Social Infrastructure:
Towards More Walkable, Resilient & Inclusive Gateway Cities

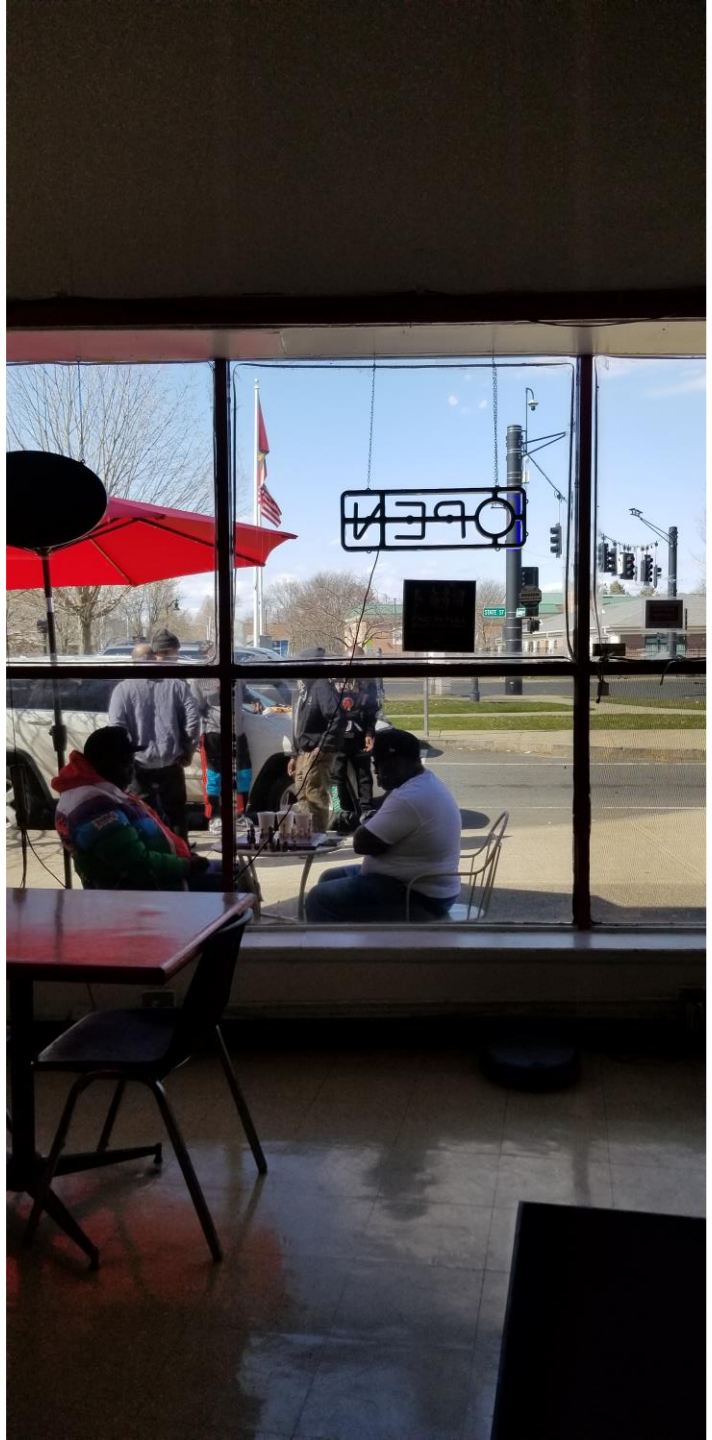
November 15, 2022

A report by André Leroux, Sidney Kuesters & Ben Forman

MassINC

Pandemic Questions

- Many Gateway Cities suffered disproportionately from the pandemic. Civic and open space became more important than ever. What is the quality of these spaces and do residents have adequate access?
- Do essential workers who live in Gateway Cities enjoy adequate transportation choices? Can you thrive without a car?
- Would a hybrid work force relocate to Gateway Cities?
- Can small downtowns flourish during and after the pandemic? Are they adequately serving their diverse communities and helping to build local jobs and prosperity?
- Why don’t regional downtowns feel as vibrant as they should?



Isolation & Public Health

- Social isolation significantly increased a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.
- Social isolation was associated with about a 50% percent increased risk of dementia, 32% increased risk of stroke, 29% increased risk of heart disease, and higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Immigrant and LGBTQ+ populations at higher risk.

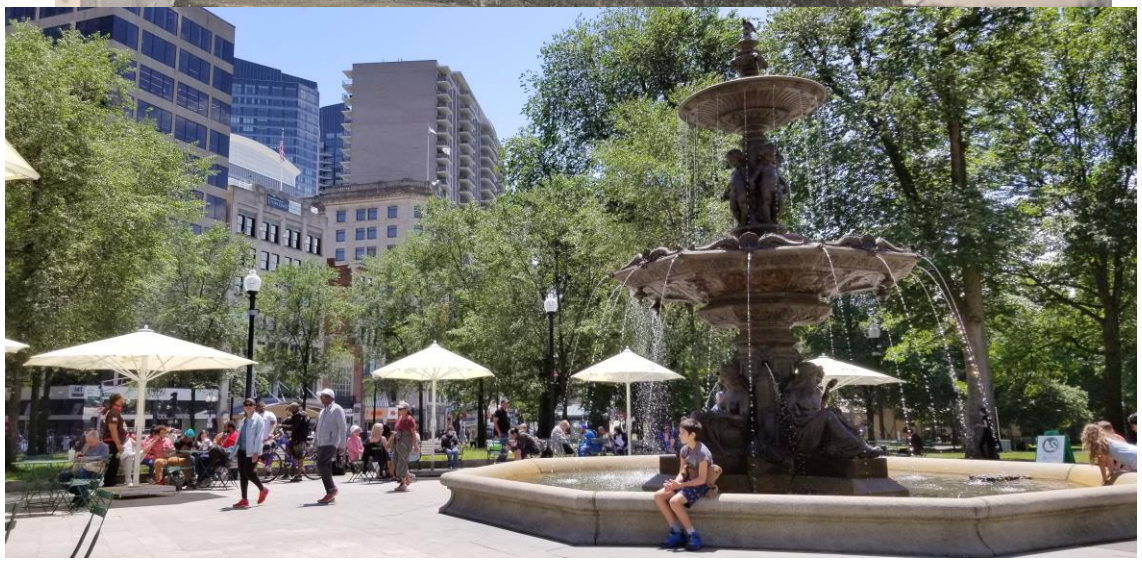
National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2020

Social Infrastructure

From cafes and barbershops to libraries, parks, and public transit, urban neighborhoods house a diverse collection of spaces that promote social interaction.

Social infrastructure refers to the ways in which the built environment shapes meaningful community life.

Examples of Social Infrastructure



Social Infrastructure

Social infrastructure is not “social capital”—a concept commonly used to measure people’s relationships and interpersonal networks—but the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops.

- Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*

Strong places are the foundation of prosperous, equitable, and resilient cities and regions.

