



**PLAN: Downtown**  
**Roundtable Discussions: Ground Floor Business Owners**  
Wednesday, March 20, 2019, 12:30–2:00 PM  
Location: NBBJ, One Beacon St, Boston, MA

**Attendees:**

- Sal DiGirolamo, The Wild Duck
- Brad Fredericks, Back Deck & Fajitas and Ritas
- John Murtha, Omni Parker House
- Rosemarie Sansone, Downtown Boston BID
- Martha Sheridan, Boston Visitors Bureau
- Shane Smyth, The Merchant Kitchen & Drinks

**PLAN: Downtown Consultant Team:**

- Kathryn Firth, NBBJ
- Chris Herlich, NBBJ
- Kyle Vangel, HR&A

**Unable to Attend:**

- Doug Anderson, Legal Crossing
- Jeff Cannon, Planet Fitness
- Gloria Chin, Double Chin, Bao Bao Bakery, & Bubor Cha Cha
- Sonny Ching, Hot Pot Buffet
- Ferguson Herivaux, OneGig
- Courtney Ho, Chinatown Mainstreets
- Laurie Mendeszoon, Macy's
- Bebe Mursalin-Smith, Bebe Mursalin
- Shin Poon, Tea Do
- James Rooney, Boston Chamber of Commerce
- Angela Soohoo, Jooksing Cafe
- Mike Weiss, Jaho Coffee

**PLAN: Downtown Website:** [bit.ly/plandowntownboston](http://bit.ly/plandowntownboston)

---

**Roundtable Summary:**

Each roundtable discussion was hosted by the PLAN: Downtown planning consultant, NBBJ. BPDA and City of Boston staff did not attend. The roundtable discussions supplement the broader conversations that occur within PLAN: Downtown public meetings and the PLAN: Downtown Advisory Group with targeted input from community members well versed in each topic. Roundtable topics include Preservation & Conservation, the Chinatown Community Master Plan, the Institutional Master Plans, Development & Land Ownership, and Ground-floor

Business Owners. Shorter follow-up sessions occurred as needed to supplement the conversation.

### **Meeting Summary:**

A short project overview & presentation was provided by NBBJ to outline the intent of PLAN: Downtown and to frame the conversation.

### **Roundtable Discussion Notes:**

The notes below were expressed by discussion participants and do not reflect the opinion of the BPDA or its planning consultants.

### ***Business and Local Economic Trends***

- There has definitely been improvements Downtown over the past 20-30 years.
- In spite of overall improvements over the past couple of decades, there is significant concern about and for the homeless population and its growth over the past 5-10 years.
  - Contributes to the incorrect perception that Downtown is not safe. There are occasional actual threats such as thefts, violence, and aggression.
  - Businesses are working with the police but perhaps more targeted programs and broader policy changes are required.
  - The Downtown Boston Business Improvement District (BID) has found that working with the homeless has become more complex and challenging over the years. The BID training for approximately 50 Ambassadors has evolved to include some social and medical assistance.
  - We want to be respectful and compassionate, but it's hurting business.
- Downtown Crossing would benefit from more vitality, a sense of safety, beauty and attractiveness.
  - Visitors comment on Downtown's scruffiness
  - The streetscape needs improvements beyond the borders of the BID.
  - The BID is working with property owners to find ways to address area ways (subsurface vaults generally located underneath public sidewalks and accessible from adjacent properties).
  - Millennium Tower had a positive effect in terms of the ground plane aesthetics and a similar impact is expected to occur at Winthrop Tower.
- Washington Street lacks retail diversity and needs a contrast to the chain stores.
- Business owners want a better sense of how visitors use the Downtown. It would be great to show people a more localized experience and to move beyond the typical tourist draws.
- Sometimes the only way to survive as a business is to rely on subsidies. For example, local universities often provides below-market rents in ground floor spaces.
  - Broadly speaking, property owners just aren't saying "I'll lower the rent", regardless of how long their retail space has been empty.
  - There are high occupancy rates in existing office space, so there's no incentive to improve the ground floor. The most valuable upper-floor spaces are already full, so there is no incentive to provide a good ground floor experience for upper-floor tenants.

