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Casey team revises traffic projections

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by Rebeca Oliveira

FOREST HILLS—The design team for the Casey Overpass replacement project revised their projections for the area's future development, impacting the expected traffic load that the overpass's replacement will have to accommodate.

The new housing projections are as much as 40 percent higher than those presented to the Working Advisory Group (WAG) at the last WAG meeting. These revisions reflect an update to the previous 2008 numbers with newer, more relevant local data.

The new numbers were presented at the last Overpass community meeting, held May 18 at the Agassiz community center. It was attended by about 90 people.

The Monsignor William J. Casey Overpass is the elevated section of Route 203 over Washington and South streets, next to the Forest Hills MBTA Station. Built in the 1950s, it has become too expensive to maintain and is now due for replacement. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) says the overpass is still safe to use.

After the current overpass comes down, a new overpass could be built, or a street-level parkway could be paved, a decision the design team has not made yet. Each option presents benefits and challenges to users: a new overpass would more likely be more efficient for regional traffic, while an at-grade parkway would likely be more accessible to pedestrian and bicycle traffic.

One of the background studies used by the design team said the street-level option is impossible. The 2008 study, "Structural Condition Investigation and Traffic Study," created by Simpson Gumpertz & Heger Inc. for the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) in 2008, and available on the project's website, states, "at-grade alternatives [without an overpass to replace the Casey] were deemed infeasible after considerable analysis and are not recommended."

That would be due to high levels of projected gridlock traffic in an at-grade replacement model.

The firm that did the study referred questions to DCR, which did not provide a comment by press time.

Paul King, MassDOT's co-project manager, told the Gazette earlier this week that that estimate was likely based on boilerplate estimates, not actual data collected from the relevant area.

"We've worked with the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) and traffic staff to develop a lot truer traffic numbers rather than filling in an arbitrary percentage," King told the Gazette in a phone interview.

"It certainly warranted a more definitive analysis of those numbers."

Using a 2 percent yearly growth model, which King says is standard, by 2035, traffic

over the Casey's area could increase by almost 50 percent. The design team currently estimates that number will be closer to 10 percent—and they consider that a high number.

That projected high traffic outcome is “very specific to the option they tried out in that report,” King added. “It may have had a bias toward keeping the structure [the Casey overpass].”

The design team's current projections estimate an increase of 310 to 390 housing units in the immediate area, along with 132,000 to 165,000 added square feet of retail and 332,000 to 416,000 square feet of new office space.

King emphasized the design team's open-mindedness when it comes to options: “We're going in here with the idea of looking at all the possibilities... We need to prove to ourselves [that any alternative would adequately handle 2035 traffic] before we decide on anything.”

The design team also announced that the first sketches of possible replacements for the overpass will be presented at the June 29 community meeting. The WAG's areas of focus before then are prioritizing specific problem locations and creating connections between different modes of transportation and different areas of the region.

The current project schedule includes: coming up with a replacement concept by October; designing the plan from then into 2013; then demolishing the overpass and building the replacement by June 2016.

The WAG consists of residents and elected officials and has members representing about 25 area organizations, including Judy Burr, representing the lower South Street neighborhood association and Roslindale. A complete list of WAG members is available at the project website.

At the May 18 meeting, several audience members offered suggestions as to point the design team should focus on.

Tom Doherty, a Boston police officer at District E-13, Roslindale resident and a WAG member, said, “Even though we don't live directly here, we're extremely affected” by the project.

Don Eunson, a WAG member representing WalkBoston, said that local, not regional, traffic should be prioritized in the design.

For more information, see www.massdot.state.ma.us/caseyoverpass.