

STARTS & STOPS

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Feet give the best, cheapest mileage

By Noah Bierman, Globe Staff | July 20, 2008

Could this be a seminal moment in the history of walking, the dawning of a gas-price-inspired walking renaissance?

I mulled the question as I ambled along a crumbling sidewalk on Massachusetts Avenue Friday morning, breathing humid air and listening to the screeches of frisky drivers, with Boston's biggest walking advocate.

"You guys are at the 100 percent corner for watching the cars and people interaction here," said Wendy Landman, executive director of WalkBoston.

She was showing us the corner of Massachusetts Avenue that intersects with New Market Square, near the South Bay shopping center. The pedestrians coming out of Victoria's Diner could not see the cars coming around a fast curve. The drivers didn't notice, or didn't care to notice, the pedestrians. Cars were parked atop sidewalks. Dust and noise from construction made it feel 20 degrees hotter.

Landman's sister Jessica Landman and brother-in-law Dan Mullaney, who were visiting from Belgium, came along for the walk.

We walked from one of the most turbulent walking areas, South Bay, to one of the calmest, the South End. Despite the travails we endured on Mass. Ave., we agreed Boston is a remarkably good walking city. It ranked third this week in yet another national walkability poll, this one based on the proximity of its neighborhoods to stores and other amenities. The city usually does well in these polls, sometimes leading the nation. This time, San Francisco and New York beat us out.

(For an interesting look at the "walkability index" of any address in the country, go to www.walkscore.com, the company that ranked Boston No. 3.)

Gas prices have everyone talking about fuel-efficient vehicles, but our legs, of course, get the best mileage of all. And with Boston's compact size and transportation network, millions of people could potentially get around pretty easily without cars, if we tried a little harder.

Landman's organization tries to spread the passion, handing out maps of downtown Boston, Somerville, and the Boston Medical Center area that remind people how close many places are to public transit. The maps show MBTA stations and time out the number of minutes it takes to walk briskly between landmarks. For example, it takes 11 minutes to walk from North Station to the Aquarium, only four minutes to walk from the Chinatown T station to Downtown Crossing.

Some of this is obvious, but not all of it. When I moved into the South End, near Boston Medical Center, it took me several months to learn how close I was to the Red Line's Broadway Station. When I asked the MBTA service officer which exit to use, she tried to direct me toward Southie, noting that no one ever used the other exit, the one that pointed toward the South End. But the 10-minute walk was pleasant enough, with a nice view of the city along Broadway, even though I had to cross under Interstate 93 part of the way.

These are the types of ah-ha moments that Landman loves. She said just about everyone wants the option to

walk, regardless of age or income, but we often erroneously think it is quicker to drive. Since gasoline prices spiked, Landman has notice more pedestrians on the Longfellow Bridge when she crosses it to get to work from Cambridge.

Walkers look at more than distance when choosing routes, though. They want to pass their favorite coffee shop or park, she said. They want shade. They want safety. They want scenery.

Safety, though, is the bare minimum, which takes us back to Mass. Ave.

Landman's group has been working with the Boston Public Health Commission and the transportation department to improve the intersection at New Market Square.

I am guessing they can't do much about the spoiled mildew odor. Landman concedes many of the roads around South Bay are designed to serve industry and will look different from the intimate, narrow cobblestone paths in the city's retail and residential neighborhoods.

Still, people were walking there Friday. There were plenty of bus stops, stores, restaurants, and offices. The city should at least maintain sidewalks that don't induce tripping and some clear places to cross the busy street without playing Frogger, the traffic frenzied video game.

The South End, of course, was another story. We walked by community gardens and parks. The small narrow streets were shaded by leafy trees.

"Now, the bird sound is louder than the vehicle sound," Landman's sister, Jessica, noticed when we turned onto East Springfield Street.

Even the alleyways had porches, brick-paved paths, and potted plants. Wendy Landman pointed out other features that made for nice walking, including cars parked on the streets that act as a barrier between pedestrians and moving traffic as well as roads that narrow near intersections to keep cars from blocking sight-lines.

It was a nice walk and a good way to show Landman's sister and brother-in-law what the city looked like. But it was getting even hotter, above 90, and we needed to get back to South Bay.

I hailed a cab.

Can't get there . . .

