

Equity and
Engagement
Framework for Lowell
Forward



FORWARD

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Project Context

- Lowell Forward is an 18-month process to set a **comprehensive plan for the future** of the City of Lowell, and community **engagement is built into every step** of the process.
- This process makes **substantial investments** of time and resources in **equitable community engagement**, including a full-time community organizer, listening tours throughout the city, and two citywide public workshops.
- As Equity and Engagement Consultants, Rivera Consulting is advising the project team on issues of **inclusive public participation practices, equity policy prioritization and development**, and **community baseline ground-truthing** in order to strengthen elements of social justice across key aspects of the Comprehensive Plan

Social Justice & Equity Lens

An equitable planning process in Lowell should...

- Be grounded in Lowell's **historical and neighborhood context**, understanding the role that city plays in shaping community trust and planning
- Prioritize and recognize the need to **plan for unique and diverse neighborhoods** that feature residents who do not typically participate in local government in Lowell, with a particular focus on its immigrant communities, low-to-moderate income residents, and BIPOC residents and communities of color
- Develop recommendations and collect community insight on opportunities that promote both **equitable mobility and equitable economic opportunity** for all Lowell residents regardless of socioeconomic status
- Create **intentional pathways to equitable community participation** that accounts for the lived experiences of residents through varied and diverse engagement opportunities

Key Historical Context for Equity

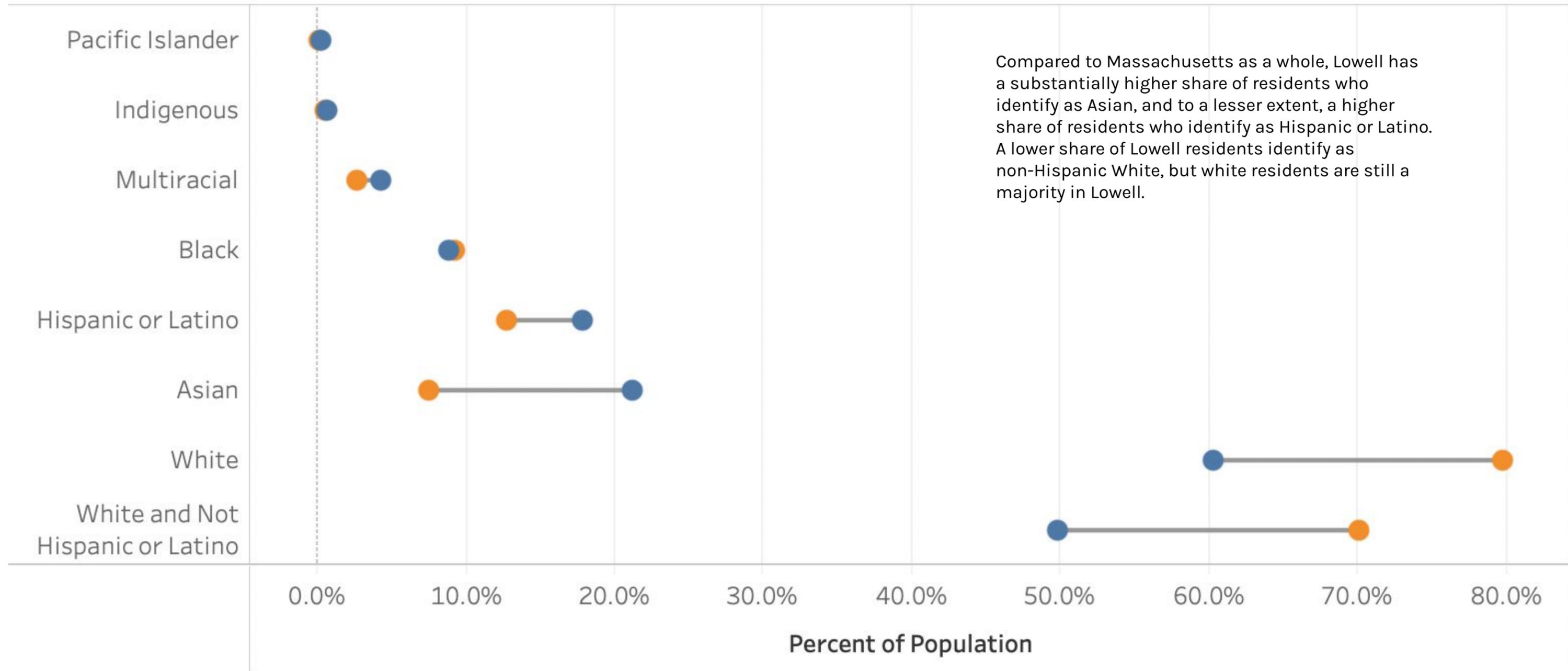
Lowell has a proud history as a gateway for immigrants, particularly for refugees.

- Several immigration waves throughout the years changed the demographic landscape of Lowell. The expansion of the textile industrial complex between 1870 and the 1900s attracted Irish, French-Canadian and Polish immigrants to the city.
 - In the 1970s, many Cambodian refugees made their homes in Lowell. Lowell has the second-largest Cambodian American population in the United States
- Shifting patterns of textile production in the early 20th century left Lowell with millions of square feet of unused mill real estate, which has formed the backbone of Lowell's focus on adaptive reuse.
 - Lowell's economy in the past was grounded in industrial production, with many jobs in trades and manufacturing available. The vast majority of Lowell residents do not have bachelor's degrees, and jobs that do not require degrees must be at the core of Lowell's economy to provide equitable access to good-paying jobs to the full city.

