

Talking Headways Podcast: How to Make a Bus Corridor Great

By [Jeff Wood](#)
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This week, we're joined by Lindiwe Rennert, a Boston transit planner, who chats about her work on the [Warren Street corridor](#), the creation of bus priority for the many riders on the corridor, and how to get feedback on projects. Enjoy the excerpted highlights below the audio player, if you prefer to get your news through your eyes instead of your ears.

Excerpts

Jeff Wood: So what is the project you're currently working on?

Lindiwe Rennert: We've got several going in my personal wheelhouse, we have two very, very big ones. One of which, which is a little further along in its planning phase, is bus and bike priority treatments along Warren street, which travels through the heart of Roxbury Dudley

station in Nubian Square down to the intersection of Warren street with blue Hill Avenue Grove Hall. I realize I'm using a lot of local terminology of the Boston area.

JW: I'm familiar, but maybe folks that are listening might not be, so perhaps maybe give them an idea of how long the corridor is and maybe its approximate location related to downtown Boston.

LR: Absolutely. So Warren street is a 1.3 mile long corridor through both the residential and commercial hubs of Roxbury, which is a neighborhood that sits very much in the center of Boston about a, another mile and a half from downtown and is the cities historically black neighborhoods still functionally very black, although under the pressures of Boston's endless gentrification.

That is in question and is certainly something we're thinking about as a part of this project as well, but Warren street is vital to the transit network in that we have five different routes traveling down Warren streets, which allow for a bus every two to three minutes during peak that runs the full 1.3 mile run. And when you hear that you'd think, wow, this corridor is very well served by transit connecting to a major transit hub, which is the Dudley station in Nubian Square that I mentioned is served by dozens of bus routes connecting much of the city, including our kind of best bus facility, which we call Silver Line, which was the city's initial attempt at bus rapid transit dating back to 2002 was our earliest implementation of that line.

So certainly many, many writers, many to the scale of just over 20,000 a day on a weekday.

JW: Is that 20,000 on the 1.3 mile segment or is that 20,000 for each of the core lines on the corridor?

LR: That is 20,000 on the 1.3 mile segments.

JW: OK. That's pretty significant.

LR: About half of those are just shy of half of those riders board along Warren street the other half enter, you know, they're the load on the bus and travel through Warren street coming from other locations.

JW: So what are some of the improvements that are in the planning stages for the corridor?

LR: Oh, I guess I should have started by framing the, the core issue that we're looking at for this corridor, though well served according to the schedule, these buses are stuck in very severe delays. So Boston congestion has only worsened and seems to be eternally worsening. And as a result, we're seeing buses unable to meet schedules. So we're seeing on-time performances as bad as 49 percent. We're seeing delays as much as 30 minutes in one direction along just 1.3 miles.

So at a comfy, slow pace, you can outwalk the bus. And so you look down Warren street and it's, you know, 25 buses, one after another, stuck in traffic with sometimes not even as much as a single car in between them. And that's just in the one lane. The other lane is, of course, are

motorists stuck to the brim and we have no bike facilities along Warren, although it is a key connector. And so we're working on redistributing our existing lane capacity to better serve our existing people as opposed to vehicles.

And so on Warren — which is currently almost for its entirety, two lanes of general travel, no bike facilities as I had mentioned and a parking lane on either side with occasional turn pockets — we are re-imagining a street to feature one general travel lane, existing turning pockets, adding a few more at heavy turn locations, adding dedicated bus facilities in either direction as well as a two way cycle track in exchange for parking on the one side of the street.

A choice that we can make because we ran the parking study in the fall of 2019 which showed that though the street is highly congested, it is not highly parked up. We're seeing 49 percent of parking being used at parking peak. Generally we're seeing down to 41-44 percent on our weekdays and slightly higher in the evenings, but never to the point where we make this exchange for parking and the exchange is not for the entire street.

