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Decision of the Secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation: Preferred Alternative for the “Throat” Section Allston Multimodal Project

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The Allston Multimodal Project has been the subject of intense public engagement and design development for more than four years, and the time has come to select a Preferred Alternative for the so-called “throat” portion of the project. While the viaduct is safe, it is in need of replacement soon, and so it is imperative that environmental review, and ultimately the overall project, move forward expeditiously. I am confident that the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) now has all of the information needed to select the Preferred Alternative, particularly given the extraordinary recent work of the Independent Review Team (IRT), as described below.

Every design alternative for the throat that was considered by the IRT or that was suggested by stakeholders such as A Better City has its advantages and disadvantages. A project of this scale and complexity involves trade-offs and will require compromise. The task at hand is to select the alternative that best balances the present-day and future mobility needs of local and regional drivers, transit users, cyclists, and pedestrians; the imperative to protect and enhance as best as possible the natural and historic resources and public realm of the Charles River Basin; and the aspirations of the neighboring Allston community.

The alternative that best achieves this balance is one of the ‘Hybrid’ options called the Highway At-Grade Hybrid With Elevated Soldiers Field Road. In this option, I-90 is relocated off of its current viaduct and placed approximately at-grade and Soldiers Field Road is instead elevated on a viaduct. This Hybrid option incorporates, updates, and improves upon aspects of the three design concepts presented in the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the overall project. This option keeps infrastructure out of the Charles River and away from its banks, creating more parkland while simultaneously creating enough room to separate pedestrians and cyclists on the Paul Dudley White Path. It meets the needs of the drivers of the cars and trucks using Soldiers Field Road and I-90, providing shoulders that ensure safe and effective highway operations. And, importantly, it preserves the potential for future public transit service between Allston and Cambridge using the MassDOT-owned Grand Junction Railroad corridor, and makes possible a north-south bicycle and pedestrian connection between the Allston neighborhood and the Charles River parks and paths in the vicinity of Harry Agganis Way.

I select the Hybrid despite the fact that it requires a long and complicated construction period that will disrupt travelers whether they are in cars or trucks, on commuter rail, or walking or cycling on the Paul Dudley White Path. All of the At-Grade and Hybrid design options feature longer construction periods than design concepts that are more similar to the I-90 viaduct that exists today (e.g. more elevated infrastructure). But because the Allston Multimodal Project

must stand the test of time and leave our region the better for it, I believe MassDOT should place more weight on the final condition of the infrastructure than on the construction-period duration and challenges. MassDOT will work to manage the construction period challenges as best as possible, but I believe the disruptions and costs of a longer and more impactful construction period are justified by the ultimate benefits.

As explained below, the At-Grade Family of design options has been eliminated from further consideration because it would require extending transportation infrastructure right up to the bank of the Charles River and likely into the river itself. These options create unacceptable impacts on the water, parkland, and historic resources of the Charles River Basin, and make at-grade options challenging if not impossible to permit.

The remainder of this memorandum will lay out in more detail the alternatives evaluated, the considerations used in making this decision, why other alternatives were eliminated, and what happens next.

I. Background

The throat is a 2,500-foot, relatively narrow area at the eastern end of the larger Allston Multimodal Project site. The throat area is bordered to the north by the Charles River, to the south by the Boston University (“BU”) campus, to the east by the BU and Commonwealth Avenue bridges, and to the west by Harry Agganis Way. This is a compact and complicated area that includes multiple high-volume roadways, crucial passenger and freight rail infrastructure, a regionally important multiuse path, and landmark, historically significant open space along the Charles River. The throat contains five critical pieces of transportation infrastructure: (1) Interstate 90 (the Massachusetts Turnpike), (2) Soldiers Field Road (an extension of Storrow Drive), (3) the Worcester Main Line railroad (used for MBTA commuter rail between Worcester and Boston, rail freight, and Amtrak), (4) the Grand Junction Railroad/Grand Junction Bridge (used by freight trains and for moving MBTA and Amtrak passenger rail cars), and (5) the Paul Dudley White Path (an essential pedestrian and bicycle path along the shore of the Charles River).

