



**TAUNTON TDI DISTRICT:**

**TACTICAL**

**INTERVENTIONS**

**PROJECT**



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*This report has been prepared for MassDevelopment by Toole Design Group as part of the Technical Assistance component of the Transformative Development Initiative (TDI).*



## Introduction

There is an idea that good urban planning, design, and engineering work is more than just the physical and spatial components of cities and towns. Beyond the technical expertise that professionals provide, these projects and processes should focus on more than just filling gaps in networks, activating spaces, or advocating for multimodal safety and connectivity. It is all these things plus the bringing together of diverse groups of people to play active and central roles in how their communities move forward.

### The **Taunton Transformative District Initiative (TDI) Tactical Intervention Project**

was created to activate the City of Taunton's Whittenton District through an organized community engagement strategy that aimed to connect people and business to each other, and to evaluate and explore a series of physical interventions that could create stronger physical, social, and economic outcomes. MassDevelopment engaged the services of Toole Design Group to work with the Whittenton Community Partnership and the City of Taunton to conceptualize, design, and implement a physical intervention to reenergize and further activate Bay St. as a public space, and not simply a means for vehicles to pass through. To accomplish this, Toole Design employed a civic design process to develop a "quick-build" intervention to set the stage for larger, more transformative visions to come.

This report summarizes a civic design process that took place between January-August 2023 leading to the completion of crosswalk art along Bay St., from Britannia St. to Whittenton St. The project team's hope is that this one, seemingly simple, intervention will continue capacity-building towards long-term, community-led planning and visioning for more permanent improvements in the Whittenton District.

### What Is Civic Design?

Civic Design is the execution of multidisciplinary design facilitated by seasoned professionals and industry leaders in equal partnership with community members and organizations. Processes subject to this approach can take many forms and serve as a guiding philosophy for projects that range in scope, scale, size, and location. When planning and design thinking centers the safe and comfortable use of transportation systems, and public health and welfare are prioritized throughout the built environment, true civic spaces can be achieved for the use and enjoyment of all.

Civic Design also acknowledges historical and current harms that individuals, communities, and their environments carry due to biased design decisions and policies. It is an opportunity to achieve more equitable outcomes and ensure that community members – particularly those whose agency has not been appropriately recognized in past planning and design efforts – have a hand in shaping their collective futures through the expression of the culture and history of their communities.



*Civic design processes ensure that residents have a hand in shaping their communities and collective futures.*

## Project Context

As the State's development finance agency and land bank, MassDevelopment impacts many facets of the state's economy in cities and towns across the Commonwealth. The Transformative Development Initiative (TDI) focuses on accelerating economic growth within districts in Gateway Cities across the state through cross-sector partnerships. This collaboration engages community members in actionable planning, implementing local economic development initiatives, and spurring further public and private investment. The program is supported by TDI Fellows – primary organizers in each district that lead and facilitate the day-to-day, place-based work of the program – and TDI Partnerships, comprising small business, organizations, and city departments and agencies that sign onto the multi-year program to provide local support, insight, and capacity.

Through TDI Technical Assistance, MassDevelopment provides its TDI Districts access to technical experts and consultants to enhance and further support revitalization efforts in each community, depending on their needs. Toole Design was brought on to provide a range of on-call planning and engineering services, such as streetscape and roadway design that facilitates active and safe streets.



*The Greater Attleboro and Taunton Regional Transit Authority's #6 bus provides access along Bay Street from Washington Street to the Bloom Bus Terminal, connecting the Whittenton District with Downtown Taunton.*

## The Whittenton District

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, industry has been a core component of the identity of Whittenton and the City of Taunton, once known as the “Silver City”, thanks to Reed & Barton Silversmiths and Poole Silver, and textile goods provided by the Whittenton Mills Complex. Today, different types of industries call Taunton home at the Myles Standish Industrial Park, a 1,000-acre campus of 8,000 employees across office, high-tech, manufacturing, warehousing, and distribution uses and facilities, roughly 10 minutes from Whittenton District.

Until its closure in 2015, [Reed & Barton Silversmiths were known for manufacturing Olympic medals, Civil War weaponry, and silverware for the White House.](#) Today, the legacy of this rich history is still apparent in the parcels and buildings that remain vacant or underutilized, ready to have new life breathed into them. [The redevelopment of the facility](#) itself will have significant implications for Whittenton District as a whole, and there will be a need for safe biking and walking infrastructure between the site and Bay St.

