

BY RACHEL FICHTENBAUM

Improving mobility for seniors and those with disabilities

Rachel Fichtenbaum is a mobility information specialist at MassMobility. She researches best practices in community transportation, and disseminates them to practitioners statewide, providing technical assistance to help organizations improve mobility.

Finding transportation can be a challenge for seniors and people with disabilities looking to get to medical appointments, jobs, or other destinations, especially in suburban and rural areas. While some require a ride, walking is also an important mode of travel. Over the last five years, the state’s MassMobility program – a joint initiative of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services and MassDOT – has worked with transportation providers, human service agencies, and advocates in all regions of Massachusetts to identify needs and develop solutions to increase mobility for seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income commuters. Improved walkability is a recurring theme of our conversations and our work.

Walkability facilitates access to transit, getting from home to the bus route, and then from the bus stop to the destination. When the members of the Cape and Islands Regional Coordinating Council reviewed results of a survey of over 250 transit riders and potential riders, lack of sidewalks or other infrastructure along bus routes emerged as the number one barrier preventing people from using public transit. As a result, the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority has partnered with regional planners on a bus stop audit to determine where improvements may be needed.

Walkability near bus stops is a particularly important issue for travel trainers, people who teach seniors and people with disabilities the skills and knowledge they

need to ride transit independently and safely. Earlier this year, travel trainers from around the state convened for a presentation on intersection design from Meg Robertson, Director of the Orientation and Mobility department at the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. Using images of Massachusetts intersections to illustrate her points, Robertson presented an overview of types of intersections and challenges each type can present to pedestrians. She emphasized that street crossing involves a number of choices, and that while no travel trainer can prevent all danger, risk factors can be reduced.

Pedestrian safety is also important for people who use wheelchairs and mobility devices. AGE TRIAD, a group of public safety officials and senior centers representing the Berkshire County towns of Alford, Great Barrington, and Egremont, as well as the local Fairview Hospital, sponsored a “Be Seen, Be Safe” event at the Great Barrington Senior Center in July – all attendees received free, safety-yellow vests. Staff and volunteers gave out flags for scooters and helped attendees decorate their scooters with reflective tape. The event was spurred by a tragic crash in which a driver of an SUV hit a person using a scooter who was crossing the street from senior housing to a grocery store in Great Barrington in 2015. The driver said she never saw the pedestrian, so AGE TRIAD, at the urging of the Great Barrington Chief of Police William Walsh, decided to conduct a public awareness campaign to increase pedestrian safety and visibility.

To learn more about these or other projects, please visit MassMobility at www.mass.gov/hst, or subscribe to its monthly newsletter at www.tinyurl.com/MassMobility.

BY TOM PALMER

A newcomer’s guide to a walkable lifestyle

Tom Palmer covered transportation and real estate development for 15 of his 32 years as a reporter and editor at the Boston Globe. He now owns Tom Palmer Communication, a consulting firm.

I’m a newcomer to Boston. I’ve only been here 40 years. The city has changed a lot in that time, but one thing hasn’t changed. It’s still a walkable city. My friends from the Midwest, and even some who visit from bigger cities closer to us, are invariably pleasantly surprised at how accessible and manageable it is. “I love Boston, because you can walk across town in 45 minutes,” a visitor told me.

There’s a lot of room for improvement, of course. Our walk/don’t walk/take-your-life-in-your-hands lights could be better. Pedestrians could shape up by paying attention to lights, but the streets are often so narrow it’s often tempting to make a run for it.

Another thing that hasn’t changed in my short time living in the Boston area is the price of housing. The front pages of newspapers in the 1970s lamented the high rents and home prices of the day, just like we do now. And today it’s even less affordable.

Even some Boston folks who arrived more recently than I object to the fact that Boston is growing so much, that

it’s so much more congested than it was. We are lucky we have the attractions and resources – educational, business, medical, sports, cultural, entertainment –



that make people want to come here and stay. In the years since Boston shook off its post-War slump and reinvented itself for the 21st century, we gradually and collectively chose to be a contemporary world-class city – competing for business and talent globally and growing to enable us to do that. As engaging as historical Old Boston was, and while we will preserve much of it, we elected not to remain a provincial, insulated community.