- Two to three lanes of I-93 south will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight through Friday to 5 a.m. the following day.
- **The Storrow Drive onramp to I-93 south** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight and Tuesday to 5 a.m. tomorrow and Wednesday.
- **The Haymarket onramp to I-93 south and the Callahan Tunnel** will be closed from 11 p.m. Tuesday to 5 a.m. Wednesday.
- **The exit ramp from I-93 south to Government Center and the Callahan Tunnel** (Exit 24 A and Exit 24 B) will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight and tomorrow to 5 a.m. tomorrow and Tuesday.
- **I-93 south Exits 20A South Station and 20B to I-90 west and Albany Street** will be closed and detoured from Tuesday 11:30 p.m. to 5 a.m. Wednesday.
- **The Essex Street onramp to I-93 south** will be closed from 11 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday to 5 a.m. Thursday and Friday.
- **Two to three lanes of I-93 north through downtown and Charlestown** will be closed tonight through

Friday nights from 11:30 p.m. (10:30 p.m. tomorrow through Wednesday) to 5 a.m. the next day.

- **The underpass from Storrow Drive eastbound to I-93 north and Tobin Bridge** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. Tuesday to 5 a.m. Wednesday.
- **I-93 north Exit 26 to Storrow Drive** will be closed and detoured from 11:30 p.m. tonight through Friday to 5 a.m. the following day.
- **The Sumner Tunnel onramp to I-93 north** will be closed from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Tuesday and Thursday.
- **The Haymarket onramp to I-93 north** will be closed from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Tuesday and Thursday.
- **The Atlantic Avenue onramp to I-93 north** will be closed from 10 p.m. Wednesday to 5 a.m. Thursday.
- **The Essex Street onramp to I-93 north** will be closed from 10 p.m. tonight through Wednesday to 5 a.m. the following day.
- **The ramp at I-93 north Exit 20 to I-90 east** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. to 5 a.m. tonight through Wednesday and Friday.
- **The I-90 east high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) tunnel to Logan Airport** will be closed from 9:30 p.m. tomorrow through Friday to 5 a.m. the following day.
- **The ramp at I-90 east Exits 24 B and C to I-93 north and south** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight until 5 a.m. tomorrow.
- Access to Kneeland Street/ South Station will remain open.
- **Access from Frontage Road and Albany Street to I-90 east and Logan Airport** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight through Wednesday and Friday until 5 a.m. the next day.
- **Access from South Boston to I-90 east and Logan Airport** will be closed from 10:30 p.m. Thursday to 5 a.m. Friday.
- **One lane of I-90 east in the Ted Williams Tunnel** will be closed from 10:30 p.m. Thursday to 5 a.m. Friday.
- **The Copley Street onramp to I-90 west** will be closed from 9:30 p.m. to 5 a.m. tonight through Tuesday.
- **Lanes will be closed on I-90 east and west** near the Prudential Tunnel from 9:30 p.m. tonight through Thursday to 5 a.m. the next day.
- **The onramp from Congress Street to I-93 in South Boston and the I-90 west Exit 24 to I-93** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight and Tuesday through Friday to 5 a.m. the next day.
- **One lane of I-90 west** in the Ted Williams Tunnel will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tomorrow through Thursday to 5 a.m. the next day.
- For the next several months, maintenance crews will do repair work on sections of **I-90 east and west from the I-90/I-93 Interchange in Boston to the New York State line** from 7 a.m. or 9 a.m. (depending on location) to 3 p.m. weekdays.
- **The four lanes on Washington Street and Harrison Avenue** are reduced to two lanes traveling on the newly constructed bridge deck. The Harrison Avenue Bridge has been reconfigured to allow two-way traffic.
- **Nighttime lane closures will take place on I-90 east and west near the Sheraton in Newton from 11 p.m. tonight through Friday to 5 a.m. the next day.**
- **One lane of I-90 Tunnel east near the Ted Williams Tunnel will be closed from 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and there will be possible I-90 Tunnel West lane closures from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.** Also, lanes in **I-90 Tunnel East** will be closed tomorrow through Thursday and in **I-90 Tunnel west** tonight, Tuesday, and Friday.
- **The Congress Street onramp to I-93 south and I-90 west** will be closed from 11 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday to 5 a.m. the next day.
- **The Sumner Tunnel onramp to Storrow Drive** will be closed and detoured from 11:30 p.m. tonight to 5 a.m. tomorrow and from 10 p.m. tomorrow through Friday to 5 a.m. the next day. Sumner Tunnel access to Haymarket will remain open.
- **One lane of the Sumner Tunnel** will be closed from 11:30 p.m. tonight through Friday to 5 a.m. the next day.
- A two-month daytime paving project continues with milling and paving from 7:30 a.m. (5 a.m. on Tuesday) to

3:30 p.m. tomorrow through Thursday on **I-90 west between Warren and Palmer** for a 10-mile stretch near Exit 8.

Please send complaints, comments, or story ideas to starts@globe.com. The column can be found at boston.com/starts. ■