

WELLESLEY SQUARE STUDY

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Prepared by Wellesley Planning Board

Beverly F. Ottaway, Chairman
John R. Verani, Secretary
Harold A. Mock
Donald P. Babson
Laurence H. Stone

Charles J. Thomas, Planning Director

I. INTRODUCTION

The Wellesley Planning Board, in response to the encouragement of the Board of Selectmen, initiated, in September, 1971, a detailed study of the Wellesley Square commercial area and its environs. This study followed a comprehensive review of previous proposals with regard to traffic, parking, land use and zoning within the Wellesley Square area. This review resulted in the following observations:

1. That the frequency and repetitiveness of proposals regarding the Square area indicates a continuing dissatisfaction with the existing situation, and
2. That the fragmented character of previous studies and proposals has made difficult their implementation.

Following this review, a four phase study program was developed and adopted by the Planning Board. The study program consisted of Phase I: Inventory and Analysis; Phase II: Development of Goals and Objectives; Phase III: Plan Development; and Phase IV: Development of Implementation Program. At the outset the Planning Board indicated its intention to bring before the 1973 Annual Town Meeting proposals resulting from the study.

II. INVENTORY and ANALYSIS

As a first step in the study program, an area encompassing the commercial and civic activities located in proximity to Wellesley Square was delineated. This area, which contains approximately 130 acres, is bounded by Linden Street and the Penn Central Railroad to the north, Morton Park and Brook Street to the east, Fuller Brook to the south, and Cottage Street and Wellesley College to the west. Contained within this area is Wellesley's largest business district, the Town Hall, Main Library, and Hunnewell School, as well as the new Wellesley Green condominium development and a number of single, two and multi-family residences.

To provide a base of information, the inventory and analysis phase of the study included the collection of data with regard to land use, zoning, assessed valuation, traffic, parking, pedestrian movement, and the character of commercial activities and of residential occupancy. In addition, questionnaires were utilized to identify characteristics, attitudes and opinions of both businessmen and shoppers. Analysis of this data led to the following observations:

Land Use:

Despite the commercial focus of the Study Area, less than twenty percent of the land within the Study Area is devoted to commercial or related activities. This is largely due to the presence within the Study Area of the substantial public land associated with the Town Hall, Library and Hunnewell School, as well as the residences within the "triangle" and along Cottage Street.

Zoning:

It was found that, where zoning permitted uses more intense than single family residence, land use and zoning were closely correlated. In contrast, a number of uses other than single family residence, consisting primarily of two or multi-family residences, are located within areas zoned for Single Residence.

Assessed Valuation:

Due to the significant concentration of business activities, the Study Area, while containing only two percent of the Town's land area, contains over 11 percent of the Town's assessed valuation. The completion of Wellesley Green will increase this percentage.

The ratio of assessed valuation of buildings to land is less for commercial structures within Wellesley Square than for residential structures in the Study Area or for property in Wellesley as a whole. This could result from a number of factors, including the age of commercial structures, inflated valuations of land used for commercial purposes, and/or the relatively low intensity (one and two story) development of many commercial properties.

Parking:

Analyses of the availability of and demand for parking indicated an over-all deficit within the Study Area of close to 200 parking spaces. More detailed analysis, on a block by block basis, indicated substantial parking deficits for the commercial area north of Central Street and for the stores in the vicinity of the Washington and Grove Streets areas, while surplus spaces are available to the commercial area south of Central Street, including the area at Washington and Church Streets (Holman Block).

The pattern of parking lot utilization within the Square indicated the presence of two conflicting types of parking: all-day commuter parking and relatively short-term shopper parking. The all-day use of a significant number of available spaces increases the deficit of parking available to shoppers. In addition to the above, several existing lots, notably the lot at Church and Abbott Streets (Fraser Lot) and the Railroad lot at Crest Road and Central Street, apparently suffer from difficult access, requiring several turns from Central Street, and lack of visibility, resulting in a level of utilization substantially less than that which would be anticipated considering their proximity to commercial establishments.

