



WalkBoston

September 22, 2006

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

RE: Comments on the Expanded Environmental Notification Form for Westwood Station, University Avenue, Westwood, MA
EOEA # 13826

Dear Secretary Golledge:

WalkBoston appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Expanded Environmental Notification Form for Westwood Station. We are commenting because of concern about the pedestrian connections to this site.

The proposed development is located on a site that has ready access to the expressway network – specifically both I-95 and I-93. In addition, with the existence of superb access to both local and intercity rail service, the site is a great opportunity for a mixed-use transit-dependent community. In this community pedestrian facilities will be of the utmost importance.

This is a huge development with the potential to create a significant town center for new and existing residents of the region. The scale of the development is so large that it will present challenges in making it safe and convenient for pedestrians. We think there are several key points to be made at this stage of the development:

- Pedestrian access between the development and the MBTA station must be encouraged. Much of the proposed development is clustered around pedestrian ways that are accessible to both on-site residents and employees and to off-site people looking for shops or offices. The scale of the big box retail facilities adjacent to the relatively low-key residential/retail buildings of the village presents a major issue for pedestrian connections through the site. Pedestrian access between the village, the large shopping center, the MBTA station and the office structures should be encouraged.
- The project's location includes major access by vehicles. The construction of the various highway improvements may heavily impact the pedestrian environment. Standards for development of pedestrian walkways should be established in relation to the hierarchy of major roadways within the project.
- Transit access will also need to be very carefully considered as it relates to changes in the roadway system, in particular at Greenlodge Street, where state highways may connect through the site at the edge of the station. This connection has the potential to disrupt pedestrian connections to transit and the general design of the central plaza for commuters and the residential community.

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- Recreational opportunities should be added to the mix of on-site improvements. These should include walks through wooded areas and along the river (if possible), as well as open space that can be used by both residents and employees for more active sports.

These points are expanded below

Pedestrian facilities

We commend the proponents for the extensive pedestrian network that is included. Three major development areas are planned, each with differing approaches to pedestrian access:

1. The first area is the pedestrianized precinct north of Rosemont Road, where the walkways will connect residential, retail and office areas to a central public open space, with a walking network that includes the waterworks park. Here the pedestrian facilities culminate in a plaza adjacent to transit access – which should encourage both walking and the use of public transit. The open space at the center of the planned residential community forms an urban plaza. Retail uses surrounding the plaza will be particularly attractive to walkers. Additional connections for walkers into the plaza should be found; at the moment there is only one major walking route in the internal street system leading to the plaza. A civic center of some kind would also be appropriate here; perhaps a storefront community meeting place or a town branch library with computer connections would attract pedestrians to use the plaza. The office building facing the north side of the plaza, next to the MBTA station and the new pedestrian entrance to the platforms, occupies a highly visible location within the site and may be a potential location for a major on-site attraction that is readily accessible to pedestrians.
2. The second area is the large big box retail concentration south of Rosemont Road. The development program for Westwood Station calls for 1,250,000 square feet of retail area, located in the retail outlets near the MBTA station and in the large commercial area just south of Rosemont Road bounded by University Avenue, Westwood Station Boulevard and Harvard Street. There are five or six large 2-3 story retail buildings in this area, supplemented by smaller scale retail between the larger buildings and parking garages on the surrounding streets. (See Figure 3-2) This will be the equivalent of a large shopping center with several large anchor buildings (it encompasses a footprint with more retail square footage than the South Bay Plaza in South Boston, Natick Mall, North Shore Plaza and Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers, South Shore Plaza in Braintree, Burlington Mall and perhaps Shoppers World in Framingham). The design of pedestrian access to and between these several large stores is critical. At the moment the design appears to call for all pedestrian access to these large stores on the main street between the buildings, mixed with vehicular traffic. While this mix of traffic could be a positive attribute, it will be important to ensure that pedestrian access to and between stores remains convenient and safe.
3. The third portion of the land use mix is the scattering of office buildings adjacent to the village retail/residential areas and along the new Westwood Station Boulevard. While offices planned in the transit station vicinity may be closely linked to pedestrian facilities, others in the development are located in a manner that suggests a predominance of access by vehicles rather than pedestrians. Sidewalks will be needed along Westwood Station Boulevard and may need special attention to attract pedestrians and keep them safe.

4. The design of connections for pedestrians within and between these three areas is a major consideration. The scale of pedestrian use in the village area near the MBTA station is relatively low-key and based on traditional living, small-scale shopping and commuting patterns. Pedestrian access to and within the big box retail areas will be entirely different – large volumes of pedestrian traffic based primarily on shopping. Compared with the village/MBTA area and the large scale retail area, special efforts will be needed to encourage walking to the workplaces at scattered offices.

