

Transit-Oriented Affordable Housing Development in the Boston Metropolitan Area
The Lincoln Institute for Land Policy
and
The Boston College Urban Action Lab
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Introduction

Residents of the Greater Boston area have a well-documented need for affordable housing. Boston is ranked fourth most expensive place to live among the 25 largest metropolitan areas in the US. For four decades, Greater Boston has failed to permit sufficient housing to meet the area's needs, and in that time a select surrounding cities and towns, including Boston, have absorbed the majority of multifamily housing in the state, most of which is concentrated along the MBTA rapid transit subway system. Neighboring towns in Greater Boston are lower density than the city and have greater availability of land for development of affordable housing. Additionally, many of these municipalities are connected to Boston by the MBTA Commuter Rail system.

If increased development of transit-oriented Development and affordable housing were prioritized along the commuter rail system, the MBTA and its users would benefit from increased ridership as the result of increased housing development within walking distance of the stations. Increased ridership and affordable housing are far less controversial than determining the location of transit-oriented development.

This report:

- 1) makes the argument for partial commuter surface parking lot conversion to affordable housing by using a model set forth by the California Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) for transit-oriented development (TOD) supportive zoning and BART-specific recommendations for commuter parking replacement; Pursuing transit-oriented development in municipalities surrounding Boston is challenging and requires cooperation of local and state resources.
- 2) Provides an initial examination of research that supports high density TOD.
- 3) Identifies station areas of interest for redevelopment.
- 4) Makes recommendations for a few high priority sites where TOD development around Commuter rail stations will likely be successful.

Section I: Review of California Policies that Increase Housing Density Near Transit

Governor Charlie Baker's Housing Choices bill is, at present, the core legal opportunity for altering the advancement and prioritization of future affordable housing development. If passed, the bill would allow Massachusetts municipalities to move from a two-thirds majority to a simple majority as a threshold to adopt zoning changes in favor of affordable housing development. This legislation would be strengthened by pursuing more intense regulation that would require all state cities and towns to adopt multi-family zoning in areas suitable for higher-density housing, specifically close to public transit. Current proposals in California serve as the best model for the TOD regulation.

Bay Area Rapid Transit Transit-Oriented Guidelines:

BART land-use requirements recommend local governments adopt land policy regulations that:

1. Support minimum density of 75 units/acre, and minimum of 20% affordable residential units
2. Require no minimum parking allocation
 - a. Goal of portfolio wide-average parking that does not exceed .9 spaces per residential unit and 1.6 spaces per 1,000 square feet of commercial development
3. Supports affordable housing
4. Promotes walkable streets and amenities, encourage mix uses that reduce car dependence

Key Factors:

Proximity to transit is the largest determining factor in ridership. Transit riders walking to stations are highest in the ¼ miles radius of a station, decline in the ½ mile radius and become insignificant beyond ½ mile. Housing development within the ¼ mile radius of station areas is essential to address goals of increasing ridership and facilitating access for residents of new developments. Limiting the parking supply and reducing surface parking lots in favor of managed on-street parking and shared parking structures, encourages transit and other forms of non-auto dependent transit.

BART affordable housing policy also sets an important precedent for inclusionary housing standards. In 2016, BART adopted a policy which requires a minimum of 20 percent affordable units with preference for low and very low-income units. This policy is consistent with the objective to ensure 35 percent of all units in the BART district are affordable.

The following checklist for evaluating transit support development near BART stations features the following criteria for density and parking thresholds, among many other variables. These specific questions are helpful in developing tools for considering and prioritizing ideal communities for increased density and TOD near transit in Massachusetts. All questions regarding transit supportive land-use are important to understand the relationship between new development and MBTA and local interests. In terms of parking, questions 4.1-4.3 are important to note in determining the percentage of parking to housing replacement, for which there is not an existing widespread model due to the great variety of circumstances municipality to municipality.

