Comments Received by MPO Staff on Transportation Improvement Program Projects: June – August 2020

The following pages include several comments received by MPO staff from members of the public regarding projects programmed or under consideration for programming in the Boston Region MPO's Transportation Improvement Program. Comments were submitted on the following projects:

1. **Pages 2-5:** #605789: Reconstruction of Melnea Cass Boulevard (programmed in FFY 2019)

2. **Pages 6-15:** #609204: Belmont Community Path (under consideration for future programming)

RE: A Message from the Executive Director

Dear Tegin Teich, Kate White and Matt Genova,

I read your statement, and was moved by its content. By its rightness.

Then I began thinking about the Melnea Cass Boulevard project, a project that I and others in the Lower Roxbury neighborhood have been fighting since 2011. The one that others had fought in the 60s and 70s. The one that has left a lasting scar, and historical trauma across a neighborhood.

The neighborhood and allies have repeatedly stated opposition in public meetings, but our words fell on closed ears: at the BTD; at the BRA; and at the MPO. Lastly at the MPO meeting where the contract for the project was passed. Approved without public input or participation.

Despite meeting after meeting where opposition was voiced, the neighborhood now faces the loss of more than 100 mature, beautiful trees, plus the loss of hundreds more due to construction damage which will result in premature deaths. (Construction equipment accommodation, damage to root systems and to canopy)

For a neighborhood already burdened by high density, increasing rents, gentrification, and living with the ongoing trauma brought about when this highway cut the neighborhood in half and razed 1000 homes, the project can only amplify the wrongs.

The true cost of this MCB project and its unnecessary bike lanes, will be borne by this neighborhood in the form of a loss of neighborhood climate resiliency, far into the future. More heat (in an already urban heat island), more surface flooding, dust, pollution, and noise, from a loss of tree canopy. Loss of carbon sequestration and storage, by tree loss and damage. This is not a justifiable investment for the MPO. Short-term or long-term.

This project presents a challenge and an opportunity to apply the right-words and intent of your statement and to pull the plug on this project.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,
Zara Zsido
Boston

Submitted via email 6/15/2020

RE: A Message from the Executive Director

Dear Kate White,

Thank you for your letter.

Further tinkering with the "design" is not something my letter seeks to address. Rather, it's the quality of life issues often considered "externalities", or "collateral damage" or "sacrifice area", by the business-as-usual mindset, which concern me.

As a founding member of the Friends of Melnea Cass Boulevard group, 9 years of tinkering is about 8 years beyond my limit. I broke with the group a couple years ago over diverging directions forward.

I also lived on Windsor Street, and had a daily experience of MCB and its noise, dust, fumes, speed, and its ability to transform into a parking lot on game days. The value of the trees in buffering the din and dirt is priceless and irreplaceable. And, offered for free.

Through neighborhood meetings, conversations, door-knocking, and at public meetings, I witnessed the pain of a neighborhood. The well-trodden "desire paths" attest to the frequency of crossing MCB to connect to shopping, to schools, to transportation, to friends/family.

The neighborhood raised their opposition at every public meeting I attended, but the advocate agencies (BTD, BRA...) and organizations (bike groups, Save the Harbor, NEU ?...) failed to consider the depth of the opposition, nor to heed it. That is to their discredit.

Once the meeting programming tried to steer people into small group discussions of designs - people left. They had not come to the meeting to participate in a futile exercise for a project that makes no sense.

The one question never posited by the proponents was, "Do you want this project?"

This project was never neighborhood driven.

Your letter mentions your agency's concerns about the opposition to the project. How was that concern assuaged? Who did you talk with to calm your concerns? The answers to these questions are important, they explain how we got here.

Environmental justice, racial equity, and a rapidly changing climate all converge on MCB.
This project needs to be stopped before one tree is cut. Before the true cost is borne by future generation's. How can that be done?

Thank you for your time.

Stay safe.

Sincerely,
Zara Zsido

Submitted via email 7/23/2020

Re: TIP
Yvonne Lalyre (lalira53@yahoo.com) sent a message using the contact form at https://www.ctps.org/contact.

