

January 29, 2014

Richard Davey, Secretary and  
Chief Executive Officer

Frank DePaola,  
Administrator, Highway Division

Massachusetts Department of  
Transportation

10 Park Plaza  
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RE: Final Improvements to Project #606376, Cambridge Street bridge over I-90, Allston, Boston

Dear Secretary Davey and Administrator DePaola:

I have previously submitted extensive comments, and they are online at [http://john-s-allen.com/pdfs/Cambridge\\_Street\\_Bridge.pdf](http://john-s-allen.com/pdfs/Cambridge_Street_Bridge.pdf) . I stand by them.

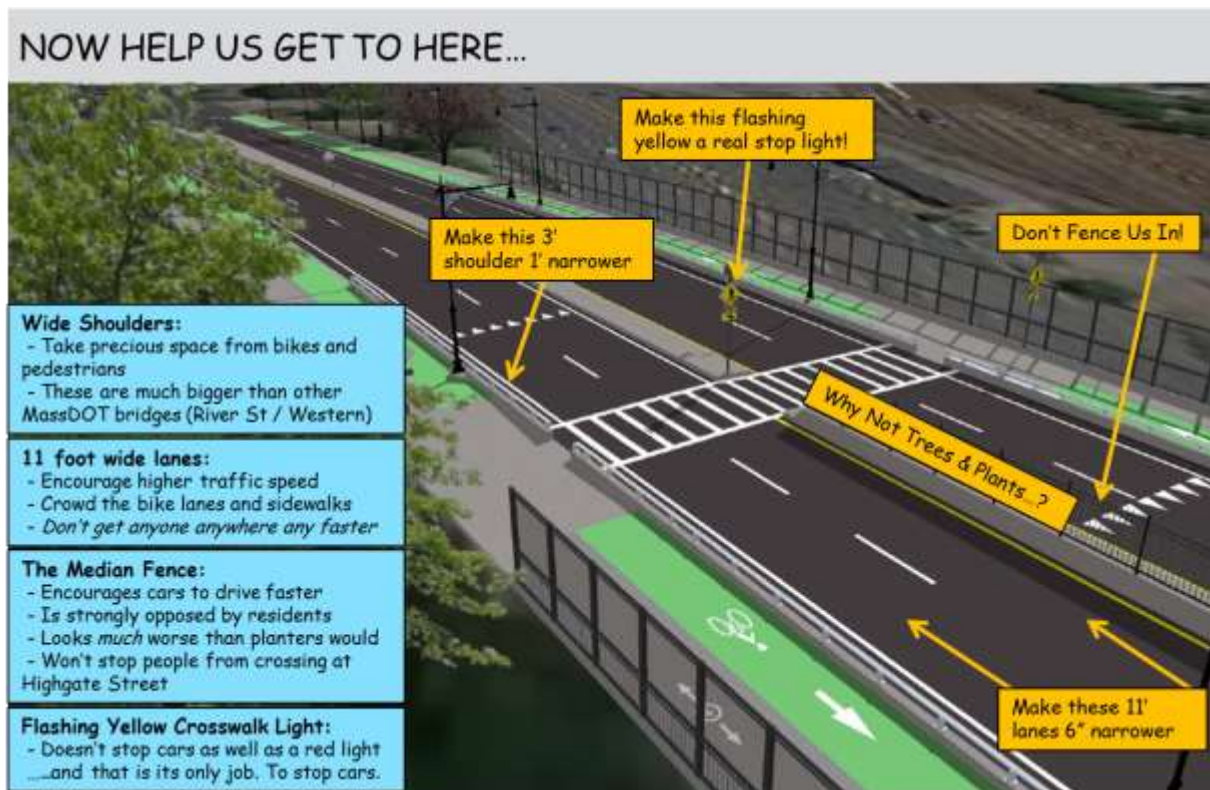
Cambridge Street may be envisioned by different constituencies as for motor traffic, as a commuter bicycle route, a bicycle route for family cycling, a walkway, or an aesthetic improvement project. Clearly, there is a disagreement between MassDOT's trying to maintain standards to accommodate motor traffic, and the wishes of neighborhood activists to accommodate family cyclists, pedestrians and beautification, but in with the most recent proposals, commuter bicyclists as well as pedestrians are being placed at a serious disadvantage,

Speaking as a bicyclist myself, let me describe my concerns with the current proposal, and how they might be resolved. My major concern is with conflicts between bicyclists and other users.

A major segment of the bicycling population in Allston is of young, healthy people, who ride efficient multi-speed bicycles. The goal of installing bikeways at sidewalk level, as proposed, is largely promotion: to entice people who do not ride bicycles, or do not ride bicycles much, to ride them, by creating a perception of safety. Feeling safe and being safe are, however, not the same, and particularly not when the feelings are those of people who have little bicycling experience.

The cycle track treatment which MassDOT has proposed would create serious conflicts between bicyclists and pedestrians. This is an accident waiting to happen on the downhill sections of the bridge, where cyclists can easily reach speeds over 25 miles per hour. As the bikeway is to the left of the walkway, faster bicyclists will overtake to the right, into the sidewalk area, merging into bidirectional pedestrian traffic. Bicyclists also will travel bidirectionally. The ends of the proposed crosswalk at the Mansfield Street stairs will become a shooting gallery with bicyclists arriving at speed, often from concealment behind pedestrians waiting to cross, as other pedestrians complete their crossing into what they perceive as a safe area. The waiting area for pedestrians at the ends of this crosswalk is in the bikeway. Bicyclists traveling across the bridge will divert onto the walkway to avoid waiting pedestrians. Similar problems will occur at the end of the Franklin Street overpass, either in the current design or in the one presented at the November 19 meeting. The complaints will be immediate and strident. "Bicyclists are going too fast." "I almost got hit by one."

