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City unveils a new Northern Ave. bridge design, hopes to begin work next year

Proposed are a lane for pedestrians, one for transit and bikes, and a waterside park

By [Tim Logan](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 7, 2020, 9:35 a.m.



An artist's rendering of the latest design for a new Northern Avenue bridge. City of Boston

The drawn-out process of designing a new Northern Avenue bridge may finally be coming to a close.

City engineers on Wednesday [unveiled their latest plans](#) to replace the existing span over Fort Point Channel, which has been closed since 2014, with an eye to finalizing designs by year's end and starting construction in 2021 on a project expected to cost about \$100 million.

It would be the culmination of years of debate over [what the 283-foot span should carry](#) — cars, pedestrians, corporate shuttle buses — and how it should incorporate the old structure's industrial history in a modern age.

Funding, especially amid the coronavirus crisis, remains somewhat uncertain. But Chris Osgood, the city's chief of streets, said designers attempted to envision a bridge that lived up to all the expectations that have been placed on it through years of discussion.

“We wanted to create a design that was worthy of the conversation,” Osgood said during a public meeting held Wednesday evening on Zoom. “This is a bridge that we think is the best solution for everyone.”



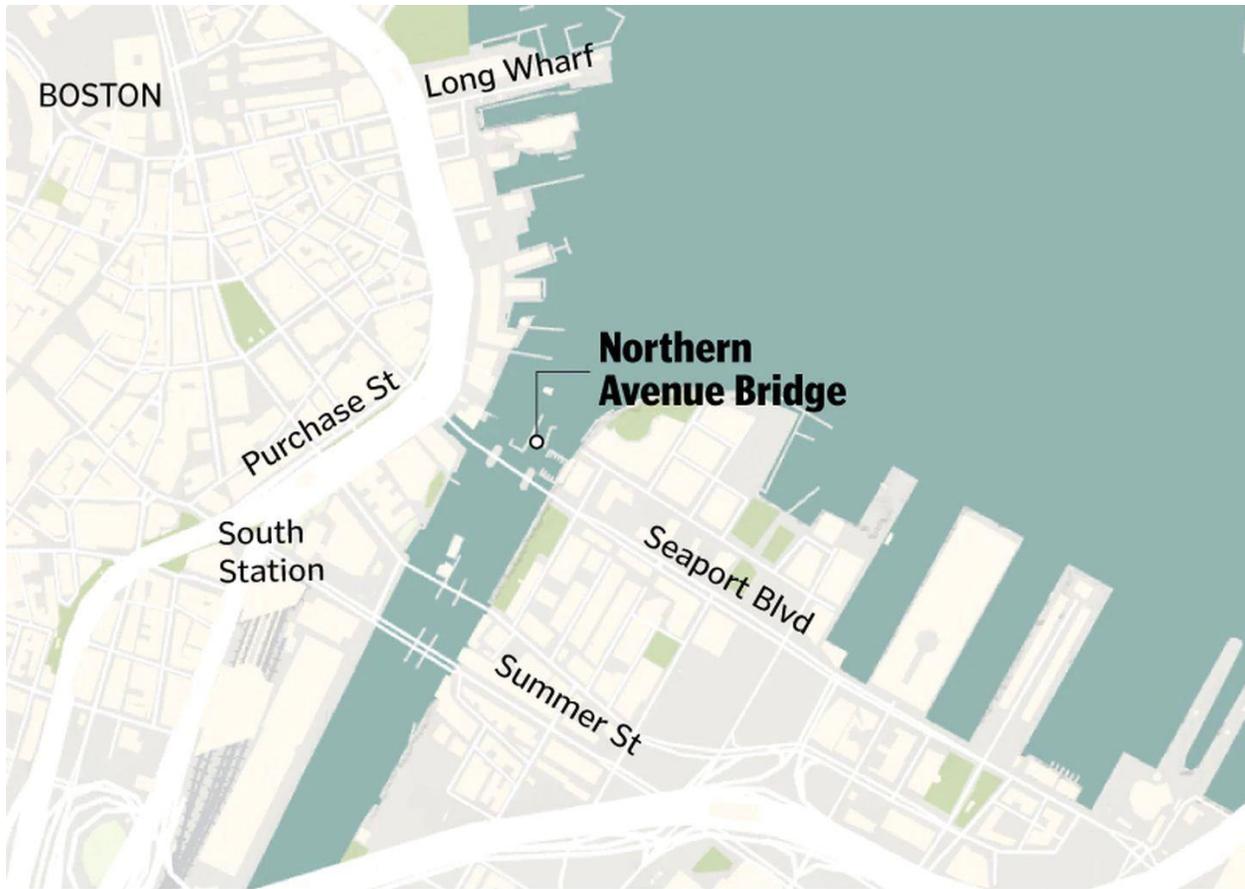
A rendering of the proposed new Northern Ave. Bridge. City of Boston

The bridge would be closed to privately owned cars, with one of its two spans — the one on the harbor side — reserved for pedestrians, the other for cyclists and transit such as buses. It would also be built to allow emergency vehicles, if needed.

In the middle, stepping down to a platform on the water, there would be a promenade-style park with benches and planters. Metal trusses would lend some of the look of the historic bridge, but the new version would be elevated to better cope with rising sea levels.

All of it, said Joseph Fleury, the city's lead bridge engineer, was designed to be active, vibrant, and unique.

“We don't want a cookie-cutter bridge going over Fort Point Channel,” he said. “This location deserves better than that.”



The Northern Avenue Bridge. Source: OpenStreetMap, NextZen SAURABH DATAR/GLOBE STAFF

Still, there are questions. Several transportation advocates have said they worry the bridge is being overbuilt, and that the transit lane would largely benefit privately run shuttles and could someday be fully opened to car traffic. Stacy Thompson, director of the Livable Streets Alliance, has long campaigned for a smaller, more human-scale bridge, and she repeated that call Wednesday night.

“We really appreciate the work the team has done to think about the walking and biking component, but we’re still deeply concerned,” Thompson said. “We want to see a person-first approach, [and] we aren’t seeing it yet.”



Fort Point Channel water traffic moved around the Northern Avenue Bridge, as seen from the Evelyn Moakley Bridge on Seaport Boulevard, looking toward the harbor, in May 2019. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

Preservationists have pushed to retain as much of the original, century-plus-old structure as possible, or at least replicate it in the new design. Greg Galer, executive director of the Boston Preservation Alliance, said it was unfortunate that the bridge has deteriorated so much it can't be saved, but the new designs are effective in giving a nod to the original.

“We like how references to the old bridge are clear from some perspectives and not from others,” he wrote. “But at night the ghost profile of the old bridge appears.”

Other people in the Zoom meeting raised questions about the bridge's climate resiliency, and the size and steepness of approaches on either end. City Councilor Michael Flaherty called it “beautiful,” but raised the nine-figure question of how the city might pay for the new bridge.

A price tag is still being finalized, said Para Jayasinghe, a city engineer who's leading the project, but he expects it will be around \$100 million.

Of that, Mayor Martin J. Walsh has already set aside \$31 million and is proposing another \$54 million in city funds in next year's transportation budget, which is currently before the City Council. Federal earmarks, long ago set aside by US Representative Stephen Lynch, could cover nearly \$10 million more, and developers in the neighborhood could be asked to help pay some of the rest.

Jayasinghe acknowledged that funding the project has grown “very challenging” amidst the coronavirus crisis. But he was optimistic that “major construction” would start next year, with a ribbon-cutting perhaps as soon as the following spring.

“We are all very excited,” he said.