

How-To Guide: Writing a Comment Letter

“Two approval” policy to represent LivableStreets

One of the reasons we have been so successful with our advocacy efforts is that we are consistent in how we communicate publicly. **LivableStreets has a policy that all staff, board, and volunteers are required to seek approval from two other people in order to publish or speak on behalf of LivableStreets.** This includes comment letters, talking points at public meetings, letters to the editor, reference letters, and correspondences with elected/appointed officials.

The reviewers must be Advocacy Committee members, board members, or staff, and they both must be familiar enough with the project to render an informed approval. You need to use good judgment. This policy is not intended to make your life harder, but to maintain the credibility of the organization and reduce your personal risk.

Writing a comment letter

Writing public comment letters is one of the most common ways Advocacy Committee members work on projects. Comment letters are valuable tools. They are an opportunity to voice concerns and share ideas in writing. They also provide a written record that can be referenced at a later date.

When writing a public comment letter as a LivableStreets Advocacy Committee member:

- Always use LivableStreets Alliance letterhead (available in the addendum)
- Identify yourself as an Advocacy Committee member, by signing off with your name and *“on behalf of the LivableStreets Alliance Advocacy Committee”*
- **Share your draft letter with the committee and gain two approvals before sending.** Also be sure to forward your final letter to the committee along with any email or other note you sent with the letter.
- Provide one sentence about LivableStreets and any other program or project you are commenting on might be attached to (i.e. Emerald Network, Vision Zero).
- Be specific. Bullet points and straightforward language are most effective.
- Don't be emotional or reactionary.
- Make sure you are addressing and Cc'ing the right people—ask for help from the Advocacy Committee or Advisors if you aren't sure who to address your letter to!

Comment letters are a matter of public record, so be sure to assess (and ask other committee members for help!) whether it makes more sense to write a comment letter or reach out to public officials in a more informal way first.

Sample comment letter:

LivableStreets

Connecting People + Places

livablestreets.info

70 Pacific Street • Cambridge, MA 02139 • 617.621.1746

To: Michael Clark and Laura Castelli
From: LivableStreets Alliance Advocacy Committee
Re: Arsenal Street Corridor in Watertown

February 16, 2017

Dear Mr. Clark and Ms. Castelli:

Thank you for the opportunity to attend the Arsenal Street Corridor working group meeting on January 24, 2016. LivableStreets Alliance would like to provide feedback and recommendations on initiatives pertaining to bicycle, pedestrian and bus transportation service along Arsenal Street. While we understand that the alternatives are still being prioritized and refined, our recommendations apply to whichever sub-set of alternatives are ultimately selected.

[Build Connections Between the Greenway and Charles River for Safer Biking](#)

- The Alternative Evaluation Matrix distributed at the meeting estimates that the connections between the Greenways/multi-use paths and the Charles River will have a neutral impact on safety. LivableStreets Alliance believes, on the contrary, that building these safe connections will provide much safer transportation for bikers and pedestrians.

- To promote active transportation in an area that is poised for growth and density over the next decade, we recommend significantly improving connectivity for people on foot and bicycles across Arsenal Street at two or three key locations, especially where there is potential to connect with existing Greenways in the area. These connections will make biking across Watertown safer and more comfortable for riders of all abilities.
- At the meeting, Ms. Castelli asked for feedback from the Working Group on which connections from the Greenway to the Charles River should be prioritized. LivableStreets Alliance recommends selecting connections based on their adjacency to protected bike lanes, enhanced sidewalks and existing/proposed Greenways. While slow neighborhood streets like Talcott, Louise and Beachwood should continue to serve as informal neighborways, we recommend the project focus on implementing a robust connection across Arsenal Street towards Arsenal Park.
- Under the Emerald Network initiative of LivableStreets, the Arsenal Park Connector has been chosen as the first round of Greenway Partners. The Town of Watertown and Boylston Properties are already committed to creating a safe and inviting connection between the Watertown Greenway Spur and the Charles River Paths through Arsenal Park. Once completed, the success of that connection for daily users of the park and commuters will depend very heavily on a safe and inviting connection across Arsenal Street.

Improve Bike Facilities and Bus Service along Arsenal Street

- LivableStreets Alliance recommends implementing a continuous bike path on Arsenal Street as well as the bus service improvements discussed at the meeting, particularly an express bus service.
- Speedier and more reliable bus service will grow the population of bus commuters. Safe bicycle paths and a bicycle lane on Arsenal Street will lead to a growth in bicycle commuters. The effect of these improvements should reduce congestion which will lead to further improvements in bus and bicycle travel times. This virtuous cycle can only be achieved if the working group looks at several of these alternatives in combination, instead of individually.
- At the meeting, Ms. Castelli shared that the road diet along Arsenal Street that would be required to make room for a shared bus/bike lane would create congestion with safety implications. The analysis presented took into consideration current vehicular

traffic and did not consider the impact of transit service and bicycle infrastructure improvements on congestion. LivableStreets Alliance believes towns should be building streets that will lead to the healthy and sustainable transportation behaviors they want to see instead of building for streets based on current habits and traffic patterns.

- To the extent that creating bicycle / pedestrian and transit facilities reduces car capacity enough to cause serious (e.g. more than 2-3 minute) backups, we can count on the intelligence of the drivers to either find another route, travel at another time, or find a better method of travel. People are smart enough to make good choices for themselves. In fact, given the environmental, public health, and transportation benefits that Watertown as a community would gain from a reduction of SOV travel, wouldn't this re-thinking of current travel assumptions be a good thing?

[Prioritize Improvements in Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure at the Watertown Square Gateway](#)

- We recommend going beyond minimum pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure improvements between the Watertown Square Gateway and the Greenway Spur. We would like to see pedestrian refuges, signal priority for pedestrians and bicycles and a road diet on this section of Arsenal Street.
- Once the Watertown-Cambridge Greenway project is completed, the spur will become a prominent connection between Watertown, Cambridge and beyond that would connect people to regional assets such as the Fresh Pond Preservation, Minuteman Trail, the Somerville Community Path and a connection to the Alewife Red Line Station.

In summary, we believe the Arsenal Street improvements have the potential to provide Watertown residents with attractive and healthier alternative to car transportation which should reduce vehicle congestion in the future. Thank you for your attention and consideration. We look forward to hearing your feedback and to following the project's developments.

Sincerely,

Nidhi Gulati, Program Manager, Livable Streets Alliance Emerald Network

Sophie Schmitt, on behalf of the LivableStreets Alliance Advocacy Committee