- Jennifer Vey & Nate Storring, *Hyperlocal*

Project Partners

MassINC
GATEWAY CITIES
INNOVATION INSTITUTE

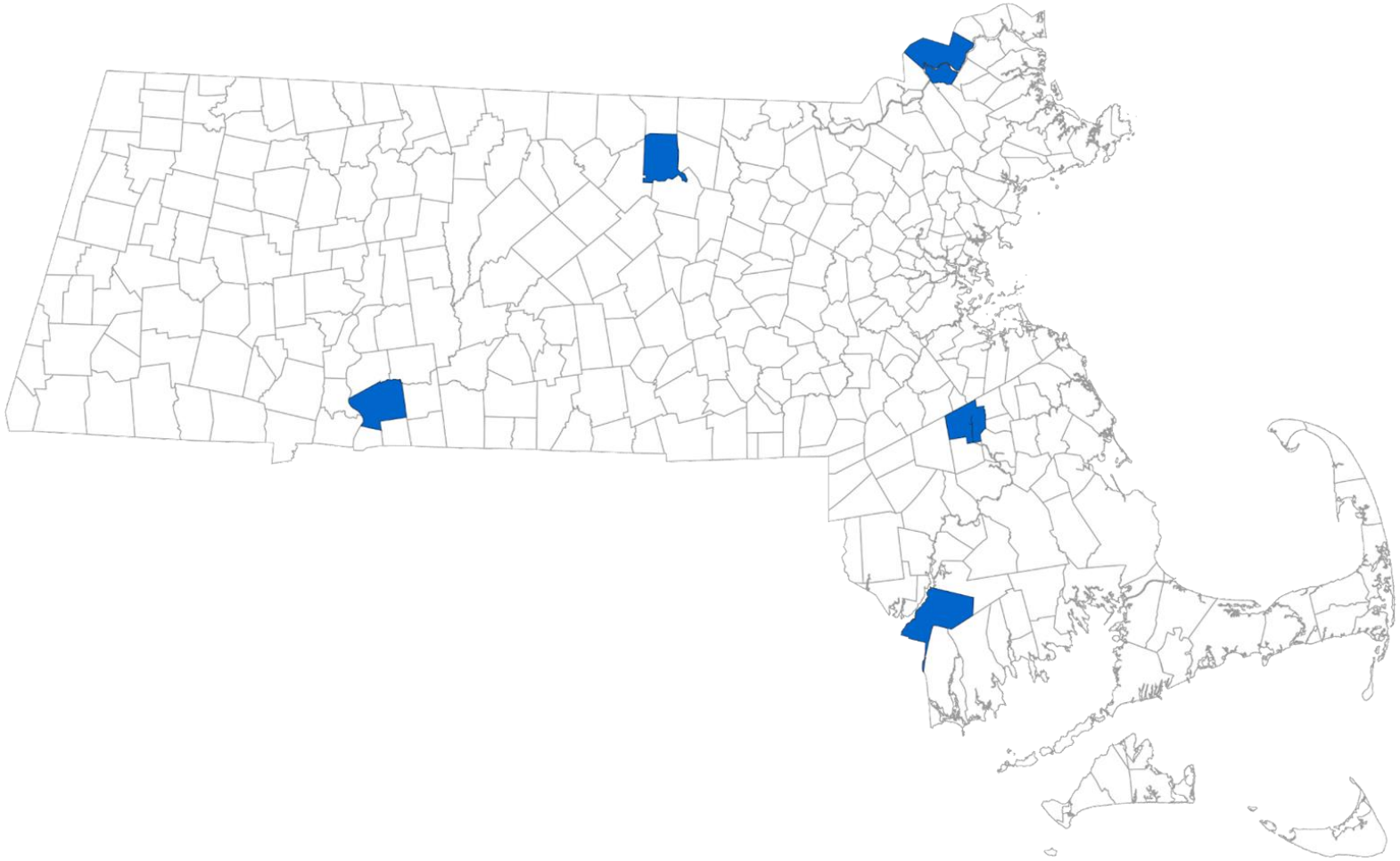
walkBoston®

Barr Foundation

THE LAWRENCE & LILLIAN SOLOMON FOUNDATION

Five Downtown Case Studies

- Springfield
- Fitchburg
- Brockton
- Haverhill
- Fall River



Why don’t more people walk in Gateway City downtowns?

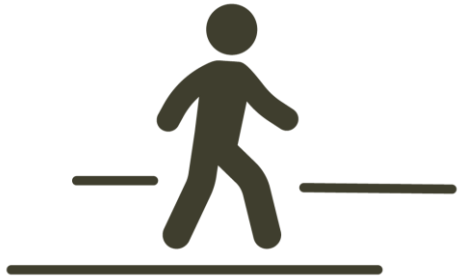
Main Street, Brockton

Walkability - Infrastructure

walkBoston®
Walk Audits

ROADWAYS

CROSSINGS



SIDEWALKS

STREETSCAPE ELEMENTS

Haverhill

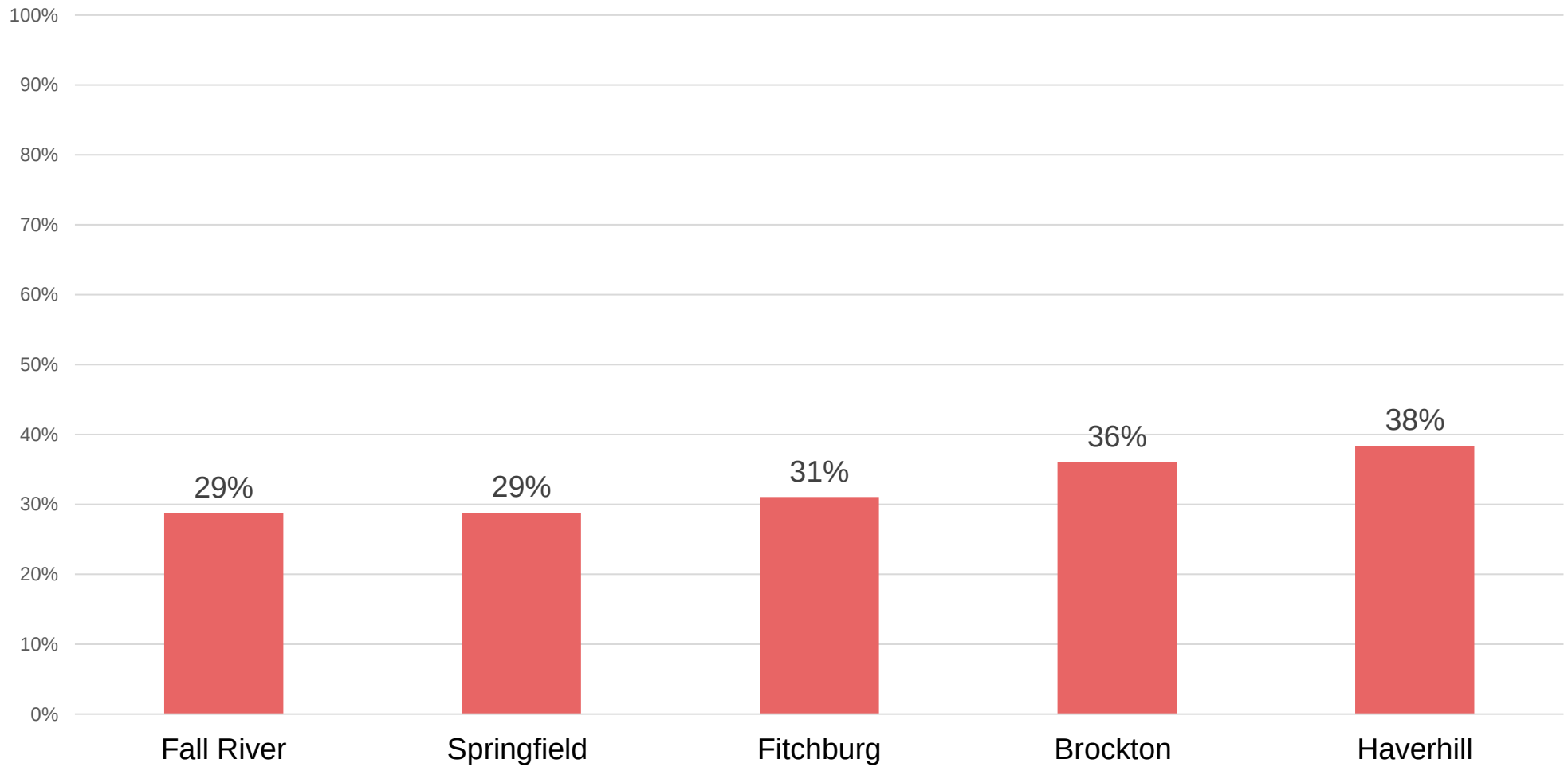
Fall River

Why don’t more people walk?

