

Connectivity and City Government: Implications for Immigrant Owned Restaurant's in Somerville



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Urban Borderlands
Fall 2011

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I. Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this paper comes from stories. The stories of successful, struggling, or somewhere in between, restaurant owners who not only fed me delicious food, but allowed me to come speak to them about their lives. Therefore, I would first and foremost like to thank the restaurant owners that took the time to speak with me. Each of them took time out of their very busy days to meet with me and to help a stranger understand their experiences as both immigrants and business owners. This report would not have been possible without their willingness to help me, and for that I am incredibly grateful. I would also like to thank David Guzman for helping me to understand another side of the story, and for also taking the time out of his work day to not only meet with me, but to prepare materials to help me better understand his perspective.

I would also like to thank my classmates in Urban Borderlands. In the four months of this class we all experienced confusion, nerves, challenges and more. Without the support of our class I doubt that any of us would have been able to come out with a finished product on the other side. My classmates helped to shape my ideas, and to direct my focus. They also aided my research heavily with their own interviews. Though my primary source of information came from my own narrators, I drew from the experiences of the business owners that they worked with as well to support the things that I had learned from my own narrators.

Next I would like to thank Katherine Conway and Rachael Plitch. Katherine kept us on task for the entire semester, reminding us when we needed to get ourselves moving. She was also essential in the final processes of my project, aiding me with any questions

that I had and helping to keep us on track. Rachael Plitch was the first person to take us around Somerville. She introduced me to the Somerville outside of Davis Square, one that I had previously been woefully oblivious to. She also worked to compile a list of potential places to conduct our interviews, something that was essential in this process.

Lastly, I would like to thank Professor Pacini-Hernandez. Not only has she been the driving force behind this project, but she has also provided much of the context in which I have learned to look at the lives of immigrant restaurant owners. Without her influence it would have been considerably more difficult to narrow down my focus and to frame my research. Additionally, I never would have been introduced to the many delicious restaurants in Somerville that I have frequented this semester. I am incredibly grateful for her help this semester.

II. Introduction

Why Somerville? This question was the first thing that popped into my head when I thought about immigrant businesses in Somerville. Why Somerville over other immigrant enclaves in the Boston area? It was the question that I initially sought to examine in my research for the Urban Borderlands project. Yet, in talking with immigrant business owners, it was immediately clear that “why Somerville” was not a question in their minds. The community, the public transportation, the ethnic diversity were not usually the reasons that these business owners had moved to Somerville. It was convenience, family, or sheer happenstance that had drawn these business owners to the greater Boston area, specifically to Somerville. The result was that this question developed from why Somerville, to what is it about Somerville that is good, or maybe even problematic.

As I learned more from my narrators I found that there were a few challenges that kept coming up, not only in my research, but also in the research of my classmates. The most prevalent of these were parking and liquor licenses. In thinking about these issues, I wanted to look at the structures that had control over these issues, which eventually led me to city government. Somerville’s city government, comprised of Mayor Curtatone, a Board of Alderman and several departments, is involved in local businesses primarily through its Economic Development department. This department runs a variety of programs aimed to help businesses in the area. Despite this, there are many problems that exist within the city government in regards to relations with immigrant owned restaurants, problems that often inhibit their success.

Initially, this research was somewhat disheartening, in that I was having a very hard time getting information on immigrants and city government. My first two narrators had had very little interaction with city government, and did not have much to say about the process of opening their restaurants. The other restaurant owner that I interviewed had nothing but praise for the city government. Yet after looking more critically at each of these interviews, and trying to understand how the issues that each of these restaurants were having intersected with city government, I was better able to understand the relationship between immigrant restaurant owners and the city. My interview with David Guzman of the Economic Development department also helped me to focus my lens, and analyze my findings better.

The primary way that I will be looking at city government in this paper is in terms of permits and programs, because these are the primary channels through which immigrant owned restaurants and city government interact most frequently. I do not examine many of the different kinds of permits necessary for restaurant owners, such as fire safety, and health certifications, simply because of time constraints. There are only so many questions that it is possible to ask, and have answered sufficiently, within a thirty minute period, which was one of the limitations to this research. After giving some background information on Somerville, I will start with a discussion of the primary issues faced by immigrant restaurant owners that I encountered in my fieldwork. I focus on liquor licensing and parking because those were the issues encountered most frequently by my classmates and I. Not all business owners have the same experiences with these issues, one of my narrators had a liquor license, but the other two did not, for different reasons. Parking problems were experienced differently in different parts of the city. In

interviews conducted by others, restaurant owners in Magoun Square voiced their concerns about the lack of parking due to construction. On the other hand, one of my narrators did not think that parking was a huge problem because the demographic that he catered to took the Red Line. I emphasize these differences now because I think that it is important to note that all of the narrators that we interviewed have very different experiences based on location, culture, customers etc. Though these differences are not the focus of my paper, I think that they are important to keep in mind when looking at the issues at hand.

I will then explain some of the city government programs that are currently in place to aid businesses, and specifically restaurants in Somerville in order to see how these programs impact immigrant restaurants. This discussion of city programs leads into the primary purpose of my paper, an examination of how being an immigrant plays into interactions with city government. Some of the things that I saw in my fieldwork, and in reading the fieldwork of my peers was a lack of knowledge about city government, and language barriers that prevented restaurant owners from being able to access the resources that are available to them. In looking at these problems, I am also looking at what, if anything, the city government is doing to address them. Barriers exist at both ends of the spectrum though, something that I will also address briefly. There is an interesting lack of unity among businesses in many parts of Somerville that seems to be detrimental to restaurant owners, which has prevented them from having a unified voice in their interactions with the city government.

There is some community mobilization among restaurant owners in certain areas of Somerville, which will lead me to look at the disparities between different commercial

centers in Somerville and how the policies of the city government have impacted this. Lastly, my conversations with the Economic Development department in Somerville revealed an increased reliance on community organizations to aid in the development of businesses, especially immigrant businesses in Somerville, and I was interested in looking at the impact of this shift in the long run. The ultimate goal of this research is to understand better what immigrant businesses and city government need to be doing to work together more effectively.

III. Methodology

I conducted my research between September 2011 and December 2011. I interviewed four different members of the Somerville community, three immigrant restaurant owners and one member of city government. Each interview was approximately thirty minutes long, though there was some variation in length. I followed a set of specific questions that addressed some of the issues that I thought may face immigrant owned businesses in Somerville. When talking to the representative from city government I tailored my questions to how city government is dealing with the concerns that I had heard from immigrant businesses. I also provided him with some of the questions beforehand so that he was prepared for the interview.

