

May 13, 2014

Richard K. Sullivan, Jr.
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Attn: Alex Strysky
100 Cambridge St., Suite 900
Boston MA 02114

Mark Kolonoski
MassDOT Highway Division
Environmental Services Section
10 Park Plaza, Room 4260
Boston, MA 02116

RE: Comments on the Environmental Notification Form for the Beacon Street Multimodal Improvements and Streetscape Enhancement in Somerville, MA

Dear Secretary Sullivan and Mr. Kolonoski:

The Beacon Street project area extends from the bridge abutment at Oxford Street to Dickinson Street, a distance of approximately 1.1 miles. The project is intended to enhance pedestrian and bicycle movements with improved streetscape, wider sidewalks, a new cycle track/bicycle lanes, and new ADA compliant curb ramps. The project goal is to enhance the multimodal connectivity of the Beacon Street Corridor.

We have reviewed this project and offer the following comments:

1. Updated and continuous sidewalks on Beacon Street

The program for complete streets along Beacon Street will result in new cycle tracks and a significant reconstruction of both the street and the sidewalk. Sidewalks are to be updated and rebuilt to correct current deficiencies, including substandard slopes and lack of ramps at intersections. A sidewalk will be added to the south side of Beacon Street in a location where no sidewalk now exists. Adherence to this plan is essential for the safety and convenience of all users of the sidewalk.

The proposed sidewalks will replace the existing 10'-11' wide sidewalks with new ones of substantially the same width. Retention of this dimension as a minimum is extremely important because some space within the sidewalk will accommodate other uses, such as trees. In only one portion of Beacon Street, where there are space constraints due to an existing stonewall, will the 10'-11' width be precluded; we note that no trees are planned for the sidewalk in this section.

2. Cycle tracks and bike lanes

Cycle tracks are proposed between Oxford Street and Museum Street, bike lanes between Museum Street and Park/Scott Streets, cycle tracks between Park/Scott

Streets and Washington Street and bike lanes between Washington Street and the Cambridge City line. On the north side of the street, the alignments of the cycle tracks and bike lanes are end-to-end, resulting in a virtually straight path for the full length of the project.

On the south side of the street the cycle tracks and bike lanes do not quite line up. The transitions between cycle tracks and bike lanes at the intersection of Beacon Street/Museum Street and Park Street/Washington Street are angled to accommodate the needed connections between cycle tracks and bike lanes. These intersections have crosswalks where pedestrians will cross near the bike routes. Since separate traffic signals for bicycles are not included in the project, WalkBoston is concerned that walkers may not be aware that bicycles are approaching at these intersections and need to be especially careful because these diversions might distract the cyclists or the motorists. We request that special signage and/or pavement markings be provided to alert walkers, bicyclists and drivers of these shifts in alignment and the need to be aware of movements by others.

3. Separation of cycle tracks and sidewalks

In several locations, the proposed cycle tracks are immediately adjacent and at the same grade as the sidewalk. In effect the cycle track will be located on an extension of the sidewalk. A pronounced and clear separation between bicyclists and walkers is needed to deter cyclists from using the sidewalk to bypass slower moving bikes. The starting and stopping of cycle tracks and bike lanes may be confusing and lead to cyclists using the sidewalks to avoid merging into traffic or worrying about people opening car doors directly in front of them.

Since all 208 of the street trees included this project are to be planted within the width of the sidewalk, we assume that they will help to separate the cycle track from walkers. Other street furniture such as the existing utility and lighting poles, or new benches, trash containers, bollards or signs might also help. The precise location of each element should be carefully considered, as they have the potential to interfere with pedestrian or bicycle movements.

