

BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

February 21, 2020

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Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

Mr. Chris Osgood

Chief of Streets

City of Boston

Via email: chris.osgood@boston.gov

Re: Northern Avenue Bridge

Dear Chief Osgood:

The Boston Preservation Alliance is Boston's primary, non-profit advocacy organization that protects and promotes the use of historic buildings and landscapes in all of the city's neighborhoods. With 40 Organizational Members, 142 Corporate Members, and a reach of 35,000 friends and supporters we represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and celebration of its unique character. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects that impact the historic character of the city.

As you know, the Boston Preservation Alliance has been deeply involved in efforts to preserve the Northern Avenue Bridge for decades, with our engagement going back to the late 1970s. Since Mayor White in 1987, mayoral administrations have committed to preservation of the bridge. In the recent phase of work, we have been active since mid-2013, most significantly since the bridge was shut down to pedestrian traffic in December 2014. We have served on two mayoral-appointed Task Forces and on an ideas competition jury organized by the Boston Society of Architects. In addition we have been involved in countless informal conversations with community groups, interested individuals, City Councilors, and various City staff members and Boston Landmarks Commissioners in an attempt to encourage and guide a preservation-focused solution to the challenged bridge. We have commented formally several times when the occasion allowed, both to your office and appropriate Federal and state agencies. In other words, we have been active advocates for the preservation of the bridge for a long time.

Yet, with a variety of engineers, including one particularly experienced in structural engineering for historic structures, unable/unwilling to present a viable restoration solution and the deteriorated condition and cost estimates for repair increasingly challenging to counter, the Alliance Board has adopted a revised position:

The Boston Preservation Alliance has actively advocated for a repair and restoration solution for the Northern Avenue Bridge, encouraging the City to keep the promise and commitment of mayors going back to Mayor White over 30 years ago. However, a combination of lack of investment and maintenance combined with the newer challenge

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of rising sea level have left the unique, historic bridge in an untenable position and forced us to reevaluate our position.

In November 2018 the Alliance Board recommended the City “Go Old or Go Bold.” In other words, restore the bridge in a reasonable fashion or demonstrate why that was not possible, and if that were the case propose a bold, interesting new design that would create a new potential landmark for the city; a design that boldly captures the essence and desirability of the historic bridge as it has been appreciated and desired by residents of the city, and Fort Point in particular. Rather than continue to advocate for a “Go Old” option any further, the Board of the Alliance is reluctantly acquiescing and focusing our energy on advocacy for a new, “Bold” design with features that include:

- A focus on place-making that creates a destination for recreation, reflection, and inspiration - not just transportation across the water.
- A design that reimagines the “outdoor room” and porous enclosure much-loved about the old bridge. The value of enclosure to pedestrians cannot be understated, and balancing a new interpretation of that enclosure with a reimagined version of the historic, truss bridge is essential. The new design must not overly mimic the historic to avoid giving the impression this is in fact the historic bridge. Bold new materials in a truss-like pattern, vibrant colors and lighting, or other adaptations and interpretations of this historic bridge are welcome. Integration of some physical beams or elements of the historic bridge within a new design as reference points and teaching opportunities should be explored.
- In the rendering shared with us, the truss elements feel incongruous with the deck structure in color, scale, proportions, etc. and we suggest development of design approaches to unify the two pieces. The heft and weight of any overhead truss network should be in proportion to its overall size of the span. Truss design references should extend to the new span and the pavilion below to create one harmonious expression and experience. We fear the design is moving along two tracks, with the truss element considered an ornamental appendage, the design of which will be determined later (or be discarded totally as cost and value engineering hit reality). The overhead truss network must be fully integrated into the design process, with the new composition considered as a singular entity, even if it includes elements of the old.
- A design that attracts people with close water-sheet harbor views and brings them into direct engagement with the water. Resiliency and the challenges and opportunities presented by such closeness to the channel and the harbor must be embraced and be an integral part of the pedestrian experience. This is a gateway to the harbor.
- A structure that is focused on pedestrians and bicyclists. Introduction of any vehicles beyond emergency vehicles will deteriorate the bold, place-making experience desired. The bridge should attract people to linger and the design must facilitate that: attractive, interesting, comfortable, and made for people. This

should be the highest-quality urban experience for pedestrians which makes neither cars, shuttles, nor transit desirable, for they only negate the place-making and people priority the city has expressly embraced.

