



Placemaking along Broadway in Somerville, MA  
Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper  
A Short Term Action Plan

July 2012

Prepared by Project for Public Spaces, Inc.



Prepared for our local partners, Somerville Community Development Corporation, East Broadway Main Street Group, Groundworks Somerville, STEP – SEC and the City of Somerville.



This report was prepared as part of the work Project for Public Spaces is doing for Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance's Great Neighborhoods Program.





# Introduction

## Great Neighborhoods Program

In 2011, the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (MSGA) announced Great Neighborhoods, an exciting and innovative partnership launching in five Massachusetts communities. Through the generous support of the Barr Foundation and Ford Foundation, MSGA is partnering with local stakeholders and Project for Public Spaces (PPS) to create Great Neighborhoods that will transform the lives of more than 100,000 residents through economic development, transportation and environmental initiatives, housing development, design and planning.

Under the Great Neighborhoods initiative, MSGA, PPS and the local partners will work together to overcome legislative, regulatory, and financial obstacles in order to enable smart community development in the communities of Lawrence, Winchester, Somerville, Boston's Fairmount-Indigo Line Corridor and the Warren Street Transit Corridor in Roxbury. These five sites represent a range of significant projects for advancing smart growth in the region. Through Great Neighborhoods, they will be part of a regional vision supported by local action.

Great Neighborhoods is working with a coalition of community development corporations and Main Street Groups (Somerville Community Development Corporation, East Broadway Main Street Group, Groundworks Somerville, STEP – SEC and MAPC) and the City of Somerville to revitalize the areas in East Somerville along the Broadway Corridor leading to a renovated Sullivan Square and Assembly Square transit stations. The project presents many opportunities for economic revitalization and the creation of new public spaces in this community.

In Somerville, the future extension of the Green Line will add six new stations to the neighborhoods; a new Orange Line station will be built in Assembly Square. When these projects are completed,

85 percent of the people in Somerville will be within a ten minute walk of a T station. It is envisioned that these projects will improve air quality, reduce traffic, and create new jobs and access to affordable homes.

There are, however, concerns that the threats of development strategies may result in the displacement of existing businesses and residents. Therefore, the City and community must find a way to work together that is productive, efficient and sensitive to each other's needs.

## Goals & Actions

Some of the important **goals of this project** are to:

- 1. Develop a process for involving the existing community** in the planning process that instills community ownership of the process and of the Great Neighborhoods project. Help people to articulate how they could better use the public realm and what types of amenities would support that use.
- 2. Engage and involve a demographically diverse range of stakeholders.** Engage local youth, older people and different ethnic groups.
- 3. Work with the City to prioritize improvement plans so that they are in sync with the community's vision.** Synchronize project timelines with the City to avoid duplication of work and to minimize repeated disruption to streets etc.
- 4. Identify opportunities for small victories and short term, meaningful changes.** Increase activity around Sullivan Square. Make the area safer feeling and more comfortable for pe-

destrians. Highlight and enhance local assets (historic sites, library, Senior/Teen center, Harris Park).

- **5. Be contextually sensitive.** Balance transformation and preservation – protect but enhance. Prioritize projects and improvements to serve the people already using the space.

## Placemaking in Action

At PPS, we understand that Great Neighborhoods are also great places to live, work, learn and play, and Placemaking – a community-driven process – is the approach in which great places that are loved and owned by the community are created.

In collaboration with MSGA, PPS is working with local Great Neighborhoods partners, including the city of Somerville, CDC and Main Street groups, to identify immediate “lighter, quicker, cheaper” (LQC) or low cost, short term actions to revitalize targeted public spaces along the Broadway Corridor in East Somerville to make them more attractive to people, jobs, and investment. The goal is to leverage the strategic planning work that has already been completed within the Great Neighborhoods program by focusing on implementation to achieve early wins that will generate excitement for sustaining long term changes, like increasing housing and job density, improving transportation facilities, creating a safer community, and remediate environmental hazards.

On July 28, 2012, PPS facilitated a public placemaking workshop in the Mud Flats Ceramic Studio on Lower Broadway in East Somerville.

The purpose of the meetings was two-fold:

- **Familiarize CDC and Main Street staff with the place evaluation workshop process** so that these workshops could be replicated in a number of sites along this corridor and other sites in East Somerville and Somerville, engage more stakeholders and players, and provide more opportunities to

engage and influence the MBTA and MASSDOT in the station area planning process and ameliorate the area around the I-93 highway overpass.

