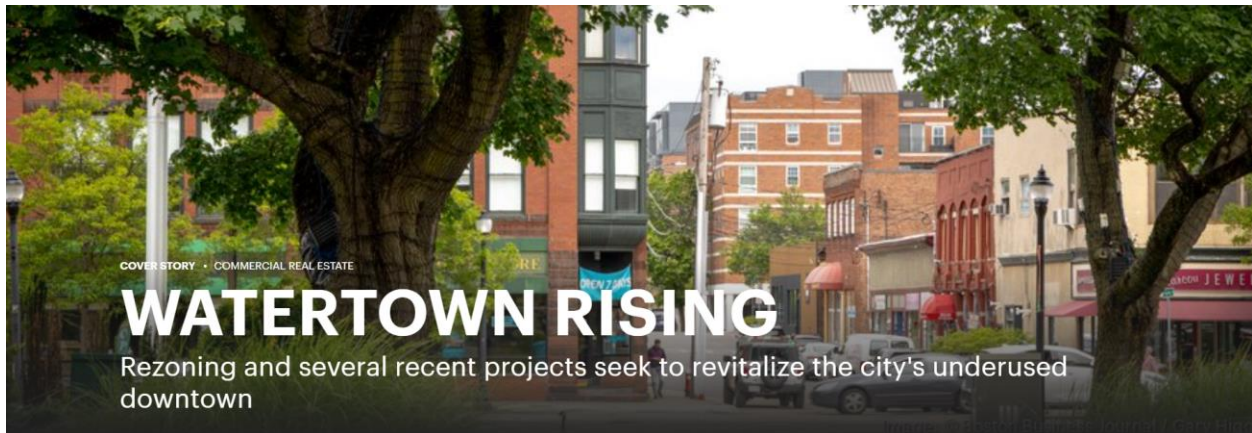


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By [Grant Welker](#) – Reporter, Boston Business Journal
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Story Highlights

- Watertown has rezoned to revitalize its downtown square area.
- The city's population grew from 32,000 to 35,000 between 2010-2024.
- New development includes apartments, retail, and life sciences companies.

David Missirian, who was born and raised in Watertown, remembers when the city didn't have much beyond a military arsenal and a B. F. Goodrich factory.

While Missirian, a law professor at Bentley University, hesitates to apply the word "lagging" to the city's past, he says he always considered it beneath some of its neighbors. "A step up was to go from there to Arlington," he said. "Belmont — that was like two steps up."

That's why Missirian supports recent efforts to remake Watertown Square into a residential destination.

"You look at downtown Watertown, and it looks like someone forgot about it," he said. "It needs people to want to come and live and shop in Watertown Square again."

Watertown has benefited from its proximity to Boston and Cambridge, which has helped make it an increasingly desirable place to live and work. New apartments, shops and offices have opened alongside the city's main thoroughfare. There's now a Warby Parker and a Shake Shack, as well as new life sciences companies, including Kymera Therapeutics and Mariana Oncology.

But city officials believe that Watertown Square, the community's downtown, has been left behind. A new rezoning effort seeks to change that.

"We've done well in the life sciences cluster. We've built housing up at Arsenal Yards," City Manager George Proakis said. "But we want to be able to say, 'OK, well, where's our next set of opportunities?' The square just kind of calls out for it as a place to pay attention."

City leaders point to a project rising across from City Hall on Main Street as an example of what they want to replicate. The development, by O'Connor Capital Partners of New York, was already in the works before the rezoning, but has the right ingredients: four floors of apartments, with 137 units in all, with above-ground-floor retail use.

"We let the community guide us, in terms of the upper and lower limits of what they wanted to be able to do," Proakis said of the density and type of development allowed.



Main Street in Watertown Square. City leaders and residents aren't satisfied with a feeling that the neighborhood is too often a cut-through, including people going to and from Cambridge and the Mass Pike.

No 'analysis by paralysis'

Municipal processes that involve public input can be painfully slow. But Watertown has moved quickly, completing its rezoning process in just a year and a half. The process also happened to coincide with the state's MBTA Communities law, which requires cities and towns to zone for a certain amount of multifamily housing. That created a timeline, Proakis said, and carried with it a spotlight on a need for new housing.

"The leadership in Watertown has always been one to not have paralysis by analysis," said Steve Magoon, assistant city manager for community development and planning.

The new zoning allows for denser residential buildings with a mix of uses, such as ground-floor retail spaces, to make Watertown Square a more livable and walkable neighborhood.

Watertown had already seen growth up-close so it wasn't an abstract idea. The four-square-mile city's population was less than 32,000 in 2010 and surpassed 35,000 in 2024, after seeing almost no growth in the decades prior.

Payam Bakhshi, a construction management professor at Wentworth Institute of Technology, said proper zoning is crucial for getting projects built. That's because obtaining variances adds a lot of time to a project before construction can even start.

"Zoning comes up, without exception, in any conversation we have with a construction-industry expert," he said. "Zoning seems to be the biggest hurdle in front of development."



Image: © Boston Business Journal / Gary Higgins

Newer residential units along Arsenal Street near commercial property is an example of how much new construction in Watertown has risen in the place of or next to lower-density uses.

Transforming a pass-through community

Proakis became Watertown's city manager in 2022, after several years as the planning director in Somerville. As he got to know the community, he said, many residents told him they felt like downtown had a persistent challenge.

"Your downtown is the way you define what your community is, and what it feels like is that we process a lot of 'through' traffic," he said. "It's a place that makes it easier to get from the Mass Pike to Cambridge. We have some successful downtown businesses, and we have the bones of a good downtown, but a lot of the pieces haven't all just quite come together."

Most of Watertown's new development over the last decade has replaced sprawling industrial properties or parking lots with denser developments. That trend continues, as another planned project would replace the Watertown Mall with a mixed-use development.

Dylan Gottlieb, who teaches American urban history at Bentley, said that makes total sense in a city where land values are high. But he still sees Watertown as undervalued for development compared to its pricier neighbor, Belmont, and not as built out as two other more commercial neighbors, Cambridge and Waltham.

Without rapid-transit lines — its Green Line branch was taken out of service in 1969 — Watertown hasn't been as appealing for dense development until more recently, when demand for life sciences, retail and residential space extended beyond Boston and Cambridge.

Watertown Square today doesn't have the same large, underutilized areas as other parts of Watertown, many of which were scooped up over the past decade. But City Hall leaders said they're seeing increased interest from developers for downtown, even as the rate of new construction has slowed for every municipality in the commonwealth.

"There are definitely a number of property owners and developers who are kicking the tires on different projects in the square," Magoon said. "Some of those are getting ready to come forward referring to a start of permitting reviews, and we'll see how that plays out."