

DOWNTOWN RAILROAD CROSSING ADVISORY COMMITTEE

August 27, 2009
Blumer Community Room
Framingham Town Hall
7:00 PM

Meeting Notes

Members: John Stasik, John Steacie, Lloyd Kaye, Tom Branham, Bill Hanson, Ted Welte, John Magri, Ronald Isaacson, Chris Walsh, Steve Cronin, Mary Anne Padien

Steering Committee: Laurie Lee, Julian Suso, Alison Steinfeld, Erika Oliver Jerram, Jay Grande, Peter Sellers, Bill Sedewitz.

Consultants: Ken Petraglia, BETA; Mike Wasielewski, BETA; Tony Lionetta, BETA; Steve Cecil, Cecil Group;

Guests: George Lewis, Tom Mahoney, Sue Bernstein, Frank DeMarco, Cynthia Laurora

I. Opening Remarks

Laurie Lee opened by describing the origins of the Downtown Rail Crossing Advisory Committee and the process to date that had brought the project to this stage. She thanked former Board of Selectman John Stasik and thanked him for his leadership of the committee from 2005-2008 and recognized the 2005 Board of Selectmen for beginning the process with the formation of the forming the original DRC Task Force. She also acknowledged Selectmen Dennis Giombetti for his help in working with State officials, and Ginger Esty for her representation on the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

She thanked the Town's legislative delegation, including Sen. Karen Spilka and her office, for helping secure state funding for this Phase of work and for their efforts to raise awareness of the project at the state and federal level. She welcomed the consultants.

II. BETA Presentation

Petraglia and Cecil presented their project goals and reminded the group of the four alternatives they were hired to assess: the Rt. 126 underpass, the Rt. 135 underpass, the East Bypass and the Far East Bypass. Then Petraglia recapped the existing traffic conditions identified in Phase I and walked the group through the logic of a two-tiered analysis which narrowed the four alternatives down to one: A Grade Separation of Route 135 under Route 126.

Cecil reviewed the 3 downtown urban design directions – residential growth, cultural/institutional growth, and mixed-use growth – that the team was asked to test against the four transportation alternatives. He discussed the impacts of each transportation alternative on the four and noted that: the Grade Separation of Route 126 underpass was Not Compatible with any of the urban design alternatives; the bypass routes were Compatible, but also did not help the urban design in any way; and the Rt. 135 underpass was deemed Highly Compatible given its ability to create

opportunities for pedestrian/bicycle linkages and redevelopment in the downtown that do not exist now.

The conclusion was a series of urban design concept slides, based on the concept of a Mixed-use Downtown to help clarify the vision for downtown that this urban design approach presents together with a discussion of next steps. Cecil encouraged the Town to establish a development entity that could guide growth and development according to the vision.

III. Review of Process

Sellers discussed the process to date, including efforts to reach out to the Lt. Governor and coordination with State EOT and Mass Highway officials. He discussed the next steps, including securing funding to keep the project on track to start preliminary design and environmental impact analyses.

IV. Question & Answer

Lee asked each of the Advisory Committee members to ask questions or comment and then turned the microphone over to the audience members.

Welte asked Petraglia to elaborate on the possibility of a rail line underpass at Bishop Street. Sellers answered that there is no defined option yet --it is still an idea as the funding for this project was strictly focused on the four identified alternatives dedicated to solving traffic issues at 126/135. He is hopeful that the next phases of EOT funding will allow us to look at alternative rail/road grade separation options. Should you say anything here and/or in Julian's comments relative to the importance of a rail/highway grade separation? (Both Julian and Peter addressed this issue—and I think Peter was rather emphatic that an actual RR/highway separation was necessary.)

Walsh said he thought the logic was excellent and was very pleasantly surprised by the land use and urban design patterning.

Magri (Assistant Fire Chief) expressed concern that Rt. 126 is a critical EMS corridor and that even with better traffic flow, this solution does not accommodate a grade separation at the rail that would allow the Town's Emergency Services vehicles to move unhindered from the southside north to the hospital. Petraglia conceded that, while the improvements in traffic flow would indeed be dramatic and the recovery period after a gate closure would be reduced, the solution does not mitigate the at-grade rail crossing at 126. Sellers added that the lack of unhindered north-south access for EMS is the driving factor in the effort to find alternative grade separation options.

Hanson noted that the designs for the proposed Upper Charles Rail Trail include the potential to have the trail end at the Framingham Commuter Rail Station. If the CSX North Yard is moved and the Town does access open space along Farm Pond, there is potential to link up to the proposed Bruce Freeman Rail Trail and have a dedicated bike trail from Milford to Lowell.

Branham noted he was pleased with the results of the study.

Kaye reiterated the concern that emergency vehicles would still be stuck at gate closings for the at-grade rail crossing on 126 and added that it will only get worse if more trains are added as proposed. He also wanted the group to consider that the political realities were different than when this study was first proposed and that with stronger representation at the state and federal level we should strive towards complete coordination and the federal government could fund most of it.

Isaacson, the owner of some key parcels in the downtown, also noted his concern for the lack of a north south grade separated rail crossing but said overall he thought it was a good plan.