I concentrated on restaurants that were from South Asia, primarily the Himalayan region of India and Nepal. The purpose of this was that there is not a large ethnic enclave of Nepali, Tibetan or Indian immigrants in the Somerville area, making my sample of restaurants those that cater primarily to customers outside of their ethnic cohort.

To get a more representative sample of immigrant restaurants in the area beyond the small sample size of three restaurants, I reviewed the interview reports of my classmates. From these reports I was primarily looking for references to city government, liquor licenses and parking issues. This was intended to provide supporting evidence on the city of Somerville, specifically.

Lastly, I drew from secondary sources to support the research I had done. I used the online resources from Tisch Library at Tufts University to find information on the intersection of immigrant businesses and local government. Additionally, I used former

Urban Borderlands reports to inform me on information on Somerville. I also used information from the United States Census Bureau on the City of Somerville to gather background information on Somerville. Lastly, a main source of information that I used to find information on businesses in Somerville, as well as the programs that are in place to aid businesses was the city of Somerville website.

IV. Background

Somerville, Massachusetts was first settled in 1630, and was established as a town in 1842 (“City of Somerville”). Since the beginning, Somerville has been a city populated by immigrants. By the early 1900’s Somerville had become densely populated and had a large immigrant population (Smith 2011). Nearly thirty percent of the population was born in other countries, primarily Europe and Canada (Smith 2011). In the 1970’s and 1980’s there was an influx of Latin and Central American immigrants who immigrated to the United States because of displacement, political unrest and more to the Boston area.

Around the same time Somerville adopted the Somerville Sanctuary Resolution, which allowed the illegal immigrants in the city, specifically those from Haiti, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala and Ireland, some of the same rights as the rest of the city’s population (Nicholson et al. 2004). This policy was basically a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for illegal immigrants, meaning that the city would not actively check the immigration status of its citizens, in an effort to prevent discrimination against illegal immigrants. Not long after this the Welcome Project was founded at the Mystic Housing Development to help assist immigrants in integrating into the housing development, and the city itself. These programs demonstrate the impact that immigrants were having on the city, and the need for the city to create programs to assist them.

In recent years there has been continued immigration into Somerville, not just from Latino populations. United States immigration policy has shifted dramatically in the last century to allow the influx of an increasing number of Asian immigrants, with over 3.5 million Asians immigrating to the United States between 1990 and 2000 (“United

States Census Bureau”). In 1996 there were around 400 Nepali’s who were legal residents of the United States (Daniels 2010). In 2000 there were 200 to 300 Nepali immigrants in Somerville area alone (Lee 2010). Though this number likely represents more than legal residents, it does indicate an increasing number of Nepali immigrants in Somerville.

Today the city of Somerville website describes the city as “an eclectic mix of blue-collar families, young professionals, college students and recent immigrants” (“City of Somerville”). In the 1980’s the extension of the Red Line into Davis Square brought an increasing number of urban, professional class young people to West Somerville (Smith 2011). This trend has been buoyed by the presence of Tufts University. Despite this, Somerville remains a city whose population is strongly defined by its immigrants. The 2010 US Census Bureau put the percentage of foreign-born residents of Somerville at just over 27 percent (“United States Census Bureau”). It also showed that 8.7 percent of the population is of Asian descent (a five percent jump since 2000), and 10.6 percent of the population is of Hispanic or Latino descent. This is reflected in the businesses here, many of which are immigrant owned.

Restaurants makes up a large portion of the businesses in Somerville, with the hotel and food industry being the fourth largest employer in Somerville (see Appendix A) and comprising of 165 different establishments in 2007, with only five of these being hotels (“Trends in Somerville”). There is no city data available on how many restaurants are owned by immigrants, but it is easy to see that immigrants make up a large number of restaurant, and food-business, owners in Somerville. These restaurants tend to be clustered in a few commercial centers in Somerville, including Davis Square, Teele

Square, Union Square, East Broadway and Magoun Square (See Appendices B and C).

The city government has focused much of its concentration in development on restaurants, as have community organizations that work on community development in Somerville, making a concentration on restaurants in Somerville an important focus when studying immigrants and city government.

V. Narrators:

Amrit Thakali, Yak and Yeti:



Storefront of Amrit's restaurant, Yak and Yeti. Photo Credit: streetcavassers.com

Amrit Thakali is from the western part of Nepal. He came over to the United States in 1998. Initially, he came to Los Angeles to visit a friend. After living in Los Angeles, he moved to New York, and eventually to the Boston area. In Nepal, he was in the British Army for fifteen years. Before opening his own restaurant he worked in Punjab Restaurant in Arlington, MA, a restaurant that serves Indian food. He was manager there, and then decided to open his own restaurant. Yak and Yeti is his second restaurant. His first restaurant, Mount Everest Kitchen, is located in Allston/Brighton and serves only Nepali food. He opened Yak and Yeti in 2010.

Yeshi Lokyitsang, House of Tibet Kitchen:



Yeshi is the owner of House of Tibet Kitchen in Teele Square. Photo Credit: Alex Neff

Yeshi Lokyitsang was born in Dharamsala, India to Tibetan refugees. Dharamsala is one of the main enclaves for Tibetans in India, and home to the Dalai Lama. She has five sisters and one brother. One of her sisters and her mother are living in the United States, and she hopes to bring more of her family over. Her husband was one of the 1,000 Tibetans given an immigrant visa when the United States included a provision for them in the 1990 Immigration Act. He came to the United States in 1992. She and her four children followed in 1996. Her primary reason for moving to the United States was so that her children could get a good education. Despite being an educated pharmacist back in India, she felt that her children would have greater opportunities here. Three of her children have graduated from college, and the last is currently studying at UMass Amherst. She worked at the Hyatt Regency Hotel for a time, and then at a coffee shop in Harvard Square. She took over House of Tibet Kitchen in 2008 at the behest of her husband and brother-in-law. She also has a job at the Broad Institute, which supplements her income at the restaurant, and she feels gives her job security.

Binoj Pradhan, Masala:



Photo Credit: Alex Neff

Binoj Pradhan was born in Baglung, Nepal, but moved to Kathmandu, Nepal before moving to the United States. He moved to the United States in 1999, when he was seventeen, with his parents, though he still has relatives back in Nepal. He has lived in Somerville for the past twelve years. Before he came to the United States he had never worked in a restaurant. In Nepal he went to a Catholic school, and then started high school in the United States when he moved here. After coming here he worked as a waiter, learning some of the subtleties of owning a restaurant by observing the owner of that restaurant. He owns multiple other businesses, including a family run Subway in Union Square. In 2010 he started the process of opening Masala with two other partners, one of whom he has been friends with for ten years. They decided to open the restaurant because the landlord offered them the space, which had previously been a restaurant. Additionally, all of the partners had experience working in restaurants. After over a year of work trying to open the restaurant Binoj Pradhan and his partners were able to open

Masala on September 1, 2011. In the future he is hoping to sponsor a Nepali chef to come to the United States and work in his restaurant.