We are living times when the conservation of the environment can no longer be taken for granted. How is it that the MPO has approved the Melnea Cass Design Project over the repeated objections of the community to build two bike paths when we already have one that could be repaired and ... there are two identical bike paths being built on the street parallel to the boulevard!!! Moreover, the project promises to eliminate air- purifying trees at intersections to make way for polluting cars!! I kindly suggest that the MPO members visit the places where the projects are being proposed before approving the expenditure of millions of taxpayer funds on ill-conceived designs.

Thank you for your attention to this message and have a good day.

ZIP code: 02120-2250

Submitted 7/24/2020

RE: Please Don’t Cut Down Melnea Cass Trees

Hi there,

I am writing as a Roxbury resident to register my strong request that the Melnea Cass Boulevard trees not be cut down.

The trees are valuable to the community. The underlying long-range plan of making things safer for bikers and pedestrians (although valuable) misses an important point: a MUCH larger problem and risk to health and safety is the homeless population that has set up strings of encampments along the boulevard, with a concomitant rise in needles on the street.

The actual need for dedicated pedestrian and cyclist routes will remain extremely low until pedestrians and cyclists feel comfortable traversing these streets, and this comfort is DECREASING, not increasing.

Please, please, please do not cut down the trees on Melnea Cass.

The resources for this project would be MUCH better deployed in:
* increasing illumination on the streets and
* getting needles off the streets.

I would dearly love to be able to go for a run after work without worrying about getting mugged or stepping on a needle.

Regards and many thanks,

Josiah Seale
10 Williams St. #28
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02119
josiahseale@gmail.com

Submitted via email 8/24/2020

RE: Belmont Community Path (#609204)

To whom it may concern:

It is difficult to muster the wherewithal to once again submit a comment regarding the proposed "multi-user path" (MUP) i.e. linear park (LP - project #609204) that will abut 91 Channing Rd., our home since mid 2015.

In behalf of myself, my husband and fellow abutters, I have raised the same complaints about the project for several years during committee meetings and individually to town committee members who are in charge of this project and to Select Board members. Despite all of the effort, the same issues that gave rise to our complaints still remain and must be presented again now during this public comment period that closes on July 29th at the conclusion of the 25% design phase.

It also seems somewhat pointless to opine on a ~~"draft"/"progress"~~ 25% design plan presented to the community online and at the July 16th public engagement meeting (PEM) due to A) the plan is proposed in the absence of essential data from soil borings to be made along the proposed RR bed and B) approximately 6-8 weeks before the plans are completed and submitted to MassDOT. The plan that we - the public and abutters - are asked to comment on may be quite different from what the town finally submits weeks from now.

Nonetheless, let's go through the motions.

1. DRAINAGE: Nitsch Engineering is proposing your standard roadside drainage: in this case, an 8" sub drain nestled in a swale/ditch running along the MUP/LP that, in turn, will run along a raised RR bed. However, the purpose of this drainage system is to collect water and then exfiltrate it back to the soil. The lowest place for this sub drain's collected water to run to (water always runs to the lowest point) will be our backyards since, in our case - as is true for many other homes - our home is ~ 10' below the RR bed.

The proposed drainage is a solution to keep the MUP/LP dry and free of winter ice pools in the winter but it is not a solution for **the abutting homes who will be the ones receiving and holding the water runoff** from what currently is designed as a 12' wide asphalted road. <u>This is not acceptable; it callously and literally dumps the burden and expense of handling the water runoff on us, abutters.</u>

2. MATURE TREE LINE: This has been a contentious issue since abutters would like to keep the tree line intact while the town has been insisting on its removal. We abutters have no idea of how this project will affect the beloved trees that serve to give us Nature's solace; to buffer us from the RR's unsightliness and noise (psychology studies show blocking sight helps lessen noise perception); to shield us from bright lights in nearby playing fields and buildings.

In the "draft" 25% plans and in the July 16th PEM, the Nitsch representative indicated that the existing trees that grow on the RR bed's embankment will remain. However the Copley Wolff representative during the same PEM revealed that only "select trees" will be kept. So what is the number of "select" trees? Most? Some? A few? The removal of ALL but 2 trees would make the Copley Wolff rep.'s statement true.

Of course, this may be a moot point by this MUP/LP's earliest construction date - 2026 - since Keolis seems intent on destroying the tree line with herbicides (tree and health hazards for us abutters). Serendipitously (?), Keolis may do the clearing for landscaping that some so ardently desire.

