



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

TRAFFIC, PARKING, + TRANSPORTATION

MEMORANDUM

To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Brooke McKenna
Transportation Commissioner, Traffic, Parking, + Transportation Department
Jeffrey R. Parenti, PE, PTOE, PTP, ENV SP
Assistant Commissioner for Street Management/Traffic Director

Date: October 3, 2024

Subject: Memorial Drive

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The recent crash resulting in the death of a cyclist near the BU Boathouse on Memorial Drive has brought a renewed focus on the safety of Memorial Drive, especially near the BU rotary. While Memorial Drive is a state parkway owned and operated by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), this third fatality of a cyclist in Cambridge in recent months weighs heavily on the Cambridge community.

As discussed during last week's City Council Meeting, there are numerous projects on and around Memorial Drive, and what follows is a summary of ongoing, planned, and completed DCR and MASSDOT work in the area.

The information in this memo is current as of October 3. Traffic, Parking, and Transportation staff will continue to coordinate with DCR through Monday afternoon and may have updated information for Council at its meeting in the evening.

CURRENT WORK

Emergency Improvements to the Paul Dudley White Bike Path near the BU Bridge

In the short time since the crash, DCR has mobilized its Engineering staff, completing layout of an expanded shared use path along the river straddling the BU rotary, for a total of roughly 1,000 linear feet. DCR will widen the path west of the Rotary (to the Magazine Beach parking lot) and east of the rotary (to the BU boathouse). The agency has also completed a traffic management plan (TMP), which will close the Paul Dudley White (PDW) path through the work zone and create a temporary two-way path on the north side of the parkway. DCR plans to complete all work before the end of this construction season and will start mobilizing its contractors in early October. The estimated total investment will be about \$1.5 million.

Speed Limits

DCR plans to reduce the speed limit of Memorial Drive in the area of the Reid Overpass from 35 MPH to 25 MPH in mid-October. Discussion with state agencies of the speed limits of all parkways in Cambridge and the state highway (O'Brien Highway) will also begin in October.

PLANNED WORK

Reid Overpass

MassDOT plans to refurbish, replace, or possibly remove the Reid Overpass, which spans the BU rotary (project number 611987). This project is scheduled and funded for 2027 on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization's five-year capital investment plan. The TIP is the near-term investment program for the region's transportation system. The cost of this project is estimated at about \$46.5 million.

DOT is including intersection traffic analysis of the rotary in this project. However, this is a DOT Bridge Division project and we don't know if any improvements to the rotary – which is a DCR asset --will be included. If DOT elects to remove the overpass, it will be forced to rebuild the rotary. (DOT completed a similar project at a larger scale for the Casey Overpass in Jamaica Plain several years ago.) The intersection analysis should be released to the public sometime this fall, and then we will know more about DOT's plans for the overpass and possibly the rotary.

It is also worth noting that construction on the I-90 project will likely have significant impacts on traffic along the corridor, and coordination with the Reid Overpass work will be important.

Memorial Drive Phase III

The Memorial Drive Phase III project was initially envisioned to extend from the BU Bridge at the eastern limit to the Eliot Bridge at the western limit. DCR held 2 public meetings in Cambridge in 2019 to present its concept of reducing the parkway in this section from 4 lanes to either 2 or 3 lanes. The community expressed strong support for the section between JFK Street and Eliot Bridge. That segment, just under a mile long, is under design and is on schedule to be advertised for construction in the Spring of 2025. This project includes increases in paths and parkland, and a decrease in the number of vehicle travel lanes to one in each direction along portions of the corridor.

The balance of Phase III, between JFK Street and the BU Bridge, was not supported by the community due to concerns about displacing regional trips into the neighborhoods onto streets such as Putnam Avenue. The City asked DCR to conduct a more detailed traffic analysis, especially for the River-Western box. DCR has not started this analysis. Given the other significant work planned for Memorial Drive within Cambridge outlined above, it is unclear when DCR will restart any planning process for the section of parkway between the BU Bridge and JFK Street.

COMPLETED WORK

Memorial Drive Phase I

Phase I construction, completed in 2004 with \$4 million in state funding, narrowed Memorial Drive between Fowler Street and the Longfellow Bridge and provided about two additional acres of green space and parkland area along the Charles River. Supplementing that investment, in July 2010, DCR provided \$2M to replace more than two miles of embankment fencing along the Charles River.

Memorial Drive Phase II

The \$7 million Phase II project extended from the BU Boat House to the Longfellow Bridge. Construction completed in the fall of 2016 resulted in a new ten-foot-wide, paved, multi-use path along Memorial Drive, a six-foot wide pedestrian path, and over 300 new trees. Roadway work included installation of new drainage components to alleviate flooding and improve storm water quality, masonry restoration of the Memorial Drive underpass, resurfacing, and installation of new pedestrian traffic signals, crosswalks, and handicapped-accessible sidewalk ramps. The September bike crash occurred just outside the limit of this project.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Although the BU Bridge refurbishment project is complete along with improvements to the intersection on the south end of the bridge at Commonwealth Avenue, a severe southbound queueing problem persists, stretching well into lower Cambridgeport in the afternoon rush period, especially before events at Fenway Park. The problem is caused by southbound approach capacity at Commonwealth Avenue rather than by the rotary itself. Additionally, the current bicycle lanes on the BU Bridge do not have physical separation and the lane configuration is challenging for cyclists. Conversations are currently underway between the multiple jurisdictional stakeholders around the rotary and the Bridge about possible improvements to improve both the congestion impacts in Cambridgeport and the bicycle facilities on the Bridge itself.

