



WalkBoston

January 5, 2007

Secretary Ian Bowles
Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, MEPA Office
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Rodney Sinclair
Boston Redevelopment Authority
City Hall Plaza
Boston, MA 02201

RE: Comments on Environmental Notification Form/Project Notification Form
Jackson Square, Boston, MA

EOEA # 13901

Dear Msrs. Bowles and Sinclair:

WalkBoston appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Environmental Notification Form/Project Notification Form for the Jackson Square development in Boston. The proposal will bring new life to a dense part of the city, and will make good use of long-vacant or underutilized sites. The project will result in significant changes, including many benefits, to local pedestrian and vehicular circulation.

The project proponents have engaged in many years of community outreach for this project. Local residents have developed a rich understanding of the land uses and site improvements they would like for the community. One result of this multi-year process is strong local support for pedestrian facilities, which are expressed in the guidelines for local development.

The Jackson Square Coordinating Group (JCG) makes a clear presentation of its design and development priorities, nearly all of which involve pedestrians. The project will rebuild the heart of Jackson Square around transit, improve pedestrian safety, and create new pedestrian connections across Columbus Avenue.

Notwithstanding the admirable project goals, WalkBoston has several concerns about the details of implementation.

- Throughout the document, there is a general need for more detailed discussion of the means through which pedestrian circulation and safety will be helped by the development.
- Traffic mitigation techniques that are well-known are fully described, but few details are presented in terms of application to these sites.
- Pedestrian sidewalks and paths form a good walking network for the project, and will focus a great deal of pedestrian activity the blocks of Centre Street that will also carry high volumes of vehicle and bus traffic. This will pose both opportunities and challenges for the project.

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- Transit oriented development is a relatively new form of development for Boston, and its effective implementation requires careful planning to ensure that it is fully pedestrian AND transit friendly.

The need for details

The project has much to offer from a pedestrian point of view, but detailed descriptions of the physical facilities are needed to make the case in a clear and compelling way.

For example, some goals are stated and then followed immediately by a commitment. The goal of improving and expanding the reach of the Southwest Corridor park and its walking and bicycling paths will be implemented by improving the indirect street crossing where the Southwest Corridor Pedestrian and Bicycle trails meet and cross Centre Street. This location is indeed a problem for walkers and bikers, and the proponent has committed to improving this fine-grained element of the pathway network by straightening out the jog.

By contrast, other goals are stated but neither details nor commitment is offered. For example a number of traffic mitigation and transportation management approaches are listed, but the document is careful to say only that they may be used in the project. The specific application of these techniques and the ways they provide safety or mobility for pedestrians need to be described in detail in order to understand the impacts of the project, and to see if the goals will be met.

The pedestrian trip generation tables show 5290 new pedestrian trips added as a result of the development. (Table 3-5, Page 3-5) However, data on existing trips are sketchy. Future volumes that include both existing and projected trips are needed to evaluate whether the infrastructure will be able to handle the total number of people who will walk on local sidewalks, use the new retail facilities and patronize the MBTA bus and rapid transit services.

Pedestrian safety and amenities

Specific information on the designs that will add pedestrian safety and amenities is necessary in the following areas:

- Roadway narrowing helps protect pedestrians by slowing traffic. Narrowing the standard 12' traffic lanes should be explored for this densely-built community.
- The provision of neckdowns makes pedestrian crossings both shorter and safer and should be reviewed at all of the project intersections.
- The new Greenway multi-use path should connect into the network of pedestrian sidewalks and paths in the area, and the proponent should propose options for connecting it into the Southwest Corridor park.
- Reconstructed and widened sidewalks are important. A detailed plan of the landscaping, benches, special lighting, and other amenities that might be included in the project should also be provided.
- "High-visibility pavement" for pedestrians includes a raised on-street platform adjacent to the Jackson Square Station. The details of how this would be implemented should be provided so that commenters can provide useful feedback.
- Alternatives such as special pavements or pavement markings should also be detailed as a safety measure for pedestrians.
- Signal upgrades should include pedestrian crossings with concurrent green crossings (where turning movements are not excessive), and signals with significant periods of time for pedestrians to cross major streets in each direction.

Pedestrian sidewalks and paths

Much of the proposed pedestrian network through Jackson Square is adjacent to roadways, with the exception of the new greenway that abuts Site III. This network is augmented by a plaza and community outdoor gathering place in the Site III proposals. Along Centre Street, the busiest pedestrian area, pedestrian access is fragmented by bus lanes in and out of the MBTA station and by the new Amory Street connection to Centre Street. Centre Street has very short blocks between Columbus, Amory, and Lamartine Streets, along with new retail uses. This promises to make this part of Centre Street a very busy place for vehicles. Understanding how projected pedestrian, auto and bus traffic volumes will be accommodated is essential to determining how best to provide for safe walking.

The new greenway adjacent to Site III will afford a pleasant way to walk to the MBTA station from the south. Over the long term, it is important to find ways to connect this greenway to areas further south of Jackson Square. Without further connections, this greenway is not likely to become a useful part of the Southwest Corridor Park.

Transit-Oriented Development

The project is one of the first in Boston to follow the principles of transit-oriented development (TOD) and should result in a diminished need for private auto use. In this high-density area with good access to transit, following a development program that fully supports TOD is extremely important.

One principle of transit-oriented development is to discourage automobile traffic beyond that which is absolutely necessary, and thus to provide a minimum number of parking spaces for all of the project land uses. For residential parking needs, there is careful attention to minimizing the number of parking spaces per unit to assure a low overall number of spaces. For retail parking needs, the excellent access provided here for pedestrians and transit should limit the need for parking. The number of parking spaces added to serve the retail uses should be closely scaled to the types of retail facilities envisioned – most of which are designated for local use. On-street parking would seem to be appropriate for the vehicle trips generated by retail uses. All parking spaces, whether on-street or in garages, should be limited to local users (either residents or retail customers), and should not provide all day commuter parking.

TOD also includes an attention to pedestrian amenities that encourage walking. Details of pedestrian accommodations as described above can help people to get around on foot. Streetscape design and signage can ease pedestrian access along and across Centre Street, Amory Street and Columbus Avenue, and perhaps slow traffic for safer pedestrian crossings.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this ENF/PNF. Please feel free to contact us for clarification.

Sincerely,

Wendy Landman
Executive Director

Robert Sloane
Senior Planner