- Opportunities for creative and educational moments to engage with real elements of the historic bridge and understand its place in the history of this formerly industrial place as well as its role as a mechanical and engineering marvel of a former generation of infrastructure, once part of this “museum of bridges.” This includes use of equipment from the tender’s house as educational elements. Yet the proportion of old to new and the differentiation of old elements to new needs to be clear and warrants further discussion. Retention and reuse of some elements of the historic truss is not inherently a successful approach without careful consideration of how it fits into the whole and how this blend of old and new is designed to make a statement about the history and future of this crossing. Interpretation needs to be part of the discussion during the design phase rather than an afterthought. Critical to the success of our efforts will be the experience we create for pedestrians and their understanding of and interaction with the historic bridge elements and this new composition.

The Alliance plans to work actively through all review processes (city, state, and federal), in particular the consultation process of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, to make all efforts to assure these design goals are accomplished in the new bridge. We urge the City and its lead Federal Agency partner to begin the Section 106 process as soon as possible and in that process we will once again request to continue a role we established some time ago as a formal consulting party in that consultation process. We will make that formal request to the appropriate Federal Agency once that process begins. In the meantime, we request to meet with the City’s design team promptly to help further explore the challenging goal of re-using some historic bridge elements within the new span in an appropriate way. Marrying historic fabric with modern uses and expressions is crucial to the success of this truss concept and warrants thoughtful, collaborative design development.

It goes without saying that we consider the City’s project outlined in the Project Notification Form filed with the Massachusetts Historical Commission on July 25, 2019 an Adverse Effect on the resource itself. Demolition and replacement can be determined no other way, and we believe the proposal has an adverse effect on several adjacent resources as well including the Fort Point Channel Historic District itself. We would like to be a signatory to any Memoranda of Agreement that results from the Section 106 Consultation.

We are greatly disappointed that after decades of advocacy we feel compelled to admit that neither restoration nor repair of the existing bridge are prudent nor feasible after so many years of neglect and deterioration. However, we hope that we are able to work collaboratively towards a replacement span that reflects the design elements we outline

above and is able to positively contribute to the historic Fort Point and Boston Harbor in a way that both provides a new place-making opportunity for Bostonians and visitors to reflect upon and learn about the historic span and its context.

Sincerely,



Greg Galer
Executive Director

Cc:

Mayor Martin Walsh, City of Boston
Brona Simon, SHPO & Executive Director, Massachusetts Historical Commission
Chris Cook, Chief of Environment, Energy, and Open Space, City of Boston
Para Jayasinghe, City Engineer, City of Boston
Rosanne Foley, Executive Director, Boston Landmarks Commission
Ed Flynn, Boston City Councilor
Annisssa Essaibi George, Boston City Councilor
Michael Flaherty, Boston City Councilor
Julia Mejia, Boston City Councilor
Michelle Wu, Boston City Councilor
Kevin Kotelly, Chief, Permits and Enforcement, Army Corps of Engineers
Jeffrey Shrimpton, Senior Historic Resources Specialist, MassDOT
Kurt Jergenson, Historic Bridge Specialist, MassDOT
Rick Dimino, A Better City, Chair of Northern Avenue Bridge Mayoral Task Force
Sara MacCommond, FPNA, Vice Chair of Northern Avenue Bridge Mayoral Task Force
Betsy Merritt, Deputy General Counsel, National Trust for Historic Preservation
John Eddins, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
Carol Chirico, GSA
Michael Tyrrell, Friends of the Northern Avenue Bridge
Paul Farrell, Friends of the Northern Avenue Bridge
Stacy Thompson, Executive Director, Livable Streets Alliance
Eric White, Executive Director, Boston Society of Architects
Jack Glassman, Chair Historic Resources Committee, Boston Society of Architects
Joseph Allwarden, Vice President and New England Structures Dept Manager, AECOM
Ben Rosenberg, Principal, Silman