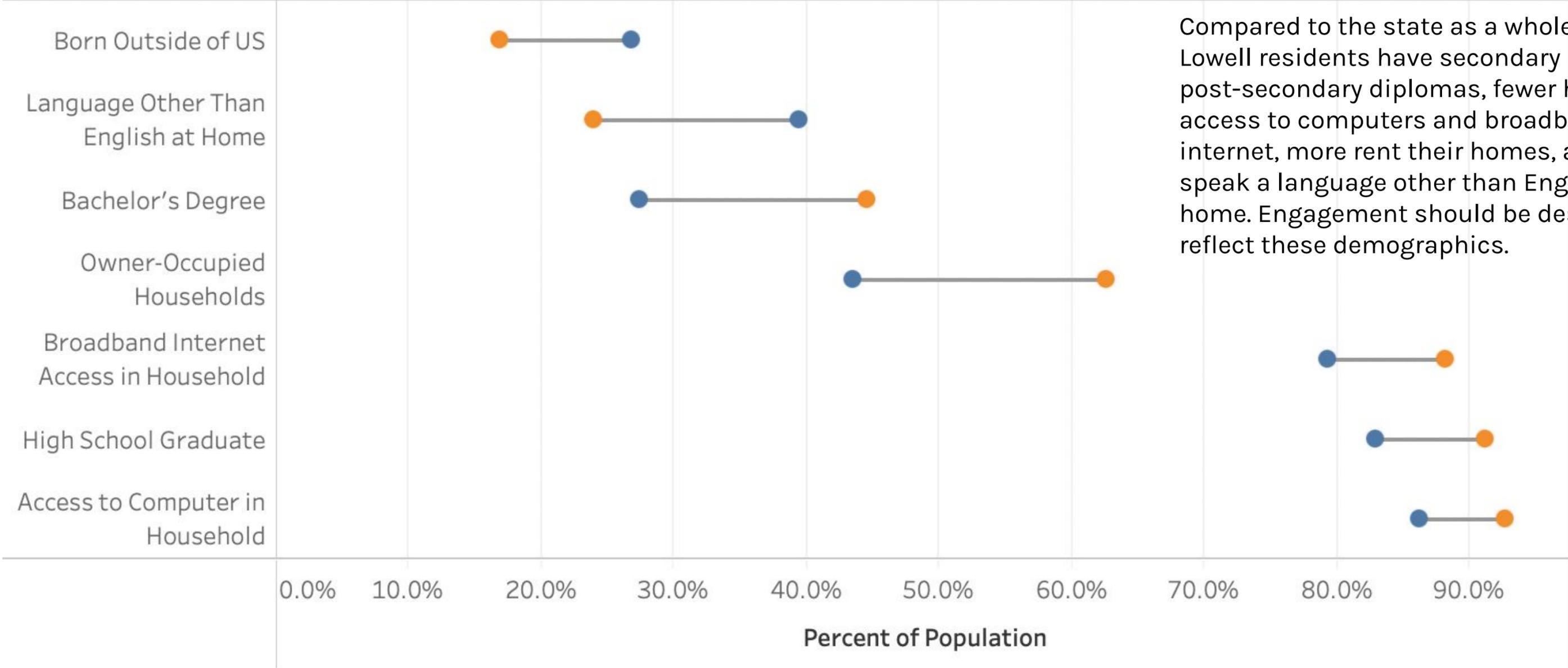
Modern Context: Key Factors for Equity

- Lowell's industrial past fuels its present and future economic development. The city's innovative focus on adaptive reuse has brought jobs and educational opportunities to the city and its residents. Current reuses of former mills are as business incubators, healthcare facilities, residential complexes, university offices, and research centers.
- Lowell and its surrounding cities and towns are a major hub of post-secondary education and career training in Massachusetts. Accessibility of these institutions via walking and public transit from any neighborhood in Lowell is a major equity priority.
 - The city is home to UMass Lowell, a 20,000-student research university and second largest in the UMass System.
 - It also hosts a campus of Middlesex Community College with 11,000 students, 40% of whom are first-generation college students.
 - Greater Lowell Technical School High School offers 23 career and technical education programs at the secondary school level in neighboring Tyngsborough.
- Lowell's recent shift to a neighborhood-based system of City Council representation formalizes roles for each neighborhood in city government, prompting an increased focus on the equitable allocation of open space and other resources between neighborhoods.

Comparison of Lowell and Massachusetts Overall: Race



Comparison of Lowell and Massachusetts Overall: Key Demographics for Equitable Engagement