- **Identify opportunities to implement short term “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” public space improvements in key locations along the corridor that would engage residents and highlight civic institutions.** This was deemed to be important a) because many sites and projects need engagement of hesitant private partners; and b) there are many areas where long term planning is already happening, and where community process could be counter-productive.

Based on the workshop findings of the community’s LQC ideas for the sites that were evaluated, PPS has prepared this report, which summarizes the findings, outlines major issues and recommends a series of lighter, quicker, cheaper improvements for key activity nodes along the Broadway corridor that will transform the road into a successful thriving Main Street for East Somerville that is strengthened by a series of vibrant public spaces. The report begins with overall recommendations for the corridor as a whole and then delves into LQC suggestions for each of the individual sites that were evaluated during the workshop in East Somerville.

# Overall Recommendations

Participants in the workshop agreed that Broadway in Somerville has many strengths that can be capitalized upon, including the street's close proximity to transit and transportation options, historic buildings and local businesses, community institutions like the library and senior center, and a rich network of local organizations. Recommendations for each of the three individual sites evaluated in the workshop are discussed below.

There were some common themes that emerged from the three groups' work, including:

## **1. Broadway has many of the destinations and the mix of uses that are necessary to make it a walkable corridor, but more needs to be done to create an attractive walking environment.**

Broadway has many destinations that would entice people to walk along the corridor, including local shops and businesses, a library, a senior center, and a park. However, in some places the street design itself is not welcoming for pedestrians. Many of the workshop participants suggested measures to improve the attractiveness of the street and its appeal for pedestrians, including enhanced landscaping and plantings, façade improvements to the buildings, street furniture, wider sidewalks, and adding a bicycle lane.

## **2. Broadway needs more places for people to gather, recreate, and hold events.**

Several of the recommendations suggested by workshop participants involved the creation of new and improved places for the community to gather, hang out, and hold events. There are several existing public spaces, such as the lawns and plazas in front of the senior center and library, which could be made more accessible, attractive, and appropriate for different types of uses. For example, moveable tables and chairs in one or more of these locations would allow people to have a new place to sit and meet. In addition, there are some locations on Broadway that are currently underutilized, such as the parking lot across from the Mount Vernon

restaurant, which could be converted into a public plaza, site for a farmers' market or events, or a community garden.

## **3. Broadway needs to have more of an identity that ties together its disparate destinations.**

The corridor currently seems to function as a series of disparate places that are not well connected. Several workshop participants suggested ideas to help give Broadway more of a unique identity to help people think about it as cohesive place, including wayfinding signage to help people navigate to the street from the local T stop, banner signage along the corridor, and the development of some iconic public art along the corridor.

## **4. Some of the eyesores along Broadway, such as the I-93 underpass and a number of vacant buildings, could be made more attractive through art, landscaping, lighting, and other options.**

While there are many assets on Broadway, there are several spots along the corridor that detract from goals of a walkable, welcoming, and attractive street. For example, workshop participants highlighted that the I-93 underpass and several vacant buildings created 'blank' areas devoid of activity, which can make people feel unsafe and unwelcome. These areas could be improved cheaply and quickly with public art, such as murals or bright colors painted on abandoned buildings and the walls underneath I-93. Additional landscaping and light fixtures in these areas would also help people feel more safe and that these areas have some life and ownership.

## Places along Broadway in Somerville, MA

PPS is proposing to develop concepts and experiments along Broadway in Somerville, MA for the summer of 2012 and extending into fall of 2012. By breaking the length of Broadway down into a series of places, each of these places will be enhanced and supported with a series of improvements, both physical and programmatic, that would make them mini-destinations in their own right.

The report that follows includes site-specific recommendations for short term (lighter, quicker, cheaper) improvements, site images and benchmark images that can be used to discuss the improvements in each area.

## Recommendations for Specific Sites

Groups of between 7 and 10 people evaluated each of the following sites, utilizing PPS' Place Game audit, which asks individuals to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and specific improvements that could be made at specific locations along the Broadway corridor. A copy of this audit is included in an appendix to this report. After completing individual audit forms, each group discussed the strengths and opportunities of each site, improvements that could be made using a LQC approach, and partners who could be engaged to help accomplish these changes. The following sites were evaluated in this process as they are thought to be the places along Broadway that have the greatest potential to be enhanced right away:



## Places along East Broadway corridor in Somerville, MA



Site 1. Old Fire Station/Senior Center/Harris Park

Site 2. Library

Site 3. I-93 Underpass Area



## Site 1: Old Fire Station/Senior Center/Harris Park





Strengths in the area highlighted by the breakout group include the historic architecture of the old Fire Station, the existing mix of uses, the well-maintained street, Harris Park, the bus stop, and beautiful brownstone buildings.