3. LIGHTS: Many abutters are opposed to the MUP/LP being lighted at night; t will affect our sleep and health. Night lighting of the path will also lead to noise and loitering which will also affect our well being. Although lights are not included in the current "draft" 25% plan, ominously, the Nitsch rep. indicated that if people ask for lights, lights will be included. This is an admission that the town is willing

to willfully ignore the impact on the psychological well-being and health of the people most impacted by lights i.e. the abutters.

4. SALT: together with water runoff, the salt that will be used to keep this MUP/LP will run into and poison our yards and therefore our trees and other landscaping. We will the ones handling the expense of landscape/tree removal and replacement or eventually, we will be left with desert-like landscapes.

5. TRASH: this MUP/LP will expose us to what has been estimated to be ~1000 path users per day (Pare Feasibility Study) and to the resulting trash that, according to Dr. S. Miller (Arlington Minute Man Bike Path), includes soiled diapers; all of it is easy to fling over the proposed 6' fence. In order to avoid the rat problem that is already known to exist in Joey's Park (next to the nearby elementary school) and in the Belmont High School property that will also abut the MUP/LP, there will have to be trash cans placed at regular intervals along the length of the path and **picked up daily**. Is the town willing to make a commitment to pick up trash when it has been negligent in that regard with Joey's Park trash? This neglect led to the closing of Joey's Park last summer. If the town does not deal with trash appropriately then us, abutters, will shoulder another burden: rats and other vermin.

Finally, we would like to point out that is disingenuous of the town and others to imply that the closing of the 25% design phase is not the momentous event that it is and that there is a MassDOT "PEM" still to occur as part of the 25% design phase that will be the final event. At this (fictitious) MassDOT "PEM", it is suggested that we, abutters, will have our final chance to speak out. Previously, it had been circulated that the 25% had as much weight as the 75% and up to the 100% design phase so that there was time for the public to weigh in with our comments. It serves the town little that its representatives engage in this type of disinformation campaign in order to keep the abutters from being fully engaged. Unfortunately, MassDOT does not seem to have a mechanism to address the problem of what seems to be a town acting in a rogue manner.

Sincerely,

Maria A. Leza, Ph.D.
Darin Takemoto, Ph.D.

Submitted via email 7/23/2020

RE: Belmont Community Path (#609204)

July 13, 2020

To Whom it May Concern,

We are writing to you as concerned abutters to a proposed public works project in Belmont. This project, which is being promoted by an organization called CPPC, is proposed to create a "linear park" consisting of a wide bike path and surrounding structures that will be lit 24 hours a day. While there are many other concerns we have about the project, we want to focus on the issue of constant lighting here. The park is proposed to be constructed in very close proximity to >100 homes in Belmont, including many of our own homes. Currently, these homes all back to vegetation and the MBTA commuter rail. If the plan is executed, much of the vegetation (mostly mature shade trees) will be removed, and the proposed constant lighting will directly shine into the homes abutting the park. This means that residents in these homes will be subjected to environmental conditions that are likely to interfere with their normal sleep. Humans and other animals have innate, hard-wired light/dark cycles, called "circadian rhythms," and disruptions to these cycles have been linked to many deleterious consequences. Some of the links between disruption to circadian rhythms are outlined below.

Learning, memory, and other brain functions: Changes to the natural light/dark cycle can have important consequences to other human processes besides cancer and chronic disease. Some of the most wide-reaching and profound effects are centered on brain function. Most people appreciate that following a night of lost or spotty sleep, their thoughts may seem "foggy" the following day or they might be forgetful. Chronic circadian disruptions have indeed been documented to negatively impact important brain functions such as learning and memory in both laboratory animal studies and in human studies. For example, disrupting circadian rhythm in mice leads to deficits in memory formation and recall [1-5]. Increased anxiety and alterations to mood have also been observed in mice with disrupted circadian rhythm [5-7]. Even transient exposure to these alterations can have profound and perhaps lifelong consequences. In mice whose mothers were exposed to disruptions in light/dark cycle, long-term differences in offspring were found for attributes such as body weight, hyperactivity, and social interactions [8]. As is the case with other environmental changes, such as diet, consequences may afflict not only a single person, but also their children. This is not an exhaustive list of changes relating to brain function that have been linked to light/dark cycle disruption, but it should be enough to raise enormous concern about this issue. Again, when considering brain development and function, we cannot assume that transient disruptions to light/dark cycles in a person's life will not have long-term or permanent consequences.

