

April 23, 2019

Dear Mayor Walsh,

LivableStreets is grateful for our inclusion on the Northern Avenue Bridge Mayoral Advisory Task Force. The community cares deeply for this bridge and has worked for more than two decades to ensure both its historic preservation and its important and unique role as a pedestrian refuge and active transportation link adjacent to a resilient Boston Harbor.

It is within this context that I wanted to reach out to you to personally express my concerns regarding the public process and technical analysis being used to determine the future of the bridge. My concerns fall into three areas:

1. Insufficient analysis of the bridge and future potential uses.
2. Misrepresenting the City's preference for the bridge's future use.
3. Disregard for public input.

### **Insufficient Analysis of the Bridge**

Since July 2018 I along with other task force members have questioned several inconsistencies in data produced by the consulting team AECOM and have requested additional data and analysis that better reflect *Go Boston 2030* and other already established mobility and resiliency plans.

I have also requested that the City incorporate the findings of other recent studies for the area to ensure the best possible analysis for this bridge. For example, MassDOT's M.G.L., Chapter 30, Section 61 finding for the Seaport Square development (signed by Highway Administrator Jonathan Gulliver on January 4, 2019) includes an approved mitigation measure including \$2.9 million towards expanding Silver Line service through the purchase of six additional buses, expanding peak service conditions to off-peak hours, and the implementation of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) along Summer Street and Seaport Boulevard. None of these transit improvements have been incorporated into the analysis conducted by AECOM.

I have also repeatedly asked for the traffic analysis to include a North Station to Seaport Rapid Transit connection via Congress Street, something that is already part of *Go Boston 2030*. Again, the team continues to disregard this request.

If the City of Boston is going to invest at least \$46 million in a new Northern Avenue Bridge, it would be immensely flawed to not incorporate ongoing development and established goals from *Go Boston 2030* into the baseline data assumptions.

This is only a short summary of data transparency and consistency issues my staff and I have surfaced. I am happy to provide a full technical summary to you if helpful.

## **Misrepresenting the City's Preference for the Bridge**

From the onset of this process, both Chairman Dimino and representatives from the City have stated publicly and repeatedly that the City does not have a preference for the final design of the bridge. Instead we were told input from the Task Force and public would be prioritized.

**A few weeks ago I was surprised to learn that the City has, in fact, always had a preference for the HOV+ option.** This was shared in an April 4, 2019 meeting that included staff from Public Works, the Transportation Department, and representatives from the consultant AECOM. Additionally, we learned that some of the discrepancies in the data presented to the Task Force were a direct result of input from BTM, specifically to improve the overall perceived level of service for the HOV+ option. This, in part, explains discrepancies between the analysis conducted by AECOM and the aforementioned MassDOT Seaport Square Mitigation study. AECOM's initial independent analysis of intersection functionality was altered significantly between October and November at the direction of BTM.

This point is so critical because of the implications of the HOV+ options. Specifically:

- The MBTA has stated that it does not see a time-savings value in running bus service across the bridge in the HOV+ scenario. **This means the vehicular use of the bridge would largely be limited to private shuttle services and Uber/Lyft.**
- The City has also confirmed that it has no way to enforce the HOV+ option, meaning that the assumed time savings for this option are questionable at best.
- The public has vocally and consistently opposed this option. I've attached comments from the City's own public meeting on the bridge on November 28th and have included several comments from that meeting as an addendum to this letter for reference.

I found this deeply troubling and have worked to address this directly with City Engineer Jayasinghe and Chief Osgood. I also notified Chief Osgood that I felt it necessary to reach out to you directly because it so deeply impacts the Task Force's ability to provide informed recommendations and, more importantly, erodes trust that this is a fair and transparent process.

## **Disregard for Public Input**

For more than 20 years residents across the City of Boston have been advocating for the preservation of this historic structure. As an advocate I often witness burn out when projects take decades to come to fruition. With the Northern Avenue Bridge I've experienced the opposite. Individuals who've worked to preserve this bridge for decades are still showing up to every Task Force meeting and are now joined by newer residents of the South Boston Waterfront who are trying to build a more sustainable future in their neighborhood.

