



Institute for Human-Centered Design
[Adaptive Environments]

January 9, 2009

Vineet Gupta
Boston Transportation Department
1 City Hall Square
Boston, MA 02201

Re: Rutherford Avenue / Sullivan Square Design Project

Dear Mr. Gupta,

An alliance of advocates recently met to discuss what we learned at the last Rutherford Avenue / Sullivan Square Design Project meeting that took place on November 13, 2008. What follows are our collective thoughts about the overall project as well as the specific areas of focus.

We are quite pleased and excited with the opportunities this project presents for creating streets that better serve all users, as well as adding much needed connectivity between Somerville, Cambridge, and Charlestown. The overall vision set forth in the presentation is one that we all support; creating streets that are human-scaled and inviting for those who live, work, or simply travel through them.

Sullivan Square

A number of options were presented for reconfiguring Rutherford Avenue and the surrounding street network around Sullivan Square. Because it best contributes to the overarching goals of the project, we support Preliminary Alternative 3: Rutherford Avenue Surface Option – No Underpass. More specifically, we support this alternative since it:

- Allows for and encourages roads with slower travel speeds, since the tunnel currently results in vehicle speeds that are much too high.
- Separates Maffa Way and Main Street, creating a smaller street grid. A smaller grid both better distributes traffic, reducing bottlenecks, and creates a very walkable environment. It also encourages smaller buildings with more street frontage, creating more space for street-level retail.
- Both eliminates the large rotary and re-connects Main Street between Sullivan Square and Charlestown proper, increasing connectivity for all users.

With regards to the street layout, we prefer the option within Preliminary Alternative 3 that results in as many of the streets as possible with two-directional travel, since it allows for increased connectivity for motorists and bicyclists, as well as results in streets that encourage slower speeds (as opposed to multi-lane one-way streets). We would like to see streets with the fewest number of travel lanes as possible (ideally one lane in each direction) in addition to bike lanes.

As you are probably aware, Sullivan Square Station is a key multi-modal transit hub for the area. This is discussed to some extent in the latest presentation materials. There is an opportunity to improve access to and from this hub with the reconfiguration of the local street network. We feel that it would be wise to consider dedicated bus lanes, transit signal priority, and other methods and technologies for giving buses and transit a much-needed edge when congestion may potentially cause delay. In addition, improving bicycle access to and bicycle parking at the station would help to provide yet another option for getting to and from the Orange Line.

We are pleased that there is coordination taking place with the City of Somerville. Better pedestrian and bicycle connections between Sullivan Square, East Somerville, and Assembly Square is very important, as I-93 already poses a very significant barrier to travel between these three neighborhoods. For example, one desire line for bicyclists is between Sullivan Square Station and Broadway in East Somerville. However, since Broadway and Maffa Way are one-way towards the station, this is currently a difficult connection that requires going significantly out of one's way in order to make legally.

Other pedestrian and bicycle connections should be taken into consideration, both of which have been discussed to some extent already, including a multi-use path along the Mystic River, connecting Assembly Square to Charlestown, and extending the proposed multi-use path beside the Orange Line and Commuter Rail tracks from Assembly Square to Sullivan Square (and possibly beyond).

Rutherford Ave

We support the creation of a much narrower, human-scaled Rutherford Avenue, transforming it from a high-speed arterial into a green, multi-modal urban boulevard. The fact that current traffic volumes are so far below capacity is very encouraging.

We are hoping that future development along Rutherford Avenue will be of an urban-style, with buildings that front the street edge and minimal driveways. Thus, Rutherford Avenue could be designed in such a way to support this vision, with wide sidewalks, on-street parking, bike lanes, and as few travel lanes as are needed. Also, frequent pedestrian crossings and a significant amount of trees and greenery should be included. We feel that it should be designed with a 30 mph speed limit or slower.



Institute for Human-Centered Design
[Adaptive Environments]

One idea to consider for Rutherford Avenue is providing separated one-way cycle tracks instead of bike lanes, between the on-street parking and sidewalks. However, a few key elements are needed to support such a design, namely keeping the number of driveways to a minimum, and carefully designing intersections, providing bicycle signal heads for the cycle track users.

Regardless of whether bike lanes or cycle tracks are used, connections between the various bicycle routes and facilities should be well-designed and clearly marked (for example a connection between Rutherford Ave and the proposed Mystic River multi-use path).

Austin Street/Gilmore Bridge

Although not part of this project directly, improvements to the Gilmore Bridge between Charlestown and Cambridge are a must. The bridge currently feels more like a highway than a multi-modal urban street. Walking along the bridge is quite unpleasant, and bicycling along it is even more intimidating. We would all love to see improvements made to the bridge to better increase connectivity and access for non-motorized users, including the widening of sidewalks and the addition of bike lanes, as well as modifications to the overall design to reduce the “highway-feel” of the bridge.

City Square

Although part of the project, but not currently a point of focus, improvements to Rutherford Avenue near City Square are very important. A key improvement that could be made in the short-term is the addition of crosswalks and crossing signals at Rutherford Avenue and Chelsea Street. Many pedestrians cross there now (illegally), mainly because the only legal connection requires one to go down one level and then back up again, via Water Street.

Thank you for considering our ideas and suggestions as the design process moves ahead. If you have any further questions about our comments, please contact Charlie Denison of LivableStreets Alliance who will serve as our point of contact. Charlie can be reached at 617.852.6125 and charlie@livablestreets.info



LivableStreets

Rethinking urban transportation



Institute for Human-Centered Design
[Adaptive Environments]

Thank You,

Charlie Denison

Charlie Denison, Board of Directors, LivableStreets Alliance

On behalf of:

Wendy Landman, Executive Director, WalkBoston

Liz Levin, President, WalkBoston

Chris Hart, Director of Urban and Transit Projects, Institute for Human-Centered Design

Chris Porter, Chair, MassBike Metro Boston Chapter

Brian Postlewaite, Member, MassBike Technical Advisory Committee

(Charlie Denison and Brian Postlewaite are also members of the Somerville Bicycle Committee. The contents of this letter are consistent with the views of the bicycle committee, but the committee itself cannot formally communicate with outside agencies and organizations.)

CC:

Susanne Rasmussen, Director, Environmental and Transportation Planning,
City of Cambridge

Sue Clippinger, Director, Traffic, Parking, and Transportation, City of Cambridge

Mayor Joseph Curtatone, City of Somerville

Monica Lamboy, Executive Director, Office of Strategic Planning and Economic
Development, City of Somerville