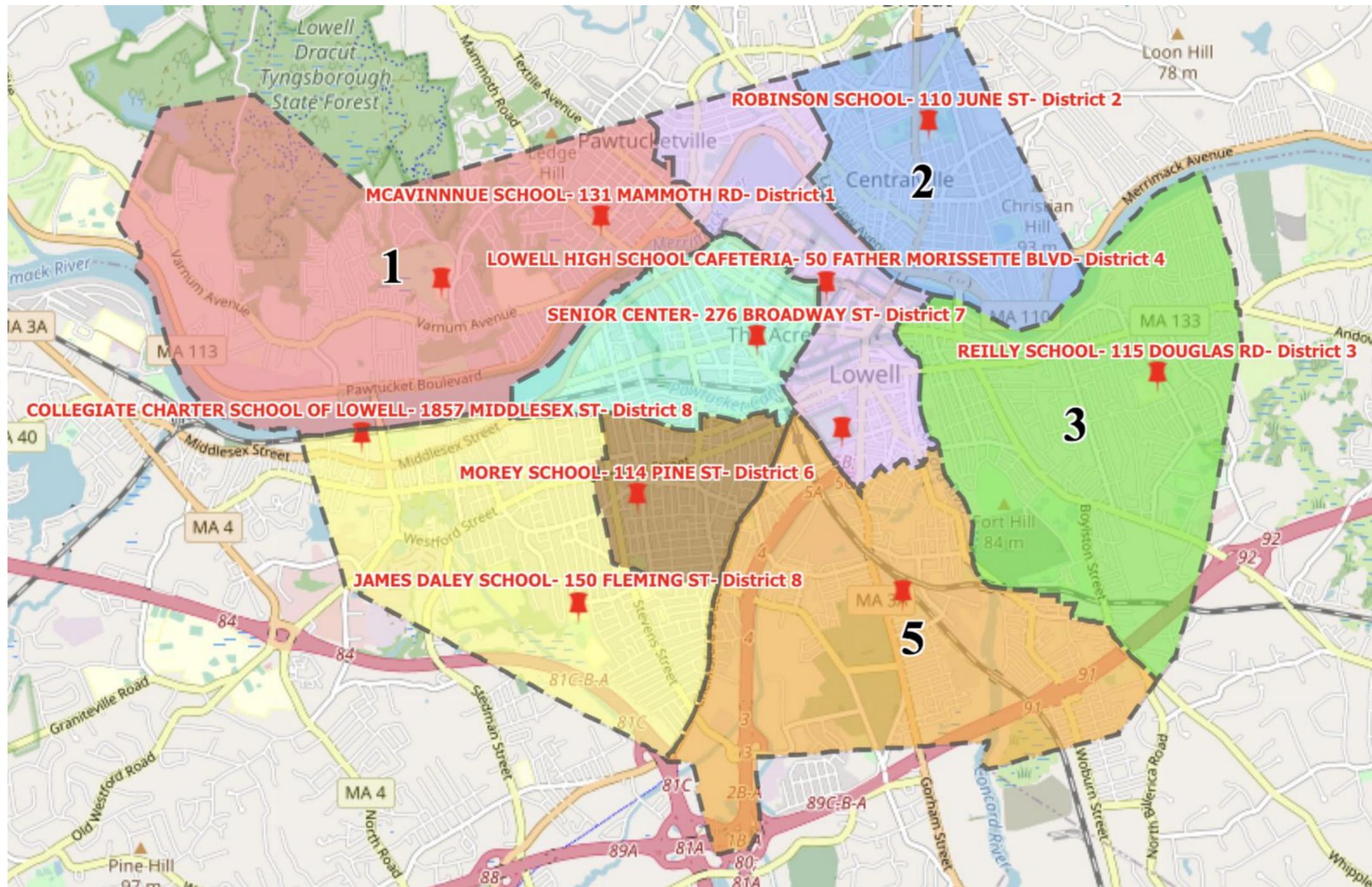


Compared to the state as a whole, fewer Lowell residents have secondary and post-secondary diplomas, fewer have access to computers and broadband internet, more rent their homes, and more speak a language other than English at home. Engagement should be designed to reflect these demographics.

Lesson from City Council Maps:

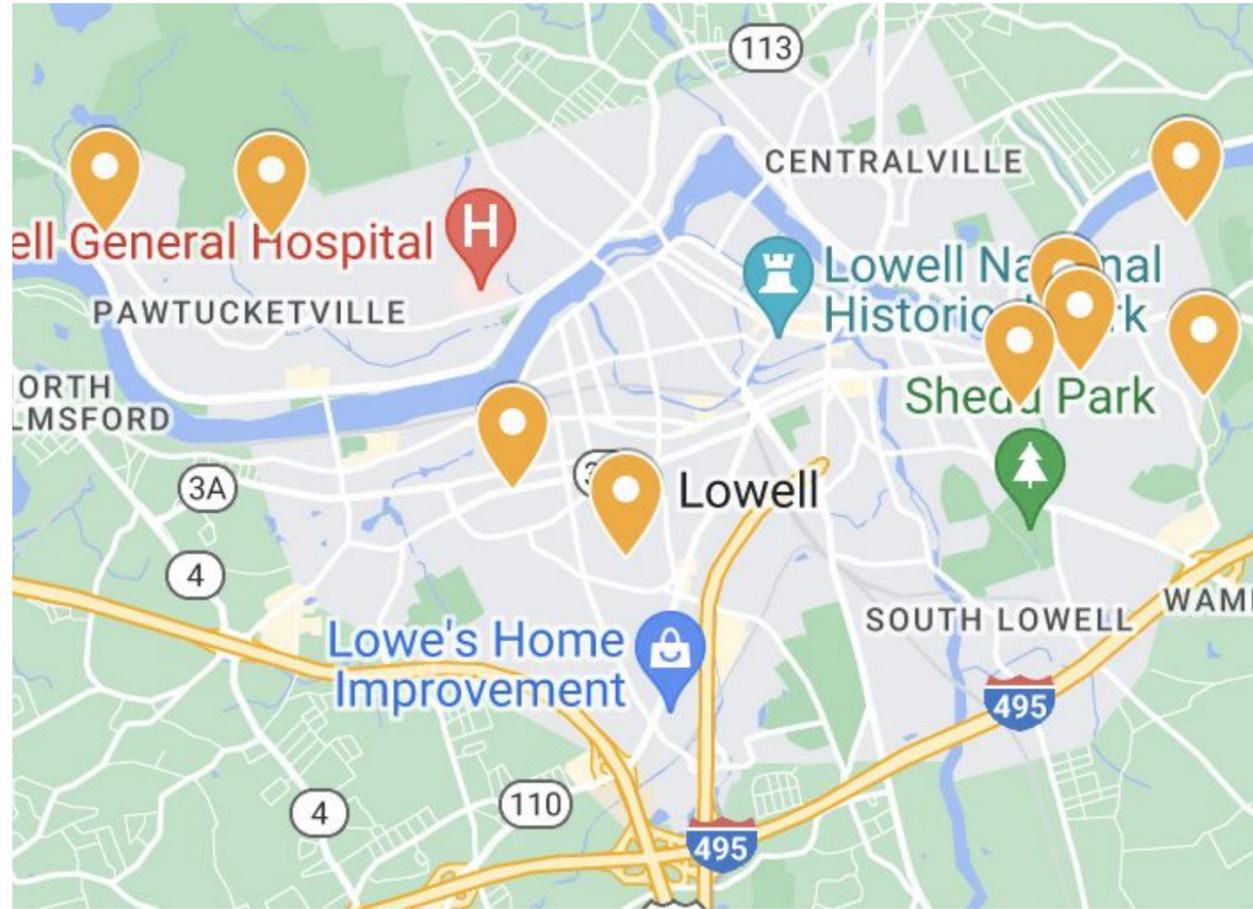
Neighborhood-Specific Equitable Engagement

- In 2017, **Latino and Asian Lowell residents filed a lawsuit** to argue that at-large City Council elections **diluted the power of residents of color to shape the city's future**. The City and residents reached a settlement to **establish the system of district representation currently in use**.
- Under the previous system, **the neighborhoods of Pawtucketville and Belvidere elected a disproportionate share of councilors**, while other neighborhoods elected disproportionately fewer relative to their share of the citywide population.
- The **same principle applies to community engagement** for Lowell Forward. Proportional representation requires an intentional focus on outreach to each neighborhood with **in-person events and engagement with community groups in each neighborhood**, not just citywide opportunities for engagement