**The message from the community has been consistent and clear at every point in this process: they strongly oppose vehicular use of any kind on the bridge.**

Though the Task Force process has been framed as transparent and open to the public it is problematic that there has been limited discussion of public comment. At each meeting, while there is a small time allotted to public comment, there appears to be no method for incorporating those comments into the process for decision making. Similarly, while there is a tool for providing online comment, there has been no discussion about how to incorporate those into the process. It is worth noting that of **the online public comments, 68% of the respondents preferred a bike/ped/emergency bridge option and only 1 person called for allowing general traffic on the bridge.** The remaining 31% of comments didn't reference a mobility preference. It's also worth highlighting that one of the comments came from the Chairs of the Harbor Towers I and II Condominium Trust, representing their residential community of nearly 1,200 people, who preferred that the bridge not be open to vehicular traffic. I've also attached all of these public comments for your reference.

You established this task force as a means of utilizing the abundant knowledge the City of Boston has to offer, to direct the process for turning the Northern Avenue Bridge into an iconic destination that improves mobility, strengthens resiliency, and honors history. Unfortunately, this process has been mismanaged and flawed from the onset.

Given these concerns I believe the public needs to hear from you directly to rebuild faith in this process. Specifically, I hope you will:

1. Formally and publicly recommit to a neutral and transparent process.
2. Commit to prohibiting the use of vehicles on the bridge (with the exception of emergency vehicles) until there is any sufficient study that would warrant repurposing the bridge for vehicular use.
3. Commit to working with the historic preservation community to rebuild a bridge that most reflects the spirit of this iconic structure.

I am happy to meet with you personally to discuss this further.

Sincerely,



Stacy Thompson

## Appendix

### Question and Answer Session from November 28th Public Meeting (select responses)

An attendee expressed desire to make the new Northern Avenue Bridge pedestrian and bike access only. He stated that the Moakley bridge is full vehicular access and in close proximity to the Northern Avenue Bridge project area. He doesn't think that bikes and pedestrians should be handicapped to provide emergency access. Mr. DePaola stated that when looking at loadings for the bridge design, the load of bikes and pedestrians will be equal to or more than vehicles, so the bridge design will support vehicles if that's what the City wants.

A representative of the Wharf District Council stated that the group feels strongly that the bridge should not be a vehicular bridge. He said that doesn't mean that no vehicles should be allowed, but this should be limited. The group would like to see the bridge as primarily bike and pedestrian. He added that vehicular access would be undesirable for the Wharf District.

An attendee said she wanted to remind people of what the old bridge meant to residents. It had a graceful shape that made it a place where people wanted to visit. The old bridge evoked happiness. The materials, design and dimensions of the new bridge should create a sense of buoyancy and contentment. The moving lights exhibit at the ICA could be used on it. She asked the team to maintain bike and pedestrian access and design a bridge that makes people happy.

An attendee expressed concern about traffic impacts in the area if the bridge becomes a destination and asked how this will be addressed. Chief Osgood responded that the City doesn't anticipate the bridge will attract a lot of vehicle traffic, but it will attract more bikes and pedestrians. He said that the City Council is evaluating how to move people safely through the area, not just over the bridge.

Becca Wolfson, Boston Cyclists Union, stated that her group does not want vehicles to use the bridge. She added that the presentation mentioned wanting to add easier transit options, but she cannot see how this would work if full vehicular access is allowed on the bridge. She added that Uber and Lyft siphon riders from public transportation. The goal of areas of respite conflicts with vehicle use.

Stacy Thompson, Livable Streets, noted that no one has said they want Uber or Lyft to have access to the bridge. She said that the \$40 million that the City has committed should go to a bike and pedestrian only bridge and placemaking. She said that Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) should be evaluated. The GoBoston 2030 report recommended more transit options.

Wendy Landman, Walk Boston, stated that there are no other locations in the city that are for bikes and pedestrians only. She agreed that the old bridge had a sense of space. It was magical and should be kept that way. She also pointed out that the GoBoston 2030 recommended BRT. She said the City should make smart transit investments and tourist attractions should be created on the bridge.

Sara McCammond, MATF Vice Chair and Fort Point Neighborhood Association representative, stated that bike and pedestrian accommodations have been a major discussion point at MATF meetings and are the highest priority for the Fort Point neighborhood. She said the bridges are the reason that the Fort Point area is iconic. She said the neighborhood would like to see the team be selective about what uses are designated for each Fort Point crossing.