Transit Supportive Land-use

- 1.1 Are the densities / height at or above BART's thresholds
- 1.2 Are key sites designated for "transit-friendly" uses and densities? (walkable, mixed-use, not dominated by activities with significant automobile use)
- 1.3 Are "transit-friendly" land uses and densities permitted outright, not requiring special approval?
- 1.4 Are the highest densities located nearest transit?
- 1.5 Are multiple compatible uses permitted within buildings near transit?
- 1.6 Are the first floor uses "active" and pedestrian-oriented?
- 1.7 Is a mix of uses generating pedestrian traffic concentrated within walking distance of transit?
- 1.8 Are auto-oriented uses discouraged or prohibited near transit?

- 1.9 Does the proposed project employ strategies to encourage reverse commute, off-peak, and non-work trips on BART?
- 1.10 Does the mix of uses complement and enhance the surrounding community?

Parking

- 4.1 Are the parking ratios at or below the BART maximums
- 4.2 Are parking requirements reduced in close proximity to transit, compared to the norm?
- 4.3 For residential and small format retail is it possible to develop buildings with zero parking? 4.4 Is parking being managed on a district basis as opposed to building-by building?
- 4.5 Is structured parking encouraged rather than surface lots in higher density areas?
- 4.6 Is most of the parking located to the side or to the rear of the buildings?
- 4.7 Where transit commuter parking?

A second policy that exemplifies progressive policies that advance housing near transit is the Title 7 of the California Government Code (Transit-Rich Housing Bonus). The California Code is a model of regulations that stipulate strict development standards in favor of higher density affordable housing in a ¼ mile radius of high-quality transit systems (high frequency bus corridor) or ½ mile radius of a major transit stop. The targeted government intervention alone does not advance the development of housing but allows existing projects to pass through the municipal process, pending compatible zoning, with greater ease, making it easier for developers to build large and dense developments near transit hubs. The zoning guidelines make it extremely difficult for municipalities to legally deny housing developments unless concerns for public health or safety exist.

Transit-rich housing bonus developments are exempt from local law limitations regarding:

- Residential density
- Local floor area ratio requirements that are more restrictive than the housing bonus
- Car parking requirements
- Building height limitations

Fears and Criticisms:

Developers must comply with local standards on demolition, inclusionary/affordable housing, relocation assistance in the case of displacement, local minimum unit mix standards, local objective zoning standards. There are concerns that wealthy developers will displace existing communities with high priced housing, further pushing low-income communities away from public transit. Other concerns emphasize the fear of over additional legislation of municipalities.

Critics suggest there is a need to be realistic about how quickly neighborhood change takes place, understand that supply does not create its own demand for transit or land near stations, a view that zoning is a necessary but incomplete factor for TOD, and openness to new development outside of existing job centers.

The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) TOD funding scoring highlights the importance of:

- a. Transit systems that offer equal to better times to automobile travel and access to a real time schedule.
- b. Access to local services, specifically amenities that limit the need for use of cars including grocery stores, schools and parks.
- c. Discounted passes for lower income households.
- d. Parking reduction strategies which emphasize the importance of mixed-use parking spots and minimal residential parking.

Section II: Affordable Housing Development Massachusetts

Baseline affordability

Chapter 40B is a state statute which supports the power of local Zoning Board of Appeals to approve affordable-housing development under more flexible guidelines if at least 20 percent of the units are deemed affordable. Greater than 80 percent of cities and towns in Massachusetts fall short of 10 percent affordable housing, which in turn denies the municipalities of the power to reject affordable housing developments pursued under Chapter 40B. Affordability requirements are based on 80 percent AMI. In regions of the state with higher housing demand, including cities in Eastern MA, the 10 percent affordability minimum is often exceeded. The housing stock in Brockton is 12.6% affordable, Chelsea is 16.9% affordable, Bedford is 16.9% affordable. In western Massachusetts the market for housing is decidedly less competitive, however urban centers such as Amherst, Holyoke and Springfield maintain affordable housing counts above 10%. Generally speaking, many towns in Western Massachusetts do not even meet a 5 percent affordable threshold.

