



Institute for Human-Centered Design
[Adaptive Environments]



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Frank Tramontozzi, P.E., Chief Engineer
MassDOT, Highway Division
10 Park Plaza, Boston, MA 02116-3973

Delivered via PDF to Frank.Tramontozzi@state.ma.us

Subject: Reconstruction of Massachusetts Avenue (from Pond Road to the Cambridge City Line), Arlington (Project No. 604687)

Dear Mr. Tramontozzi:

LivableStreets Alliance, WalkBoston, Institute for Human-Centered Design, and MassBike all believe that streets that are truly multi-modal can enhance our communities by giving people choices about how people get around. A true “complete street” is one that is safe and appealing for all users of all ages and abilities, whether it is pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, or motorists.

It is with these concepts in mind that we express our strong support for the current 25% Design for the Massachusetts Avenue reconstruction project in Arlington (Project No. 604687). The Mass Ave project is an important example of the principles of a complete street put into practice by MassDOT. It is important as an example of the implementation of both GreenDOT and the Healthy Transportation Compact. This design not only repairs deficient infrastructure, but makes broad improvements for all users, resulting in a street which is safer, more accessible, and more aesthetically pleasing.

Specifically, we applaud MassDOT and the Town of Arlington for the following:

- A more clearly defined roadway cross-section, including dedicated left turn only lanes at key locations such as Lake Street
- Sidewalk widening in key locations, especially in the Capitol Square business district, allowing for more space to walk as well as new space for sidewalk cafes
- Curb extensions, raised refuge islands, and additional crosswalks where needed, to enhance pedestrian access and safety
- Additional pedestrian-scaled lighting for increased visibility and safety
- Bike lanes along the entire length of the project, for increased safety and appeal for a wide range of bicyclists (the notion that four shared lanes instead of bike lanes are preferable for cyclists is not credible to our organizations)
- Preservation of all existing legal parking spaces (and, from our reading of the plans, possibly the addition of a few more)

The Mass Ave project is the ideal application of a “road diet”, where travel lanes are reconfigured to strike a better balance between all travel modes, while preserving appropriate traffic capacity along the corridor for current and future projected traffic volumes. Mass Ave currently operates as a combination of two very wide travel lanes or four narrower unmarked lanes, depending on the time of day and volume of traffic, and has no bicycle accommodation at all. At the Lake Street intersection, it is frequently treated as a five or six lane roadway. This configuration can be confusing for motorists, unappealing and potentially unsafe to bicyclists, and dangerous to pedestrians, in particular due to the long crossing distances and unpredictable motorist behavior. As you know there have been numerous vehicle-pedestrian crashes over the years resulting in numerous serious injuries and two fatalities in the late 1990s.

The proposed cross-section makes much better use of the curb-to-curb width, by widening sidewalks in areas of high-pedestrian activity, adding clearly defined bike lanes, and clearly defining travel lanes (both general and turn-only) to accommodate existing and future traffic volumes.. This new configuration will be much more appealing and safer for all users. It will better serve residents, who will now be able to more safely walk, bike, or drive in their own neighborhood. It will also better serve local businesses, whose customers will have more choices for how to get to their shops, and in some cases will now have the opportunity to dine outside in the warm weather months.

We recognize that there is some opposition to this new design by members of the local community, some of whom feel that four travel lanes are necessary (at the expense of bike lanes), and others who feel that this new design will hurt local businesses. We cannot disagree more strongly. We have seen the traffic counts and projections. We have seen this type of design work well time and time again in Massachusetts and in many cities all over the world. MassDOT and the Town of Arlington should feel confident that they have the full support of our coalition of advocates and our organizations’ members who use this stretch of Mass Ave, including many who live in North Cambridge and Arlington.

Moving forward, we have one recommendation we would like MassDOT and the City of Arlington to consider: We would prefer that pedestrian signals be timed automatically as part of each light cycle (no push-buttons should be provided), concurrently phased where possible along with a leading pedestrian interval of 3 to 5 seconds, and should include countdown timers to indicate how much time is remaining to cross. If some vehicular phases are not automatic, then it may be acceptable to make pedestrian signals push-button activated for these phases as well during times of the day when there are low pedestrian volumes. If so, signage should be posted notifying pedestrians of when their walk signal is automatic and when it is not.

Thank you for providing us the opportunity to comment on this project in advance of the 25% design public hearing. If you have any further comments or questions, please feel free to contact Charlie Denison, Advocacy Director, LivableStreets Alliance, at charlie@livablestreets.info or 617-852-6125.

Best regards,

Charlie Denison, LivableStreets Alliance
Chris Hart, Institute for Human Centered Design
David Watson, MassBike
Wendy Landman, WalkBoston

CC:

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