Encourage pedestrian traffic and community engagement
In recent years there has been a push to make communities more pedestrian friendly and accessible. Medford, Mass., is among the towns that have made this a priority and it has a tangible project to show for it.

The city of about 60,000 people recently launched a pilot of FindMedford, a new pedestrian wayfinding program aimed at promoting walkability, reducing traffic congestion and limiting emissions by encouraging the public to access points of interest by foot.

“Medford is undergoing a comprehensive planning process right now,” said City Planner Amanda Centrella. “As such, we’ve been doing a lot of community outreach on a bunch of different themes. Some of the themes that have been emerging from that is the need to better highlight connections between the squares.”

She added that historically there’s been some attention around Medford Square, which is near Haines Square, West Medford Square and South Medford Square. Certain stakeholders like community advocacy group WalkMedford are advancing the conversation around making these and other places more pedestrian friendly and accessible. Centrella said the organization has been championing FindMedford and other initiatives related to walkability for some time, and they’ve informed the project quite a bit.

The program is also made possible by funding through the Massachusetts Department of Transportation’s Shared Streets and Spaces grant program. Centrella said once they secured funding, early conversations within city departments and Walk Medford helped to establish the scope of the program.

“The talks helped determine our focus on Medford Square as our starting place, particularly because the square is fairly central to other squares nearby,” she said. “Highlighting those connections makes more sense in that way. One of the goals for the program was to highlight city services and the city spaces located within our area of focus.”

It just so happens that there are a lot of city services operated near, adjacent to and within Medford Square, so that helped further their cause. Centrella said WalkMedford was an essential partner in helping determine key factors like the quantity, location and placement of signs, and the city worked with them extensively over several months to map out the installation sites. The project went online in August.

Sign design, walking routes and destinations were developed in collaboration with WalkBoston, an advocacy organization dedicated to improving walkability across Massachusetts. Centrella said they also had help from students at nearby Tufts University.

Now that a few months have passed since the installation, the conversation has shifted to what’s next. It is still considered a pilot project and therefore temporary, and Centrella noted that those involved want to engage community members so they can make adjustments as necessary. For instance, maybe there’s a chance to partner with local artists on designs, or they might need to evaluate whether they’re highlighting the places that people are interested in learning more about. The city recently released a survey on the program to gauge community interest, solicit feedback and answer questions.

“We want to take that information and inform a more comprehensive program that doesn’t include just Medford Square, but includes all of the squares,” she said. “At this time, we don’t know if that will be a piecemeal approach or if it’ll happen more all at once. But this is a way to test the field. And I think what will feel successful to us is if we reach people and get a lot of feedback.”

Her colleague and Economic Development Planner Niwa Yvette agreed, adding that the temporary nature of the project allows for some creative flexibility.

“Before we put actual metal poles in the ground with expensive signs on them, we want to know how the community feels about wayfinding,” she said. “We want to know what’s important to them to be pointed to and what the design should look like, in their opinion. So, I would hope that other communities would see this as a success in terms of community engagement.

This project is a “conversation starter” in Centrella’s words — and just the beginning of their commitment to making Medford more pedestrian friendly. The effort also fits into the city’s larger goals related to sustainability, which Mayor Lungo-Koehn highlighted by signing a pledge to cut the city’s carbon emissions in half by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.