

November 17, 2009

Rob May, Director of Economic Development
Somerville City Hall
93 Highland Ave
Somerville, MA 02143

Delivery by Adobe PDF via email to rmay@somervillema.gov

Subject: Union Square Transportation Study and Plan

Dear Mr. May:

LivableStreets would like to take this opportunity to provide some feedback and comments in response to the designs presented at the Union Square Transportation Study public meeting on October 21, 2009.

Overall, we are quite pleased and excited about the work being done to improve mobility and livability in Union Square through this design process. With the Green Line coming in a few years, now is the time to set the stage to support increased use of the square and to foster new development that high quality transit service will bring to the area.

Overall concepts

Pedestrians

We are pleased to see the attention made on **widening sidewalks, creating of curb extensions, and maximizing the size of the plaza** in the heart of the square. This will not only allow for a more pleasant walking environment, but will also provide space for sidewalk cafes, farmers markets, and other events. We are also glad to see that additional crosswalks are being added in desirable locations. In our experience, the use of distinctive (yet wheelchair, bicycle, and stroller-friendly) materials for crosswalks and woonerfs is very effective for delineating these spaces and creating awareness of pedestrians and calming traffic.

One important concept that was brought up at the public meeting was that of signal timing. As you are probably aware, most traffic signals in Somerville are exclusively phased and push-button actuated. While exclusive phasing is technically the safest for pedestrians, it also requires them to wait a significant amount of time. Furthermore, most pedestrians do not bother to push the button, and simply cross when there is a gap in traffic. We were glad to hear from Monica Lamboy at the meeting that **the traffic signals in Union Square will be concurrently timed with a leading-pedestrian interval**, and that the pedestrian phases will be automatically part of each light cycle. The leading-pedestrian interval gives pedestrians much of the benefits of exclusive timing by letting them start to cross while vehicles are stopped, however they do not have to wait for an entire light cycle to cross. Furthermore, by making the pedestrian phase automatic, pedestrians are more likely to wait for them since they expect a walk signal to appear without pushing a button. **We hope that this automatic, concurrent timing policy will be applied to signals throughout the city**, as it not only works best for pedestrians, but for vehicles as well, as there are only a few seconds per cycle where vehicles cannot flow through the intersection.

Bicyclists

We are glad to see that **bike lanes and bike boxes are being provided** in all the alternatives where possible. We ask that **sharrows be added** to the designs where bike lanes are not possible. We also ask that **bicycle parking be added** throughout the square as needed. In particular, where there is space, it would be great to see the addition of **covered bike parking**, where an overhang or shelter protects the parked bicycles from rain and snow. We encourage you to work with a firm who is well-versed in the design and placement of bicycle parking in a commercial district.

Finally, we would like you to explore ways to **allow bicyclists to take advantage of the leading pedestrian interval** at intersections where there are bike boxes. This could be done by adding bicycle-signal heads that are coordinated with the pedestrian signal, for example.

Transit Riders

As mentioned at the meeting, the conversion of one-way streets to two-way streets provides an opportunity to **reroute some of the many MBTA bus routes** through the area, in particular to allow for easy transfer between them and so that riders going in one direction can easily choose between “whichever bus comes first” of routes that have similar destinations, and in anticipation of the new Green Line station, which will without a doubt be a very popular transfer point. We are pleased to see that these routes are being analyzed and **bus stop locations are to be moved** as needed to simplify the use of the many bus routes throughout the square. We ask that sidewalks be wide enough for the **addition of bus shelters wherever possible**. Shelters make a big difference to riders when waiting in inclement weather.

Motorists/Parking

As described at the meeting, the **conversion of one-way streets to two-way streets** will have a large impact on the efficiency of the intersections and traffic flow throughout the square. It is very positive that many of the bottlenecks will be eliminated through this conversion without needing to add more travel lanes. Furthermore, the concurrent pedestrian signal timing will also make the intersections more efficient.

We are pleased to see a focus on finding an **appropriate balance of on-street and off-street parking**. Furthermore, we are very **supportive of the use of pricing** as a mechanism to encourage short-term parking on-street and long-term parking off-street, as well as to discourage MBTA riders from parking in the square and taking the Green Line into the city. As an example, the City of Cambridge prices meters in commercial districts at \$0.25 per 15 minutes. This benefits both the retailers by creating high turnover and the City itself through the revenue it brings, which can then in part be reinvested back into improvements for the commercial district. And recently, the Chamber of Commerce in Brookline has asked the City of Brookline to eliminate free parking on Saturdays in order to create more parking turnover. Business owners in Somerville will likely be opposed to or skeptical of charging for parking, as they are in Boston, Cambridge, and other cities, however studies show that the benefits of properly priced parking are undeniable. This is an opportunity to help educate and bring business owners on board to these policies.