In rebuilding the I-90 Viaduct, this small footprint must be made to work as well as possible for all users while also protecting existing rail service and allowing for future expansion, providing enhanced public space, and making way for possible future land and air-rights development.

A. Independent Review Team Evaluation

Six months ago, I commissioned a multidisciplinary team of planners, engineers, and environmental permitting experts – the Independent Review Team (IRT) mentioned above – to perform a fresh analysis of the options for reimagining the Allston I-90 viaduct in the area between the BU Bridge and Harry Agganis Way, colloquially known as the “throat.” Over the past six months, an immense amount of work and thought has gone into the process of reviewing the work that has been done to date, generating alternatives for the throat, assessing the pros and cons of those alternatives, and engaging the public and particularly the Allston I-90 Project Task Force in evaluating the different alternatives.

With intense collaboration with project stakeholders, the team considered the five major transportation elements in the throat, weighed the need for those elements to function well to the greatest extent possible during construction, and evaluated how the elements could be permanently arranged so as to provide maximum capacity and flexibility to meet the current and future transportation needs of all users. For all of this work, I want to thank the members of the IRT, Allston I-90 Project Task Force members, MassDOT staff, the Department of Conservation & Recreation, the City of Boston, and all of the other individuals and organizations who put so much time, energy, and thought into this process.

The IRT's work achieved what I had hoped it would: it offered a new perspective on the trade-offs and engineering challenges inherent in the design options for the throat area, and ensured that MassDOT did not miss any good ideas that might help to solve the problems that have made the throat such a challenging design puzzle.

The work done by the IRT was truly independent: no one within MassDOT dictated the nature of the design concepts the IRT produced.

B. Design Options Proposed and Evaluated

The work by the IRT ultimately included improving upon the design concepts that had been laid out in the DEIR and developing a new hybrid design that attempted to combine some of the strongest ideas in the other concepts while minimizing some of their greatest risks. The IRT then organized the various design options into three design 'families.' The families are differentiated by the elevation and organization of the five major transportation elements in the throat area. The design families are:

- The At-Grade Family - All five transportation elements are essentially at the grade of existing Soldiers Field Road, with no elements elevated or stacked over others.
- The Highway Viaduct Family – I-90 is elevated above the other elements, similar to today.
- The Highway At-Grade Hybrid Family (hereafter 'Hybrid') – I-90 is lowered to grade, and possibly below grade by as much as six feet for a short section of its length, while one of the other transportation elements (the rails, Soldiers Field Road, or the Paul Dudley White Path) is elevated on a viaduct.

I want to note that cost did not play a role in my decision among the alternatives. For the variants laid out by the IRT, the costs varied within a small range, from roughly \$1.1 billion to \$1.2 billion (in year-of-expenditure dollars). Given the extremely early and conceptual stage of the project and the certainty that cost estimates will change as design advances,

these cost differences are not significant enough to materially affect the choice of a Preferred Alternative.

C. Considerations That Shaped the Decision

The various alternatives – whether developed by the IRT, MassDOT, or others (such as A Better City, which played a critical role by suggesting a number of alternatives and variants) – all involve serious and meaningful trade-offs, both short- and long-term. They all attempt, in their own ways, to balance the many competing visions for the throat within its narrow physical parameters.

The considerations that shaped the selection of a Preferred Alternative fall into three broad categories, each with sub-factors, in order of priority:

- A. The ability of the final configuration of transportation elements to meet the mobility needs of local and regional users of all modes.
- B. The ability of the final configuration to avoid where possible and otherwise minimize adverse impacts to environmental, historic, and community resources and to enhance them where possible, and thus to receive the environmental permits it needs.
- C. Whether the project can be built without undue disruption to transportation system users, neighbors, and nearby environmental and historic resources.

These are now discussed in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.

