

# Watertown Square Plan Charrette

Existing Conditions Analysis



Tuesday, November 28, 2023



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# Goals for Watertown Square

## Why are we making a new plan for Watertown Square?

- To create lively public spaces
- To create street design that promotes safe walking and biking
- To ensure that small businesses can thrive
- To promote shared public-private open spaces that are activated and expanded, with more access to the Charles River
- To create expanded housing options
- To explore more opportunities for public art
- To reuse, enhance, or preserve the Square's most significant historic structures
- To make the Square a destination for residents and visitors alike, with attractions for community members to visit and spend time

## What we heard during the Comprehensive Plan

- Watertown Square is the defining feature for the community
- Watertown Square needs planning to address streetscapes, multimodal access and circulation, and small business success, to build community by enhancing character and quality of life
- Busy roadways in Watertown Square are barriers for non-auto trips *and* can be assets for businesses by increasing visibility

# Elements of the Plan

What we'll be working on

## Existing Conditions Analysis

- Synthesis of past plans, including the Comprehensive Plan, Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, and Resilient Watertown
- Identify travel patterns and desire lines
- Analysis of current small businesses
- Soft sites analysis

## Public Engagement

- Stakeholder Engagement: Watertown Business Coalition, Kitchen Table Conversations with the Community Conversations group
- Polis Online Survey
- Design Charrette

## Urban Design & Redevelopment Scenarios

- Potential development opportunities
- Public realm recommendations: street reconfiguration/lane diet
- Urban realm design: open space proposal acknowledging subsurface conditions and their impact at grade

## Transportation & Parking Plan

- Detailed conceptual plan for redesigned street right-of-ways
- Implementation timeline
- High-level peer review

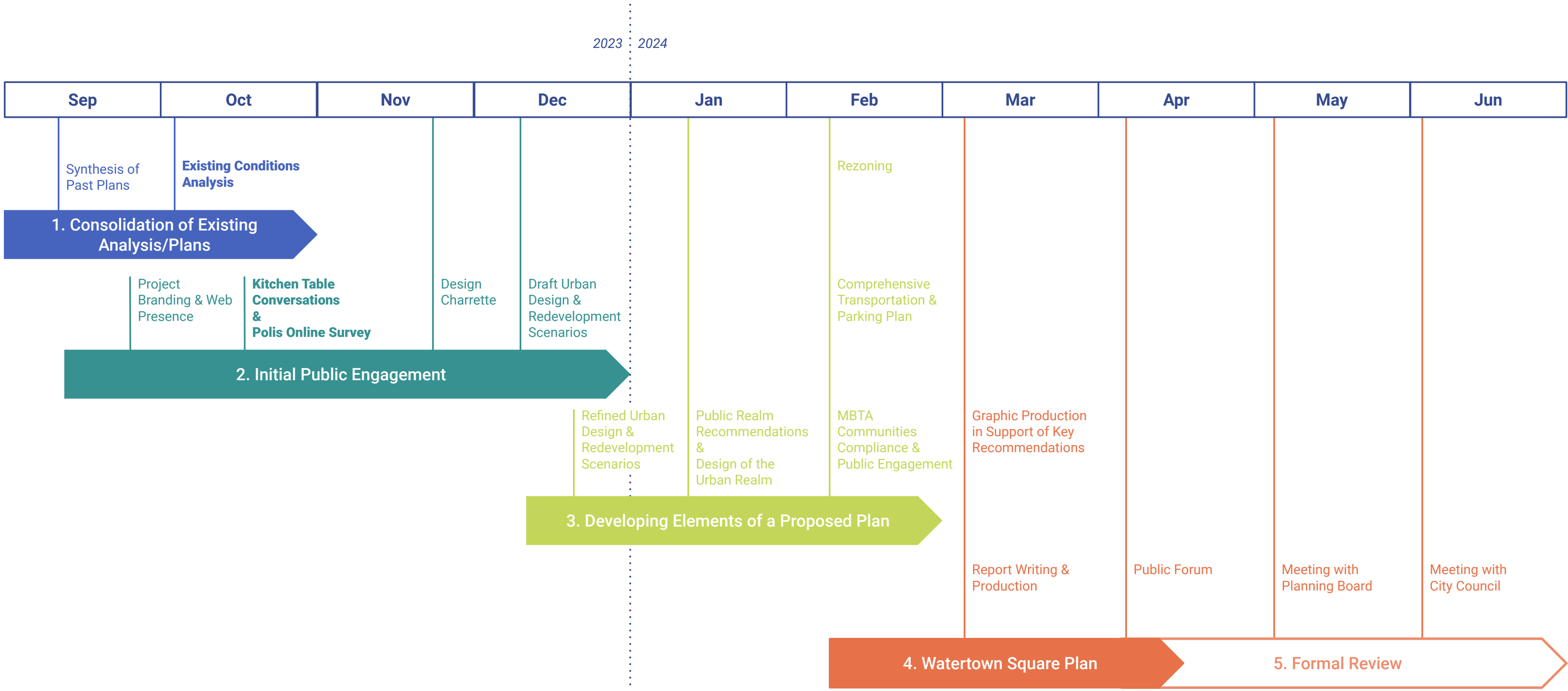
## Rezoning

- Development of a tiered zoning approach
- MBTA Communities compliance analysis
- Public engagement: Webinar and WCATV



# Watertown Square Plan Timeline

Roadmap to a complete plan





# Study Area



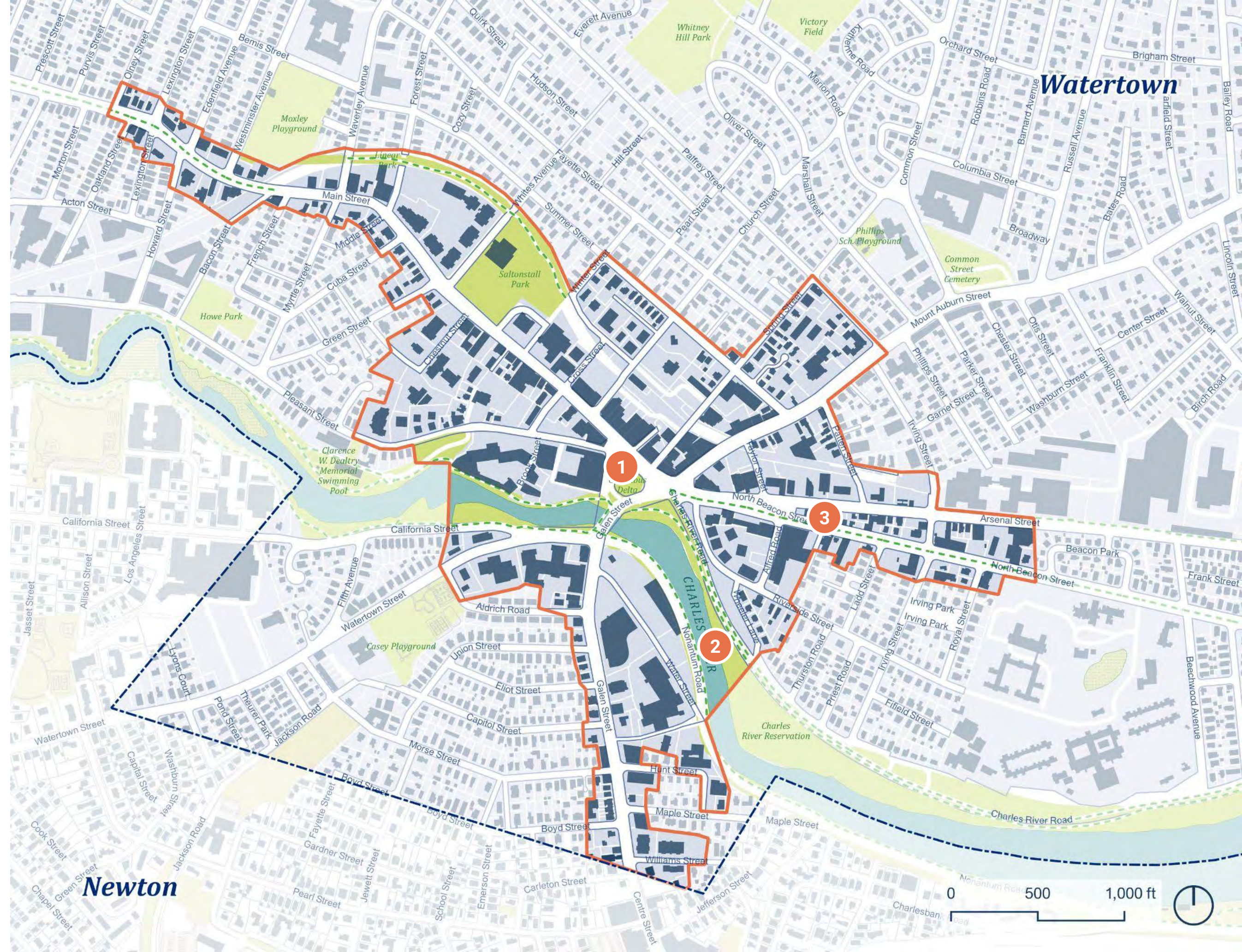
1. View looking toward the Watertown Square intersection



