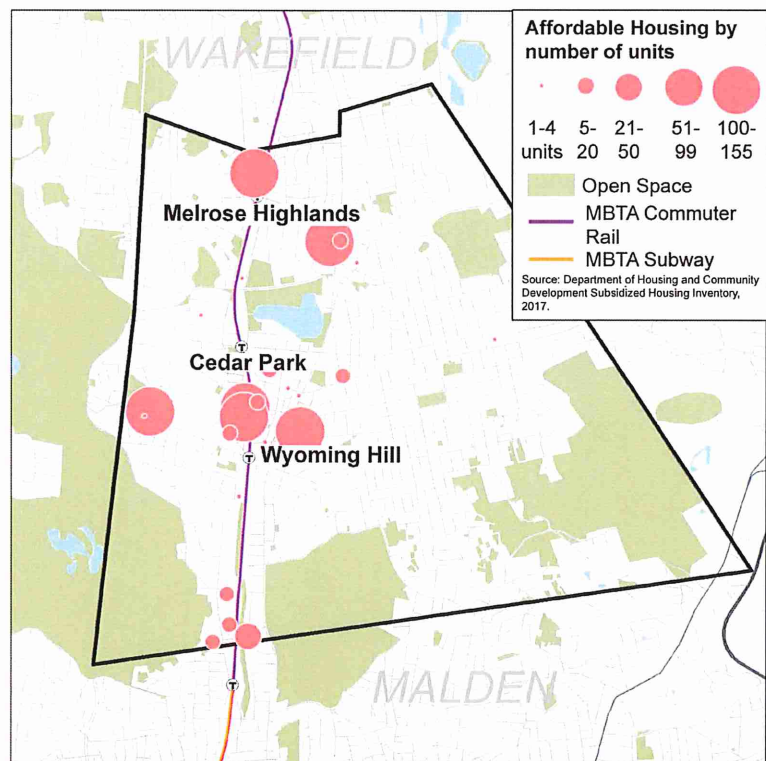


been a 5- to 10-minute walk to Cedar Park would now turn into a 15- to 20-minute walk to Wyoming Hills. Not only would this be incredibly inconvenient for commuters, but it would also eliminate all the foot traffic that supports the small businesses in this district. These mom-and-pop businesses—including a market, coffee shop, restaurant, jewelry store, and more—are already suffering tremendously as a result of the pandemic. They will be devastated by the elimination of the Cedar Park Commuter Rail Station and it will be nearly impossible for them to bounce back once the pandemic is over and people are riding the Commuter Rail again. The minimal cost savings for the MBTA to not stop at Cedar Park are simply not worth the decimation of an entire business district that has grown up around the transit station.

It is wrong for the “Forging Ahead” presentation to imply that there is available parking at the Wyoming Hills station to serve people who may be affected by the elimination of Cedar Park. Not only would there not be enough parking at Wyoming Hills to accommodate those who may have otherwise walked to Cedar Park, but it is likely that more Melrosians will simply drive farther distances to park at an Orange Line Station or drive straight to Boston and avoid taking the Commuter Rail at all. This is likely if other cuts are made around evening and weekend Commuter Trail service and especially likely if two of our local bus lines are also eliminated. Encouraging people to drive more and take less public transportation is the very last thing we should be doing given our current climate change crisis.

We do not understand at all how the MBTA can justify cutting two of our local bus lines. For people who cannot afford to pay the high Commuter Rail rates, the 131 and 136 Routes provide a crucial link to Oak Grove Station, which is their connection to Boston and the whole Boston region. While the loss of the 136 Route will mean less frequent and less reliable pick-ups, the loss of the 131 Route will result in the elimination of transit service for the entire eastern half of Melrose. Further, it will cut off an important east-west connection on Franklin Street between Main Street and the Melrose Highlands Commuter Rail Station. This is an area with a number of mixed-use development projects on the horizon and any

reduction in service would make those less likely to come to fruition. Further, as shown on this map, it is an area that is home to hundreds of affordable housing units. This is another indication that these cuts will hurt the most vulnerable Melrosians.



