

McGrath Boulevard Project - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Asked at or Following Public Information Meeting #1 (2024)

- 1. Can the corridor width be better utilized to benefit the community, considering options like adding housing, parks, or green spaces, and is there potential to redesign this area for improved development? Can the corridor geometric design be revised in consideration of reduced interior median space, elimination of frontage roads, and removal of slip lanes?**

The design team is working to strike a balance with the cross-section of the corridor. The median is required due to grade differences between the northbound and southbound sides of the street, it provides pedestrian refuge on an otherwise long crossing, and improves safety by preventing left turns. The median width is being continually evaluated and refined, as are the tree locations. The median is generally shown at the minimum allowable widths to provide for safe pedestrian refuge and to accommodate turn lanes where necessary.

The boulevard concept, featuring landscaped medians, new sidewalks, and bicycle facilities on both sides of the roadway was selected as the preferred option from the *Grounding McGrath* study (see link on the project website) after thorough evaluation of alternatives, including options that would have maintained the existing overpass, as well as various at-grade configurations such as a signalized rotary concept and median u-turn concept. The Boulevard concept narrows the roadway from the previous configuration of three (3) lanes in each direction to two (2) lanes in each direction, reducing the overall roadway width for pedestrian crossing more than any other alternative, even with the landscaped median included.

It would be very challenging to convert a portion of the existing right-of-way (ROW) to housing since a substantial amount of the ROW is still needed for transportation given the wider median, added buffer areas to separate pedestrians and bicycles from motor vehicles, and additional green space being provided. The remaining available space will likely not have sufficient depth for buildings. The frontage roads provide driveway access to numerous properties. The extension of these driveways to the Boulevard would pose traffic and bicycle safety concerns and reduce the usefulness of the added green space. The team will reconsider the implementation of slip lanes where possible, recognizing the potential disadvantages to pedestrians and cyclists. We will consider received comments and concerns as we continue to evaluate and refine the cross-sections and roadway features.

- 2. Can the lane assignments, including the number, width, and purpose of lanes at key intersections, including Washington Street at McGrath Boulevard, be reassessed to determine if they are necessary and be optimized for traffic flow, safety, and pedestrian accessibility?**

The project focuses on reducing travel speeds with traffic calming measures while ensuring space for multiple modes of transportation, including people walking, biking, and taking transit. The intersection designs were developed to balance traffic flow with safety by minimizing the number of travel lanes that pedestrians need to cross while still processing significant traffic

volumes and providing efficient travel for buses and transit riders. As the project progresses, intersection traffic and transit operations will be continuously evaluated to optimize lane widths and assignments.

3. It seems excessive to have the width of the boulevard be so vast where some cross sections contain four sidewalk segments and two-way bike lanes. Who is going to use them?

In the development of the cross-sections, the team has worked to strike a balance between the needs of different users, the desire to change the overall look and feel of the corridor, and safety considerations. The overarching theme of the design is to reduce the McGrath corridor to two travel lanes in each direction and to increase the allocation of space to non-motorized users.

Due to the frontage roads along McGrath, particularly in the northern part of the study area, there are locations that have sidewalks along both the McGrath Boulevard and the Frontage Roads, as well as several intersections with redundant sidewalks (McGrath at Somerville Avenue/Medford Street, Washington Street, Cross Street, and Medford Street). At these intersections, the sidewalk is intended to follow anticipated pedestrian desire lines, which will be adjusted as the design advances. Two-way bike lanes on both sides of McGrath improve connectivity to destinations on either side of the boulevard and do not require much additional space compared to a one-way bike lane.

4. How will the project address transit priority and bus accommodations, including considerations for transit signal priority, dedicated bus lanes, potential bus stop locations, the integration of bus rapid transit or light rail options, and coordination with MBTA.

The design team will continue to consider transit, including bus priority features and bus stop design, as the design progresses. Coordination with MBTA is ongoing as MBTA reassesses bus routing in Bus Network Redesign (BNR), including the potential to better serve East Somerville Station, and with the City's implementation of its Bicycle Network Plan and how it may affect bus circulation. Bus service along McGrath is expected to be restructured in BNR, in part in response to the new Green Line, which now runs parallel to McGrath. As such, light rail options and bidirectional bus only lanes are not practical start to end on the corridor. Bus priority measures will continue to be considered as the project progresses and will be commensurate with the level of bus frequency. Bus stops, including floating bus stops, will be designed to be safe, accessible, comfortable for bus riders. Transit signal priority (TSP) is being considered at signalized intersections along the corridor with existing and proposed bus movements.

5. How will the project ensure a pedestrian-friendly environment on McGrath Boulevard, including the implementation of pedestrian islands, pedestrian-only signal phases, and pedestrian-scale lighting?

