



# Washington Square Gateway Neighborhood Action Plan

June 30, 2008



This comprehensive planning effort was made possible through a grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) from the City of New Bedford Office of Housing and Community Development.



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## Acknowledgements

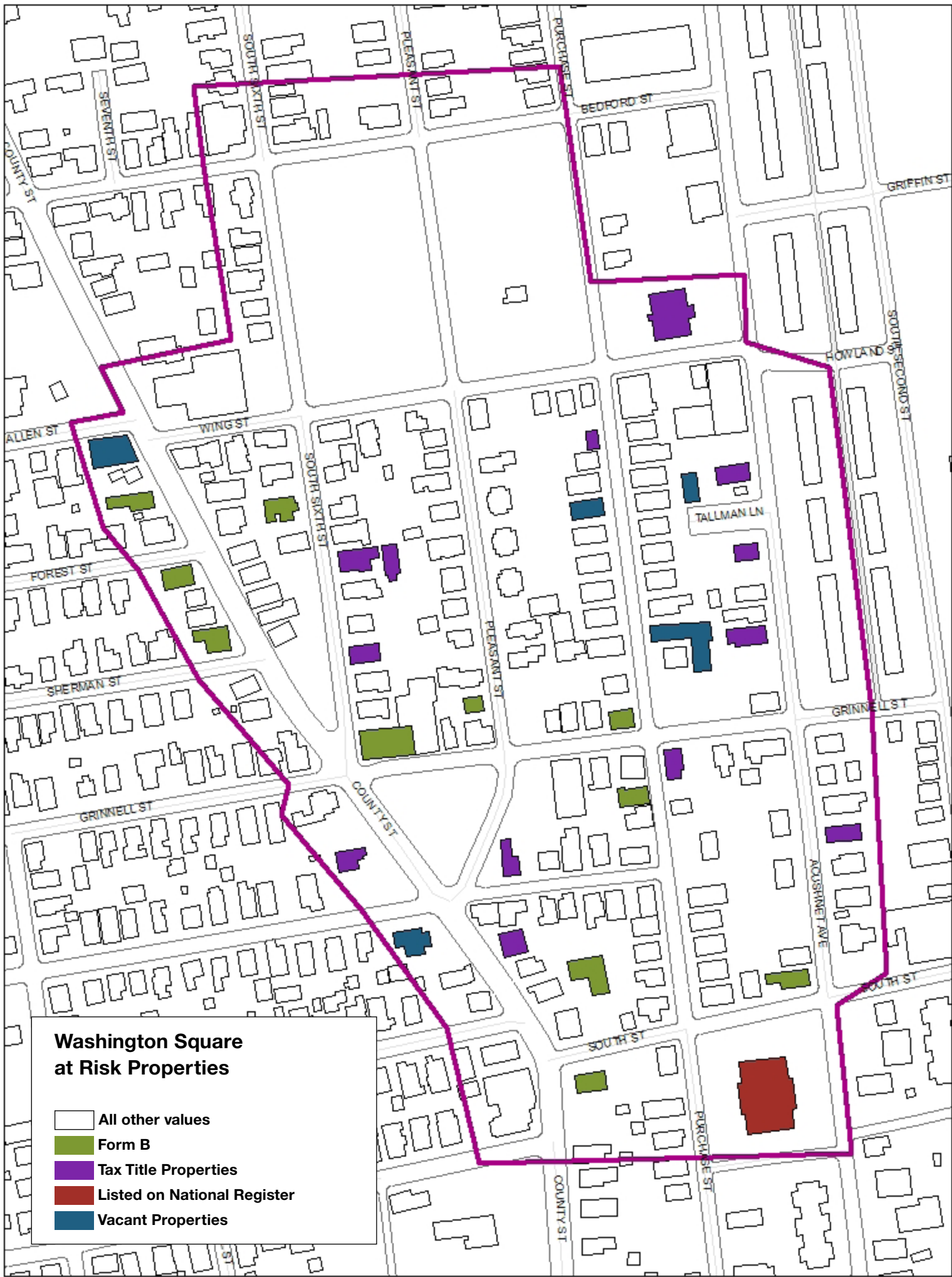
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WHALE would like to acknowledge the individuals and entities that ensured the success of this comprehensive planning effort.