2. View of the Charles River from the Greenway path



3. View of the auto-dominated stretch of Arsenal Street





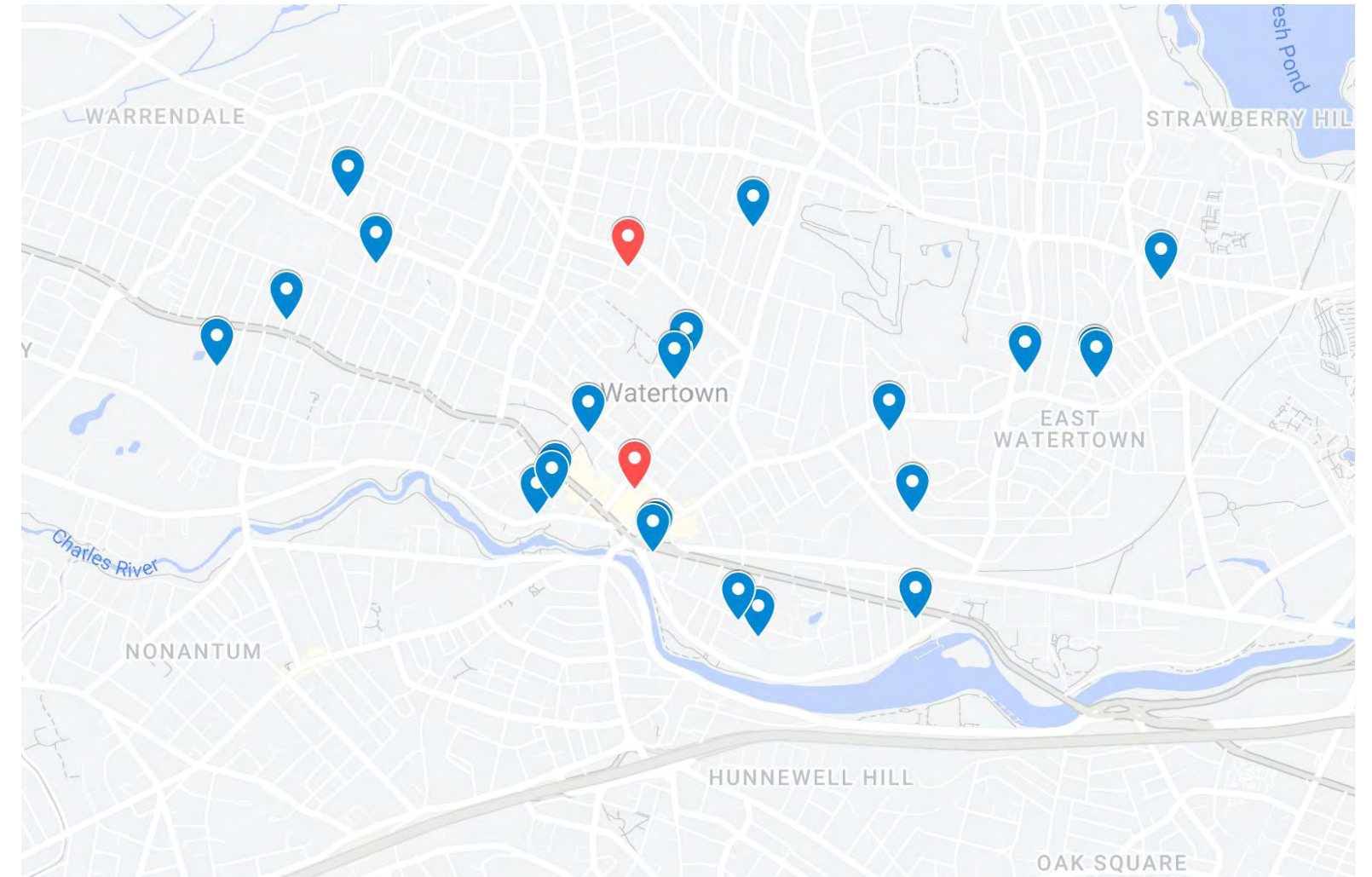
# Public Engagement

Kitchen Table Conversations Preliminary Feedback  
Polis Survey Results

# Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC)

Hosted from October 30 to November 17, 2023

- Small group conversations focused on how residents currently engage with the Square and what they would like to see the Square become
- Attended by over 150 residents in 20 locations across the City
- Facilitated by Watertown Community Conversations
- Specific meetings with Perkins School for the Blind and Watertown Business Coalition



*Initial Kitchen Table Conversations Locations*

# Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC)

Feedback Received

## What's working in the Square currently?

- Watertown Free Public Library fosters community
- Access to Charles River Greenway
- Cultural diversity

## What would you change about Watertown Square?

- Slowing and reducing traffic to increase biker and pedestrian safety
- Enhanced and increased connectivity to greenspace
- More, vibrant businesses and venues catered to gathering and community: i.e. grocery store, food stand or restaurant, music or dance venue, etc.
- Architectural character of buildings



# Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC)

## Common Themes

Throughout all conversations, the following themes were emphasized:

- The new Watertown Square should **invite and foster community**
- **Walkability and connectivity** between assets already in the square should be improved
- **Accessibility and green space** considerations should be at the forefront of any design
- Look to **unique building facades** like the Watertown Savings Bank to guide the aesthetics and design





# Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC)

## Selected Quotes

Plan accessibility FIRST when thinking about Watertown Square – whatever is not functioning well for us [low vision and blind community members] needs to be top of the list for any upcoming changes.

We already have a lot of what we want, but there isn't a design to foster a community feel, enhance businesses that are here, and connect all the pieces. Often we have to stumble upon things.

My pet peeve is the Delta, which lacks charm. Why don't we copy European examples? Install a fountain, benches, and invite food carts.

The library is the heartbeat of the Square. How can this reverberate and be expanded throughout the Square?

Arsenal Yards is a cautionary tale. Is there a way to do that without chains? We want to retain our New England character and preserve our history.

Watertown Square should be less of a highway and more of a destination. Give it a sense of place, with clues that say 'you have arrived.'

# Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC)

Varying Opinions

The following topics had conflicting opinions across different conversations:

- **Parking**

- Desire to keep parking to support local businesses and for personal convenience
- CVS lot identified as potential space for recreational use
- Many pointed to Arsenal Yard as a negative example due to car focused infrastructure

- **Transit**

- Some preferred to improve and increase bus access in and through Watertown Square
- Many wondered if removing bus service from the Square would improve traffic





# Polis Survey

Snapshot of Results

**1,076**

people voted  
(based on logins or individual devices)

**973**

people grouped  
(**261** in Group A, **712** in Group B)