Bay Street is the primary corridor through the neighborhood and doubles as its retail and social center. Between the intersections of Bay St. & Britannia St. and Bay St. & Whittenton St. are homes of different types and sizes, young families and longtime residents, small businesses, social clubs, and religious institutions. Whittenton has “good bones”: the existing infrastructure needs only time and investment to unlock its potential and provide the services and experiences that are needed.



*Reed & Barton's history of silversmithing includes Civil War weaponry, Olympic medals, and silverware for the White House. (Photo Credit: The Reed & Barton Development Company)*



The Whittenton District and its surrounding neighborhood context. (Map Credit: Studio Luz)

## The Challenge and The Opportunity

The [Federal Highway Administration](#) defines [collector roads](#) as streets that gather traffic from local roads and funnel them into the larger arterials in the network. As a collector road, Bay Street’s functional use is to funnel traffic from Whittenton’s local roads to Washington St and Broadway (east and south) and Myles Standish Boulevard (north). Last October, [in a Taunton Daily Gazette article covering the city’s urban renewal planning process](#), roadway safety was named as a primary concern for Whittenton residents, with Pulaski Square – the intersection of Bay & Britannia – at the top of list.

During peak traffic hours, the high number of turning movements on/off Bay St. and the lack of a traffic signal make for unpredictable, if not perilous, conditions for both vehicles and pedestrians. Additionally, the awkward shape of the intersection – noticeably the misalignment of East Britannia and West Britannia, and the placement of crosswalks – make it so that vehicles must encroach into Bay St to increase visibility of oncoming traffic, thus exacerbating crossing conditions for pedestrians.



*The irregular shape of the intersection at Bay St and Whittenton St creates unsafe conditions for all users, including high speed turns and poor visibility.*



*The intersection of Bay St and Britannia St is one of the busier intersections in Whittenton, providing critical east-west access between Washington St and Broadway and the Reed & Barton Complex.*

Streets should serve a more comprehensive and communal purpose than merely facilitating efficient traffic operations and the movement of people and goods from one point to another. Bay Street can become a place to get to, not just a path to get through, because the true importance of great streets lies beyond solving transportation and mobility issues. When designed and executed correctly, great streets can transform communities and shape the way people live their lives.

## The Goals & Objectives

By actively engaging residents, business owners, and City personnel, MassDevelopment will help the TDI Partnership cultivate project champions throughout the community who lead and support efforts to further engage with and build coalition across stakeholder groups to achieve the following:

- **Safety and Access for All Users**
  - Through traffic calming measures and better roadway design, Bay Street will be safe and accessible for all people, regardless of their age, ability, or modes of travel (e.g., walking, biking, transit, and driving).
- **A Vibrant and Attractive District**
  - Through place activation and programming, Bay Street will support its existing businesses, encourage new retail and service opportunities, and invite local and visiting customers to create a functional and social streetscape.
- **Long-Term Capacity for Community-Based Planning**
  - Through engaging, tangible, and inclusive activities, Whittenton District residents can literally have a hand in shaping change in their neighborhood in service of a collective vision that centers community and collective impact.

The objectives of this project are twofold:

- 1) Activate the Whittenton District through an organized community engagement strategy that connects people and businesses to each other, and through physical interventions that can create stronger physical, social, and economic outcomes.
- 2) Aid in capacity building for long-term, community-led planning and visioning for more permanent improvements that center safety, access, social life, and connectivity.

Looking ahead to the next 5-10 years, TDI Partnership's vision is to increase public programming, redevelop large sites, increase the amount and activity of local businesses, and realize vibrancy in the neighborhood. The physical intervention that resulted from this process can support its short- and long-term goals and objectives on safety, community building and cohesion, vibrant small businesses, and overall quality of life.

## The Impact of Tactical Interventions

Over the past decade, tactical intervention projects have gained traction and popularity across cities of all sizes around the country. Publications such as [Smart Cities Dive](#) and [Bicycling](#) bring to the forefront the numerous reports, studies, and articles that touch on the positive impact that creative visual, physical, and programmatic elements can have on public infrastructure. Crosswalk art, as a more specific example, has been used as a traffic calming measure to improve the safety, predictability, and comfort in some of the most challenging intersections and corridors.