- Staffing the Food and Beverage and Retail markets is very hard, but not a problem that's unique to Boston. There is not enough late night transit to support full nighttime employment, which is unique to Boston.
- It is easier to find and keep employees in a Downtown business than in other neighborhoods.

### ***Business and Local Economic Trends***

- More nighttime and weekend activity would be welcome as it would increase business. Some of the restaurants are already open until 2am 7 days/week.
- The Financial District is still inactive at night.
- Active uses should go beyond Washington Street.
- The temporary activities provided by the BID – e.g. brass bands – are welcome and more useful than the one-off events. Is there a unique programming opportunity on Washington such as a Ferris wheel or a zipline?
- The BID is looking at introducing more weekend festivals and evening programs such as a parade down Washington and fireworks on the Harbor.
- Having universities such as Emerson and Suffolk in the Downtown has had a positive impact.
- Lighting should be improved.

### ***Customer Base***

- The customers Downtown are very diverse: residents, visitors, workers. The restaurants are more likely to have a resident or worker clientele.
  - A show at the Opera House can have a big impact on the restaurants, upping sales by 30%.
  - Dinner is actually a bigger portion of the Food and Beverage business Downtown. For some it is the majority of their business.
  - The increasing number of residents is helpful for business, but they also have their own kitchens so maybe aren't as valuable as workers or hotel guests for the F&B businesses.
- Omni Hotel: Guests are predominantly domestic tourists, business travelers, and suburbanites.
- The Wild Duck: Similar customer base to the Omni Hotel
- The Merchant restaurant: 75% are Downtown workers, 25% tourists and residents
- Back Deck: people over 28 and more women than men; 30% lunch market, 70% dinner market
- Fajitas & Ritas: 20-28 age group
- More independent shops would be a benefit to everyone, as these would add to the local character.
- Liquor and beverage licenses are difficult to obtain and result in only larger restaurant groups opening F&B.

## ***Role of Downtown***

- Downtown is more attractive than 3–5 years ago, but business owners rely on the Downtown office market making businesses highly susceptible to macroeconomic trends.
- We need more of an identity for Downtown – which is not easily defined, but requires consistent programming and not just one-off events.
  - Downtown has more character and history than the Seaport
  - Downtown is the heart of the city, it's a transportation hub, and “it's where everyone wanted to go 60 years ago.”
  - Techies and Millennials like that Downtown has history and recognize that it is more interesting than the Seaport.
  - Downtown has some character, some soul. It's not as corporate as the Seaport or as fancy as the Back Bay.
  - There are lots of reasons a person might be Downtown.
  - We should be aiming to reclaim some of funkiness, but be adaptable and amenable to change.
- Resources for visitors should be boosted. The standard attractions are fine but how can we get people to explore and appreciate the neighborhoods without something more specific?
  - Downtown needs more amenities that are attractive to casual visitors (e.g. movie theaters, museums) – things like Boda Borg in Malden, an activity you can do any time but is a little out of the ordinary.
- The BID is interested in creating “affinity groups” across Downtown tenants, e.g. chess club, running groups, to create a stronger community.
- The gateways into Downtown don't communicate or suggest all that Downtown offers.
  - Kneeland Street, for example, should be a major welcome point into Downtown but it lacks wayfinding and legibility.

## ***Plan Outcomes & Role of the City***

- Streets and sidewalks need to be reflective of the importance of Downtown to the region with further capital investment and maintenance.
- There is an increasing focus on “safe and clean” and monitoring.
- The City's restaurant assistance program was very helpful. It's incredibly difficult to start a business in Boston, especially a F&B establishment.
- Delaying business startup can basically kill a business before it even opens.
- Schools, daycares, and hardware stores are sorely lacking.
- Downtown needs more green and open spaces.