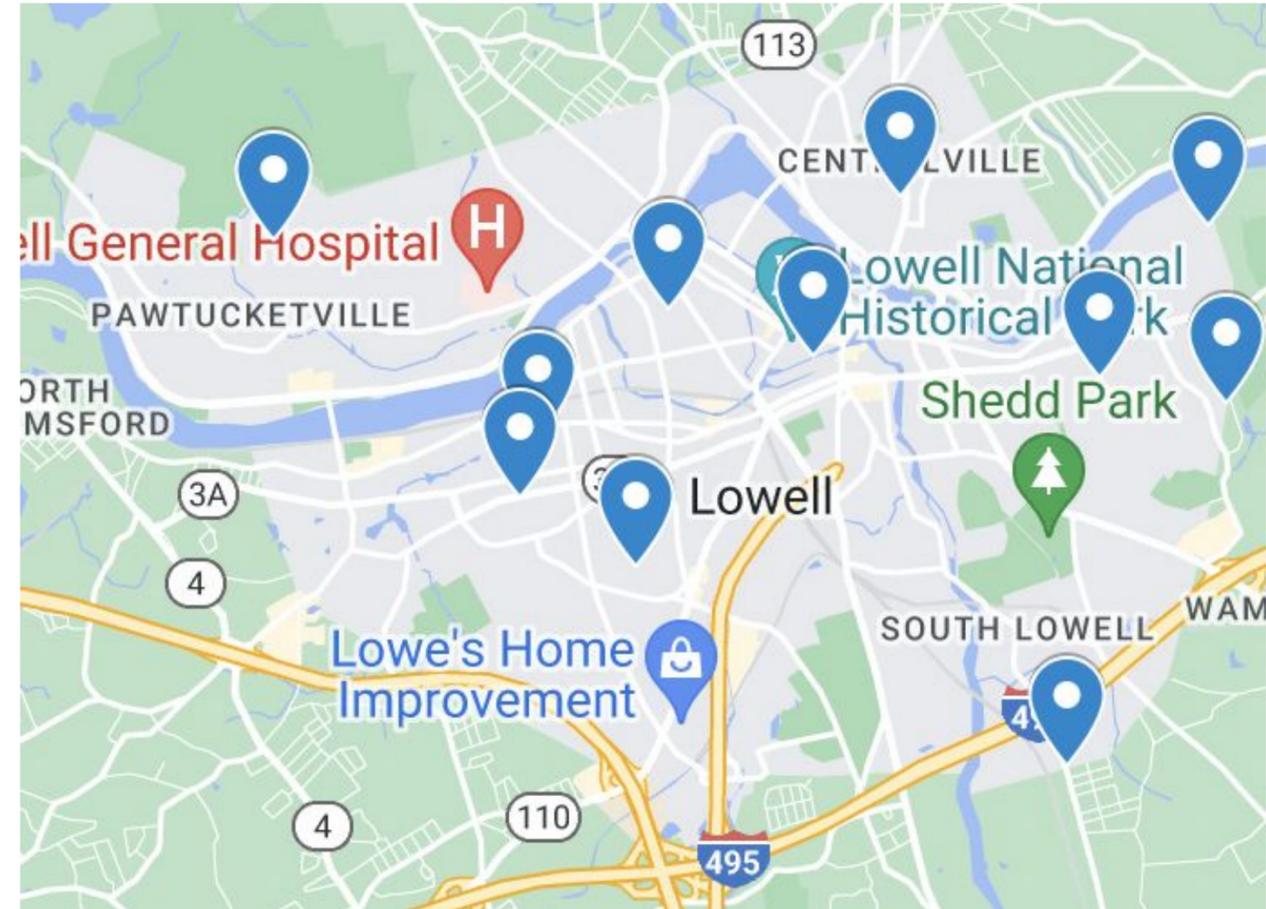


Lowell City Council districts used in 2021 elections. Screenshot from lowellma.gov/findmydistricts

2020-2021



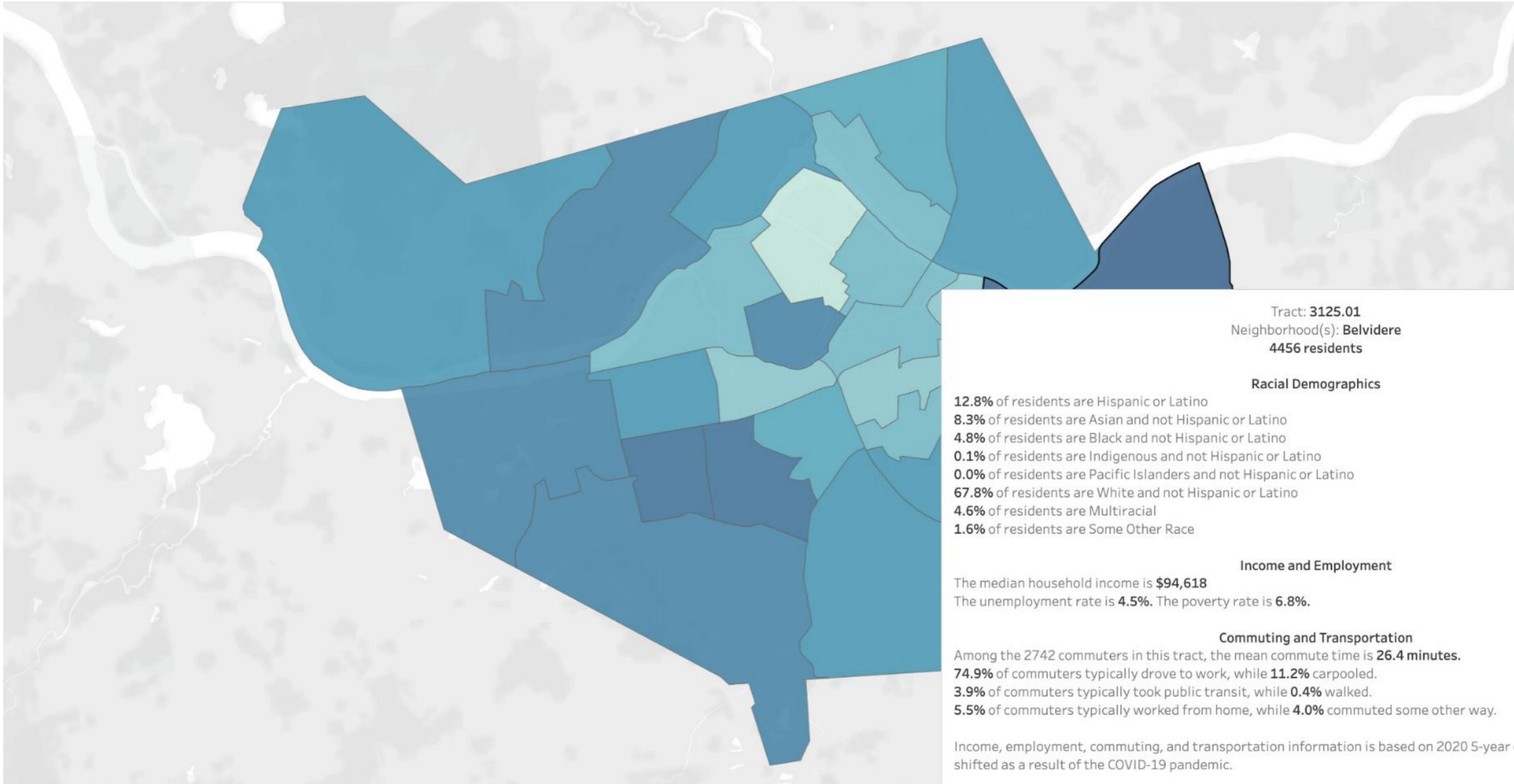
2022-2023 (present)



Lowell's intentional focus on equity between neighborhoods in municipal government has already reshaped neighborhood representation on the City Council, demonstrating the immediate impacts of a focus on neighborhood-level representation (current councilors) and the shortfall of representation when this is not an intentional priority (councilors immediately before new system).