Chapter 40R

The Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District Act, also known as Chapter 40R promotes the development of dense residential or mixed-use smart growth zoning districts with a high percentage of affordable housing units located near transit stations. Increasing the housing supply and decreasing its cost through zoning changes and dense housing targets low and moderate households by requiring affordable units in private developments. It is an alternative to the Chapter 40B permit process for communities that have not met affordability guidelines. 40R does not impose profit limits on developers.

Inclusionary Development Policies:

Inclusionary zoning has been successful in Boston and Cambridge and should be considered in other municipalities with the transportation resources where the policy would be economically feasible. These policies make urban core density more attractive to policymakers but are not feasible for many of the commuter rail stations featured below given significantly lower existing density.

Section III: Permissible Land Use: Massachusetts Commuter Rail Stations Areas

Underused Surface Area Parking Conversion for TOD:

Many of the MBTA Commuter Rail stations are significantly underused and present a latent opportunity for TOD. 1 acre of land provides approximately 124 parking spaces. In the case of

BART parking conversion recommendations, models work under the assumption of replacing each acre of parking with 60 residential units and deviate from existing assumptions calling for one-to-one parking replacement.

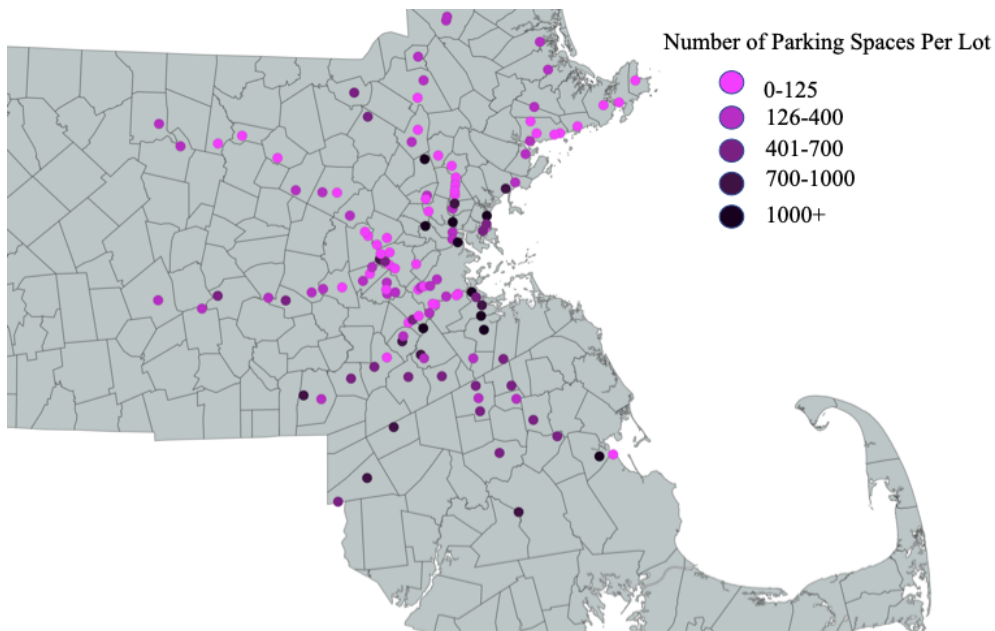
The MBTA has TOD conversion projects underway. A number of these projects identify underused surface lots at station areas. These projects may serve as effective models and validation of increasing density near transit stations future TOD. Some of these projects include:

North Quincy Station (Rapid Transit): The MBTA intends to convert 290,000 square feet of surface area parking to 55,000 square feet of retail space and 610 residential units. 852 replacements parking space will be provided in a parking garage.

Newburyport (Commuter Rail): The sale of 407,266 square feet of an underused MBTA parking lot and wetlands to build 76 residential units, including 16 affordable units.

