

FURTHER COMMENTS ON LONGFELLOW BRIDGE OPTIONS
As Described in Bill Logue's September 30, 2010 Draft Narrative
Submitted by Bob O'Brien of Downtown North Association

With Regard to the Background Information: It is well worth noting that until quite recently, and for many decades before that, the Longfellow Bridge was owned, operated and maintained by the Department of Conservation and Recreation or its predecessor, the Metropolitan District Commission. These two agencies also long had responsibility for the Charles River over which the Longfellow Bridge crosses and the Boston and Cambridge parklands that it connects. The nature and scope of this DCR/MDC jurisdiction clearly reflected the longstanding public and legislative understanding that the Longfellow Bridge was an integral element of the Charles River parkland system; and reference to that relevant history is conspicuous by its absence.

With Regard to the Scope of the Longfellow Bridge Reconstruction Project: The background information referenced above is a matter of more than just historical interest since it underlies the conviction of many on the Task Force that the scope of the Longfellow Bridge reconstruction project should necessarily include its connection to the Esplanade and Memorial Drive parklands. That conviction is strengthened by the fact that, as a practical matter, the full multimodal potential of the range of bridge-center cross-sections now being considered cannot be fully realized unless and until the bridge approaches are redesigned and operated in order to accommodate those new options, which is certainly not currently the case.

The September 30th draft narrative emphasizes the relevance of these parkland connections to an extent not evident at the outset of the Task Force process; and that is encouraging and commendable. But it does so in a manner that seems to suggest that for the most part, these connections are important collateral considerations that could/should/must be addressed as somewhat separate matters, either financially and/or chronologically. I believe that the Task Force, in its advisory capacity, would support a more definitive position – i.e., that the parkland connections should be integral element of the Longfellow Bridge reconstruction project as a whole. And I would, therefore, suggest that that position should be reflected and reinforced in the draft narrative that will be made available for public comments at the October 6th public meeting.

With Regard to Specific Additional Scope Elements: If such an expended project scope were to be recommended, I would further suggest that the following issues/opportunities should be explicitly acknowledged to be within that evaluation scope:

- ❖ The capacity, efficiency, safety and convenience of the pedestrian and bicycle links between the Longfellow Bridge and the parkland in Boston and Cambridge, with particular attention to the types of linkage possibilities presented by the Esplanade Association and the pedestrian bridge strategies presented by Miguel Rosales, both of which met with the overwhelming approval of the Task Force, as noted in the September 30th narrative.
- ❖ The capacity, efficiency, safety and convenience of the pedestrian, bicycle and motor vehicle connections to the street and sidewalk networks in both Boston and Cambridge, with particular attention to the changes in signalization, circulation, signage and striping patterns at Charles Circle in particular that could be made before or during the bridge reconstruction process.

- ❖ The proposed/possible widening of the bridge approaches at and around Charles Circle either through the cantilevering of the deck and/or the relocation of the foundation wall, with particular attention to the multimodal benefits that might thereby be achieved and the 4F and others historic and parkland consequences that would be involved.
- ❖ The proposed two-lane and three-lane inbound motor vehicle approach options to and at Charles Circle, and their implications for the capacity, efficiency, safety and convenience of pedestrian and bicycle circulation through this area in light of the various scenarios made possible by any of the strategies enumerated immediately above.

With Regard to the Range of Options to Be Evaluated in the Environmental Assessment:

Although I do not have any significant objections to the range of options being recommended for the outbound side of the bridge, on the inbound side, I would strongly argue that the option of a convertible lane inbound should be included in the mix. In so doing, I acknowledge that I have been an advocate of this option I previous Task Force writings and discussions; and on that basis, I am not only sensitive to the your repeated cautions about pride-of-authorship issues, but also to the criticisms of this strategy by those whose opinions I respect and value. Nonetheless, after having reviewed with some care the options that are now being recommended

for further consideration, I would suggest that the array of inbound options described in the September 30th draft would be incomplete and inadequate, both substantively and procedurally, without the addition of a convertible-lane option:

- ❖ ***As for more procedural considerations.*** Notwithstanding the many interesting and innovative design ideas that have emerged from the Task Force deliberations to date, it is important to remember that at this stage in the planning process the Task Force is not actually charged with task of designing the Longfellow Bridge. Rather, we are first charged with designing the scope of the Environmental Assessment, from which criteria for that design will ultimately emerge.

For the sake of comparison at least, that environmental assessment process should consider and evaluate a series of instructive alternatives, including those that many may consider less than optimal, precisely because their evaluation of which would in some important ways inform, influence and support a preferred option. In the outbound direction, for example, even though few if any recommend or expect that the existing two-motor-vehicle-lanes option would/should be continued, it is being recommended for evaluation in the environmental assessment process as a base case that will provide a relevant frame of reference for the comparison and evaluation of other more preferable options. And that procedural rigor and logic should apply in the inbound direction as well.

