



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Date: October 10th, 2025

To: Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee

From: Mobility Division, Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development

RE: Response to PTAC Western Pearl Street Comment Letter

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for your engagement in the Western Pearl Street Reconstruction Project and for your June 10th comment letter regarding the concept design options presented for the project earlier this year. We have reviewed your comments and appreciate the opportunity to respond. We look forward to hearing your discussion on the Updated Design at the October Committee meeting.

The comment letter begins by highlighting priority concerns identified from a review of the Western Pearl Street Community Engagement Report, including *Traffic, Speeding, and Cut-Throughs, Suggestions, Safety at Intersections and Crossings (in particular at: Medford Street, Marshall Street and Walnut Street), Sidewalk Condition, and Environmental and Aesthetic Issues*. We agree with the particular importance of these issues and believe we have responded to them in the updated design. Below, we address each topic area, italicized:

Traffic, Speeding, and Cut-Throughs

The updated design includes 6 raised features (crosswalks or intersections) along either Pearl Street or Medford Street as well as 11 raised crosswalks across every single side street in the project area. The overall curb to curb width of Pearl Street will be reduced from 33 feet to between 21 and 28 feet and curb extensions into Pearl Street are proposed in numerous locations. Taken together, these elements are likely to have a significant impact on speeding

and aggressive driving on Pearl Street. They are intended to make crossing the street or pulling out of side streets easier, safer, and more comfortable for all users as lower speeds will lengthen gaps between vehicles and increase yielding behavior. We also anticipate that these design elements will make the street less attractive to use as a cut through street to avoid McGrath Highway.

Safety at Intersections and Crossings

The introduction of a significant number of raised crossings and intersections is intended to increase safety for pedestrians crossing the street. Further, existing regulations not permitting parking within 20 feet of all intersections and crosswalks has been reenforced with curb extensions or painted lines and signs, including on the ends of all public side streets, to improve visibility for all users traveling the street. At Medford Street, the realigned intersection will required all traffic on Medford Street northbound, where we have observed higher speeds, to stop at Pearl Street before continuing. Traffic on Pearl Street westbound and Medford Street southbound will be calmed by a raised crosswalk, which has been moved closer to the intersection, and by the bend in the street introduced by the new alignment. At Marshall Street, a raised intersection will improve visibility and crosswalks have been added to all legs and moved closer to the intersection, aligned with straighter pedestrian paths of travel. At Walnut Street, a raised intersection has been added to reduce vehicular speeds and increase visibility. Large curb extensions will also visually narrow the intersection without inhibiting larger vehicles. We are also exploring the introduction of four-way stop control at Walnut Street to emphasize pedestrian priority, further calm traffic, and potentially reduce inefficient queuing that can lead to frustration and aggressive driving. We welcome committee discussion and comment on this proposal.

Sidewalk Condition

The Updated Design addresses existing sidewalk deficiencies and the significant deterioration of the pedestrian realm at present. The introduction of raised crosswalks along all side streets has allowed crosswalks to be moved more in line with desired pedestrian paths of travel. The use of flexible porous pavement in coordination with the City's Urban Forestry staff will allow the City to maintain healthy trees while reducing their impact on walkways as they grow. The project will also install compliant pedestrian signal infrastructure at Walnut Street, including audible signals, upgraded pushbuttons, and countdown timers. Unfortunately, we are currently unable to include lighting improvements in this project.

Environmental and Aesthetic Issues

The Updated Design proposes sixteen new tree plantings in locations identified by our Urban Forestry staff. Many existing tree pits will be expanded and/or will have porous pavement added to support tree health. Existing benches will be reset or replaced as needed, and a new seating wall is proposed at the intersection with Medford Street. We encourage the Committee to propose additional locations where new benches, trash cans, or bicycle racks are needed as a part of this design phase. Unfortunately, we are currently unable to include green stormwater infrastructure in this project.

We agree with the Committee that conceptual design Option 1 best reflects what we heard from community members, and we have refined and advanced that concept in the Updated Design. Below we respond to specific comments and requests, italicized:

More Traffic Calming Needs

We appreciate and share the concern about vehicular speeds at Pearl Street and Medford Street. Choosing between the two conceptual design options previously proposed requires the prioritization of either Pearl Street westbound or Medford Street northbound for stop control. We are prioritizing Medford Street northbound for stop control given previous data collection as well as the concerns we have heard about commuter traffic and speeding vehicles coming from the Medford Street Bridge. To address Pearl Street speeds, we moved the raised crosswalk closer to the intersection, both for better visibility of crossing pedestrians and so that there is now less than 150 feet separating that raised crosswalk from the raised intersection at Marshall Street. We have also added a raised intersection at Walnut Street so that there are now regular and recurring traffic calming elements across the project area.