Cancer: In epidemiological studies, it has been shown that working night shifts has significant association with aggressive prostate cancer, and this association has been traced to specific genes known to promote cancer progression [9]. For

more than 50 years, it has been known that disruptions to circadian rhythm increases incidence of breast cancer [10]. Disruption to circadian rhythm has been declared a probable carcinogen by the World Health Organization (WHO) [11]. Cancers as diverse as breast, lung, liver, pancreas, and bone, have been studied in mice and observed to be instigated or exacerbated by disrupting the normal light/dark cycles in the environment [12-15]. Mice are the most commonly-used and powerful laboratory animals for modeling the genes that drive human diseases. These human epidemiological studies and mouse studies—and numerous other scientific studies—demonstrate there is solid evidence that changes to the normal light/dark cycle to which humans have evolved is likely to increase a person's individual lifetime risk of developing cancer.

Cardiovascular disease: Evidence for light/dark cycle disruption contributing to cardiovascular disease risk is significant in the medical literature (reviewed in [16]). Sleep disruptions in humans are risk factors for cardiovascular disease[17]. Light/dark cycle has been linked to risk of heart attack in humans[18-20] and also stoke[21] in humans. Evidence changes to light/dark cycles increase cardiovascular disease risk and progression is growing. For example, just this year it was published that disruptions to light/dark cycle lead to increased atherosclerosis in mice[22].

Type 2 diabetes: Disruptions to light/dark cycle have been linked to metabolic disorders, including type 2 diabetes, in both human and animal studies (reviewed in [23-25]). Shifting the light/dark cycle or exposing mice to chronic light predisposes them to diabetes or exacerbates the effects once established[26-28]. Similar relationships have been shown in human pancreas cells grown in the lab[29,30]; normal light/dark cycles are required for cells to properly make insulin.

Obesity: Risk of obesity in humans is correlated with changes to the typical light/dark cycle in long-epidemiological studies[31]. There exists a very strong correlation between childhood obesity and adult obesity[32-34], so we cannot assume that disrupting light/dark cycles will not have negative consequences for individuals decades after the disruption.

Other medical concerns: Circadian disruptions have also been linked to infertility in humans (reviewed in [35]). These studies indicate that couples who are actively trying to conceive may be negatively impacted by constant artificial light right outside their homes.

In summary, from a scientific perspective, and from the perspective of parents, which many of us are, we have serious concerns about how this project, as proposed, is likely to negatively impact the health of nearby residents. This includes our children and all the children in close proximity. As there is no way to completely mitigate the hazardous effects of constant light projecting into residents' homes, we ask that the committee strongly consider the detrimental effect this plan will likely have on the long-term health of nearby residents.

Sincerely,

Jessica Whited, Ph.D.
710 Pleasant St.
Belmont, MA 02478

Maria A. Leza, Ph.D.
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91 Channing Rd.
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TOWN OF BELMONT

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Via electronic mail

Mr. Matt Genova
Transportation Improvement Program Manager
Central Transportation Planning Staff

RE: Belmont Community Path

Dear Mr. Genova:

We are writing in response to your email to Glenn Clancy dated June 16, 2020 about the Belmont Community Path. While we understand Mr. Clancy addressed many of the concerns in your email during a telephone conversation on June 18, 2020, we also wanted to provide a more comprehensive written response. In particular, we wanted to respond to parts of your email that suggest the Town has failed to be open or transparent about the planning process or to allow sufficient community engagement.

The Town of Belmont has been considering construction of a community path on or near the former Massachusetts Central Railroad right of way for more than 25 years. Since 2012, this planning has been the responsibility of three successive volunteer committees appointed by the Belmont Select Board. An initial feasibility study was completed in 2017 by an engineering consultant. A second engineering consultant is currently preparing a design that should be submitted for 25% review to MassDOT later this year. The committees and the Select Board have conducted numerous public meetings, including specific public engagement meetings, during this time. The committees and the consulting engineers have also conducted public site walks and surveys of preferences regarding the design. There has been frequent and voluminous feedback from a broad spectrum of Town residents. We have made great efforts to respect and respond to this feedback.