Parking Analysis

Brockton City Hall and parking lot

Parking as a Percentage of Developable Land



Haverhill

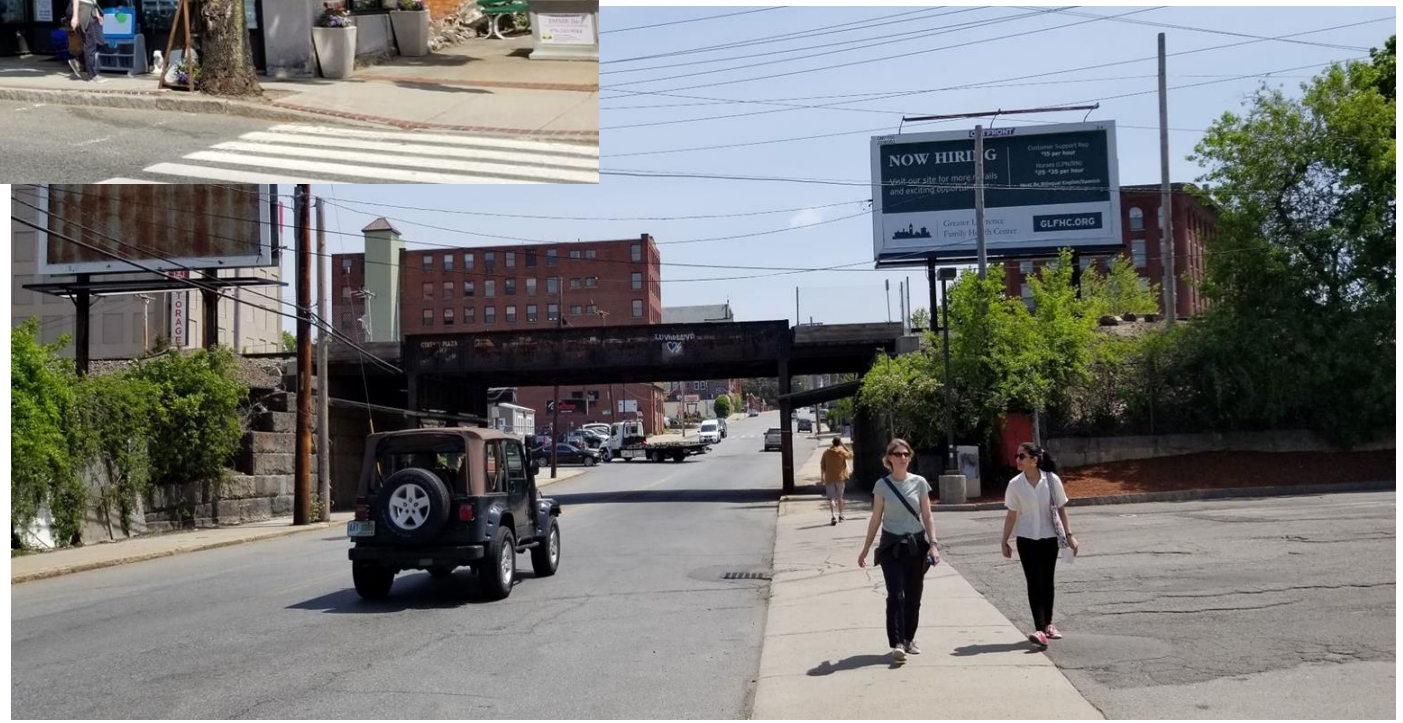
Total Land Dedicated to Car Infrastructure