Pedestrian Movements:

Detailed observations of pedestrian movements, undertaken with the assistance of students from Dana Hall School, indicated linkages among various activities and commercial establishments within the Study Area. Also identified were variations in pedestrian movement within the Study Area, with movements in the Washington and Grove Streets area indicating greater reliance on on-street parking and less walking among individual stores. These observations

indicated a number of points of conflict between pedestrians and vehicles. Such conflicts were observed along the entire length of the Central Street commercial area and at the Washington and Grove Streets intersection. The presence of such conflicts suggests that the relocation of crosswalks or changes in traffic patterns could serve to improve activities within the Study Area.

Census Data:

The portion of the Wellesley Square Study Area known as the "triangle" bounded by Weston Road, Central Street and Washington Street, along with a small residential area on Norfolk Terrace, is located within a single geographic area established by the U. S. Bureau of the Census. Data with regard to the population and housing within this area was collected as a part of the 1970 U. S. Census. Analysis of this data indicates that the area contains, in comparison to the Town as a whole, a disproportionate number of:

1. Elderly women,
2. Single member households,
3. Multi-family or multiple occupancy dwelling units, and
4. Dwelling units with plumbing deficiencies.

This character of population is markedly different from the Town as a whole, i.e., traditional family units in owner-occupied dwellings. In addition, census data indicates that rental levels of housing found in this area exceeds the anticipated means of many of its occupants.

Commercial Comparison:

A comparison of Wellesley Square to other commercial areas in Wellesley and its environs indicated that Wellesley Square represents a unique type of commercial area. Unlike other commercial areas of comparable size (Needham, Natick, Wellesley Hills) Wellesley Square is highly specialized with a dominant proportion of its commercial establishments devoted to the sale of clothing, accessories and related items. This unique character indicates that solutions to problems identified within other areas will not be applicable directly to Wellesley Square and, as a result, proposals appropriate to Wellesley Square may be innovative, at least in terms of application in the Wellesley area.

Business Questionnaire:

To supplement the quantitative data described above, the Wellesley Planning Board, with the cooperation of the Wellesley Chamber of Commerce, undertook a survey of opinions of businessmen located within the Study Area. Responses originating from the Central Street area were tabulated separately from those originating from the Washington and Grove Streets area. Among the observations resulting from analysis of questionnaire responses were the following:

Area merchants perceive the Central Street area as competing with shopping centers on a regional basis. Interest in additional off-street parking and the creation of a pedestrian mall was expressed by a number of establishments in this area, with these actions being characterized as being necessary if the area is to compete with modern shopping centers.

The Washington and Grove Streets area was characterized as being service oriented, relying upon neighborhood generated, short-term shopping. This was reflected in greater concern for on-street parking and vehicular circulation within this area than was exhibited by Central Street respondents.

Among the actions suggested by respondents were the following:

Traffic:

Elimination of through traffic from Central Street area.

Simplification of and improvement of traffic flow through the Washington, Grove and Central Streets intersection.

Parking:

Additional and/or relocated off-street parking to serve the Central Street area. To assure proximity of this parking to stores on Central Street, deck or garage structures might be appropriate.

Replacement of on-street parking, which might be removed to accommodate improved traffic flow, by off-street parking.

Provision of off-street parking for employees in the Washington Street area to make available, for short-term customer use, a maximum number of on-street spaces.

Pedestrian Movement:

Creation of pedestrian malls and/or plazas in the Central Street area.

Improved street crossing opportunities in the Washington Street area.

Land Use:

Introduction of additional apartment units to the Study Area as a whole.

Introduction of new commercial activities to the Central Street area.

Aesthetics:

Exterior redesign and remodeling in the Central Street area.

