



WalkBoston

July 28, 2009

Secretary Ian Bowles
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
MEPA Office
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

RE: Comments on the Environmental Notification Form for the Nonantum Road improvements in Boston, Watertown and Newton
EOEA #1441

Dear Secretary Bowles:

WalkBoston appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the Environmental Notification Form for the Nonantum Road improvements in Boston, Watertown and Newton.

The proposal calls for reconstruction of the roadway between North Beacon Street in Boston and Galen Street in Watertown. A major feature of the design is the narrowing of the existing roadway layout and the addition of an improved shared use path for the full length of the roadway segment

The project is intended to improve the safety of all roadway users – pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers – in this dangerous roadway alignment. We are very pleased that DCR and MHD are undertaking this badly needed project and giving important consideration to all roadway users. Pedestrian access is especially important because residents of the neighborhoods adjacent to Nonantum Road must be able to cross the road to safely access the path and the river's edge.

Our comments address several issues that would make the reconstruction even safer for walkers.

Design speed of the road

WalkBoston is concerned that the roadway has not been designed to accomplish travel speeds that are appropriate for the roadway to safely serve all of its intended users. During the meeting on July 20, 2009, the engineers indicated that narrowing the lanes of traffic helps to reduce speed. This road, while a commuting route, is also a crossing between neighborhoods and the river. People will continue to be afraid to cross or to use the median as a safe haven if cars are going 40MPH. The street should be designed for speeds appropriate for a neighborhood. We suggest that the travel lanes be 10 feet wide the entire length of the project, and the road should be posted at 25 MPH. The mix of users, the frequent intersections, the lack of commercial vehicles, and the location of the roadway within the Charles River Reservation all make this an appropriate design speed for the road.

Crosswalk markings and signage

Pedestrian crossings should be highlighted with crosswalk striping and signing in advance of each location. The designers might also consider the use of textured pavement in advance of each crosswalk to give drivers additional warning that they are approaching a crosswalk. Without markings the designated locations may be dangerous spots for pedestrians to cross the street. We hope that crossing light at Maple Street can be installed as part of the project and not be delayed.

Links to existing sidewalks

It is unclear from the plans whether the street crossings link to existing sidewalks in the residential neighborhoods on the south side of the roadway. For example, the proposed crossing of Nonantum Road at Maple Street is shown with links to existing sidewalks. At the proposed street crossings at Water Street and Charlesbank Road a link to existing sidewalks should be provided. All projected sidewalks should be built to be continuous to the borders of the state-owned right-of-way.

Galen Street intersection

The width of the multi use path shrinks to six feet as it approaches Galen Street traveling west. This narrow path will create dangerous congestion among walkers, children's carriages, and recreational bikers. If the lane width for cars narrows to 10 feet, there would be about two feet of space available to widen the path. We appreciate the proponent's willingness to move the utilities currently on the path to another location to make this portion of the path safer.

Median islands as refuges for pedestrians

Plans for the new roadway detail the design and identify the components of the proposed 32' cross-section throughout much of the existing roadway. The cross section indicates a 4' flush median as a typical section. This median will not serve as an effective pedestrian refuge unless traffic is moving at speeds of 30 mph or less. If those moderate speeds are accomplished, and the median is carried throughout the project, it will provide a relatively safe haven for pedestrians trying to cross the street.

- A raised concrete island provides a refuge for pedestrians crossing at Maple Street and at Charlesbank Road. These refuge islands can be particularly helpful in making street crossings safer.
- The pedestrian crossing of Nonantum Rd, between Pedestrian Ramps No. 9 and No. 6 appears quite long - by our estimate, approximately 70 feet. In the current configuration, a traffic island is provided as a refuge for pedestrians in the middle of Nonantum Road. The plans for the improvements are somewhat unclear, but it seems that the median might be removed. This is unacceptable, as it causes new dangers for pedestrians rather than adding safety improvements that help in crossing the street on foot. We welcome clarification of the design for the replacement of this crossing.

The crosswalk at Brooks Street appears to be little changed. New ramps leading to the crosswalk on Brooks Street should strengthen the safety of the pedestrian crossing.

Fencing

A guardrail is proposed for virtually the full length of the proposed improvements. This guardrail will separate the travel lanes for vehicles from the shared-use path and provide a significant feature to protect pedestrians from adjacent vehicles and potential accidents that might involve vehicles leaving the roadway.

In addition to the guardrail, a wood rail fence is proposed between the path and the river from North Beacon Street to Galen Street. The fence appears to be a signature feature of the new path, not especially designed for the safety of pedestrians, although it will prevent walkers or bicyclists from accidentally falling into the river. The proposed fence has a missing section that extends roughly between Sta. 63+00 and Sta. 79+40, which appears to coincide with the property set aside for the skating rink and new facility for Community Sailing. This missing link is not explained.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Nonantum Road Project. Please contact us for any clarification or additional comments that you may need.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director

Robert Sloane
Senior Planner

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Frank Tramontozzi, Chief Engineer, MassHighway