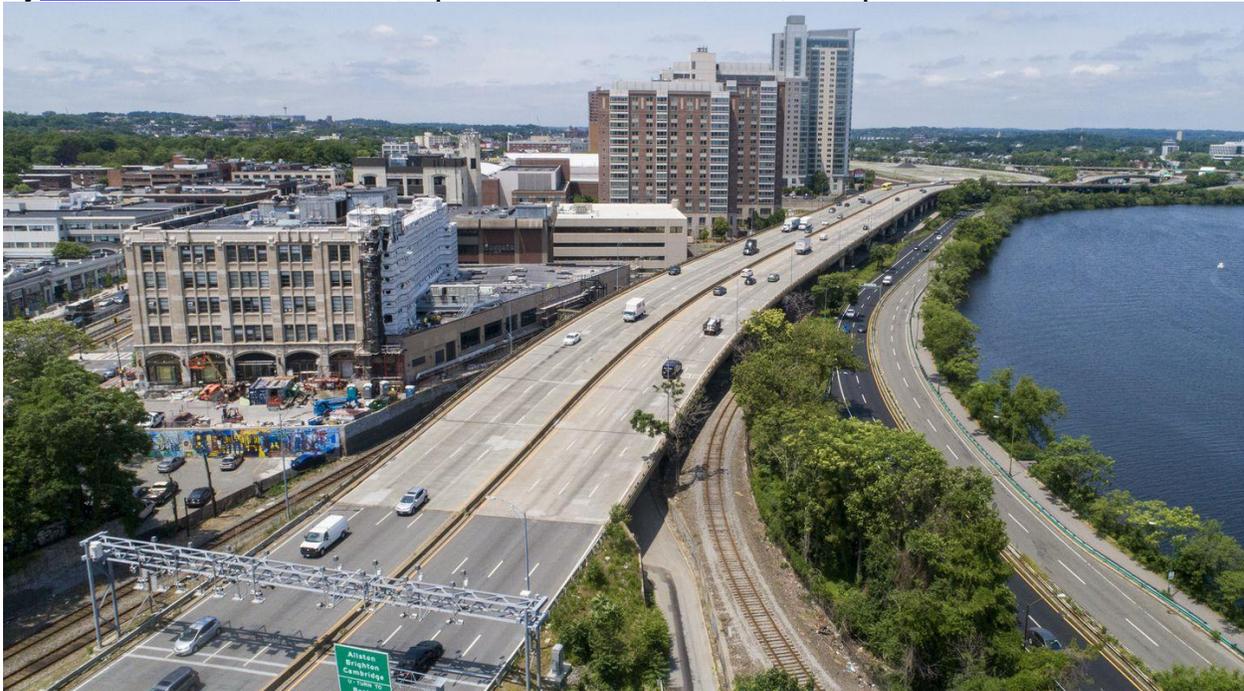


# The Boston Globe

## Huge Mass. Pike project pushed back another year

**State officials are suggesting postponing the \$1.3 billion-plus reconstruction even longer to resolve a stalemate over the layout of road lanes, rail lines, and paths.**

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 18, 2020, 1:46 p.m.



The state is considering two designs for the area, known as the throat, centering on what to do with the viaduct. Blake Nissen for the Boston Globe

The Baker administration is putting off a key decision about the layout of the \$1.3 billion reconstruction of the Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston, delaying a megaproject beset by indecision and debate for another year — and possibly much longer.

Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack said Wednesday that the state would skip a self-imposed fall deadline to decide about replacing the elevated section of the turnpike along the Charles River with a new viaduct or putting the Pike at ground level.

“We owe it to ourselves and the public to do more homework,” Pollack told a transportation department committee.

For now, the state has pushed back until mid-2021 its design choice for a section of the project known as the “throat,” where multiple road lanes, rail lines, and a bike path must squeeze through a narrow strip of land between the Charles River and the Boston University campus.

But a long-running stalemate over this section prompted other key transportation officials Wednesday to suggest they are inching toward a more nuclear option: putting off the project altogether by as long as a decade, and instead doing a smaller repair job on the existing, aging viaduct that supports the Pike before it becomes unsafe.

“There might be real wisdom in waiting,” Betsy Taylor, a member of a state transportation board, said at the meeting Wednesday. “We can take our time with everything, except repairing the viaduct. And if we need, then, to find a way to repair the viaduct to buy time for all parties to consider the larger thing, that too is an option to consider.”