Shopper Questionnaire:

With the assistance of the Planning Board, two graduate students from Babson College undertook a survey of shopper attitudes within Wellesley Square. This survey, which was administered only in the Central Street portion of the Study Area, reinforced several earlier observations with regard to the characteristics and problems within the Study Area.

Although Wellesley residents accounted for a substantial portion of shoppers within the Central Street area, more than half of those surveyed were from other communities. Data with regard to shopper habits indicated that Wellesley Square shoppers, when they shopped elsewhere, utilized shopping centers such as Shoppers World, Natick Mall or Chestnut Hill. These data reinforce earlier observations which characterized the Wellesley Square commercial area as serving a regional area and as being in competition with other shopping centers. As noted above, this character of shopping activity can be expected to require a physical structure unlike that of a more locally based community or neighborhood shopping area.

Negative attitudes were expressed with regard to traffic and parking, and a number of improvements oriented toward shoppers (including improved pedestrian movement) were suggested by respondents. Satisfaction was expressed with the variety, type and quality of stores within the area, the only significant change suggested being the introduction of additional restaurants and other eating establishments.

III. GOALS

Based on the above material, the Planning Board formulated a series of goal statements. These statements establish as goals to guide the planning for Wellesley Square, the following:

Basic Goal:

To achieve an orderly transition of the functional, physical and economic character of Wellesley Square in the face of internal and external pressures.

Functional Goal:

To achieve a balance among competing and conflicting residential, commercial and civic activities located within the Study Area while enhancing the position of Wellesley Square as the focal point of Wellesley's commercial and civic activities.

Social Goal:

To introduce and expand the activities available to various income and age groupings within the Town.

Circulation Goal:

To provide for efficient traffic movement within and around Wellesley Square.

Economic Goal:

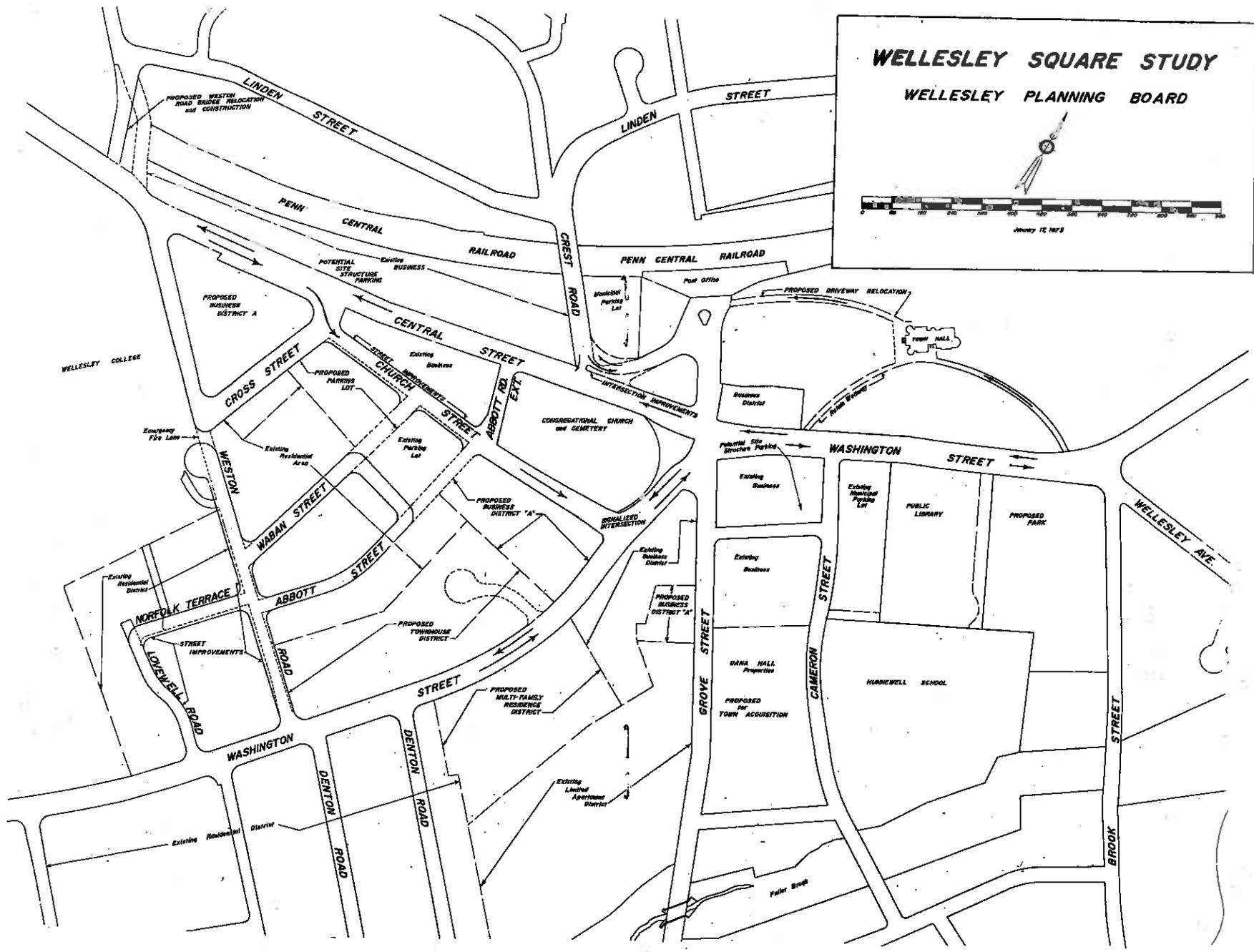
To foster the expansion and diversification of the economic base within the Study Area.

