

June 10, 2008

Michael Kineavy, Chief of Policy and Planning, City of Boston
Dennis Royer, Commissioner, BPW
Tom Tinlin, Commissioner, BTB
Jim Gillooly, Deputy Commissioner, BTB
Vineet Gupta, Director of Planning and Policy, BTB
Para Jayasinghe, City Engineer, Public Works Department
Nicole Freedman, Director of Bicycle Programs
Boston City Hall
Boston, MA 02201

Re: Transportation Improvement Program
Massachusetts Avenue, Boston

Dear Colleagues:

WalkBoston, LivableStreets Alliance, MassBike, the Institute for Human Centered Design, the United South End Settlements, the United South End/Lower Roxbury Development Corporation and Alternatives for Community and Environment are sorry that the City was unable to meet with many of our organizations as planned this Wednesday, June 11th. We are concerned that time is short and we have not yet had any confirmation from the City as to the redesign of the Massachusetts Avenue project to address the concerns we have been discussing, some of which are set forth below. We want to thank you for the efforts you have made to resolve internal questions about how to proceed, and we appreciate the hard work that all of you have done.

We ask that the City make a formal commitment to a redesign of the project by June 18th. Doing so will provide sufficient time for the MPO to agree to a postponement of construction and to placing a hold on the funds until a redesign can be completed. We look forward to meeting with you to hear the results of the traffic analysis, so we can plan our next steps, including coordinating how we can best support these changes before the MPO, and with the South End and Roxbury communities.

Our Design Concerns

The Mass Ave reconstruction project, for which federal and state funds are being requested, is essentially the same project that was being designed in the mid-1990's. While it may have been in keeping with accepted design standards in 1995—even though it did not meet the neighborhood's desires—now 13 years later it is completely outdated in view of subsequent design guidelines and standards.¹ It therefore violates more than a decade of changes in the law, in public policy, in transportation guidelines and in public participation.

¹ 1996 Bicycle & Pedestrian Accommodation Law, MGL 90E, Section 2A; Streetscape Guidelines for Boston's Major Roads, 1999, City of Boston; Boston Bike plan; MHD Project Development and Design Guide 2006.

The present design, beyond adding left turn lanes, is little more than repaving of a recently repaved street. It will likely increase traffic volumes and speed; and, at the same time, reduce safety for pedestrians and cyclists as well as create new obstructions to those with disabilities. It does not meet the intentions of neighbors expressed in 1995 and recently. The unsatisfying nature of this design has been pointed out at every single public meeting we were asked to attend and in numerous letters over the past years.

Within the past couple of years, the three blocks of Massachusetts Avenue at Symphony Hall--from Westland Avenue to St. Botolph Street--were removed from the project and re-envisioned via an efficient, inclusive community process. The resulting pedestrian-friendly proposal is ready to be designed. The seven blocks that this project addresses could, and should, be re-conceptualized and in a similar manner. Proceeding with the current design of the remainder of Mass Ave would be a misuse of considerable public funds and would violate the laws of the Commonwealth.

The Current Design

Seven blocks of Mass Ave are to be reconstructed—from St. Botolph to Albany Streets—blocks full of residents, hospitals, stores, transit and bus service, traffic, cyclists and pedestrians. The current design has the following shortcomings:

- It is designed for a 35 mph travel speed, inappropriate and dangerous for such a heavily populated area, including many seniors.
- It eliminates median refuges at all 7 intersections, replacing them with left turn lanes, even though residents at the Public Hearing of March 26, 2003, expressly asked that medians be retained to provide safe refuges for pedestrians crossing Mass Ave.
- Sidewalks remain at their current narrow 6-8 feet. The functional dimension 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.
- Brick pavers--deadly for the elderly and disabled--will be installed. This is the neighborhood's primary accessible pedestrian thoroughfare, providing access to hospitals, transit, stores and schools.
- Crosswalks are crooked and not continuous with approaching sidewalks.
- 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.

The project does have a few improvements--some curb extensions, street trees, a wider crossing at the Mass Ave MBTA station, and better WALK light timing.

The current design is particularly indefensible because the City's "Walk This Way" pedestrian safety project in 1999 identified this corridor as having particularly heavy pedestrian fatalities and injuries and it continues to be high on danger lists. By establishing a design speed of 35 mph for this reconstruction, the City is not reducing the danger at these intersections.

Finally, the proposed design wastes \$12+ million. It would require three years of Mass Ave lane closings and probable traffic diversions onto parallel streets. Yet, it does nothing to restore a good neighborhood environment to these blocks that once were graced by elm trees in the medians and beautiful Chester Park. Instead, the project's goal is moving cars. Such a lot of money and long inconvenience should result in improved safety and an award-winning urban boulevard.

The Opportunity

The Massachusetts Avenue project could be designed to meet Mayor Thomas Menino's goals for a pedestrian and bicycle-friendly city. It could help connect, not further divide, the South End and Lower Roxbury.

Basic requirements of an acceptable design for the reconstruction of Mass Ave would:

- Widen sidewalks;
- Establish a continuous bicycle lane in both directions;
- Retain intersection medians;
- Add curb extensions at cross streets;
- Align crosswalks with sidewalks;
- Pave sidewalks with smooth walking surfaces;
- Design for a maximum 25 mph speed;
- Serve traffic flow by progressive signal timing;
- Design bus bulb outs at bus stops and;
- Develop a comprehensive strategy to improve bus service, bus stop and shelter locations.

We understand that our position may be frustrating to many. It is to us too. Several of our organizations were quite involved early on in this project in the 1990s when Boston's Public Works Department explored putting the roadway underground for a block at Chester Park. When this concept didn't work, the City's original broad outreach shrank down to a small task force of abutters. Further, despite claims to the contrary by some, groups such as WalkBoston, MassBike, Adaptive Environments and adjacent agencies and housing developments that had attended meetings, drawn up concepts and provided written comments during the first phase, received no meeting notifications during the balance of the design process. It is only quite recently that we have met with City staff about the project. Thus, the professional expertise and knowledge our organizations provide was lost to the project. It is both obvious and unfortunate that lower Roxbury stakeholders such as Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) and the Roxbury Neighborhood Council have had little, if any input and are aware of the project thanks to outreach by our organizations.

As we wait for redesign in conjunction with the Symphony Hall section, two causes of delay along Massachusetts Avenue can be addressed immediately: uncoordinated traffic signals and double parking. Traffic signals should be timed progressively so that traffic can proceed from one green signal to the next without being stopped at almost every block. Secondly, the City should enforce double parking bans. A third useful change would be re-timing signals to serve pedestrians better. A relatively simple, low-build, smart change by the City is the lane shift recently made at Albany Street/Southeast Expressway that prevents traffic from getting stuck behind a left-turn lane. Maybe there are others.

Massachusetts Avenue could, and should, become a better roadway, one which blends urban life and efficient movement of all modes, one of which we can all be proud. That is our goal, and our hope. We are ready to go to work immediately on making it a reality.

Sincerely,

Wendy Landman, Liz Levin, Ann Hershfang, WalkBoston
Charles Denison, Jeff Rosenblum, Ken Kruckemeyer, LivableStreets Alliance
David Watson, Chris Porter, Andrew Fischer, MassBike
Valerie Fletcher, Chris Hart, the Institute for Human Centered Design
Kevin Hepner, The United South End Settlements
Syvalia Hyman III, The United South End/Lower Roxbury Development Corporation
Penn Loh, Gene Benson, Alternatives for Community and Environment(ACE)

Cc: Luisa Paiewonsky, MassHighway Commissioner
Barbara Lucas, Boston MPO
James Hunt, Boston Environment Dept