The range of inbound options now being recommended for further environmental assessment includes:

- One configuration of a single permanent lane of motor vehicle traffic, with generous allowances for pedestrian and bicycle circulation – essentially a variation of the preferred outbound strategy.
- Another configuration of two permanent lanes of motor vehicle traffic, with far less adequate pedestrian and bicycle provisions at all locations and quite problematic conditions at various pinch points and in the final Charles Circle approach – a case that is being well documented by other commenters.

- A third and final configuration that employs an innovative hour-glass strategy, which gradually varies the cross-section between one and two motor-vehicle lanes over the course of the bridge span, with corresponding increases or decreases in pedestrian and bicycle capacity.

Based on the Task Force discussions to date, these three options clearly merit further evaluation, as is already being recommended in the September 30th draft narrative. But I would suggest that the fourth alternative of a convertible lane also deserves a place on the comparative continuum.

- ❖ On the one hand, the convertible lane strategy is arguably less permanent and more flexible than the more innovative hourglass approach, to which it surely warrants a more systematic evaluative comparison. On the other hand, it is an intermediate approach that is intended to combine the advantages of two other options already under consideration:
 - Two motor vehicle lanes only when they are most needed during and between peak commuter traffic periods – e.g., 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM – during which other peak-period traffic management strategies like HOV restrictions might also be considered.
 - One motor vehicle lane when that is all that is required and much more spacious pedestrian and bicycle circulation is wanted – i.e., the evenings, nights, weekends and holidays account for about two-thirds of the total time that the bridge is actually available for use.

For that reason, from a procedural perspective, an evaluation of the two elements of a convertible plan is already implicit in the evaluation of these other two options; and making that evaluation explicit for the convertible lane option would inevitably and appropriately focus more attention on off-peak period utilization in all of the other options.

- ❖ **As for more substantive considerations:** I am seriously concerned that by unduly constraining our in-bound cross-section options at this point in the analysis we may be limiting ourselves to a choice between one-vehicle-lane option that will not survive the traffic modeling process and a two-traffic-lane option that may not provide adequate and acceptable multimodal balance and will devote more pavement to the motor vehicles than is demonstrably necessary. In that event, the advantage will likely go to the latter option in a zero-sum game; and the only alternative now being considered is the innovative hourglass approach, which could well prove on further analysis to have problems that are not yet fully predictable.

In that context, I do not believe that it makes much sense to limit options by excluding a convertible lane strategy that has been successfully and extensively applied elsewhere in Downtown Boston and could conceivably create a positive sum outcome. Examples of convertible lanes have recently included the curb management policies and procedures for the downtown CAT surface right-of way, which were formulated by the Mayor's Surface Transportation Action Forum. These included conversion of moving traffic lanes at peak periods to parking and other purposes during off-peak traffic periods when this area is the principle domain of residents, tourists and visitors rather than commuters. And that record suggests that a demonstrated convertible option at least deserves serious consideration along with an innovative and arguably less well-documented approach like the hourglass.

That is not to suggest that the convertible lane strategy is without some well-known problems – specifically including its additional enforcement, signage and educational requirements, as has been pointed out by others on the Task Force and as is noted in the September 30th draft narrative. It is also not to suggest that the convertible lane strategy would/should be the preferred option that would ultimately emerge from the environmental assessment process. It is simply to suggest that the cost/benefit equation weighs far more strongly in favor of inclusion of this option over exclusion. Given the challenging constraints that we obviously face in this process, there seems little point in foreclosing an option for the Longfellow Bridge that we may need in the future and the evaluation of which may shed more light all of the options under consideration.

Post Script: Just a brief personal note about the enforcement, education and signage requirements of a convertible lane strategy. I am old enough to remember when virtually everyone – myself included -- smoked cigarettes and did so virtually everywhere in public and private. Indeed, I distinctly recall when it was considered unusual, if not downright rude or inconsiderate, to ask someone not to smoke. It seemed almost inconceivable then that in not very many years a successful campaign would be undertaken to reduce or eliminate smoking, in public and private spaces alike. And when one was suggested, many feared and/or predicted that such an effort would involve enforcement, educational and signage requirements that would be impractical, intrusive or otherwise unacceptable – if not completely idealistic or naïve. Little did we know; and now such requirements are the exception and not the rule.

In more recent years, it has long struck me that a similar phenomenon is now occurring with regard to the rights and roles of pedestrian and bicyclists in an increasingly multimodal and energy conscious urban environment. Indeed, more than a few Task Force members and observers are primarily responsible for that change. And at this point in that process, far from being inconceivable, the successful realization of a more balanced transportation system actually seems inevitable. It is only a matter of time; and in that regard, time is moving faster all of the time.

Given that past and continuing experience, I less intimidated by the potential interim requirements of additional enforcement, signage and education; and I am more alert to opportunities to advance and accelerate the process of change for the better. I think that the Longfellow Bridge project, with public visibility and multimodal history, could well be, and probably should be, just such an opportunity.