Stasik had 2 questions: 1) Is it necessary to depress Route 135 under Route 126 AND a introduce a grade-separated rail crossing elsewhere or could you just leave this intersection as is and find a better place for a rail crossing. Sellers answered, "Yes". He noted that while an underpass along Rt. 126 (a state highway) will not work, we also cannot accommodate a 4-lane underpass elsewhere within the downtown that would accommodate the current or projected volumes on Route 126. It is a typical problem in historic, established downtowns and requires a more complicated solution. 2) Stasik was pleased to see how the three urban design scenarios were integrated, but asked Cecil how the Town should encourage the right kind of development downtown. Cecil answered that as the recession ends, developers will be looking for opportunities but currently the rest of the downtown pieces aren't together yet. First the Town must establish how people will get around and what it will look like, and then acquire or establish clear guidelines for what you want to see on key parcels – particularly near the train station where there are more opportunities for transit oriented development (TOD). Beverly was cited as a good example. He noted this was often difficult for towns to do because of the governmental structure and it puts additional pressure on Framingham to think carefully about what it wants and prepare permitting and zoning in advance. He believes that coordination and preparation, along with a few big moves, will have developers banging down the door.

Padien, who represents State Senator Karen Spilka, noted that the Senator supports this project fully and is willing to do whatever she can to advance it.

Stacie asked what would happen to the historic H.H. Richardson railroad station and to the stores to the north and south sides of Waverly, just west of the 126/135 intersection. Cecil answered that the concept calls for a plaza in front of the historic station and that sidewalks would extend from the intersection west on each side of 135. In addition, the Town should encourage any TOD development, particularly where it includes commuter parking to include pedestrian access to the current rail station. Steacie also wondered if either of the bypass options could complement this solution. Petraglia noted that both of the proposed bypass solutions had too many environmental and other physical impacts to be workable.

Stacie also asked if it weren't possible to put a T station east of 126 to serve the trains that just turn around and head back to Boston. Wasielewski answered that those trains have a hold-over period and there is no excess track space and no room to build any on the east side of 126 for them to wait and still let freight and Amtrak trains pass through.

Bernstein asked if the team had looked at what would happen at the Memorial Building Rotary, which was well-intended when initially designed, but now seems to just be backed up much of the time. Petraglia answered that one of the options they were considering was removing the rotary and converting the Union Ave/Concord Street intersection into a 3-way signalized intersection. She also noted that bridges can often be hostile environments to pedestrians and asked where the first at-grade pedestrian crossing would be possible. Cecil answered that the intersection of Hollis Court and 135 would have a pedestrian crosswalk and function like a normal intersection. He added that Rt. 126 would have more width along the west side over 135 in order to accommodate a more generous sidewalk and nice landscaping.

Mahoney asked if the team had considered a 135 overpass instead of underpass in order to limit the impact on the existing structures along Waverly. Cecil answered that the urban design rule-of-thumb was that an underpass was much less disruptive than an overpass as overpasses have an area of unusable space underneath them that are dark and shadowed and actually obscure store fronts more, particularly where they ramp down to meet the road at grade again.

Lewis made several observations: 1) this option obliterates any connection of 126 and 135 and removes any opportunities for development at that intersection. 2) Waverly is very narrow and introducing an underpass would hinder development. 3) The Hollis Court extension would result in a lot of new traffic in an already congested area, particularly adding to existing back ups on Hollis Street. He said it was a clever idea but there were still a lot of concerns to address. Petraglia answered that while this is still conceptual, they've done a lot of work to show that this solution will actually improve traffic and will actually help with some of the congestion on Hollis as 135 flows freely. Cecil addressed the comments by saying that this concept creates new road frontage and actually opens up opportunities that currently do not exist.

DeMarco noted that it looked like a bomb hit downtown but was concerned that not enough attention was being paid to the fact that the Town needs a highway from the Sherborn line. He felt that the proposed concept would create more traffic and more problems in downtown and is the wrong approach for the Town. He also expressed concern that nobody was asking what the people in the neighborhoods want.

Laurora wondered if there were any unintended consequences of forcing more traffic west on 135 towards Fountain Street? She suggested that efforts to improve the signals along 126 and 135 should be undertaken before anything this drastic was contemplated. She also wanted to know if the team had quantified the number of trucks going through the intersection that were linked to the Adesa operation in the old GM plant and whether any effort was being made to route them a different way. Petraglia noted that this alternative will have a significant positive impact on the traffic going in all directions at the intersection. He noted that they had no specific data on the impact of the trucks entering and leaving Adesa.

Branham asked whether Obama's plans for high speed rail might affect this plan or any other development downtown. Cecil noted that the current station location is not likely to change because of utilities, slopes, farm pond, etc and that restricts the

length of the trains that can use it. Framingham ultimately may not be able to accommodate intercity rail.

V. Concluding Remarks

Lee noted that anyone who had further comments should get them to Erika Oliver Jerram by September 8th. The consultants would be giving a similar presentation to a joint meeting of the Board of Selectmen and the Planning Board on September 15th. Town Manager Julian Suso then thanked the Advisory Committee members for their many years of dedication to this project which had brought us to this point. He noted that our next steps involved securing the release of earmark funding for further design and environmental reviews. He thanked Senator Spilka and the Town's other legislators, including Rep. Pam Richardson and Rep. Tom Sannicandro for their efforts to raise awareness at the state level for this project. He added that the process moving forward allows ample opportunities for public input.

Notes prepared by Erika Oliver Jerram
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