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Boston 2024 has declared their intention to plan the most walkable Olympics in history. This is good news – a truly walkable Olympics can be more fun, manageable and sustainable for residents, visitors, and athletes. Done right, the long term benefits of Olympic-related improvements for walking will make Massachusetts residents healthier, local stores and Main Streets livelier, our communities greener and our streets more accessible for all.

Neither Massachusetts nor Boston has ever had a grand scheme for investing in and improving walking. Creating the bid for the Olympics presents us with that opportunity. That’s why, as we start an intensive and accelerated discussion of just how the Olympics should be designed, operated and paid for, it is crucial to step back and consider how the Games can have a lasting positive impact on walking and transportation in Boston and beyond –in downtowns and neighborhoods serving many of Massachusetts’ residents.

From Dorchester to Allston, from Lowell to Brockton, and from Worcester to Foxborough, let’s add great sidewalks and paths to connect the Olympic venues to transit. Since all of the Games’ spectators will be directed to use transit, we should also use the Olympics as the opportunity to improve walking and accessibility to all of the MBTA’s stations – so that access to transit from the beginning of the trips to the Games is also walkable. With a commuter rail system stretching from Newburyport to Fitchburg, from Worcester to Providence and Plymouth – the transit system encompasses more than 75% of Massachusetts’ population.

We need to consider what will happen well before the Olympic flame is lit and long after the last Olympic Marathon competitor crosses the finish line on Charles Street. Let’s start the conversation right away and create a special Olympics Walking Advisory Group. This will provide an independent voice for ensuring that the Games and their legacy are truly walkable and that they are the impetus to inspire the mix and level of private, local, state and federal investment needed to make a great stride in connecting our communities to transit.

Let’s really plan and spend wisely on walking – from creating interconnecting paths and greenways across the city; to making new smartly-designed walking connections to rail, subway and bus stops. We need to improve the nitty gritty details that make it safer and easier for everyone to cross every street such as ensuring that traffic signals are timed correctly for walkers, and that traffic on city streets moves at a pace that works for pedestrians.

Massachusetts is already one of the nation’s leaders in pedestrian safety, and has among the nation’s highest proportion of people who walk for their daily transportation needs. Let’s seize the Olympic moment and create walking connections that will move the hordes of Olympic visitors for two weeks -- and Massachusetts’ residents and visitors for decades to come.

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MAKING MASSACHUSETTS MORE WALKABLE

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