**112,174**

votes were cast

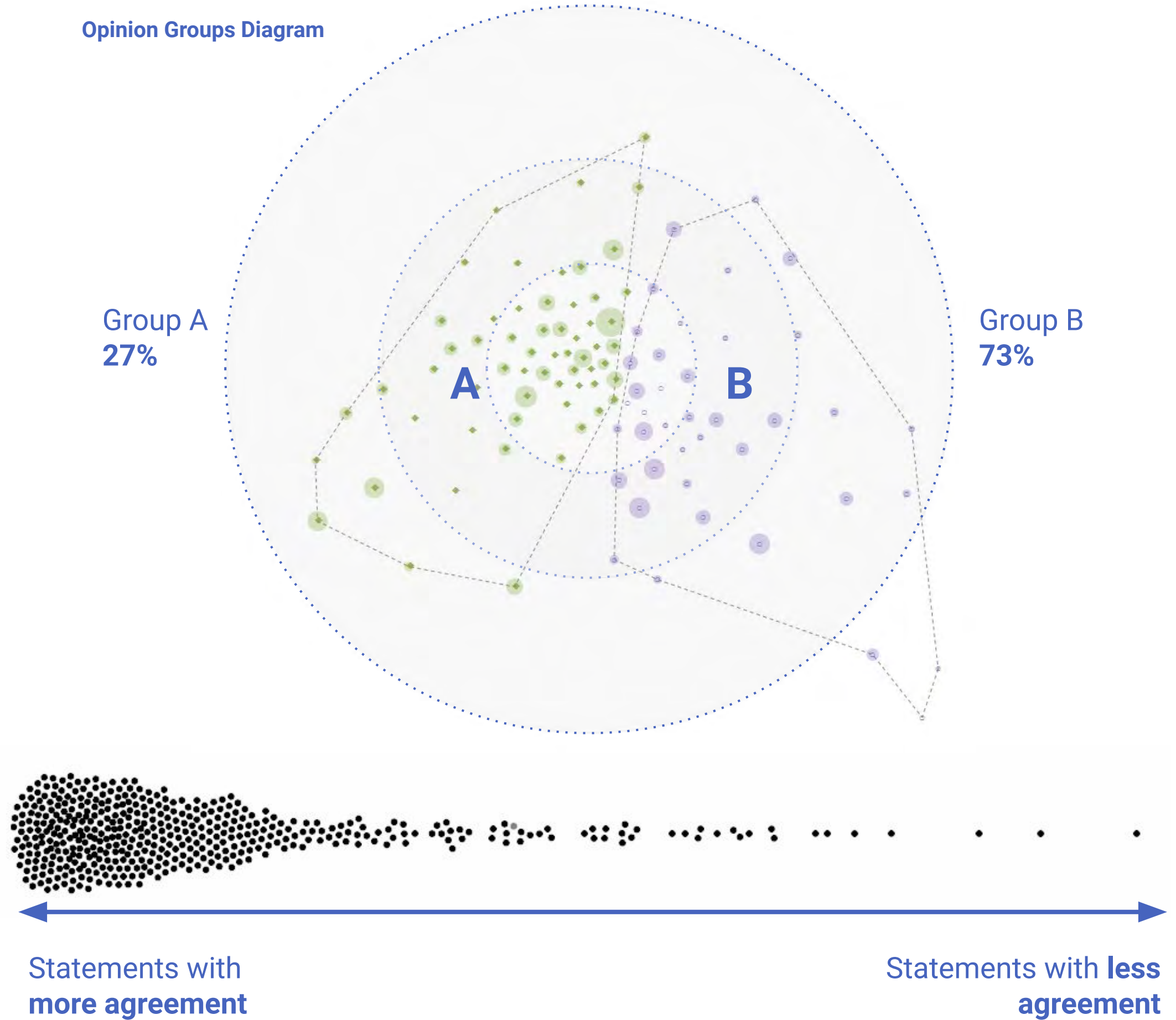
**1,073**

statements were submitted

**104.25**

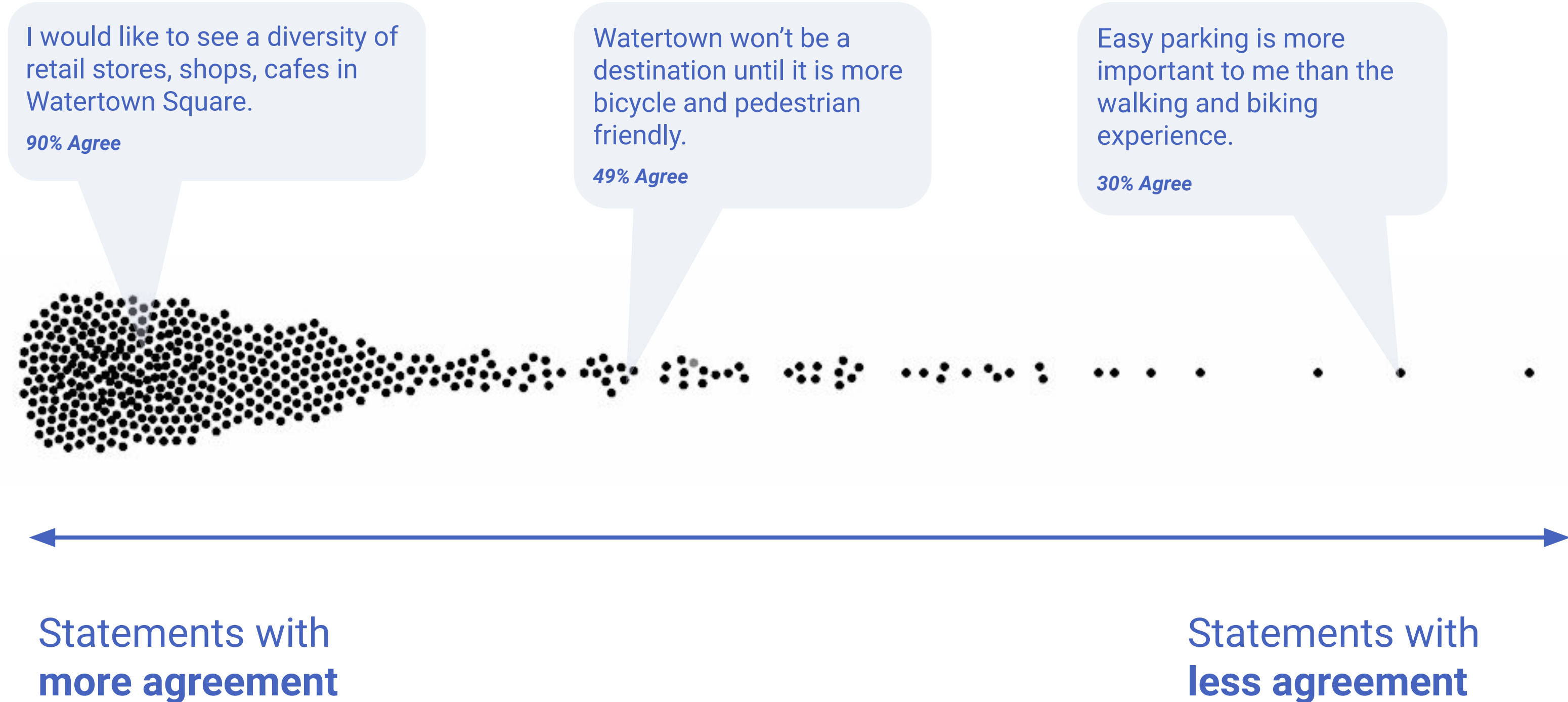
votes per voter on average

Opinion Groups Diagram



# Polis Survey

Snapshot of Results



# Polis Survey

## Snapshot of Results

### Group A (261 participants) agrees with:

Easy parking is more important to me than the walking and biking experience.

One reason businesses turn over so often is that parking is both limited and inconvenient. Why would I risk a parking ticket over dinner?

The most important consideration for Watertown Square is to keep traffic moving.

Denser housing development will contribute to the current traffic issues in the Square.

### Group B (712 participants) agrees with:

Cars are loud, dirty, dangerous, and expensive. There should be less hardscape for cars/parking, and more room for people and shade trees.

Building dense housing in the Square would provide foot traffic that will support local businesses.

All major corridors should have physically separated bike lanes.

Build the square for people, bikes, and mass transit options, not cars with 1 passenger.

# Polis Survey

## Major Themes

### Environment

- Provide easier access to the Charles River path and make the river more visible
- Create green corridors of trees along streets to regulate climate stress and provide shade and beauty

### Economic Development

- Diversify businesses (shops, retail, cafes) to encourage residents and visitors to spend time in Watertown Square
- Add more support/infrastructure for small businesses

### Housing

- Increase the density and diversity of residential and mixed-use development
- Add more affordable housing development
- Provide more options for family housing

### Transportation

- Consolidate connections among the various bus lines to make a convenient and user-friendly transit hub
- Provide faster, frequent, and more reliable transit through the Square
- Create continuous, protected bike lanes
- Ensure easy parking and walking

### Arts & Culture

- Create more spaces for outdoor dining, socializing, and lingering
- Add more diverse events (like the Farmers' Market) to the Square
- Foster a vibrant nightlife in the Square (extended hours for restaurants/retail)

### Other

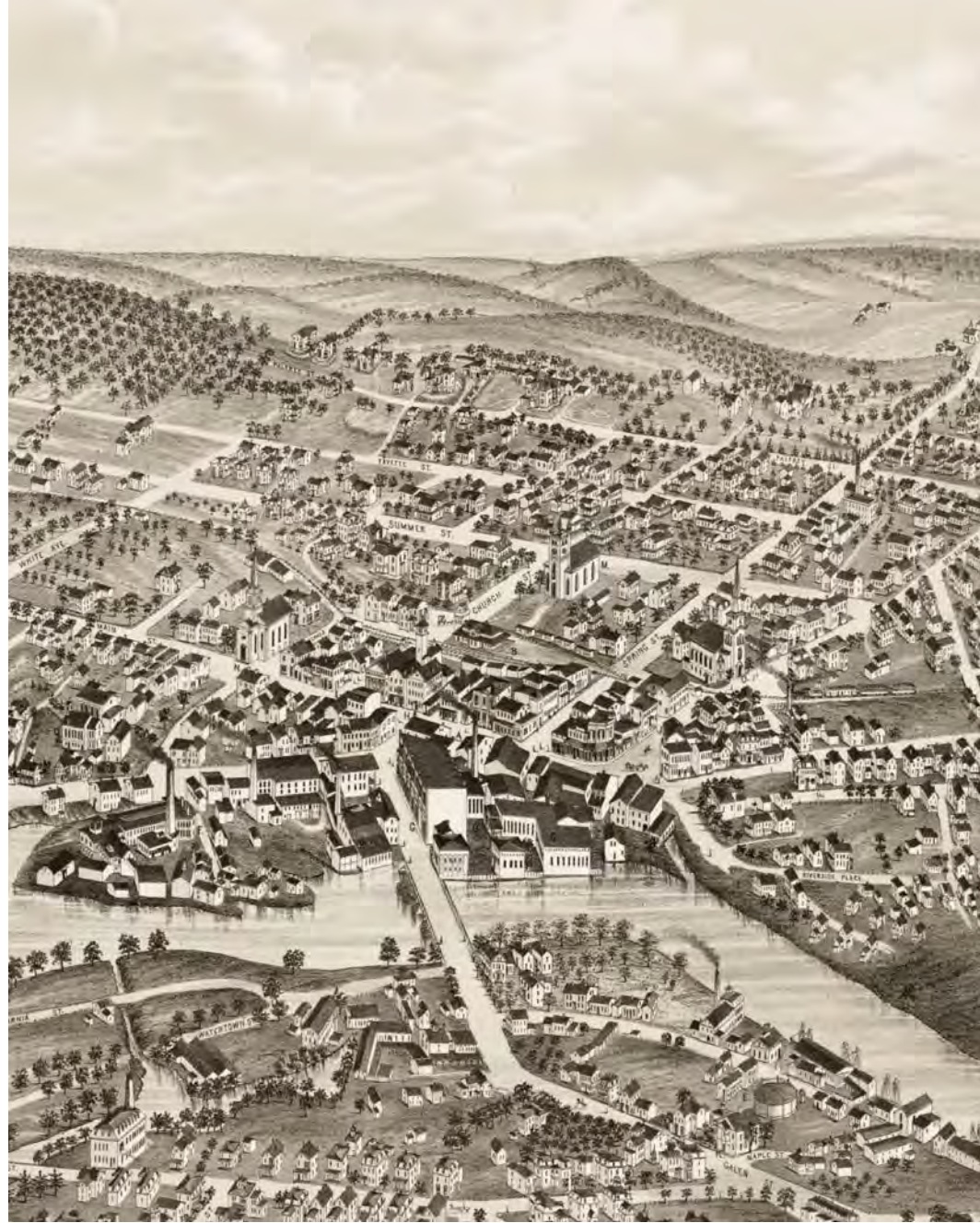
- Disabled and senior citizen pedestrians need to be taken into account for the redesign of the Square
- Revitalize Watertown Square storefronts

# Existing Conditions Analysis

Urban Design Spatial Analysis  
Market Trends and Considerations  
Transportation Conditions and Demand



# Historic Watertown



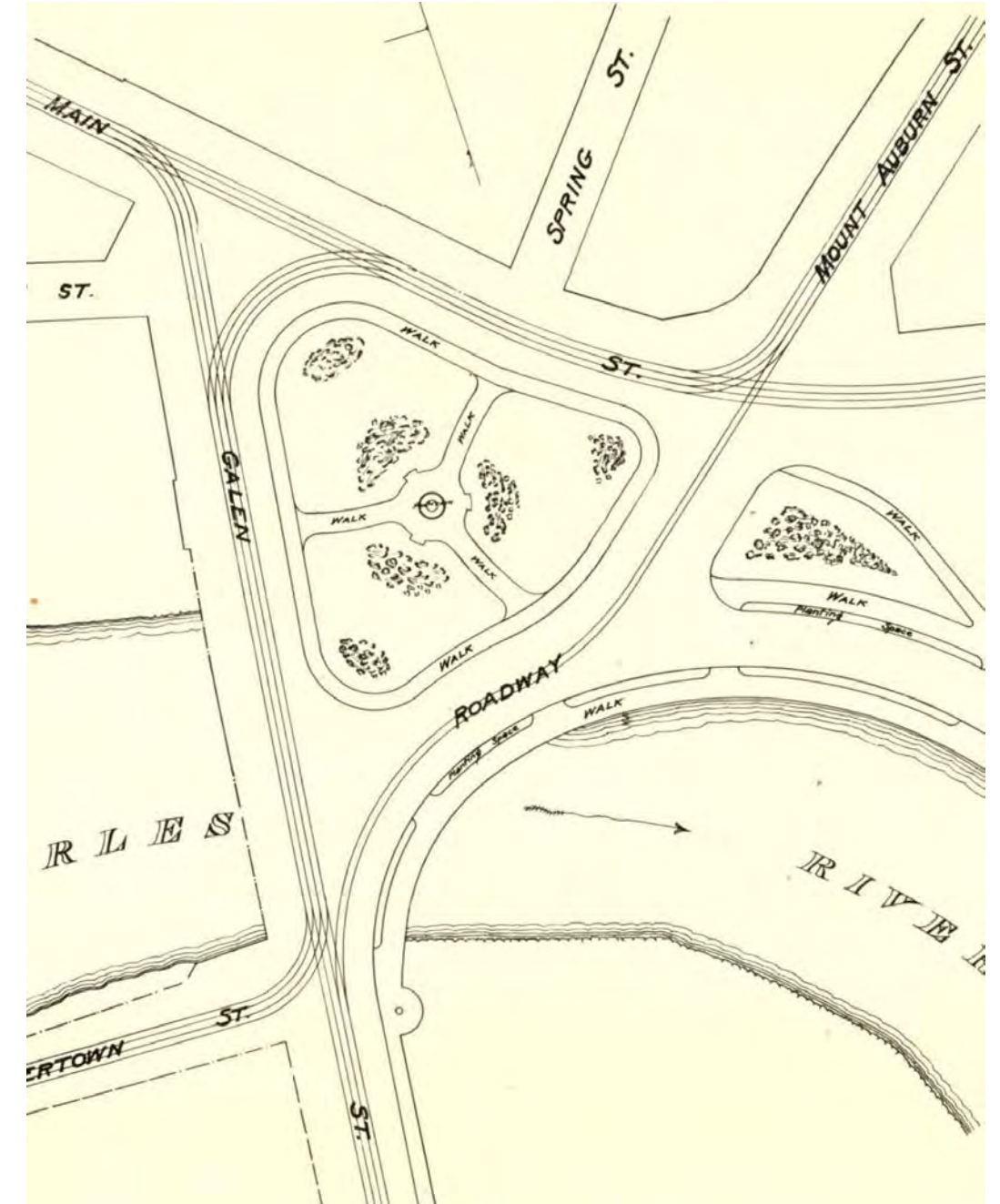
**1879**

"View of Watertown, Mass : 1879" by O.H. Bailey & Co.