Long before the terms “transit-oriented development” and “smart growth” became commonplace, the City of Melrose created opportunities for dense development near transit through progressive zoning and cooperative relationships with developers. The City has had progressive, growth-oriented zoning in place since the early 1980s and, in recent years, has seized opportunities to promote high-density housing in our transit-rich locations. For example, in 2001, the City worked collaboratively with Pembroke Real Estate to support their vision to create a model, high-density, mixed use village on a 12-acre obsolete industrial site located in close proximity to Oak Grove Station. The 400-unit mixed use development, known as Oak Grove Village, helped set the stage for the ambitious smart growth agenda we have pursued since. In the years that followed, we have undertaken two comprehensive Master Plan processes and created new tools, including zoning overlay districts and affordable housing regulations that promote housing opportunities for all ages and income levels and encourage growth aligned with the community’s vision.

In 2008, the City established a Smart Growth Overlay District (SGOD) to incentivize dense, mixed-use development along the lower Washington Street corridor near Oak Grove Station. SGOD projects can have a maximum residential density of 35 units per acre by right. Since establishing the overlay district just over a decade ago, this formerly underutilized industrial area has been transformed into a lively neighborhood with the addition of 394 housing units and 9,200 square feet of new commercial space. Another SGOD project, on the one remaining site available in the District, is under construction and will add another 141 units of housing less than ½ a mile from Oak Grove Station.

Following up on the success of the Smart Growth Overlay District, the City established the Rail Corridor Overlay District (RCOD) in 2014. This district was created to incentivize dense, mixed-use redevelopment of underutilized structures and sites east of the Commuter Rail tracks along Tremont and Essex Streets near Cedar Park Station. RCOD projects can also have a maximum residential density of 35 units per acre by right, except for assisted living facilities which can have a density of up to 60 units per acre. Since the RCOD was established, a 90-unit independent and assisted living facility and a 26-unit condominium development have been constructed and a 23-unit mixed use development has been permitted in the district. There are several additional RCOD projects in the pipeline whose feasibility will be directly threatened by the loss of Cedar Park.

In addition to our overlay districts, many base zoning districts in Melrose, including those built around the commuter rail stations, allow for high-density, multifamily and mixed-use development as of right. This is the reason why, along with the flexibility of the Planning Board to ease or waive parking requirements, our neighborhood business districts and downtown Melrose have seen an unprecedented level of development in recent years.

The Planning Board has also just approved an incentive program for the zoning districts around the Commuter Rail Stations that is meant to incentivize higher densities in exchange for providing community benefits like green building practices. If we lose Cedar Park Station, it will be much more difficult for us to promote this high-density, transit-oriented approach to the community and the chances for it being approved by the City Council will be slim.

As a result of Melrose's myriad efforts to promote smart growth development and affordable housing, the City was designated as a "Housing Choice Community" by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development in 2018, the first year this designation became available. This designation enabled the City to receive \$168,000 through the Housing Choice Capital Grants program to make safety and accessibility upgrades to Cherry Street, which provides a major connection between the Main Street downtown and business area and points west, including the Cedar Park Commuter Rail Station. In 2020, Melrose again applied for and received the two-year designation of a Housing Choice Community.

We seriously question our ability to receive Housing Choice designation in future rounds if the MBTA's cuts are made and it chills development in the City. It perplexes us as to how Massachusetts can have a Housing Choice program to encourage new housing development while also rolling back public transit. These two things are completely antithetical to one another.

The City is also creating a Housing Production Plan with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council that will require us to identify affordable and market-rate housing production targets for Melrose to meet. Again, we question how we can meet the goals we set in that plan to grow the City's housing stock if we no longer have reliable public transportation. This particularly concerns us because it is a large part of the reason why people choose to move to Melrose and stay in the community, why small businesses set up shop here, and why visitors come here for the day. In fact, Melrose's Master Plan from 2017 identified the ability to get around by a diversity of transportation options as the community attribute most important to residents.

Again, we strongly urge you to reconsider the proposed cuts for the MBTA. Whatever money may be saved is simply not worth the disruption to our region and the hardships that will be placed on those already suffering as a result of the pandemic. We now know that a vaccine will be available this month and most people will be able to receive it by this spring. People will go back to the office again. People will take public transportation again. Please do not make this short-sighted decision that will have a cascade of impacts for decades to come.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Denise Gaffey
Director & City Planner



Anne DeSouza-Ward
Planning Board Chairwoman

Cc: Mayor Paul Brodeur
Senator Jason Lewis
Representative Kate Lipper-Garabedian
Jennifer Grigoraitis, City Council President
Melrose Planning Board