



**River Street Reconstruction
Working Group Meeting**



Tuesday, February 26, 2019

6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

**Manning Apartments 1st Floor
237 Franklin Street – Community Room**

ATTENDEES

Working Group Members	City Staff	Public
Daniel Beaulieu	Patrick Baxter – TP&T	Norma Barrett
Sai Boddupalli	Bill Deignan - CDD	Solveig Galbo
Valerie Bonds	Jerry Friedman - DPW	John Goodman
Matthew Ciborowski	Justin Schreiber - CDD	Cathy Hoffman
Abby Duker	Rach Tanenhaus-CCPD	Young Sook Kim
Melissa Greene	Tegin Teich - CDD	Judith Nathans
Kai Long	Kathy Watkins - DPW	Dylan Russell
Andrew Tarsy Founder	Frank Gutoski - CPD	Carolyn Shipley
Christopher Tassone	Charlie Sullivan – Historical Commission	Frank Stone
Annie Tuan	Consultants	Olivia Turner
Randy Stern	Christi Apicella	James Williamson
Sam Gebru	Arthur Bonney	Robert Winters
Not here:	Nidhi Gulati	
Patrick Barrett	Rick Plenge	
Gabriel Cira	Natalie Raffol	
Neil Rodriquez	Cynthia Smith	
Oliver Turner	Nneka Sobers	
	Peter Stidman	

Key:

CCPD = Cambridge Commission for Persons with Disabilities

CPD = Cambridge Police Department

CDD = Community Development Department

DPW = Public Works

TP&T = Traffic Parking & Transportation

MEETING SUMMARY

The following is a meeting summary of the Working Group Meeting #2 for the City of Cambridge's River Street Reconstruction Project. For more information see Cambridgema.gov/riverstreet.

1. Introductions

The meeting was initiated by Tegin Teich, Transportation Planner for the City of Cambridge, with a review of the schedule and ground rules. Generally, the Working Group will meet on the 4th Tuesday of the month. However, since the first public meeting being held on March 23rd, 2019 coincides with the regularly scheduled working group meeting, the next working group meeting will be held April 23, 2019.

2. Your Input/Developing Trends

Tegin reviewed themes identified from the public input provided by group members at Working Group meeting #1, including:

1. Making the street safer, particularly by slowing traffic
2. Making the street more accessible, both from the perspective of people with disabilities, but also with respect to residents' circulation and access
3. Enhancing public space to make it more livable, comfortable, and pleasant
4. Supporting local businesses
5. Making travel easier and more efficient for all people traveling – e.g. addressing points of more severe congestion, thinking about school traffic, and helping buses carrying many passengers through the congestion.

This input was compared to goals from Envision Cambridge. Other transportation related city plans and polices were reviewed at Working Group meeting #1 and links to them are available on the project website.

Some Working Group members expressed interest in turning River Street back to a neighborhood street and enhancing the existing neighborhood character.

3. History of Project Area

Charlie Sullivan, Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission, provided a presentation on the history of River Street. His presentation began by looking back at the earliest bridges and turnpikes in and around Cambridge, focusing on River Street's changing role in the regional transportation network.

Originally Cambridge was very isolated from Boston, as the only way between the two was via ferry. As new connections created by turnpikes and bridges opened up, western towns, and Cambridge became the site of the first street car railway, the routes of which still resemble current MBTA bus routes.

Charlie focused on an image from 1946 showing long crosswalks in the middle of Central Square as an early attempt to provide safety for pedestrians. In 1968 a traffic island with benches and trees was put in the intersection at Central Square, and that island evolved into what Carl Barron Plaza is today. The current median islands at and between the intersections with Massachusetts Avenue and Green Street help define the space and reduce the length of existing crosswalks.

Charlie described the wetlands and a tidal mill that occupied the River Street neighborhood, also showing how much land was filled in to create Memorial Drive. When the Massachusetts Turnpike's Boston Extension was completed in the 1960s, River Street and Western Avenue became one-way pairs to accommodate traffic going to and from the turnpike. Around this time the area close to River Street and Memorial Drive was being developed, and neighborhood complaints of traffic and trucks traveling at high speeds began. The full presentation from Mr. Sullivan is available on the project website.

