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Who should own the road in the Seaport, trucks or buses?

Boston City Hall and Massport are sparring over a plan to reserve a portion of Summer Street for buses.

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) and [Tim Logan](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 28, 2020, 3:30 p.m.
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Boston City Hall is in an unusual public spat with a state agency over a traffic solution for the highly congested Seaport District, pitting public transit improvements for a fast-growing neighborhood against the trucks that have rumbled through since it was a barren expanse of waterfront shipping yards.

The Massachusetts Port Authority has objected to Boston's plan to add dedicated bus lanes to Summer Street to improve public transit along a road that is often at a standstill during rush hour. One of the Seaport's biggest landowners, Massport recently sought to rally opposition among businesses that rely on freight trucks, arguing the bus lanes would affect trucks coming in and out of freight sites such as the agency's Conley Terminal.

Massport sent a letter to businesses suggesting they use talking points such as: "Fully dedicated bus lanes would increase congestion and delay for trucks, further exacerbating ongoing supply chain disruptions."

At a time when [officials are rushing to install bus lanes](#) across Greater Boston, the dust-up highlights the challenges of improving public transit at the expense of long-time constituencies of changing neighborhoods.

"There has been a long history of challenges around balancing the transition from an industrial space that carries a lot of large vehicles and trucks in particular, to a space that accommodates more residences, businesses, and people traveling on transit or by bike," said Stacy Thompson, director of the Livable Streets Alliance, which advocates for better transit and biking connections.

In a surprisingly aggressive response, the Boston Planning & Development Agency pushed back on Massport's politicking with an open letter released earlier this week.

“We care about all modes and all users of the transportation network including trucks that serve Massport and BPDA priorities, but our emphasis is on the needs of the entire community and all users,” the letter read.

Massport declined to comment, saying only that it would “continue to work with all stakeholders to meet the transportation needs of all parties in the district.”

BPDA director Brian Golden said his agency felt compelled to issue the letter after Massport circulated its criticism.

“We wanted everybody to understand what these short-term transit recommendations are and how they benefit all of the Seaport when we consider all of the mobility challenges,” said Golden, who was a finalist for the Massport CEO job last year.

Already, City Hall and Massport may be close to a compromise, Golden said: Along with the MBTA, the parties will work on a design for lanes that could accommodate both buses and trucks. Massport’s talking points specifically targeted lanes “that can only be used by buses.”

While shared bus-bike lanes have quickly spread in the Boston area, there is no precedent in the region for exclusive traffic lanes that serve both buses and heavy-duty trucks.

Jim Fitzgerald, a BPDA transportation official, said the combined use may work out well because truck traffic is generally heaviest outside of peak commuting hours. Cyclists would have their own lane on Summer Street that would separate them from vehicle traffic.

In theory, most trucks are supposed to avoid local streets in the Seaport and instead use the South Boston Haul Road, which was built for freight traffic as part of the Big Dig construction project. But those trucks must still use the eastern end of Summer Street to get to and from Conley Terminal. Others, though, may come into the Seaport by exiting Interstate 93 in downtown Boston instead of using the Haul Road, especially those coming from the north.

Getting those truckers to use the Haul Road would be a “tall ask because of the distance and travel time considerations,” said Rick Dimino, president of the business group A Better City, which is heavily involved in transportation issues in Boston. “But I can also see that question being posed every once in a while, because of the changes in that space, if streets have a growing demand to be more people-oriented.”

Massport has advocated for trucking concerns on other Seaport traffic matters. In 2017, it complained about a plan to add bike lanes to a major development on Seaport Boulevard, saying the resulting traffic lanes would be too narrow for a “primary truck route.”

The agency has also raised concerns about — though not outright opposed — plans to build hundreds of apartments and condos on the site of the L Street Power Station in South Boston, which sits alongside a new truck road connecting Conley and the Summer Street Bridge.

On the other hand, as the BPDA pointed out in its letter, Massport itself has contributed to the Seaport's traffic problems through the redevelopment of a number of its properties into large-scale housing, office, and hotel complexes, as well as a massive parking facility.