David Guzman, Economic Development Department:

David Guzman is an Economic Development Specialist in the Economic Development department in Somerville. He is an immigrant from Colombia. Before coming to the United States in 2009 he attended graduate school in Puerto Rico. While attending graduate school he worked in a non-profit doing technical assistance for small businesses. He joined the Economic Development department in Somerville in 2009, and his primary role is in Community Development. He works very closely with small businesses in the area, as well as with the Storefront Improvement Program. He was formerly a Somerville resident, but moved to Malden after his baby was born, earlier this year. In the future he hopes to move back to Somerville because he loves the character of the city.

VI. Immigrant Restaurant Owners and City Government

A. Prevalent Issues Among Immigrant Restaurant Owners

The two issues that came up most frequently in the interviews that my classmates and I conducted were liquor licenses and parking. In Somerville, liquor licenses are obtained in two primary ways. They can either be purchased from businesses that are selling their license, or they can be obtained through the city. There are forty-nine restaurants and bars that hold licenses currently in Somerville (Metzger 2011). When purchased from the city the cost of a liquor license ranges from \$1,500 to \$5,000 depending on the type of license, but these licenses are difficult to obtain because there is a cap on the number that the city is allowed to issue (Thompson 2011). The cost of purchasing a license from another business is even greater, and is often infeasible for restaurants with less financial capital. This was the biggest issue at stake in my very first interview, with Amrit Thakali. In the back of Amrit Thakali's restaurant there is a countertop that, at first sight, appears to be a bar. Yet, because of his inability to obtain a liquor license that space cannot be used as a bar, and instead is not used at all. He says that he often gets calls from customers asking if they are able to bring their own beer or wine to dinner, but the system of licensing in Massachusetts does not even permit bring your own without a license. He fears he is losing customers as a result.

Amrit Thakali's fears are not unwarranted. In an interview with Vinny Migliore, owner of Vinny's Ristorante, Vinny said that, though he has a liquor license, he knew of other restaurants that had gone out of business because they were unable to obtain a

liquor license (Fedele Interview Vinny Migliore). Binoj Pradhan's restaurant Masala's opening was delayed over a year, mostly due to the time that it took for the liquor license process. Binoj Pradhan is one of the lucky few that were able to pay the expense of purchasing a license from a former business. When he and his partners started the process of opening their restaurant they saw an advertisement for an available liquor license and jumped at the opportunity. Despite the fact that they did not purchase their license from the city, it still took them eight to nine months to finish the permitting process. They did not want to open their restaurant without the permit, so for the entire period where they were unable to open their restaurant, they were forced to pay rent for the space. The access to the amount of capital needed to purchase a liquor license from another restaurant is unfeasible for many restaurants; Binoj Pradhan was lucky enough to already be the owner of another restaurant, in addition to a few other family-run businesses. Yeshi Lokyitsang, on the other hand, did not even bother to look into purchasing a liquor license because she had heard how expensive they were.

The distribution of the city controlled liquor licenses has been the subject of some contention among some restaurant owners. Amrit Thakali's restaurant has been open since May 2010, and he still is unable to obtain a liquor license. The majority of his interactions with city government are through his attempts to get a license, he says. The owner of Istanbul'u, in Teele Square has also been unable to obtain a liquor license, and says that if he does not get one soon he will consider moving to another area where it is easier for him to get a license, due to the impact that it has on his business (Fedele Interview Huseyin Akgun). Gladimir Pacheco, owner of Rodizio Brazilian Steakhouse is another restaurant owner who has been dissatisfied with how the city has handled the

distribution of the licenses that they control (Chatterjee Interview Gladimir Pacheco). He also has been unable to obtain a liquor license, and pointed out in an interview with one of my classmates that none of the Spanish or Brazilian restaurants in his area, East Broadway, had a liquor license. The question that this brings up is how the government chooses to distribute its licenses, and whether immigrants have a harder time obtaining a license for more reasons than simply a lack of financial capital.

The city is currently looking to change its policies though. They are looking to follow in the footsteps of cities like Cambridge, and petition the state to allow them to have an unlimited number of liquor licenses to distribute (Thompson 2011). All of the new licenses would then be held by the city, and businesses would no longer be able to sell their licenses after they close. According to David Guzman this move is going to make licenses more accessible to restaurants in the area. Businesses will still have to go through similar processes to get a license, they will just be unable to purchase them from closed businesses, and the city will have more to distribute. The question remains though, how will Somerville regulate the distribution of these licenses? Cambridge has placed a cap on itself for the number of licenses that it distributes, and it is possible that Somerville will do the same, but the issue of whether or not the distribution of these licenses will disproportionately go to non-immigrant restaurants still remains.

Parking is the second issue that consistently came up in interviews. That was one of the biggest obstacles that Yeshe Lokyitsang saw as impeding her business. Because much of the parking around Teele Square is resident parking, she says that it is often not worth it for customers to go out to dinner, pay for dinner, and have to pay for a ticket on top of that. She felt very strongly that the lack of parking was having a negative impact

on her business, and she is not the only one who has had this problem. Binoj Pradhan, whose restaurant is also in Teele Square, did not have the same perspective on parking as Yeshi Lokyitsang. Though he seemed to acknowledge that there was limited parking, he thought that his proximity to the Red Line was a positive, and that it helped his business. He did agree that there is a lack of parking in Somerville, but he didn't think that the lack of parking was the city's fault, though we didn't discuss the issue of residential parking spots.

Teele Square is not the only area in Somerville affected by the issue of parking. In an old interview with Nora Cabrera from 2003, she said that she was very concerned about parking and the lack of an unloading zone in front of her store, La Internacional, which is located in Union Square (Chasan et al. 2003). In an interview this year with one of my classmates, she did not voice her concerns about parking quite as strongly, but she did say that it was very hard to find parking (Weiner Interview Nora Cabrera). Although this indicates that there has been some improvement in the parking situation, it shows that in eight years, there still has not been enough.

