

November 18, 2012

Shawn Holland, Project Manager
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Delivery by Adobe PDF via email to shawn.holland@state.ma.us

Subject: Beacon St, Somerville Reconstruction (Project No. 607209)

Dear Mr. Holland:

LivableStreets would like to provide some feedback and comments about the Beacon St Reconstruction Project in Somerville (Project No. 607209). We are pleased with the general direction of the project, but there are some very important details that we think are key to getting right.

The most exciting part of the project is that cycle tracks are planned to be part of the design. As you are probably aware, Beacon St is the most heavily used street for bicyclists in Somerville, carrying over 400 bicyclists per hour during rush hours (nearly as many as cars and trucks during those times!). A few years ago, bike lanes were installed by the City on Beacon St., which have been a huge improvement over the unmarked shared lanes that were there previously. The City of Somerville is now looking to build on that success and encourage even more people to bicycle by including cycle tracks along part of the project. We are pleased to see the cycle tracks included; however, we believe that the following improvements should be made:

- The cycle tracks should be designed to meet minimum recommended dimensions according to the NACTO Urban Bikeway Design Guide (6.5' clear width, 5' clear width in limited constrained areas, 1.5' buffer against a curb, and 3' buffer against parking). This is necessary in order to ensure the cycle tracks are wide enough so that faster cyclists can pass slower ones and are protected from dooring by people exiting parked cars.
- The cycle tracks should continue for the entire project length. Having cycle tracks for only half of the length of the project as is currently planned will not sufficiently serve the goal of appealing to bicyclists who do not feel safe enough using standard bike lanes.

- Street level cycle tracks could be installed along the western AND eastern portion of the street, with the eastern ones being a “pilot” project. After 6 months to a year, the parking situation could be reevaluated after having lived with a new configuration. If necessary, the cycle tracks could be easily removed and traditional bike lanes restored.

The cycle tracks in the proposal currently do not meet NACTO minimums. They could, however, if the travel lanes were 10.5’ and 11’ instead of the proposed 12’ and 13’. We understand that MassDOT is requiring this additional width in the travel lanes as a buffer space for larger vehicles and for space for snow during the winter. While we recognize that these are desirable clearances to have, we do not believe that they should trump the safety of a properly designed cycle track. Also, we feel that the dimensions required by MassDOT are not necessary from an operational perspective. Vassar St in Cambridge has two 10.5’ travel lanes and a 7’ parking lane, along with raised cycle tracks. Trucks, buses, and emergency vehicles have regularly traveled on Vassar St for the past ten years, and snow removal of the roadway itself has taken place every winter without issue. If necessary, rolled curbs could be used on the cycle tracks to allow motor vehicles to mount them in an emergency situation. Our proposal for the Beacon St cross-section is:

	Current proposal	LivableStreets proposal
Sidewalk	10’	10’
WB Cycle Track	7’ (incl buffer)	6.5’ + 3’ buffer
WB Parking Lane	7’	7’
WB Travel Lane	13’	11’
EB Travel Lane	12’	10.5’
EB Cycle Track	7’ (incl buffer)	6.5’ + 1.5’ buffer
Sidewalk	10’	10’
TOTAL	66’	66’

We applaud the City for proposing to remove parking on the south side of Beacon St from Oxford St to Washington St (referred to as Zone 1 in the parking study) in order to make room for cycle tracks. Proposing to remove curbside parking is nearly always politically challenging since passions tend to run high when it comes to parking issues. The City has approached this in a thoughtful way by doing a study of parking utilization along Beacon St. We agree with their conclusion that removing parking on one side of Beacon St between Oxford St and Washington St is feasible since the overall utilization is less than 50% (41% during weekdays, 35% during weekends). However, we disagree that one side of parking cannot also be removed between Washington St and the Cambridge City Line. With better parking management and better use of off-street parking we feel could the utilization could realistically be brought to less than 50% as well.

The average parking utilization for eastern part of Beacon St (referred to as Zone 2 in the parking study) is 63%. It has fewer businesses than Zone 1 and most of these businesses have off-street parking available. Like the western part, the parking regulations are similar, allowing Somerville-permitted cars to park all day and others to park for up to 2 hours at a time except during overnight hours. We suspect that the all-day parking behavior by Somerville residents who do not live along the corridor is also taking place on this section, although it's not clear from the parking study just how much. By better regulating the on-street spaces (for example by designating spaces directly in front of businesses as 2-hour or 1-hour general parking, with permit parking only allowed overnight), narrowing curb cuts to create additional on-street spaces, and encouraging residents and businesses to make better use of off-street parking (by fostering the creation of parking sharing agreements), we are confident that eliminating parking on one side of Beacon St in Zone 2 would not adversely harm residents or businesses.

