

**Adaptive Environments, Livable Streets, Mass Bike,  
United South End Settlements & WalkBoston**

February 22, 2007

Mayor Thomas Menino  
Boston City Hall  
Boston, MA 02210

Dear Mayor Menino,

WalkBoston, Livable Streets, Adaptive Environments, MassBike and the United South End Settlements ask the City of Boston to halt work on the Massachusetts Avenue Project until the issues below are addressed.

We are anxious that the precious federal/state funding of \$14.5 million be well spent and believe these recommendations will be a considerable improvement over the current Public Works Department design. Knowing how much you care about good walking conditions in Boston, we hereby put our recommendations and alternatives before you.

**The Avenue's Potential to Become a Great Street**

The re-design and reconstruction of the seven blocks of Massachusetts Avenue from St. Botolph Street to Albany Street is an opportunity to create a Great Street along the principles of the Streetscape Guidelines for Boston's Major Roads, published in 1999. As you so eloquently stated in your introductory letter:

“The objective of these Streetscape Guidelines is to encourage the creation of an urban environment that supports the co-existence and equitable sharing of various modes of travel.”

The current proposed design for Massachusetts Avenue provides for vehicular flow at the expense of pedestrian and bicycle movement and shortchanges the thousands of residents and scores of storeowners who face onto Massachusetts Avenue. It separates rather than joins the South End and Lower Roxbury neighborhoods. The City of Boston will be the poorer if the current design is built. This opportunity to improve this important part of Boston should not be missed.

The objectives of the Streetscape Guidelines and the potential of Massachusetts Avenue could be realized with six important changes to the proposed design.

1. Widen sidewalks. Existing sidewalks are a narrow 6-8 feet. In the proposed design this limited width remains and is so narrowed by trees, poles, lighting and signal control boxes, as well as bus shelters, that some sidewalks are effectively only 3 -1/2 feet wide. This width barely meets Massachusetts AAB and ADA guidelines and contributes to awkward curb ramp and crosswalk layouts. A wider sidewalk should be provided to meet decent pedestrian levels of service and ADA compliance, provide sufficient space for healthy street trees (making the street more livable for its many residents), and allow for minimum-width bus shelters that will not further block pedestrian movement.

Additional space can be given to the sidewalks by reducing the width of the proposed 10-foot median and eliminating turning lanes at the intersections.

2. Retain the medians at intersections and eliminate added exclusive left turn lanes.

At the Public Hearing of March 26, 2003, residents expressly stated that they wanted medians at the intersections in order to provide a safe refuge for crossing the street.

**Nonetheless, medians were eliminated at all seven intersections and replaced by left-turn lanes.** We believe the Task Force was persuaded to accept the elimination of the intersection medians because they did not realize there were other options.

The added left-turn lanes are not justified by need, now or in the future. As we read vehicular counts conducted in October 2005 by the consultants, left-turning volumes are projected to be only one or two left turns per signal cycle during peak hours; these turns could be accommodated by an advance exclusive left-turn phase in the signal cycle. Traffic projections predict a less than 10% increase over the next 20 years so future need is unlikely.

Thus, this precious space in Massachusetts Avenue's limited right of way could and should be used for pedestrians and bicyclists, rather than exclusive turning lanes. The proposed minor gains for left turning vehicles bring major losses for pedestrians.

3. Design for a speed of 20 miles per hour for pedestrian safety. Speed kills. A pedestrian hit by vehicle traveling 35 mph will most likely be killed; but a pedestrian hit at 20 mph has an 85% chance of living. That these plans design Massachusetts Avenue for 35 mph is perplexing, given that the street's speeds (per the consultants) are currently 20 mph and that the City has lobbied for a 25-mph speed law for many years.

4. Establish a bicycle lane. Residents and commuters along Massachusetts Avenue would benefit from a bicycle lane. Reducing the width of the median would free up more space for a bicycle lane and encourage greater reliance on non-motorized transportation and work toward meeting your own goals toward compliance with the Kyoto Accords.