**1881**

"Part of Watertown"



**1898**

"Ideal Watertown" Sketch showing possible improvement of property and adjoining streets by the Young Men's Assembly,



# Historic Watertown



*Main St, opposite Galen St, ca. 1920*

**1905**

Main Street looking toward the north side  
(location of present-day CVS)



**1935**

The Delta, looking east toward Boston



*Parking Area Rear of Appraised*

**1947-1949**

Public parking lot behind current CVS on  
Main Street



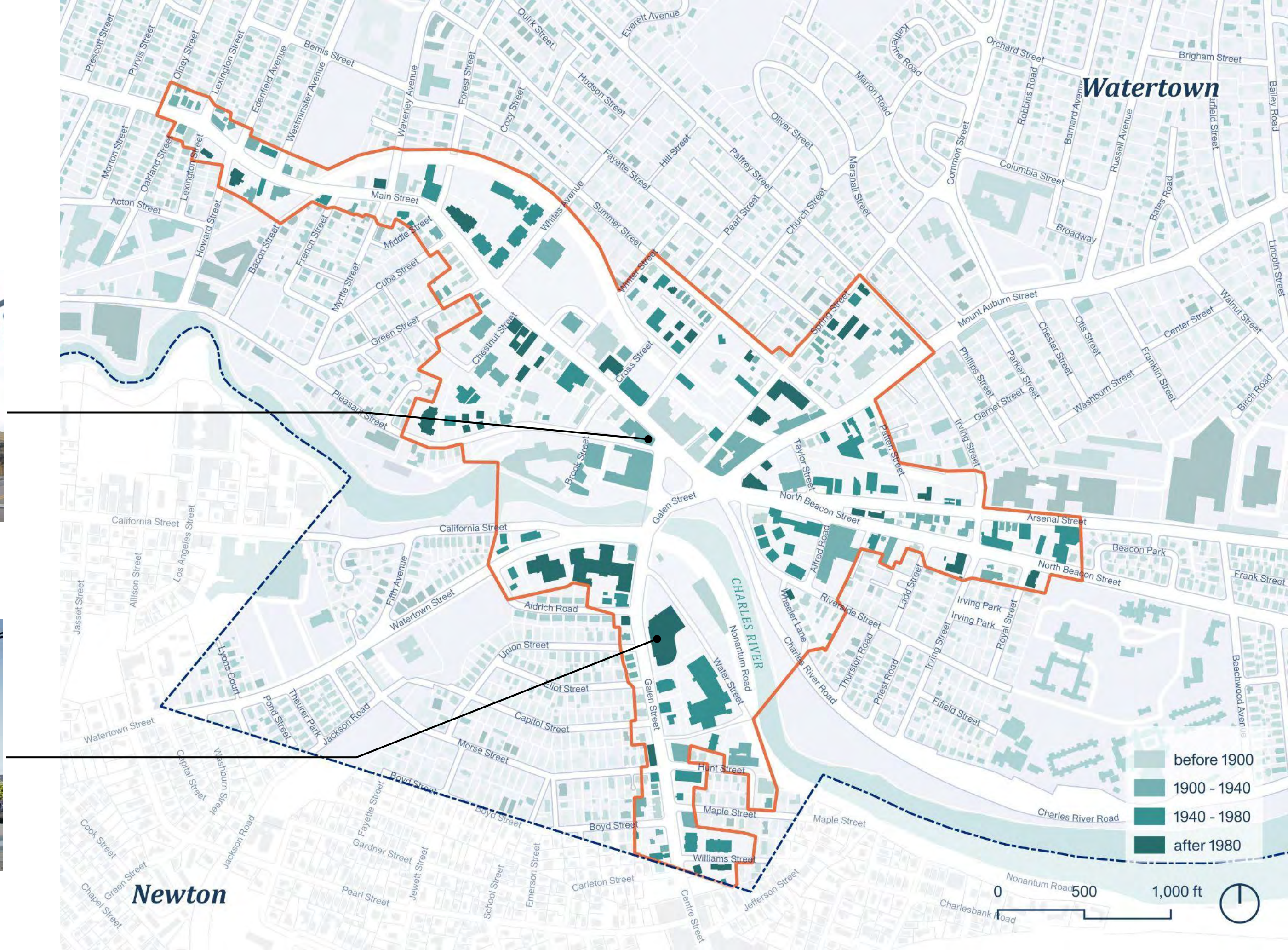
# Building Age



**1915**  
Watertown Savings Bank



**2023**  
66 Galen St

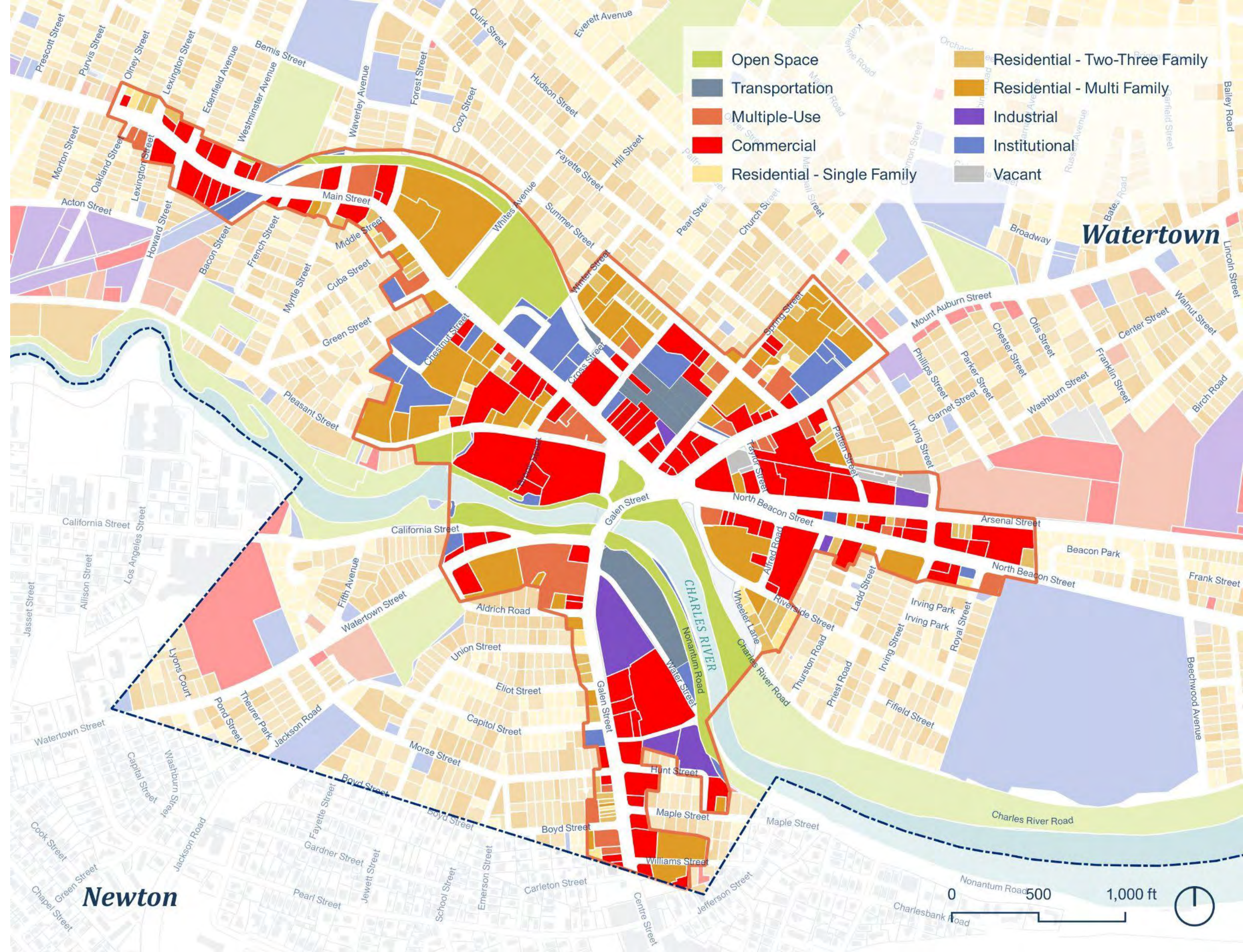




# Land Use

Watertown Square is characterized by mostly commercial uses, followed by multi-family residential and institutional uses.

There are some mixed-use developments currently in the Square; more mixed-use development should be considered in order to create a more vibrant urban experience.