We have heard that some Beacon St. business owners are very concerned about the loss of parking in front of their businesses. We certainly understand their concern, and as such we feel that it is very important to communicate to them that no one is trying to make it more difficult for their customers who arrive by car to find parking or for delivery drivers to find space for loading and unloading. One thing to keep in mind is that the side of the street that does have parking does not have to be the same for the entire length of the street. If there are more businesses or more parking/loading activity on one side of the street for one area but on the other side for another area, the parking can switch sides as well. For example, many of the houses on the north side across from Café Rustica have huge paved yards with lots of parking. The north side from Sacramento St to Park St also has plentiful off-street parking for every land use (Star Market, Auto Repair, etc). It makes sense in this context to have the parking on south side from Oxford St to the American Academy, where it would then switch to the north side. With this configuration, since the travel lanes would shift left or right as well, this would also act as a traffic calming measure to ensure that people drive at a safe speed.

We recognize that MassDOT is reluctant to alternate the parking on different blocks since it would require a shifting of the center line, which is not possible with the current design speed of 30 mph. We understand MassDOT's reluctance to lower the design speed since it is a regional route, however, based on current traffic conditions and the fact that this is an urban environment with frequent traffic signals, we feel that the design speed could easily be lowered without affecting traffic capacity. According to Google traffic data, the average travel speed along the corridor is 22 mph and during rush hour is 12 mph. Designing for 30 mph serves no benefit from a travel or a safety standpoint. Slow but steady traffic is safer for everyone than traffic that speeds between red lights.

As mentioned earlier, Beacon St actually has a good amount of private off-street parking available. It would be helpful for the City to do an inventory of this parking to complement their on-street parking study. Based on casual observation, there are certainly parking lots that are not being utilized to the greatest extent. For example, the lots by Star Market, Dial-a-Pizza, Wine and Cask, Johnnie's Foodmaster, and Walgreens nearly always have spaces available. With some encouragement from the City, these businesses could make arrangements to allow for some of their excess spaces to be used by local residents or businesses. We understand that the manager of the Star Market has said that he has permission from headquarters to rent out more spaces in his lot (he has a few ZipCar spaces currently), but need permission from the City in order to do so. In addition, many residents have driveways that do not appear to be used to their fullest. Taking up precious on-street spaces when off-street spaces are available is generally not a wise use of resources.

We also think it's important to communicate to the Beacon St business owners that the addition of cycle tracks (as well as other pedestrian/bicycle/transit improvements) has been shown to be a boon to local businesses along a street where these improvements are made. According to a recent survey in New York City, "Using data from the city's Department of Finance, the DOT found an increase of as much as 49% in retail sales at "locally based businesses" on 9th Avenue from 23rd to 31st Streets since the bike protected lane [aka cycle track] was initiated in the fall of 2007. In that time, retail sales increased only 3% in the rest of Manhattan." [1]

There is also local precedent for removing significant parking along a major business street. In January 2012, the City of Boston removed 71 parking spaces along the east side of Mass Ave through the Back Bay in order to make room for bike lanes. As with Beacon St, some local business owners were concerned about how this change would impact them. From what the City of Boston has seen so far, this change has been very successful. It greatly improved safety for bicyclists along one of the most dangerous corridors for bicycling in the City of Boston and has resulted in increased numbers of people arriving by bike, while not causing a significant hardship for those arriving by car.

In summary, we applaud the City of Somerville and MassDOT for their ambitious design for Beacon St. However, we are very concerned that this current design will not be successful unless important changes are made:

- Reworking the cross-section dimensions to meet the minimum NACTO recommendations for cycle track and buffer widths as shown above
- Extending the proposed cycle tracks for the entire length of the project (by removing one side of parking from Washington St to the Cambridge City Line), possibly as a "pilot" project
- Reducing the demand for on-street parking by reworking the parking regulations to best make parking available for business customers and deliveries during the day and for overnight parking by residents, and fostering better use of off-street parking through parking sharing agreements

Thank you for taking our comments into account as this project moves forward. As always, if you have any questions, please contact Steven Nutter, LivableStreets Alliance Advocacy Committee Member, who may be reached at 617.621.1746 and steven@livablestreets.info.

Sincerely,



Steven Nutter
on behalf of the LivableStreets Alliance Advocacy Committee

[1] <http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2012/10/24/report-bike-lanes-pedestrian-plazas-good-for-businesses/>

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