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Subject: Western Ave Reconstruction Plan

Dear Cambridge Community Development Staff:

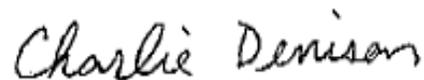
After almost two years of exemplary community planning for the reconstruction of Western Avenue, it was extremely upsetting to learn at the recent public meeting that the city was suddenly thinking of vetoing one of the main options - the creation of a family-friendly bikeway separated from traffic - because of what we believe are surmountable concerns about snow removal.

We believe that not creating such a bikeway would be an embarrassing step backwards - not only from Cambridge's commitment to multi-modal equality, but also to its climate protection and public health goals, as well as its reputation as a national leader in all of these areas. Making snow removal into a show-stopper also means that Cambridge will never be able to move beyond its current "naked bike lane" approach to create the protected, family-friendly bike facilities that are required to convince the safety-concerned majority of our population to leave their cars at home for short trips.

We understand the difficulty of snow removal with limited resources, so we would be happy to work with the city to think of possible solutions and help with the educational outreach needed to build support.

The rest of this letter provides the detailed feedback about each of the five Concepts requested from the public by city staff at the most recent public meeting.

Sincerely,



Charlie Denison,
Board Member & Advocacy Director

COMMENTS ON WESTERN AVE. SURFACE LAYOUT OPTIONS

As LivableStreets Alliance has frequently stated, effective snow removal from both private and public sidewalks, roads, and bikeways is a vital concern - although we note that many people have somewhat unrealistic expectations of the speed with which this should happen after major snow storms here in the increasingly weather-volatile northeast. Still, we don't think that the benefits of neighborhood livability, pedestrian safety, and expanding the number of people willing to use a bike instead of a car should be sacrificed because of what we believe are surmountable concerns.

We understand that the city has limited resources for snow removal and that access for the disabled takes top priority. But even if it takes an extra day or two to get to the cycle track after a heavy storm - wouldn't it be better to have it available for the other 350 days of the year? Since the whole idea of a cycle track is to make it easier for traffic-intolerant cyclists to use their bikes, and since those are the very people least likely to be on their bikes right after a big nor'easter, the bolder minority of cyclists biking on those 5 or 10 days are likely to be willing to stay in the street - in fact, many of them might insist on staying in the street all year since you have to go much slower on a cycle track.

Furthermore, although the concept of protected bike lanes would be demonstrated by even a couple of blocks, it is precisely in the area of heavier car traffic between Putnam and Memorial that a cycle track is most needed. It makes no sense to create a family-friendly route that simply dumps people back into a un-nerving position next to moving cars (albeit in a "regular" bike lane) before they can get either to the river basin bike paths or the Western Ave. bridge - which will hopefully soon have its own bike lanes leading to a cycle track on the Boston side!

From a public health perspective, Cambridge has a long commitment to providing residents with a transportation infrastructure that facilitates "active transportation" - walking and cycling. In addition, new research shows that separating cyclists from heavy traffic by placing them on the other side of parked cars reduces their environmental exposure to highly-dangerous "ultrafine" pollution particulates (linked to respiratory disease, heart attacks, and perhaps neurological damage leading to dementia) by nearly 50%.

Concept 3 - Best Option

After extensive neighborhood outreach, the Cambridge Community Development Department (CCD) prepared five "conceptual options" for Western Ave. As noted above, we are most in favor of Concept 3, which includes the cycle track on the non-traffic side of one of the parking lanes, with a buffer space between the cyclists and the less-used passenger doors; preserves two car travel lanes and parking on both sides; expands the sidewalk; and shortens the distance that pedestrians need to travel to cross the street. We think it is important that under Concept 3 the cycle track would be extended for the full length of the street from Franklin to Memorial Driver (going to street level for the Putnam Ave. crossing) - it is not equitable to force cyclists to bear the entire burden of the heavier traffic near the river. If the available street

space is inadequate, the burden should be spread more evenly among all modes without compromising the safety of the most vulnerable.

Concept 2- Acceptable Option

Should the raised cycle track concept be rejected, we would support Concept 2 - which also separates cyclists from traffic by moving the bike lane to the other side of the parked cars, but leaves it at street level. As with Concept 3's cycle track, this creates the kind of "protected bike lane" that makes heavily trafficked roads accessible for mainstream use. (We believe that the Concept 2 cycle track would also be extended for the entire length of the road.) However, Concept 2 doesn't narrow the pedestrian street-crossing distance adequately. To address snow removal issues, we suggest that the City posts signs forbidding parking on those blocks during any "plowable" snow fall, which would allow regular plows to zip through the area rather than require the city's limited number of smaller machines to do the job.

Concept 1 - Unacceptable Option

We do not support Concept 1, which essentially recreates what currently exists - a "naked bike lane" sandwiched between the driver-door-side of active parking and heavy car traffic that will continue to scare away all but the most risk-tolerant riders, will not improve neighborhood cohesion, and won't increase pedestrian safety.

Concept 4 - Unacceptable Option

We do not support Concept 4, which cuts car traffic to one lane along the mid-section blocks and greatly expands the sidewalk. In general, it is highly preferable to have bike lanes on the right side of the cars, next to the less-used passenger doors, rather than next to the always-used driver doors - although in this case such placement might create problems along the Central Square and Putnam-to-the-River sections. This concept would be worth exploring if there were a long stretch of cafés or other shops along these middle blocks that could expand into the new sidewalk space, but these blocks are essentially residential and the empty space is likely to remain just that - empty and uninviting. As a result, other than constricting car traffic flow, we see little difference between this Concept and the current situation presented by Concept 1.

Concept 5 - Innovative But Unclear

Concept 5 also narrows the mid-section roadway to one car lane, but uses a very innovative "reverse angle parking" scheme to move all the parked cars to one side of the road without losing any parking spaces, and allowing the street-level bike lane to be located in the preferred position against the curb on the other side of the road. Reverse angle parking is very space-efficient, and easier to use than parallel parking. However, it is unclear from the rough drawings if parking a car under this Concept requires temporarily blocking the traffic lane before backing in, which would make it likely that drivers would swerve into the adjacent bike lane to their right. This is a potentially very unsafe dynamic unless some way can be found to raise the bike lane an inch or two above the street.

Conclusion: We Support Concept 3

We think that Concept 3 provides the most benefits with the fewest tradeoffs. We urge Cambridge to continue moving towards its transportation, health, and environmental goals by creatively implementing protected bikeways on Western Ave. In the long run, the benefits to the city's residents, and to our planet, are worth the effort. We are eager to work with the city to achieve these goals.