



OPINION | STEPHANIE POLLACK

Getting the Allston multimodal plan right



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The Mass/ Turnpike and former train yards in Allston.

By Stephanie Pollack

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In order to advance its billion-dollar project to replace the Mass. Pike viaduct in Allston with a new urban interchange, connecting roadways, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and a regional transit hub called West Station, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation has two key decisions to make.

First, in the so-called throat along the Charles River, should we keep the highway elevated or put the Mass. Pike flat on the ground, alongside Soldiers Field Road and rail tracks?

Second, when and how do we build West Station, a \$100 million transit hub that can serve commuter rail trains and future, as-yet unplanned regional bus and transit services?

Some say it's a no-brainer for MassDOT to just start building West Station immediately and put the highway at grade. Others fear MassDOT has already decided to postpone West Station and build the elevated option.

Neither could be farther from the truth.

MassDOT has no preferred alternative yet. I've pledged to hold off on a decision on both the preferred throat option and West Station timing so that we can put fresh eyes on these important but difficult decisions.

Both decisions are complicated. Each of the options along the river, for example, has pros and cons. The viaduct option would rebuild a perceived barrier between Allston and the Charles River and could make it harder to improve pedestrian and bicycle connections to the riverfront. But the "on the ground" option would still present a formidable barrier. Eight lanes of the Mass. Pike, four lanes of Soldiers Field Road and train tracks, built in parkland and a floodplain, would continue to separate the neighborhood and river and push asphalt right up to the water's edge.

And West Station? Many argue the state must build the large, multimodal station immediately so as not to discourage development in Allston and on Harvard University's land holdings in the former Beacon Park Yards. But the proposed site is also the staging area for taking down and reconstructing the Mass. Pike. The station cannot physically be built before 2025, when the Mass. Pike construction is scheduled to be completed. While it can be built soon thereafter, the point of the station is to support new regional bus and rail services — which no one has yet planned or committed to fund or provide.

How can we work through these issues and still move this critical project ahead expeditiously? Given concerns about whether MassDOT staff and consultants can be

unbiased, I have launched three related efforts to bring in new expertise, perspectives — and facts.

First, I am convening an independent team of engineers, designers, and permitting experts to develop the best possible version of viaduct and at-grade options for the throat. This 90-day independent review began on Wednesday and is modeled on one that successfully brought fresh eyes to the MBTA Green Line Extension. The team will help people visualize the different options and document the benefits and challenges of each. We will also solicit public and stakeholder feedback before using this new information to select the preferred alternative.

Second, to address immediate transit needs raised by the neighborhood, we've worked with the City of Boston to launch a near-term transit planning process that will complement the city's broader Allston/Brighton multimodal planning study.

Third, we are working with city officials and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council to launch a study that will lay the groundwork for planning new regional transit services for Allston. This foundation will help ensure that we get both the design and timing of West Station right. Once we understand what services should be provided at West Station — and when — MassDOT will re-phase the project to start construction of the station as soon as it is both possible and sensible.

We can't wait much longer to rebuild the current Mass. Pike viaduct. It is structurally deficient, carries 150,000 vehicles every day, and is a critical freight connection between the Port of Boston and a freight rail transfer facility in Central Massachusetts.

But neither can we miss the generational opportunity to create better automobile, transit, bicycle, and pedestrian connections, improve Allston, and support millions of square feet of new development. The transit studies and independent review will inform both decisions with fresh thinking and a shared factual underpinning, so we can get the Allston multimodal project right.

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