Of the two locations for structured parking proposed, we are more **strongly in favor of the location on Somerville Ave just east of the square**. The other location directly in the square would be much better used for retail, offices, and/or residences in our opinion because of its central location. We encourage you to explore the development of **public-private partnerships for off-street parking** as well. For example, the Goodyear dealership on Bow Street could allow and charge for public parking during peak weekend hours.

As a general concept, we would like to suggest that **traffic signals be timed to facilitate slow but steady progress** through the area, resulting in efficient traffic throughput while providing a safe environment for pedestrians and bicyclists. We further encourage you to **minimize the addition of new traffic signals** as much as possible. We encourage you to utilize other cheaper and more effective ways of controlling and calming traffic and facilitating pedestrian crossings, such as raised intersections, flashing lights, stop signs, and yield signs.

Webster Ave & Prospect Street

We fully support the conversion of Webster Ave and Prospect Street from one-way to two-way. As mentioned previously, this is a large factor in eliminating the vehicular bottlenecks in the square. We are glad to see the addition of bike lanes and future widened sidewalks on Prospect Street. However,

we would ask that the **southbound bike lane continue all the way up to the intersection with Somerville Ave.** It appears from the presentation that it has a short gap in it.

With Webster Ave, we recognize that there is a tradeoff to be made between on-street parking and bicycle accommodations. The preferred option for bicyclists would certainly be bike lanes in each direction, however given the need for parking on at least one side of the street, **we recommend a bike lane in the southbound (uphill) direction and sharrows in the northbound (downhill) direction.** If there is not enough width for that, then sharrows in each direction would be appropriate.

We are also glad that pedestrian connections to the future Green Line station are being taken very seriously, such as the **decking over of the sharp corner of Webster and Prospect** to allow for a more direct pedestrian connection. We **do not feel that trucks should be allowed to turn that corner** however, as is being currently considered by adding further decking and a wide turn pocket.

Bow Street & Somerville Ave

We support the conversion of Somerville Ave to two-way travel. Since the addition of a bike lane is not possible without removing parking, and the fact that Bow St will have a westbound bike lane, we ask that **sharrows be added to the westbound lane on Somerville Ave** to make motorists aware that bicyclists may use that route if desired. Since this westbound lane is not wide enough for a bicycle and automobile side by side, we suggest that the sharrows be placed in the center of the lane and that “Bicyclists May Use Full Lane” signage be installed along that stretch.

There seems to be a **strong desire for a contraflow bicycle connection along Bow Street** from Summer Street to Warren St and Somerville Ave. Although there does not appear to be enough width for a contraflow bike lane on Bow St without eliminating parallel parking, we ask that you think creatively about possible solutions. For example, perhaps that segment of Bow Street could be converted into a woonerf, designated with signage and textured pavement, where bicyclists and motorists share the road, and where two-way bicycle travel is allowed.

Heart of Union Square

Of the two options remaining for the heart of the square, **our preference is Option 1**, primarily because it creates the largest amount of open space where there is already a desire for it and creates movements for bicyclists and motorists coming westbound on Somerville Ave that are much simpler than in Option 3. We ask that the **following tweaks be made to the design:**

- Combine the westbound left turn lane and through lane of Somerville Ave at Webster St, as it is in Option 3.

- Make the 30-space parking lot and access road on the north side of the plaza into a woonerf, paved with the same material as the plaza itself, and perhaps simply delineated with bollards. This would make the parking lot feel like part of the plaza where cars are allowed, as opposed to a parking lot that is intruding into the plaza. (There are examples of this treatment along Atlantic Ave in downtown Boston where hotels have vehicular pulloffs.)
- Continue to think creatively about the intersection of Washington St with the parking lot entrance in order to prevent vehicles from blocking it and to facilitate desirable pedestrian crossings. For example, the addition of a coordinated traffic signal and crosswalks may help to meet both of these goals.

Thank you for considering our input as this project moves forward. If you have any questions on the above comments and suggestions, please contact Charlie Denison, Board Member & Advocacy Director, LivableStreets Alliance, who may be reached at 617.852.6125 and charlie@livablestreets.info.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charlie Denison".

Charlie Denison,
Board Member & Advocacy Director

CC: Larry Slotnick, LivableStreets Alliance, Member of Union Square Focus Group