We're doing the two way cycle track for about 60 percent the street and then in the southern portion where the street narrows, we're doing parking protected bike lanes, but that are split by direction. No longer than two-way cycle track, which allows for a little more space on street and allows us to keep much of the parking in the southern section, the more residential portion where people are parking for kind of the entire day. Certainly overnight. It's really just a re-balancing of what is otherwise a high capacity street to favor transit and our sustainable modes.

JW: And how did you get the community involved? What kind of processes did you use to reach out to them and to discuss the changes?

LR: It's a mixed bag of kind of your standard "old school, rarely works and yet we also continue do it" public meetings because there is that portion of the community that that is how they are accustomed to being engaged and that is how they would like to continue being engaged. And so we've hosted open houses. We've hosted kind of a, I won't say "design charette," but kind of a concept comparison in our earlier days where we came out to the community with, you know, just the large open maps, a few ideas, some red bus lines here and there and tweaked in live action.

My favorite — which I think is the best way to involve voices that rarely attend kind of standard public meeting, town hall, old-school engagement style — is we rode the bus, we were on board, we did surveys on board, we have conversations on board and we certainly do surveys at bus stops, which is a big one cause of course onboard that may be a writer's only only personal me time right? So you don't necessarily want to take that away from them.

But while waiting at the bus, people do tend to be more, you know, engaged and willing to have that portion of their commute be a social affair in which they kind of have their voice heard.

What else have we done? We've teamed up with two groups that are well known in the community for their organizing work. One of them is called Transit Matters, the other is called Livable Streets Alliance. Livable Streets Alliance has done their own surveys focusing on elderly communities, which has been great because their work tends to be during the middle of the day, whereas ours tends to be early morning and evening and very much centered on your standard commute, which we realize is a blind side and that's where livable streets has come in and done kind of the, you know, trips to the community center and the trip to your health care provider around 1:00 PM and engaged with a group that doesn't always get to be as loud and expressive necessarily at these public meetings.

And they came with up with a report that they then gave to us. I accompanied them on a few of these trips. These ride alongs is what they're called. And so that's been a collaborative effort. And then with Transit Matters, we've organized a group of, we're calling them our internal advisory committee. They are stakeholders with a front door along the corridor, some of them are businesses, some of them are community groups. Certainly some of the schools I had mentioned earlier, Urban League. The NAACP is also very conveniently for us right on Warren street and has a strong hold in the community.

So they're on our advisory committee as well. So kind of this tag team effort of us and existing organizing groups has done a good job of engaging the community in multiple ways. Trying to get that comprehensive voice.

JW: I'm curious if you have any good stories of bus stop canvassing.

LR: Certainly. So on one of the ride-alongs I went with Livable Streets Alliance. We were traveling with a group of women who were all in their 60s perhaps a little bit older and we did a full trip departing from the senior center. Then we walked to the nearest bus stop at that bus stop. Their first concern was that the map, and this is true and unfortunate, the system wide transit maps that is a part of the shelter was five years old and they knew that it didn't correspond with what existed on the actual service.

And they were furious about this and were like, this is a tiny thing. Why has this not been updated? That was one that I thought, huh, very reasonable and also very much in oversight. Why have we not fixed that? The next was that this group of ladies, none of them sat down on the available bench. And I was surprised by that I, I thought, OK, I mean they do definitely look like they're all in fantastic shape, but even I want to sit on this bench right now. And so I asked, I said, why? Why aren't any of us using the bench?

And he said it was too directly in the sun. We did this in the summer and the bench was away from the coverage of the shelter smack directly in the sun. And I thought, oh, of course. I mean why I would have missed it, but if I'm sitting here for a bus that is in fact delayed 30 minutes as many of these are than it is a big deal. I could see why the MBK would've put that bench where it was because when you're only waiting four minutes as the schedule is designed for, then it's actually the widest part of the sidewalk and it's the more enjoyable space to be.

But kind of that, “Oh, I wouldn’t have caught that if I weren’t out here.” Definitely one that I remember writing down. I’m thinking this is a big deal. We need to reevaluate our stop amenities and that these women are a wonderful candidate group to give us insight on that.