4. Placement of trees

Although the sidewalks are 10 feet wide in nearly all locations along Beacon Street, some of that width – perhaps up to 5 feet - will be lost due to the planting of 208 trees directly in the sidewalk. All of the proposed new trees should be placed in long narrow tree pits (we have seen tree pits that are 2' wide by 6'-8' long). More typical 4-foot square tree pits that intrude into the sidewalk should not be used. Irrespective of the shape of the tree pit, tree grates and or special permeable but sturdy filler (similar to that used in some South End locations) should be explored. This is important for the safety of walkers, as is the long-term maintenance of the tree pits so that they do not pose tripping hazards for walkers or for the visually-impaired.

5. Traffic signals at crosswalks and mid-block

New traffic signal equipment and signal timing at the intersections of Beacon Street with Park/Scott and Washington Streets are planned. In addition, two High-Intensity Activated crossWalk (HAWK) pedestrian signals on mast arms are planned for

pedestrian crossings at the Sacramento Street intersection and at the Buckingham/Cooney intersection. The project thus appears to have signals of some sort at intervals of about ¼ mile; however, in the portion of Beacon Street between Sacramento Street and the rail overpass at Somerville Avenue, the intersections with Oxford and Prentiss Streets have no traffic signals. With no signals to slow traffic these mid-block crossings may be difficult for pedestrians. Signage or other warnings may be essential to inform drivers and cyclists of the crosswalks.

6. Crosswalk paving

The proposed use of concrete pavers at crosswalks has been cited by one of our members as a hazard for nearly all walkers, and we agree. For all crosswalks on Beacon Street, the customary white reflective thermoplastic strips should be used. Pavers have low visibility and are uneven, making it harder for wheelchairs, seniors, and people pushing strollers or grocery carts.

7. Pedestrian signal phasing

At existing signal locations the exclusive pedestrian phase will be replaced with concurrent pedestrian phasing. For all new signals, a leading pedestrian interval (LPI) is proposed to allow pedestrians to enter the crosswalk before vehicles approaching the intersection have a green signal indication. It will be important to coordinate the LPI at each signalized intersection with any preferential treatment given to bicycles at the same location, to avoid potential conflicts.

8. Signage

There is a need for sidewalk and cycle track signs that make it clear to walkers, bicyclists and drivers how the cycle tracks function. In particular, since all the street's users will be unfamiliar with cycle tracks it will be important to let pedestrians know what to expect in bicycle movements adjacent to them. Signs should advise bicycles to stay within the cycle tracks and avoid using the sidewalks. Signs should advise walkers of approaching bicycle traffic, places to wait before crossing the street, and to not walk in the cycle tracks. Specific notice should be given to cyclists and pedestrians of potential conflicts at intersections, where turning bicycles, vehicles and pedestrians present many different movements.

9. Lighting

New street lighting has not been proposed, and cyclists may be 'invisible' to walkers and drivers. The City should explore the need for additional lighting, especially at intersections where so many different movements will be taking place. In addition, as part of the introduction of the cycle track, the City should explore the opportunity to market and enforce state laws requiring bicycles to carry white front lights on bicycles visible that are visible from 500 feet. WalkBoston has received comments from a number of our older members that they find it impossible to see bicyclists approaching at night if they do not use head lights, and with the addition of a sidewalk level cycle track they are very nervous about crossing the track at intersections.

10. Driveways

A great number of private driveways will be accommodated with this design, with each

rebuilt to cross both sidewalk and bicycle facilities. The north side of the street has 43 driveways and the south side has 30. Most of the driveways are narrow, and will involve drivers who will back out to reach Beacon Street. Drivers backing vehicles into the street may have obstructions that limit abilities to see approaching walkers, runners or cyclists.

11. Speed control


Speeds on local streets that are primarily residential such as Beacon Street should be strictly regulated. The current 30-mph limit should not be raised. It should be made lower with advisory signs if possible. Reminder signs should be posted at intervals along the route to warn drivers not to go faster.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project. Please feel free to contact us if you should have questions.

Sincerely,



Wendy Landman
Executive Director



Robert Sloane
Senior Planner

Cc: Hayes Morrison, Somerville Director of Transportation and Infrastructure