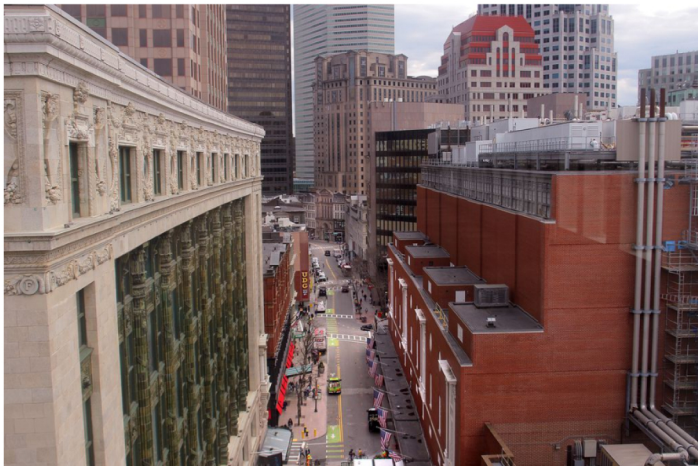
[The report](#), done for the city by Boston Consulting Group, echoes many of the themes of an action plan the Wu [administration released in March](#), aiming to address the empty offices and dark storefronts caused by the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. But challenges abound.

[Many office towers don’t lend themselves to residential conversions](#), and downtown remains an expensive place to build. The city will likely need to wrap up a broad downtown plan before making substantive zoning changes. There’s no huge pot of money to help. And success hinges on a rapid transit system that is often slow and unreliable, and largely beyond the city’s control.

Foot traffic downtown remains about half of its prepandemic levels, with far sharper declines seen in the Financial District than in other parts of the city. The rise of remote work is a big reason why downtown office occupancy levels are still at about one-third of prepandemic levels.

“I feel a significant sense of urgency about this,” said planning chief Arthur Jemison, who leads the Boston Planning & Development Agency.

“Downtown Boston is a critical asset for the city and the region. ... There’s so much to love about it that I really want to make sure we are moving with urgency to take steps to make it easier for people to achieve their development goals downtown.”



Summer Street in Downtown Crossing. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Much of the discussion has focused on adding more housing, and thus residents. There have been a few examples of office-to-residential conversions in recent years, including along Winter Street and Temple Place. Suffolk University successfully remade the former Ames Hotel into a student dorm, while two former Suffolk buildings on Beacon Hill have been converted into luxury condos. City officials want to explore whether other institutions, such as Massachusetts General Hospital and Emerson College, can tackle conversions as well.

But the physical conversion of existing offices to residential space is a tall order. A recent study by design firm Gensler found that just 10 of 84 buildings in downtown Boston would warrant closer review to see if they could be converted. Owners have to be willing to make the investment. Jemison declined to name the downtown spots where city officials would like to see these conversions.

“We think that there’s targets and opportunities, and we think we’ve got good relationships with owners who were open to it,” Jemison said.

But Jim Rooney, chief executive of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, expressed skepticism about relying too heavily on reviving downtown via residential conversions.

“I don’t hold out much hope for that, though I’m sure there are some [properties that could work],” Rooney said. “If it was financially feasible, we would already be seeing it happening.”

Rooney applauded the efforts to bring a more local flair to the ground-floor spaces, including at Faneuil Hall Marketplace.

“One of the complaints ... is when you see ground-floor retail, it’s Anyplace USA,” Rooney said. “There’s something there to try to activate the ground floor retail and at the same time provide local businesses with opportunities.”

Toward that end, Idowu said the city has set aside \$9 million of federal recovery funds to provide rent subsidies for retail businesses across the city. The focus of this program, which launches in December, will be on encouraging diverse business ownership, particularly downtown. Up to \$150,000 could be available, over a three-year period, for as many as 60 small businesses.

The report recommends broadening retail zoning to include nontraditional uses such as child care, co-working spaces, and “maker spaces” where artisans work on their products and sell them. Jemison said he would prefer to hold off on zoning changes until the Boston Planning & Development Agency completes its downtown plan, but it’s possible some might be advanced at an earlier date.



People had lunch at an outdoor table on Water Street in downtown Boston this summer. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The report dedicates a page to “reimagining” Faneuil Hall, the historic marketplace overseen by landlord Ashkenazy Acquisition Corp. under a long-term lease with the city. But the details are scant other than expressing a desire to shift the emphasis away from national chains to local entrepreneurs — a long-held goal for the market — and to improve the marketplace’s physical condition. When Jemison was asked if city officials are negotiating with Ashkenazy to accomplish these goals, Jemison simply said “we talk to all of our tenants frequently” and declined to expand on the bare-bones description in the report.

Michael Nichols, president of the Downtown Boston Business Improvement District, said he likes the report’s suggestion to test programs that reserve specific streets for pedestrian use. He also backs the concepts of making empty upper floors available at low-cost or no cost to startups, nonprofits, and entrepreneurs of color, and filling vacant storefronts with pop-up, or temporary, stores to try out new business ideas. The report even floats the idea of the city leasing or otherwise acquiring spaces in attractive locations to offer short-term leases for pop-ups; city officials have already identified certain locations that could work for this.

“Anytime you have a shock to the system like this, it creates an opportunity,” Nichols said of the pandemic. “The owners don’t want to have that space sit empty forever [so] they become more flexible.”

As with the Wu administration, the BID hopes to hold more event series that can draw crowds downtown and gradually change the area into a full-fledged neighborhood as opposed to a forest of office towers that goes dark on nights and weekends.

“I think the tourism, the students, the theater traffic, that stuff is back in large measure,” Nichols said. “The city is right to say we can throw gas on that fire and make it even stronger instead of waiting for an office worker who may never return given the change in the future of work.”