

Guest Column

By Mayor Gina-Louise Sciarra

“Picture Main Street” is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redesign downtown Northampton. With the help of \$19 million in state and federal funds already designated for the project, our community will be able to address several critical needs: safety, accessibility, vibrancy, and climate resiliency.

In this pivotal moment for Northampton, we have an extraordinary opportunity to shape our city's future. I urge everyone, especially those who still have reservations, to consider the lasting impact of Picture Main Street. This isn't just about updated crosswalks or wider sidewalks; it's about creating a downtown that represents the best of who we are and who we aspire to be.

By investing in a more inclusive, safe, and vibrant Main Street, we're not just making aesthetic changes. We are helping our beloved brick-and-mortar businesses overcome the existential threat posed by online retail. We are giving ourselves more reasons to get off the couch and get together with our friends, families, and neighbors. We are preserving what we all love about small-city life—the kind of life that drew so many of us to Northampton or convinced us to never move away.

And when I say “we,” I mean it literally. While the project is mainly funded by outside sources, the design was shaped by extensive Northampton community input over many years. A review of city meeting agendas shows redesigning Main Street was posted for discussion in at least 63 publicly posted meetings over the last six years. Three community surveys were conducted and nine Picture Main Street public forums were convened, as well as dedicated business and other stakeholder meetings. Furthermore, reimaging and redesigning Main Street was publicly deliberated during the creation of the city's plans for Transportation, Streetscape Improvement, and a Sustainable Northampton. Those plans involved dozens more public meetings, forums, and charrettes in over two decades of work by Northampton residents on the city's volunteer boards and committees and were ultimately approved by the City Council.

In 2021, four Picture Main Street design options were presented to the public. These designs were the result of an extensive collaboration with Toole Design, a woman-owned engineering, planning, and design firm with 20 years of experience guiding cities through complex roadway design projects. The community was invited to explore the benefits and trade-offs of each of the design alternatives. The proposals were measured against a set of evaluation criteria based on priorities expressed by the community. After extensive debate, modifications, and compromises, city and state

officials finalized a design plan. (One of my very first acts as Mayor in January 2022 was to preserve a section of angled parking in response to feedback from those in the disability and business communities.) Construction is slated to begin in 2025.

The scope of this project is extensive, making it challenging to see how each part of the plan contributes to the overall vision. As debates and conversations around Picture Main Street continue, I'd like to delve into the urgent needs downtown faces and the innovative solutions we have developed to tackle them. I won't shortchange you on details, as I am confident they will only get you more excited for the next chapter of our cherished downtown.

The first critical area is safety. As the *Gazette* reported earlier this year, according to Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) data, "the affected area of Main Street made the top 5% of crash clusters in the state for pedestrian and bicycle accidents." This is a danger not just for Northampton residents, but for anyone who visits our great city. For this reason, Picture Main Street rose to the top of the regional list for state and federal funding.

To end the dangerous roadway confusion, we will clearly mark two car lanes, one on each side of the road, through the length of Main Street. A third lane for turning will be added between the two lanes. Northampton will not only remain accessible by car but will be easier to navigate by car. Clarifying three lanes of traffic for the traffic volumes on upper Main Street (12,000 - 12,900 vehicles per day (VPD)) easily falls under the 20,000 VPD threshold established for three-lane roads.

This change also creates more space for pedestrians, rollers, and bikers. Curbs at crosswalks will be extended to further narrow the distance across which pedestrians and rollers are exposed to moving traffic. All nine crosswalks across Main Street will be narrowed. For example, the rainbow crosswalk currently is approximately 90 feet across, and the new design will narrow it to 41.

Crosswalks at intersections with signals will include a "leading pedestrian interval" which allows people to begin crossing before any vehicular movement. The interval will enhance the visibility of walkers and rollers, especially for people at a lower height, such as wheelchair users.

In keeping with established city and MassDOT policy, we will be significantly improving bicycle safety and comfort by delineating bicycle travel ways. These will be physically separated as necessary to achieve the greatest safety given the extent of street parking, intersections, turning movements, and traffic volumes.

Many community members who participated in public forums and surveys asked for the city to prioritize separated bike lanes. However, bike policy is not just a matter of public opinion, but also of science and law. Bike lane research shows that the crash rate of separated lanes is about half of that of conventional bike lanes. Furthermore, under the Vulnerable Road Users law that Massachusetts enacted this year, operators of motor vehicles must pass “vulnerable users”—walkers, bikers, and rollers—at a safe speed and distance of not less than four feet. The separated bike lanes will help with compliance by ensuring the legally required space from vehicles. This would not be possible with four traffic lanes.

Beyond safety, these changes also enhance equity and accessibility. In past Main Street designs little attention was paid to the needs of pedestrians, rollers, and bikers. Steep grades and narrow sidewalks pose significant issues for those with mobility challenges.