A. Adequacy of Final Infrastructure Configuration and Connections

Four key issues need to be addressed in order to ensure that the project ultimately creates transportation infrastructure that is robust and flexible enough to meet the needs of current and future users:

1. Accommodating Future Transit Connections Across the Charles River

The promise of future new public transit services running through the throat area is a key element of the overall Allston Multimodal Project. In order to allow for such a service to travel from a future West Station, over the Grand Junction Bridge, and into Cambridge – whether this service be rail or bus rapid transit – the Grand Junction Railroad must cross from north to south across the throat area. Each Design Family makes this possible. The construction work required to accomplish it, however, is markedly different between the Hybrid and At-Grade Families, and the Viaduct Family. This topic will be discussed in detail later in this document.

Consequence: all design families enable rail and transit use on the Grand Junction Railroad.

2. Accommodating Future North-South Bicycle/Pedestrian Connections

Stakeholders have long called for a north-south connection over the throat, linking neighborhoods along Commonwealth Avenue with the riverfront and Paul Dudley White Path. Most discussion of this link has centered on a potential pedestrian and bicycle bridge extending northward from Harry Agganis Way adjacent to Nickerson Field. Many public comments to date have focused on the ability of different potential designs to accommodate such a connection.

The relative comfort and ease – or lack thereof – of travel through a potential north-south connection is driven primarily by the vertical height a connection would have to attain in order to get over four of the transportation elements (I-90, Soldiers Field Road, the Worcester Main Line, and the Grand Junction Railroad), and land on the Paul Dudley White Path. Every Design Family faces the same challenge of executing this connection safely and comfortably.

Existing overhead road crossings in Boston typically have an elevation change of 14 to 18 feet, requiring short ramps to reach the top. Because a pedestrian and bicycle bridge in the throat would be required to span an elevated roadway, such a bridge would be significantly taller and have much longer connections than do the Fanny Appleton Bridge, Arthur Fiedler Footbridge, or Magazine Beach Footbridge. For example, designs within the Hybrid Family could require a total length of up to 1,000 feet – more than three football fields – to connect from the Paul Dudley White Path to Harry Agganis Way.

The Highway Viaduct Family would require the largest change in elevation: approximately 30 to 35 feet on the Agganis Way side, and 45 to 50 feet on the Charles River side. This would entail a ramp approximately the length of one block of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall along Harry Agganis Way. The Hybrid Family of designs would require a shorter, but still potentially significant, vertical change. On the south side, this would be 5 to 10 feet (with a short ramp), while the north side would require 30 to 35 feet (with a ramp approximately the length of one block of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall). Even in the At-Grade Family, which would require the lowest height, a bridge would have substantial length and little to no room on the north side to connect to the Paul Dudley White Path.

I emphasize this challenge in order to help stakeholders understand the reality of what this connection would mean under the various design options. By no means would this connection be easy to access due to the long ramps and vertical changes, and such a connection could discourage users who are not comfortable making the trip and crossing over a highway. While I believe that all of the possible connections could be technically feasible, no connection would be ideal for users from a comfort, connectivity, or exertion perspective – the topography and infrastructure simply does not allow it.

Consequence: preserving the opportunity for a safe north-south connection for bicyclists and pedestrians is a key part of the Allston Multimodal Project, but the ultimate design will be challenging to develop and implement. By necessity, it would be higher than any other pedestrian bridge in the Boston area, with the Highway Viaduct Family requiring the highest structure and the Hybrid Family requiring slightly less elevation.

3. Grade-Separated Paul Dudley White Path

The current Paul Dudley White Path in the area of the throat is inadequate, with a width of no more than 8.5 feet in some locations and with no room for separation between pedestrians and bicyclists. Each Design Family would address this issue differently, but it is clear that the farther Soldiers Field Road can be moved south and away from the Charles River, the more space is available for a separated path for pedestrians and bicyclists. As a function of having all elements at the same elevation while at also trying to avoid impacts to the Charles River, the At-Grade Family provides the least overall path width, and no meaningful buffer from adjacent vehicular traffic. The Highway Viaduct and Hybrid families are each able to provide separate paths for pedestrians and bicyclists, as well as a buffer from automobile traffic.

Consequence: providing safe and comfortable facilities for non-motorized users through the throat requires additional space. The At-Grade Family does not provide that space, while the other Design Families do.