When I broached the subject of parking with David Guzman he brought up a point that I had not previously considered. Instead of increasing the number of parking spots, he says that he thinks that Somerville needs to be encouraging other types of transportation. Because Somerville is a small city, just over four square miles, and many of the main commercial centers are located within a mile of a transportation hub; he feels that encouraging foot traffic is most important. He brought up the idea of thinking green, that increasing foot traffic would also decrease motor vehicle use. As idealistic as I initially was when he first discussed this with me, after thinking about it further I realized

that this idea was somewhat problematic, because it targets a different population than that which frequents many of the immigrant-owned restaurants in this area. Though the clientele served by the restaurants that I interviewed are, more often than not, young, educated professionals who are involved in the discourse about “thinking green”, many of the restaurants in Somerville do not serve this population. Instead, they serve a lower socioeconomic status clientele comprised of their ethnic cohorts, a population less likely to change their habits due to environmental reasons because of education and circumstance. There are also many areas of Somerville that are not accessible for foot traffic, namely East Somerville. East Somerville is an area densely populated with immigrants, which has McGrath Highway running right through it, making the restaurants in that area very difficult to access by foot by people from outside of the area, because of the metered and McGrath Highway. The impact is that these smaller restaurants, and those located in areas like East Somerville will continue to be negatively impacted by parking restrictions because the people that they serve are not embracing the idea of being green and foot traffic is not even a possibility.

B. Existing City Government Programs

The impact of the city government on restaurants extends beyond their control over liquor licenses and parking. The Economic Development department of the city government has many programs aimed at assisting small businesses. Many of these programs are briefly covered in the Business Welcome Kit, available on the city website. One of the primary programs of the Economic Development department is the Storefront

Improvement program. This program is based on the idea that if the storefront of one store is improved, then other stores in the area will follow. It is a federally funded program aimed at improving storefronts in lower income areas, among smaller businesses. Currently, there are twenty-five to thirty businesses participating, all of them owned by immigrants, says David Guzman. According to Binoj Pradhan, though, it is a three to four month process, which is the primary reason that he has not participated.

Other programs that the city has to aid businesses include a database to find available commercial spaces, workshops and training sessions. Many of these resources are aimed at the initial process of opening a restaurant. In general, David Guzman says that after a restaurant opens, his department has much less to do with the restaurants than other departments. He did not say how many businesses participate in these programs, though he did indicate that the programs that provided some sort of financial incentive were more popular. One program, called Retail Best Practices, was discontinued after participation dropped significantly due to the loss of funding for grants to participating businesses. The primary way that businesses find out about these programs is word of mouth, the city does not advertise for them. This indicates that the businesses participating in these programs need to have a certain level of social capital to even know about these programs. Businesses that are not connected to others in the community, or to city government do not have the opportunity to participate in these programs, because they do not have the opportunity to know about these programs.

C. Interactions with City Government

"By making the effort to reach out and communicate with the local business community, local officials ... can gather input to help improve local business policies, demonstrate that the community cares about the success of their business and helps city leaders ... celebrate small business" (McFarland & McConnell 2011)

The most striking part of my research was my realization that many restaurants know very little, if anything at all, about city government beyond the permitting process. As I stated before, most of the interactions between city officials and restaurant owners occurs during the permitting and licensing process, or through the city government programs. Yeshi Lokyitsang knew next to nothing about city government because she had not been the one to handle the permits necessary to take over House of Tibet Kitchen, her husband had taken care of the entire process.

One could argue that the reason that she had had virtually no interaction with the city government was that she took over her business, so the city government was less involved than they would be if a new business were opened, and that she chose to not be engaged in the permitting process. Even so, Amrit Thakali, whose business was a new business, had very little interaction with city government beyond his attempts to obtain a liquor license. He did mention that he thought that two alderman from Somerville had welcomed him when he opened Yak and Yeti, but it did not sound like he had had much interaction them since, or that his initial interaction had been of much benefit to him.

Both Amrit Thakali and Yeshe Lokyitsang had experienced very little involvement from city government after the initial process of getting their permits, and did not seem to be participating in any of the programs that the city offers. Binoj Pradhan, on the other hand, had met the mayor and had been visited by Bob Trane, his local alderman. He seems to be an exception in many ways, though, because of his proactive attempts to become closer to city government. It was he who had approached David about different city programs, and it was he who was trying to get Mayor Curtatone to come to his restaurant. It wasn't the government that was trying to become more involved in his restaurant; it was he who was actively trying to get the government more involved.

This brings up the question of whether or not government should discontinue their involvement after the initial process of opening a restaurant, and whose role it is, the restaurant or the government to maintain a relationship. There is no doubt that it would be impossible for every restaurant in Somerville to get individualized attention for its entire lifespan, but the lack of involvement on the part of local officials does exactly the opposite of what the above quote suggests should be done. By not talking to the restaurant owners, local officials are not seeing the issues, such as parking and liquor licensing that are barriers to their success. This is especially important when it comes to immigrant businesses because there is often a lack of understanding on their part about how local government functions in the United States. According to David Guzman, many of these restaurant owners come from places where there is not a lot of regulation and involvement on the part of local officials. By making the extra effort to reach out to these businesses their needs can be heard, needs that they may not necessarily know how to

voice. The result is that it is more difficult for immigrant restaurant owners to maintain a relationship with the city government, making it so they fall by the wayside.

This also brings up the issue of language as a barrier to success for immigrant businesses, in regards to their interaction with the city. According to David Guzman, there are a variety of translation services available for working with the city government. He says that the Constituent Service Division provides translation services, though when I looked at their webpage I was unable to find any information on such services. He also said that they work with community partners for translation services. Yet working with community partners, despite being beneficial in some ways, makes it so translation services are not constantly available. They likely have to be notified in advance, meaning that restaurant owners who come into city hall with a problem, but do not speak English, are unable to get the help that they need immediately. David Guzman did say that he considers himself a part of the translation services of city hall, because he is bilingual, but he is just one member of an entire department. In a former Urban Borderlands report from 2004, they found that the lack of bilingual staff and full time interpreters at city hall was a major barrier for the businesses that they interviewed (Palchik 2004). Though some of these things have clearly changed, there is still evidence that language acts as an impediment in the interactions between restaurants and city government.

Though none of the restaurants that I interviewed experienced this problem because they were either proficient in English, or had little interactions with government, this issue existed among for some of the restaurant owners interviewed by my classmates. Gladimir Pacheco, the Brazilian owner of Rodizio Steakhouse, has had to bring a Portuguese translator with him to city hall in the past because they did not have one

available to help him (Chatterjee Interview Gladimir Pacheco). Lucia Tauares, another Portuguese speaker, said that she was not confident in her interactions with city officials because she was often unable to understand what they were saying, because of her lack of proficiency in English (Anna Williams Interview Lucia Tauares). These are two Portuguese speakers who have struggled at city hall, even though David Guzman told me in an email that Portuguese is one of the most common languages that they offer translation services for. This language barrier creates an environment in which certain restaurant owners are not able to participate in city government, and most of those restaurant owners are immigrants. The impact is that those restaurants have a much harder time accessing the programs that the Economic Development department makes available, and may have a harder time with the permitting process, simply because each visit to city hall requires a good deal more effort than if they had no need for a translator.