The biggest regional highway project in a generation, the turnpike rebuild represents a massive opportunity to reshape the western edge of Boston, opening the way for Harvard University to construct a new neighborhood where the highway currently winds on a loop toward Brighton, and for the state to add a new train station, transit options, and improved access to the riverfront

The latest setbacks stem from the ongoing lack of consensus between the state and many stakeholders, from the City of Boston to environmental groups, transportation advocates, and nearby residents, over the best course of action for the quarter-mile throat section.

Pollack warned on Wednesday that the ever-heightening ambitions around the highway project plan could ultimately sink it.

“I am concerned that the project is actually in danger of collapsing under the weight of expectations for the project,” she said.

At this point, the state is considering two designs. One would replace the turnpike with a new highway at ground level, roughly at the same grade as the adjacent Soldiers Field Road, commuter rail tracks, and the riverfront bike and pedestrian path. The other option would replace the viaduct essentially as it is now.

The Baker administration has for years been skeptical of the at-grade approach, arguing it would be more complicated to build and difficult to permit, because it would require filling a portion of the Charles River. But the at-grade option has the support of [Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh](#), [BU](#), and other high-profile stakeholders, and was the overwhelming favorite in more than 500 public comments submitted to the state this fall. Many say a new viaduct would continue to wall off the riverfront from nearby neighborhoods.

“I’ll state the obvious: Had it not been for the very strong public support of the all-at-grade option, we would be moving forward with the highway viaduct option as the preferred alternative,” Robert Moylan, a member of the MassDOT board, said at Wednesday’s meeting.

Both options would include a new bus and commuter rail station, bike and pedestrian paths, and the elimination of the winding highway curve and the torturous interchange in Allston. The version with the new viaduct would cost about \$1.3 billion, while construction of the at-grade version would be closer to \$1.6 billion because of additional costs to mitigate construction impacts, such as the construction of a new commuter rail maintenance facility. Each version could take up to seven years to build.

Stacy Thompson, director of the Boston transportation group Livable Streets Alliance, said the state should be perfecting the at-grade design, rather than continuing to deliberate between the options.

“Knowing that there is a broad consensus around supporting the removal of the viaduct, what work is the state going to do to ensure that they can avoid unduly impacting the river and ground the viaduct?” she said.

Yet some MassDOT board members suggested Wednesday that given the lengthening timeline, it may make more sense to walk away from the project for now and, for a fraction of the cost, simply patch up and strengthen the current viaduct. That could buy another 15 years of useful life for the elevated section and allow the seemingly endless debate to continue for another decade or so, but also postpone other ambitious features of the project.

Punting on the larger-scale project “may be the way in which we move forward with this project and get people to come together,” Moylan said, adding that it would give more time to assess the long-term impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on commuting and travel patterns.

That viewpoint may have a key ally at the State House, where Representative William Straus, who leads transportation policy in the House of Representatives, indicated that the smaller, interim repair may be necessary.

“If the parties continue and have no consensus, then I think public safety concerns become stronger and stronger every day to ensure the integrity of the existing viaduct,” Straus said in an interview.

But Rick Dimino, who as president of the business group A Better City has long championed the at-grade model, is among several advocates who said the state’s indecision may have long-lasting consequences.

“Kicking the can only sets us up to waste taxpayer dollars on a temporary repair of the Allston viaduct,” Dimino said.

Harvard also pushed back at the prospect of more delays. University spokeswoman Brigid O’Rourke said school officials hope the state “resists [the] inclination” to scrap the larger

project, “given the years of constructive public process and inspiring vision for this transformative project.”

A delay would restrict Harvard’s development plans, since the highway would remain in its current configuration, though the university is already undertaking significant expansion elsewhere in the Allston area.

The state may come knocking at Harvard’s door for money to help fund the project, which does not currently have a financing plan. While tolls and debt may cover some of the costs, Pollack suggested major project stakeholders — including the City of Boston — may need to contribute a “fair share.”

O’Rourke countered that Harvard has already committed more than \$50 million to help build the transit station, and paid to remove a railyard from the site to help facilitate the project.

[Back in 2014](#), the administration of former governor Deval Patrick forecasted that the highway project would begin in 2017. The version of the project at that time, however, would have kept the highway viaduct in place.

Since then, the project has been subject to numerous public meetings, revisions, and lobbying campaigns. Now, the state hopes construction could begin in 2023 or 2024. But even that timeline is dependent on getting a financing plan together by 2022.