The City of New Bedford, Mayor Scott W. Lang  
The City of New Bedford, Office of Housing and Community Development  
The City of New Bedford, Department of Community Services  
The City of New Bedford, Inspectional Services  
The City of New Bedford, Planning Department  
The City of New Bedford, Police Department  
The City of New Bedford, Public Infrastructure  
The City of New Bedford, Treasurer's Office  
New Bedford Economic Development Council  
New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park  
Ward 4 Councillor Bruce Duarte  
Ward 5 Councillor Jane Gonsalves  
Alfred J. Gomes School  
Gene Bergson  
Bisca Club  
Diane Brodeur  
Café Arpeggio  
Manuela Cormier  
Christina D'Amico  
Jan DaSilva  
Michelle Duarte  
Nick Francis, Franchise Studio Inc.  
Lyn Keith  
Anne Louro  
Jill Maclean  
mediumstudio  
Old Bedford Village Development Corp, "Buddy" Andrade  
Reynolds DeWalt Printing  
Derek Santos  
So. First/So. Second Neighborhood Association  
Soren Triff  
WHALE Board of Directors

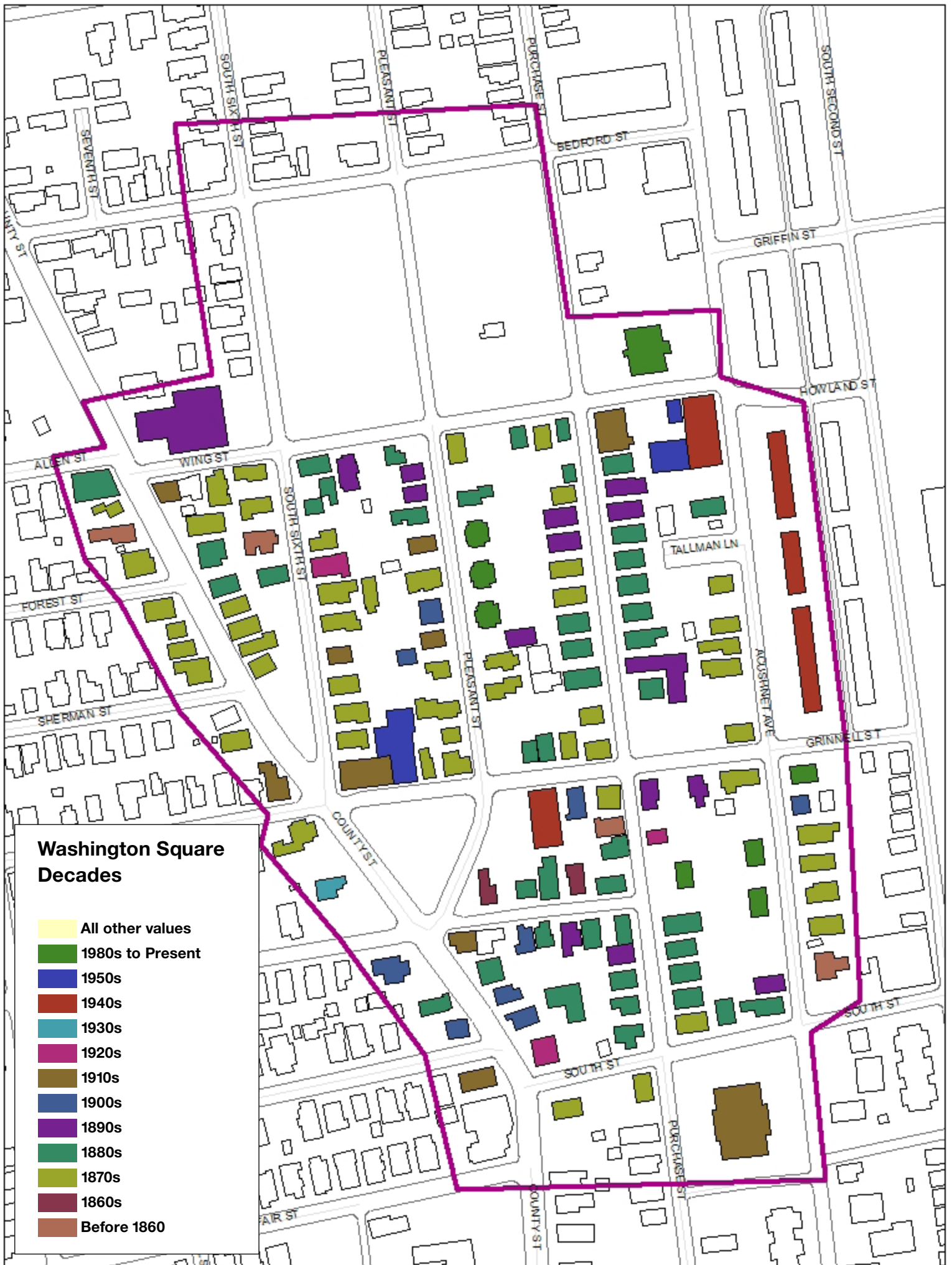
Washington Square Neighborhood

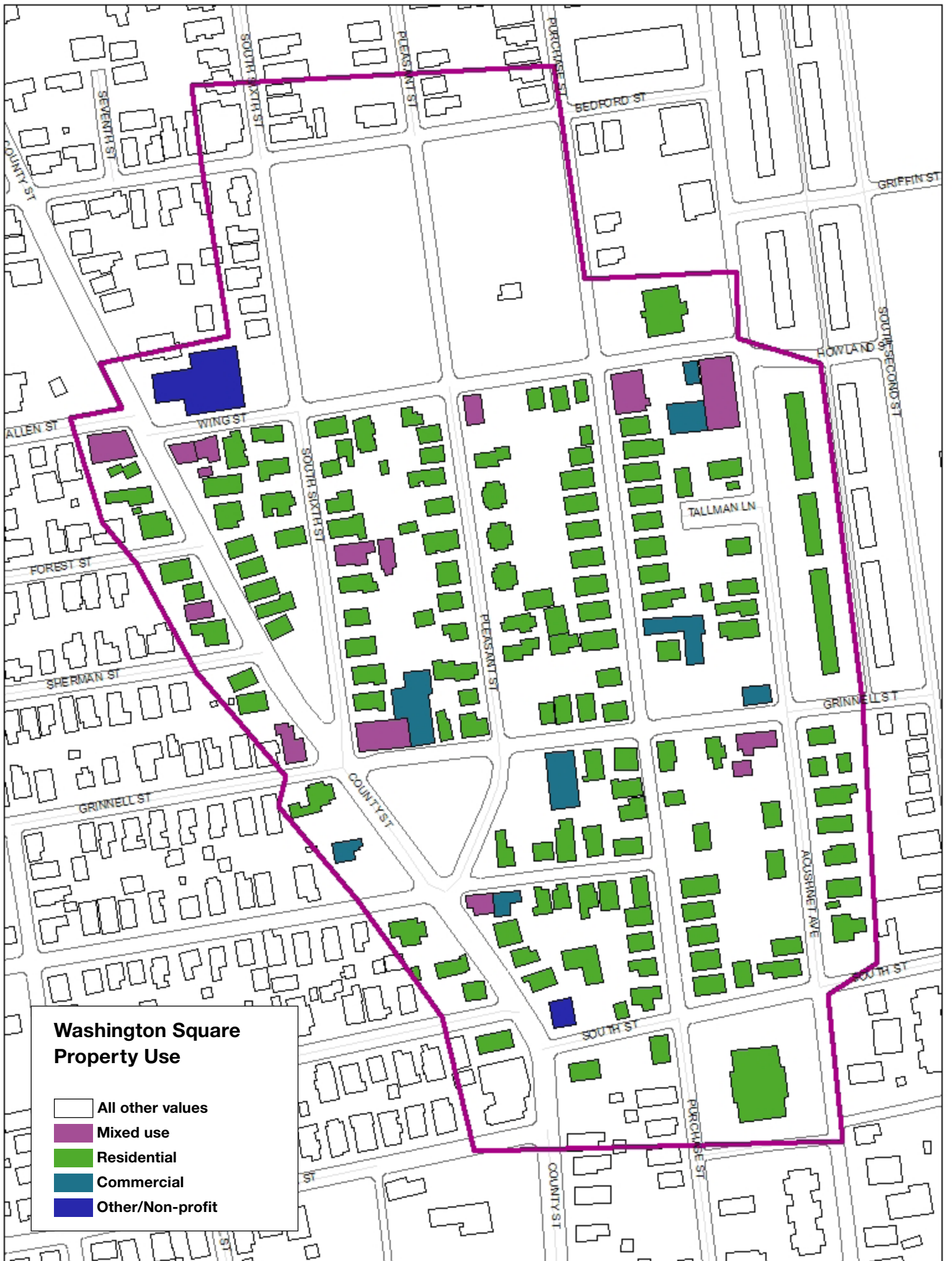




### Washington Square at Risk Properties

- All other values
- Form B
- Tax Title Properties
- Listed on National Register
- Vacant Properties





**Washington Square  
Property Use**

- All other values
- Mixed use
- Residential
- Commercial
- Other/Non-profit

## 1. Preface

This report documents the research, field work, participation and outcomes of the public planning process completed by the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) for the Washington Square Neighborhood. The purpose of the Washington Square Neighborhood Meeting was to allow meaningful, public involvement and community consensus, which would inform the development of a Washington Square Neighborhood Action Plan. More than 60 participants engaged in a creative, open and inclusive dialogue surrounding particular themes they deemed as a priority for this neighborhood. The themes discussed included housing, historic preservation, open space, vehicle and pedestrian access, and safety.



