

Madalyn Letellier

From: Alessandra Seiter [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, June 21, 2024 8:18 AM
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: Transportation; Mayor; Ben Ewen-Campen; Judy Pineda Neufeld; Willie Burnley, Jr.; [REDACTED]; Jake Wilson; Matthew McLaughlin; JT Scott; [REDACTED]; Naima Sait; Lance Davis; [REDACTED]; [REDACTED] Public Comments
Subject: Comment on McGrath Boulevard (MassDOT Project File No. 607981)
Attachments: PTAC_McGrathBlvd_June2024.pdf

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Good morning, McGrath Boulevard Project Team and copied Somerville and State officials--

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) is pleased to provide comment on the concept design for McGrath Boulevard, and are grateful for the opportunity to do so. Please find our letter attached. Thank you for your time, energy, and consideration.

Warmly,
Alessandra Seiter
Chair of PTAC
Somerville Resident, Ward 5



June 21, 2024

McGrath Boulevard Project Team (Project File No. 607981)
MassDOT Highway Division
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116

Dear McGrath Boulevard Project Team,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the concept design for McGrath Boulevard, presented to the public on February 13, 2024. Thank you also for the time, energy, and dedication you continue to invest in this once-in-a-generation project that will transform our fair city for decades to come. We on the Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) are ecstatic about the opportunity to turn McGrath Highway into an at-grade, shared-use boulevard that is safe and comfortable for people of all ages and abilities, using all modes. We are impressed with MassDOT's willingness to recreate the corridor based on a proactive vision for a livable and sustainable future, and believe that with a few changes the concept design can serve as a foundation for getting us there. Our requested changes are largely aligned with those of the coalition of local advocacy groups and Somerville residents from whom you received a letter last month.

As you well know, McGrath Highway has long been one of the most dangerous corridors in Somerville, hosting five of the 14 highest-crash intersections in the city¹. It divides our city, forcing residents of East Somerville, Union Square, Inner Belt, and Brickbottom into harrowing journeys every time they need to go to school, grocery shop, use public transit, or reach a library. It produces high levels of particulate matter from vehicle emissions, resulting in increased risk of disease and healthcare costs for those who live closest. It is a vestige of an auto-centric approach to urban design that today stands in opposition to municipal and statewide goals of creating safe streets for all users, reducing vehicle miles traveled, and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions. As is often the case in the U.S., the safety, health, environmental, and social consequences of this urban highway are not borne equitably. Virtually all areas closest to McGrath Highway are Environmental Justice areas, meaning residents have a median household income below 65% of the statewide median, over 40% of residents identify as a race other than white, over 25% of households identify as speaking English less than "very well," or some combination of the three characteristics is present². Traffic volumes on McGrath Highway have also been declining precipitously since 2011, indicating that the corridor is overbuilt³. The time is ripe for a complete overhaul of McGrath.

¹ Mobility Division. "Bike Somerville: City of Somerville Bicycle Network Plan." Somerville, MA: City of Somerville, April 2023. <https://voice.somervillema.gov/13778/widgets/42028/documents/41597>.

² Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and Office of Environmental Justice & Equity. "Environmental Justice Populations in Massachusetts." Mass.gov, 2022. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/environmental-justice-populations-in-massachusetts>.

³ MassDOT. "McGrath Boulevard Construction - Public Information Meeting." MassDOT, February 23, 2024. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/massdot-meeting-presentation-somerville-mcgrath-hwy-21324/download>.

In the concept design, we are excited to see continuous sidewalks separated from motor vehicle traffic, protected intersections with curb extensions and pedestrian medians, new pedestrian crossings, floating bus stops, dedicated bus lanes where bus stops already exist, and much more green space including new trees.

However, there are several elements of the concept design that concern us and that we would like to see changed in the 25% design:

- **Number of lanes:** We want to see a maximum of three travel lanes with pedestrian refuges between each lane, or four lanes if two of them were dedicated bus lanes. The concept design includes four motor vehicle lanes along the entire corridor, with an additional lane north of Somerville Avenue and again north of Bonair Street. This proposal is only one to two lanes narrower than McGrath's current footprint with the recently implemented road diet – a width we think is out of step with traffic trends on McGrath and certainly with our city's multimodal and safety goals. We do not want to end up with an overbuilt corridor like the Casey Arborway⁴ – an unequivocal improvement over the elevated highway but still auto-centric. Minimizing the automotive right of way would also leave open the possibility of using excess land for housing, as would keeping the ROW to the east or west side of the alignment rather than down the middle.
- **Median between motor vehicle lanes:** We want to see the median removed in future designs and replaced with well-protected pedestrian refuges between each lane of traffic. While we appreciate that the median can serve as a pedestrian island and improve the overall greenery of the road, we are concerned that it will encourage speeding behavior by reducing a sense of friction for drivers. Standalone pedestrian refuges could also facilitate future bus stops, especially if corridor-length bus lanes are not included in the initial construction and must be added later. Similarly, not having a median in the first place would make any retrofitting much easier, whether for removing a lane or adding bus-priority infrastructure. The space originally dedicated to the median could be shifted to either side of the roadway, allowing pedestrians and cyclists to benefit from tree shade and creating more room for green space and other human-scale uses.
- **Bus infrastructure:** We would like to see more bus service on McGrath Blvd and dedicated lanes along the corridor's full length to support it. Providing bus service along the entire corridor would create a sorely needed north-south transit route in Somerville, connect with the existing bus lanes on Broadway, and better serve a perpetually disconnected Mystic Ave. We think the 85 and 90 – currently slated to run on a soon-to-be-traffic-calmed Tufts Street⁵ in the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign⁶ – would be ideal candidates to shift from Cross St to the northern portion of McGrath. Extensions to the 100 and 108 could also use McGrath Blvd to connect Malden with the Green Line Extension. An extension to the T47 could use McGrath to connect Longwood and Cambridge to Assembly Sq and Malden. We think McGrath Blvd would be an ideal candidate for center-running lanes, which have seen resounding success on Boston's Columbus Ave⁷. To align with our hopes of minimizing McGrath's footprint, we would like bus lanes to replace motor vehicle lanes rather than widen the right-of-way.
- **Sidewalk experience:** We believe a strong pedestrian presence will turn both sides of the corridor into commercially viable spaces. That can only be achieved with large, inviting, illuminated sidewalks that encourage people to linger and explore, benefiting local businesses. It is difficult to tell from the concept design how wide of sidewalks we can expect on McGrath Blvd. We prefer a pedestrian through zone width

