

## **Worcester chamber pans latest plan for Mass. Pike project**

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It aims to reconnect Allston and the Charles River with new open space and bicycle and pedestrian access, straighten out a dangerous and deteriorating section of highway into Boston, and construct a new commuter rail station on the Framingham-Worcester line.

But coalitions of economic, environmental and planning advocates have written to urge state Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack to remember the transportation needs of residents - especially those west of Boston - as she nears a decision on the Allston Multimodal Project.

“Yes it’s physically located in Allston, but the implications are statewide, and it’s important to do it right not just for the neighborhoods but by balancing the needs of Central Mass. and Western Mass.,” Timothy P. Murray, president and CEO of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, and a signatory on two recent letters to Pollack, said Friday.

“If done right, the development that will happen around it is of a size and scale similar to or bigger than the Seaport District and Assembly Square ... It’s important that we get the transportation right so it benefits the whole state and maximizes the smart growth and development of that area,” Murray said.

The Allston Multimodal Project aims to replace the viaduct that carries the Massachusetts Turnpike from the Allston interchange to the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. In addition, the \$1 billion project will create walking and cycling connections from the neighborhood to be built at the former Beacon Rail Yard to the Charles River and build a new commuter rail station called West Station.

But fitting eight lanes of Mass. Pike, four lanes of Soldiers Field Road, access to a riverfront pedestrian path and parkland and commuter rail tracks into a 204-foot wide area between Boston University and the Charles River known as “the throat” - and constructing these with minimum commuter and environmental disruption - has prompted several potential potential designs and revisions over the last five years.

In June, officials presented the latest potential plan. It calls for keeping the Pike elevated (albeit on a structure that is shorter and closer to BU than currently), constructing a pedestrian and bike

footbridge beneath the highway to connect Allston to the Charles, and keeping Soldiers Field Road at ground level.

But the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce joined several community, environmental and transportation advocacy groups- including TransitMatters, Livable Streets, Conservation Law Foundation, and the Charles River Conservancy - in a July 31 letter panning the latest proposal.

“Repair or replacement of the highway viaduct is neither practical nor just,” the letter said. “The existing viaduct is the legacy of inequitable highway policies that tore communities apart decades ago - the impacts of which are still being felt by the residents of Allston today. The multiple ‘S’ curves and steep grades of the viaduct cause danger to drivers, and MassDOT has failed to demonstrate that reconstructing the viaduct in place can be implemented without reducing the Worcester Branch to single track operation for substantial periods of time, disrupting both driving and rail options of MetroWest commuters.”

The letter also requests that a mitigation plan be devised that includes better transit opportunities before, during and after the project. It asks that this plan include maintaining two tracks on the Framingham-Worcester line and building West Station early in the project with four tracks, including a connection to Kendall Square via the Grand Junction railway.

Finally, the letter requests that the project expand access to the Charles River and explore riverbank restoration that may include “limited fill.”

“In summary, we reject the turnpike viaduct option because of its unacceptable community impacts and we believe that either the at-grade or hybrid option could be refined to yield a preferred alternative that works for all modes of transportation, and that yields long-term benefits for the adjacent community, for commuters, for the river and parks, and for the environment writ large,” the letter concludes.

It wasn't the local chamber's only input on the project.

Murray also joined nearly a dozen signatories representing Central and Western Mass. business and economic development groups in a letter advocating for the transportation and economic needs of Central and Western Massachusetts communities as the project moves from the drawing board to a decadelong construction project.

“We remain deeply concerned about the potential impact the project may have on commuters and businesses to the west of Boston,” the letter said. “The eight- to ten-year construction schedule could have significant deleterious impact on travel and economic growth if not properly managed.”

Other signatories included the presidents and CEOs of 1Berkshire, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Corridor 9/495 Regional Chamber of Commerce, the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce, the Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Marlborough Regional

Chamber of Commerce, and the executive directors of the 495 / MetroWest Partnership, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission and the MetroWest Visitors Bureau.

The letter has several requests to help ensure commuters and local economies are not overburdened by the project.

These include:

- maintain the current number of lanes on the Mass. Pike and two tracks for commuter rail service on the Framingham-Worcester line;
- prioritize commuters needs rather than a shorter construction timeline by pursuing mitigation strategies including enhanced Park and Ride lots, additional bus and shuttle service, and incentivizing public transportation and carpooling;
- stagger construction with the I-495/I-90 interchange project;
- Build West Station with the potential of adding a future connection to Kendall Square via the Grand Junction railway;
- Consider tolling equity in funding the project.

“Without proper mitigation, the long construction schedule of I-90 can have a substantial negative impact on the livelihood of residents west of Boston,” the letter states. “The final project should enhance commuting options to and from Greater Boston, and should not reduce capacity or service when completed.”

MassDOT said it had received the letters and was in the process of responding so it couldn't immediately comment.

Murray stressed in an interview that the project would have major statewide implications, opening up Central Mass., MetroWest and eventually Western Mass. to transportation options and economic development that would be felt for decades. He cited Worcester's economic resurgence with the growth of commuter rail - the Framingham-Worcester line's ridership increased 46% from 2012 to 2018 - as an example of the positive impact of expanded transportation options.

“The most important component for Central Mass., Metrowest, and eventually Western Mass. is that we do not lose track capacity during this 10-year construction period, that there be a robust mitigation plan during the course of this construction ... and, once completed, we not see a reduction in vehicle lanes,” Murray said.

“Let's do it right,” Murray continued. “Let's not just do what's cheapest and fastest, let's do what will make it last, foster economic growth and make it be able to pay for itself.”