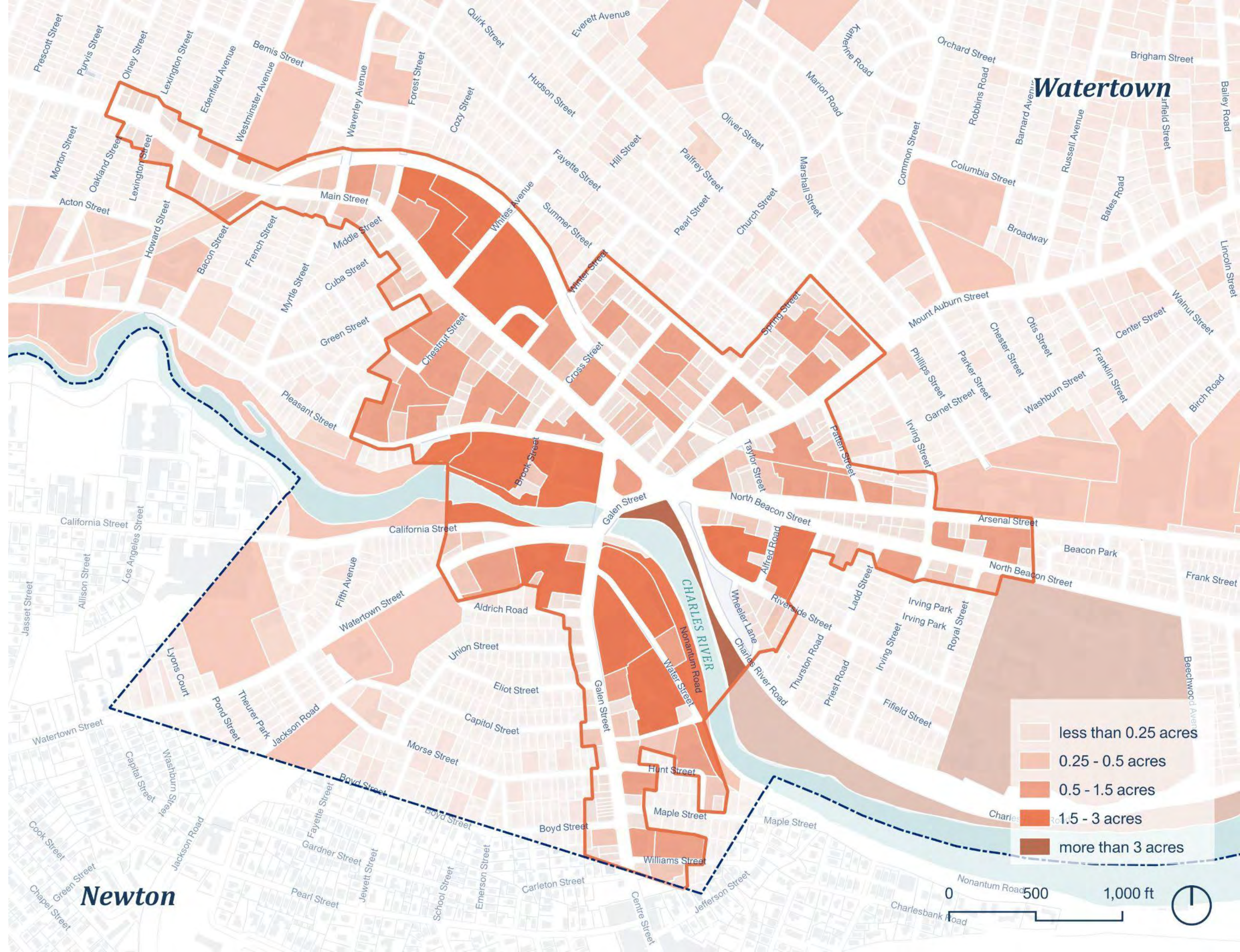




# Parcel Size

Watertown Square has a wide range of parcel sizes, with many parcels that are smaller than ¼ acre.

For these smaller parcels to be viable for potential future development, opportunities for parcel aggregation may need to be explored.





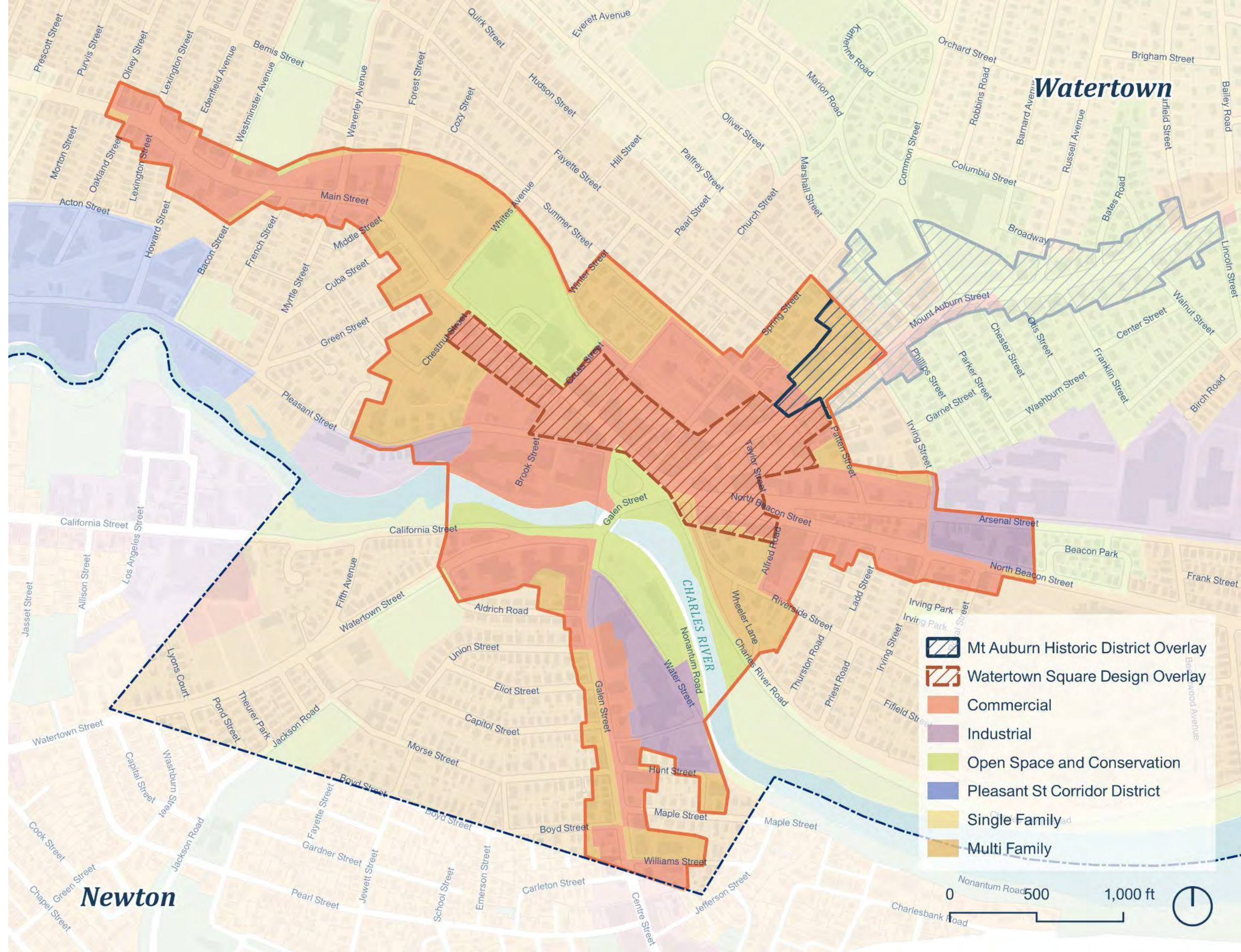
# Zoning

Most development currently happens by Special Permit within the study area. We need by-right zoning in order to meet MBTA Communities requirements for housing production.

The study area is primarily comprised of Central Business (CB) and Limited Business (LB) districts.

**CB:** 5 stories/55'

**LB:** 4 stories/40'



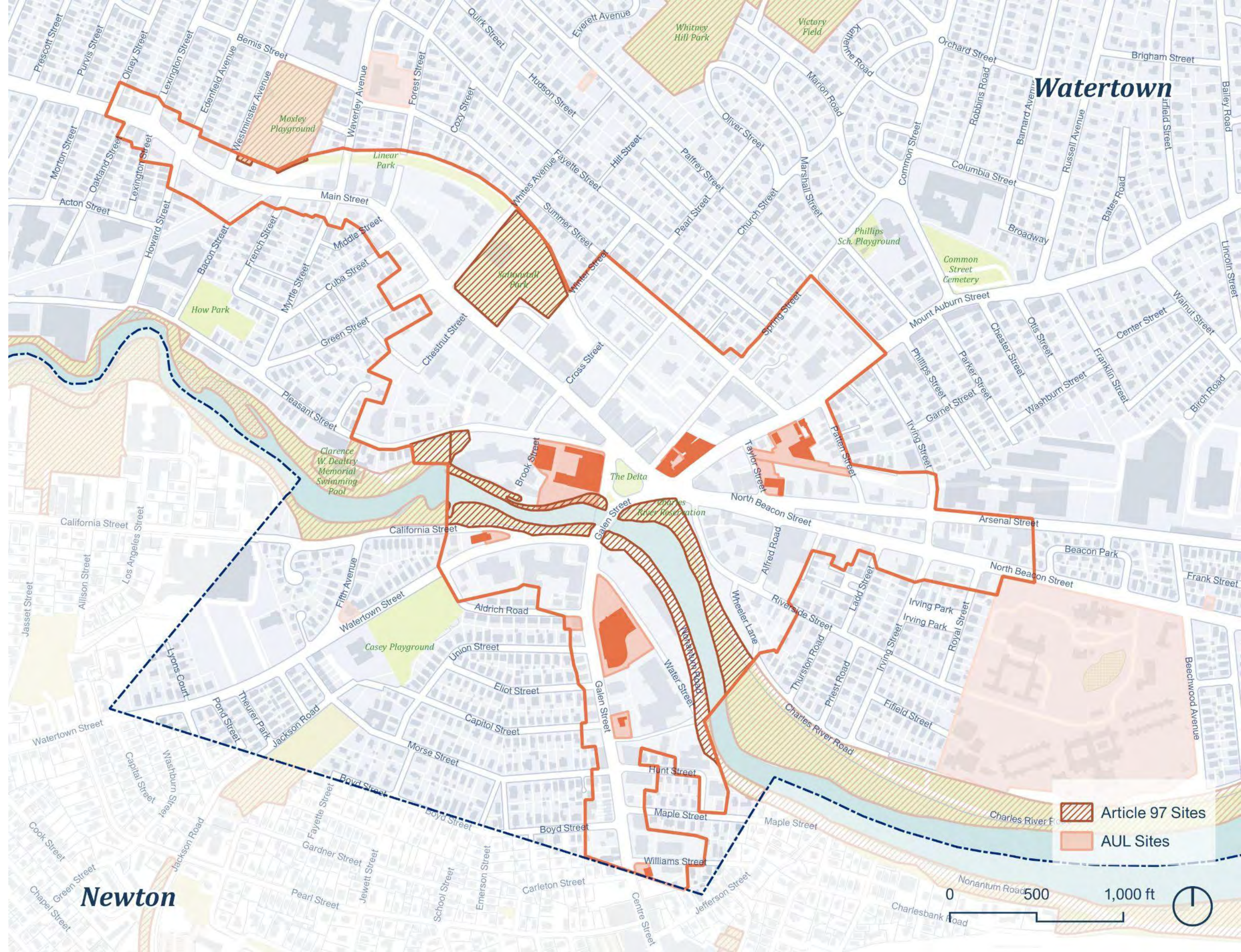


# Constrained Land

## Article 97 and AUL Sites

Article 97 is a State act to protect, preserve and enhance open space areas. Areas with this designation shall not be used for other purposes or disposed of without a  $\frac{2}{3}$  Legislature vote.

AUL sites are those defined by the State as having Activity and Use Limitations. These are sites that may have oil or hazardous materials.