Research has shown, though, that even though language is a huge barrier in the integration of immigrants, and in this case their ability to engage with city government, it does not account for all of the isolation of immigrants (Lamphere 29). There are also barriers that exist among the immigrant community that discourage them from engaging with each other to form cohesive groups that are able to act as a unified voice to petition the city government for change. With the population that I was looking at, South Asians, there is not a large ethnic cohort in the Somerville area, though there are an increasing number of people of certain ethnicities, and only a few South Asian restaurants spread out between different commercial centers. The businesses surrounding them are either American, or immigrants from very different areas of the world.

When I asked Yeshe Lokyitsang if she thought she and her restaurant had become a part of the Somerville community, she responded that she didn't think she had. Amrit Thakali mentioned that he felt he had become a part of the Somerville community, but in terms of working with places like Tufts. He mentioned nothing about his relationship with other restaurants. In an ethnographic study of a meatpacking plant in Kansas the researchers were told that there was very little socialization between immigrant employees of different ethnicities (Stull, Broadway & 55). The reason, this interviewee said, was not prejudice, but that they essentially had difficulty conversing due to language, and had little to relate to each other about. For immigrant restaurant owners in Somerville, the difficulty that different immigrant groups have in relating to each other is a potential reason that there is a lack of community mobilization between them.

Though this was not the specific concentration of my paper, it seems like this is a potential barrier among immigrant restaurants specifically. By creating social networks beyond ethnic groups, restaurants have the potential to be a greater lobbying force with the city government. There is some mobilization among community organizations such as Union Square Main Streets and East Somerville Main Streets to unite restaurants in different areas of Somerville, but the immigrant restaurant owners themselves do not lead these movements. Instead, they are led by community actors who, despite trying to do good for these areas, have their own motivations and intentions. The impact is that there is no network among the restaurant owners themselves to lobby for their own rights and needs, a network that would have the potential to mitigate some of the problems experienced by immigrant restaurant owners.

The last structural barrier that I encountered was on a different level than city government, but I believe is worth mentioning. One of the biggest problems that Binoj Pradhan was having with expanding the Nepali side of his business was United States immigration policy. Because there are not many Nepali's in this area he has had a very hard time finding a Nepali chef, yet he is unable to sponsor a chef from Nepal because his business is so new. Even if his business wasn't a new business he thinks that he would have a hard time getting the government to issue a visa to a Nepali chef. The impact of this is that he has been unable to expand one of the crucial parts of his business. This is important to look at, I think, because it is an example of how policy has a very direct impact on the ability of businesses owned by immigrants' ability to survive, not only in Somerville, but also throughout the United States. It also illustrated some of the structural barriers that are faced by immigrant restaurant owners, on a larger scale than city government.

D. Different Commercial Centers in Somerville (See Appendix C for map)

"Competitive advantage of a location does not usually arise in isolated companies but in clusters of companies" (Porter 1995)

In Somerville there are several of these clusters, or commercial centers where the majority of restaurants and other food businesses reside (see Appendix B). They all have different characteristics, including resident population, proximity to public transportation, economic capital etc. The city government is developing these different areas of the city

differently. Currently there is a concentration on Assembly Square aimed at bringing new businesses into Somerville. When discussing the development of Assembly Square with David Guzman, he indicated that he felt that this development was representative of an effective way to improve the city of Somerville by focusing on infrastructure and public-private partnerships. The work being done in this square, while important to the city of Somerville, highlights how the city is putting a lot of emphasis on new development, something that has the potential to take away from small businesses that already exist, though whether this will happen remains to be seen.

Ignoring the development of new commercial centers, there is a lot of disparity between different existing commercial centers and the resources that they are appropriated by the city. One article that discussed immigrant owned small businesses emphasized the importance of opportunity structures. Opportunities are linked to markets, and these markets need to be accessible in order for entrepreneurs to be able to succeed (Kloosterman & Rath 2010). Within Somerville these opportunity structures are more accessible in certain areas than others. In my conversation with Binoj Pradhan, though he had almost nothing negative to say about city government, he did mention that he felt that there was not enough concentration on smaller squares, that all of the concentration was on the larger squares like Davis and Union. He said

“I’m disappointed because Teele Square definitely needs some attention from the city, right now the focus is on Davis and Union and I think it would be good if the city focused on all of the small squares also at the same time.”

Binoj Pradhan sought out David Guzman looking for programs that might help his business, but because he is located in Teele Square, he could not find any programs that

he could participate in. I found this interesting because Teele Square is very close to the Red Line and Tufts University, giving it an advantage over other commercial centers in East Somerville that do not have those positive assets. Despite this, there are programs available to restaurants in these areas that he is not able to participate in, based on his location.

Even though Binoj Pradhan had difficulty accessing city programs, his location did give him an advantage as compared to other areas of the city, because of its position in West Somerville. Many restaurants in East Somerville, struggle a disproportionate amount compared to those in West Somerville. Amrit Thakali felt that he had a distinct advantage being located in Ball Square compared to other areas of Somerville. Orlando Aldana, owner of Los Paisanos, which is located on East Broadway, blatantly said that he thought that the city preferred certain areas, like Davis and Union Square's. The result, he feels is that East Somerville is neglected (Anna Williams Interview Orlando Aldana). This, along with other factors like his inability to get a liquor license, made him feel unsupported by the city government. Though I did not speak directly with restaurant owners outside of West Somerville, it seemed through my conversations with David Guzman and through the interviews of my classmates that there was not a lot of direct involvement on the part of the city in those areas. His emphasis on the intersection between public and private in regards to East Somerville indicated that the responsibility for promoting development in East Somerville was being put on community organizations like East Somerville Main Streets, a topic that I will discuss in further depth momentarily.

Binoj Pradhan and Orlando Aldana may have had reason to feel neglected. One of the biggest threats to Somerville area businesses at this point in time is the closure of the Red Line between Alewife and Harvard Stations. Between those stations is the Davis Square station. This closure is occurring over the holiday season, something that has the potential to negatively impact the surrounding businesses greatly, and something that the city of Somerville is very concerned about. One of the ways that they are looking to deal with this problem is to discount advertising for Davis Square businesses on MBTA buses and trains (“Somerville Asks MBTA to Give Davis Square Shops a Break”). The city council has drawn up a proposal, and has submitted it to the MBTA. The problem with this is that the proposal seems to only concentrate on businesses in Davis Square. This means that businesses in other areas of Somerville, particularly those who get foot traffic from the Red Line, but are not located in Davis Square, are not going to get the benefit of this discounted advertising. Teele Square will likely also be affected by the decreased service; yet because of the way the proposal was framed, will likely not receive the same benefits as Davis Square businesses. Considering the emphasis that David put on foot traffic in Somerville, it seems to be important to take into account the fact that Teele Square will be adversely affected by this closure.

