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STATE REPRESENTATIVE

R E P O R T

Longfellow Bridge In the 21st Century

by State Rep. Marty Walz

Walking across the Longfellow Bridge is one of my favorite things to do. The views of Boston and Cambridge are magnificent, while the chance to experience the wide-open sky is a welcome change from the cityscapes that dominate my days.

On both sides of the bridge, however, are serious safety hazards that the state is failing to rectify. Near the Charles Street Station, the sidewalk on the inbound side narrows to a mere 17 inches wide due to a light post. On the outbound side, the sidewalk ends entirely. In both instances, pedestrians are forced into the roadway, risking collision with bicyclists or vehicles. It does not have to be this way.

Notwithstanding years of advocacy, the Department of Conservation and Recreation failed to widen the sidewalks. On November 1, as a result of the transportation reform law, the bridge was trans-

ferred to the Highway Division of the Department of Transportation. With a fresh opportunity to improve pedestrian safety, four organizations have teamed up and are urging the Highway Division to take action. LivableStreets Alliance, MassBike, WalkBoston, and the Institute for Human-Centered Design have proposed a solution that the state ought to adopt now rather than years into the future when the bridge reconstruction is finished.

This seemingly simple task of creating even modestly sized sidewalks presages the challenge of reconfiguring the bridge as part of the restoration and rehabilitation project due to begin in 2011 (with preliminary work getting underway next year). An iconic structure whose beauty must be maintained, the bridge accommodates a growing number of pedestrians and bicyclists along with cars, trucks and the Red Line. The challenge is how to fit everyone in safely.

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Meeting this challenge will require new ways of thinking about the transportation system. In the second half of the 20th century, even in urban areas such as the one we live in, traffic engineers prioritized cars and focused their energies on moving the maximum number of cars in the shortest period of time. For example, when thinking about intersections, the “thru-put” for cars was a key measurement. The goal was to allow the maximum number of cars through the intersection in each cycle of the traffic signals. For the 21st century, we must place more emphasis on moving growing numbers of pedestrians and bicyclists.

As we plan our transportation system for the future, we must evaluate long held assumptions about traffic growth. In the past, traffic engineers assumed that traffic

would increase by a certain percentage each year, a figure known as the “background” growth rate. This increase was in addition to any traffic created by new real estate development. Turns out, we have almost certainly been overestimating the amount of traffic we will have in the future, and, consequently, some of our city’s streets are nowhere near as congested as once predicted.

When we plan for the Longfellow Bridge, pedestrians and bicyclists should be a priority, and we must carefully evaluate whether we can reduce the number of vehicle lanes. If we stop wrongly assuming that the amount of traffic will automatically increase every year, we will find possibilities that were unthinkable in the 20th century mindset.

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