

Two-year construction begins on Mass Ave

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After discussing renovations for almost 20 years, the city of Boston began a two-year construction project on Massachusetts Avenue Sept. 11, which will include adding bike lanes, between St. Botolph Street to Albany Street at the Boston University Medical Center.

The project's \$14.5 million budget comes from federal state transportation funding, and construction is projected to be finished in 2011, according to an announcement by Mayor Thomas M. Menino.

"Our first thoughts of reconstructing Mass. Ave. occurred back over about 20 years ago," said Jim Gillooly, deputy commissioner of the Boston Transportation Department. "There was a recognition that the roadway was dealing with a lot of users and had its fair share of high accident areas."

The construction includes the addition of bicycle lanes on both sides of the road, new traffic equipment like left-turn lanes, countdown signals for pedestrian crossing and new handicap ramps on the sidewalks, Gillooly said.

"The new signals will also be connected to the city's new traffic management system by fiber-optic cables, which will be helpful," Gillooly said. "When things become more organized, driving in the area becomes less erratic."

Peter Furth, a Northeastern professor of transportation engineering and member of Livable Streets Alliance, a nonprofit organization that worked with the city on this project, said the plan originally didn't include provisions for bikers or pedestrians.

"There was no provision for improving bus service, nothing for bicycles, and a worse sidewalk flow," Furth said. "Who's getting the benefit? The benefit was for cars."

Massachusetts Avenue has one of the highest pedestrian accident rates in Boston, especially near Boston University Medical Center, Furth said. Organizations like Livable Streets and WalkBoston, a group that advocates for better walking conditions in Boston, helped make the city more aware of biker and pedestrian needs, he said.

"They said they were going to keep the plan the way it was, but Livable Streets kept up the pressure," Furth said. "Then the city said they could make a few minor changes."

Involving the community and bringing in citizen interest groups is a long process, but Gillooly said he believes the plan is now stronger because of outside input.

"An interesting combination of players had ideas about how the corridor would work," he said. "The Mass. Ave. task force, WalkBoston and what not, they're to be credited heavily with constantly reminding us about lanes for bicycles."

Although not all of the changes the interest groups wanted were made, Gillooly said that the city made a concerted effort to implement as many as possible.

"We weren't able to do everything they were asking for, and that comes from the fact that there's a certain amount of space between the buildings [on either side of the road]," he said. "The dilemma is, some parties say 'make the sidewalks wider', another party says 'please add a bike lane', and another group says 'please eliminate the median.' You constantly have to make hard choices between one element of the roadway and another."

Allyson Goldhagen, a sophomore international affairs and human services dual major, said the pedestrian traffic on Massachusetts Avenue was her biggest concern.

"Especially if they're doing construction on the sidewalks, there's gonna be a huge traffic jam in that area," she said.

But Gillooly said improvements made during construction would benefit pedestrians walking on busy areas of the sidewalk.

"Traffic will be brought to a halt at the front of the [Massachusetts Avenue T] station, and additionally the sidewalk will be extended out so pedestrian crossing is shorter," he said.

Some other students, like Kristin Cook, a sophomore psychology and education dual major, said they see the project as just another construction scene among many others.

"I feel like construction is pretty much everywhere in Boston, at least in some way or another, so it doesn't surprise me," Cook said.