In December 2021, the Barr Foundation published "[Quick and Creative Street Projects: Measuring the Impact in Massachusetts](#)," a report that demonstrated the impact of rapid response projects on people, businesses, and communities around the state. The timing of the report was especially poignant. COVID-19 pushed cities and towns around the country to provide safe spaces outdoors where people could be physically distant while supporting their small and local businesses who provided basic services and amenities. Through creative materials, methods, and the urgency and unprecedented nature of a global pandemic, projects that typically took years of study, design, engagement, and construction were reimaged, retrofitted, and repackaged to deliver impacts overnight.

MassDevelopment understood that the use of quick-build materials and short-term actions to achieve long-term impacts could be of use in Whittenton to showcase potential design changes that reenergize and further activate Bay St. as a public space and not simply a means for vehicles to pass through. Discussions with the TDI Partnership revealed that short-term areas of interest and concern in Whittenton District are increasing foot traffic to support local businesses, increasing pedestrian safety at major intersections, along with wayfinding and branding.



*In addition to their visual and physical impacts, one of the many benefits of tactical intervention projects is that they come in all shapes and sizes. They can be low-cost, temporary, and easy-to-install or more expensive, permanent, and complex.*



*In San Pablo, CA, Toole Design used low-cost materials like small planters, straw wattles, and some paint to create curb extensions that reduce crossing distances.*





*The completed tactical design intervention at Bay St. and State St. (Photo Credit: City of Taunton)*

## **Civic Design – The Process**

A civic design process is not a “one size fits all” approach to community design and planning. Rather, it is an intuitive, intentional, and iterative process that must be tailored to the context to which it’s being applied. As a process facilitated by seasoned professionals and experts working in equal partnership with community members and organizations, it is important that this work is done with humility and flexibility. As the process evolves, it is possible that expectations and outcomes will change accordingly in response to a variety of internal and external factors. These may include real-world constraints in timing, budgets, and material resources, to misconceptions about how different ways of organizing people and executing processes can help realize longstanding visions.

Overall, it is important to keep in mind that civic design is both a process and an outcome. From the onset, there will be initial thoughts as to what “good” outcomes could be, based on previous efforts and conversations or general agreement on what “just makes sense”. However, to the extent that the civic design process is an exercise in community, the process itself must justify the outcome. A process that centers the community’s voice and lived experiences, shares information in open and transparent ways, revisits the drawing board as necessary to refine and retool deliverables, products, and messaging, and that enables people to tangibly shape and mold the process, is a process that validates the outcomes, whatever they may be.

Here is how a civic design process was executed for the Taunton TDI Tactical Intervention Project:

### **1. Organize the Players**

Upon enlisting the services of Toole Design in January '23, MassDevelopment brought the firm and its staff up to speed with an overview of the TDI program and the Whittenton District. This included a project brief that provided some history of the district and a high-level vision for what the subsequent years of work would entail, a discussion on roles and expectations, followed by a walking tour of Whittenton. When Toole Design met with the TDI Partnership for the first time in February '23, they established what services the firm had provided other communities and how those skills could be of use in Whittenton.

### **2. Develop Goals and Objectives**

The interventions project represents a small piece of a larger, multi-year effort MassDevelopment is undertaking to work with and invest in the Whittenton District. While there were goals and objectives for the project itself, those needed to be reconciled and aligned with the larger goals and objectives for the District. The TDI Partnership already has plans in motion to create programs and events over the summer to raise awareness surrounding efforts to make the District more visible and vibrant. These plans were shared with Toole Design and the group sought to discover points of synergy and identify how to execute these efforts in a concerted effort.

### **3. Bringing New Ideas to the Table**

Toole Design shared with the TDI Partnership examples of their work conducted in other communities around the country, ranging from easier, smaller, and less costly demonstrations (e.g., crosswalk painting and curb extensions), to more complex and larger built interventions with more generous budgets (e.g., floating bus islands and parklets). The ensuing discussion covered the benefits of quick-build project in realizing bicycle, pedestrian, and traffic safety improvements, creating opportunities to engage with the public in tangible and creative ways, and how these types of projects help build support for more permanent solutions. Additional ideas were put on the table, primarily regarding how the neighborhood's youth and school-aged children could be included and benefit from this work.