**Improvements that could be made to the area include:**

Make the area more colorful, green, and attractive by planting flowers, adding flower boxes to the fence surrounding the senior center, and enhancing the landscaping.

Eliminate the fence surrounding the senior center to allow more people to access the lawn area for sitting, reading, eating lunch, or other activities.

Consider painting the utility boxes or crosswalks, and adding banners to the street, to add more color, identity, and vibrancy to the area.

Create a special path using an existing alleyway – painted or demarcated in some way – that leads to the new park being created.

Make the area outside of the senior center a 'town square' with moveable tables and chairs, an outdoor café, and the capacity for events and a farmers' market. Have teens and elders work together on programming this space with activities, such as games, art, etc.

Paint a wall mural on an existing building, such as the Pasta Factory.









## Site 2: Library



Strengths in the area highlighted by the breakout group include green space, existing seating, lanterns on the buildings, and the memorials.

**Improvements that could be made to the area include:**

Remove or the fence surrounding the library property to allow more people to access the lawn area for sitting, reading, eating lunch, or other activities. Alternatively, consider rebuilding the fence with alternatives such as a short seating wall or a picket fence that provides access to the grass area. Allow dogs on the grass surrounding the library.

Create a focal point in front of the library, such as a water fountain, public art, or a bird bath.

Provide more seating and trash receptacles in the area to encourage people to congregate and eat in the area.

Take advantage of opportunities for public art to add color, vibrancy, and character to the area, such as an art mural at the 'Rent a Center' and/or an illustrated book mural on the sidewalk outside of the library.

Improve the landscaping in the area to create a greener and more attractive environment.

Enhance the lighting by the library entrance and area, including providing lighting for the library's signage.

Create opportunities for children's play in the area, including swings, climbing, sprinklers, etc.

Consider eliminating a parking space in front of the library.













### Site 3: 1-93 Underpass Area



Strengths in the area highlighted by the breakout group include access to many transportation options (including the local T station and I-93), steady pedestrian traffic, the availability of empty spaces that provides opportunities, and diverse businesses, including the long-operating Mount Vernon restaurant.

**Improvements that could be made to the area include:**

Create a 'Welcome to Broadway' kiosk after the underpass to provide information about local businesses and opportunities to help orient people walking from the T station.

Add 'Welcome to Broadway' signage or flags to create an identity for the area

Plant additional trees and consider other landscaping opportunities to provide shade and a more welcoming pedestrian environment.

Make the I-93 underpass more attractive by adding additional lighting, a mural, and a screen to mask the rock pile under the highway.

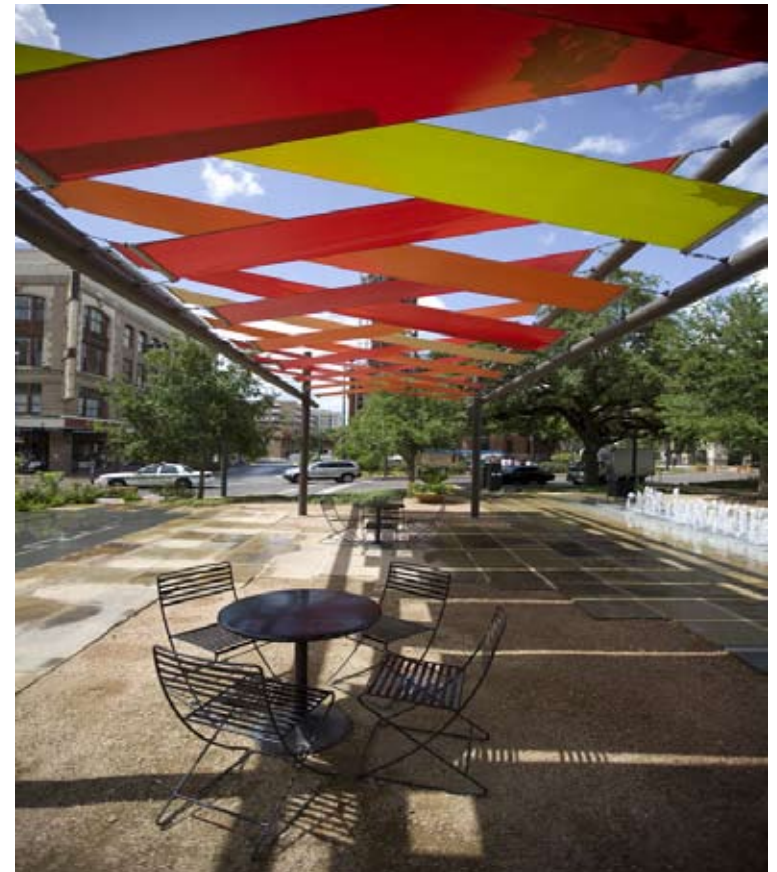
Work with local businesses to help them improve their facades, such as with new paint, signage, landscaping, windows, awnings, etc. and to provide sidewalk seating for some, such as at the Mount Vernon restaurant.