Though this is only one example of how Davis Square seems to be favored, either intentionally or not, by city government, it is clear that areas it is an area that can be deemed more “successful.” Union Square is another such example of a successful area that city government has concentrated on. Davis and Union Squares are both areas with greater financial capital, for a variety of reasons. The question is, though, why should these areas be developed more, and concentrated on more, by the city than other areas?

Immigrants are being disproportionately affected by these problems, because they have less access to the capital necessary to start a business in areas like Davis Square, and end up in areas that are not being focused on by the city government. As I previously stated, David says that the city is trying to put an emphasis on greater public-private partnerships to improve development in Somerville. The impact of this on some areas in Somerville is that community organizations are becoming the primary means of developing these areas.

E. City Government, Community Organizations and Development

There are several organizations in Somerville currently devoted to the development of different areas, including East Somerville Main Streets, Union Square Main Streets, Davis Area Resident/Business Initiative, and more. There are also organizations not specifically aimed at development, like Somerville Arts Council and the Welcome Project, that are working on improving business for restaurant owners in particular areas around the city. These organizations are increasingly playing an important role in the promotion of immigrant businesses specifically. Earlier this semester East Somerville Main Streets held an East Somerville Foodie Crawl. The event was incredibly successful from their perspective. According to David Guzman it drew over a thousand attendees, and as a participant of the crawl, I can say that it was jam-packed. The majority of the restaurants that participated were immigrant owned, and each had food that they gave out to attendees. Though the event was hailed as a success, the restaurants that served food did not see the same benefits that East Somerville Main Streets saw. Orlando Aldana said he has only seen around 10 repeat customers since the

crawl (Anna Williams Interview Orlando Aldana). Additionally, the restaurants got none of the monetary benefits from the crawl, only losing money on the production of food.

This example shows how these local players are acting in ways that are not necessarily in the interests of the businesses that they are trying to aid. So where does that leave those businesses? If the organizations that the city government is counting on to take an active role in the development of immigrant owned businesses are not working in those same businesses best interests, what are those businesses supposed to do? As organizations whose boards are primarily comprised of larger businesses, the question of who is being benefited by the development that they do is a primary issue. This seems to be one of the bigger problems with the current trend within city government to place more emphasis on community organizations. There is also the issue of the areas in Somerville that are not being focused on by these organizations. Teele Square comes to my mind in particular, because it was the site of two of my interviews.

Teele Square, with its proximity to the Red Line and its location in West Somerville is not the struggling area that is East Somerville. It is also not the thriving square that are both Davis and Union Squares. The Business Welcome Kit for new businesses in Somerville describes Teele Square as featuring “several excellent restaurants and shops” and as being close to Tufts. On the other hand, Davis is described as being “a true urban destination” and Union as “the rising star of Somerville’s squares.”

This jargon surrounding the different squares almost suggests that Teele is lacking in some way. Yet it is not being developed by either the city government or these community organizations. They are either focused on the more prominent areas like Davis and Union, or the more dilapidated areas like East Somerville. The result is that

these in between places are neglected. Magoun Square is another area that does not have a community organization working to improve the area and help businesses. Though these are smaller areas, something that could affect the ability to organize on a community level, the need is still there, and still not being met. The result is that businesses are being adversely affected by the construction going on in Magoun Square, yet have no voice advocating for them.

Community organizations are not just working with immigrant businesses by promoting the development of certain areas. There are also moves by organizations such as the Somerville Arts Council and the Welcome Project to promote businesses through food fairs and advertising. Binoj Pradhan is particularly interested in tapping into this market because he thinks that it will promote his business, and they have worked with many businesses in the area. Yet, in my conversations with Yeshe Lokyitsang, I found out that she had participated in many such initiatives to improve her business, and she hadn't felt that any of them had made a substantial difference. She participated in YUM and Cultural Survival, as well as the coupon book that Tufts University gives to its incoming freshman, but none of these things have really improved her business. Eventually the money and manpower that she needed to participate were not worth it, and she stopped. Her experience shows the limitations of community organizations in helping businesses, and may indicate that there are other things that the city government needs to be doing to improve the economic environment for immigrant owned restaurants.

When I left David Guzman's office he gave me an article that emphasized many things, including the importance of public and private partnerships. The reliance of city government on community organizations is a primary component of these public-private

partnerships that David talked to me about, in terms of immigrant owned restaurants. Yet, the most concerning things about this model in Somerville was that David Guzman felt that the economic future of these organizations could possibly be in jeopardy, that they may not be able to sustain themselves in the long run. That leaves the question, then, of what happens to the immigrant restaurants supported by these organizations, if the city government leaves the development of them up to unsustainable organizations?

VII. Conclusions

Before I make my conclusions I have to add one note. My research was limited. The conclusions that I have drawn are based on a few interviews within a four month period. With greater time and resources, this research could have been expanded to get an even better idea of the impact of city government on immigrant run restaurants. The conclusions that I present below are a general overview of some of the themes that I found throughout my research, and hopefully will ultimately present a good introduction to how some of the problems faced in Somerville could be addressed.

According to one article about immigrant entrepreneurship, immigrants are more than twice as likely as native-born people to start a business (McFarland & McConnell 2011). At the same time, immigrant owned businesses survive for shorter periods of time than native owned businesses, according to the same article. Considering the size of the immigrant population in Somerville, and the impact of their businesses, the importance of focusing on immigrant businesses in Somerville is unquestionable. Restaurants play a significant role in this because they are both instrumental to Somerville's status as a destination, and also provide a large number of jobs within the city of Somerville. The result is that they are vital in spurring economic development in the city. The interactions between city government and immigrant owned restaurants, though, are limited by structural barriers that exist in city government, as well as the inability of the immigrant population to voice their concerns effectively.

There are many issues in city government, outlined in this paper, that disproportionately affect immigrants run restaurants. One of these issues is the concept of

foot traffic. Though the idea of being green is very trendy in development right now, the problem remains that many of the immigrant restaurants assessed in this research often serve populations that may not share those same environmental concerns, or they are serving populations that come from farther away, and are not using public transportation to reach their destination. The discourse in the city government about thinking green, rather than changing the parking systems in Somerville, ultimately causes these restaurants to continue to be exposed to a potential decline in customers because of fear of expensive parking tickets.

