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For the love of Longfellow

A visionary plan is necessary to properly rebuild the iconic bridge

By Renée Loth | September 4, 2010

MAYBE YOU got your first kiss in one of its granite niches overlooking the Charles. Maybe you had to memorize Longfellow's poem in high school. Maybe you are among the 100,000 Red Line commuters who thrill to one of the best views in Boston — or stare vacantly — from dusty train windows every day. Chances are you have strong feelings about the century-old Longfellow Bridge. Which is why plans to rebuild it involve a titanic public process — and why it is so important to get it right.

In 2007 Governor Patrick launched the \$3 billion Accelerated Bridge Repair program, with a \$280 million revamp of the crumbling Longfellow at its center. The state highway department submitted a plan keeping the current four lanes of traffic, and then withdrew it in order to consider a different mix of automobile, pedestrian and bike lanes. Since then a 38-member Longfellow Bridge Task Force has been slogging through the issues to recommend a final design.

Such a process is vital to contain the multitude of stakeholders, from pedestrian advocates to rowers and river-keepers to abutters like Massachusetts General Hospital and the Museum of Science. But it is easy to get bogged down in the details: how to synchronize traffic-light cycles to avoid long queues of cars; how to share lanes with emergency vehicles or MBTA buses in the event of a Red line breakdown; whether a dedicated bicycle track is too hard to plow during snowstorms.

Not to mention: what color to paint the metal railings? Is it possible to hang banners from the bridge? What about serving hot chocolate or setting up café tables in the stone niches, with their fabulous views?

This is no time to be hemmed in by bureaucratic limits. Happily, Luisa Paiewonsky, the state's highway administrator, pioneered a theory called "context-sensitive design," recognizing unique characteristics for every road and bridge project. The Longfellow repair is the perfect opportunity to put those theories into practice.

Thanks to the opening of the nearby Zakim Bridge and other changes in traffic patterns brought about by the Big Dig, the Longfellow is one of the few places in Boston where auto use is actually decreasing. MBTA riders are by far the greatest users. But even planning well for cars requires looking beyond the 2,100 feet of the bridge itself.

"To think creatively about the bridge we really need to think about what happens on either end," said Wendy Landman of the advocacy group WalkBoston at a task force meeting earlier this week. "It's not bridge traffic that creates the queue, it's getting on or off."

Here is a key place for contextual thinking. The epic traffic snarls at Charles Circle on the Boston side, and to a lesser extent Memorial Drive on the Cambridge side, need to be addressed if the Longfellow is to function as it should. Plus, the bridge sits in the middle of the historic Charles River Basin park system, and easing links to the Esplanade is crucial for the bicyclists and pedestrians who increasingly use the crossing.

Earlier this summer Paiewonsky took a bike ride over the Longfellow and its environs — a jaunt she described as "very nerve-wracking" — and it opened her eyes to the challenges beyond the bridge span. "Our horizons

have been expanded,” she said.

Being sensitive to context also means recognizing how transportation policy is evolving. State Representative Marty Walz, a devoted attendee at the task force meetings, says “a slightly wider bike lane or sidewalk is not the kind of visionary thinking” she is looking for. “We ought to build a bridge that creates incentives for getting people out of their vehicles.”

Rafael Mares of the Conservation Law Foundation points to no fewer than nine separate state or federal laws and policy documents that call for greener transportation alternatives, including the “healthy transportation compact” contained in the Patrick administration’s much-touted transportation reform law.

There’s a limit to how wide the task force can open the lens. But state officials have more options. For example, consider how the pain of bridge construction, expected to start in 2013, will change driving habits. Perhaps it’s possible to nudge drivers toward different choices — including by enhancing public transit — that become permanent. It would require cross-agency co-operation, but that’s the visionary part.

In 1845, when Longfellow wrote in “The Bridge” of “the long procession / still passing to and fro” he was inspired by an earlier version of this span. Rebuilding this beloved bridge is a rare chance to create poetry in motion for the next 100 years.

Renée Loth’s column appears regularly in the Globe. ■