Lowell Neighborhood Atlas for Organizer

Lowell Neighborhood Atlas



Tract: 3125.01
Neighborhood(s): Belvidere
4456 residents

Racial Demographics

- 12.8% of residents are Hispanic or Latino
- 8.3% of residents are Asian and not Hispanic or Latino
- 4.8% of residents are Black and not Hispanic or Latino
- 0.1% of residents are Indigenous and not Hispanic or Latino
- 0.0% of residents are Pacific Islanders and not Hispanic or Latino
- 67.8% of residents are White and not Hispanic or Latino
- 4.6% of residents are Multiracial
- 1.6% of residents are Some Other Race

Income and Employment

The median household income is **\$94,618**
The unemployment rate is **4.5%**. The poverty rate is **6.8%**.

Commuting and Transportation

Among the 2742 commuters in this tract, the mean commute time is **26.4 minutes**.
74.9% of commuters typically drove to work, while **11.2%** carpooled.
3.9% of commuters typically took public transit, while **0.4%** walked.
5.5% of commuters typically worked from home, while **4.0%** commuted some other way.

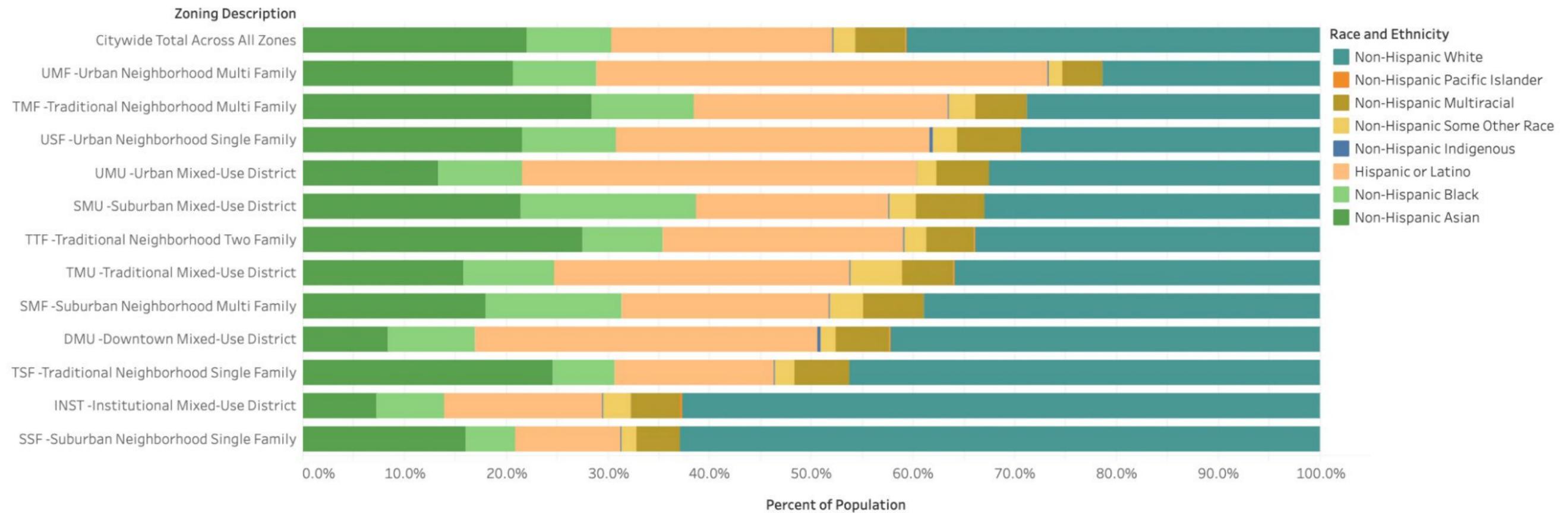
Income, employment, commuting, and transportation information is based on 2020 5-year estimates, and may have shifted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Land Use Planning and Neighborhood Racial Demographics in Lowell

- Lowell’s zoning ordinance [emphasizes the preservation of existing conditions](#)—the ordinance states that residential zones are “designed to preserve, promote, and enhance the character” of existing neighborhood development patterns (p. 25)
 - “Suburban neighborhood” single-family and multi-family zones
 - “Traditional neighborhood” single-, two-, and multi-family zones
 - “Urban neighborhood” single-family and multi-family zones
- This focus on the preservation of existing conditions makes it important to analyze whether those conditions are equitable, including **whether each neighborhood is accessible to Lowell residents of all backgrounds**

Racial Demographics of Land Use Zones

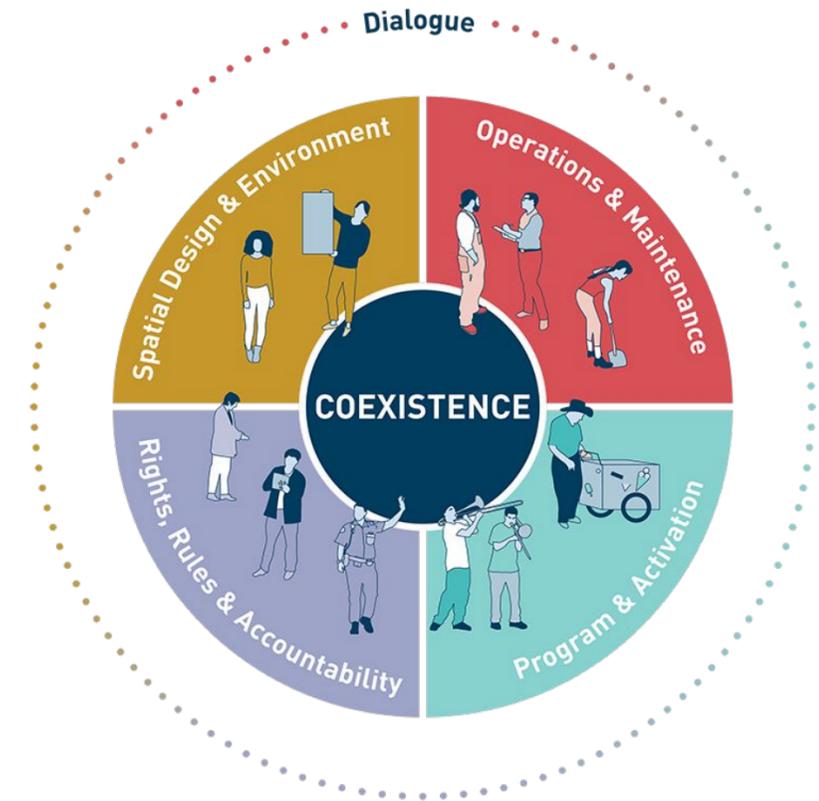
Racial Demographics of Lowell's Land Use Zones on the 2020 Census