5. Re-align and stripe crosswalks. Many crosswalks shown on the drawings are crooked and not continuous with sidewalks. They need to be straightened and painted with the ladder design specified on page 19 of the Streetscape Guidelines. The current layouts put waiting pedestrians directly in the path of others, including those in wheelchairs, who wish to pass by. Further, curb ramp widths should match the widths of crosswalks, wherever possible, to ease mobility for everyone.

6. Pave sidewalks with smooth walking surfaces. As the City is well aware, many pedestrians find brick sidewalks difficult to navigate. We suggest that brick be used only in a decorative trim band along Mass Ave and that concrete sidewalks be installed to improve accessibility for all. This is particularly important since the old and uneven brick sidewalks on the parallel streets are virtually impassible to anyone who has difficulty walking or is in a wheelchair.

The good aspects of the current design are: concurrent signalization, some curb extensions, and a wider pedestrian crossing at the Massachusetts Avenue Orange Line Station.

### **History & Background**

Massachusetts Avenue is the major north-south roadway across Boston. It is heavily pedestrian and densely residential for 6 of the 7 blocks of the project. Along this stretch are many of the South End's remaining low- and modest-income residences; institutions such as the BMC/BUMC Medical Center, Susan Baillis Assisted Living, United South End Settlements; stores and restaurants; the heavily-used Orange, Green and Silver line transit stations, and the #1 bus, one of the system's busiest. These uses are all pedestrian generators.

In 1999, the City's "Walk This Way" project identified this Mass Ave corridor as having particularly heavy pedestrian fatalities and injuries. Research at the time found that Mass/Columbus and Mass/Albany were among the top 12 most dangerous intersections in Boston, and Mass/Tremont, Mass/Washington and Mass/Harrison were also high on the danger list.

### **Public Hearing Process**

When Boston's Public Works Department began the Massachusetts Avenue design in the mid-1990s, neighborhood hopes were high, meetings open, broadly attended and lively. There was serious exploration of putting the roadway underground for a block to restore the glory of Chester Park. When this concept didn't work, the community was accepting but asked that the project upgrade the corridor with landscaping, medians with trees and a safer walking and living environment.

Then the original broad outreach by the Public Works Department was narrowed to a small local task force. Groups such as WalkBoston, MassBike and Adaptive Environments, which had attended meetings and provided written comments during the first phase, were dropped and received no meeting notification.

At the public hearing on the final design held on March 26, 2003, the project goals mentioned by the City's consultant were: (1) reconstruct the roadway, sidewalks and medians; (2) provide continuous through lanes; (3) better bicycle and pedestrian accommodation; (4) new lighting, and (5) sustainable landscaping. The final design does provide two through lanes, but at the cost of the pedestrian environment, which is made considerably more dangerous. Basically, the project rebuilds sidewalks and roadway. Since Massachusetts Avenue has been resurfaced within the past 2-3 years, its rebuilding could certainly wait for a good design.

Just this past year, the three blocks of Massachusetts Avenue at Symphony Hall-- from Westland Avenue to St. Botolph Street--were removed from this project and re-envisioned in an efficient community process. The resulting pedestrian-friendly proposal is now ready to be designed. These seven blocks could, and should, be redesigned at the same time.

**Recommended Next Steps**

Two major causes of delay along Massachusetts Avenue are uncoordinated timing of traffic signals and double parking. Before spending \$14.5 million, the City should try to alleviate delay by retiming traffic signals progressively so that traffic can proceed from one green signal through the next (preferably at 20 mph.) Secondly, the City should enforce double parking. A third useful change would be re-timing signals to serve pedestrians better. An example of how much can be done at very little cost is the recent smart solution of lane shifts at Albany Street/Southeast Expressway, which prevents traffic from getting stuck behind a left-turn lane.

We urge you to direct the City's restructured Transportation and Public Works Department to suspend the current design proposal that does not adequately meet community needs and begin a new, speedy, inclusionary design process that will fulfill the hopes of the neighborhood and abutters.

With such a process, Massachusetts Avenue could become a beautiful example that blends urban life and efficient traffic movement, and one of which we can all be proud.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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cc: Luisa Paiewonsky, Massachusetts Highway Department  
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Representative Byron Rushing