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Re: Causeway Street Reconstruction Project #606320

On behalf of LivableStreets Alliance, we are writing in regard to the 25% plans for the Causeway Street Reconstruction presented to the community on August 9, 2012.

In general, we support the overall goals of this project – to make the area safer for pedestrians (who outnumber vehicles!) and other non-motorized travelers (the North Station Hubway Station is the busiest in the city!), better deal with commuter surges, and upgrade the vehicular facilities to meet the area’s evolving residential and commercial uses.

The 25% design plans unveiled at a public meeting last week incorporate many useful attempts to adjust to the new realities such as wider sidewalks and shorter intersection crossings, narrower lanes and raised “intersection tables,” some sections of bike lanes, and the straightening and signalization of Endicott Street.

Unfortunately, while the current proposals will technically turn Causeway into a “complete street,” neither pedestrian nor bicycle movement is fully enabled or protected. The design lacks many exciting, safety-improving and mobility-enhancing designs already proven to work in other parts of this country and the world. The proposals are better than what exists, but not good enough; Boston needs better.

SPECIAL TREATMENT OF GARDEN-EMPTYING MOMENTS

One step forward would be to accept that Garden event ending times are unique. Rather than using media strips or planters to try to “channelize” the hordes of people into narrow crosswalks, why not accept that for a half-hour or so after an event, the street belongs to pedestrians – at least the section of Causeway near the Garden. Suspend the concept of “jaywalking” -- Cars, bikes, trucks would all still be allowed, but only if moving no faster than 5 mph and held to a “strict liability standard” where the larger vehicle in any interaction has full default responsibility for any problems they’re involved in. (There is a rich body of literature about these kinds of temporal “shared space”.) Taxi, kiss and drop, company buses, and limo pickup would be moved to the Lomasney Way entrance or perhaps over to Haverhill and Canal Streets to serve the Orange and Green lines as well. For the specified period of

post-event time (and perhaps on other occasions as well) programmable LED signs would announce the special rules allowing unrestricted walking. These changes would allow the area to clear more quickly and safely!

ENABLING THE “CROSS ROADS”

Another set of special situations arises because Causeway Street is a crucial connector of three separate high-use (or potentially high use if conditions were improved) walking and bicycling routes: (a) from the Rose Kennedy Greenway to the Charles River paths and Harborwalk on either side of North Station, across the river and eventually to the Community Path heading north, (b) from downtown to the future multi-use path along Rutherford Ave and around Charlestown, and (c) along the Freedom Trail between the North End and the USS Constitution. The current proposal says nothing about the special needs of these crossings. In an improved Causeway Street and Keany Square intersection, each of the crossings should be raised to sidewalk level and have zebra stripes across the street to make it clear to cars that they are entering a pedestrian/bicycle space rather than the reverse.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

There are a lot of businesses on and along Causeway. The current proposal doesn't seem to provide enough flexibility to allow for deliveries and pick-ups. At the least, if special space can't be created for these functions, there should be a special time of day set during which certain curb-side zones or travel lanes can be used for delivery trucks. Given all the other people and purposes on Causeway, the set-aside would have to be at an “off hour” – maybe 5 to 6:30 AM, although noise controls would have to remain in force for the sake of the growing number of people who live in the area.

DEALING WITH THROUGH TRAFFIC

Causeway is also a through street. Commuters, shoppers, residents, event-goers – all need to travel through the area. While the proposed redesign makes some improvements, it has dangerous inadequacies. The sidewalks will be widened, particularly at several corners, but much of the rest of the new off-road space will be used for planters and trees. Causeway Street desperately needs more green, and planters do help to “channelize” pedestrian flow where that's appropriate. Including narrower or more widely spaced planter beds – or even moving trees into the street to serve as spacers between parking spots or as vertical elements in the median – would achieve the same goal while not taking up much needed pedestrian space.

Furthermore, although dealing with automobile traffic is important, travel lanes should not come at the expense of high quality bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The North Station area is one where people are encouraged to use non-automobile options. It is a transportation hub already, one where car traffic is dwarfed by people using other modes. And as we have seen throughout the Boston region, traffic volumes have been going down over the past 8-10 years, while walking, bicycling, and transit ridership has been going up. This trend is sure to continue, and we should design our streets with that in mind.

SAFER INTERSECTIONS

The intersections at either end of Causeway Street, Lowell and Keany Squares, are confusing and potentially dangerous in their current state, and the proposal will make some improvements. However, they don't go far enough.

On Causeway Street itself, the raised intersection and other wide zebra crossings across it will be well used by the throngs of pedestrians going into and out of North Station. We would suggest, however, that each intersection have two crosswalks across Causeway St, not just one, as people typically do not willingly take extra street crossings if they don't have to. So, at Portland St and Haverhill St, we ask that you add an additional crosswalk across Causeway St.