4. Existing Conditions

Jerry Friedman, River Street Reconstruction project manager for the Department of Public Works, started the existing conditions discussion with a review of the basic infrastructure on River Street. The overview included the following elements:

- **Subsurface infrastructure issues:** Much of the infrastructure under River Street, including the sewer and stormwater collection system, is very old and outdated. A segment of the sewer system, near Central Square, is still connected to the stormwater system which can combine sewage with stormwater that drains to the Charles River during major rainfall events. Many of the catch basins within the project area are substandard, do not promote good water quality, and are prone to clogging due to their outdated design. Modern green infrastructure can help reduce the volume of stormwater entering the drainage system and reduce the amount of pollution going into the Charles River. Furthermore, a reduction in stormwater volume entering the combined sewer systems connected to the MWRA sewer system reduces the City's cost for stormwater treatment. The existing water distribution system along River Street is also older and will be enlarged to provide greater capacity. Other utilities will also have an opportunity to upgrade their infrastructure before the reconstruction takes place.
- **Surface Condition issues:** Jerry spoke about the various aspects of the surface work that will be addressed, and for which some existing conditions data was covered later in the presentation. He highlighted the poor accessibility of pedestrian crossings, including existing non-ADA compliant ramps and potholes, the extent of the current tree canopy cover, and emphasized that street lighting will be replaced by the project.
- **Urban Design:** These are mainly subjective elements that improve the experience for people using the street such as the street furniture, look and feel of the buildings, incorporation of art and playful elements, and landscaping. A question was asked about a percentage goal for tree canopy cover, to which Jerry responded that the City's goal is to maximize canopy coverage and look at regular spacing of trees. Cambridge is in the process of completing an Urban Forestry Master Plan, which will help this project strategize on selecting tree species, improving soil conditions, and setting goals for increasing the tree canopy.

Tegin summarized transportation-related aspects of the existing conditions. She began by looking at River Street in the regional context, taking into account the large amount of development expected by Harvard in Allston in the coming years following the reconstruction of the Mass. Turnpike and as part of the Harvard Institutional Master Plan. She made the point that even if this project weren't happening, existing conditions around River Street would change, likely having an effect on River Street. She also said that this project should take into account that nearby change. Existing conditions provide information on where we are now, but Tegin explained that we still have to design for where we want to be.

Tegin reviewed the existing cross section of River Street and showed the differing character of the corridor from end-to-end, with the western end feeling and appearing more car-centric and eastern end near Central Square more multimodal. The number of people walking, biking, taking MBTA buses, and driving on the corridor were measured at multiple points on River Street and displayed in charts. The data show that a smaller percentage of people drive near Green Street compared to at Memorial Drive and Putnam Ave, but there is still room for improvement to reach the City's goals for reducing worker and resident drive alone commute trips. A member of the public requested to see a comparison to how people travel on Western Avenue, which the City said it will provide in future working group meetings.

Tegin reviewed the following topics as part of the existing conditions overview for River Street:

- Vehicle Speeds: Higher speeds were recorded east of Pleasant Street as compared to West of Putnam Avenue.
- Vehicle Type by Hour: Patrick Baxter, City of Cambridge Transportation and Parking, provided a history of trucks based on a discussion from the last meeting. A truck prohibition was enacted by the City in 1999, but overturned by MassHighway (now MassDOT – Highway Division). Since then localized truck restrictions have been in place, for example on Putnam Avenue, but they are hard to enforce as they do not apply to trucks with destinations on a street or to trucks taking the shortest and most reasonable route to get to a nearby destination. To get a restriction placed on a street, there also needs to be a MassDOT-approved alternate street following approximately the same route. In addition, hazardous material carriers (HAZMAT) have not been able to travel through the Prudential Tunnel on I-90 in Boston since 1968. The signed HAZMAT routes in Cambridge include River Street, which is the only option for this segment of the trip between I-90 and I-93.
- Crashes: Although the data shows 24 crashes at Memorial Drive and only two at Green Street, those at Green Street both involved bikes/pedestrians. The city's commitment to Vision Zero affirms the idea that even a single death or serious injury on our streets is too many. Overall, the crash data is consistent with the corridor and intersection configurations in that the types of crashes shown seem logical for the types of intersections and street configurations that are there today.
- Pedestrian & Bicycle Facilities: There distance between pedestrian crossings make them convenient and may be leading to people choosing to cross where there are not crosswalks. Bicycle parking is concentrated towards Central Square. A question was asked about the existing bicycle lane and Tegin clarified that it is 4-foot wide, which is the bare minimum for this type of facility along the curb, but it is not comfortable for most riders, particularly when riding next to larger vehicles like trucks or buses.