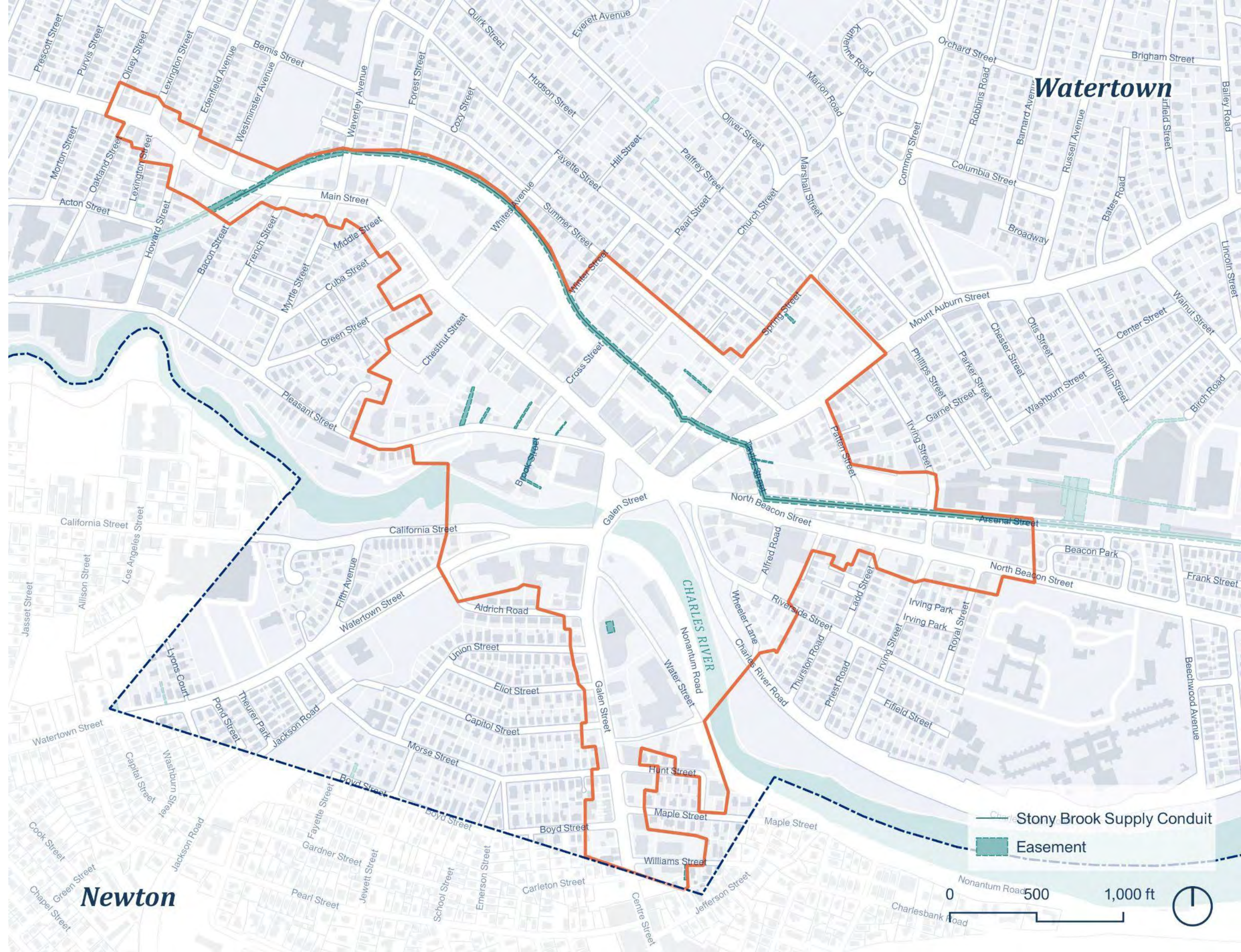
# Easements

## Development Constraints

The Stony Brook Conduit is the largest continuous easement in the study area.

This underground, 7.7-mile long aqueduct belongs to Cambridge and carries water from the Stony Brook Reservoir to Fresh Pond.

There is a 20'-wide easement around the conduit that must be maintained for maintenance and assessment.



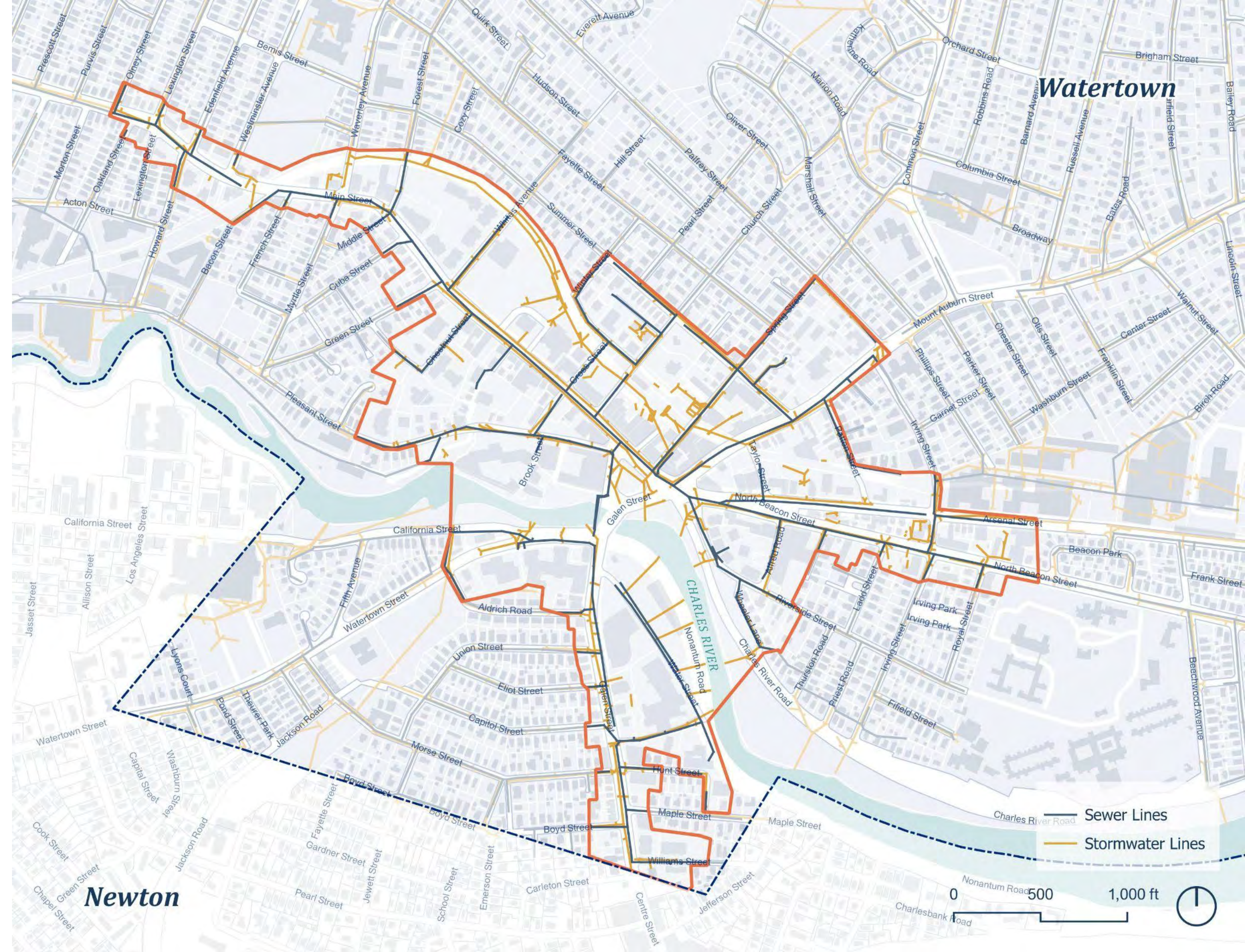


# Utilities

## Sewer and Stormwater

The sewer and stormwater lines are underground utilities which generally follow the location of the street grid.

These subsurface conditions must be considered in any new development to minimize the need to reroute them.



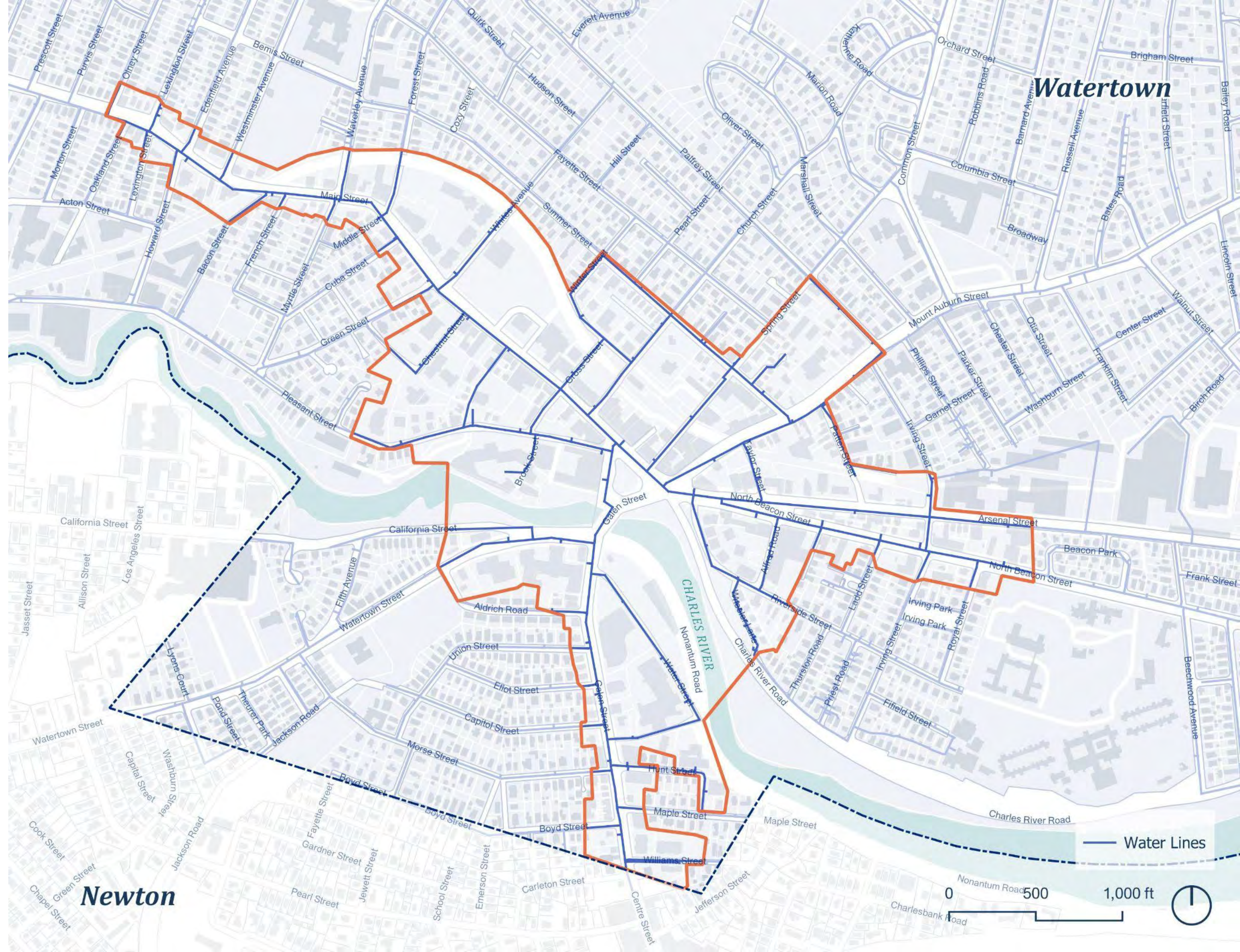


# Utilities

## Water

The water lines are underground utilities which generally follow the location of the street grid.

