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OPINION

Divided we fall

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If city engineers and a select task force of residents get their way, Massachusetts Avenue - which was just repaved a couple of years ago - will be torn up again next spring. After three years of reconstruction, we will end up with a wider street designed to carry more cars at higher speeds, a few cement planters at mid-block and narrower sidewalks paved in brick. The city and the task force say it is "a very good plan - the best we can get."

I am positive that this plan is not the best we can get.

This project should be an opportunity for the South End - the city is ready to rebuild Mass. Ave.: Mayor Thomas Menino, an early signer of the Kyoto Accord, wants to reduce fuel consumption. The city has a new and energetic Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator. Gas prices are up. The traffic counts on Mass. Ave are down. Throughout the US, there is a new focus on quality of life in cities, on reducing the impact of traffic, on walking and cycling for health, on mobility alternatives as we get older, on healthy street trees, on improving public transportation. Cities across the country are putting roads "on diets" and testing new ways to calm traffic. "Complete streets" that satisfy all needs are being built - to the delight of users and neighbors alike.

Yet, here are the details of what we will get on Mass Ave: The street pavement will be widened by two feet. Existing trees will be removed. New sidewalks will be a foot narrower - so narrow we will be forced to walk single file to get past the newly planted trees in narrow pits, if they even survive.

And what about safety? The street is being designed for 35 miles per hour. At crosswalks, the existing medians are to be taken out and replaced by left turn lanes, leaving no place to pause when you cross the street. The outside travel lane will be wider (proven to speed up traffic) and there will not be a separate bike lane. And there is nothing designed to improve bus service and no space for bus shelters.

How could this have happened? The city has been working on this plan since 1993, spurred by the desire to get more cars from the expanding Prudential Center to the Southeast Expressway. The city's own Streetscape Guidelines for Boston's Major Roads (1999), the AccessBoston 2010-Boston Bicycle Plan (2001) and Mass. Highway's Design Guide (2006) all require a design that satisfies the needs of pedestrians, bikes and buses as well as cars. The current project doesn't embrace any of these new guides, but instead, adheres to outdated guidelines.

Public meetings were held and neighbors listed a broad set of goals. Over the past several years, city engineers selected a task force, primarily from the neighborhood associations, to review the details. Advocacy groups working on similar issues city-wide - the Livable Streets Alliance, WalkBoston, MassBike, and the Institute for Human Centered Design - were not included in the task force. Also left out of the process were many other Mass. Ave residents including people in elderly housing, assisted living, and affordable housing developments.

Why is the makeup of the task force important? Because in diversity, in knowledge and in numbers comes strength. Because when everyone is represented a design will work for everyone. Because a design will benefit from knowledge about what is happening on the other side of town, in other cities across the country and around the world. And it helps to have a lot of support when it comes time to get a project funded.

The task force says that it voiced many of our

common goals: reducing the impact of traffic, widening sidewalks, medians at intersections. But they were constantly told by the city that these goals could not be funded - that by raising objections they risked losing the project all together.

South Enders have not always been so ready to accept what the engineers told us was the best we could get. In the 1970s, we scotched the city's plans for the South End By-Pass and the state's plans for the Southwest Expressway, and we helped get the money to build the Southwest Corridor with its parks and transit. In the 1980s, we got Tremont Street and Columbus Avenue reconstructed as four-lane and two-lane streets; the city had planned to widen Tremont to six lanes. Narrowing Columbus from four lanes to two was the first time federal highway money was used to reduce travel lanes and widen sidewalks.

These successful projects were the result of inclusive public design processes; yet for Mass. Ave, the city and its select task force overlooked the reality that broader representation would have assured a better solution.

On June 24, at a public meeting open to all residents of the South End, we heard about another plan, a better plan. This plan would eliminate left-turn only lanes in exchange for wider sidewalks and bike lanes. At the meeting, it was neighbors shouting at neighbors, opinion split right down the middle, with half backing the new plan and half opting to stick with the old. Unfortunately, state officials voted that plan down on June 26, putting us on track for 36 months of construction for the old plan.

But at that meeting on June 24, there was a glimmer of hope. A diverse group of people had gathered. The city acknowledged that there were better solutions and that the traffic numbers are down. Task force members said they really did want to reduce traffic and that they would rather have wide sidewalks and medians at the intersections. There was near consensus on the desires. But the city's threat that the money

would disappear and the task force members' desire for planters in mid-block medians, brick sidewalks and "historic" lighting won the day. The remaining half of the attendees was left wondering if a little more time and effort wasn't necessary. After all, we will have to live with this design for the next 40 years. And there are people at the city and state who want to lead us toward the future rather than tie us to old ideas.

Shouldn't \$12 million and three years of construction result in a project that would be safer and more beautiful and more functional for all?

If we are to live in a healthy and prosperous neighborhood, one that that consumes less fossil fuel, one that is safe for all of our neighbors, then our public streets have a lot of work to do. We need a generous place to walk, to stop for a moment and talk. We need space to roll a shopping cart, to jog without tripping, to bicycle safely. We need healthy trees to provide shade and keep our houses cooler. We need space for bus shelters and frequent, reliable bus service. It will be hard to turn this project around, but if we want these goals to become reality we need to find a new way of coming together, and we need to support progressive leadership that will help us create a Mass. Ave that works for our neighborhood. South End streets are too precious for us to allow them to be overwhelmed by cars.

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