

# Opinion: A Boston Transportation Wishlist

Here are the Boston transportation projects I hope are under the Christmas tree for us this year.

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Boston has a transportation problem.

Our city is home to 617,594 residents. Its population swells to over one million workers and shoppers, every weekday, including **approximately 300,000 commuters**, half of whom take public transportation. The other half, lamentably, drive. Meanwhile, more than 350,000 Boston residents have their own cars.

The city's streets can't handle this burden. Even if we continued to build new roads it wouldn't reduce congestion or stop traffic jams. **Experts** believe that adding expressways, tunnels, and bridges only encourages more people to drive.

Instead, we need to promote the use of public transportation. Buses, subways, and the commuter rail can move larger numbers of people, and are cost-effective, too. (Public transportation has the added benefit of reducing the negative effects that automobiles have on our health and environment.)

Here are some of my ideas for making public transportation better and more accessible. (Many of the statistics quoted are from the [MBTA](#) website.)

### **Seaport District public transportation**

Seaport District public transportation is a failure. Bus options are few. You can take the Silver Line bus line from South Station to three stops in the district, but it's a slow and cumbersome trip. You can take the #4 bus, but it only runs six hours a day, and not on Saturdays or Sundays.

In order to help this new neighborhood succeed, plans for an improved public transportation system have to be developed, now, before all the [planned development projects](#) get started. A trolley right down Seaport Boulevard might do the trick, or I'd even settle for a new [Bus Rapid Transit](#) (BRT) line, but not one that requires passengers to switch at South Station, which is the case now on the Silver Line (which isn't a BRT, no matter how many times we're told otherwise).

### **QR codes for bus stops**

I've been doing some research into [QR codes](#), which are those bar codes you see popping up everywhere. Many brands of smart phones can read these to download data from websites.

The plan would be to have QR codes put up at every bus stop. Someone standing at a stop could wave his/her phone at the sticker and immediately bring up the schedule and "next bus" data. Currently, the information at each bus stop is limited; the bus line number is listed, if you're lucky, and there might be a map of the route. That's it.

A QR code at each stop would allow riders to access up-to-date information, making bus use more convenient. It's a low-cost solution that could be implemented right now.

### **Improvements to the #1 and other heavily used lines**

Fully 40 percent of MBTA bus riders use just 10 of the MBTA's 170 routes. The popular routes include the SL5, #66, #39, #1, and #57.

Riders of these routes appreciate the ability to take the bus to and from work and leisure activities, but the high levels of usage means there's always pressure on the lines to carry their loads. More focus should be put on improving the reliability of the buses on these routes. They're popular for a reason - they go from where people live to where people want to go. The T can take advantage of this by making simple improvements (cleaner, more-frequent buses) and some that aren't so simple (before-boarding payment options to speed passenger loading).

### **Regrade Washington Street**

Washington Street in Downtown Crossing should be regraded so that the street and sidewalks are at the same level. And, either have it open to traffic or completely closed to traffic, not open to taxis and police cars, etc., but only at certain times of the day. Or, even better, open to buses only - perhaps an extension of the [Silver Line](#).

If and when the [One Franklin](#) project happens, transportation in the neighborhood will have to be improved, anyway; re-opening Washington Street to cars or closing it off completely should be considered at that time.

### **A monorail on the Rose Kennedy Greenway?**

The [Rose Kennedy Greenway](#) suffers from being too much of a median strip located between six lanes of automobile traffic. In order to prioritize it as a place of leisure, there needs to be less traffic on both sides.

The city / state should reduce the number of lanes in each direction from the current three to two. The only people this would inconvenience are those who use the surface artery to get in and out of the city during rush hour. Why should their needs take precedence over ours?

The extra lane in each direction can be turned into a dedicated bus lane - perhaps an extension of the Silver Line (paging [State Representative Aaron Michlewitz](#)) running from North Station down the Greenway all the way to South Station. Or, in my dreams, a [monorail](#).

## **Prioritize Boston-based projects**

If I had my way, intra-city public transportation would take precedence over inter-city public transportation projects. These include the [North South Rail Link](#), the [Urban Ring](#), and the MBTA [Red Line / Blue Line Connector](#) (from Bowdoin to Charles Street/MGH).

Boston should have a bigger say in what gets built when it comes to public transportation. The city contributes \$74 million toward the MBTA's \$150 million annual cities' assessment; 49.8 percent, far and away higher than second-placed Cambridge, which pays \$8 million per year (about percent). We contribute more; we should get more in return.

## **Part 2.**

Last week, I offered suggestions on how Boston's public transportation system could be improved. This week, I'm proposing changes that would improve automobile traffic flow into, out of, and through the city.

