

KENMORE

Walk on, walk on, Comm. Ave. Roadway to get upgrade aimed at pedestrian safety

By Robert Preer, Globe Correspondent | January 1, 2006

In the Back Bay, Commonwealth Avenue is a grand tree-lined boulevard, flowing past stately brownstones, lanes divided by a wide green space.

Heading out of Kenmore Square, though, the road changes dramatically. The green disappears. Buildings become taller and more institutional-looking. The two westbound travel lanes expand to three.

Traffic accelerates as it leaves Kenmore, and soon Commonwealth Avenue becomes a speedway, running through the heart of 27,000-student Boston University.

To get from one side of campus to the other, students and faculty must pick their way across five lanes of traffic, two rows of parked cars, and a trolley line.

Next spring, this scene could change. The Massachusetts Highway Department hopes to award a \$12.7 million contract shortly to rebuild the road, as well as the sidewalks and median, between Kenmore Square and the Boston University Bridge.

"It's an effort to make Commonwealth Avenue much more pedestrian-friendly," said MassHighway spokesman Jon Carlisle.

Boston University has been involved in planning the project since the mid-1990s and is contributing about \$2 million toward the cost.

"It would make the campus much safer for pedestrians, for our students, our faculty, and our staff," said Joseph Mercurio, the university's executive vice president. "It also would make it more attractive."

The three westbound travel lanes would be compressed to two most of the way from Kenmore Square to the BU Bridge. With the new space, the median where the Green Line trolleys run would be widened and landscaped, and sidewalks would be rebuilt. Trees and benches would be added.

The plans also call for the crosswalks to be raised and made more visible. To enhance traffic flow, the traffic signals would be synchronized. Boston University would give up a slice of a parking lot near the BU Bridge to allow construction of a new right turn lane onto the bridge from westbound Commonwealth Avenue.

The work is expected to take 2 1/2 years. MassHighway expects to award the contract soon in hopes of having the project start in the spring. The state plans eventually to rebuild Commonwealth Avenue all the way to Boston College, although there is no timetable for that work.

City and state officials, working with Boston University administrators, designed the plans for the stretch of the road around the university after a series of accidents in the early 1990s involving motor vehicles, pedestrians, and bicyclists. In 1991, a van struck and killed two young women who were crossing Commonwealth Avenue.

"This project began as a safety initiative," Mercurio said. State Representative Michael J. Moran, a Boston Democrat whose district includes much of Commonwealth Avenue, said, "It just seems like it's getting worse and worse. More cars and more people."

Research by Ralph Hingson, a Boston University School of Public Health professor, found the road to be one of the most dangerous in the city. Hingson analyzed data on ambulance runs.

According to data compiled by Boston Emergency Services, there were 41 ambulance calls for pedestrians hit by vehicles on the one block of Commonwealth Avenue between Granby Street and the BU Bridge from 1995 to 2002, an average of just over five per year. Citywide during this same period there were between 900 and 1,000 pedestrian accidents per year. Boston has about 4,900 blocks.

In an interview, Hingson said that the narrowing of the westbound side of the road to two lanes will slow traffic and improve safety.

"The evidence is quite clear that the travel speeds are related to pedestrian injuries," Hingson said.

The project was delayed repeatedly because of lack of state funds. Carlisle said the money is available now. The City of Boston is contributing \$4.8 million to the work.

"We have our fingers crossed [that] it is close to actually happening," Mercurio said.

While officials say that Commonwealth Avenue around Boston University will become safer and more attractive, it will never look like the stretch of the road from the Public Garden to Massachusetts Avenue.

"You are never going to make it a lush greenway, but you can put in vegetation and do other things to make it more appealing," Moran said.