Use some of the existing vacant properties in this area as a canvas for a mural or other public art until they are redeveloped.

Turn the parking lot across the street from the Mount Vernon restaurant into a plaza, a park, or consider as the site for a local hotel, business incubator, or fabrication lab.

Create a mid-block crossing to allow people to cross Broadway more safely and to calm traffic.

Work with the Broadway Brake business to move some of its storage and trucks to another site.





Expand the sidewalks and consider adding a bicycle lane and narrowing the street to calm traffic and create a more welcoming environment.



## Partners to Engage

Participants in the workshop had many suggestions on groups and people to engage to help realize the short-term improvements for Broadway discussed in this report. The list includes:

**Local and state government:** MassDOT, City of Boston, City of Somerville

**Municipal groups:** Walk Boston

**Local institutions and organizations:** Senior Center, Library, Historical Somerville, Shape up Somerville, El Systema, Teen Empowerment, Groundworks Somerville, Save our Somerville, Somerville Arts Council, Rutherford Avenue Coalition, East Somerville Main Streets, Chamber of Commerce, Prospect Hill Academy

**Local businesses:** Broadway Brake, Home Depot, Mudflat, Mount Vernon restaurant, Pasta Factory, Stop 'n' Shop

**Individuals:** Local musicians, artists, photographers





# Appendices

## About PPS & Placemaking

Project for Public Spaces is a nonprofit, educational, advocacy and technical assistance organization with an international reputation for its success in the creation of more livable communities. Place-based initiatives are the best way to promote vitality and prosperity in cities everywhere. Our experience helping people in more than 2500 towns around the world improve their community's shows that mobilizing people to make great places strengthens neighborhoods, cities and entire metropolitan areas.

Placemaking is about making your community a great place to live and reversing the trends of recent decades that have reduced our social and physical health and led us to unsustainable ways of living. The most authentic, most enduring destinations in a city – the places that keep locals and tourists coming back, that anchor quality, local jobs, that give a city an identity – are born out of a series of incremental, locally-based improvements that build a destination that's more than the sum of its parts.

Placemaking is central to many of the powerful trends shaping the world today. Project for Public Spaces has been working in communities across the US for thirty-five years to develop a proven model for sustainable development of human environments that elevates economic and community benefit, social capital and environmental health.

In economic terms, Placemaking is a cost-efficient way to become a competitive city. Abundant research suggests that human and creative capital of our communities is now the catalyst of economic growth rather than mere results of that growth.

In social terms, Placemaking builds a lasting sense of community that helps integrate diverse populations. Research has shown that

residents of compact, walkable neighborhoods with places to socialize produce healthier lifestyles, promote the lively exchange of ideas and further social equity.

In terms of environmental sustainability, Placemaking is about creating more sustainable and livable communities that encourage walking, transit, support community health, and reduce reliance on the automobile.

## Placemaking Concepts

PPS's Placemaking approach creates places where people want to be. Every project we plan is rich with vibrant destinations: parks, squares and streets should feel comfortable and offer a wealth of amenities; waterfronts should provide access to an abundance of water-related and other activities; and cultural attractions should contribute to a place's unique identity. Equally important is how these destinations connect and interplay, supporting and complementing each other rather than struggling in isolation.

Some common sense ideas underlie our work and represent the fundamental changes we feel can have a more lasting impact throughout Lawrence than any discipline-driven approach.

