

Priorities for US Mayors

Focus areas receive greater attention in Boston due to COVID-19

Transportation, the changing nature of work and pedestrian safety are important issues for mayors across the nation, according to the latest [Menino Survey of Mayors](#) by Boston University's Initiative on Cities. Released in January 2020, the survey results were based on interviews in 2019 with 119 mayors from cities with populations at or above 75,000.

The survey results reflect mayors' priorities before the COVID-19 pandemic and offer context for the increased emphasis city leadership is now placing on these policy areas because of the public health emergency. In Boston, the pandemic has raised important questions regarding transportation, pedestrian safety and the changing nature of work. In some areas of government, the City has accelerated policy initiatives due to COVID-19; in others the pandemic has required policy adjustments and new thinking.

Transportation Infrastructure

When asked what three infrastructure areas should be priorities for investment, mayors' survey responses indicated transportation infrastructure was a central focus. Roads (66%) and mass transit (43%) ranked one and three respectively. Mayors also acknowledged the growing impact of car culture on cities: 76% of mayors agreed or strongly agreed that cities are too car-oriented.

Updating transportation infrastructure was a top priority for Boston before COVID-19, as reflected in the City's efforts to address worsening congestion and other issues with urban mobility leading up to March 2020. The public health crisis has generated new urgency and opportunities around infrastructure improvements, including key projects in the City's long-term transportation plan, Go Boston 2030. In advancing the City's [Healthy Streets program](#), The Boston Transportation Department (BTD) is partnering with the MBTA to improve bus service for safe and reliable service for essential trips by expanding eight bus stops and installing new bus-only lanes on Washington Street, with potential for additional new lanes in future phases. The MBTA has also been using this period of low ridership to advance transit repairs, such as [those on the Blue Line](#).

Key questions over the coming months include how commuting and urban mobility patterns will shift and what additional infrastructure changes are necessary to accommodate public health guidance. The volume of vehicle use will influence how much revenue City officials see from parking meter use, parking fines and other revenue sources tied to funding transportation projects.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety

Pedestrian safety was another survey area that mayors across the country identified as a priority. Mayors have used a variety of policies to improve pedestrian safety, but there was no consensus on which improvements had the biggest impact. A 68% majority of mayors said that adding bike lanes had the biggest impact on cyclist safety and an additional 14% said that a bike/pedestrian master plan had the

biggest impact. 71% of mayors agreed that cities should make their roads more accessible for bikers even at the expense of driving lanes or parking. When it came to pedestrian safety, 26% of mayors indicated sidewalk improvements had the biggest impact.

Pedestrian and bicycle safety is a key focus of Go Boston 2030, the City's long-term transportation plan. Boston is approaching this goal through smart growth policy and following the model of national initiatives, such as Complete Streets and Vision Zero, which advance integrated street design for safety and improved mobility. Nationally, few mayors indicated that Complete Streets (8%) and Vision Zero (14%) had the biggest impact on pedestrian safety. Although traffic fatalities have risen in Boston during the pandemic due to sparse vehicle traffic and increased speeding, the City remains committed to meet the Vision Zero goal of zero traffic fatalities by 2030.

The City's pursuit of bike infrastructure projects signals that Boston's leadership, like most mayors surveyed, considers bike lanes a critical area for improving pedestrian and bicycle safety. As part of the Healthy Streets program, in the coming months the City will expand pedestrians' share of the road and accelerate development of bike infrastructure in key corridors to enable social distancing and retail commerce to resume with more space. Similar to the acceleration of bus infrastructure projects, the enhanced and more immediate focus on bike lane installation and creation of open street space reflects a shift in the City's near-term Go Boston planning priorities given new public health challenges.

Changing Nature of Work

The survey asked mayors to predict which areas of work would be more and less common in the next five years. A number of mayors identified high tech (48%) and health care (29%) as sectors where they anticipate the greatest expansion over that period. Mayors predicted retail (28%) and manufacturing (23%) will experience the greatest decline. Survey responses indicated uncertainty about the future of service sector jobs—13% of mayors said the industry would likely decline and the same percentage said the industry would expand in the next five years.

Changes in how people work, already underway, have accelerated in the past three months—and there is even greater uncertainty about the pandemic's long-term impact on industries where new public health norms make normal commerce infeasible.

Massachusetts' state-wide stay-at-home advisory, in effect for much of the past three months, prompted many employers to expand work-from-home initiatives—and offices in Boston have yet to be allowed to operate at full capacity. A decrease in demand for and occupancy of commercial real estate would adversely affect restaurants and retailers reliant on customers who, before COVID-19, commuted to areas with higher density of commercial office buildings. In the long-run, declining demand and occupancy of commercial properties could also impact the value of those properties. This would in-turn have significant implications for Boston's property tax base, what revenue the City can generate from property taxes and how the City sets its tax rates for commercial and residential properties.