The image below, from the Web page <http://cambridgestreetoverpass.blogspot.com/> shows activists' proposal for what they describe as improvements to the MassDOT plan. I agree with *one* of these proposals: a better traffic signal, and partially agree with another, removal of the median fence.



The blog post proposes to resolve bicycle-pedestrian conflicts by drastically restricting bicyclists, placing a row of planters between the sidewalk and the bikeway. The planters would allow only about a two-foot range for a bicyclists' wheel track without risk of snagging a pedal on a planter, guardrail or lamppost. There would be only room for a single line of bicyclists, all would be restricted to the speed of the slowest. Imagine a bicyclist trying to get somewhere, unable to a family with a child on a tricycle traveling at 5 miles hour! Contraflow bicycle traffic would use the walkway, which will be just as narrow. The planter configuration would not allow street cleaning machines, or space to to store plowed snow either from the sidewalk or from the bikeway. The predictable result would be to divert faster bicyclists back out onto the roadway, which also would be narrowed further with a 2-foot shoulder adjacent to a 10.5 foot travel lane. This is explained as a traffic calming measure. It is a truism among activists narrowing travel lanes slows traffic, but in fact, the effect is minimal, and particularly when traffic is light.

About the median fence, the blog asks, and then answers its own question:

How often do you see someone jaywalking in section of Cambridge Street, between Lincoln Street and the top of the Mansfield St stairs?



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In my experience, it effectively never happens. There is relatively little pedestrian activity here and there are no "attractions" on either side that would draw people to cross the street here.

Is there an actual safety problem, as shown by safety statistics? I don't know, but people do walk here. I found these Google Street View images –from two different passes of the Google camera car – while researching existing conditions on the bridge:



The blog, and also an activists' letter, see <http://tinyurl.com/knazotg>, plead for elimination of a fence in the median. Pedestrians would be fenced in even without a fence in the median, having to step awkwardly over a guardrail at either side of the street, as shown in the image on page 2. There is certainly is no need for a fence 6 feet high, and in the section with guardrails, there is no need for a fence at all.

Now, as to transitions at the ends of the sidewalk bikeways, I have searched the Internet thoroughly but have found nothing showing how transitions would coordinate with the new proposal.



With sidewalk-level bikeways, re-entering the street is possible only at gaps in a guardrail or non-mountable curbing, or at the end of the sidewalk segment. Bicyclists who are unwilling to wait in a “bike box” for a second signal phase to turn left will need to merge across a lane of motor traffic. Others will need to merge away from the right curb to avoid a “right-hook” threat when continuing straight at either end of the bridge. Neither of these merges is difficult, as bicyclists will be traveling downhill and able easily to merge onto the roadway. In making this comment, I agree with the suggestion in the activists’ letter to eliminate the dedicated right-turn lane onto Franklin Street, but a shared-lane marking would not generate a “right-hook” problem like a bike lane to the right of right-turning traffic. There needs to be a long enough merging distance, however. This means that bicyclists must be able to merge starting several hundred feet before the Harvard Avenue and Lincoln Street intersections. Eliminating the right-turn lane also would allow more room eastbound from Harvard Avenue to Linden Street, a problem which the activists and I both have pointed out.

I stand by my suggestions in my previous letter for bike lanes on the roadway. I ask why the bridge superstructure might not be widened, as with the Harvard Bridge, to allow wider sidewalks – perhaps in the upcoming bridge replacement – but lacking that, I recommend 10-foot wide sidewalks, with shared use by pedestrians and bicyclists, wider in the on-land section between the Franklin Street overpass and Harvard Avenue, where there will necessarily be heavier two-way bicycle traffic. 10-foot sidewalks would be wide enough to accommodate pedestrians and family cyclists, and would leave room on the roadway for bike lanes wide enough for one bicyclist to overtake another. The bike lanes could be separated by flexposts if desired in the uphill segments where there is no need for bicyclists to merge to the left.

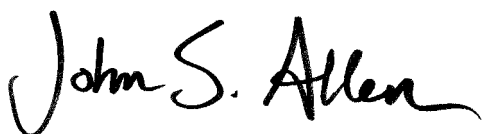
Finally, let me discuss the issue of traffic calming in general. MassDOT and even more so, activists, propose to calm motor traffic by increasing conflicts between vehicles and making travel more difficult, while forcing bicyclists off the roadway into pedestrian space. This may be a way to slow traffic but it is not a way to induce calm. The burden of this falls heavily on bicyclists and pedestrians, as I have described. Let me instead propose other means of speed reduction: reduction of the speed limit (also suggested by the activists in their letter); speed limit enforcement; speed tables; educational campaigns. A couple of license plate cameras would go a very long way to solve the speeding problem.

I note also that many of the same issues I raise were raised at the January 14 public meeting, as noted in the letter online at <http://walkingbostonian.blogspot.com/2014/01/follow-up-to-jan-14th-public-meeting.html>

I thank you for your attention.

Very truly yours,

John S. Allen



Member, Waltham Bicycle Committee

Board member-elect, Charles River Wheelmen

Member, National Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices Bicycle Technical Committee  
but speaking for myself.