4. Roadway Safety and Operations

Since the beginning of the Allston Multimodal Project, there has been significant discussion about the width of shoulders on a future I-90 – what is necessary, what is safe, what is desirable, what is comfortable, and what is best for the operations of the road. It is correct that narrower roadways may allow for more open space and a wider Paul Dudley White Path, but it could also degrade the operations of the roadway, especially for maintenance activities, which would have real impacts on users of I-90 and could pose legitimate safety concerns.

Further, roadway widths are governed by federal regulation, and design waivers may be required to go outside the standard requirements. Obtaining a design waiver may be feasible, but a need to do so in order to implement a particular Design Family needs to be weighed in the decision about a Preferred Alternative.

I have examined all of the technical information that has been presented and I believe that I-90 will require shoulders of at least four feet on the right-most travel lanes; shoulders along the medians may be able to be narrower. A minimum of four-foot shoulders adjacent to the right travel lanes in both directions of I-90 are necessary for the safe and effective operation of the highway, including for drains of sufficient size to prevent flooding and ponding on the road surface and clearing snow in order to

keep I-90 open during storms. As MassDOT continues design development and analysis, including discussions with governing federal agencies, it is possible that shoulders will have to be widened. Any such changes would reduce the amount of available parkland.

Prior to the IRT report, shoulder width discussions tended to pit the safety and mobility of road users against stakeholder desires to bring all five transportation elements to grade, a false conflict that fails to recognize that there are legitimate needs on both sides of the argument. The At-Grade Family shrunk shoulder widths to the minimum in order to squeeze the transportation elements in the project limits with a goal of avoiding river impacts. We now know that the trade-off does not eliminate impacts to the Charles River. We also now know that the Hybrid Family provides the balance needed to create separated or shared facilities on the Paul Dudley White Path - including a sizeable buffer between the path and the roadway infrastructure. The size of this buffer will vary as the shoulder widths are finalized during design development and the best balance for all five of the transportation elements is established.

Consequence: shoulder widths will continue to change during design development of a Hybrid Family alternative, and changes will impact other design elements.

B. Adverse Impacts and Permitting

Four key issues need to be addressed in order to ensure that the project meets legal and permitting requirements to avoid or minimize adverse impacts to environmental, historic, and community resources, and to enhance them where possible:

1. Permitting Risk

Based on legal counsel and discussions with permitting agencies, it appears clear that any design for the throat area that creates a permanent impact on the Charles River is not legally permissible, as viable design alternatives exist that would allow the river – a protected resource under state and federal law – to remain un-impacted. The At-Grade Family requires altering or filling a significant portion of the Charles River in order to physically fit all five transportation elements, making it more impactful than the other two design families, and thereby almost certainly unpermissible.

Consequence: given that the At-Grade Family cannot obtain needed permits due to impacts on the Charles River, the Preferred Alternative needs to come from either the Highway Viaduct or the Hybrid Family, with at least one of the five elements elevated above one or more of the others in order to avoid impacting the river.

2. Impacts to the Charles River Basin Public Realm

The Charles River Basin is a regionally important public space. But within the throat, the current parkland is either occupied by Soldiers Field Road, disconnected from

public access (between Soldiers Field Road and I-90), or located along the edge of the river with insufficient width and no ability to comfortably separate bicyclists and pedestrians. Working with our partners at the Department of Conservation & Recreation, MassDOT would like to improve this section of parkland by creating pleasant, accessible, buffering spaces that enhance the visual and recreational quality of the riverfront. This requires moving Soldiers Field Road as far south and away from the river as possible.

Consequence: the At-Grade Family brings Soldiers Field Road extremely close to the riverfront, eliminating the possibility for new parkland to be created.

3. Impacts to Historic Resources

The Charles River Basin Historic District, which includes Soldiers Field Road and the Little Grand Junction Bridge, is listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places. All of the design options have some degree of effect on the historic district, but the Hybrid Family (and the At-Grade Family, as well) would have a significant impact by shifting the Interstate directly into the historic district. MassDOT is concerned that this intrusion into the historic district, combined with elevating Soldiers Field Road onto a viaduct immediately adjacent to the parkland and replacing the Little Grand Junction Bridge, could require a longer review process (under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966) that could significantly impact the project schedule and ultimately require changes to the design to cause less impact on historic resources.