These subsurface conditions must be considered in any new development to minimize the need to reroute them.





# Flood

Worst Case Scenario

Watertown Square has fairly low topography.

In the worst case scenario of a total failure of the Cambridge Reservoir dams, Watertown Square could see a large area impacted by flooding.

The FEMA 100 and 500-year flood zones don't indicate significant risk to Watertown Square.





# R.O.W. Width

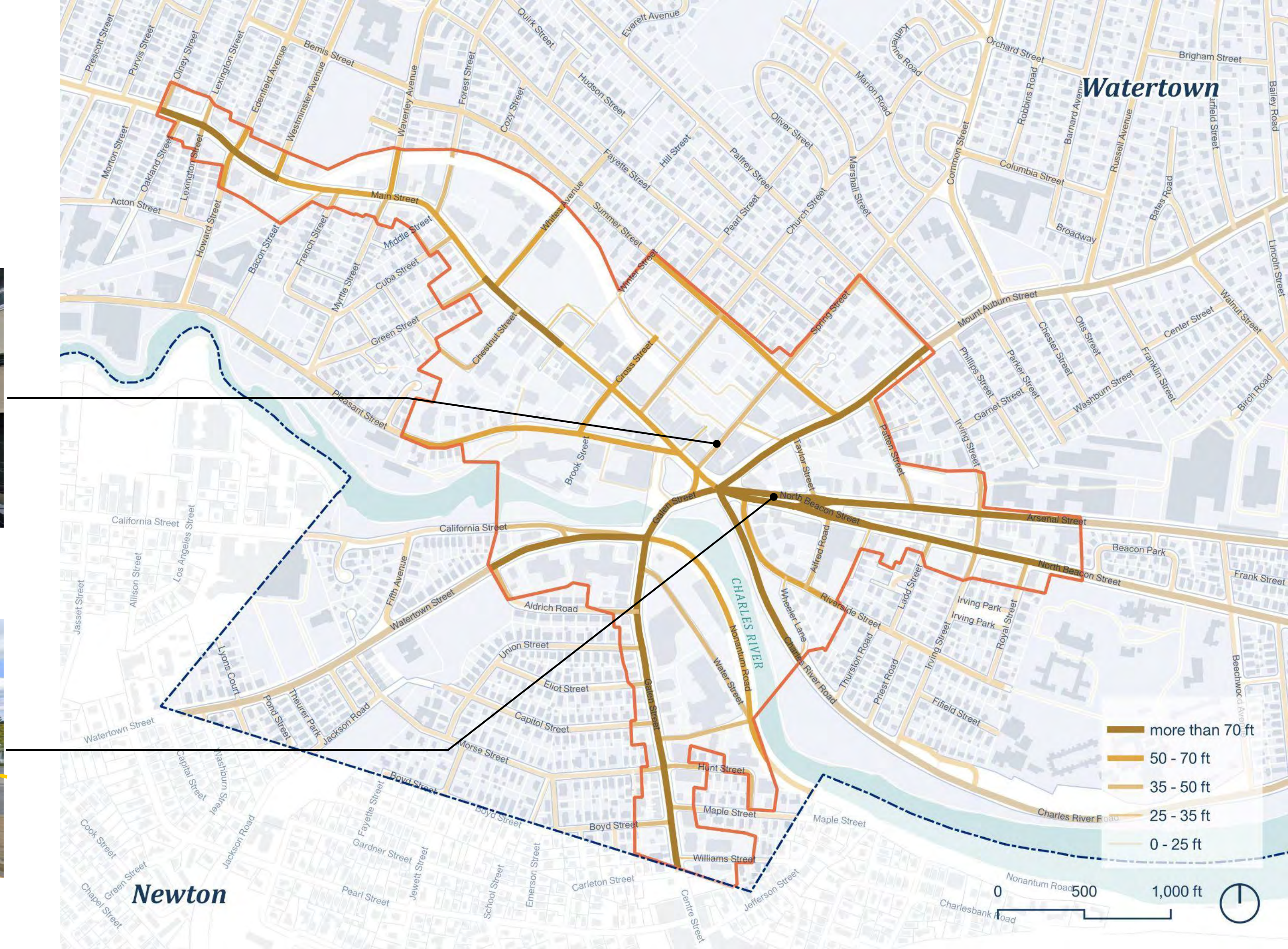
Measuring Total Street Width



R.O.W. Width: **42', 1 lane**  
Spring St



R.O.W. Width: **90', 4 lanes**  
North Beacon(eastbound) / Arsenal St (westbound)





