

Allston Interchange Task Force tackles urban design



The Allston Interchange Task Force recently met for the first time. Matt Robare/Wicked Local photo

By Matthew M. Robare

Posted May. 21, 2014 @ 7:00 am

ALLSTON

Walking, biking and building a direct connection from the Massachusetts Turnpike onto Soldiers Field Road or Storrow Drive were at the forefront of recent discussions at the first meeting of the Allston Interchange Task Force.

Established last month, the task force brings together around 45 Allston residents and stakeholders to work with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation on developing a "preferred alternative" for the replacement of the toll plaza, on- and off-ramps and viaduct off of I-90 in Allston.

"I have a flavor as to what I feel some of the concerns and priorities are for each of you," said Michael O'Dowd, the MassDOT project manager, at the Fiorentino Community Center in the new Charlesview. "All of you bring a unique concern or a unique objective or goal that you want to see as part of this project and the successful outcome of this project."

He added that the task force members were selected on the basis of representing a specific organization, community and neighborhood.

Everyone went around the room to introduce themselves and say what they wanted out of the project. Many of the comments were on a similar vein of reducing car traffic and improving walking and biking connections.

"Out of the many amazing things that can come out of this project, one of the things I'm really hoping to get out of it is more permeability between North Allston and Allston Village and the BU (Boston University) campus and the river in all of those directions," said resident Jessica Robertson.

"What we're hoping for is that the transportation improvements and the accompanying infrastructure that goes with that creates a framework for the future that both solves the multimodal transportation issues in the area – cars, bikes, walking and transit – but also sets the stage for reknitting the city, whether it's Allston with North Allston or Allston and the river, BU to Harvard, etc.," said Wendy Landman, executive director of Walk Boston.

Joseph Beggan, representing Harvard, said that he wanted to see urban designs that reflect the ideas of Complete Streets, where streets are designed to accommodate walking and cycling along with driving.

Vineet Gupta, the director of planning at the Boston Transportation Department, echoed the need to incorporate walking and biking and fit in with North Allston's street grid.

"My interest is in the quality of life in Allston," said Paul Berkeley, president of the Allston Civic Association. "I was here when this road opened – in fact I rode on it the first night it was open. I think about 20 billion cars have passed through my neighborhood since that happened. We've been waiting 49 years for this meeting, so thank you for holding it."

Reuniting North Allston with Allston and improving access to the river were also objectives frequently named by task force members.

"I hope to echo what other people have said regarding neighborhood connectivity," said resident Paola Ferrer. "I think it's really important to bring the village and North Allston back together again somehow, like Humpty Dumpty. We need improved infrastructure for non-motorized users of the road ... and I would like to see better connections to the river, which is probably one of our biggest assets and resources. Though we are the closest neighborhood to the river, we are probably the most distant from it."

Much of the rest of the meeting was taken up going through the ideas MassDOT has already put together: Two suburban type interchanges and one urban one. The two suburban types are typical interchanges with on- and off-ramps from Cambridge Street directly on to the highway. The urban interchange has the on- and off-ramps going to frontage roads that feed back into the local road network.

Task force member Bruce Houghton pointed out that in all of the proposals, the traffic coming off the Turnpike is discharged onto Cambridge Street, but that many people use the exit to access Soldiers Field Road and get onto Storrow Drive to head to downtown Boston. He suggested that a connection be built between them to allow direct access.

There was also discussion about the proposed West Station for the rail yard, since there's not much road access there at the moment. However, it was limited to speculation because a representative from the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority wasn't there.

Ed Ionatta, the task force facilitator, said that the bottom line is using the available resources in the allotted timeframe. MassDOT wants construction completed by the end of 2020.

"I'm optimistic, in part because of everybody around this table is taking about the need for the project to address all the modes – walking, biking, transit and vehicles – and I think there was unanimity around the table about that," Landman said afterward. "I think MassDOT is committed to it, too. MassDOT has the goal of tripling the number of walking, biking and transit trips, so they need to be committed to that here, too."

O'Dowd said that he originally believed it would take 10 meeting to produce a consensus for the preferred alternative, but after listening to everyone talk about their goals, he said they could do it in fewer than 10.

There is no date yet for the next meeting.