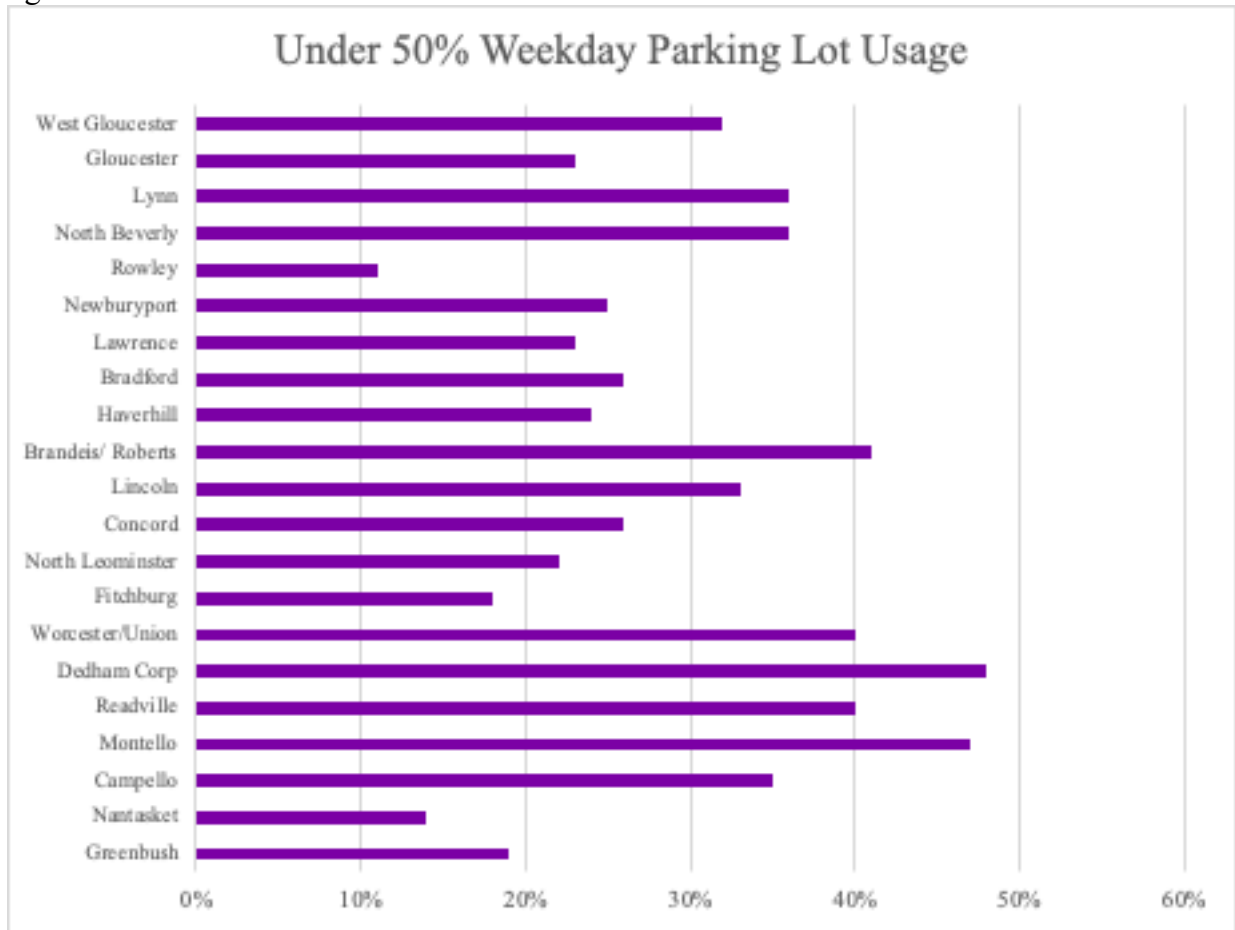
A comparison of parking lot size and usage will help to prioritize stations for TOD. Most research on parking with regard to TOD discusses parking requirements for new developments, instead of a formula to determine replacement parking policy.