Roadways and sidewalks

All pedestrian connections shown in this proposal are located along roadways. With the project anticipated to attract large numbers of pedestrians, the roadway hierarchy must be carefully designed to accommodate and encourage walkers.

1. All of the project's sidewalks should have a minimum clear walking width of 8 feet, and should be designed to include shade trees – perhaps on both sides of the walkway - and occasional benches for walkers. Pedestrian scale lighting will also be important for pedestrian safety and visibility.
2. In the design of project roadways, equal consideration should be given to the movement of vehicles, pedestrians (and bicycles). Lane widths should be narrow to slow traffic along pedestrian routes. Pedestrian crossings should be well designed, highly visible, and placed to respond to desire lines for people walking to work, transit, and shopping. Crossings of busy intersections should include automatic pedestrian signal phases of generous time. Pedestrian activity along Westwood Station Boulevard should be given careful attention given the routing of heavy truck traffic through the Boulevard.
3. Greenlodge Street may become an important link into this site, with the stump of the existing street reconnected to the regional roadway network by means of a new bridge over the tracks. With this new function for Greenlodge Street, the intersection of Blue Hill Drive/University Avenue and Greenlodge Street becomes significantly more complicated, handling more traffic because of the direct connection into the interchange. Pedestrian crossings at this intersection, as anticipated in Figures 4 and 5-27, may further complicate traffic management and will need very careful design and management.
4. Greenlodge Street may have another impact on the development. The proposed local street that serves the residential/retail/transit portion of the project is shown connecting directly with Greenlodge Street directly across the street from the entrance to the MBTA garage at Route 128 Station. This intersection is very close to the University Avenue/Blue Hill Drive/Greenlodge Street intersection. It seems unlikely that the two intersections can coexist so closely spaced if Greenlodge Street becomes a more major thoroughfare.

Access to transit

Transit access to this development is of the utmost importance, and the emphasis is on providing primarily pedestrian access.

1. Pedestrian access to transit is accomplished by a planned new connection to the MBTA station, which, as diagrammed, would serve foot traffic outbound from Boston quite well. However, inbound transit access to the city can only be accomplished by crossing over the tracks to the

inbound platform. In order to achieve the transit mode share that is desired new stairway connections will be required.

2. The nature of Greenlodge Street will be changed significantly if it becomes a highway access ramp. To accommodate this new function, Greenlodge Street may be rebuilt as a facility that is wider and higher than the present stump. This may be a major opportunity for improvements to pedestrian transit access by building new access beneath the new roadway and adjacent to the tracks.
3. Rebuilding Greenlodge Street may require elimination of a local street through the portion of the residential/retail area closest to the MBTA station. This could open the possibility of a traffic-free residential precinct adjacent to transit – perhaps a first for Massachusetts. Without the local street, it is possible that no walker would need to walk more than 700—800 feet through this precinct (roughly 2-3 minutes) from a parking garage or a shuttle bus stop to reach the MBTA station.
4. Pedestrian paths through this precinct could take the form of covered ways – perhaps awnings along the fronts of retail spaces could provide protection for commuters during inclement weather.

On-site recreation

In the absence of parklands for active on-site recreation, the developer may want to consider adding sites for recreational walking or markers that encourage walking.

1. In Westwood a band of open space acts as a buffer between commercial buildings and the residential community along Whitewood Road. (See Figure 2-13) As shown in Figure 1-3 this open space is to be enlarged by a contribution of project area land that would continue this buffer to Blue Hill Drive. It would be interesting to explore a pedestrian path and nature walk in this wooded area that could be enjoyed by both on-site residents, employees and nearby Westwood residents.
2. The area might warrant provision of a playing field for baseball or other outdoor sports. Perhaps sufficient space for a full-sized playing field could be found in the portion of the project near the intersection of Rosemont Road and Westwood Station Boulevard. The space could be shared by the 1500-2000 on-site residents with nearby Westwood residents. Safe pedestrian connections to this site from residential areas will be imperative.
3. Pedestrian access to the adjacent Neponset River Reservation for residents or employees does not currently exist, and access from the site to the river is impeded by the MBTA tracks. Residential development along this edge of the site may be sufficiently elevated above parking garages and the railroad tracks for a pleasant view of the river, but in the plan no direct pedestrian access to the riverfront is shown. One opportunity for pedestrian access to the river may be the proposed Neponset River Wildlife/Pedestrian underpass, a combination unique in our experience. (See Figure 5-28) To be constructed as part of the Add-a-Lane project on Route I-95, this underpass and any walkways within the adjacent park and conservations lands might be connected via the Greenlodge Street alignment to this development site. The result could be a riverfront nature walk only a five-minute walk from the development.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project. Please feel free to contact us for clarification or additional comments. We look forward to the coming phases of developing this exciting project.

Sincerely

Robert Sloane
Senior Planner