2020 Census Data reveals that lower-density residential zones in Lowell have substantially fewer residents of color than the city as a whole, while higher-density zones have substantially higher shares of residents of color. Note that Lowell's 2020 census demographics differed substantially from those on the 2021 ACS.

Inclusive Planning for Open Spaces that Meet the Needs of All Users

- Open spaces in Lowell serve multiple constituencies, each of whom is key to equitable planning
 - People of all housing statuses use open spaces for recreation
 - Some unhoused people also use open spaces in Lowell as places to live
- Gehl's Toolkit for Respectful Coexistence outlines best practices for open space planning in communities with mixed housing statuses among open space users



Graphic: “Homelessness in Public Space: A Toolkit for Respectful Coexistence”, Gehl, 2021

Questions for Further Research: Open Space

- Equity principle: Every Lowell resident should have access to open space for recreation within walking distance of their home.
 - Research question: What share of Lowell residents live within a half-mile buffer of a recreation space?
 - Subquestion 1: How does this share vary by race based on block-level census data?
 - Subquestion 2: How does this share vary by neighborhood?
 - Subquestion 3: How do walking routes to these recreation spaces intersect with the Walking Trouble Spots map on the Miro board?
- Equity principle: Every recreation space in Lowell should have consistent investment in lighting, benches, water fountains, restrooms, and other key infrastructure
 - Research question: Where do recreation spaces lack this infrastructure?
 - Subquestion 1: How does this vary between the north and south riverfronts?
 - Subquestion 2: How does this vary between properties owned by the City of Lowell and properties owned by the Department of Conservation and Recreation

Equity Implications of Walk, Bike, and Transit Accessibility in Lowell

- One in six Lowell households do not own a vehicle (ACS 5-year estimates).
- Vehicle ownership nationally correlates strongly with income, as households with incomes below \$25,000 are nine times as likely to own 0 vehicles as households with incomes above this threshold ([Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#))
- Modes of transportation other than driving alone are critical for connecting Lowell residents to employment opportunities, community programming, faith communities, and recreation...
 - ...in their own neighborhoods
 - ...in other neighborhoods in Lowell
 - ...outside of Lowell and across the Merrimack Valley
- **Zero-vehicle accessibility is a key equity metric for Lowell Forward**

Lowell's Walk, Bike, and Transit Scores Compared to Comparably Dense MA Cities

- Scores are compiled by WalkScore.com, and reflect the following factors
 - Walk: “walkability based on the distance to nearby places and pedestrian friendliness.”
 - Bike: “whether an area is good for biking based on bike lanes and trails, hills, road connectivity, and destinations.”
 - Transit: “how well a location is served by public transit based on the distance and type of nearby transit lines.”
- Lowell's scores broadly mirror those in comparison Gateway Cities, but lag those in comparably dense Metro Boston cities

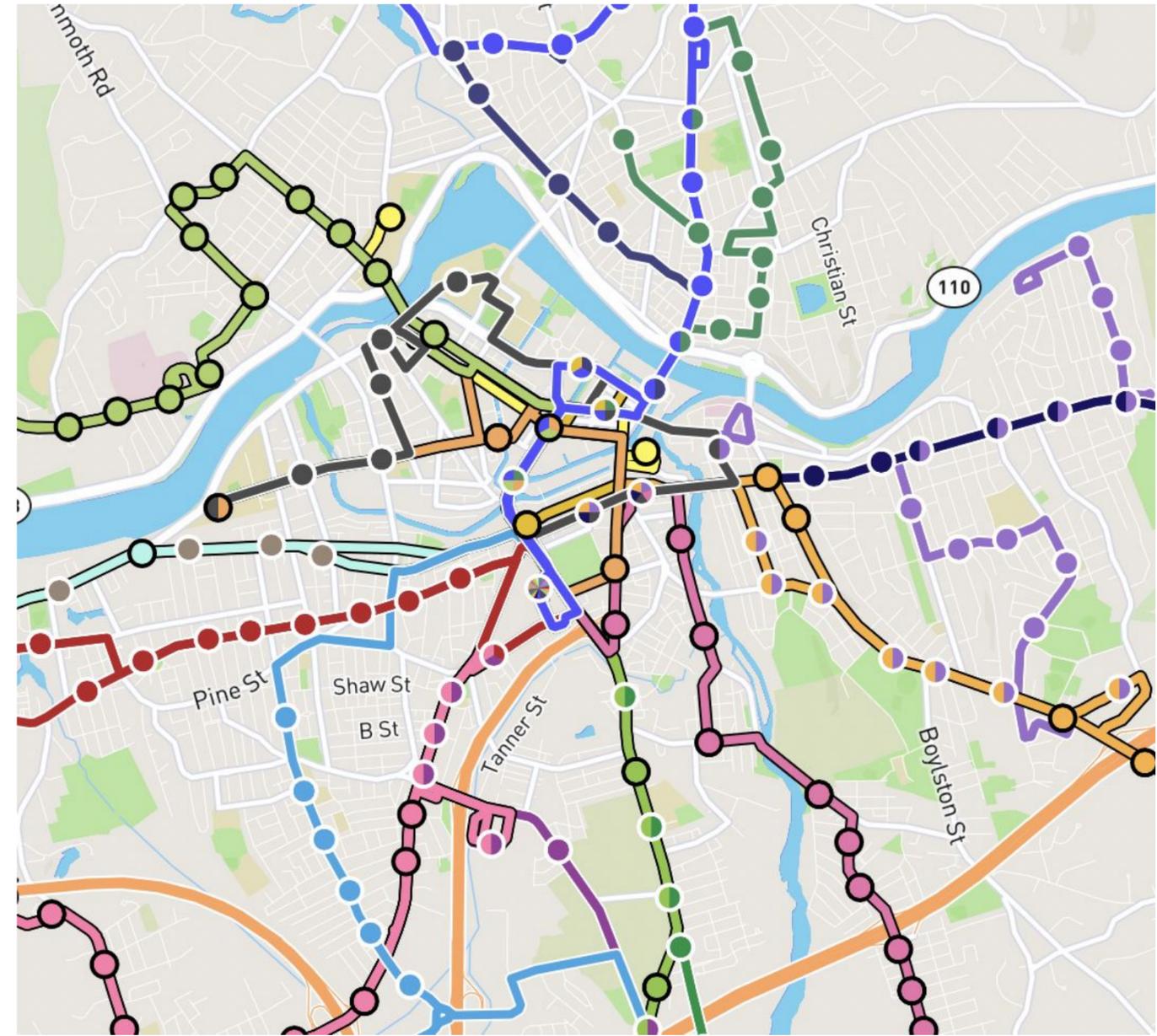
City	Walk	Bike	Transit	Average
Boston	83	72	69	74.7
Brookline	81	67	74	74
Watertown	76	46	68	63.3
Arlington	64	45	65	58
Lynn	70	40	45	51.7
Lawrence	72	37	44	51
Lowell	67	32	44	47.7