### **4. Workshop Ideas**

Following early discussions with MassDevelopment and the TDI Partnership, Toole Design planners, engineers, landscape architects, and urban designers convened a small design workshop to generate ideas for physical interventions for the intersections of Bay & Britannia and Bay & Whittenton. These concepts were focused on mitigating traffic operations through curb extensions and roadway design, and opportunities to reallocate roadway space for public use. These concepts were then brought to the TDI Partnership to solicit their input and feedback, before undergoing further refinement by Toole Design.

## 5. Bridge The Gap

Once the team reached a certain point in development the planned physical interventions for the Whittenton District, Toole Design and the TDI Partnership met with City of Taunton leadership and departments to present and discuss designs. While there were those who fully supported the proposed plans for curb extensions and outdoor spaces for passive and active uses, there was some apprehension about the particulars of the design treatments, including the removal of parking spaces and how curb extensions might negatively impact freight movement.

The team reconciled the “idea” of the proposed designs with the realities of what could be executed, to what degree those plans would meet the level of comfort of city officials, and how it would be executed in collaboration with city departments, community members, and project leadership. Due to concerns about placing physical items of any kind in the right-of-way, it was clear that the path to more complex, longer-term interventions would require more work, time, and coordination with the City.

During a final round of design revisions and discussion with the TDI Partnership and city staff, it was decided that it would be best to move forward with crosswalk painting as the tactical intervention. This would allow for the roadway to be physically altered in the least disruptive way, address safety concerns, and include the community in the process. While Toole Design put forth the idea of circles as the artistic element, it was the TDI Partnership who decided on the colors (red, white, and blue), which aligned with a parallel effort of commemorating local fallen heroes with banners on Bay Street’s light posts.

## 6. Implement the Intervention

The implementation process was broken into two phases: Phase I was completed before the mural reveal party on Thursday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, and Phase II was completed ahead of the Whittenton Block Party on Thursday, August 10<sup>th</sup>. The intent behind this scheduling was to align parallel efforts in the District and reinforce the established goals of safety for all users (as people cross the streets on visually distinctive crosswalks to get to/from the events), a vibrant and active district (catalyzed by local programming and place activation), and long-term community planning (through ongoing engagement, dialogue, and capacity building).

A true civic design process leans on the collective networks and relationships that comprise it. Through Pastor Deb Iddings of the Broken Chains Biker Church, the team put the word out to the community and was able to amass a group of roughly 12-15 community members who were accompanied by staff from MassDevelopment and Toole Design, totaling 20 individuals for both phases of implementation. Through Captain Arsenio Chavez, the team was supported by details of Taunton Police, who shut down the streets and intersections overnight and redirected traffic, and the Dept. of Public Works, who provided additional support through materials and signs.

# Civic Design – The Outcome

## Phase I (Part I)

On Wednesday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, the first of a two-phase installation process of crosswalk art in Whittenton District began, and focused on five crosswalks closest to the Broken Chains Biker Church: across Bay St. (2), Jenny Lind St. (1), State St. (1), and Alger Ave. (1)

Toole Design led a group of local volunteers, including Mayor Shauna O’Connell herself, who all brought a level of enthusiasm and energy that made the night a memorable one. The work started after 10pm in concert with the shutdown of the street by Taunton Police. Even with a late start, the group quickly found a rhythm in implementing a multi-step process of painting circles of different colors and sizes. Participants gladly took turns with tasks and, even when they were done, were eager to continue helping in whatever way they could. On hands and knees, Whittenton Residents of different ages and backgrounds were in community on a crisp summer night in June. Not only was the team able to get all five crosswalks painted in less than an hour and a half, but the group even started to sing “Lean On Me” as they gathered for a group photo at the end of the night!

