

MEMORANDUM

To: Planning Board and Staff
Conservation Commission and Staff
City Council

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FEB 5 1990

Ans'd.....

From: Hugh Russell

Date: 2/4/90

Re: CENTRAL ARTERY INTERCHANGE IN CAMBRIDGE

The current proposal for the Storrow Drive/I93/Tobin Bridge interchange in the North Point/Millers River Area of Cambridge as presented to the Conservation Commission and Planning Board on 11/1/89 and 1/30/90 has several obvious major problems, of which the most important seem to be:

- The multi-layer multi-ramp design is highway engineering gone wild, about twice as wide and twice as high as the Central Artery that is being replaced. It appears that the Project Engineers can't see what is obvious to all of us on first viewing the model - this is something that will be monstrously ugly and a blight on Boston and Cambridge.
- The ramps added to the previously approved Central Artery North Area (CANA) make things much worse, because they are higher and closer to North Point and the Charles River. The closest ramp to North Point is about 100' in the air and close to the area proposed for redevelopment, making such redevelopment, particularly for residential purposes, less likely.
- The bridges and ramps almost completely cover the Millers River and perhaps 1000' of the Charles River north bank, making these resources pretty unpleasant for public use.

It also seems pretty clear that Cambridge interests have been given last priority compared to Boston and Charlestown. The Project Designers seem to feel that because interchange site is a railroad yard it is OK to blight it some more, and that we shouldn't care about that. Their strategy seems to have been to listen to then ignore comments from Cambridge, and get so far down the road that our concerns cannot be resolved in the rush to approvals. For this reason, if we want to prevent this alternative from getting built as planned, we need to pull together on a common strategy. It seems to me that there are 4 major possible strategies:

1. STOP THE HIGHWAY

We could attempt to prevent adoption of this design by various means. The Conservation Commission seems to (currently) have to authority to prevent work in and around the rivers. Delays and lawsuits could be used to interfere with the apparently delicate funding package. Some have proposed another design with the Central Artery Tunnel extended to Somerville, and the interchanges underground. And what about earthquakes - isn't this structure and the underlying fill similar to the conditions at the Oakland end of the Bay Bridge - is this design safe?

I have difficulty with this general strategy because I believe that the overall project is very desirable for the region and may give relief for some time to Cambridge arteries, like O'Brien Highway, and therefore it is irresponsible to attempt to stop it entirely.

2. TUNNEL

The tunnel alternative, Scheme "M", seems to have the fewest long-term impacts on Cambridge, and minimizes the 3 major problems cited above. The Project Engineers have spent a lot of time studying the tunnel option, although much that time seems to have been spent in making the option seem impossible. It seems possible that if we said this is the only scheme that Cambridge can support, some answers might be found to these problems. For example, if Boston Steam cannot be relocated, why can't it be underpinned for the tunnel that has to pass under it? Also, if a 39' wide steel tube section could be fabricated elsewhere and fit through the locks, why not live with 39' width for a 2 lane tunnel, and avoid the graving yard excavation problem? (Note that 4 lane Memorial drive is 40' wide, and that Storrow Drive follows few interstate standards for the rest of its length.)

Because of the amount of effort spent to date on proving this option is unworkable, it would be very difficult to succeed in this strategy.

3. REDESIGN THE WORST RAMP AWAY FROM CAMBRIDGE AND THE CHARLES

Much of the worst impact comes from a ramp added above and outside of the previously approved CANA ramps. This ramp connects from I93 north and south to Storrow Drive west. If this ramp were relocated to the inside of the ramp system or put underground, it would make a significant difference to North Point and the Charles. This might involve some compromise of ideal highway design, but considering what it is connected to, that doesn't seem too bad. If the double-deck Storrow Drive crossing of the Charles ended up as single layer, this would be an additional significant bonus.

This strategy depends on the technical feasibility of relocating the offending ramp. Impacts on the Millers River would continue to

amount to total obliteration. The advantage of this strategy is that the worst impacts are addressed, but it isn't necessary to change the proposed design very much.

4. MITIGATION

This is what the Project Designers want us to buy into. Approve the highway mess and we'll decorate it so that... And that's the problem. There really isn't any sort of decoration or mitigation that can make a significant reduction of the impacts on Cambridge from the high-flying ramps. In theory, you could build a 100' high berm to hide the interchange, but it would take a lot of land and have to be honeycombed with tunnels for the railroad and highway. You could build a 10 story building along the highway facing the other way, but I can't imagine any possible funding mechanism.

SUMMARY

The proposed design for the interchange will have significant negative impacts on Cambridge, and there appears to be no current strategy that will prevent this. There are options, but unless Cambridge pulls together behind one option, our views cannot be effective. I would hope that the City Council, as the top policy setting body in the city, could act immediately to pull together a unified strategy, including the views of the Conservation Commission, Planning Board, Charles River Watershed Association, and US Environmental Protection Agency.

8. 5-134

Comm. from Hugh Russell, 1 Corlis Place,
regarding the Central Artery Interchange
in Cambridge.

In City Council,

Feb. 12, 1990

*Referred to City
Manager for report
and referred to
Community Development
& Environment Committee
Copies sent to City Mgr &
Community Dev. & Environment
Committee. 2/14/90 (w)*