Car-Oriented Infrastructure makes up 48% of Haverhill's Downtown Area

Streetscape Analysis

Active vs. Inactive Streetscapes

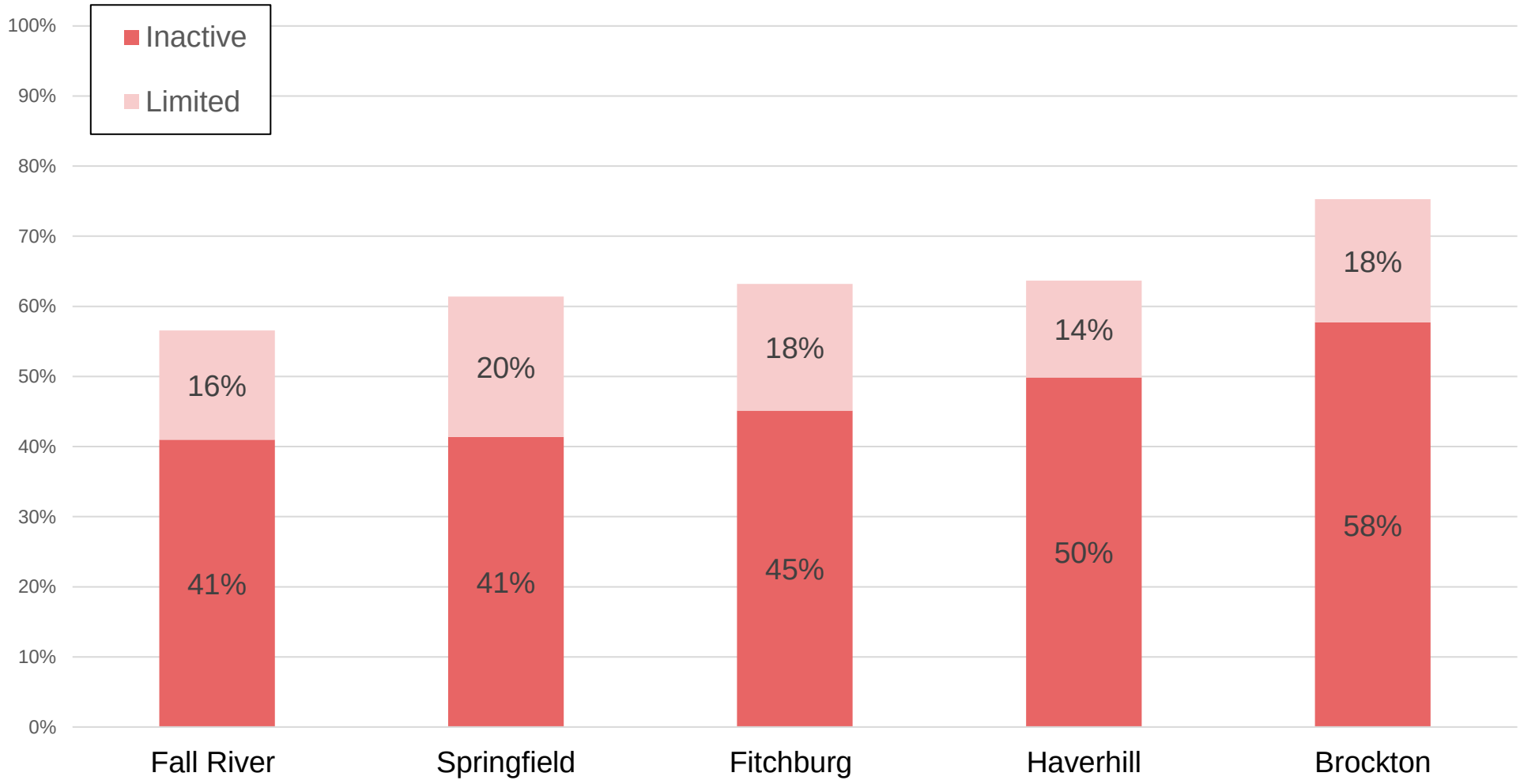
Haverhill



Streetscapes

Fall River

Limited and Inactive Frontage as a Share of Total Streetscape

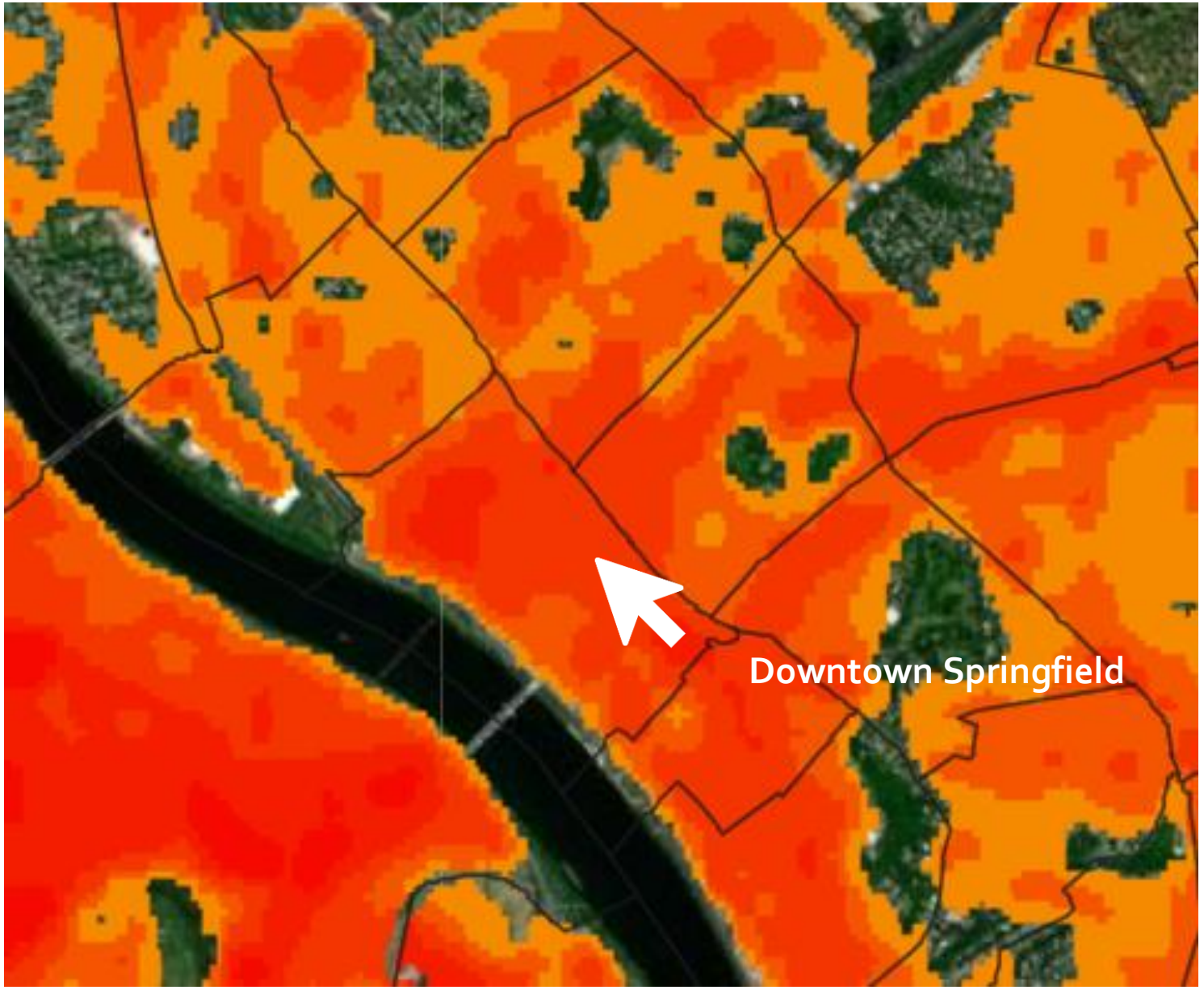


Urban Heat Island

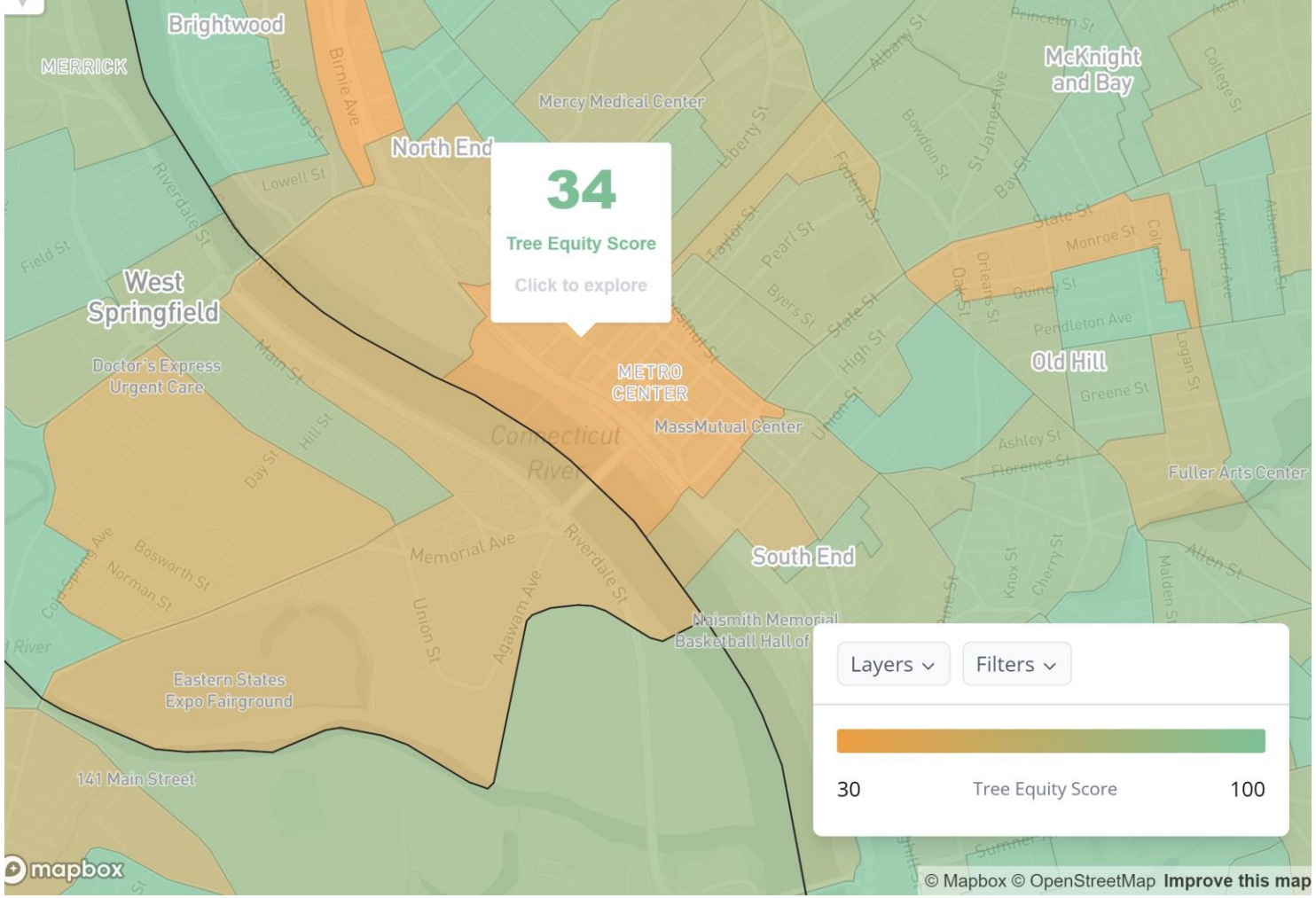
What is the Urban Heat Island Effect?

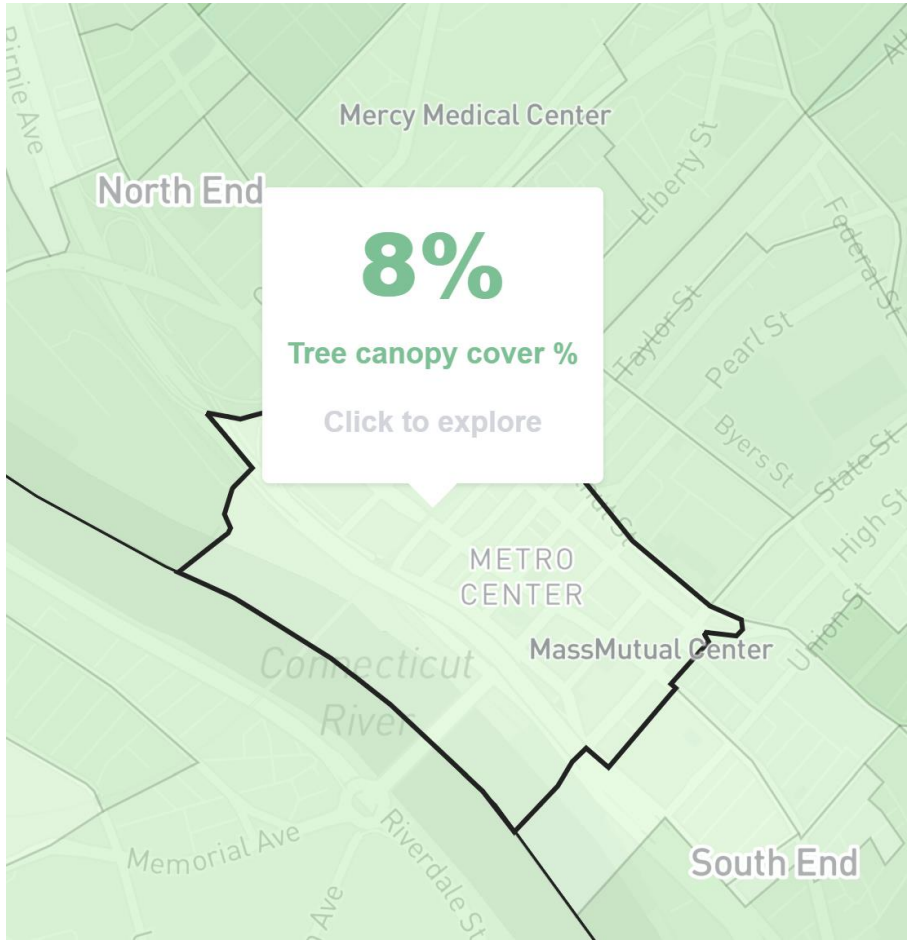
"Urban heat islands occur when cities replace natural land cover with dense concentrations of pavement, buildings, and other surfaces that absorb and retain heat. This effect increases energy costs (e.g., for air conditioning), air pollution levels, and heat-related illness and mortality."- EPA