- **Bicycle Level of Comfort:** This measures a rider's tolerance for traffic stress, 1 being the least stressful and 4 the most stressful. River Street is now rated 3 or worse, while most of Western Avenue, with its separated bicycle lane, rates as a 1 or 2.
- **Vehicle Operations:** Measured traffic queues were shown, which are an average over a three-hour period. Because of the three-hour average, it was acknowledged that people sometimes see longer queues for a shorter period of time, but it was also noted that we may not want to design for the worst-case scenario. Adding capacity for car travel tends to attract more drivers to the road.
- **Transit Operations and Bus Ridership:** Buses experience the same congestion as vehicles, with the Central Square area resulting in the most delay and unreliability in the corridor. Although there aren't a large number of people using stops along River Street compared to Central Square, the buses are carrying a relatively large number of people per day on River Street (up to 2,000) in only a very small number of vehicles compared to the overall traffic. So, providing the buses with preference encourages bus ridership and moves people through the corridor without adding traffic. It can also be challenging to reach stops by foot due to surface accessibility issues mentioned by Jerry, and not all the stops meet current accessibility standards.
- **Curbside space:** There are currently many different ways in which the curbside space is used on River Street, including storing vehicles/parking (most of which is unregulated), commercial-loading zones, bus stops, and a bike lane. These current uses only make up a small number of the ways that curbside space could be used. Some additional possible uses were summarized in a chart describing the "flexible toolbox" for curbside space and include but are not limited to: curb bumpouts, pick-up/dropoff, food truck parking, parklets, public art, plantings, rain gardens, additional ways to move people (e.g. bus lanes), and different kinds of storage/parking. There is a large range of uses to think about that could use the space on the curb.
- **Vehicle storage:** Most parking on River Street is unregulated and heavily used. Unregulated means that there are no specific restrictions on storing a vehicle there, other than street cleaning restrictions. Most other curbside space in the neighborhood is specified as parking for residents only. There are 13-metered spaces near Central Square which are heavily used in the evening, when that parking also becomes unregulated.

5. Carl Barron Plaza Charette

Nidhi Gulati of the Project for Public Spaces provided an overview of planning for the Carl Barron Plaza Charrette. They will work with the Project Team to understand how people use Carl Barron Plaza, including where they linger and where and how they pass through the space. Three phases of the process include:

- Information gathering and sharing through in-depth interviews with area stakeholders and focus groups
- Design of engagement activities for the May open house

- Design charrette on Thursday June 20 and Saturday June 22, 2019 (dates to be confirmed)
- Outdoor day of engagement on June 23, 2019 (date to be confirmed)

Working Group members commented that there are social issues surrounding the space, including its use of the space related to the proximity to traditional/short term housing and services for the homeless people. Working Group members acknowledged the importance of space serving everyone and providing dignity to those who use it, members expressed the opinion that the way the space currently works doesn't promote that dignity and also noted the presence of sexual harassment and drug and alcohol use. It was mentioned that families do not always feel comfortable accessing Central Square through this area at night or certain periods of the day. Nidhi expressed the goal to accommodate the current users of the space as well as inviting new ones. She acknowledged that there is a delicate balance for engagement in this type of area, and Project for Public Spaces has experience working in other places with similar issues, assets, and challenges.

Public Comments

When public comments were asked for, no one present raised their hand to speak.

6. Next Steps

Tegin wrapped up the meeting by providing a brief overview of online methods for collecting input, **including the Public Input Map (wikimap) and comment form, which are both now live.** These are linked on the project website at Cambridgema.gov/riverstreet.

The first public meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 26, 2019 at the Cambridge Community Center Gymnasium at 5 Callendar Street from 6:00PM – 8:30PM. Doors will open at 6:00 PM, for food, refreshments, and viewing project/existing conditions information. The presentation will start at 6:30 PM. The agenda will include an overview of the project scope and schedule and an opportunity to comment directly on issues as well as issues and opportunities that people feel are present on River Street. Members of the Working Group will be able to download the flyer for the public meeting to distribute. The flyer will also be shared via email, social media, distributed door-to-door, and posted at communal places like the Senior Center.

The next Working Group meeting #3 will be held on Tuesday, April 23, 2019. The meeting will review feedback from the public meeting and public input map, allow for exploration of details of the existing conditions, and start to consider where there are competing demands for space on the street and how this information will lead to developing project goals and exploring design options.