
2 CONCERNS OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

Public outreach and stakeholder involvement are two very important elements in the successful development and implementation of any transportation plan. For this study, staff developed an inventory of concerns pertaining to the present and future of the corridor using three major sources: meetings and communications with members of the Advisory Committee, transportation literature and news media,, and input from the public received at an informational meeting held at the start of the study.

Concerns range from general to specific ones. General concerns are often communitywide; some of these relate to Route 28 directly, some indirectly. These concerns are about the character of the physical space and aesthetics along Route 28, urban design, open space, the quality of life of residents living along the corridor, including air quality, and the development of land in relation to smart growth and sustainability. Other, more specific concerns relate to pedestrian and bicycle access along and across Route 28, pedestrian and bicycle access to the waterfront at Assembly Square, access to a potential new Orange Line station at Assembly Square, roadway and transit connections between Assembly Square, Union Square, and Lechmere Station, safety at specific intersection locations, such as Broadway, Pearl Street, and Medford Street, and the Route 28 viaduct over Washington Street (including potential removal or reconstruction).

Key areas of concern are summarized below in 10 broad categories.

2.1 CORRIDOR URBAN DESIGN

Advisory Committee members and the public feel strongly that the corridor should be renewed and redeveloped to achieve a visual and functional continuity through a corridorwide urban redesign that respects and integrates with existing neighborhoods. A human scale should be brought to the corridor. It should be changed from “simply a series of destinations” to “a fun place to live and work.” The current roadway, which is designated as “other freeway,” is designed to serve as a major thoroughfare, often as an alternative to I-93 travel, that allows some local access. The committee members and citizens would like Route 28, especially in its middle section between Mystic Avenue and Medford Street, to eventually be downscaled to a boulevard, including allowing for a transitway. It is the committee’s and the public’s belief that the Urban Ring, the Green Line extension to Medford Hillside/Union Square, the potential Orange Line station at Assembly Square, the completed CA/T project, the Rutherford Avenue Bypass Road, and the potential replacement of the Route 28 viaduct over Washington Street are all projects that can help lessen Route 28 traffic volumes, therefore allowing for enhanced urban design opportunities.

2.2 THE “BIG PICTURE” VS. MITIGATION OF DEVELOPMENT IMPACTS

The committee and citizens are concerned about development mitigation in the area being “too narrow, limited, and self-serving.” These concerns are really about how individual and localized improvements will eventually fit into the “big picture,” which is presently a vision of renewal in which many elements remain to be defined. The “big picture” relates to urban design and redevelopment and the integration of appropriate transportation infrastructure to support the urban renewal process, which is complex, requires careful timing, involves many actors, depends on political and economic market forces, and demands innovative private and public funding.

The scope of this study includes listing the known mitigation measures of developers and also bringing forward the “big picture,” hopefully providing an improved sense of direction to follow in addressing issues along the corridor. For example, exploring urban design issues in Chapter 8, identifying travel patterns in Chapter 4, and analyzing Assembly Square access issues in Appendix D help us to understand the nature of the concerns, verify them, and finally decide how to address them. From conceptual recommendations about general direction in the corridor and the study area, improvement projects can be defined. These improvements then can be undertaken for implementation by a variety of entities which include the Cities of Somerville and Cambridge, state agencies, and the private sector (developers).

2.3 LAND USE, SMART GROWTH, AND SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

Sustainable or smart growth consists of land use and transportation decisions that lead to fiscally, economically, and environmentally responsible development.

Careful land use planning, strategic zoning, smart growth, and sustainable transportation are very important to committee members and citizens. They believe that Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, and state agencies must engage in planning strategies such as zoning, master plans, design guidelines, preservation or creation of open spaces, parking management, programs for bicycling, for sidewalks, and for recreational paths, transportation demand management programs, and traffic calming to promote effective and functional urban design plans along the corridor that preserve the human scale in its neighborhoods and commercial districts. Committee members and citizens asked that these concepts be emphasized in the study.

2.4 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The Advisory Committee is unanimous on the importance of public transit along and across the corridor. Its importance was also expressed at the public meeting. While East Somerville is crossed by two commuter rail lines and the Orange Line, residents do not have direct access to them. Better rapid transit and light rail connections would improve residents’ travel times and connections with downtown Boston and other parts of the region, intercept traffic passing through East Somerville and East Cambridge along Route 28, reduce the need for MBTA feeder buses along the roadway, and improve air quality for residents adjacent to the roadway. The desire is strong for better connections via a Green Line extension from Lechmere Station to Union Square and/or Medford

Hillside. Also, a new Orange Line station at Assembly Square is seen as extremely important to achieving sustainable growth in the Assembly Square district and to reducing vehicle use to/from that area.

Finally, the Advisory Committee and the public strongly feel that an integral part of any transportation plan to reduce Route 28 traffic is the Urban Ring. Concerns and questions center on how that project might improve traffic congestion and delays along the corridor and how it will account for public transit that currently utilizes Route 28 and other roads in East Somerville and East Cambridge. The Urban Ring is currently in Phase 2 of the Draft Environmental Impact Report/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIR/DEIS), which will determine the impacts and benefits of the chosen improvements.

