

Turnpike project is heading the wrong way



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

The state plans to demolish the u-turn at the Allston toll booths on the Massachusetts Turnpike.

By Paul McMorrow | GLOBE COLUMNIST | JUNE 03, 2014

STATE CONSTRUCTION crews are preparing to take a wrecking ball to the Massachusetts Turnpike's Allston tollbooths. They're going to level the toll plaza, knock the bend out of the Pike as it passes through Allston, and erase a tangle of ramps that connect the highway with the surrounding neighborhood. It's an enormous undertaking. But it's also just the beginning of the work that needs to happen around that stretch of highway.

State transportation officials are treating the road-straightening effort strictly like a highway project, threatening to leave other improvements, like a new rail station, for another day. This misses the point of fixing the Allston interchange. It's a warning sign that state transportation officials are rushing into a \$260 million boondoggle.

The Pike straightening isn't a highway construction project. It's an economic development project. The real endgame isn't what the construction effort will mean for drivers (a straighter roadway, a quicker commute, and cashless tolling). It is the first step that's needed to unlock 140 acres of

surrounding land for new development. The things that come after the road straightening are the only things that really make the road construction worth doing.

The \$260 million Allston roadway project is still early in the planning process, but it's heading the wrong way in a hurry. MassDOT said last week it has no plans to build a new rail hub, known in transportation circles as West Station, as part of the Turnpike straightening effort. That statement was a gigantic red flag, because unless you're speeding through Allston on the Turnpike, every benefit that stems from a straightened highway flows from the construction of West Station.

Harvard owns 140 acres around the Turnpike in Allston, including dozens of acres that, until recently, were an active CSX rail yard. CSX has moved its freight operations to Worcester, but the shuttered rail yard is still largely worthless, because the Turnpike and its spaghetti bowl of ramps slice through the middle of the site. The straightening project will completely transform the old rail yard, and its potential. Construction will move the highway toward the site's southern edge, alongside a set of commuter rail tracks, opening up a once-unusable site for large-scale redevelopment.

The Allston rail yard sits at the junction of two transit routes that loom large in Boston's economic development future: the stretch of commuter rail track from New Balance's Boston Landing development to the Fenway and South Station, and a route connecting the western suburbs to Kendall Square and North Station. MassDOT has plans to run diesel-powered streetcars on both sets of tracks, allowing the MBTA to extend subway-like service far outside the urban core without building new subway tracks.

The Allston rail yard is a lot like Somerville's Assembly Square before a new Orange Line station arrived: It's a huge former industrial site just waiting to be transformed by transit. Rapid rail service could turn the area into an enormous hub for commercial and housing development. Allston residents and Harvard officials both want to open the yard up for redevelopment; it's a rare instance where the two sides are on the same side of an issue.

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Rapid rail enables the intensity of development that the site's location and size demand, and rail has to be on the table before the neighborhood, the city, and Harvard can rezone the site for new development. The station's location will also dictate smaller details, like where new streets will go and how cross-neighborhood connections happen.

The effort to redevelop the vast acreage around the Pike will be a complicated, years-long project, and it can't begin to move forward until the vision's set. Right now, it doesn't look like MassDOT even wants to do that much. Meetings with Allston neighbors haven't shown that the state is thinking at all about the site's future. It's acting like it would be content to just do a highway project. Until that changes, a whole neighborhood will be sitting in limbo.

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