

MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT

Answers to some common questions, 23-June-2008

LivableStreets Alliance, WalkBoston, Institute for Human Centered Design, MassBike, United South End Settlements

BACKGROUND

Seven blocks of Mass Ave are to be reconstructed—from St. Botolph to Albany Streets. These blocks are full of residents, hospitals, stores, transit and bus service, traffic, cyclists and pedestrians. Traffic counts taken recently by the traffic engineers show that vehicle traffic on Mass Ave fell from 1994 to 2008 and that there are not enough left turns at some intersections to require the planned left turn lanes. Nonetheless, this design is automobile-centered. Briefly, the major problems with the current design are:

- The street is designed for a 35 mph travel speed, dangerous for such a heavily populated area, including many seniors.
- Sidewalks remain at their current narrow 6-8 feet, because the space is used by left-turn lanes at all 7 intersections. Pedestrian walking space is further narrowed by poles, trees, electric and signal boxes so that in many places 2 people walking or someone in a wheelchair will be barely able to pass and walking will be single-file.
- There are wider outside travel lanes but no striped bike lane nor provision for bicycles at intersections. Wider lanes have been shown to increase vehicular speeds, further endangering cyclists and pedestrians.
- Though there are some curb extensions, there could be more.

MISUNDERSTANDING #1: "If the project does not move forward as planned it will lose funding." FALSE.

Because of the significant support this project will have in its redesigned form by key players at MassHighway, the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Executive Office of Transportation, and a broad coalition of transportation advocates, it is very unlikely that this will not be funded in FY2009. The city is already working to ensure it will be funded in FY2009.

MISUNDERSTANDING #2: "A redesign will take many years and puts years of hard work by the task force to waste." FALSE.

The city has identified several consulting firms that are experts at urban street design and at a rapid public involvement process that can get this project ready to be constructed in less than a year. The many years of work that the task force has put in will serve as a strong foundation for the redesign process.

MISUNDERSTANDING #3: "The current design is a really good one." FALSE.

While the current design includes repaving and sprucing up the area, it does not live up to its potential to truly improve the character of the street. The road will not be reconstructed again another 25 years or more, so we should push for the best design now while the opportunity is here. A lot of improved thinking and attention has developed since the early 1990's when this project was first designed. With the number of pedestrians and bicyclists rising steadily, and the price of gas causing an increase in the use of transit, the current automobile-centric design is not the best it can be.

MISUNDERSTANDING #4: "The median is the most important design element in the project, providing beautification and pedestrian safety, and must be defended at all cost." FALSE.

It is true that the Task Force, and many others, have been expressing for years to the city of Boston two major desired outcomes for this project: beautification and pedestrian safety. But, the median will not achieve these desired results. The decision to include a median means that there is not space for wider sidewalks and bicycle lanes. So these trade-offs must be considered wisely.

MISUNDERSTANDING #5: "The median will have big trees, providing a beautiful canopy over the street." FALSE. The median is too narrow to support trees, only shrubs will be planted. Past experience shows that plantings in the median have not survived. The Parks Department does not have the resources to maintain the median, and the city does not have a maintenance plan. Medians are very difficult to maintain because it is very difficult for residents to access the plantings to help water and weed. BU Medical Center has agreed to use a watering truck for the first several blocks for the first several years, but has not made a commitment beyond that. Because the sidewalks are not being widened (in fact being narrowed in several locations), there is not enough space to support large trees. Including the median takes away the opportunity to widen the sidewalk, provide larger trees and other plantings on the sidewalk.

MISUNDERSTANDING #6: "The median improves pedestrian safety." FALSE.

While it is true that medians at intersections allows for a refuge for pedestrians in the event the pedestrian needs to stop mid-crossing, the current design does not have medians at the intersections because of the left-turn lanes. Medians are primarily useful at mid-block crossings not at a traffic light or crossings at a traffic light where it takes the pedestrian two light cycles to cross the street (which isn't desirable here).

MISUNDERSTANDING #7: "If we don't have the turn lanes, it will cause significant traffic congestion." FALSE.

Traffic counts over time have indicated a steady decline in traffic from the 1990's to today, a trend that is expected to continue, partly a result of the completion of the Big Dig project. Also, for decades traffic engineers and politicians have pushed for increase in capacity on roads whenever there is congestion, and this has only resulted in more traffic and more congestion. We must be planning for the future, and for urban streets that are more livable.

MISUNDERSTANDING #8: "The new design will slow cars down." FALSE.

The street has been designed for 35 MPH traffic, which is inappropriate for the context. Traffic speed and traffic throughput are different. Throughout the US, traffic engineers armed with increased technology have been able to coordinate the timing of the traffic signals to maximize the number of cars travelling on the street, but have the cars travel at a lower speed. Instead of speeding up only to get to a red light and then waiting, traffic would be slower, more steady, and therefore safer.

MISUNDERSTANDING #9: "If this project gets redesigned and delayed, it will be embarrass our community." FALSE.

If the project moves forward as designed, the results will be more and faster traffic, narrow sidewalks, no bike facilities, and landscaping that will not last. A redesign to new standards will bring national recognition to our neighborhood as leaders in the movement to keep urban main streets and communities livable. A new design will be one that will be proud of.