

5.14

MAKING MASSACHUSETTS MORE WALKABLE

BY CHRISTINE GIRAUD

Targeted transportation planning will reduce inequity

John A. Powell is a professor of law and executive director of the Hass Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California, Berkeley. He spoke on March 21 at the Boston Society of Architects. This is a summary of his talk.

To achieve equity in a transit system, we have to be intentional. We need to think about “the other” in our planning, whether it is based on race or being able-bodied.

Race especially requires profound thinking. We try to be neutral when planning transit and treat everyone the same. But treating everyone the same doesn’t recognize that we’re situated differently. An example is Hurricane Katrina. The evacuation plan was to drive away but 40% of blacks didn’t have cars. So instead of universalism we have to use targeted universalism. We have universal goals but our strategy has to be targeted according to how people are situated.

To be more targeted, we need to move beyond conscious decision making and toward an awareness of our unconscious practices. Race comes with a set of practices. Unconscious practices and norms in the systems we create often produce what I term racialized outcomes. We have to analyze the unconscious creation of systems that increase disparities, often in unintended ways.

When it comes to public transportation planning, the home is an important factor to consider. Where you live determines what air you’ll breathe, what food you’ll have access to, whether your property will appreciate in value, whether you can walk easily, what school you’ll go to, what access you’ll have to jobs. Therefore, the home is the hub of transportation planning opportunity.

BY KYLE ROBIDOUX

Blind man walking (and running)!



Kyle Robidoux is the Director of Volunteer & Support Group Services at the Mass. Assoc. for the Blind & Visually Impaired.

I walk everywhere. As a marathoner, I also run all throughout Boston and neighboring cities.

I’m also legally blind so walking, along with public transit, is my main mode of transportation. Therefore, walkability is very important to me and my family.

The walkability of the city and its public infrastructure impacts me every day. It impacts where I walk, how quickly I can get to where I need to be, and most importantly how safely I can get there.

As someone with low vision (I have very restricted central vision, similar to looking through a toilet paper roll), I rely on sidewalks, curb cuts and ramps, and crosswalks to get me safely to where I need to be. I use a white cane most of the time so the quality of sidewalks and streets is very important.

Brick sidewalks are one of the most unfriendly surfaces for me and most folks with limited mobility (I assume most sighted walkers, too). My cane tip frequently gets stuck in a missing brick or I trip because of the unevenness of the sidewalk. Old (some say historic) sidewalks are very common in the South End, where I spend a good majority of my time. If I have a choice,

One important purpose of transit is about connecting people from their homes to their jobs. Poor people tend to live farther away from jobs and are less likely to be on a subway line. In response to this, Portland, Oregon no longer allows the building of large employment facilities if there is no public transportation nearby. Planners there realized we have to make the market work for everyone.

Environmentalists hate to hear this, but sometimes it is easier to have a car if you have lots of trips to make during the day (schools, daycare, work, errands) and your public transit is inadequate. In our planning we have to acknowledge the neighborhood trips made by many people, mostly women, which include housework, raising kids, and taking care of parents. Follow the path of women from low-income neighborhoods in their average day and you will learn a lot about inadequate public transportation.

But we have to focus on everybody, not just people of color. For example, the fastest growing cohort is people over 65. And people in their 40s are increasingly using canes and wheelchairs for walking. The transit systems we’re building are not considering these groups. We should start not with debating between train, bus, or light rail, but with the specific needs of the people.

Lastly, we have to have participation from the community. Bike lanes in Portland, Oregon were called “white lanes” by people in neighborhoods where few people have bikes to use them. Residents were not originally part of the planning process. Planners realized they had to bring people in. Equity needs to be deliberately planned. Systems are never neutral.

I will avoid going down a street if I know it has terrible brick sidewalks. I’m thankful that the city has set a new policy limiting the amount of brick in the walk path when repairing/installing new sidewalks.

As my eyesight decreases, I am becoming more reliant on audible street crossings. Otherwise, I have to ask someone to help me find the push button. It would be wonderful if more street crossings had regular intervals in which to cross or a “walk signal” triggered by a sensor on the closest curb ramp.