Located just south of downtown, the Washington Square Neighborhood is a significant, historic neighborhood in New Bedford. With 95% of its 166 properties having been built before the 1950s, historic and architecturally significant properties are abundant on the neighborhood's tree-lined streets. Even more impressive is that 85% of these properties are considered in good to excellent condition and 21% retain high or very high historical integrity. Nearly 70% of all properties are owner occupied. This documentation confirms that the Washington Square Neighborhood is a

perfect location for focused historic preservation and neighborhood revitalization efforts. Clearly, the Washington Square Neighborhood is worthy of preservation.

Initially, a neighborhood charrette was scheduled for Saturday, April 12<sup>th</sup> at the Alfred J. Gomes School. A postcard invitation was hand delivered to all residents in the neighborhood as well as press releases sent to various media outlets. Due to a low neighborhood turnout, the meeting was cancelled because resident participation is crucial to create buy-in for the plan. The residents who attended the initial meeting shared their confusion about the meeting, its purpose, focus and result. They also were not familiar with WHALE and had confused the different components of WHALE's Neighborhood Restoration Program, one of which is the development of this Neighborhood Action Plan.

It was clear that a more intense, grassroots effort in the neighborhood was needed to achieve positive, desired results. The Washington Square Neighborhood Meeting was rescheduled to Saturday, May 10<sup>th</sup> at the Gomes School and the work in the neighborhood began. Numerous times, WHALE staff, assisted by residents and Ward 4 City Councilor Bruce Duarte, went door to door in the neighborhood distributing various brochures and flyers printed in English, Portuguese and Spanish. This promotional material explained the topics and themes that would be discussed at the neighborhood meeting. WHALE found that residents clearly understood the issues that exist in their neighborhood and were very vocal about their concerns.