Consequence: compared to the Highway Viaduct Family, the Hybrid Family has more risk for lengthy and potentially unsuccessful Section 106 and Section 4(f) review processes.

4. Community Impacts

The current highway viaduct can be seen from significant distances in both Boston and Cambridge, and the noise produced by trucks and other heavy vehicles climbing the steep grade or striking bridge joints can be heard across the river and in residential neighborhoods on both sides of the river. The Allston Multimodal Project has the ability to reduce that impact, although the sense of how best to do so is somewhat subjective. The visual impact of one transportation element being raised above others (such as in the Highway Viaduct Family and Hybrid Family) can create a “wall” effect that precludes views through to the other side, so reducing elevated infrastructure should provide some benefits and the visual impact of elevated infrastructure can be subdued by a visual barrier such as landscaping.

Noise impacts are extremely complex due to the nature of the area, with sound likely to reflect and travel in many different ways that will each be impacted by the final details of design. Given the sensitive issue of noise, leaving space in the detailed design process to create buffers and mitigation is the best course of action at this

time. MassDOT wishes to create a design that would allow for sufficient improvement over the current visual and audio circumstances, which is most likely to be achieved via landscaping or new barriers between transportation elements.

Consequence: the At-Grade Family removes the visual “wall” created by the current viaduct, but leaves little room for landscaping to reduce noise and other visual impacts. The Hybrid Families, while still having a vertical element creating some visual barrier, provide opportunities for noise and visual mitigation that can be developed further during the detailed design process.

C. Construction Period Disruption and Impacts

Three key issues need to be addressed in assessing how construction of the different alternatives will impact and disrupt transportation system users:

1. Closure of the Grand Junction

The Grand Junction Railroad currently passes on a bridge over the Paul Dudley White Path and Soldiers Field Road and underneath I-90. Design options in the Hybrid and At-Grade Families necessitate that Grand Junction Railroad infrastructure be moved, a significant logistical consideration because the work required is a major and lengthy construction project in and of itself, and one with substantial impacts on freight and passenger rail service. With the Highway Viaduct Family of alternatives, there is no need to relocate the Grand Junction Railroad and so the duration of construction and impacts on passenger and rail freight are less.

The Highway At-Grade Hybrid With Elevated Soldiers Field Road could, in the worst case, require complete closure of the Grand Junction for up to four years. The Grand Junction is the primary link between the north and south side of the Commuter Rail system, and is frequently used to move both locomotives and coaches for maintenance, or to respond to breakdowns, ridership growth, and other factors. The Grand Junction is also used by rail freight and by Amtrak. The only detour available requires trains to travel an additional 100 miles, which would cause the reliability of the Commuter Rail system to suffer.

The fact that the Hybrid and At-Grade Families require a lengthy closure does not automatically mean that the Highway Viaduct should be the Preferred Alternative; many other factors need to be taken into account. But these construction impacts are real, and the process of relocating the Grand Junction Railroad to implement either the At-Grade or Hybrid families will be complex and costly.

Consequence: it will require a lot of planning, coordination, and cooperation – and a lot of patience – to manage the lengthier construction period required of the Highway At-Grade Hybrid, to relocate the Grand Junction Railroad, and to accommodate such future north-south transit connections.

2. Closure of the Paul Dudley White Path

Design alternatives that require construction near the river will displace the Paul Dudley White Path during construction, potentially for the entire construction period.

For the Highway Viaduct Family, construction would be primarily focused on the southern side of the throat, with the demolition and rebuilding of the I-90 Viaduct the chief activity. This keeps the majority of heavy construction away from the Charles River and creates less disruption to the Paul Dudley White Path.