The redesign will be the most accessible and equitable configuration in the history of Main Street. Significantly widened sidewalks will allow groups of people to walk or roll side by side. Wheelchair users and those with strollers will be able to safely pass others on the sidewalk without impediments. A separate "furnishing zone" will further reduce sidewalk obstacles by locating benches, trash receptacles, light poles, and landscaping out of the way of through-travelers. Sidewalk cross slopes, and where feasible grades, will meet current accessibility standards. Where possible, these changes will allow some business entryways to meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access, reducing the number of businesses that are not wheelchair accessible from the sidewalk. Crosswalks will be relocated to the top of the slope, which will not only meet ADA requirements but also create much safer crossings at Crafts Avenue and Old South Street.

Picture Main Street will also establish additional dedicated accessible parking spaces. We heard from some wheelchair and other mobility device users who greatly prefer parallel parking spots and from others who felt safer in angled spaces. It depends on the type of vehicle and mobility device used by the individual. To provide access for both preferences, there will be four angled accessible spaces on the south side of upper Main Street with buffered space on the sides, where there are now only two. There will be two parallel and buffered accessible spaces on the north side of upper Main Street, where there is now just one unbuffered space. All buffered spaces will allow for safe side and rear embarking from vehicles.

When we build it, people will come. The human-centered redesign of Main Street will make visiting downtown Northampton a vibrant experience for residents and visitors,

helping our local brick-and-mortar businesses compete in an increasingly internet-based economy.

Online retail, food delivery, and streaming services are massive threats to the viability of all downtowns. The status quo is insufficient to get more people out of their homes. More sidewalk space means more space for entertainment, dining, art, gathering, and fostering an overall sense of community that cannot be achieved while sitting on the couch and doom-scrolling social media sites. We're not just beautifying the area; we're investing in the long-term success of our restaurants, shops, art galleries, and entertainment venues, while also laying the groundwork to attract new businesses in the future.

Lastly, any plan for the future must build resiliency from the climate crisis. Picture Main Street will cool our downtown, strengthen our infrastructure, and reduce our carbon footprint. It's time to stop talking about it, stop agreeing we need it, and start doing it.

The addition of 36 trees—more than doubling the existing amount—will create a cooling canopy to help offset the heat that is typically elevated in downtowns. Thanks to the wider sidewalks and the separate furnishing zone, we can thoughtfully plant trees in healthy locations instead of shoehorning them in minimal, leftover space without sufficient room for growth. Trees will be planted more sustainably with increased soil volume, connected trenches, and structural soil to allow them a long healthy life.

We know that transportation is one of the biggest contributors to our carbon footprint, so we must provide all available opportunities to minimize our reliance on motorized vehicles for trips that can be completed by other means. Some people need to roll, walk, or bike. Some people need to drive. The reallocation of dangerous and inconsistent vehicle lane space provides safer options for individuals who can choose an alternative to driving.

Aging infrastructure is no match for the extreme weather caused by climate change. Thankfully, the state and federal investment in Picture Main Street will facilitate the replacement of over century-old water, sewer, and drainage utilities under Main Street. This critical infrastructure is well past its end of life and needs to be replaced as failures are arising with it. The replacement of these aging utilities also creates the opportunity to redesign surface level and underground stormwater systems that can handle the increased volume of stormwater we have been experiencing and which will likely get worse. Performing this necessary infrastructure work during a major construction project largely financed by state and federal dollars will save Northampton taxpayers millions.

So, what's next for the Picture Main Street process? After all of the feedback from community members who have participated in our extensive, deliberative, and debated engagement process, the design has been approved by MassDOT in what is known as the "25% submission." With that step completed, we are moving toward the next phase, known as the "75% and 100% submission," which involves final cost estimates, minor design refinements, and the development of traffic management plans to mitigate the impacts of construction. This will include developing a real-time communications strategy. The Toole Design team will be our liaison with the MassDOT design and construction team once we transition from design to construction to ensure that our mitigation interests are implemented.

As the design is already approved and not up for reconsideration, our community conversation should move in tandem with the state process, and focus on the best ways to support our downtown businesses during the construction period. The Mayor's Office and city officials are partnering with the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Northampton Association, and other organizations on plans around support and community engagement. We have begun soliciting input from businesses and community members and will ramp up outreach throughout this stage of the process.

If you still have questions about the Picture Main Street design, I encourage you to read the city's [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document, which you can access from the home



page of the city's website or this QR code. Also, you can find a link to the City Council's Resolution in Support of the Picture Main Street Project [here](#) - it includes a comprehensive timeline of downtown planning. If you need any assistance accessing the document or need the information in a different format, please contact the Mayor's Office.

Throughout this public process, we have heard differing opinions on certain aspects of the project. But we have also heard a remarkable consensus about the overarching goals of the project. We all want safer streets and sidewalks, public spaces and travelways that are accessible to everyone and easily navigated by wheelchairs or other assistive devices, fewer greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient spaces, and a vibrant and thriving downtown.

Thanks to all who have shown their commitment to Northampton by taking the time to research these important issues, ask the tough questions, and share their insights. This is what democracy looks like.