Figure 1: Commuter Rail Surface Area Parking Lots Based on Number of Parking Spaces



Of the 23 MBTA Commuter Rail Station parking lots with over 400 parking spots, all but seven stations have existing solar resources including plans for and constructed solar canopies. However, many of these stations use more than one lot and solar does not cover the entire surface parking area. Based on 2016 parking utilization data, Figure 2 demonstrates the station lots with lowest usage

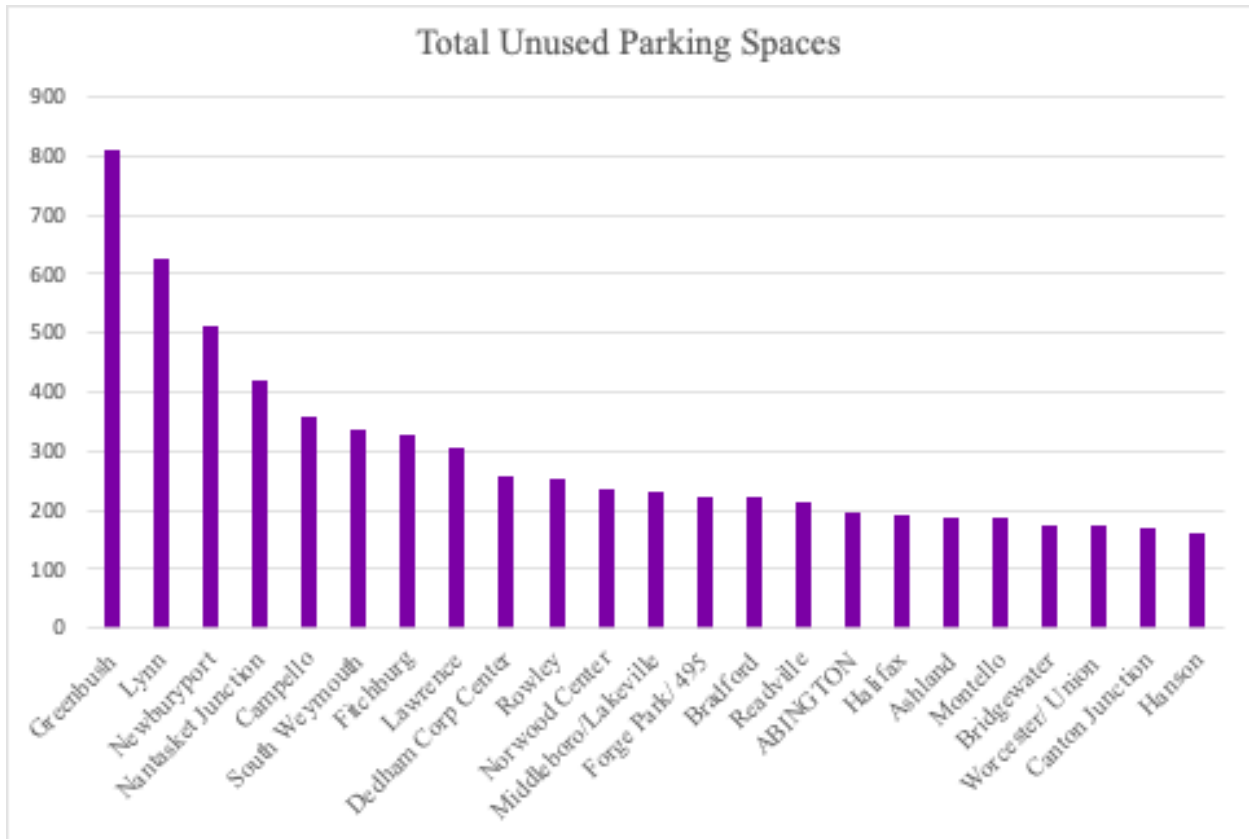
Figure 2:



Data from Parking Facility Pricing Strategy Study for the MBTA produced by Desman April, 2016.