### *Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper*

Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper describes a hyper-local development framework that is tried and tested; one that is lower risk and lower cost that capitalizes on the creative energy of the local community and that efficiently generates new uses and revenue for places in transition. In an LQC approach, we ask the question: "What can we do to begin transforming a place within the next six months?"

### *Power of Ten*

The Power of 10 can be a framework to elevate Placemaking to a neighborhood, city or regional level. Our experience of physical environment is most defined and enhanced by great places and the things we do in them, yet we seldom focus on creating

great places and defining them around uses. A great place typically has at least 10 things to do in it; a great neighborhood or district has at least 10 great places; and a great city or region has at least 10 of these great districts, plus other major destinations. By having people think about their special places and greatest opportunity places, a community can quickly determine its strengths and prioritize a path forward. This simple, common sense idea can be transformative for evaluating and strategically improving an entire city or region.

### *The Community is the Expert*

"Placemaking" has its greatest impact when applied through the people who know a place best—the local community. Despite their intimate knowledge of a community's assets and needs, the local stakeholders are rarely empowered to formulate their own transformative agenda for their communities. Too often professionals are engaged to impose solutions rather than facilitating a community vision. Moving beyond narrowly defined disciplines, Placemaking cultivates a collaborative campaign grounded in the community's aspirations.

### *Comfort and Affection*

One knows immediately whether a space is warm and welcoming or not. When a place provides a sense of comfort, patrons naturally relax, become part of their surroundings and feel free to be affectionate and at ease with others. It is this goal of creating happiness that has been all but forgotten in shaping the public realm for communities of all levels of the economic scale.

### *Triangulate*

"Triangulation is the process by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to other strangers as if they knew each other" (Holly Whyte 1980). In a public space, the choice and arrangement of different elements in relation to each other can put the triangulation process in motion (or not). For example, if a bench, a wastebasket and a telephone are placed with no connection to each other, each may receive a very limited use, but when they are arranged together

along with other amenities such as a coffee cart, they will naturally bring people together (or triangulate!). On a broader level, if a children's reading room in a new library is located so that it is next to a children's playground in a park and a food kiosk, more activity will occur than if these facilities were located separately.

### *Zealous Nuts*

Almost every great place is the product of the passionate work of a zealous nut, or a group of them. Zealous nuts can take many forms—community residents, shop owners, school officials, librarians, police officers – the Placemaking process invites these vital stakeholders to take a leadership role in injecting the soul into a place.

### *It has to be a Campaign*

Based upon Harvard Business School professor John Kotter's book, *People Who Make Dramatic Change*, we have realized that a successful transformation of place requires a holistic campaign. It starts by developing a vision and opening lines of communication. Impediments must be acknowledged and strategies to overcome these challenges must be determined. Through this initial process, a strong team can emerge to attack complacency and produce short term wins, then move on to bigger challenges, all while keeping the vision grounded in and driven by the community.



## Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper

LQC projects quickly translate a community's vision into reality and keep momentum moving. Ideas can be efficiently implemented, assessed, then tweaked and customized based upon a community's response. Although a lighter, quicker, cheaper approach is not for every situation, it can be a creative, locally-powered alternative to capital-heavy, top-down planning. Lighter, quicker, cheaper projects:

- Provide an efficient, creative, hyper-local way to leverage a city's assets.
- Transform underused spaces into exciting laboratories that citizens can start using right away and see evidence that change can happen.
- Represent an "action planning process" that builds a shared understanding of a place that goes far beyond the short term changes that are made.
- Leverage local partnerships that have greater involvement by a community and results in more authentic places.
- Encourage an iterative approach and an opportunity to experiment, assess, and evolve a community's vision before launching into major construction and a long term process.
- Employ a place-by-place strategy that, over time, can transform an entire city. With community buy-in, the LQC approach can be implemented across multiple scales to transform underperforming spaces throughout an entire city.
- Create Jobs and incubate local entrepreneurs.

## Placemaking Process along East Broadway in Somerville, MA: Place Performance Evaluation

PPS visited Somerville on July 28th to conduct our Place Performance Evaluation exercise (e.g. Place Game) with local community members to evaluate the existing conditions of the sites along East Broadway that represented the best places to target LQC strategies.

Participants included a wide range of stakeholders, including municipal government and agency staff, CDC and Main Street staff, people from the arts and design community, and neighborhood residents. As it turned out, agency and government staff attended the Upham Corner's workshop while the participants in Four Corners were more locally based.