Prior to the May 10<sup>th</sup> neighborhood meeting, there was extensive outreach into the community and neighborhood to ensure awareness and participation of as many stakeholders as possible. Press releases were sent to the major local newspapers, including both English and Portuguese speaking papers. Radio stations and the local public cable access channel were notified and assisted in spreading the word. The area's churches advertised the meeting in their bulletins. Letters were sent to City Councilors and key department heads within the City of New Bedford encouraging participation in the event. Several departments were represented at the meeting including Planning, Community Development, DPI, DPF, Treasurer's office, Mayor's office, New Bedford Economic Development Council, and Police. Several neighborhood organizations, associations and clubs like Old Bedford Village Development Corp. and the Bisca Club helped promote the meeting. This grassroots approach paid off as 62 individuals participated in the meeting.

## 2. Shaping A Vision



Bright and early on a beautiful Saturday spring morning, more than sixty people, the overwhelming majority of which were residents of the neighborhood, came together to participate in the Washington Square Neighborhood Meeting. In addition to neighborhood residents, participants included City Councilors, WHALE Board members and staff, planners, nonprofit directors, and representatives from neighborhood organizations and various city departments. The meeting was held at the Alfred J. Gomes Elementary School on

South Second Street and provided an opportunity for the residents of the neighborhood to share their thoughts and ideas.