My relationship to the built environment in my neighborhood plays a large factor as my eyesight decreases, especially during the winter. Trying to navigate unshoveled sidewalks and curb cuts blocked by snowbanks is physically and mentally exhausting. I walk my daughter to school along the South Bay Harbor Trail. Sections of the trail were not plowed this winter days after a snowstorm. Some days my daughter and I, along with other students, were forced to walk in the street because the unplowed path was too difficult to walk.

As our communities continue to develop, I hope less time and energy is spent on talking about parking and traffic and more on creating accessible public spaces. Creating accessible spaces is not only good public policy but will also ensure that they flourish and reach their greatest potential.



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events

Thurs, May 8, 5 - 7 pm

Dudley Square Walk with Boston Mayor Marty Walsh
and many neighborhood co-hosts. The walk will include brief presentations about the Tropical Foods grocery store now under construction, the redevelopment of the Ferdinand Building, and the reclamation of Bartlett Yard as a mixed use, mixed income project. Meet: at Hibernian Hall, 184 Dudley Street.

Wed, June 4, 6:30 - 8:30 pm

Boston Public Library

Making Massachusetts Livable: A Forum on Transportation and Smart Growth. T4MA/Smart Growth Alliance forum for gubernatorial Candidates.

plan for women

In a 1999 survey, Viennese planners learned that women used public transit more often and made more trips on foot than men. Based on these findings, planners designed sidewalks that met the needs expressed by women, such as better lighting and wider sidewalks to fit strollers and shopping carts. With explicit attention to women and girls when planning housing and parks, new park designs now attract as many girls as boys. Vienna has adopted a "Fair Shared City" approach. "Vienna's urban planning activities take targeted account of the different needs and interests of distinct user groups and differentiate by life realities, life phases, social and cultural backgrounds."

girl trek

GirlTrek (GT) is a nonprofit in Chicago that is energizing black women to walk. Black women are facing a health crisis of epic proportions - over 80% are overweight and 43% obese. Against these odds, GT has rallied over 20,000 women across the country to get active. Each month, GT issues walking challenges to motivate people. It rewards trekkers by planning special health adventures, or "TREKsperiences." GT also has a monthly calendar of activities to keep people on track. Part of the success of GT is its emphasis on building community. Trekkers check in with each other by phone, text, email, and social media. Women start at every level. www.girltrek.org.

commute disparity

Among Greater Boston workers, black bus riders spend an extra 66 hours a year waiting, riding, and transferring than white bus riders, according to a 2011 analysis from Northeastern University's Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy. The disparity in bus commute times is about 80 minutes per week. The Dukakis Center called the results "a reflection of the affordability of the region." Affordable housing is often far from desirable subway stations. Our transit system has focused on funneling commuters toward downtown Boston while ignoring jobs elsewhere. The result - longer, slower bus rides, often with transfers. www.northeastern.edu/dukakiscenter/transportation

thank you!

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BY BOB SLOANE

Showing the way in Dorchester

Wayfinding signs are coming to Dorchester! WalkBoston has been working with local groups and city agencies for more than a year on signs that promote walking or bicycling for transportation and for health. Now we have a pilot project in Codman Square.

For the pilot, wayfinding signs will be installed at the main intersection in Codman Square. These signs will include popular destinations within about a half-mile. Arrows will point toward a specific destination, along with estimated times for walking or bicycling to that location.

The signs were conceived through a partnership of city agencies and nonprofits including the Boston Public Health Commission, Boston Transportation Department, Healthy Dorchester (a community group associated with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Mass in Motion program) and WalkBoston. Healthy Dorchester has been convening the meetings of the planning group. WalkBoston is providing a design and details for printing each of the signs.

Codman Square, like many of Dorchester's neighborhoods, is an ethnically diverse community focused on the local business area. Its vibrant shopping area is comprised almost entirely of small, locally-owned shops. Its many business and community organizations were included in the planning process.

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