



July 21, 2023

Governor Maura Healey
Office of Constituent Services
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon St.
Office of the Governor, Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

Secretary Rebecca Tepper
Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs
100 Cambridge St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02114

Secretary Gina Fiandaca
MassDOT
State Transportation Building
10 Park Plaza
Suite 4160
Boston, MA 02116

Commissioner Brian Arrigo
Department of Conservation & Recreation
State Transportation Building
10 Park Plaza
Suite 6620
Boston, MA 02116

Dear Governor Healey, Secretary Tepper, Secretary Fiandaca, and Commissioner Arrigo,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) is writing in regards to the Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing bridge project¹, led by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). We are very excited for the construction of this long-awaited bridge², but are concerned that the proposed 12-foot deck (path) width will not adequately support safe and comfortable travel for users of all ages and abilities. Most recently, these concerns were voiced to the DCR by the Somerville Transit Equity Partnership (STEP) and Friends of the Community Path. Four years ago³, a chorus of groups shared the same concerns, including Bike to the Sea, Boston Cyclists Union, Cambridge Bicycle Safety, Conservation Law Foundation, East Coast Greenway Alliance, Friends of the Community Path, Friends of the Mystic Connector, the Lawrence & Lillian Solomon Foundation, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Medford Bicycle Advisory Committee, Mystic River Watershed Association, Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee, WalkMassachusetts, Boston Harbor Now, and several individual Somerville residents⁴. We join these groups in requesting that the DCR restore the deck width to 14 feet, as it was in the project's 2018 conceptual design⁵. Notably, there have been no public meetings about the project in the five years since the conceptual design was presented.

Background

The proposed Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing will provide a safe, off-road, shared use path over the Mystic River between the Fellsway and Route 99/Alford Street. This will be a critical connection between the Mystic River Greenway

¹ William Henry Conroy, "Project 612004: Everett-Somerville Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing," Project Information: MassDOT, February 6, 2023,

https://hwy.massdot.state.ma.us/ProjectInfo/Main.asp?ACTION=ViewProject&PROJECT_NO=612004#.

² Streetsblog Massachusetts, "Car-Free Mystic River Bridge Will Begin Construction in 2024," June 20, 2023,

<https://mass.streetsblog.org/2023/06/20/car-free-mystic-river-bridge-will-begin-construction-in-2024>.

³ Kathleen A. Theoharides, "Certificate of the Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs on the Environmental Notification Form: Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing," May 24, 2019,

<https://eeaonline.eea.state.ma.us/EEA/emepa/mepadocs/2019/061019em/sc/enf/16015%20Mystic%20River%20Bicycle%20and%20Pedestrian%20Crossing.pdf>.

⁴ Somerville PTAC did not exist in 2019 so, regrettably, could not join this chorus!

⁵ Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), "Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing: DCR Public Meeting" (Everett, MA, February 14, 2018),

<https://www.mass.gov/files/mystic-river-bicycle-and-pedestrian-crossing-presentation-2-14-18.pdf>.

passing through Assembly Square in Somerville and the Northern Strand Trail passing by Encore Casino in Everett. Currently, the only viable connections between these nodes require vulnerable road users to traverse dangerous roads and intersections, namely Route 28 to the north or the traffic circle off of Mystic Ave to the south. The Crossing will drastically improve this situation, strengthening the network of shared use paths between Somerville, Everett, Malden, Boston, and beyond to support non-vehicular travel modes. Further, it will provide Everett residents a more direct connection to the Orange Line MBTA station in Assembly Square.

The Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing project is at the 75% design phase as of February 2023. The project is expected to undergo a bidding process by the end of this year, break ground in 2024, and finish construction in 2026. There have been no public meetings about the project since the DCR unveiled the conceptual design in February 2018. This is particularly concerning given that the conceptual design included a 14-foot deck width. In the intervening five years, the deck width was narrowed by two feet without a public meeting held.

Bridge Width

The 75% design specifies a 12-foot deck width. This is the same width as the narrowest segments of the newly opened Somerville Community Path Extension (CPX), inclusive of the path itself and the 1-foot gravel edging⁶. While the CPX is an enormous benefit to our community, concerns have already been raised about its ability to comfortably support multiple modes at its narrowest points – particularly where the path is lined by fencing on either side. With a 12-foot deck surrounded by nothing but water, the Crossing has the potential to reproduce these less-than-ideal conditions on the CPX.

State⁷ and federal⁸ standards along with a state-funded study by the VHB (2009)⁹ call for a 14-foot deck width. In the very same MEPA Certificate where the State approved a 12-foot deck width, MA Secretary of Energy & Environmental Affairs Kathleen A. Theoharides stated: “I expect the proponent [DCR] to consider increasing the width of the bridge to maximize the significant investment.”¹⁰ The justification offered by DCR for reducing the width is that “narrower paths of travel will help to reduce the speed of the bicyclist” and “reduction in width would yield substantial cost savings with minimal impact to the viability of the bridge.” We, along with the many community organizations listed above, hold a different view of safety. A safe deck width must comfortably accommodate all users, including those using wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers, as well as those walking side-by-side in both directions (as is typical). It must also offer space for users to rest and make way for other users. This is particularly important given that users will not be able to exit the bridge midway across. As such, we are concerned a 12-foot width will not adequately support the expected volumes of 2,040 pedestrians and 350 cyclists on weekdays (2,320 pedestrians and 390 cyclists on weekends)¹¹.

Thank you for your consideration. With the Crossing project at 75% design and going out to bid by the end of the year, there is a time-sensitive opportunity to ensure a 14-foot deck width, as called for by state-funded studies and state and federal standards.

Sincerely,
The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

Ted Alexander	Christopher Ferry
Ginny Alverson	Vitor Pamplona, <i>Vice Chair</i>
Caroline Bodager	Zach Rosenberg
Meredith Brown	Alessandra Seiter, <i>Chair</i>
Laura Evans	Carole Voulgaris, <i>Secretary</i>

⁶ City of Somerville, “MBTA GLX Community Path” (Somerville, MA, April 2021), https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema.gov-if-us-east-1/s3fs-public/Community_Path.pdf.

⁷ MassDOT, “Shared Use Paths and Greenways” (2006), <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/08/nq/ch-11.pdf>.

⁸ AASHTO, “Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities, 4th ed” (2012), <https://njdotlocalaidrc.com/perch/resources/aashto-qb-4-2012-bicycle.pdf>.

⁹ VHB. “Alternatives Analysis” (June 2009), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzyjGvNUuLdpZXM4NHBFYXA2WE9SSUtXTVR3eUZLUzBFc2h3/view?usp=sharing>.

¹⁰ Theoharides, K.A. May 2019.

¹¹ Massachusetts DCR, February 2018.

CC: Patricia D. Jehlen, MA Senator from the 2nd Middlesex District
Christine Barber, MA House Representative from the 27th Middlesex District
Erika Uyterhoeven, MA House Representative from the 27th Middlesex District
Mike Connolly, MA House Representative from the 26th Middlesex District
Katjana Ballantyne, Mayor of Somerville
Ben Ewen-Campen, City Council President and Ward 3 Councilor, City of Somerville
OSPCD Mobility, City of Somerville