The Trust for Public Land, Descartes Labs, USGS



Tree Cover: Springfield





Canopy cover goal: 48%

Current canopy cover: 8%

Regional Mobility

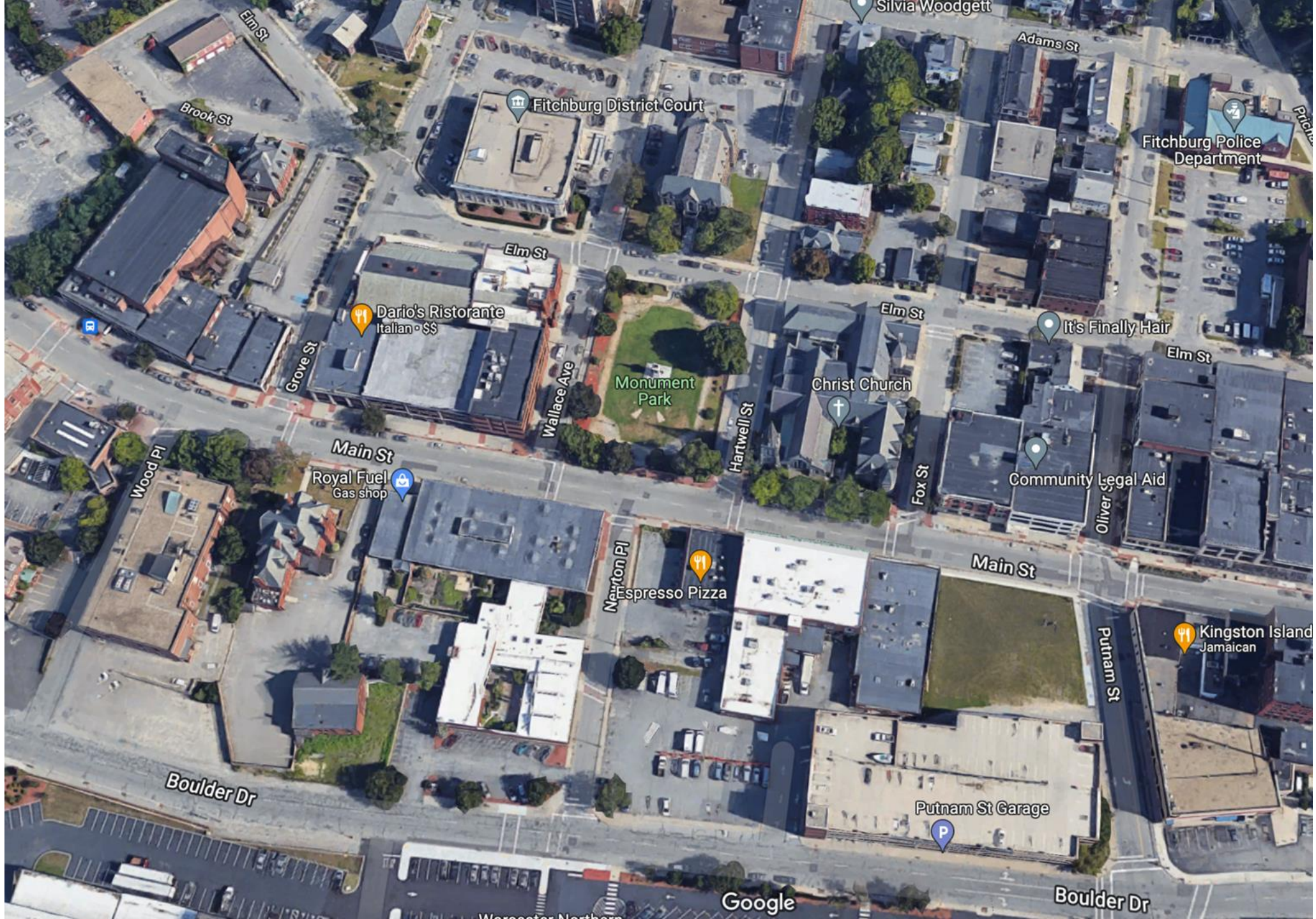
Brockton Commuter Rail Station and Police Station

Civic Spaces

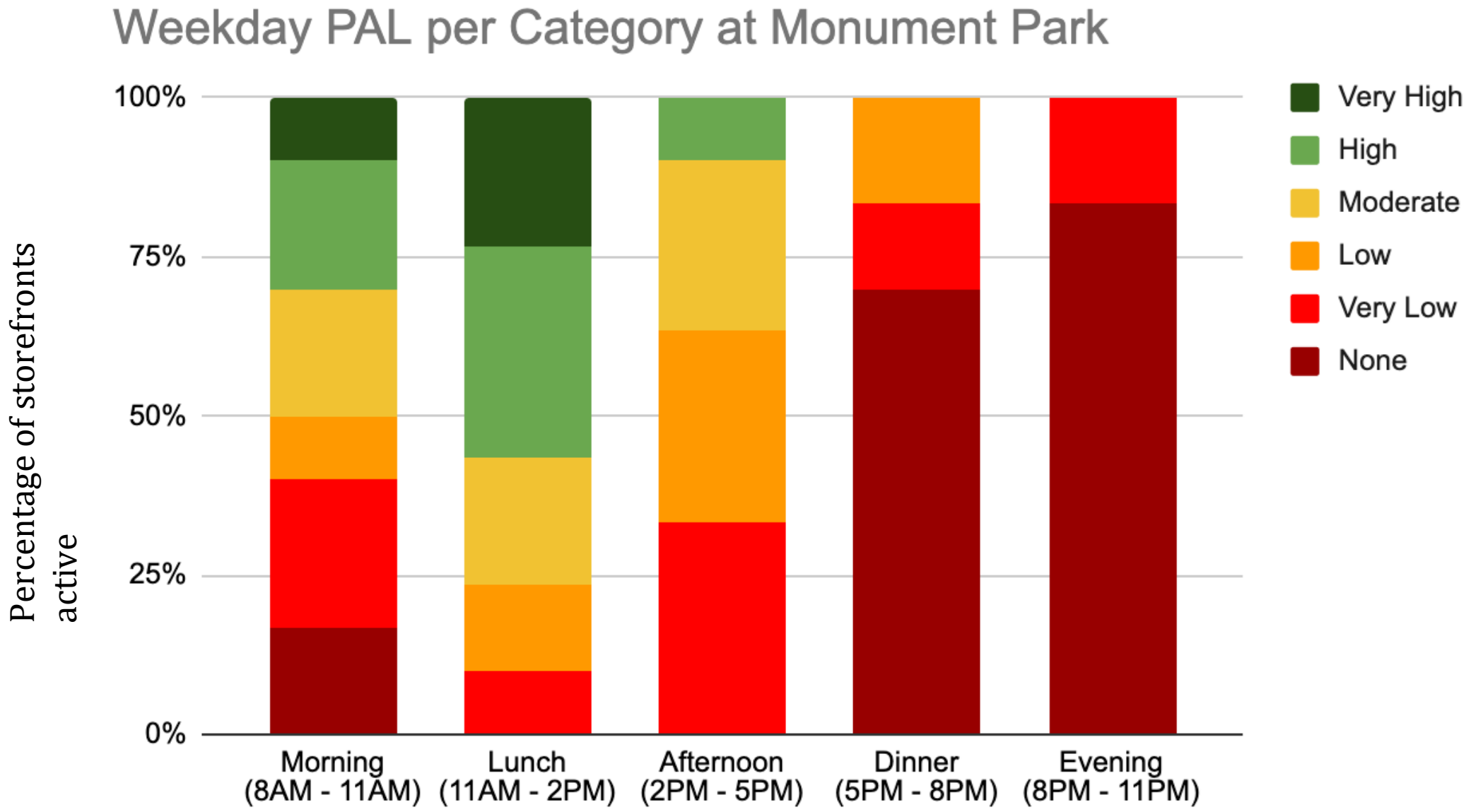
Monument Park

Heart of downtown Fitchburg

35,458 ft^2


Elm St
Brook St
Fitchburg District Court
Adams St
Fitchburg Police Department
Elm St
Dario's Ristorante
Italian · $$
Grove St
Wallace Ave
Monument Park
Elm St
It's Finally Hair
Elm St
Christ Church
Hartwell St
Main St
Wood Pl
Royal Fuel
Gas shop
Fox St
Community Legal Aid
Oliver St
Newton Pl
Espresso Pizza
Main St
Putnam St
Kingston Island
Jamaican
Boulder Dr
Putnam St Garage
Google
Boulder Dr