Lowell Square is certainly much improved compared to the confusing layout there today. However, the crosswalks need to be much wider and the "storage areas" larger than proposed to handle the over 1,000 people per hour who cross at Lomasney Way each day or even the lower numbers at other corners. In addition, it will be very tempting for pedestrians to cross diagonally between the northwest corner and southeast corners since it is the shortest distance between those two corners and since there is a flush median in the middle. We strongly suggest that you add a formal crossing there which is given a WALK signal during an exclusive pedestrian phase. Whether or not you formalize it, it's nearly guaranteed people will do it anyway. The new bike lanes on Lomasney Way, Merrimac St, and Causeway St connect well into this intersection, however more guidance in the intersection itself for bicyclists would be useful (narrowing the median a bit and adding dashed bike lanes), as well as bike boxes to help bicyclists who are making left turns. We'd love to see bike lanes on Staniford St as well.

In Keany Square, given the speed at which cars head into and out of Boston on to the North Washington Street Bridge, further investigation into an exclusive pedestrian phase (in addition to the planned concurrent phases) would be worthwhile even though it will have some impact on vehicle throughput. Pedestrian signals should be designed to maximize the crossing times and minimize the waiting times. On top of that, the lack of bicycle facilities through the intersection in the current plan is unacceptable. At minimum, continuous bicycle lanes should be included, connecting Causeway St to Commercial St, as well as connecting the North Washington St Bridge to North Washington St. As with Causeway St. itself, safely guiding bicyclists through this intersection should not take a back seat to motor vehicle travel lanes.

The design of Keany Square from the 2009 version of these plans was actually much better for pedestrian and bicyclists. It had eliminated the porkchop island on the northeast corner and had bike lanes on the N Washington St Bridge and on Commercial Street. The main improvement that we would make to this plan would be to either combine with the eastbound through lane or remove entirely one of the 2 left turn only lanes from Causeway St going eastbound, creating room for a continuous eastbound bike lane; we would also dash the bike lanes through the intersection.



Causeway Street/Keany Square plans from February 9, 2009

Note that Commercial St just east of this project has recently been restriped with 2 northbound travel lanes and 1 southbound travel lane, with 5' bike lanes on each side. This is the start of continuous bike lanes that go from the North End along the harbor and the Greenway all the way to Kneeland St! The bike lanes on Causeway St should continue through Keany Square onto Commercial St to line up with the existing bike lanes along the rest of Commercial St. To have a gap in the bike lane network through such a busy and difficult square to navigate is simply unacceptable!

BUFFERING BICYCLISTS

Bicycles are the city's fastest growing travel mode. Hubway use, already high, will escalate as stations are added in Cambridge and Somerville. It is therefore key that this project include bicycle facilities that will appeal to people of all ages and skill levels.

The Lowell and Keany Square intersections dump bicycles from every direction into a confusing whirlpool of cars rushing around the multiple and awkwardly positioned street corners. There should be dotted or solid guide lines to show the way through. All major streets should at least have bicycle lanes, and at best should have separated cycle tracks between the sidewalk and roadway. Each approach on an intersection should have a bike box – a space between the crosswalk and stop line where bikes can gather during red light phases and then be able to start through the chaos a few seconds ahead of the cars.

The most basic problem is on Causeway Street itself. The proposed design puts bicyclists on "naked" bike lanes crossed by taxis and u-turning cars, and even those disappear several hundred feet before Keany Square – where bikes are supposed to weave into one of the two left-turn lanes (heading towards the bridge to Charlestown) or merge with traffic into the one straight-and-right-turn

lane that is (during business hours) almost always blocked by an MBTA The Ride vehicle letting off a disabled person at the veteran's service office, which will force both cars and bikes to swerve into the left-turn lanes. And as we alluded to earlier, Causeway St is the ONLY connection between the Harborwalk, Charles River Paths, and Rose Kennedy Greenway (since North Station is in the way).

While standard on-road bike lanes are certainly an improvement over what is there, Causeway Street is so wide, and the numbers of cyclists using it can be reasonable expected to grow so much (note the Hubway station!), that cycle tracks really make perfect sense there! Cycle tracks on Causeway Street could be at the same or a different height than the travel lanes, separated by a high curb or low mountable curb. They could be in the form of a two-way cycle track on one side of the street or in the middle, or a one-directional cycle track between the parking lane and sidewalk on each side of the road (this is the most common configuration).

If after a thorough evaluation of cycle track options, it is determined that cycle tracks are not appropriate for the project, the minimum that should be done in this project is for the on-street bike lanes to be continuous along ALL of Causeway St and to continue dashed through all intersections. Bike lanes should continue onto all the major cross streets for the limits of this project. The City would be expected to continue the bike lanes on those streets in the future. As was stated by multiple citizens at the Public Hearing, bike lanes that start and stop are no better for many people than having no bike lanes at all.

As part of this project, funds should be set aside to provide at least some of the huge amount of additional bicycle parking needed around the entire North Station/Causeway area, including both covered and open sites, which should meet current best-practice standards for two-point stability. Secure "Pedal and Park" cages, similar to those the MBTA installed at South Station, should be part of the mix.

CONCLUSION

The 25% designed unveiled at the recent public meeting is an improvement over the dangerous and dysfunctional current conditions. But if Boston wants to be "world class," it's not creative, bold, or good enough. This is an opportunity that should not be missed to truly transform Causeway Street into a place for people.

For LivableStreets Alliance

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