Neighborhood-Level Mobility

- Neighborhood-level mobility is heavily driven by walkability, which depends on several factors:
 - Existence of sidewalks, pedestrian crossing signals, and other pedestrian infrastructure
 - Example intervention: Set a goal of 100% sidewalk coverage on Lowell streets
 - Road design and traffic speed, particularly at intersections
 - Example intervention: Convene a working group of local and state transportation officials to develop resolutions to problem intersections identified by the Lowell Forward team, several of which include crossings of local and state roads
 - Destinations within walking distance
 - Example intervention: Expand on the Lowell School Committee's existing work to establish neighborhood schools as community hubs for healthcare and other programming, and identify walkability issues along common routes to schools

Mobility Between Neighborhoods

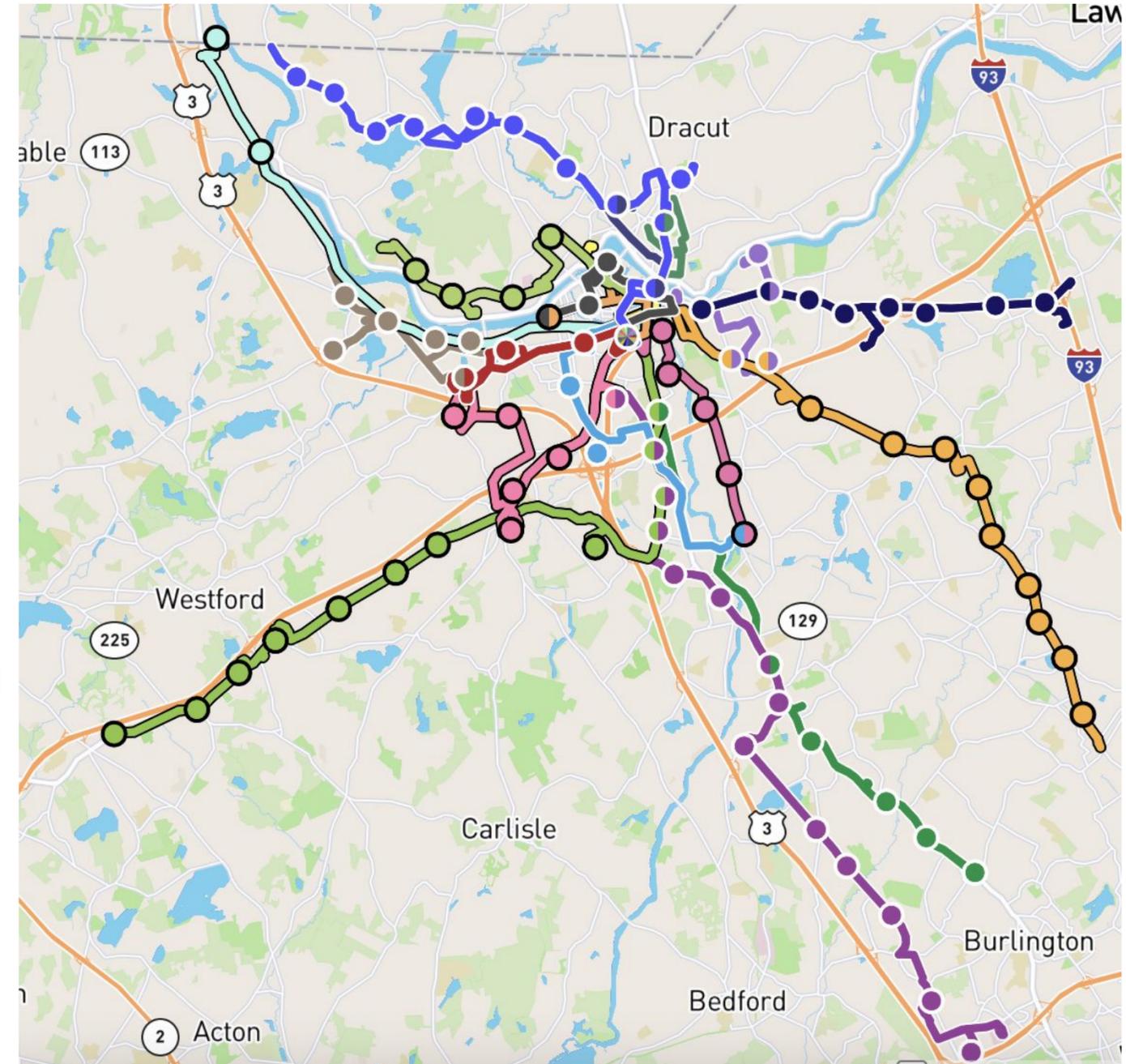
- The LRTA largely operates on a hub-and-spoke model. This means that connections between neighborhoods generally require a transfer.
- LRTA buses on many routes run only every hour, though some schedules are aligned to facilitate transfers.
- Example intervention: Harness LRTA's commitment to community-responsive service and partnership with the City to explore demand for a more frequent ring route between neighborhoods.