The Town recognizes the particular apprehension about project on the part of a number of abutters to the proposed route who live on Channing Road in Belmont. The vast majority of the comments referenced in your June 16 email came from this group. Unfortunately, there are assertions about the substance and process of the community path project that are incorrect and should not be taken at face value.

In particular, it is unfair to suggest that the Town did not engage in a cooperative planning process or provide an opportunity for all voices to be heard. Let us give a few examples of the process we actually followed. The Community Path Implementation Advisory Committee (CPIAC) hosted ten well-attended public engagement

meetings with substantive presentations by Pare Corporation, the first engineering consultant. Documents from and recordings of many of these meetings are on the CPAIC's website: https://www.belmont-ma.gov/community-path-implementation-advisory-committee-cpiac/pages/community-path-feasibility-study, and the overall public engagement process is outlined in the final feasibility study (available at https://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif2801/f/uploads/bcp_feasibility_study_-_updated.pdf). After the issuance of the final feasibility study, and hours of robust public deliberation by the CPIAC and the Select Board (including meetings with the MBTA and MassDOT and multiple opportunities for additional public comment), the Select Board voted unanimously to approve the currently proposed alignment in early 2018.

Many of the residents whose comments you referenced in your June 16 email actively participated throughout this process, but ultimately disagreed with the result (which set the alignment on the north side of the railroad alignment

rather than the south side, and therefore closer to the residences along Channing Road). A number of the comments you reference in your June 16 email appear directly or indirectly related to that decision. However, we do not believe it is appropriate to construe a carefully considered, researched, and publicly debated decision as a failure to appropriately consider or address resident concerns. Consensus is always desired but not always attainable, and we do not think it is reasonable to expect complete consensus when undertaking a significant public project.

In 2019 the Town appointed a Community Path Project Committee (CPPC) and retained Nitsch Engineering to design the first phase of the path. As part of preparing its February 2020 conceptual design report (available at https://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif2801/f/uploads/609204-belmont_community_path_cdr.pdf), Nitsch met a wide variety of local stakeholder groups, and conducted a well-attended site walk targeted specifically at potential abutters along Channing Road in November 2019 (which was again attended by many of the individuals whose comments you reference in your June 16 email). While the COVID-19 pandemic delayed other portions of the planned public engagement process, the CPPC hosted a well-attended virtual public information meeting with Nitsch on July 16 for Nitsch to present its draft 25% design plans, answer questions, and accept public input and feedback (see agenda here: https://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif2801/f/agendas/2020-07-16_community_path_project_1.pdf). In advance of this meeting and at the direction of the CPPC, Nitsch publicly posted its draft 25% design plans on a dedicated project website (https://belmontcommunitypath.com/), along with a survey and a free-form comment function.

Every meeting of the CPAIC and the CPPC is a public meeting subject to the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law (OML). While public comments were and are generally accepted at these meetings, sometimes they have to be limited in the interest of time at the discretion of the Chair, as recognized by the OML.[1] For this reason, the project schedule includes periodic public engagement meetings, such as the one on July 16, that are devoted to public input. Moreover, many individual CPPC members and Town staff have made time available outside of formal meetings to answer questions from interested residents.

Some residents also appear to misunderstand that certain decisions will be made at later stages of the design process, e.g., whether a specific tree will be impacted by the path. The CPPC and Town staff have repeatedly explained that many design decisions are premature for the 25% design phase and must wait until later in the design process. We have reiterated that there will be future opportunities for public comment about those decisions. Unfortunately, confusion on this point also appears to have influenced the comments you reference in your June 16 email.

The Town of Belmont is committed to an open, collaborative process as design continues on the proposed Belmont Community Path. There is broad community support for the project but there are still a number of residents with understandable concerns about it. As we have from the beginning, we will continue to work in good faith to listen to those concerns and do our best to address them.

We very much look forward to working with you on this important project, which we believe will be a great asset not only for the Town of Belmont, but for the entire Commonwealth. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Russell Leino, Chair, Community Path Project Committee
Roy Epstein PhD, Chair, Select Board
Patrice Garvin, Belmont Town Administrator
Glenn Clancy, Director, Office of Community Development

[1] There were one or two occasions as the CPPC was first using the virtual meeting format when technical difficulties prevented some members of the public from entering the meeting. There was no intent to inhibit participation and these problems have not recurred.