Although we all wish that everyone would take public transportation to and from Boston, the truth is, we will always need roads, bridges, and tunnels. The problem is, our system is overburdened, even after completion of the \$22 billion Central Artery and Third Harbor Tunnel projects. Many Bostonians think of our city as one continuous traffic jam.

Here are some ways we can ease the commutes of many while also improving the lives of Boston residents.

### **Congestion pricing**

We should charge commuters a fee when they come into the city from points north, south and west. Not a toll, per se, because the revenues raised wouldn't go toward paying off the cost of the bridges and streets that people travel, but similar.

The idea is to make the cost of driving equal to an amount that reduces the desire for commuters to drive into the city. Those who come to the city by car or truck would be required to pay a fee if they chose to do so during the morning and evening rush hours - basically anytime there is congestion. The money raised would go toward improving (and expanding) the public transportation system throughout Eastern Massachusetts.

I realize it's easy for those of us who live in the city to want this - we wouldn't have to pay anything and we'd be the ones to benefit, too. It's a win-win. But, it would benefit commuters, too - traffic jams would be eliminated. Those who feel they have to drive into the city would be able to; those who do so out of convenience or because they it costs less could switch their modes of transportation.

Major issues would have to be worked out. There are so many routes into and out of the city, from major arteries to small, narrow roads. How would you track everyone? And, what if it worked "too well" - what if the new fee discouraged too many people from working in downtown Boston and wouldn't this added "tax" lead major employers to seek out suburban locations in which to expand?

There's the privacy issue. How do you track commuters without invading their privacy? And, what about those who come to the city out of necessity, mainly to visit its hospitals? When you're sick (or dying), you aren't necessarily able or willing to take public transportation. Would the added cost be too much for them to bear?

### **Variable parking meter fees**

There's another way to raise revenue while reducing congestion and the release of carbon-based gases. Technology exists that would allow the city to modify its parking meter prices based on the time of day. For example, we could increase the current flat rate from \$1.25 per hour to \$2.50 or \$5.00 per hour during the business day, reduce it to \$1.00 before 8am and after 5pm, and make it free on Sundays and holidays and, since the mayor seems to like it, on the four Saturdays between Thanksgiving and Holiday.

In tandem with this, privately and publicly-owned parking garages would have their taxes increased to cover the direct and indirect costs incurred by people driving into the city.

### **Bowker Overpass / Storrow Drive**

The Bowker Overpass is the multi-lane steel beam bridge monstrosity that lurks over Storrow Drive, that drivers use coming into Boston from north and west of the city to get to the Longwood Medical Area and Fenway Park. Proposals have been floated that would replace the overpass with a series of interconnected, street-level roads that would improve local traffic patterns and rejoin the Back Bay with Kenmore Square.

Storrow Drive was never intended to be a major access point for people traveling into and out of the city - that's why its bridges are so low (the ones that U-Haul trucks slam into every September 1st) - but it now carries 100,000 cars per day.

Removing the overpass and returning Storrow Drive to its intended purpose as a "parkway" would mean commuters would have to find new ways to get into the city, mainly by using the Massachusetts Turnpike Extension.

Which means we would need ...

## **Additional Mass Pike on & off ramps**

It's been estimated that **nearly half the traffic** on Storrow Drive exits at the Bowker Overpass. What would happen if we added on and off ramps to the Massachusetts Turnpike Extension near the Back Bay, South End, and Chinatown? Would it reduce congestion on Storrow Drive? Would commuters start taking Route 93 from the north and south and access the Mass Pike from there?

What effect would this have on traffic and, more importantly, on the residents in those neighborhoods?

From a **Back Bay Sun** story of several years ago:

In fact, early Big Dig plans included ramps that did connect to the Back Bay. But James Kerasiotis, who was then secretary of transportation for the commonwealth, killed the plan, allegedly in response to objections from Chinatown residents, according to Fred Salvucci, also a former secretary of transportation, who was instrumental in executing the Big

Dig. Kerasiotis said, "We already have a ramp to the Back Bay. It's called Storrow Drive," Salvucci recalled.

The proposal scares many Back Bay and South End residents, and with good reason - the fear is that the neighborhoods would be over-run with traffic if new off- and on-ramps were built. I think, however, that a new study needs to be completed to figure out what the actual impact would be.

### **Politics and money are impediments to these projects**

We're limited only by our leadership ... and money. With a bit of both, we can improve every-one's lives, commuters and residents alike.

To keep abreast of Boston / Greater Boston transportation projects, I highly recommend joining the conversation going on in the [ArchBoston transit and infrastructure forum](#).

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