Immigrant run restaurants are also affected by restrictions on liquor licenses differently than other businesses. Things like language barriers, lack of financial capital or a lack of knowledge about the permitting process all inhibit the ability of immigrant restaurants to obtain licenses from either the city itself, or from businesses that have closed. These are issues not faced as frequently by restaurant owners born in the United States, and therefore put immigrant restaurant owners at a disadvantage. Language and lack of knowledge about city processes define many of the interactions between city government and immigrant run restaurants. The inability to interact with city government officials makes it nearly impossible to work within the system effectively, making it much more difficult for restaurants to be successful. Additionally, the areas of Somerville that are being developed by the city itself the most are the parts of Somerville that are less likely to be where immigrant restaurants are, or are slowly pushing immigrant businesses out, because those parts require greater access to financial capital, or will in the near future.

The impact of these structural problems within city government could be mitigated in a few ways. To begin with, there needs to be greater involvement on the part of city government after the initial process of opening a restaurant. Typically, after this initial process restaurants only come back if they are participating in one of the city's programs, or if they have permits to renew. The restaurants that did have more interaction with city government were those like Binoj, who had a working knowledge of the processes within city government, and were not subject to barriers like language. He sought assistance from city government himself. Other immigrant restaurant owners were not as fortunate to be able to do so, because they were subject to structural barriers within the community. The impact is that the city has very little involvement, and very little investment, in the success of those restaurants after that initial contact, something that is very detrimental. If the city spent more time supporting the restaurants after they opened there would potentially be fewer problems faced by these restaurants because their concerns would be being addressed by the city. It's true that not all immigrant restaurant owners will take advantage of these services, but by providing them, the city will be actively supporting those who are interested in working alongside the city.

Additionally, the city needs to make a greater effort to provide translation services. Obviously it is impossible for the city to employ translators for each of the over fifty languages spoken by Somerville residents. Even so, the languages that David Guzman listed to me as the most commonly used by the business owners that they work with should have translators within the Economic Development department. This will make it so immigrant restaurant owners do not have to struggle to understand the

processes of the department, and are able to communicate with the department with minimal inconvenience.

As discussed earlier, there are also barriers on the part of restaurant owners themselves. Many things could explain the lack of social cohesion that exists among immigrant restaurant owners. Whatever the reason is, it is clear that it is to the detriment of the restaurant owners themselves, because it makes it more difficult for them to voice their concerns. This area is one where community organizations can be a force in making positive change. There has already been some success with organizations like East Somerville Main Streets, and Union Square Main Streets in helping to give a voice to that population, and the city government seems to be onboard with this model. The one caveat to this is that these immigrant restaurant owners need the opportunity to be more involved in these organizations themselves, so that their needs are being fully represented, and not eclipsed by larger business owners or other agents with their own interests in mind. Community organizations definitely have a role to play in the future of Somerville, particularly in regards to immigrant owned restaurants, but there are improvements that could be made in order to help them to better support immigrant restaurant owners in Somerville.

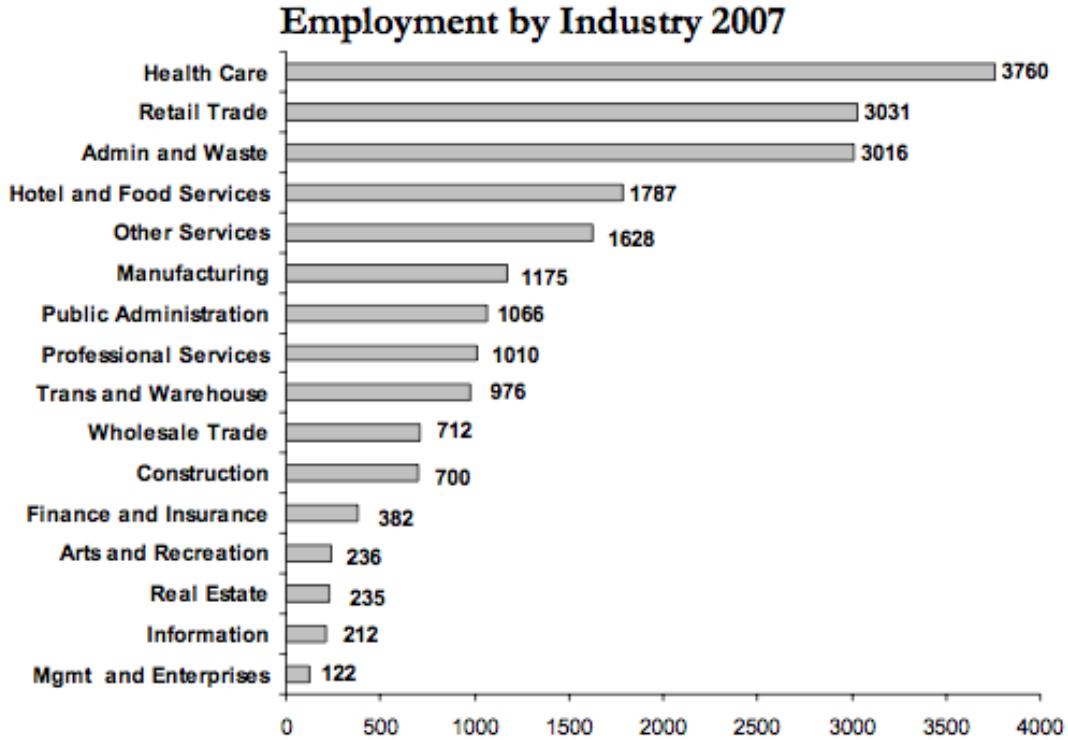
My final conclusion, and recommendation, from the research that I have done throughout this semester has to do with the role that city government plays, and the role that they will play in the future. The city government has a huge stake in the success of businesses in Somerville. The success of Somerville's businesses determines the success of Somerville as well. Because of the particular barriers that adversely affect immigrant-run restaurants, and the impact of immigrant run businesses within the Somerville

community, I believe that there needs to be a specific emphasis on these restaurants within the city government. Such a concentration would enable these restaurants to succeed, and at the same time would give them a medium to voice their concerns. Though it may be difficult to accomplish at first, I think it would ultimately benefit the city, as well as the restaurants in question. For Amrit, Yeshi and Binoj, an emphasis on immigrant run restaurants within city government could be the difference between struggling to keep their restaurants afloat, and thriving within the immigrant city that is Somerville.