Pedestrian Activity Level (PAL) - Monument Park



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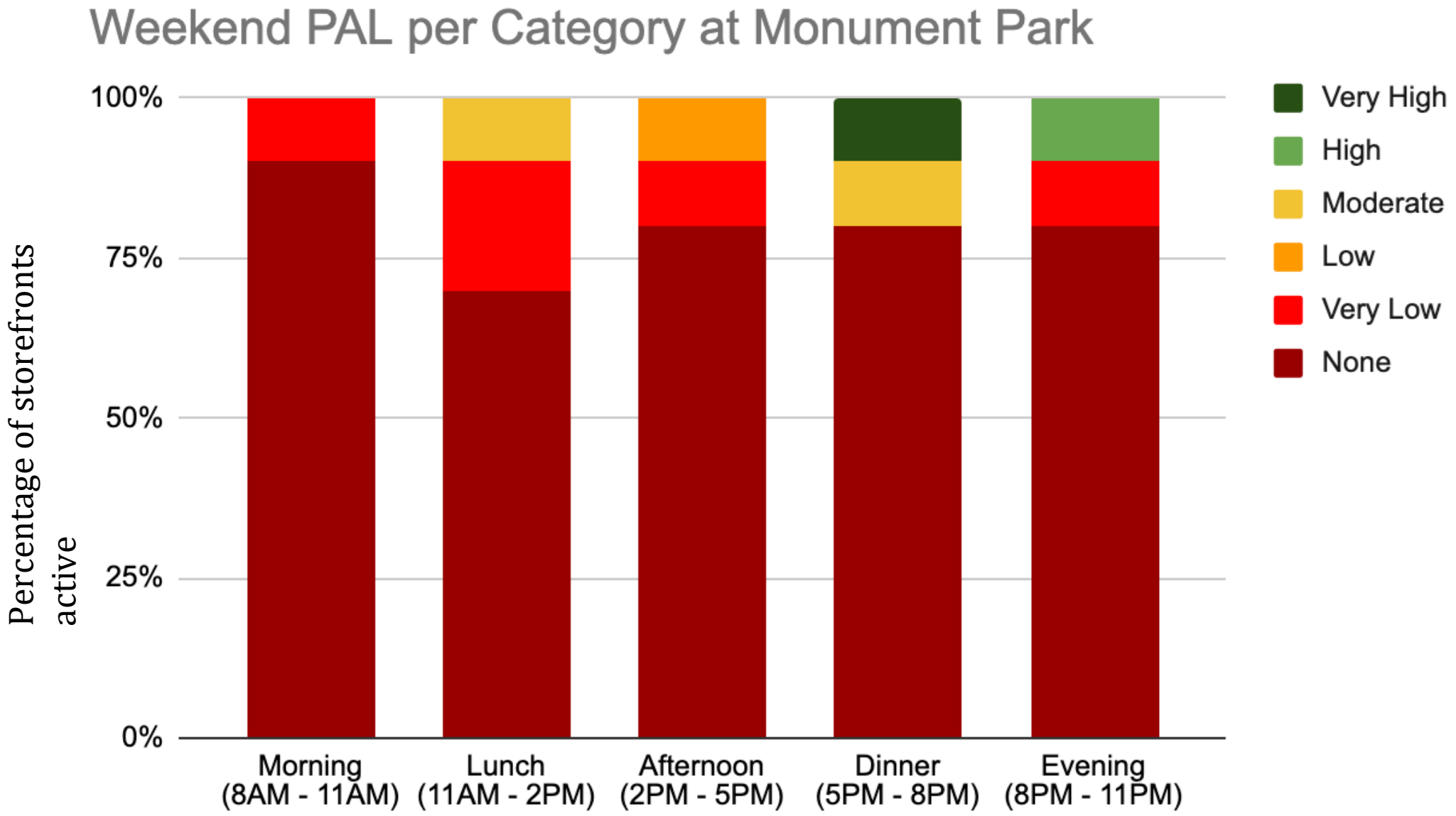


Active & Inclusive Civic Spaces

Zocalo, Coyoacan, Mexico City (Photo: Viator, TripAdvisor)

Inclusive Entrepreneurship & Third Spaces

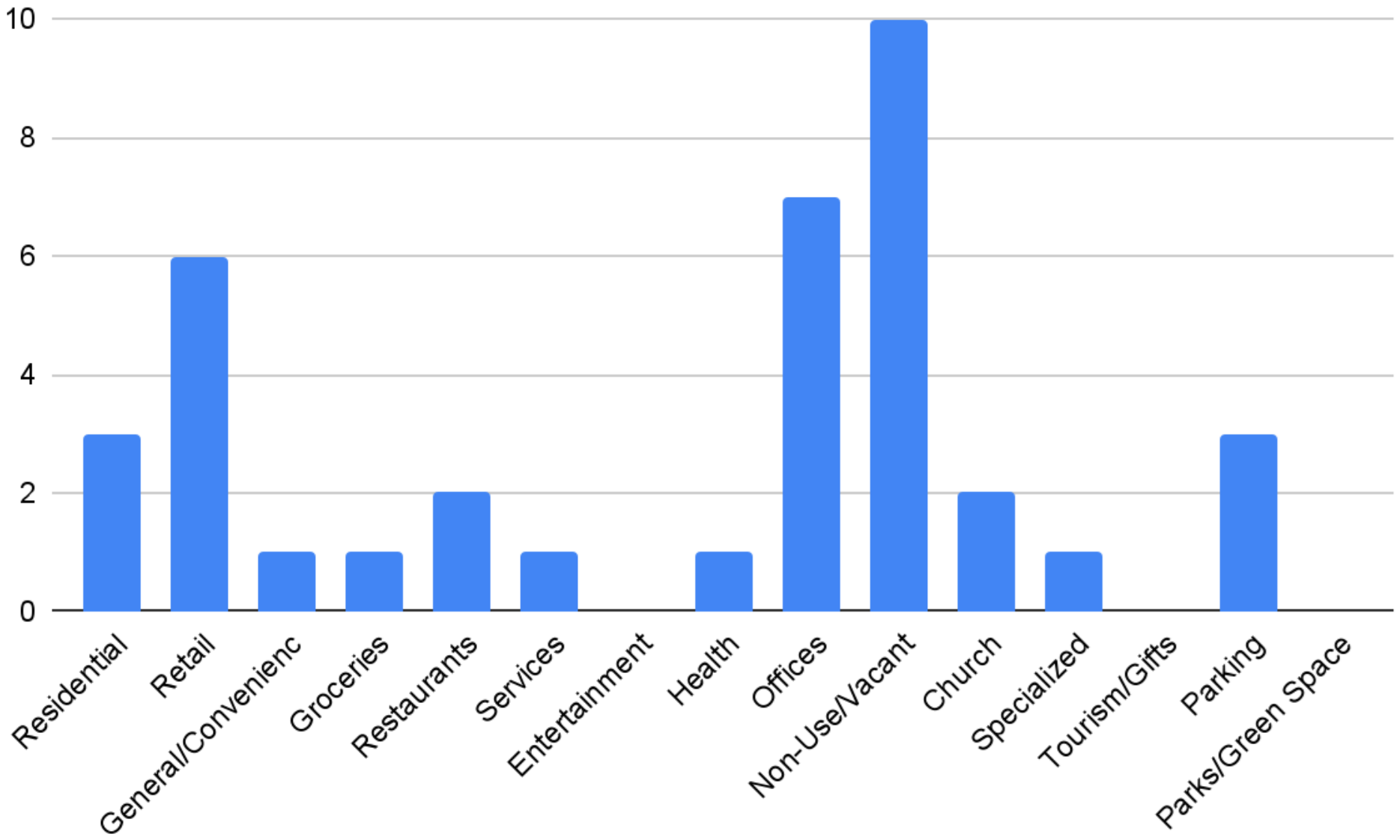
Legion Parkway
Brockton

- 2 Blocks
- 23 Active Entrances
- 9 Empty Storefronts
- 4 rows of parking
- 63,308 ft^2