With that choice came the responsibility to overcome the barriers to increasing our housing supply, to accepting density. We’ve taken some steps in that direction, adding thousands of apartments just since the recent recession. Boston was at its most dense at mid-20th century, but the automobile did not yet dominate like it does in today’s car culture. People walked more and took public transportation more. The population then declined and only began growing again in about 1990. If we are going to accommodate continually increasing numbers of fellow residents of the Boston area, we must adjust our ways so we can all efficiently get where we need to go. A young professional woman I met the other day rides a foldup electric scooter from her home in the Seaport *continued*

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News

Wed. March 29, 2017, 5-8pm
Microsoft NERD Center
1 Memorial Drive, Cambridge
Admission: \$25; Save the date!
 Join walkers from around the Commonwealth for our yearly celebration of mobility and walking advocacy! RSVP: walkboston.org or 617.367.9255

Effective January 9, 2017 the default speed limit on City of Boston streets was reduced from 30 to 25 mph.
 Thanks to the combined efforts of Mayor Marty Walsh, Boston City Council, Governor Charlie Baker, MassDOT and State Legislature, this will improve safety for people who walk, drive and bike on city streets. State-owned roadways in Boston are not covered by this new law.

Newcomer's guide

continued to her job in the Back Bay, wearing a collapsible helmet that she found from a European manufacturer. We need more entrepreneurial commuters like that.

But most people in the city are going to walk at least a portion of their daily trips. Walking is healthy and social. As a counterpart, a big part of the solution to our overcrowded highways and streets is expanding our transit capacity. That means both fixing our ill-maintained existing MBTA system and eventually adding to the network. A good transit system enables and encourages walking.

Our continued economic development and our quality of life depend on it.

BY JOSEPH CUTRUFO

The key to BRT success? Walking.

Joseph Cutrufo is a former member of the WalkBoston staff and current Director of Communications and Connecticut Policy at Tri-State Transportation Campaign.

In March 2015, Connecticut cut the ribbon on CTfastrak, New England's first bus rapid transit system. CTfastrak features a 9.4-mile bus-only guideway which runs from downtown New Britain through Newington and West Hartford to its terminus in downtown Hartford.

CTfastrak has outpaced ridership projections so far. But the real test for CTfastrak will be whether it can transform the way people travel in greater Hartford, where 81 percent of commuters drive to work alone — even higher than the national average of 76 percent.

Not long after the system launched, prospective riders bemoaned the lack of parking near stations. Predictably, the Connecticut Department of Transportation responded by building more parking.

But when people won't use the system due to a lack of parking, we shouldn't ask, "Where can we build more parking." We should ask, "Why can't people get here without a car?" In greater Hartford, the answer is simple: the neighborhoods surrounding CTfastrak stations aren't dense enough, and the streets in station areas don't safely accommodate walking. continued

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1.17 walk + transit

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mission
 WalkBoston makes walking safer and easier in Massachusetts to encourage better health, a cleaner environment and vibrant communities.

thank you!

RACEWALKERS

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The key to BRT success? Walking.

continued Some in the CTfastrak corridor recognize these challenges. The City of New Britain hired a consultant to run a series of public workshops to identify what kind of developments would be most appropriate for the city's three CTfastrak stations. And in West Hartford, town officials amended local zoning regulations to allow mixed-used development around CTfastrak stations, where much of the land is currently zoned for industrial uses.

But in suburban Newington, the town's zoning board passed a moratorium on "high density development" shortly after CTfastrak service launched.

Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy has set aside funds to help speed along transit-oriented development projects, but ultimately the region needs a more holistic approach to making greater Hartford a more walkable region. The state had a chance to start the process through legislation in 2015, but a bill proposing a "Transit Corridor Development Authority" was viewed unfavorably by towns that saw it as a threat to home rule.

That won't be the end of the movement to unchain the greater Hartford area from car-dominant planning. One place to look for inspiration is the city of Hartford, where a major zoning overhaul seeks to undo a half-century in which the city's parking inventory increased by 30,000 as the population declined by 40,000 people.

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