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January 12, 1973



Aesthetic Goal:

To preserve and enhance the visual character and features of the natural and man-made environment and to create an identifiable visual image for each of the functional areas within the Study Area.

IV. PLAN DEVELOPMENT

To provide a basis for discussion, four sketch plans, presenting alternative approaches to attaining the goals articulated above, were developed. These sketch plans may be summarized as follows:

Church Street Mall:

This sketch plan proposed the establishment of a one-way circulation pattern utilizing Washington and Central Streets and Weston Road. Church Street would be discontinued as a vehicular way and devoted to pedestrians. Access to the parking facilities south of Church Street would be provided by an access road south of, and replacing, Church Street. Multi-family housing appropriate to the needs of existing and/or potential Study Area residents would replace single family structures, predominantly with multiple occupancy, in the "triangle" and in the Lovewell Road, Norfolk Terrace area. A second element of this plan would provide a parking facility on the northerly side of Central Street.

Central Street Mall:

This sketch plan proposed the discontinuance of Central Street as a vehicular way and its conversion into a pedestrian mall. Route 135 traffic would be diverted to a new road, utilizing a portion of Weston Road, intersecting Washington Street at a signalized location southwest of Wiswall Circle. This diversion of traffic would simplify the present Wellesley Square intersection as all traffic on Routes 16 and 135, other than that utilizing Grove Street, would proceed through the Square on Washington Street and would be separated at the signalized intersection described above. Access to existing or future parking facilities along Church Street would be provided by Church and Cross Streets. Other elements of this plan include:

1. Changes in existing residential areas similar to those outlined with regard to the Church Street Mall Sketch Plan,
2. The reconstruction of the Weston Road bridge, and
3. The discontinuance of the use of the Crest Road bridge for vehicular purposes.

Associated with this plan, however, would be problems with regard to deliveries to businesses located along the mall. Possible solutions which could be explored should a plan of this type be selected would be:

1. A rear entrance, paralleling the railroad tracks,
2. The provision of loading areas (restricted to use in early morning hours) on the mall itself, and/or
3. A below grade entrance from Cross Street.