For the Hybrid Family (and for the At-Grade Family as well), Soldiers Field Road must be relocated to the north, toward the riverbank, for a long portion of the construction period. This condition would make it extremely difficult, and potentially unsafe, to keep the Paul Dudley White Path in place during construction. Some have suggested that during construction, pedestrians and bicyclists might be diverted to a bicycle/pedestrian path built cantilevered over the Charles River. However, at this point it is unknown whether such an option could be permitted or would be safe with heavy construction underway nearby. If that is not possible, bicycle and pedestrian traffic would likely need to be shifted to the north side of the river – to the Cambridge/Memorial Drive side – for most or all of the 8 to 10 year construction period associated with the Hybrid Family.

Consequence: during construction, designs in the Hybrid Family would require extended closures and detour of the Paul Dudley White Path.

3. Utility Relocation

Another reason for the extended construction timeframe of the Hybrid Family is anticipated impact to utilities. A number of major utilities now run under and across the throat area – including large MWRA water mains connecting Boston and Cambridge and gravity-driven sewers and drains connecting to significant outflow pipes – and must all remain in operation throughout construction. Unlike in the Highway Viaduct Family, the best approach with the Hybrid options may involve lowering roadway elements, (by zero to six feet in one section of the project length), in order to make it easier for crossing the Grand Junction Railroad over I-90, and future construction of a north-south bicycle and pedestrian link. It should be pointed out that significant lowering of roadway elements to below the existing ground level could impact buried water and sewer lines.

The Hybrid Family of options may take 1 to 2 years longer to build than the Highway Viaduct Family, due to the need for the relocation or modification of utility infrastructure.

Consequence: the construction period of the Hybrid Family is influenced, and most likely lengthened, in part by the need to relocate significant utilities.

C. Selection of the Preferred Alternative

a. Elimination of the At-Grade Family of Alternatives

Although attractive for its avoidance of any elevated structure separating the Allston community from the Charles River and its potential for superior future north-south bicycle and pedestrian connections, the At-Grade Family of design simply includes too many shortcomings, too much risk, and too many other disadvantages, including:

- An at-grade alternative will require extending transportation infrastructure right up to the bank of the Charles River and likely into the river, making it impossible to permit given that there are feasible alternatives with fewer environmental impacts.
- Even if this alternative could be permitted, its impacts on the Charles River basin – both the water sheet of the river and the parkland – are unacceptable: the infrastructure would run right up to the edge of the river, with no parkland between the infrastructure and the river. MassDOT should not put highways into parks (or rivers) where there is an alternative.
- The changes needed to fit all of the infrastructure at grade would compromise the long-term quality of the finished infrastructure, resulting in an interstate highway with inadequate lane widths and shoulders and a Paul Dudley White Path where pedestrians and cyclists would have to continue to share the same narrow path.
- The At-Grade alternative (like the Hybrid Family of alternatives) would require relocation of the Grand Junction Railroad with all of its adverse impacts on commuter rail operations for an extended period of time but without the benefits that come with the Hybrid alternatives.

b. Choosing Among the Hybrid and Highway Viaduct Options

All of the other design alternatives include some elevated structure. The question essentially becomes which infrastructure element will be elevated. The Highway Viaduct option has Interstate 90 on a viaduct, as it is now. And the Hybrid Family options have one transportation element other than I-90 on a viaduct, which – given that rail infrastructure is a poor choice to elevate for the reasons explained below – means that the best of the options to elevate is Soldiers Field Road or the Paul Dudley White Path.

The strongest arguments for putting I-90 on a viaduct once again, as it is today, is that it presents the fewer construction challenges, construction would take place faster than in other options, and there is less overall risk.

I do not, however, believe that the easier, shorter, less-disruptive construction period outweighs the fact that the Highway Viaduct option fails to address long-standing concerns that the I-90 Viaduct stands as a barrier between the Allston community and the Charles River and is inconsistent with MassDOT's attempts, where possible, to construct infrastructure that is less obtrusive. The numerous comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report and IRT report amply illustrate the concerns raised by the Highway Viaduct alternative. These concerns outweigh the positives of the Highway Viaduct alternative.

This leaves the Hybrid Family of design alternatives, in which some element(s) of transportation infrastructure will be elevated.