*This list does not include lots in which MBTA does not own, lots with existing TOD plans or stations outside of Massachusetts.

Figure 3: Total Unused Parking Spaces (Weekday)



*Only includes sites with over 124 available spots which is equivalent to about 60 residential units

Data from Parking Facility Pricing Strategy Study for the MBTA produced by Desman April, 2016.

Recommendations:

Based on surface parking lot usage and lot size, the following stations warrant further exploration and consideration for conversion to transit-oriented development. The stations here were selected based on the highest percentage of unused parking spaces, total available parking spaces and commuting distance to Boston. Priority is given to municipalities that either fall short of Chapter 40B affordability requirements which would offer zoning leeway in supporting a new development and municipalities with high percentages of affordable housing that have a record of willingness to provide housing for lower-income residents.

Greenbush (Scituate): This station and the town of Scituate are of great interest given the ample parking lot size that only reaches 19% capacity, with over 800 spots available between 2 lots on a weekday. There is also a deficit of affordable housing in the local municipality. Approximately 4.5% of the town’s housing is affordable, thus falling short of Chapter 40B requirements.

Campello (Brockton): This station is located in Brockton where support for affordable housing is high. Brockton is one of the cities with the highest rates of affordable housing in Massachusetts.

Over 350 parking spots lie vacant each weekday at this station, which could potentially provide 120 units of affordable housing working under BART conversion assumptions. Although Brockton currently exceeds 40B requirements, the station parking lot is underused, as is the neighboring Montello station. The Campello station could present an opportunity for full parking lot elimination and full diversion of parking commuter rail passengers to the Montello station parking lot.

Nantasket Junction (Hingham): This station parking lot is the most underused for its size, with only 14% usage each weekday which translates to over 420 spaces. With little demand for parking, this conversion would be the most feasible in terms of size. The town of Hingham currently meets 40B requirements.

Lynn (Lynn) : This station utilizes garage parking and does not fit into the constraints of this analysis. However, the garage is currently severely underused, at 36% weekday usage and 8% weekend usage. With exploration of models of redevelopment for garage parking, this station could be advantageous given its proximity to the city of Boston. Lynn currently exceeds 40B requirements. With approximately 12.5% affordable housing, one of the highest rates in the state, the city is of interest given the zoning flexibility and willingness to support affordable housing.

This process of examination would be improved by a more thorough comparison of ridership statistics with station parking lot size, in the absence of 2020 parking lot occupancy data matched with exact solar canopy coverage.

In terms of execution, California is one of many states that has pioneered examination of the decision-making process of weighing trade-offs between commuter parking versus transit-oriented development. The BART model works to “facilitate station planning and development, examine ridership impacts, fiscal impacts, and qualitative factors” all by deviating from one-to-one replacement of commuter parking. Extensive simulations of conversion to housing with varied parking policies found that TOD projects can produce substantial revenue from increased fares and ground rent, instead of parking; a problem solved by creative replacement strategies town or city-wide. Viewing stations through complete Commuter Rail line context was helpful in prioritizing stations for redevelopment, particularly applicable to the Campello and Montello stations in Brockton, MA.

Section IV: Conclusion

There is great potential for growth in the affordable housing stock in the Metropolitan Boston area, when one considers the valuable and latent opportunity presented by the MBTA owned property that can be brought into useful service. The MBTA Commuter Rail is an underused resource both in terms of ridership and underutilized surface parking lots.

Municipalities, the MBTA, and people in need of affordable housing would greatly benefit from TOD at commuter rail stations.

The MBTA Commuter Rail is underused from both a ridership and parking perspective. With 21 parking lots under 50% usage on weekdays, the MBTA currently has too many resources devoted to automobile use. Although a full replacement model at each of the outlined stations is unlikely, over 2000 residential units could be developed in existing underused lots alone. Given BART precedent for surface parking conversion, these lots across the state could be repurposed for transit-oriented development. The above recommendations are a starting point for further examination and advocacy for commuter parking conversion in Boston’s suburbs.