Central Street By-Pass:

This sketch plan proposed the diversion of traffic from Central Street by the construction of a westbound by-pass over the Penn Central Railroad and an eastbound by-pass from Weston Road, south of Church Street, intersecting Washington Street at Wiswall Circle. Additional elements of this plan were:

1. The expansion of the Common into the area currently occupied by Central Street,
2. The provision of a parking lot or structure on the northerly side of Central Street, and
3. Changes in residential areas similar to those proposed with regard to the Church Street and Central Street Mall Sketch Plan.

Problems similar to those associated with the Central Street Mall Sketch Plan would be encountered with regard to the provision of access for delivery purposes and similar solutions could be explored.

Pedestrian Center:

The fourth plan proposed the removal of vehicular movement, except as necessary for deliveries, from the Central Street and Church Street areas through the provision of an east-west by-pass from Weston Road, south of Church Street, to Washington Street in the vicinity of Wiswall Circle. Substantial open spaces would be provided at Cross Street, Abbott Street and at Washington and Grove Streets. These open spaces would be linked by pedestrian malls on Central and Church Streets, with pedestrian movement within this area free of vehicular conflicts. Other changes with regard to residential areas, the reconstruction of the Weston Road bridge, and the discontinuance of the Crest Road bridge as a vehicular way would be similar to those indicated with regard to the Central Street Mall Sketch Plan.

These plans were displayed at the Wellesley Public Library during June, 1972 and an open hearing, to which all residents and businessmen from the Study Area were invited, was held at the Hunnewell School on June 22, 1972. Subsequent to the open meeting, the sketch plans were presented to the Wellesley Chamber of Commerce. Elements of each plan were criticized by those attending these meetings, with a number of possibilities not contained in any of the plans being suggested for consideration.

As a result of these meetings, a Wellesley Square Liaison Committee, consisting of residents and businessmen from the Study Area, was formed. This Committee met with the Planning Director and representatives of the Planning Board throughout the summer of 1972. During this period a number of proposals expressed by the Committee, the Planning Board, and other interested citizens and businessmen were considered. The result of this process was the development of the plan for Wellesley Square presented below.

V. WELLESLEY SQUARE PLAN

The plan for Wellesley Square contains a series of proposals dealing with land use, traffic, parking and pedestrian movement. These proposals may be summarized as follows:

Land Use:

That the residential area along Weston Road, Cross, Waban and Abbott Streets be returned to a single and two-family status.

That the Lovewell Road/Norfolk Terrace area maintain its character as a mixed single-family, townhouse residential area.

That the area along Washington Street between Weston Road and the commercial properties along Church Street be re-developed for townhouses or apartments.

That the vacant portion of the Simons property at the intersection of Washington and Brook Streets be dedicated and preserved as Park Land.

That the Dana Hall School properties on Grove Street between Fuller Brook and the commercial property at 40 Grove Street be acquired by the Town.

Traffic:

That the Crest Road, Central Street, Railroad Avenue intersection be improved and turning movements restricted.

That Weston Road be closed at Cross Street, preventing shopper or through traffic from entering the residential area. This would be accomplished by the construction of a cul-de-sac and emergency fire lane immediately south of Cross Street.

That Church Street be widened and improved between Cross and Washington Streets either for two-way traffic or to accommodate eastbound traffic to be diverted from Central Street.

That a one-way traffic system, utilizing Central Street westbound from Washington Street to Cross Street and Church Street eastbound from Cross Street to Washington Street, be instituted. This would necessitate the installation of a traffic signal at Church and Washington Streets.

That Lovewell Road and Norfolk Terrace be connected and improved.

That the Town Hall exit driveway be relocated to Grove Street.

That the Weston Road railroad bridge be relocated and re-constructed.

Parking:

That a new off-street parking area be provided on Church Street, between Cross and Waban Streets.

That parking structures be constructed on Central Street and at Spring and Cameron Streets.

Pedestrian Movement:

That a pedestrian sequence be added to the traffic signal at the Washington, Grove and Central Streets intersection.