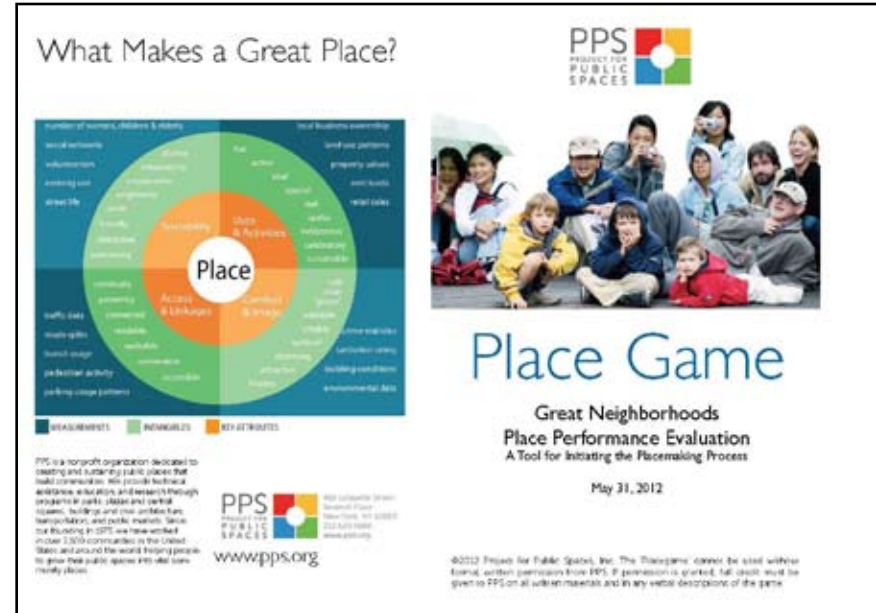
The Place Game evaluates a site based on the following criteria:

- Uses & Activities
- Access & Linkages
- Sociability
- Comfort & Image

Participants are then asked to create a short and long-term vision for their sites, and a list of partners to help in the implementation.

The workshops started with a PowerPoint presentation of Place-making principles and how the Power of 10 can be used as a process for making changes. The presentation also included benchmark images, case studies of other similar sites and how they have been improved using short term, small scale (lighter, quicker, cheaper) interventions, and images of the sites as they exist now.

After the slide show, small groups visited each of the sites to observe the activities and informally interview people in the area. During the visit, observation checklists, designed by PPS, were filled out.



PLACE GAME

SITE #: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Rate the Place:**

	POOR	GOOD
<b>COMFORT &amp; IMAGE</b>		
Overall attractiveness	1 2 3 4	
Feeling of safety	1 2 3 4	
Cleanliness/Quality of Maintenance	1 2 3 4	
Comfort of places to sit	1 2 3 4	
Comments/Notes:		
<b>ACCESS &amp; LINKAGES</b>		
Visibility from a distance	1 2 3 4	
Ease in walking to the place	1 2 3 4	
Transit access	1 2 3 4	
Clarity of information/signage	1 2 3 4	
Comments/Notes:		
<b>USES &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		
Mix of uses/services	1 2 3 4	
Frequency of community events/activities	1 2 3 4	
Overall busyness of area	1 2 3 4	
Economic vitality	1 2 3 4	
Comments/Notes:		
<b>SOCIABILITY</b>		
Number of people in groups	1 2 3 4	
Evidence of volunteerism	1 2 3 4	
Sense of pride and ownership	1 2 3 4	
Presence of children and seniors	1 2 3 4	
Comments/Notes:		

**Identify Opportunities**

1. What do you like best about this place?
2. List 5 things that you would do to improve this place that could be done right away and that wouldn't cost a lot (please list activities and the amenities that would be needed):
3. What changes would you make in the long term that would have the biggest impact?
4. Ask someone who is in the "place" what they like about it and what they would do to improve it. Their answer:
5. What local partnerships or local talent can you identify that could help implement some of your proposed improvements? Please be as specific as possible.



After the observations, the groups returned to the meeting room for a discussion of what each group found. Spokespeople from each group described their findings using slides of the observation areas for reference. Specific suggestions for improvements were developed along with a plan of action appropriate to the location.

It is from this Placemaking process that a vision emerged of what the Broadway sites can collectively become in Somerville; focusing on both small-scale improvements that can begin to take place almost immediately as well as longer-term improvements to be implemented over time.