### GETTING STARTED

Although registration was scheduled for 8:30 a.m., enthusiastic participants began to arrive as early as 8:15 a.m. Participants were randomly assigned to a group and provided with a Washington Square Neighborhood Reference Guide for use in the working group sessions. The three-hour meeting began with an introductory speech followed by an informational presentation to explain the goals of the meeting and the overall project.

Research completed prior to the meeting yielded five major themes that have a significant impact on the Washington Square Neighborhood. These themes were presented to the participants as the major areas of discussion for the working group sessions. The five themes were:

#### 1 Housing



#### 2 Open Space



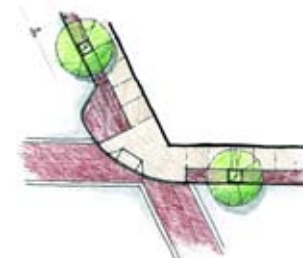
#### 3 Historic Preservation



#### 4 Vehicle and Pedestrian Access (Streets & Sidewalks)



#### 5 Safety



## FOUR GROUPS, ONE NEIGHBORHOOD

After the initial presentations the participants broke out into four groups led by facilitators to discuss the five themes presented to them. Each participant was given three colored dots to vote for the three themes he/she felt were most pressing in the neighborhood. The votes were tallied in each group by the facilitators and the top three vote getters became the focus of discussion for that group. Some groups added a fourth theme for discussion that the participants felt equally strong about. Each group discussed the neighborhood's strengths and weaknesses in the top three or four selected areas.

Residents appeared very enthusiastic and proud of their neighborhood and were eager to make recommendations and offer suggestions for consideration.



## FINAL PRESENTATIONS

As the group sessions came to an end, each group selected one or more members to present the results of the morning's discussions in a final presentation to all participants. All participants gathered together to listen to the group presentations. During the final presentations, groups summarized and presented the themes and goals, which they had identified and developed to positively impact their neighborhood. The following pages consist of the thoughts noted and developed by the individual groups, at the neighborhood meeting.



## CONSENSUS

**Each group was instructed to rank and discuss the five themes by level of importance to the neighborhood and quality of life in the neighborhood. Although they only had to touch upon three of the five topics each group had time to discuss a fourth. Historic Preservation and Open Space were the two topics chosen by all four groups and were each picked as a number one priority once. Safety and Vehicle and Pedestrian Access were chosen by three groups each. Housing on the other hand was only discussed in two groups. Just as the groups addressed themes in order of importance, the following will be listed based on popularity within the groups.**



### **Historic Preservation**

Several groups stressed the importance of preserving the historic fabric and character of the neighborhood. Another common suggestion involved new construction. In cases of infill construction, participants advocated for a "build to blend" philosophy that would encourage new construction that fits in with the existing character, architectural styles, and charm of the neighborhood.

Groups mentioned the need for cultural and historic-looking enhancements that would improve the neighborhood walking experience such as special street treatments, improved and even sidewalks, and old fashioned street lights, sidewalks, and signs.

Several groups expressed interest in expanding the historic markers program in the Washington Square neighborhood in order to recognize the abundance of historically and architecturally homes within the neighborhood.

One group called for a moratorium on demolition. Another felt it would be important to establish a local historic district in this neighborhood governed by a historical commission in order to prevent any inappropriate alterations to the historic fabric of the neighborhood, although it was unknown what steps would have to be taken to accomplish this or the level of difficulty to complete such a process.

The expense of historic preservation to a home owner was also addressed. They emphasized a need for programs to help homeowners keep and maintain these older properties. All groups acknowledged the abundance of history associated with the neighborhood and one group suggested that an oral history project be completed to document the history.

A common idea throughout the groups did not relate to the preservation of buildings and structures but instead a need for more memory and commemoration throughout the neighborhood. There were several discussions relating to the importance of monuments and memorials to the community. Some of those pre-existing, were noted as needing maintenance or landscaping while participants also offered ideas for additional monuments and public dedications. This includes the seemingly popular idea of preserving cultural heritage by way of a Cape Verdean Cultural Center.



