

Livable Street Alliance
17 Bishop Richard Allen Drive
Cambridge, MA 02139

8 September 2005

John Blundo, P.E.
Chief Engineer
Massachusetts Highway Department
10 Park Plaza, Boston, MA 02116-3973

RE: Somerville Avenue Reconstruction

Dear Mr. Blundo:

Livable Street Alliance would like to thank the Massachusetts Highway Department for giving the public a final opportunity to comment on the reconstruction of Somerville Avenue. Overall, we are very pleased with changes that have been incorporated into this design document. We would like to recognize the pedestrian and bicycle improvements that will come with this project. The reconstruction of the degraded sidewalks, introduction of bicycle lanes, planting of new street trees, installation of pedestrian-scale street lighting, and installing a new signalization system will significantly improve the existing environment.

We would like to have the following comments included into the public record for this project.

We encourage that MassHighway incorporate the following changes before releasing the final design out to bid.

- (1) **Eliminate Bike lane width reductions.** The bike lane should maintain 1.5m (4'11") throughout its length. There are currently three short stretches where the bike lane is narrowed to a substandard width of 1.25m (4'1"), unnecessarily compromising the safety of bicyclists with no significant benefit to motorized vehicles. In these areas, we urge MassHighway to reduce the vehicle travel lane from 3.5m (11'6") to 3.25m (10'8"). For comparison, a newly paved and painted stretch of Main Street (a designated "Truck Route") in Cambridge near Portland Street, has an 10'8" travel lane and a 5'0" bicycle lane next to parking. The current dimension of 1.5m (4'11") meets the AASHTO standard 5'0" bike lane, and the recommended minimum dimension cited in two MassHighway reports, the 1999 Better Bicycling Guide and the 2004 Design Subcommittee report. We encourage that MassHighway take the final step of designing for a continuous 1.5m (4'11") bike lane for the entire stretch of the reconstruction.

- (2) **Improve transitions for bicyclists.** We urge MassHighway to take another look at the bike-lane transitions to and from Somerville Avenue. At the west end of the project, the plans currently drop the bike lane three blocks short of the Cambridge line when in all likelihood bike lanes will be striped on the short Cambridge portion of Somerville Avenue as part of the Porter Square street improvements currently under construction. This fragmentation adds a three block unmarked stretch which is potentially unsafe for cyclists. We recommend that the vehicle travel lanes be narrowed so that at least a 1.25m (4'1") bike lane can be striped against the curb. Additionally, transitions to Beacon Street, Elm Street and at the projects' termination at Washington Street need more careful consideration to improve safety for cyclists merging with vehicles at these important locations. Our organization would be pleased to collaborate with you in making these final design changes, please contact us.
- (3) **Include bicycle accommodation in construction plan.** The presentation did not indicate that the construction plan would ensure adequate and safe access for bicyclists, though there is an extensive specifications for other transportation modes. We urge MassHighway to incorporate best practice specifications in the bid document for bicycle accommodation during construction. Unless written into the bid document, it is very difficult to hold the contractor accountable.
- (4) **Additional crosswalk needed between Sacramento and Beech Streets.** Within the current Plan, there is a long stretch between Sacramento and Beech Streets where pedestrians and wheel chair users are not able to safely cross Somerville Avenue. We urge MassHighway to include a crosswalk connecting the planned bulb-outs at Spring Street. A crosswalk at a non-signalized intersection such as this should be a zebra-stripe design in white thermoplastic. While crosswalks of stamped concrete or textured pavers work well at signalized intersections or within historic Union Square, the zebra-stripe crossings are more highly visible and increase the likelihood that a motorist will follow the law and yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk.
- (5) **Eliminate crosswalk buttons instead including pedestrian phase automatically in each cycle; utilize concurrent pedestrian timing whenever possible; utilize advance pedestrian walk signal.** The signalization plan discussed at the most recent hearing indicated that: (a) pedestrian-request buttons would be installed at each intersection; (b) pedestrians would receive a 4-way "walk" with all traffic stopped during that phase; (c) the pedestrian phase would only occur when the request-button was pushed; (d) when the request-button was pushed, immediate priority would not be granted, rather it would insure that the next time the pedestrian phase occurred in the cycle, the pedestrian phase would be activated.

- (6) **Additional information request.** The latest public hearing on 30 August 2005 was very informative and we appreciate the time taken by the project team. A few questions linger, and we would appreciate hearing back from you regarding the following: (a) What year was the vehicle and pedestrian data taken collected that has been used in the capacity analysis to determine the traffic/pedestrian signalization plan? (b) It was mentioned that the traffic/pedestrian signalization for all the intersections will be interconnected to allow for programmed “domino” timing. If so, what was designed to be the optimal speed for a vehicle to be able to travel smoothly through all the lights?

We appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments to you a part of the public-input process. If any of our understanding of the current design as presented above is incorrect, we would appreciate you letting us know.

Together, we all will make this project the best it can be for the citizens and visitors of the streets of Somerville. Our organization would be pleased to collaborate with you to flesh out more specifics on the items listed above for the final design— please contact us.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. 617-939-3824 or rosenblum.jeff@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey L. Rosenblum, P.E.
Executive Director
Livable Street Alliance

Cc: Peter Gammie, Michael Bloukos