Appendix:

MBTA Commuter Rail Station Parking Capacity

Station Name	Facility Type	Owner	Total Capacity
Abington	Surface Lot	MBTA	404
Andover	Surface Lot	MBTA	149
Ashland	Surface Lot	MBTA	693
Auburndale	Surface Lot	MassDOT	35
Ballardvale	Surface Lot	MBTA	120
Bellevue	Surface Lot	MBTA	37
Beverly Depot	Garage	MBTA	494
Bradford	Surface Lot	MBTA	300
Brandeis/Roberts	Surface Lot	MBTA	24
Bridgewater	Surface Lot	MBTA	499
Campello	Surface Lot	MBTA	552

Canton Center	Surface Lot	MBTA	215
Canton Junction	Surface Lot	MBTA	762
Cohasset	Surface Lot	MBTA	387
Dedham	Surface Lot	MBTA	497
East Weymouth	Surface Lot	MBTA	335
Fairmount	Surface Lot	MBTA	39
Forge Park/495	Surface Lot	MBTA	718
Framingham	Surface Lot	MBTA	294
Franklin	Surface Lot	MBTA	183
Gloucester	Surface Lot	MBTA	100
Grafton	Surface Lot	MBTA	386
Greenbush	Surface Lot	MBTA	1000
Halifax	Surface Lot	MBTA	412
Hamilton/Wenham	Surface Lot	MBTA	194
Hanson	Surface Lot	MBTA	428
Haverhill	Surface Lot	MBTA	150
Hersey	Surface Lot	MBTA	318

Highland	Surface Lot	MBTA	175
Holbrook/Randolph	Surface Lot	MBTA	362
Hyde Park*	Surface Lot	MBTA	121
Islington	Surface Lot	MBTA	33
Kingston	Surface Lot	MBTA	1030
Littleton/495	Surface Lot	MBTA	226
Lynn	Garage	MBTA	978
Middleboro/Lakeville	Surface Lot	MBTA	769
Montello	Surface Lot	MBTA	351
Montserrat	Surface Lot	MBTA	117
Nantasket Junction	Surface Lot	MBTA	490
Needham Heights	Surface Lot	MBTA	99
Needham Junction	Surface Lot	MBTA	129
Newburyport	Surface Lot	MBTA	680
Norfolk	Surface Lot	MBTA	630
North Beverly	Surface Lot	MBTA	86
North Scituate	Surface Lot	MBTA	249

Norwood Center	Surface Lot	MBTA	781
Norwood Depot	Surface Lot	MBTA	219
Plymouth	Surface Lot	MBTA	96
Reading	Surface Lot	MBTA	71
Readville	Surface Lot	MBTA	353
Roslindale	Surface Lot	MBTA	143
Route 128	Garage	MBTA	2578
Rowley	Surface Lot	MBTA	283
Salem	Garage	MBTA	712
South Attleboro	Surface Lot	MBTA	579
South Weymouth	Surface Lot	MBTA	636
Southborough	Surface Lot	MBTA	372
Stoughton	Surface Lot	MBTA	361
Swampscott	Surface Lot	MBTA	144
West Newton Washington St.	Surface Lot	MassDOT	45
West Newton Webster St.	Surface Lot	MassDOT	161
Wakefield	Surface Lot	MBTA	116
Walpole	Surface Lot	MBTA	345

West Gloucester	Surface Lot	MBTA	43
West Hingham	Surface Lot	MBTA	231
West Medford	Surface Lot	MBTA	34
West Natick	Surface Lot	MBTA	178
West Roxbury	Surface Lot	MBTA	62
Westborough	Surface Lot	MBTA	448
Weymouth Landing	Surface Lot	MBTA	290
Whitman	Surface Lot	MBTA	199
Wilmington	Surface Lot	MBTA	198