### **Open Space**

Residents seem to believe firmly in the redevelopment of the Morse Twist Drill Site. Recurring suggestions included some form of recreation/entertainment area, infill, affordable housing (home ownership not rental), mixed use involving commercial on the lower floors and residential above, and a community center. The main point driven home by the participants is that the residents want to be included in conversations with the city about how the site will be redeveloped. They want an opportunity to be heard and provide input.

The Cape Verdean Veterans Memorial Square (formerly known as “Washington Square”) was a popular topic, with many residents stressing the need for maintenance, clean up, improved landscaping and lighting, and a general need for all-around beautification of the space.

Several solutions were proposed to resolve the lingering issue of multiple vacant lots in the neighborhood. Several lots on Acushnet Avenue are currently owned by the City of New Bedford and have the potential for a new use. Ideas ranged from infill construction, to landscaped community gardens and off street parking for clubs and neighbors.

Only three groups brought up the issue of the former site of One Washington Square, two strongly favoring that idea of rebuilding a house on this gateway property that would be sensitive to the historic neighborhood in which it will be located and the Queen Anne that once graced the lot while the other group urged for the lot to be green space. The first group felt the highest and best use for this location was a house. This group felt that this location would not be safe for open, green space, a community garden or an area for children to play because of the heavily traveled County Street and its gateway location. Another group concurred with this group’s findings and felt that other empty lots would be better suited for open, green space. A third group felt that the lot should be used for green space.

### **Safety**

One issue that most residents agreed on was the need for more police presence throughout the neighborhood, especially during school hours. They also stressed the importance of the police working with the community and thought they should build a stronger relationship. Neighbors also hope for

more teamwork and communication amongst themselves and expressed interest in creating some type of neighborhood watch.

The existence of certain “problem areas” around the neighborhood, both as open areas and blighted buildings, was strongly emphasized. The possibility of additional lighting throughout the streets and especially in and around Washington Square was discussed as a viable solution for some of the open areas.

The blighted properties and lots however may prove to be a bit more difficult and must be addressed sooner rather than later. Residents singled out specific properties of concern including a vacant lot at the south end of Acushnet Avenue, the abandoned and rapidly deteriorating building at 5 Tallman Lane, a particular Wing Street property, the abandoned Frates Funeral Home at 265 County Street, and what has become of the site formerly occupied by the Queen Anne at One Washington Square. One group agreed with the concept of creating an abandoned buildings registry and requiring property owners to pay an “operational fee” in order to prevent problem property owners from letting their buildings/lots go too far. These abandoned and blighted properties pose a threat to homeowners around them because of the fire danger and the lower the values of homes surrounding them and threaten the neighborhood



### **Vehicle and Pedestrian Access – Streets and Sidewalks**

The absolute number one concern under this category was the issue of speeding on neighborhood streets in particular County and Sixth Streets. This concern was mentioned multiple times by several groups. Two of the groups brought specific attention to intersection of County and South Streets where County Street takes a sudden bend. Pedestrians trying to cross at this point are unable to see the speeding

vehicles coming from both directions, making it extremely difficult to cross safely.

Special attention must be paid as well to the neighborhood's use of the public transportation system. With several stops, both for city and school buses, there is a growing need for bus stop shelters. Residents also stressed the poor condition of the bus routes. Timely repair on these streets, as well as many other streets and sidewalks throughout the neighborhood would greatly improve transportation.

A great deal of concern was expressed for basic maintenance and care given to the streets, sidewalks and public areas within the neighborhood. Potholes were a major concern. One third of the neighborhood streets had potholes in heavily traveled areas. Sidewalks are broken and uneven and pose a safety threat. Timely repair of the streets and sidewalks coupled with better, historic-looking lighting and trees plantings would improve the pedestrian experience throughout the neighborhood. Litter throughout the neighborhood was also an issue. A cleaner, more beautiful streetscape is what the residents want to see in their neighborhood.

### **Housing**

Although all five themes were discussed at the meeting, only two groups chose to touch on the topic of housing. Between the two groups, the major issues and ideas that overlapped, were also relevant enough to one of the other themes and thus were included elsewhere. For an example, the idea of a moratorium on knocking down houses was mentioned under “historic preservation” and the issue of problem properties, under “safety”.