Rail Infrastructure on a Viaduct: While DEIR considered a Hybrid alternative in which the Grand Junction tracks are elevated, both the comments on the DEIR and the IRT report make a persuasive case that rail is the wrong transportation element to put on viaduct. Elevating rail requires long distances for grade changes and the location of the viaduct would be very constrained by gradual turns the railroad must make. Elevating a roadway is far nimbler, allowing for tighter turns, steeper slopes, and more flexibility, all of which could lead to improved open space and a better overall project.

Placing the Bicycle and Pedestrian Path on a Viaduct: While I appreciate the excellent work of A Better City in proposing a variant in which the Paul Dudley White Path is placed on a viaduct, it is far easier for automobiles to progress up the grade necessitated by the viaduct than it is for cyclists and pedestrians, many of whom would likely prefer to journey at grade along the river's edge. Asking pedestrians and cyclists in Boston to travel onto a viaduct – one with no protection from the elements – displaces them from their current path through a park next to a river and puts them in a potentially uncomfortable environment. In addition, there seems to be little stakeholder support for putting the Paul Dudley White Path on viaduct. Therefore, I do not believe that the elevated bicycle and pedestrian path is the best of the Hybrid alternatives.

C. The Highway At-Grade Hybrid With Elevated Soldiers Field Road Is the Preferred Alternative

As stated at the beginning of this decision, the Preferred Alternative must be the option that best balances the present-day and future mobility needs of local and regional drivers, transit users, cyclists and pedestrians, the imperative to protect and enhance as best as possible the natural and historic resources and public realm of the Charles River Basin, and the aspirations of the neighboring Allston community. Based on the many factors reviewed above, the Preferred Alternative that will be incorporated into the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) will be the Highway At-Grade Hybrid with Soldiers Field Road placed on a viaduct. (The placement of that viaduct relative to the infrastructure below will be determined as part of the continuing design development associated with the Final Environmental Impact Report).

This option keeps infrastructure out of the Charles River and away from its banks, creating more parkland while simultaneously creating enough room to separate pedestrians and cyclists on the Paul Dudley White Path. It meets the needs of the drivers of the cars and trucks using Soldiers Field Road and I-90, providing shoulders that ensure safe and effective highway operations. And, importantly, it provides future flexibility both to create north-south transit between Allston and Cambridge using the Grand Junction Railroad corridor and to create a north-south bicycle and pedestrian connection between the Allston neighborhood and the Charles River parks and paths in the vicinity of Harry Agganis Way.

I select this alternative despite the fact that it requires a longer, more complicated, and more disruptive construction period. MassDOT has a lot of work to do with our fellow state agencies (including the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority); federal, state, and local permitting authorities; the Cities of Boston and Cambridge; and the project's residential and institutional neighbors to work through construction and mitigation issues. It is my hope that the many stakeholders who have been involved in this process to date will recognize the long-term benefits of the Hybrid option and therefore work with MassDOT to realize those benefits by working collaboratively to address the mitigation of the project's impacts, particularly during the lengthy construction period that the Hybrid option will require.

D. Next Steps

With more than 45 Task Force and public meetings held and the analysis of the IRT now complete, the time has come to return to the work of advancing the design development of the Allston Multimodal Project, addressing remaining issues other than those affecting the throat, developing construction and phasing plans, and developing comprehensive mitigation plans for both the construction-phase and long-term impacts of the project - all with a goal of filing the Final Environmental Impact Report for the project in 2019. All of this work will continue to be led by the MassDOT staff and consultant teams in charge of the project, in continuing consultation with the Task Force, relevant city and state agencies and all interested stakeholders.

While there is much work to be done, I want to close by highlighting some of the most critical next steps for this project:

- Operationalizing the Preferred Alternative: The Hybrid option with Soldiers Field Road on viaduct remains a design concept and the MassDOT team has a lot of work to do to bring the Preferred Alternative far enough along in design development to move ahead with environmental review and permitting. Among many other issues, I am instructing the team to focus immediately on addressing critical issues such as the potential need to relocate major MWRA infrastructure. The placement of the Soldiers Field Road viaduct will need to be determined, balancing distance from the river and the location of utilities. In addition, I am

instructing the team to work closely with MBTA commuter rail operations to reduce or mitigate the number of and duration of closures and outages of the Grand Junction Railroad.

