



Union Square Partnership

INNOVATION

Developed in response to input from a core audience of residents, business owners, and those with strong connections to Union Square, the plan provides a blueprint for the district's future that responds to the most pressing needs facing the district. These include long-term economic recovery, open space, support for a diverse and inclusive public realm, and sustainable multi-modal accessibility.

Above all, pedestrian safety has been a top priority in developing the plan. A 33% increase in public open space will expand the amount of greenery, promote sustainable modes of transportation and reduce overall private vehicle traffic. Union Square will be a more vibrant, green, safe, and inclusive space as a result of these innovations.

Public transit users will enjoy improved access to the 14th Street Busway along the park's southern edge with expanded sidewalks and safer pedestrian crossings, and Union Square's subway station will feature ADA-accessible entrances and improved infrastructure. The plan will also expand upon the existing bicycle network with new lanes, bike parking amenities, and improved safety measures to ensure better interaction between cyclists, pedestrians, and vehicles. Inspired by successful shared streets programs, bike lanes will either run through expanded pedestrian areas at-grade or share the road with limited vehicles in a designated lane.

The plan also encourages waste reduction and decreased trash on sidewalks that often interfere with the pedestrian environment. The plan includes a concept for a containerized waste system, which consolidates pick-up locations for multiple establishments into one container located in the curb lane.

OUTCOME

Since launching, the plan has been a bright spot on the horizon as the district focuses on recovery and it has sparked excitement about the possibilities for redesigned streets and public spaces. Dozens of media outlets have reported on the plan, and hundreds of stakeholders, including residents, business and property owners, and city partners, have signed up to learn more and provide feedback. Primary community benefits include expanded public space to reduce congestion and provide space for public programs or outdoor dining, improved multi-modal transit access, as well as increased greenery to improve the overall environment.

Success will be measured in the number of new public space users, increased foot traffic to the district, financial investments towards Vision Plan projects, and new residents and businesses choosing to make Union Square home. Additional research will include a traffic impact analysis of street design changes, and a health impact assessment to measure both physical and social accessibility improvements that are key to the success of the plan.

USP estimates full plan implementation over 10-20 years, phased in terms of complexity and cost. Each phase will require a consultant team to undertake public engagement, perform engineering analyses, finalize designs, and develop phased construction timelines and estimates. In the near term, USP will pursue pilot programs to demonstrate the concepts outlined in the plan, including prototypes of street furniture and expanded public space programming within existing roadways. While these projects will have an immediate benefit, major infrastructure upgrades will be ongoing over the coming decades.

EXECUTION

The visioning and planning process kicked off in fall 2018 and followed with a robust community engagement effort over nine months. At that time, several City initiatives and external forces had a significant impact on the project timeline and the plan's final content development. First, the partial L train shutdown and subsequent implementation of the 14th Street Busway pilot created critical transportation changes in the district that required evaluation and integration in the vision document. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests centered in Union Square spurred a critical need to reassess the planning and design priorities for the future of the district.

Throughout 2020, the team refined the plan to incorporate a renewed focus on public health and safety, economic recovery, and social equity. Despite the extended timeline for release, the final Vision Plan reflects a more comprehensive response to community feedback, and contemporary infrastructure and social needs. Moving forward with plan execution will require additional community engagement as well as consultants with expertise in engineering and design. Any permanent street furniture element will also require approval from several city agencies to ensure the design meets high-quality standards for the public realm.

REPRESENTATION

During a nine-month engagement period, the team connected with more than 1,000 community members through public forums, pop-up kiosks, stakeholder working sessions, and online surveys to hear what was most important to them. The team made a concerted effort to meet the community where they were: at the Greenmarket, bus stops, subway entrances, and building lobbies. Several city agencies, including the Departments of Transportation, Parks, and Small Business Services, have also been involved in the plan's development, as well as local elected officials and neighborhood partners such as the Greenmarket, and transit advocacy groups. Following the plan's release, USP organized small stakeholder conversations and presentations to community boards to provide updates and gather feedback. This is the largest such outreach effort USP has undertaken in its 45-year history.

The final plan aims to ensure that the district's future reflects one of diversity and inclusion. First, it is centered on strengthening equitable access through infrastructure as well as programming. Second, the plan strives to maintain an environment that supports free expression, and social activism. Union Square has served as a gathering place for peaceful demonstrations for more than a century, and the district's future should celebrate and honor this legacy.

REPLICATION

The Vision Plan draws inspiration from best practices in urban design and public spaces from across the globe while adapting the concepts to serve the Union Square context. In the same way, the concepts outlined in the Vision Plan may be replicated across New York City districts and beyond.

First, the plan's Streetscape Toolkit is designed to be scalable and implemented in multiple locations. It consists of street furniture elements such as benches with integrated seating, parklets, and a waste container that is designed to occupy the curb lane. USP is working to develop prototypes for these elements that may be adapted for other BIDs and public spaces, potentially establishing a new standard within the city's suite of street furniture.

Second, while the plan's major projects are site-specific to Union Square, they build upon the city's current street design initiatives, such as temporary plazas, shared streets, and the 14th Street Busway. The plan aims to make these temporary sites permanent using a cohesive design, material, and color palette. Once the design language is established, similar treatments may be applied to multiple sites across the district to create a unified look and feel that is still uniquely Union Square.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Each major project in this plan is a substantial undertaking requiring extensive planning, community engagement, financial investment, and coordination among various city agencies. Furthermore, the nature of the site, which is located above a complex network of NYC subways and utilities will require strategic engineering and technical analysis before long-term upgrades can move forward.

The team developed a prioritization matrix as a way to organize the Vision Plan projects and refine the implementation timeline. The matrix ranks each of the projects according to priority, cost, time, and complexity. It also evaluates the way each project achieves the plan's overarching goals. Through this, it is possible to prioritize projects that can be achieved quickly, and more efficiently. The earliest projects, which will be pilot programs or short-term installations, will demonstrate the ideas presented in the larger vision. Lessons learned from these early projects will inform planning and priorities for longer and more complex project phases.

USP will also work with community stakeholders and agency partners to refine the priorities and ensure that the projects align with planned citywide initiatives and programs. For example, coordinating surface-level street design projects with planned subterranean infrastructure projects may simplify the construction timeline and reduce spending.