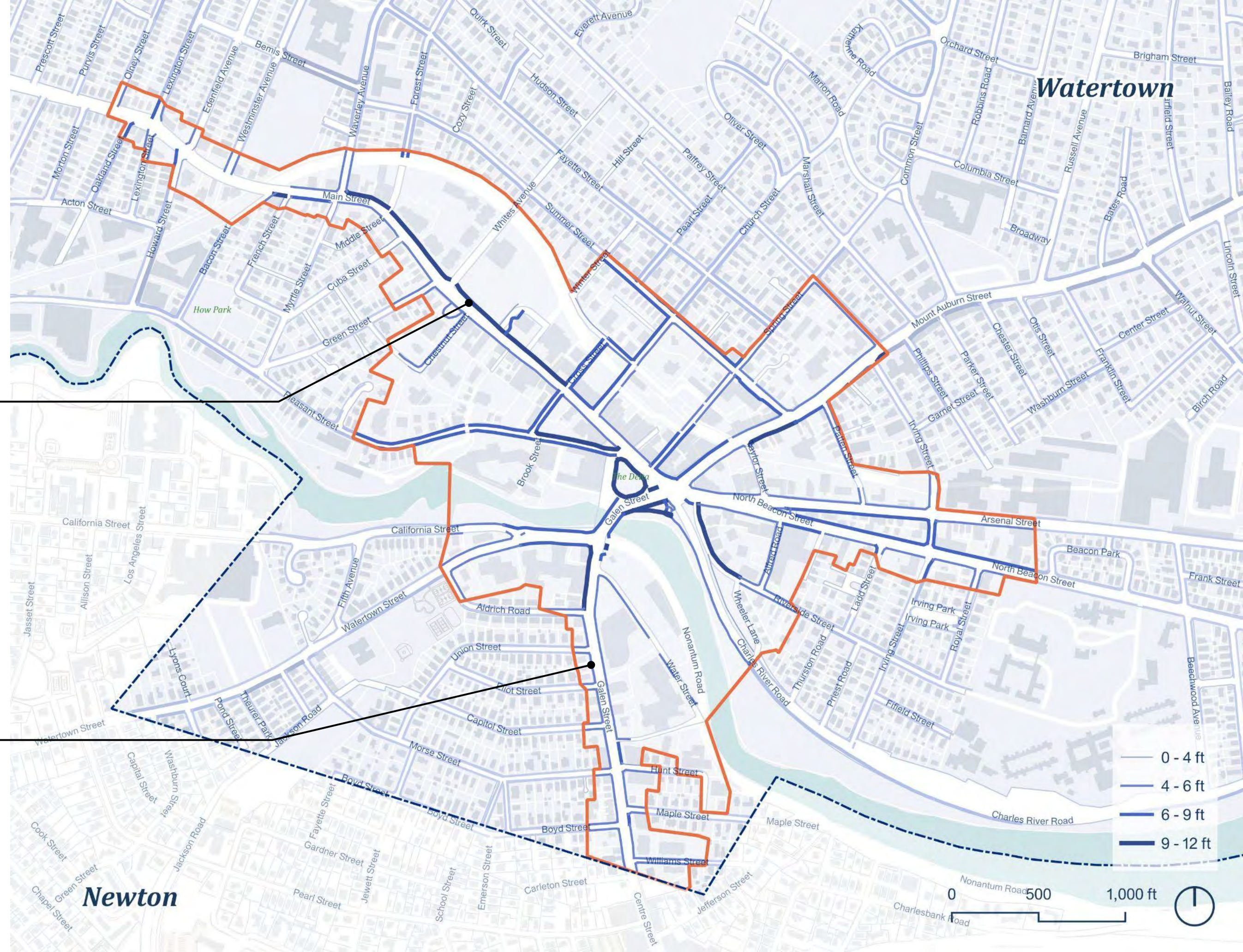
# Sidewalk Width



Sidewalk width: 10'  
Main St



Sidewalk width: 5'  
Galen St





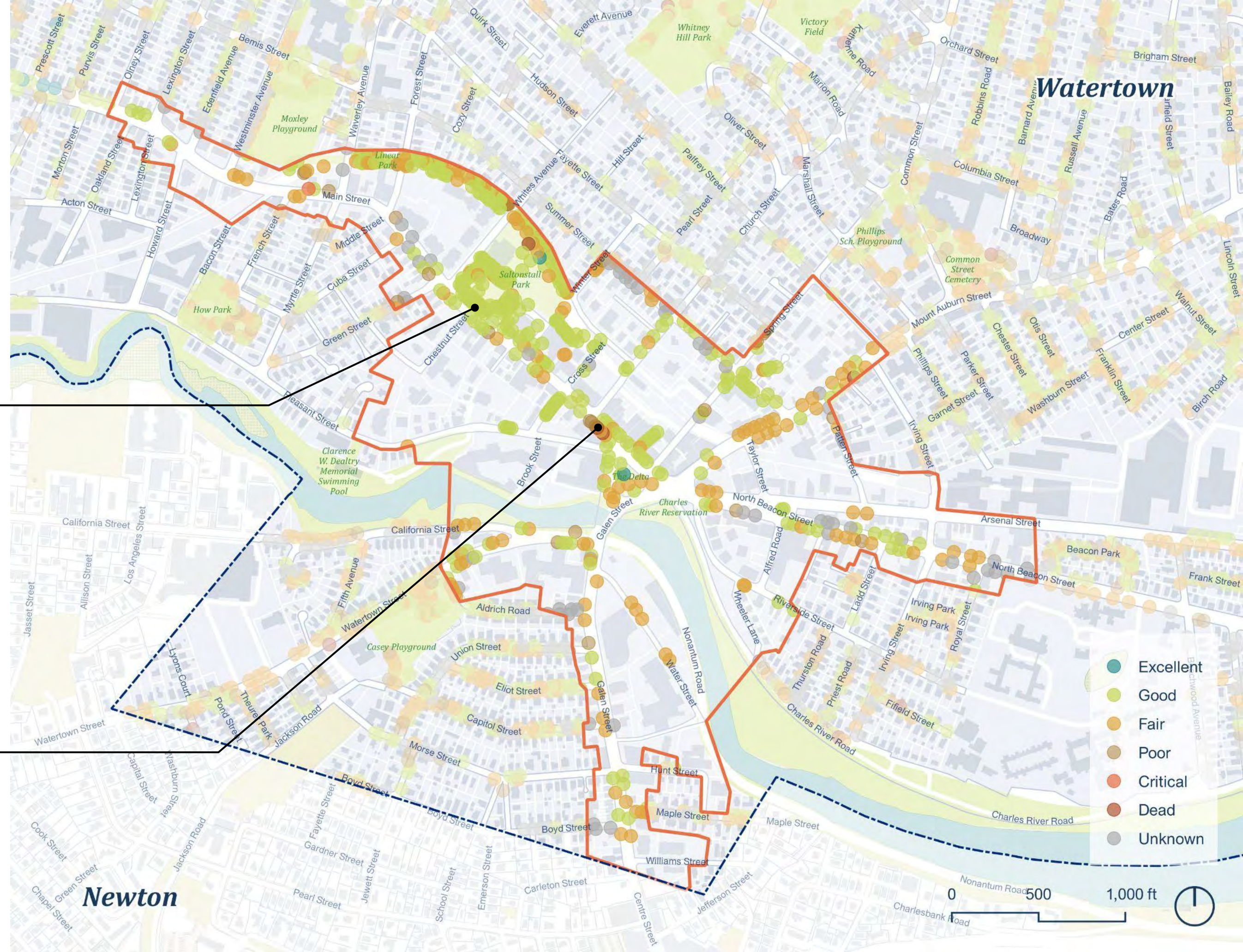
# Tree Condition



Tree Condition: **Good**  
Saltonstall Park



Tree Condition: **Critical**  
Main St





# Tree Condition

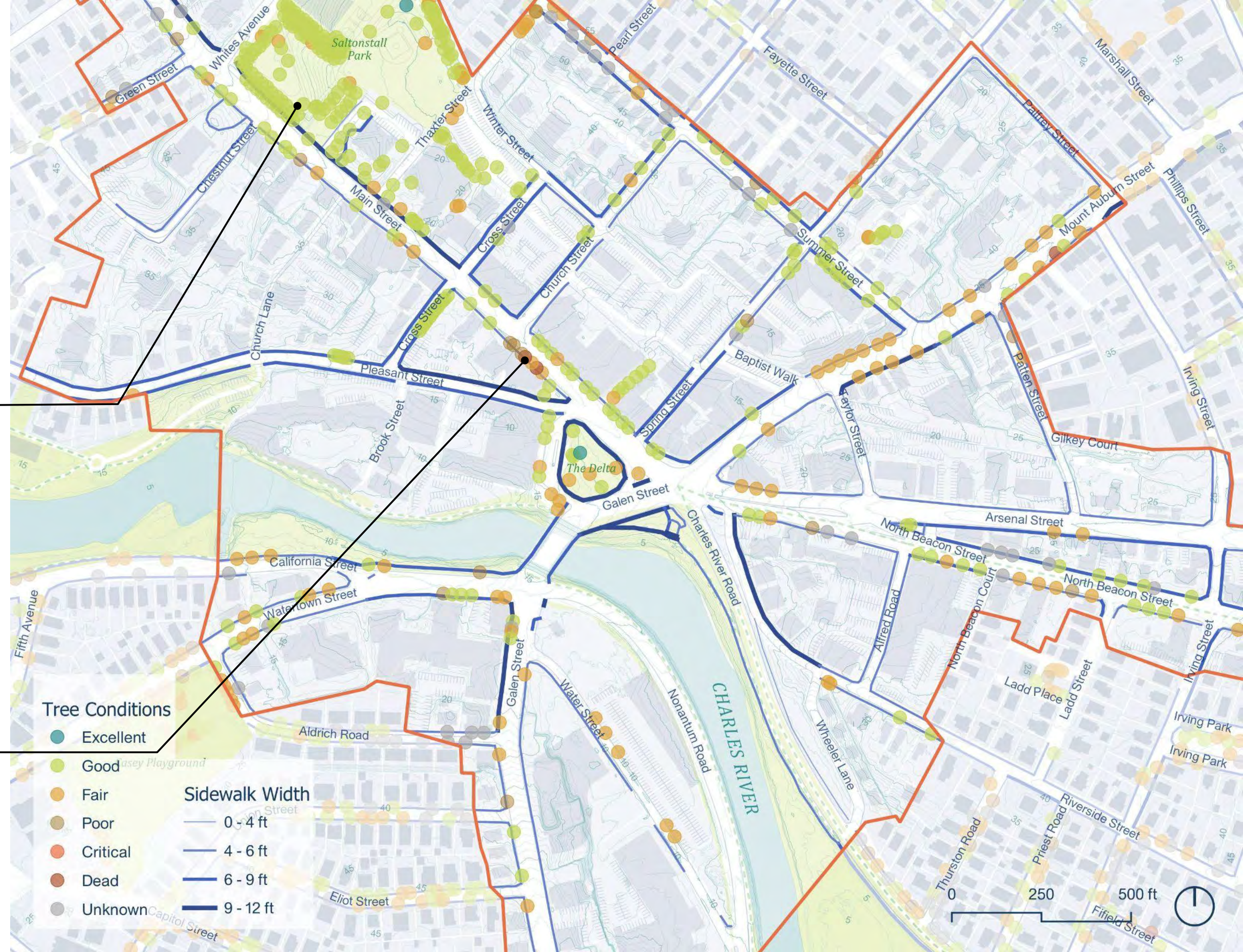
Relationship to Sidewalk Width



Tree Condition: **Good**  
Saltonstall Park



Tree Condition: **Critical**  
Main St





# Urban Design

Opportunities in the Square

Watertown Square has a strong street edge defined by buildings along Main Street.

Mount Auburn Street, Arsenal Street and North Beacon Street would all benefit from having a stronger street edge supported by new development.



Example of potential street wall along Arsenal St





# Urban Design

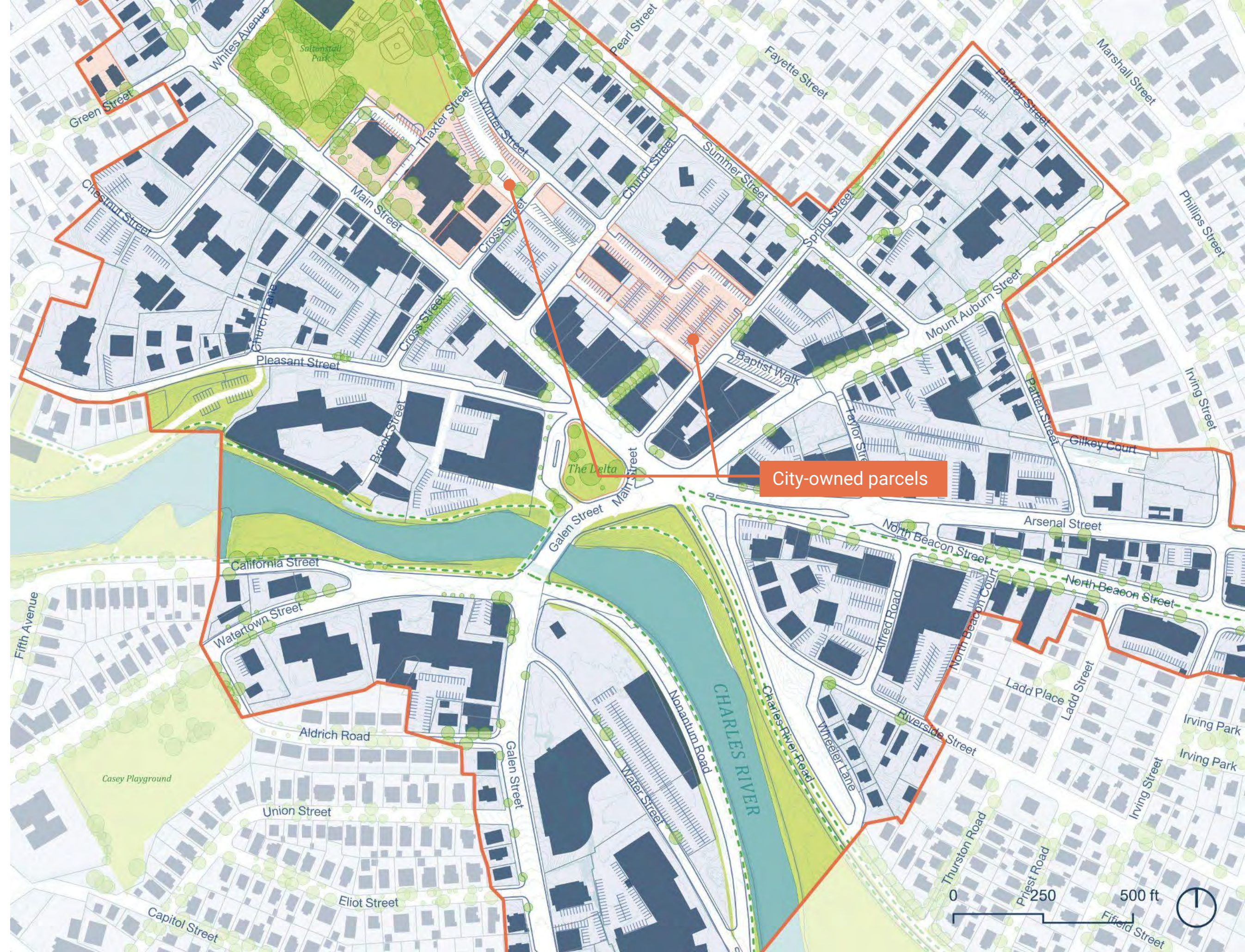
## Opportunities in the Square

The Square has many surface parking lots, several of which are tucked away from the street edge behind buildings.

The City-owned parcels shown in **orange** present an opportunity to rethink the large surface parking lots behind Main Street for other dynamic uses.



View of parking lots behind Main Street





# Takeaways

## Urban Design Spatial Analysis

- We need to pay attention to what is underground as much as what we can see on the surface.
- The sidewalks are narrowest at the heart of the Square, affecting pedestrian safety and comfort, opportunities for activation of the public realm, and the ability to increase the amount of tree canopy. Rectifying this should be a priority.
- There are a lot of surface parking lots in the study area, but most are hidden behind buildings. Convenient parking needs to be part of the recipe, but should and can be better designed.
- The zone of parking lots, parallel and north of Main Street, present an unique urban design opportunity, partly because many of them are owned by the City.
- Extending the Linear Park into this zone and identifying priority pedestrian routes that provide safe, comfortable, and visually engaging connections south to the Charles River should be a focus.