



The supports for the Massachusetts Turnpike viaduct are in tough shape.

Pike-ageddon looms

But there are ways to ease congestion, speed construction



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Aug 28, 2017

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION and Boston officials have done an admirable job minimizing impacts of rebuilding the Commonwealth Avenue bridge above I-90 (the Massachusetts Turnpike) in Allston at the BU Bridge. A project of this scale and at such a complex site was bound to have disruptions for the local and regional flow for all forms of transportation, and we applaud the project team for their expediency in keeping the road closures to a mere “[hellish three weeks](#).” However, a much bigger and far more complex highway construction project looms in the near future just down the road.

MassDOT is making plans to demolish and rebuild the Allston I-90 interchange, starting in just two years and with construction lasting five years or more. This project will straighten out the Turnpike's reverse curve and completely reconfigure the eight-lane freeway, including the highway interchange with Allston/Brighton and Cambridge and the crumbling raised-highway viaduct that was elbowed between Boston University's Commonwealth Avenue campus and the Charles River in the early 1960s. Parts of Soldiers Field Road (Storrow Drive); Cambridge Street in Allston, including all ramps with I-90; the Paul Dudley White multi-use path; the Worcester/Framingham commuter rail tracks; and the Grand Junction line are also slated to be completely reworked.

Construction on this next project will not be limited to a couple of summer weeks, as was the case with Commonwealth Avenue. Rather, MassDOT predicts its much larger I-90 Allston reconstruction will have shovels in the ground from 2019 through 2024. Impacts on our quality of life, environment, and regional economy are inevitable. Whether you commute regionally from the west to downtown Boston, Harvard Square, Longwood Medical Area, or Kendall Square; drive to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park; or live in the Cambridge or Boston neighborhoods whose roads will be used as an escape route, you will feel the reverberations of this project.

Fortunately for the driving, train-riding, and taxpaying public, there are two big ways the state can reduce the cost, duration, and disruption of the project.

First, a new Allston commuter rail station, officially proposed as West Station, can be built and operational before the I-90 Allston demolition begins. With West Station as the node of connecting bus and shuttle routes from both the north and south, commuters could gain a fast and dependable option during the highway construction. West Station's prime location between Yawkey and Boston Landing makes it uniquely valuable to people who live west of Boston and commute to Harvard Square, Boston University, and Longwood. And West Station's proximity to the Grand Junction Bridge also facilitates potential bus or rail service to directly connect with Kendall Square and beyond.

During construction, providing the transit component first allows opportunities to get more people on mass transit and fewer cars on I-90, which in turn means less traffic headaches for everyone. Thankfully, West Station will also continue to pay dividends long after the highway work

ends, since it meets all the goals of the MBTA's Focus40 25-year investment plan. Mayor Marty Walsh's Imagine Boston 2030 plan highlights West Station as a key transportation and economic catalyst. West Station also aligns perfectly with the Harvard Square to Dudley Square route that the Greater Boston Bus Rapid Transit Study Group identified as one of the five prime corridors for gold-standard bus rapid transit in Boston.

A second opportunity to reduce five years of construction impacts is to design the new I-90 roadway at-grade, with the highway on the ground instead of on another elevated highway structure. Building on the ground means simpler and faster construction, and many fewer months of detours and lane-closures and less disruption for everyone who drives, takes the train, rides a bike, or walks through the area. Constructing the highway on terra-firma would also save money, reduce the risk of extended construction schedules, and lessen the highway noise on Boston, Brookline, and Cambridge neighborhoods. Looking ahead, an at-grade roadway allows for future bike/pedestrian overpasses from Commonwealth Avenue to the Paul Dudley White Pathway, which could once again connect Boston University and nearby Brookline to the Charles River.

Thankfully, state Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack has directed her team to study two versions of at-grade alternatives; one with everything fully at-grade and the other with the Grand Junction rail line on a narrowed viaduct crossing over I-90 as it heads to the bridge over Charles River. Each at-grade highway option has its set of benefits and challenges, including squeezing all modes into a narrow stretch of land while providing the opportunity for an elevated multi-use path to connect Commonwealth Avenue to the river. Both at-grade options are a preferred alternative to another 1960s-style raised-highway viaduct, which would choke off Allston and Commonwealth Avenue from the Charles River for another 60 years.

As this important regional and local project proceeds, we urge state and Boston officials to minimize the impact of five years of construction, and make smart investments in our region's future at the same time. Building West Station and its connections before demolishing the existing highway and putting the new highway at-grade on the ground will help this huge infrastructure project be as smooth, quick, and economical as possible.

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