

498 Green Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
September 19, 2000

Cambridge City Council
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear Councillors,

I write for myself and for the Cambridge Pedestrian Committee to express our disappointment that you voted to scrap the plan for North Mass Avenue, and send it back for redesign AFTER ALL THE TIME AND EFFORT put in by us and hundreds of other citizens. It is a discouragement to any kind of public service by Cambridge citizens when, by a vote of eight to one, you cavalierly toss out lots of effort, advice, consideration, professional consultation, and expense all because a few very loud contrarians have chosen this project to prove their muscle.

Here are their claims as I understand them, and the reasons I personally think they should not influence the road design.

False claim #1:

The median strip is a safety refuge for pedestrians wanting to cross Mass Ave everywhere .

Pedestrians crossing away from crosswalks are a danger to themselves and to others. They can cause accidents. It is illegal to jaywalk. If the median strip proves an encouragement to pedestrians to jaywalk, that's a bad thing. The plan had fifty percent more crosswalks, and all of them had an island in the middle.

False claim #2:

The removal of the median strip will allow for many more left-hand turns, so the street will become more dangerous, as people make turns at intersections.

As best I understand the plan, there are not likely to be any more turns permitted than before. Parts of the median are left in places for precisely this control. There are other ways to discourage illegal left turns, such as rumble strips and signs. The intersections themselves will have bumpouts which are already proven to make intersections safer. Anyway, this argument is offered not because it presents a real concern, but only to bolster their position.

False claim #3:

"The vast majority" of people in North Cambridge and the entire business community are against the redesign plan.

Rubbish! This is not true. Of the hundreds who attended the meetings, the vast majority were in favor of the plan. I have personally asked people from North Cambridge whom I met in totally unrelated circumstances. Of those I asked, the "vast majority" were in favor of it; most had not attended a meeting on it, but fully presumed that the plan would go through.

The business owners who see fewer parking spots nearby of course don't like that aspect. How many are actually against the plan because of it? Besides, the fewer parking spaces are directly correlated with the added crosswalks and bumpouts that are going to make pedestrian movement safer, easier, and more relaxed. Do you hope to get a new redesign that will not provide these benefits?

False claim #4:

We don't want bike lanes.

Bike lanes encourage bicyclists to stay off the sidewalks by providing a safe place for them in the street. This makes sidewalks safer for pedestrians. In many pedestrian-car accident reports, we see that the pedestrian walked out from between parked cars and was not seen. The most recent such accident I know about in Cambridge was in fact on Mass Ave, in front of the Miracle of Science. A bicycle lane would give car drivers an extra amount of time to see and avoid the pedestrian.

4A. One woman told me she was against bike lanes until all bicyclists follow all the laws.

This is mean spirited and un-civic minded. We wouldn't think of making such a claim for cars or pedestrians; we try to accommodate our limited system to everybody.

4B. Craig Kelley has claimed that bicycle lanes are unsafe for bicyclists because it lures them into feeling safer than they are.

All the bicyclists I know say otherwise. This is a crazy notion, totally unsupported in any traffic study. In fact, traffic studies have indicated that bike lanes make for safer bicycling. In my own bike riding, I much prefer a bike lane.

False claim #5:

People who don't live in North Cambridge should just butt out.

Mass Ave is one of the oldest roadways in Massachusetts, and is a current state highway. As such, it is of interest to every citizen and taxpayer in the state. Being the spine of Cambridge, it is of special interest to every citizen of Cambridge. As a person who frequents businesses on North Mass Ave, it is my business. Ask the business owners whether their patrons count. You, as city councillors, should have a special interest in pulling our city together, making it easier for other residents to get to North Cambridge, rather than keeping us isolated from each other.

Many of us have experiences that are relevant to North Mass Ave. Mass Ave from Harvard Square to Central Square has been redesigned. Having been involved in the process, and seeing how the results pan out, we can and should lobby for effective improvements elsewhere in the city. On the Pedestrian Committee, we review lots of plans, have asked significant questions, and can provide useful input BECAUSE we have been involved elsewhere. The very purpose of such committees is to provide interested, informed, and regular input into city processes.

We have made big strides forward in crosswalk compliance by both pedestrians and drivers, from Harvard Square down through Central Square. One of the limiting factors is the behavior people bring from other places. Drivers not used to stopping for crosswalks in North Cambridge are much less likely to stop for pedestrians when they get to lower Mass Ave. It is in our interest to improve North Mass Ave, specifically to get crosswalk compliance from both pedestrians and drivers.

Let's reverse the question: Why would anybody who wants total control over his environment move next to a business-lined highway in a densely-populated urban area? Will they next want to put up a toll booth and charge us to pass by, like the robber barons of the dark ages?

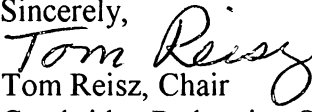
False claim #6:

The traffic study that was done was not scientific enough.

This complaint simply means they didn't like the results. There were many studies done throughout the country whose scientific results are considered in the design. The notion that no study done elsewhere is relevant is itself a silly, unscientific notion.

You may have thought that voting down the redesign plan was a cheap vote. The redesign is put on hold anyway because of funding, and you get some very loud, shrill people off your backs. But, it costs in other ways, and ultimately only encourages bullying, shrill, unreasoned discourse as the best means to get your way in all future projects. It makes reasonable, civic-minded people realize that it's not worth the effort, because the city councillors will respond to that kind of pressure rather than take responsible positions based on what's best for all the citizens.

The city of Cambridge is under legal obligation to promote pedestrian and bicycle mobility. Standing up for this plan would have indicated that you understood that responsibility. I expected better judgement from city councillors who, the papers say, want to be treated as professionals.

Sincerely,

Tom Reisz, Chair
Cambridge Pedestrian Committee

Consent Commurciation #11

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A communciation was received from
Tom Reisz, Chair, Cambridge
Pedestrian Committee, relative to
the North Mass Avenue design project.

In City Council October 2, 2000

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