That cross walks be relocated to mid-block locations.

Zoning:

That the properties at #'s 49 and 53 Grove Street be rezoned from the Educational District to the Business District A.

That the westerly side of Washington Street, from Weston Road to Wiswall Circle, be rezoned to permit townhouses or apartments.

That the properties at #'s 592-610 Washington Street be rezoned from the Educational District and Limited Residence District to a multi-family residential district.

That the properties at Weston Road and Cross Street and at Washington and Church Streets be rezoned to the Business District A to assure the provision of parking in conjunction with any new commercial construction.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of the above proposals requires a variety of actions, both public and private. The following summarizes these actions:

A. Town Meeting Action:

1. Rezoning:

Several of the study's proposals would require a two-thirds vote of the Town Meeting to change zoning district classification. Following rezoning, property owners would have the option of developing their properties in accord with the new zoning or of continuing existing land uses.

2. Park Land Dedication:

The dedication of the vacant portion of the Simons property to Park Land would require a two-thirds vote of the Town Meeting. Subsequent to such a vote the permission of the General Court would be necessary to permit non-park use of the land.

3. Land Acquisition:

The acquisition of land, either of the Dana Hall property or of the properties on Church Street proposed for use as a parking lot, would require a vote of the Town Meeting and the appropriation of funds. The cost of acquisition would be dependent upon negotiations with the owners in each instance.

4. Traffic Improvements:

A number of traffic improvements would require, or would be facilitated by, Town Meeting action. Action by the Town Meeting would consist of authorizations to proceed with the preparation of plans for the construction of proposed traffic improvements. It is proposed that TOPICS funding (100% Federal) be sought for these projects. However, it may be desirable for the Town to appropriate funds to initiate construction more rapidly than possible under the TOPICS program.

In addition, Town funding may be necessary with regard to some proposals if TOPICS funding is refused.

B. Private Action:

1. Land Use:

As noted above, implementation of most land use proposals would be predicated on Town Meeting action. However, private action would be necessary to initiate construction in accord with the new zoning.

2. Parking Structures:

The construction of the two parking structures would be dependent on their economic feasibility. In each instance, the landowners and businessmen who would benefit from the construction of such a facility would have to determine whether the necessary expenditure was financially justified. The Planning Board has not undertaken the detailed architectural engineering and economic studies necessary to determine such feasibility.

VII. PHASING

The Planning Board has identified a series of the proposals described above for presentation to the 1973 Annual Town Meeting. These proposals are as follows:

Town Hall driveway relocation
Simons property dedication to Park Land
#'s 49 and 53 Grove Street: Rezoning to Business A
Stearns/Fire Station Triangle: Rezoning to Business A
Washington Street (Weston Road to Wiswall Circle):
Rezoning to Town House or Limited Residence
Holman Block: Rezoning to Business A
#'s 592-610 Washington Street: Rezoning to Multi-Residence
(This requires the establishment of a new Multi-Residence District)
Crest Road Intersection Improvement
Weston Road Improvements
Church Street land acquisition
Church Street Widening
Construction of parking lot - Church Street

It is proposed that TOPICS funding be sought prior to construction of a number of the above construction projects. Thus, despite a 1973 Town Meeting authorization construction will not occur until 1974 or even later. The construction of a parking lot on Church Street would require, as the proposed Town Meeting specifies, the relocation of a number of persons. It can be expected that this will take place over a period of time, delaying actual construction.

Remaining for implementation at later dates will be the following:

Lovewell Road/Norfolk Terrace improvement
Weston Road bridge reconstruction
Dana Hall property acquisition
Parking structure construction (pending feasibility studies)

Also remaining for implementation, but requiring Massachusetts Department of Public Works rather than Town action, will be the incorporation of a pedestrian sequence into the Washington, Grove and Central Streets traffic signals and the relocation of crosswalks to mid-block locations. These actions could be implemented, by the Selectmen, independently from other proposals.