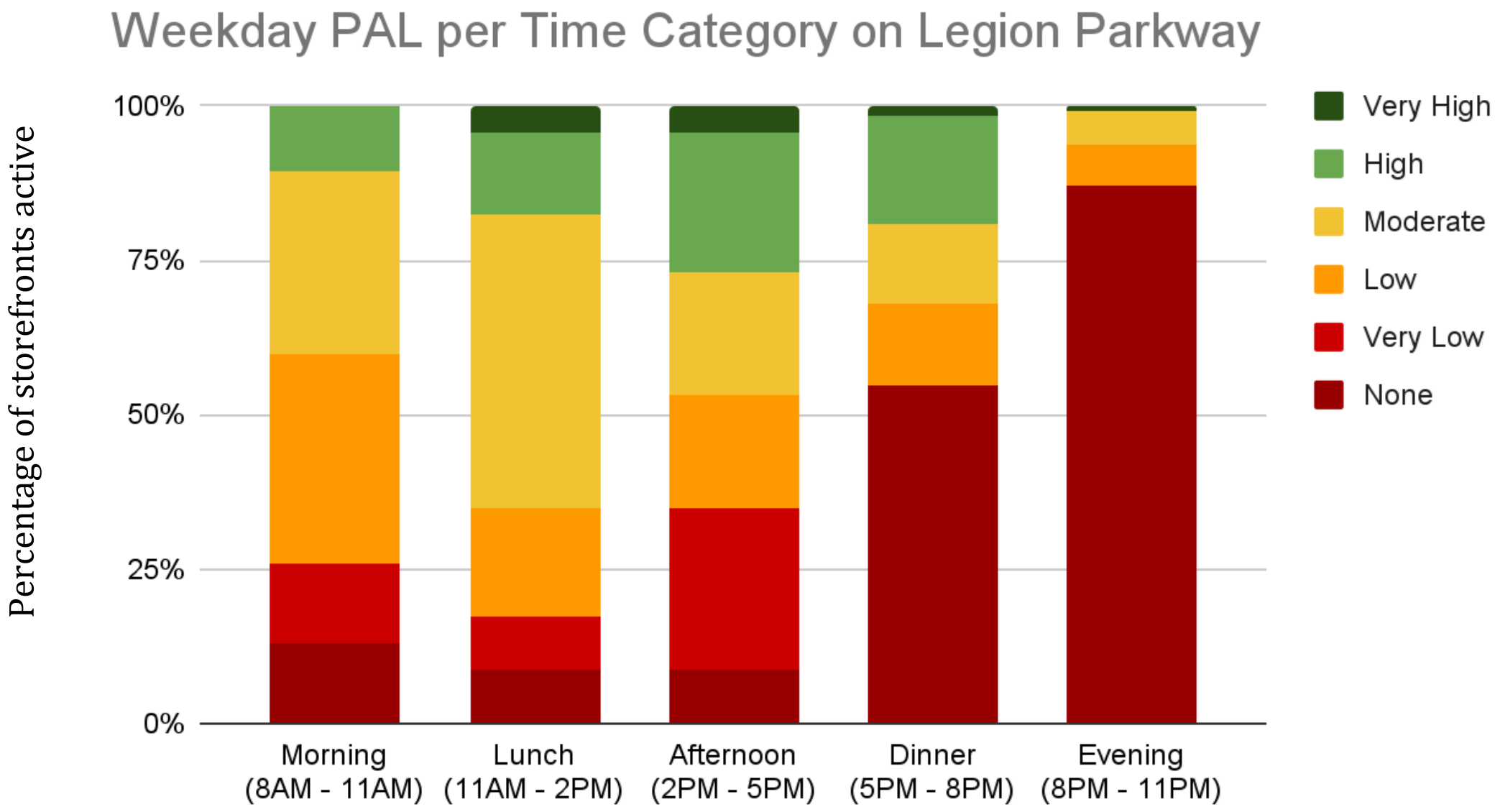
https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:0k225s89p

Google
Street View
DIVA FASHION
LADY'S WEAR AND ACCESSORIES
Legion Pkwy
Panda Chinese
Brock
L St
Google