⁴ Bowman. "Casey Arborway." Bowman. Accessed May 4, 2024. <https://bowman.com/projects/casey-arborway/>.

⁵ Mobility Division. "Tufts Street Reconstruction." SomerVoice, February 29, 2024. <https://voice.somervillema.gov/tufts-street-reconstruction>.

⁶ MBTA. "MBTA Bus Network Redesign - Revised Network Map Fall 2022." Fall 2022. <https://platform.remix.com/project/4e7bbb9c2latlng=42.38603,-71.08991,14.902>.

⁷ Boston Transportation Department. "Columbus Avenue Bus Lanes Project Report." City of Boston, July 2023. <https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2023/10/Columbus%20Ave%20Report%2020230705%20%281%29.pdf>.

of 12 feet, with additional room for frontage, street furniture, and green space⁸. We want to emphasize the need for ample street lighting, especially in contrast to the many dark segments along the corridor today.

- **Otis Street pedestrian overpass:** The Otis Street pedestrian overpass currently provides safe passage across McGrath Hwy for countless children and families who go to school at the Edgerly Education Center or use the Otis Street Playground. The number of daily users has only increased since Summer 2023, when many Winter Hill School families had to shift to Edgerly following a concrete failure and closure of the former school. Given the high rate of vulnerable users, the current and future safety of this crossing is vital. With an ideal McGrath Blvd, children and families would be able to comfortably cross the street at grade without using a detour. We also recognize that the bridge poses accessibility and maintenance challenges, and that reconstructing the bridge would likely encroach on the playground at the corner of Otis Street and Dana Street. However, we are concerned that the number of lanes in the concept design will mean that an at-grade crossing will be significantly less safe than the overpass. We also think a future HAWK beacon at this location is inappropriate compared to RYG signalization. If the safety of this crossing cannot be guaranteed, we would rather see the overpass maintained post-construction. Finally, we think it is important to keep the overpass up as long as possible *during* construction so families are not endangered or significantly detoured during the years McGrath Blvd is being built.
- **Pedestrian crossings of cycletracks:** We are very supportive of the bike infrastructure planned for McGrath Blvd. The corridor will create a regionally significant north-south bike corridor, enhancing the north-south connections acutely needed through Somerville and supporting safe travel between the Mystic Valley Greenway and Charles River Path. McGrath Blvd will also facilitate the connection between the Community Path Extension and the Grand Junction Multi-Use Path that is currently in the early planning stages⁹. Our only note is that we would like to see clear markings and accessibility features where pedestrians cross bike lanes, especially to minimize conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians with visual impairments.

We think these changes will ensure that the future of McGrath will support a livable, healthy, environmentally friendly community for generations to come. We look forward to engaging further on this critical corridor. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

Ted Alexander	Brenda Marvin
Ginny Alverson	Steven Mulder
Caroline Bodager	Barbara Myers
Meredith Brown	Bianca Norkunas
Laura Evans	Vitor Pamplona, <i>Vice Chair</i>
Christopher Ferry	Zach Rosenberg
Tim Gilman	Alessandra Seiter, <i>Chair</i>
Preston Gutelius	Robert Stanzel
Satoko Hirai	Carole Voulgaris, <i>Secretary</i>

⁸ National Association of City Transportation Officials. "Sidewalks," July 11, 2013.

<https://nacto.org/publication/urban-street-design-guide/street-design-elements/sidewalks/>.

⁹ City of Cambridge. "2023 Transportation Planning Grant Application," January 31, 2023.

<https://massgaming.com/wp-content/uploads/City-of-Cambridge-2023-Grand-Junction-Transportation-Planning-Application.pdf>

CC: OSPCD Mobility, City of Somerville
Mayor Katjana Ballantyne, City of Somerville
Ben Ewen-Campen, City Council President and Ward Three City Councilor, City of Somerville
Judy Pineda Neufeld, City Council Vice President and Ward Seven City Councilor, City of Somerville
Willie Burnley Jr., City Councilor At Large, City of Somerville
Wilfred N. Mbah, City Councilor At Large, City of Somerville
Kristen Strezo, City Councilor At Large, City of Somerville
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Naima Sait, Ward Five City Councilor, City of Somerville
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