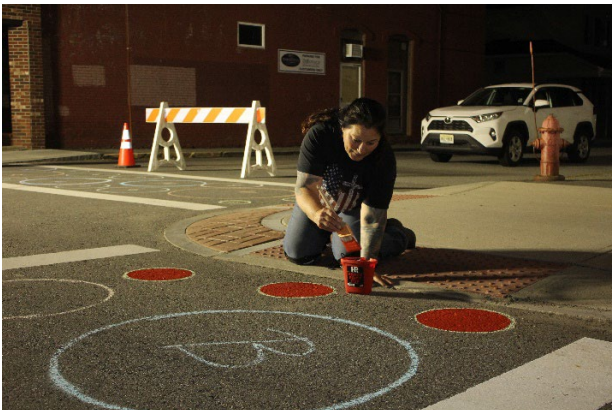


Photo Credit: Melissa Santos Photography



Photo Credit: Melissa Santos Photography



Photo Credit: Melissa Santos Photography



Photo Credit: Melissa Santos Photography



## Phase I (Part II)

On Thursday, June 7<sup>th</sup>, Phase I was completed with the painting of the King St. crosswalk, which was intentionally reserved for the Whittenton Community Partnership Mural Reveal Party. The piece was done by Ryan Jones, a Taunton born and raised painter and tattoo artist, and commemorates the history of silversmithing in the City of Taunton and the Whittenton District. The event featured a live DJ, games, activities, food, and fellowship. By reserving the King St crosswalk for the event, a different group of residents were able to spontaneously get involved in this project who were not present the night before, including some of Taunton's youngest residents!



*Artist Ryan Jones, his parents, and Taunton Mayor Shauna O'Connell. (Photo Credit: City of Taunton)*





## Phase II

On Sunday, August 6<sup>th</sup>, the implementation process came to an end with Phase II where the team painted the three crosswalks at Bay & Britannia, and the four crosswalks at Bay & Whittenton.

Another strong showing of volunteers from the community made this work possible, including additional staff support from Toole Design. What was most encouraging was not only the handful of returning volunteers from the June installation, but the many new faces who participated in this community event. One young volunteer talked about how she was born at the nearby Morton Hospital and had memories of visiting Party Cake with her grandmother growing up. To now be able to work on a physical intervention project at the intersection where she spent so much time as a child was a special moment for her!

Another volunteer shared that he'd been a resident of Taunton for over 40 years but hadn't spent much time outside with his nieces and nephews because there weren't too many places to go or too many things to do. Hopefully, he shared, this was a sign that things were taking a turn for the better. After painting the last circle of the night and the project, he said with pride, "Now, when I come through here, I can point to something and say, 'I did that; this one is mine.'"



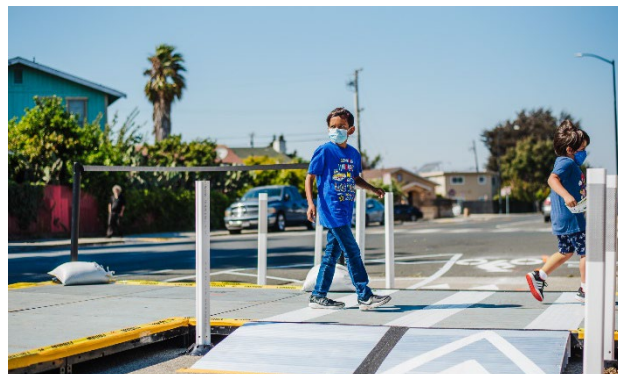




## Summary + Next Steps

Over the course of roughly seven months, MassDevelopment and the TDI Partnership set into motion a process to plan, design, and implement a tactical intervention project in the Whittenton District. As technical assistant's, Toole Design leveraged their expertise in traffic operations, roadway design, prioritizing multimodal safety for users of all ages and abilities, and their values of creating streets as places and not just paths to support the goals and objectives for the District. Staying true to the civic design process, the group collectively reached an outcome that could improve the conditions and experiences on Bay St., subject to the consent and collaboration of the community and city leadership.

Building on the work that has begun in the Whittenton District, future efforts should explore opportunities for further design treatments that can enhance multimodal safety in realizing a district that supports its local business through foot traffic, placemaking, and programming. These may include rectangular rapid flashing beacons, raised crossings at key locations, revisiting curb extensions at designating locations, and converting two-way into one-way streets where feasible and appropriate.



*Tactical interventions of all types and sizes are fundamentally about reimagining how space can be used differently when (re)designed to center people.*

Civic design is both a process and an outcome that must reinforce each other. While the outcome of this project was not what was initially conceived, the process by which the team arrived at crosswalk art justifies the outcome itself. Such a process, over time, can and will lead to more complex, elaborate, and impactful work that can continue to have positive impacts on the community. So long as community is at the center of this work as equal partners and shapers in the vision and the plan, the outcomes are endless.



*Photo Credit: Melissa Santos Photography*