VIII. Appendices

Appendix A:

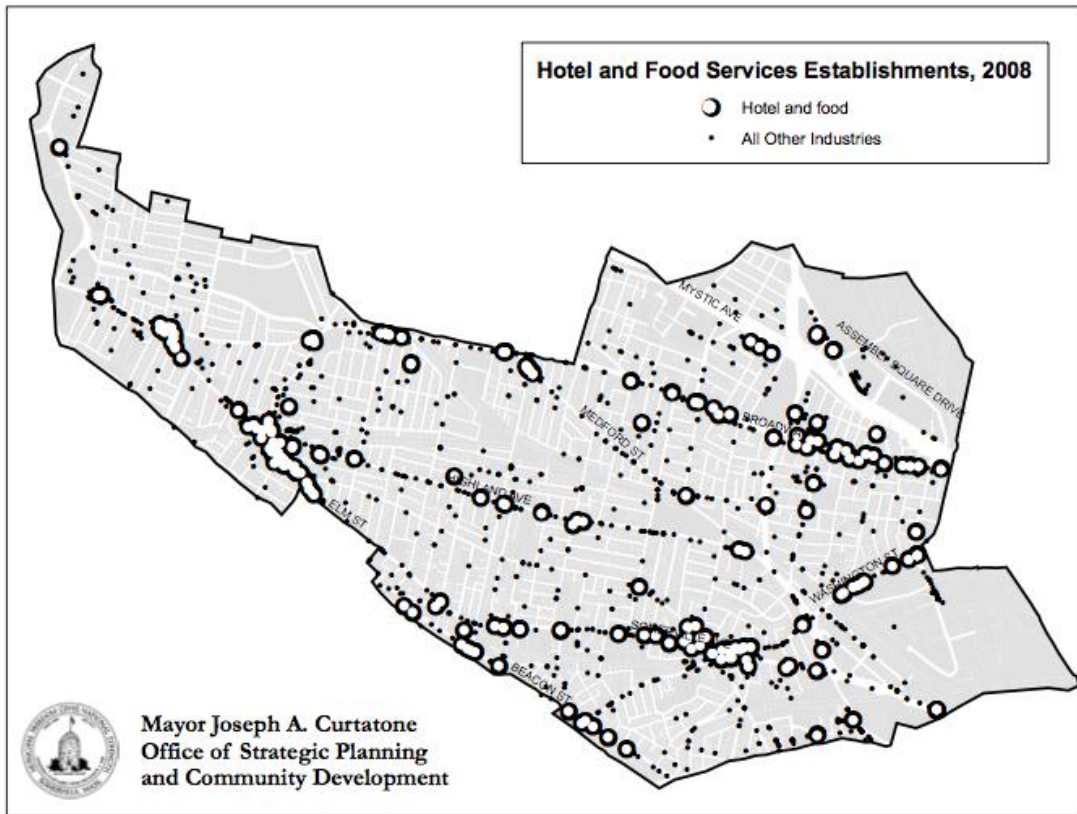
Employment by Industry in Somerville, MA



(“Trends in Somerville”)

Appendix B:

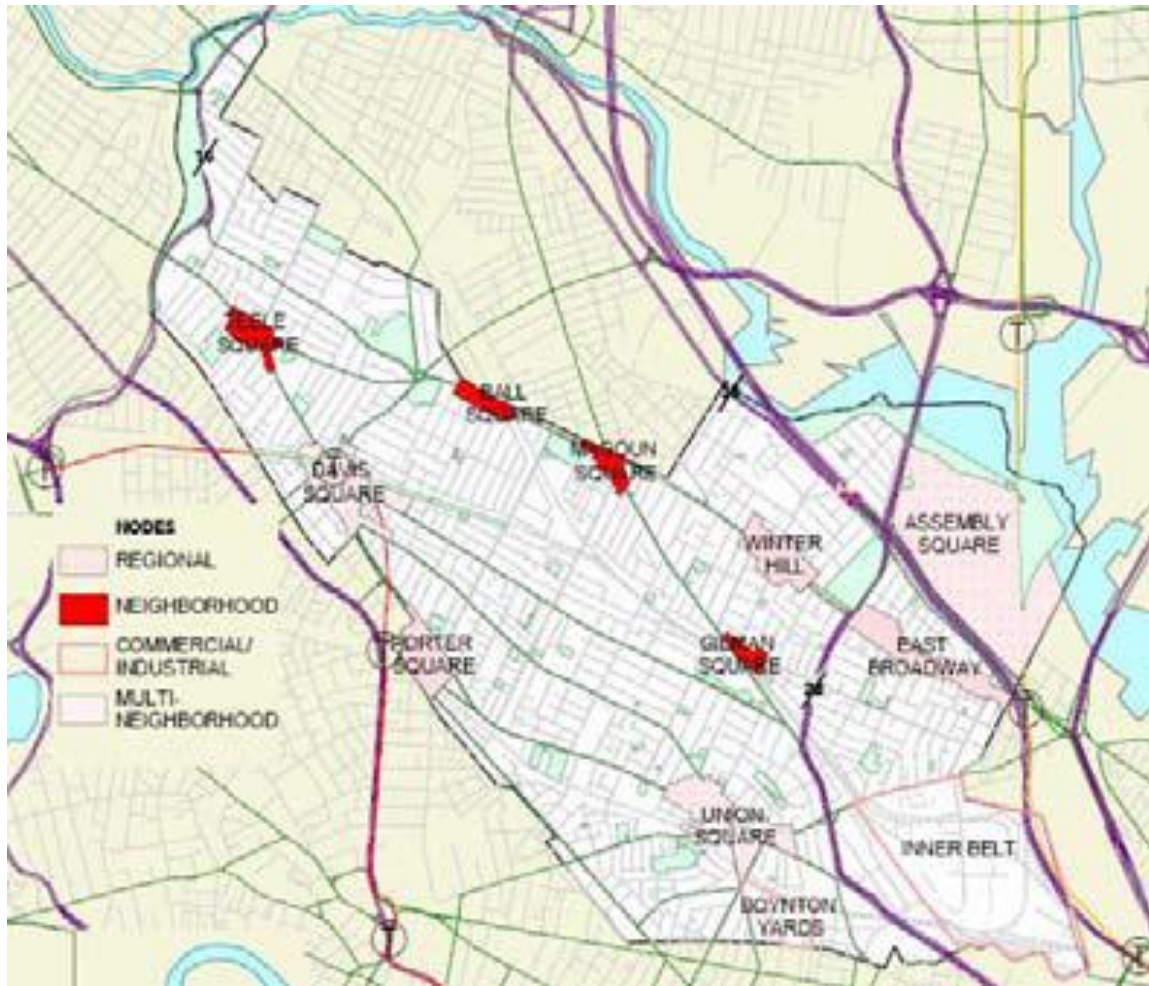
Map of Hotel and Food Service Establishments in Somerville, MA



("Trends in Somerville")

Appendix C:

Map of Squares in Somerville, MA



(“City of Somerville”)

Appendix D:

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