Lowell Regional Transit Authority [Route Map](#), showing Downtown Lowell and central neighborhoods

Mobility Beyond Lowell

- Intercity mobility in the Merrimack Valley is essential for equitable access to education and employment opportunities
 - Connecting Lowell residents to expanding manufacturing hubs in Methuen and across the Merrimack Valley
- Commuter rail service from Lowell broadly does not serve zero-car households
 - Only 5% of passengers to the Lowell stop have zero cars in their households (MBTA survey)
- Example intervention: Planning for regional mobility should heavily emphasize expanding service LRTA and MVRTA buses, which are the mode most likely to serve zero-car households



Lowell Regional Transit Authority Route Map, showing intercity connections

Questions for Further Research: Regional Transportation Networks

- Equity principle: Regional transportation networks should support a regional economy in the Merrimack Valley with good-paying jobs for people of all industries and educational backgrounds
 - Research Question: Where do people who live in Lowell work?
 - What share of residents work within Lowell?
 - What share of residents work in Cambridge, Somerville, or Boston?
 - What share of residents work elsewhere in the Merrimack Valley?
 - How have the answers to these questions shifted over time?
 - How do the answers to these questions vary according to race in Lowell?
 - How does the public transit system support and impede transportation between Lowell and Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen?

Human-Centered Engagement Principles

- Human-centered community engagement should **meet residents where they are**, including by:
 - Engaging with existing community groups
 - Acknowledging and addressing barriers to participation for traditionally underrepresented neighborhoods across Lowell
 - Designing engagement when possible in languages that residents speak at home
- Human-centered community engagement also means **involving community members in every stage of planning**, including initial goal-setting
 - Many comprehensive planning processes rely on developing plans in closed-door sessions and presenting them to community members for “feedback.” This approach presents a high risk of undermining trust if draft plans do not reflect the priorities of the people who respond to them or if responses are not reflected in the final plan.
 - Human-centered approaches rely on community members at every stage to identify problems and collaboratively develop solutions to them.

Our Current Plan for Equitable Participation

- Our team has hired a long-time community resident to lead our grassroots engagement and organizing efforts for Lowell Forward
- As the Lowell Forward Community Organizer, Mercy Anampiu brings decades of experience within the Lowell community as an immigrant, women of color, and expert in the field of engaging with Lowell residents around issues of public health and equitable outcomes
- She will ensure ongoing insight and feedback of residents is incorporated into real-time analysis and design of the master planning process
- In addition, our team will supplement Mercy's grassroots efforts with traditional forms of engagement including meeting pop-ins as listening tour stops with existing groups, digital engagement opportunities, and two plan-defining public workshops

Equitable Engagement Recommendation Examples by Project Phase

- Vision, Values, and Goals (October 2022 to January 2023)
 - Organizer and the project team will work together to identify the key CBOs and constituencies who are not covered by existing personal networks
 - The project team will publicly document a commitment to the project's equity goals, with intentional communication to community planning partners
- Scenario Planning/Actions and Recommendations (February 2023-July 2023)
 - Organizer and the project team should seek to add listening tour stops to the agendas of existing meetings of community and neighborhood associations
 - Organizer will meet regularly with the project team to give reports on what they are learning through network-building, allowing these reports to shape the project team's policy and plan development work
- Implementation Plan/Plan Production and Approval (August 2023-December 2023)
 - Organizer will assist community members in identifying roles for themselves and their community groups in the implementation process
 - Organizer and the project team will collaboratively prepare a description of how network-building community engagement shaped the outcomes of the planning process.

For full list of engagement recommendations by phase, please see our [Network Building Strategy Memo](#)

Formative Indicators For Equitable Engagement

- To hold ourselves to quantifiable metrics of equitable engagement, the demographics of community engagement participants should **broadly mirror those of the city** on each of these metrics
 - Metrics marked with an asterisk are included in the Neighborhood Atlas tool. Those marked with a caret are included in the Zoning Data Dashboard
-
- Neighborhoods, Land Use, Zoning
 - Racial demographics of each zone^
 - Housing
 - % of residents who rent*
 - % of renters who are rent burdened*
 - % of households experiencing crowding (>1 person/room)*
 - Economic Development/Opportunity
 - Median Household Income*
 - % of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher*
 - Natural/Cultural/Historic Resources, Open Space, and Recreation
 - Access to parks
 - Public Services and Facilities
 - Access to libraries
 - Access to health centers
 - Access to youth/teen/community centers
 - Access, Mobility, and Circulation
 - % of residents with commutes of 30 minutes or less*
 - % of households who do not own a vehicle*
 - % of commuters who use public transportation*

Four key approaches for operationalizing network-building strategy

1. Phased approach to network-building

Community engagement will be phased and iterative. Later phases will *build on the foundation established on what has come before*, with community shaping each phase of Lowell Forward in real time

2. Building on existing relationships and assets

Building deep trust and relationships takes time that cannot be achieved by outside actors in this process. The hiring of a community-rooted organizer can kick off this process with an early foundation of relational trust. In addition, *relationships and knowledge held in existing community groups* must be empowered and intertwined in order to supplement traditional forms of engagement.

3. Consistent communication and data management

Few things undermine community trust more than hearing conflicting information from different members of a project team. The project team, community organizer, and city staff will *prioritize the systematic collection and organization of community feedback* that allows Lowell Forward to truly incorporate community vision in real time.

4. Varied, low-threshold opportunities for engagement

Our network-based approach will create low-commitment opportunities for community members to ask questions and give feedback on the plan. An accessible community process should meet residents where they are not just physically, but also temporally via *low-time-commitment engagement points that are available at all times*.

Conclusion and Planning Implications

- Inequity in planning and governance in Lowell has been particularly present in the relative role of each neighborhood in shaping the city's future.
 - The city of Lowell has recently made substantial progress in addressing this inequity and strengthening community engagement efforts, and it should remain a top priority for the planning team to build upon this success.
- Lowell's focus on maintaining existing conditions in its current land use planning framework makes an equity evaluation of these conditions vitally important.
 - Currently, land use zoning is substantially correlated with neighborhood demographics.
- Equitable access to economic and educational opportunities requires a deliberate focus on mobility for Lowell's zero-car households via walking, cycling, and transit.
- The strength of the landscape of community organizations in Lowell and of the city government's engagement with them is a key asset for community engagement.
 - The network-building strategy provides recommendations for leveraging these assets to support collaborative planning and trust-building.