2.5 SAFETY

Improving the safety of motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists is very important to committee members and the public. They are specifically concerned about certain high-crash locations along Route 28, including the roadway area under I-93, the intersections with Broadway, Pearl Street, and Medford Street, and the roadway area under the Route 28 viaduct at Washington Street. This study will address the crossing at Foss Park. Safety at roadways at I-93 will be part of the I-93/Route 28 interchange project. Recent intersection improvements at Broadway, Pearl Street, and Medford Street have already addressed improvement needs at those locations. Safe pedestrian circulation at Washington Street would be part of a Washington Street/Route 28 viaduct study, which in turn would probably be included in the potential redevelopment study for Lower Brick Bottom and Inner Belt.

2.6 BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN TRANSPORTATION

As the land use in and surrounding the corridor is mixed, pedestrian activity needs to be accommodated and encouraged. Improved, safe opportunities for walking along roadways and crossing roadways ought to be examined in all studies and plans as part of the corridor's urban design. All pedestrians should be accommodated, especially nursing home residents along the corridor and students walking to school. Direct and safe access to shopping, entertainment, and open space should be ensured. Specific pedestrian movements along the corridor that are difficult include Mystic View residents' access to Assembly Square; pedestrian access under and within the ramp system of the I-93 interchange at Route 28 and Mystic Avenue/Route 38; crossing Route 28 at Broadway, Pearl Street, and Medford Street; crossing the roadway at Foss Park near the new Stop and Shop grocery store; crossings in the vicinity of Washington Street, under the Route 28 viaduct; and access to the waterfront. Good pedestrian connections in the future to the relocated Lechmere Station (which will move from its present location between Cambridge Street and O'Brien Highway [Route 28] to a location within the property of the North Point development on O'Brien Highway) must also be provided.

Committee members and residents are concerned about the types and characteristics of present and future pedestrian crossings in the area. With regard to at-grade versus grade-separated (pedestrian

bridges), concerns were expressed about pedestrian bridges and the false sense of safety they tend to provide as they are most times underutilized. Other similar concerns include the duration of pedestrian phases, upkeep of pedestrian traffic signal equipment, and exclusive pedestrian phases as part of traffic signal designs.

At present, bicycle travel is not safe on Route 28 in the study area, because of adverse traffic conditions. Crossing Route 28 on a bicycle is equally tough, largely due to turning vehicles, and bicyclists resort to using circuitous paths. Major bicyclist travel paths include connections from areas to the north and northwest to the Charles River basin. For improved nonmotorized travel, bicycle and pedestrian trails and on-road bicycle lanes must be constructed. They would provide more numerous, safe connections between neighborhoods and various recreational areas in East Somerville, Charlestown, and Cambridge, and also between recreational areas. Somerville has an active bicycle committee that offers input in the public participation process for bicycle transportation projects.

2.7 OPEN SPACE

Related to urban design and urban renewal issues is the concept of open space. Some members of the Advisory Committee and the public held that this and other studies should emphasize the importance of preserving and enhancing the existing open space along and near the corridor, including creating or improving access to these recreational spaces. This is tied to the quality of life of residents of East Somerville, East Cambridge, and Charlestown. Current open spaces on or near Route 28 include Foss Park, Mystic River Reservation, Charles River Basin, Amelia Earhart Dam, Draw Seven Park, and Charlestown's Ryan Park.

2.8 AIR QUALITY

Committee members and many East Somerville residents living along the Route 28 corridor have serious concerns about the quality of the air they and their families breathe. In addition to concerns about air quality in the vicinity of Route 28, there are concerns about air quality impacts from I-93 on the adjacent neighborhoods. East Somerville quality-of-life activists have initiated studies to monitor air quality levels.

Air quality concerns along Route 28 relate to the heavy congestion along it, especially during peak periods in the summer, and emissions from MBTA diesel buses. As additional public transit becomes available and traffic delays at intersections and on I-93 are mitigated, air quality should improve. Also the MBTA is steadily upgrading its bus fleet by retiring older diesel buses and replacing them with environmentally friendly condensed natural gas (CNG) buses and low-sulfur diesel buses. By continuing to replace the older diesel buses, the MBTA is reducing the average age of their buses from 14 years to 4 years.

2.9 ACCESS ACROSS THE CORRIDOR

It is just as important for all modes to be able to safely and efficiently cross Route 28 as it is for vehicles to safely and efficiently travel on it. This study reviews the recent improvements at Broadway, Pearl Street, and Medford Street, the exploration of an at-grade crossing of Route 28 at Washington Street, and the pedestrian crossings analysis at Foss Park across from the Stop and Shop supermarket. It also endorses urban design projects such as the East Broadway Streetscape Project, which runs from Route 28 to Mt. Vernon Street.

2.10 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Various members of the Advisory Committee and various citizens, particularly East Somerville residents, stressed the importance of public participation, of opportunities to be heard and to influence the direction and pace of planning. The point was expressed that it is important for participation to begin during the early, conceptual stages of planning, when there is still flexibility regarding outcomes. Public participation is felt to be important in all types of studies and planning, especially those led by the MBTA.