The design team is committed to creating safe and inviting pedestrian spaces throughout the corridor. While the design details are still being finalized, the intent is to include exclusive pedestrian signal phases where feasible, pedestrian refuge islands, and pedestrian street lighting, which will be evaluated and incorporated as the project progresses. The sidewalks are also located away from the roadway where possible, behind the bike lanes and landscaping, to further enhance the pedestrian experience. Good pedestrian connectivity and a pedestrian-friendly environment will also be paramount in the design of all bus stops.

6. What measures will be in place to provide pedestrian safety and mitigate speeds on multi-lane roads?

The corridor is being designed to change the look and feel of the corridor from a "highway" type environment to a tree-lined "boulevard" providing adequate space and safety for all users. The design includes traffic calming measures along with separate spaces for both bicyclists and pedestrians from vehicular traffic, aims for lower travel speeds, and will implement pedestrian street lighting along the length of the project corridor. As the design progresses, the team will continue to work towards the provision of safe pedestrian crossings throughout the corridor, including those adjacent to bus stops, and will re-examine potential traffic control measures for the Otis Street crossing and Cross Street/Prospect Hill Ave crossing. Protected extensions of sidewalks into the roadway and reduced widths of travel lanes (11') and turn lanes (10') will provide the shortest possible crossing distances for pedestrians and cyclists given the overall function of the corridor.

7. Can the design include improved separation for bicycles, potentially with bi-directional lanes on both sides of the Boulevard throughout the entire corridor, if dimensions allow, as well as protection at intersections and bicycle storage along the facility?

The design team is committed to providing protected bike spaces throughout the corridor, with maximum vertical and horizontal separation from vehicles and safe crossings at major intersections and floating bus stops. The project aims to transform McGrath Highway into a multi-modal boulevard with adequate space and safety for all users. Two-way cycle tracks are included on both sides where feasible, though some areas with restricted right-of-way width may have a cycle track on only one side. The protection of cyclists along the corridor and at the intersections and connections to nearby bike facilities such as the Community Path and the nearby Grand Junction Path are being considered during design. As the project progresses, bike storage along the corridor and at bus stops will be considered.

8. Why is the Otis St pedestrian bridge being removed, and how is this decision being coordinated with Somerville Public Schools to ensure student safety? Additionally, will the Otis St overpass remain accessible while an alternative is being constructed?

The existing Otis St. pedestrian bridge, which is not accessible to all users, is being replaced with an at-grade crossing designed with pedestrian safety in mind. The design team is evaluating various traffic control measures, including full signalization. The proposed McGrath Boulevard cross-section cannot be constructed with the pedestrian bridge in place since the center pier is in the location of a travel lane. Retaining and retrofitting the existing bridge or constructing a completely new pedestrian bridge accessible for all users would require much longer ramps at both ends of the bridge, which would adversely impact the Deanna Cremin Playground and/or require property acquisition. Removing the pedestrian ramp structures provides an opportunity to enhance and provide more green space within Deanna Cremin Playground and on the opposite side of McGrath Boulevard.

The team is coordinating with the City of Somerville, including Somerville Public Schools, to address student needs, and to evaluate crossing alternatives for use during the project construction.

9. Where can we look at the slides from the PIM?

The presentation slides are posted on the project website as well as on the original landing page for the public information meeting.

10. Is there/could there be an email list created for this project for updates so that one can hear when meetings will be?

The project's website contains project information and updates. Additionally, anyone can sign up to be notified of project updates via a link on the project website under the “Social” heading.

Additional questions related to the project can be directed to this email address, created specifically for this project: MassDOTMcgrathblvd@dot.state.ma.us.

Asked at or Following Public Information Meeting #2 (2025)

- 1. Can the planted median be removed or significantly reduced — reserving only short segments for pedestrian refuges at crossings — and instead consolidate green space and trees along the sidewalks where they provide direct shade and benefit to pedestrians?**

The design team is working to achieve a balanced corridor cross-section that considers multiple needs. A median is necessary in certain locations to address grade differences between the northbound and southbound sides of the street. It also plays a critical role in pedestrian safety by providing refuge at long crossings and helping to manage traffic by limiting left turns. That said, both the median width and tree placement are being carefully reviewed and refined. In most locations, the median is kept at the minimum allowable width to maintain its safety function while preserving flexibility and space for other corridor elements.

- 2. Can MassDOT commit to keeping the Otis Street Pedestrian Bridge open for as long as possible? We do not want to see any gap in time when there is not a safe way to cross the road.**

We will maintain the pedestrian bridge at Otis Street for as long as possible prior to the construction of the final crossing. Suitable pedestrian accommodations to cross McGrath at this location will be provided during construction.