Legion Parkway Land Use



Pedestrian Activity Level (PAL) - Legion Parkway



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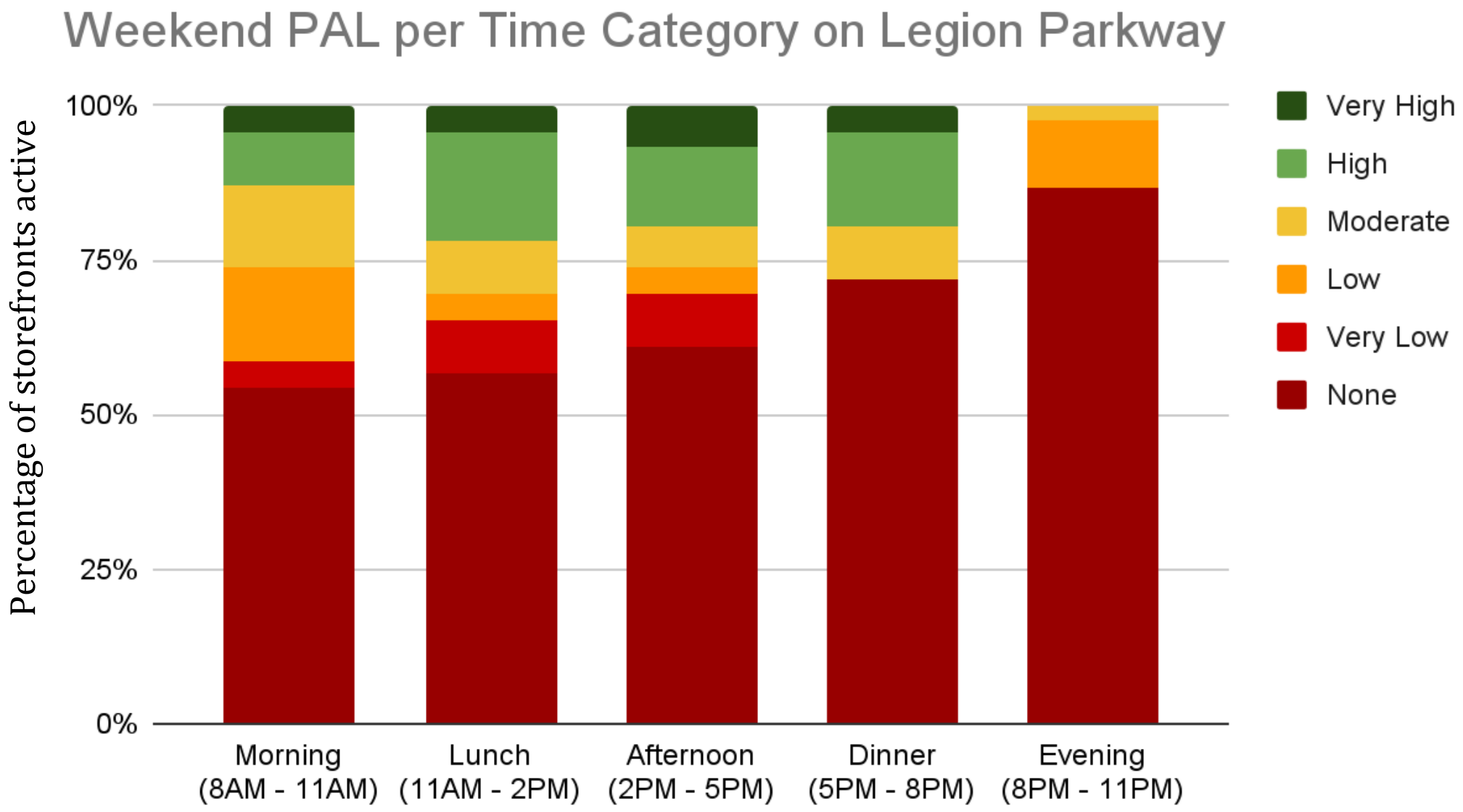
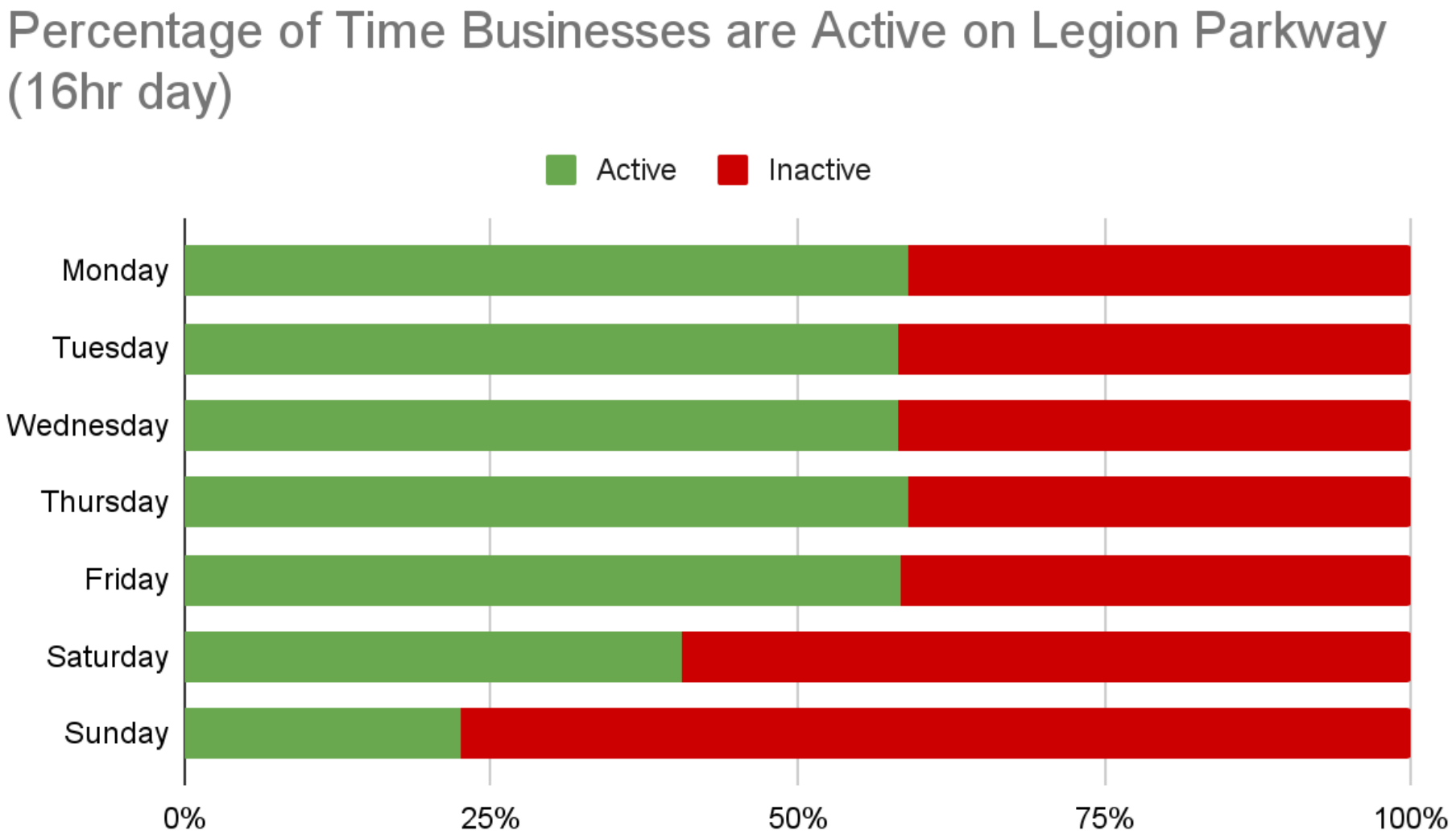
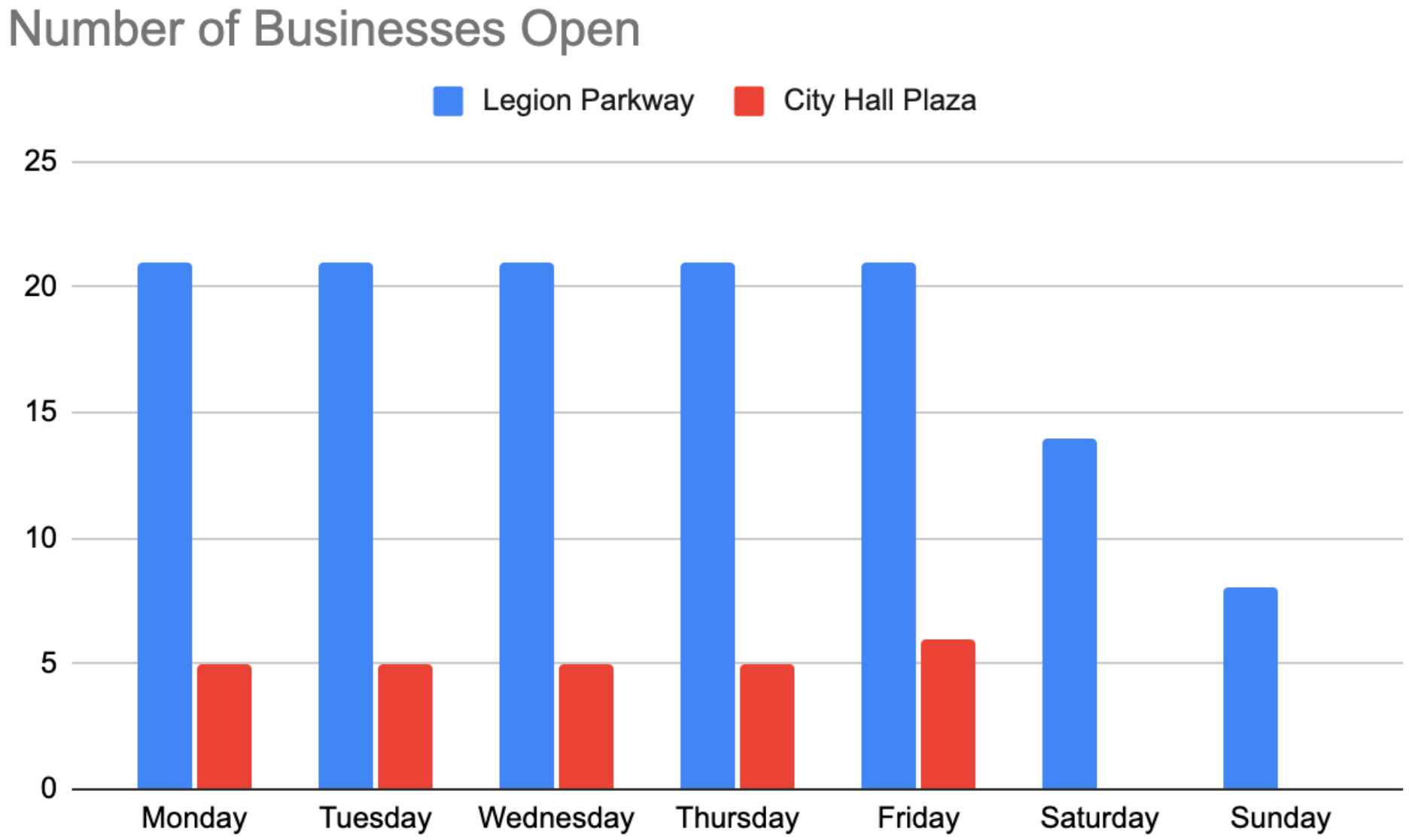


Active Time - Legion Parkway



Activity: Legion Parkway vs City Hall Plaza



Place Governance

The collaboration of actors across sectors to make decisions that help shape the economic, physical and/or social dynamics of a specific place.

- Jennifer Vey and Nate Storring, *Hyperlocal*

- Cross-sector collaboration & shared vision
- Common goals and mutual accountability
- Placemaking/placekeeping strategies
- Long-term investments
- District management tools:
  - *Business Improvement Districts*
  - *Cultural Districts*
  - *Parking Benefit Districts*
  - *Leadership cohorts*

Policy Recommendation Highlights

1. **Infill Development**: Support effective financing tools for small and mid-sized infill development in Gateway Cities—replace surface parking, generate more activities, entrances, and engagement with public space.
2. **Parking**: Centralize downtown parking in structured parking facilities designed to introduce electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure to Gateway City downtowns.
3. **Place Governance**: Dedicate a portion of state online sales tax revenue for reinvestment in downtowns to support district management, placemaking strategies, and improvements to civic space.
4. **Public Transit**: Fully implement the MBTA's Rail Vision strategy and increase access by supporting low-income fares for commuter rail and fare-free programs for RTAs.