## Next Steps

The following table represents the action steps that should be implemented in order to improve the quality of life and livability of the historic Washington Square neighborhood and a tentative timeline for accomplishing each tasks.

### SHORT TERM PROJECTS – 1 TO 2 YEARS

 **Recommended Action Steps**      **Lead Entity**

#### HISTORIC PRESERVATION



**1. Reconstruction of One Washington Square.**

Community Development issues RFP/ Proposal Submitted/ Developer Selected WHALE is interested in participating in some capacity for this project.

**2. Design infill construction model that fits in with the historic neighborhood and incorporates green building principals.**

WHALE/New Bedford Historical Commission

**3. Promote the historic markers program in the neighborhood to recognize significant historical properties.**

New Bedford Preservation Society with assistance from Neighborhood groups/association

**4. Expand/develop program that will help homeowners keep and maintain their historic property**

WHALE/Office of Housing and Community Development/ CDBG funds – Action Plan 2009-2010

#### OPEN SPACE



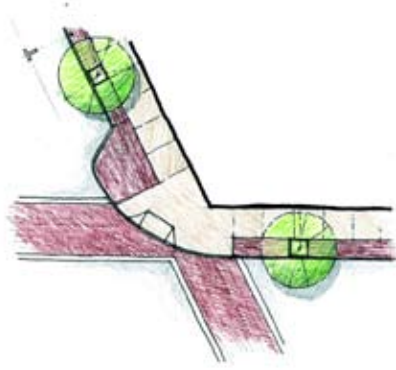
**5. Identify and determine highest and best use for vacant lots**

City of New Bedford Planning Department

**6. Greening the neighborhood – encouraging private property owners to spruce up their property, plant flowers, and landscape their properties.**

Neighborhood Association, Groups & Residents

## SAFETY



**7. Develop stronger relationship between residents and police department, especially Community Police Officers.**

Police Department with residents

**8. Develop a Neighborhood Watch**

Police Department and Neighborhood Association/groups

**9. Require registration and “operational fee” of vacant properties to help address abandoned, blighted, problem properties.**

City Council & City of New Bedford Housing Task Force

**10. Address speeding, especially along County Streets and So. Sixth Streets**

Police Department, DPI

**11. Install Bus Stop Shelters & Bus Route Street Repair**

SRTA/DPI

**12. Repair of potholes, improve condition of streets and repair broken and unsafe sidewalks in a timely manner.**

DPI

**13. Review existing streetscapes. Design improvements to streets and sidewalks including pedestrian scale street lights, signs, sidewalks and street treatments**

Planning & DPI

## MID TERM PROJECTS – 3 TO 4 YEARS



**Recommended  
Action Steps**



**Lead Entity**

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION



**14. Create a local historic or national register district**

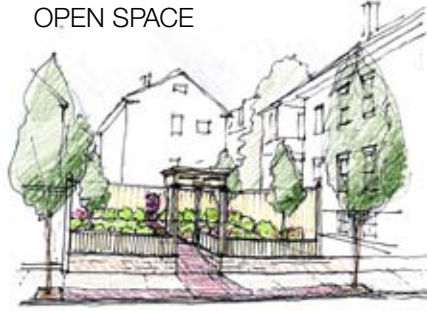
Planning Department/ Preservation Planner

**15. Conduct an oral history project**

New Bedford Historical Society – School department/UMASS  
Dartmouth History Program

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OPEN SPACE



**16. Beautification of Cape Verdean Veterans Memorial Square**

City of New Bedford, neighborhood volunteers

**17. Implement plan for highest and best use for vacant lots**

City of New Bedford DPI, Parks and Recreation

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VEHICLE & PEDESTRIAN ACCESS  
(STREETS AND SIDEWALKS)



**18. Seek funding to implement improvements to streets and sidewalks (see # 13)**

Planning & DPI

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**LONG TERM PROJECTS – 5+ YEARS**



**Recommended  
Action Steps**



**Lead Entity**

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HISTORIC PRESERVATION



**19. Development of Morse Twist Drill Site**

**(Residents expressed a strong desire to be included in conversations about this site.)**

City of New Bedford with input from neighborhood leaders, associations, groups & residents