

Lexington Minuteman.

Town plans for updated, safer downtown by 2025

By Ross Crisantiello | March 21, 2019

When Lexington residents of the past pictured their town center in the future, perhaps they envisioned a high-tech hub complete with robots and flying cars. While there are no hoverboards or jetpacks on the horizon, Lexington center could still be getting a significant, though slightly less futuristic, upgrade soon.

A plan to update the the area along Massachusetts Avenue between the police station and the Battle Green has been in the works for year, and is now poised to reach its final phase.

This renovation would have three main goals: to improve the area's safety, to make it more accessible, and to restore the mid-century modern aesthetic implemented during the center's last major renovation in the 1960s.

"Safety is number one and has been the dominant factor in all decisions," said Pam Shadley, a landscape architect who moved her business to Lexington center 12 years ago. Shadley has been involved with the project since the beginning. She served on the center streetscape design review ad hoc committee, created by the Board of Selectmen after years of discussions about renovating the center.

The project would place a heavy emphasis on pedestrian safety, mainly in the form of updating the area's crosswalks. Although there are currently many crosswalks in the center, they are not seen as particularly safe. This is because they are not ideally located or clearly marked. The new plan calls for a relocation of these crossings to shorten the distance that it takes to get to the other side of the street, Shadley said. It would also add new lighting and sidewalk bump-outs that would help calm traffic and make people more visible as they wait to cross. A number of recent accidents involving people crossing Massachusetts Avenue informed the decision making process, Shadley said.



As Lexington center currently stands, it is not particularly accessible to those with disabilities. For example, the molded brick that make up some walkways does not meet requirements set by the state's Architectural Access Board, Shadley said. Many of the bricks stick out, and can be a tripping hazard. Also, the areas near the road do not have tactile warning pads, the bumpy floor sections which are used in many subway stations and other crossing areas to alert those with vision impairment when they are near a dangerous area.

"The parts of the center that are looking to be rehabilitated are all long in the tooth... people are still getting hurt. It's a 60-year-old infrastructure and it's got to be addressed," said Eric Michelson, who runs Michelson's shoes on Mass Ave with his brother, Jerry.

The town has already installed two sidewalk additions with tactile warning pads on the corner of Mass. Ave and Wallis Court. The town manager's office is looking for feedback from the public on these additions, as they very closely resemble what would be added throughout the center.

The current streetscape traces its history back to 1966, when architect and Lexington resident Hideo Sasaki laid out a comprehensive plan to update the center. Sasaki's plan was notable because it widened the sidewalks and added trees to make the center more friendly for those on foot.

Today, the sidewalk is deteriorating and the trees do not have enough room to

grow, Shadley said. The new plan seeks to restore Sasaki's original vision and make it viable for the modern day by repaving the sidewalk and giving the trees more space to grow both above and below ground.

The plan is being developed by BETA group, a consulting firm specializing in engineering and landscape architecture. Construction drawings are now close to 75 percent complete, Shadley said, which is crucial because it allows the planners to settle on a realistic estimate on how much the project will cost. At Town Meeting, Shadley and others will be seeking \$9,105,000 in funding.

This is an estimate. If Town Meeting approves, the Town Manager's office would move forward and start applying for grants from the state to help with costs. After that, the project would go out to bid, and contractors would have the chance to offer their services to Lexington. It's not until after that process is complete, likely around fall of 2020, that there would be a definite cost for the entire development. Construction could then start in 2021, and the town is aiming to have the entire plan completed by the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington in 2025.

Although a lot remains undecided, there is serious momentum behind the project.

"I believe that most people in town and most committees are behind this project," Shadley said. "You can never be fully confident in something like this, but I'm hopeful."