- **Commuter Rail Operations:** The most problematic impact of selecting the Hybrid option as the Preferred Alternative (which would also have been a problem with the At-Grade family of options) is the need for extended closure of the Grand Junction Railroad. The MBTA simply cannot be expected to operate the commuter rail system for months or years without the ability to move locomotives and coaches between the northern and southern parts of the system. A location needs to be identified for a south-side maintenance facility that can be operational before the Grand Junction closure would begin. I note that there is real potential for long-term use of such a facility as the MBTA will likely need a new maintenance yard to accommodate new vehicle types and technologies in years and decades to come as pilots and ultimately new service models are implemented after the completion of the Commuter Rail Vision Study.
- **Phasing and West Station:** I am also instructing the Allston team to revisit construction phasing and sequencing concepts presented in the Draft Environmental Impact Report, with the objective of shortening the overall construction duration to the extent possible and accelerating the construction of West Station. The ultimate in-service date for West Station will depend on service and scheduling decisions that will be made by the MBTA at a later time. I am, however, asking the Allston team to work closely with MBTA Railroad Operations to determine whether or not West Station construction could begin while the highway project is being completed and what the earliest feasible opening date could be.
- **Mitigation Commitments:** Many Task Force members and stakeholders have been eager to turn to issues of how best to mitigate the impacts of the Allston Multimodal Project on traffic and transit, the neighboring community and the Charles River and its adjacent parkland and Paul Dudley White path. MassDOT's first obligation is to avoid or minimize adverse environmental, open space and community impacts and only after that has been accomplished to mitigate the unavoidable impacts. With the selection of a Preferred Alternative that I firmly believe best avoids and minimizes adverse impacts, the time has now come to turn to the questions of how to offset and mitigate unavoidable impacts to the Charles River and its adjacent parkland, to the Allston and Cambridge communities and to all affected elements of the transportation system. MassDOT will work closely with the Task Force and affected stakeholders in considering mitigation strategies, which will in turn be presented in the Final Environmental Impact Report for further public review before they are "locked in" by the project's Section 61 findings.
- **Coordinated Development Planning:** Much of the planning for the Allston Multimodal Project has proceeded without any specific understanding of the medium- and long-term development plans for Harvard University's adjacent and extensive land holdings. While MassDOT and Harvard will ultimately need to execute a land deal, that cannot occur until after completion of the MEPA environmental review process for the Allston Multimodal Project. My hope, however, is that officials with the City of Boston, Harvard University, Boston

University and MassDOT/MBTA can engage in a coordinated discussion about future development plans – because the better all of us understand what development the universities are planning, the better we can design transportation infrastructure that both meets both local and regional needs generated by future development.

- Financing Plan: The current MassDOT/MBTA capital plan does not provide funding to construct this critical project. A joint MassDOT staff/Board committee will work on developing a financing plan once a price tag for the selected Hybrid option is refined and finalized.

We have come a tremendous distance on design options with the support and engagement of the Allston I-90 Task Force Members, elected officials, the cities of Boston and Cambridge, stakeholders such as A Better City, and other organizations and members of the public. Where we are today is thanks, in part, to strong external partnerships.

The robust involvement I have seen with community members, stakeholder groups and Task Force members, which began in earnest four years ago, will continue to be valuable in the years ahead as MassDOT undertakes design, permitting and construction of the Allston Multimodal Project. I look forward to continuing conversations with one and all to make this not just a great infrastructure project, but a great project that leverages a generational opportunity to create better automobile, public transit, bicycle, and pedestrian connections, while improving the Allston neighborhood and supporting regional development and public transportation improvements.

With today's designation of a Preferred Alternative, we can now turn to the remaining challenges and opportunities that must be addressed to advance the Allston Multimodal Project.

Stephanie Pollack

Secretary and CEO
Massachusetts Department of Transportation