- 3. Can you confirm a fully signalized intersection at Otis Street is proposed and not a HAWK signal?**

Pedestrian safety is a top priority of this project. Prior iterations of the concept design at the intersection of Otis Street and McGrath Boulevard included a fully signalized intersection with pedestrian activated crossings. The project team has since continued to evaluate potential traffic control treatments at the intersection that conform to MassDOT and MUTCD requirements. Discussions continue about pedestrian activated signal crossing options and related traffic calming measures for the Otis Street and McGrath Boulevard Intersection.

- 4. Would installing raised crosswalks or a signalized intersection near the Otis Street Pedestrian Bridge help slow traffic? If raised elements are not feasible due to federal requirements, are other traffic calming measures—such as lane narrowing, visual cues, chicanes, rumble strips, or zig-zag (“wobbling”) medians—being considered to address the straightaway effect and discourage highway-speed driving behavior?**

The project team is actively evaluating a range of traffic calming strategies throughout the corridor—including at Otis Street—based on state and federal guidelines. Measures such as lane narrowing, visual cues, and potential alternatives like chicanes or modified medians are under consideration to enhance driver awareness and reduce speeds near crossings.

- 5. Could MassDOT please commit to raised, curb-separated bike lanes throughout the project area, in contrast to “buffered” bike lanes? How will bike signals be incorporated?**

We are continuing to evaluate treatments for the separation of bicycles and pedestrians throughout the project area which will include raised, curb-separated treatments, where feasible. The implementation of bicycle signals is being evaluated to ensure MUTCD compliance and safe management of bicycle and vehicle conflicts.

6. What will be the treatment for bike lanes over the Truss Bridge and Gilman Street Bridge? Can there be concrete curbing to separate the bike lanes from cars, instead of the flex posts?

We are continuing to evaluate the feasibility of different bike lane treatment over the Truss & Gilman Street Bridges where we are constrained by the width and placement of piers on the existing bridges and weight considerations on the structures.

7. Does the plan for McGrath Boulevard include a safe connection to the Community Path - either at Washington Street, Cross Street or Poplar Street?

Yes, the plan maintains the connections to the Community Path at Cross Street and Washington Street. The bike lanes and cycle tracks along McGrath Boulevard provide a safe way for cyclists from the surrounding neighborhoods to reach the path at these locations. The city has a future project along Poplar Street that will connect the McGrath project with Community Path.

8. How will pedestrian signals operate at intersection? Will pedestrians have to wait for long light cycles to be able to cross? Can pedestrians cross the entire Boulevard in one cycle or will they have to wait in the median?

Pedestrian signal phasing is proposed to operate in different ways at the intersections throughout the corridor. Where feasible and appropriate, pedestrian crossings will operate without conflicting turning traffic including select locations that will operate with exclusive pedestrian phasing. The project team is working towards reducing wait times for pedestrians as feasible when balancing needs of other modes within the signal cycle. The intention of the pedestrian phasing would be to provide at least one opportunity each cycle to complete the crossings in that single phase while also providing opportunities for multi-stage crossings to reduce the time to complete certain crossing movements.

9. Numerous questions were received about how/where local roads will connect to McGrath Boulevard and where U-Turns and left-turns will and won't be permitted. Attendees asked specifically about Somerville Avenue Extension ("Scary Way"), Brickbottom in general, Medford Street, Washington Street, Cross Street, Otis Street, and Greenville Street.

We will continue to work with the City of Somerville on how this project connects to local roads with the safety of pedestrian crossings a top priority. The project team continues to evaluate the turning movements at intersections throughout the corridor, so at this point we cannot say if or

how many u-turn locations will be included in the final design. Additional information for the intersections mentioned are as follows:

Somerville Ave Extension ("Scary Way") - The project team concluded that the current design for the Somerville Avenue Extension can be improved under the future Squires Bridge project.

Brickbottom – The city's current design does not depict turn lanes at the Poplar Street intersections with Linwood or Chestnut Streets.

Medford Street (near Truss Bridge) – Is being evaluated based on traffic analysis.

Cross Street – The grade differential between McGrath northbound and southbound does not allow for a left turn lane on Cross Street onto McGrath southbound.

Otis Street - No left turns anticipated. Volumes are not sufficient to warrant a left turn lane and the city wishes to maintain neighborway gateway treatment.

Greenville Street – Similar grade differential as Cross Street. There are no plans to introduce a break in the median to facilitate left turns from McGrath onto Greenville.

10. How long is construction expected to last?

Construction is currently anticipated to last somewhere between 4-5 years.