Raised Intersection at Bradley Street

We decided to retain a raised crosswalk at Bradley Street rather than introduce a raised intersection. We have heard from community members that the smaller table size of raised crosswalks improves its traffic calming impact. We believe this design will result in slower vehicle speeds that will better serve people biking on Pearl Street westbound who are waiting for a gap to access the two-way bike facility. Since there is no excess right-of-way available to provide a waiting space, people biking must occupy the full lane to make this maneuver. To reduce potential confusion for people driving, we opened a gap in the median island for bicycle access that is separate, but downstream, of the raised crosswalk to provide access to the two-way bike facility. This placement is intended to slow any traffic behind a person biking making this turn and prevent any unnecessary conflict with crossing pedestrians.

Separate Bike and Pedestrian Routes in the Park

The proposed plan for improvements to Ed Leathers Park relocates the bicycle route from a narrow shared five-foot sidewalk through the center of the park to a repaved shared use path on the south side of the park. This design preserves the central walkway for people walking and rolling. We do not believe it is necessary for the southern path to be for people biking only, as this would not be enforceable and it would limit existing passive use of that area of the park by pedestrians. We believe the wider shared use path will be sufficient and intend to use signs and pavement markings to communicate the shared use nature of the path. We intend to replace all existing benches along the shared use path to continue to encourage passive use by pedestrians.

Bus Stop Obsolescence Planning

Although the MBTA Bus Network Redesign does propose eliminating bus service from Pearl Street, the MBTA has not given any timeline for these changes, and we believe that they are

at least several years from occurring. The MBTA has asked the City to maintain bus access within this project and to consider upgrades to better serve the bus. Given that, we have designed some upgraded bus stops, including one floating bus stop and three in-lane bus stops, where space permits. If bus service were to cease in the future, these areas would essentially be curb extensions, providing expanded sidewalk areas. These are locations that could be used for additional amenities such as trees, bicycle parking, benches, and more without requiring extensive reconstruction.

Gilman Street Pedestrian & Bicycle Priority

The westbound bicycle route along Aldrich Street, Gilman Street, Ed Leathers Park, and Skilton Avenue will be designated as a Neighborway Route. Neighborways are walk-, roll-, and-bike friendly streets that run parallel to larger main streets, creating a low-stress and high comfort experience on residential streets. Although not a full redesign, this project will include upgrading existing Neighborway segments with additional signage and pavement markings. Gilman Street is already a popular choice for school travel to and from East Somerville given that it bypasses a major intersection with McGrath Highway. We are happy to note that in the current McGrath Boulevard conceptual designs, MassDOT proposes to close vehicle access to Aldrich Street. This provides an opportunity for a protected connection from Pearl Street to the Gilman Neighborway and has the potential to further reduce vehicle volume on the Neighborway route. Some people biking may prefer to simply travel more directly on Pearl Street in a shared lane, and this will be easier to do with the many traffic calming elements being introduced. However, we believe the extended Neighborway route to serve westbound bicycling will be a safe and comfortable alternative that has the potential to serve as a primary route for children and youth. Even with these improvements, we still aim to provide safer options for people walking, rolling, and biking throughout the whole length of Pearl Street given the many people who live directly on the street or nearby for whom the Neighborway route may not be an option.

South Bike Lane vs. Sidewalk Priority

Thank you for the suggestion to promote the Neighborway route to people biking in both directions between East Somerville and Gilman Square, given its low stress nature. People biking may prefer one route or the other for safety or directness reasons, as well as motives based on their origin or destination. We are still considering exactly how to communicate this nuanced message of alternative routes, but we intend for the final design to include wayfinding signs on Pearl Street westbound at Skilton Avenue to highlight the existence of an alternative to continuing on Pearl Street that avoids an intersection with McGrath Highway. We are open to the suggestions of the Committee and are also considering how to harmonize this message with other Neighborway signage.

Thank you again for continued engagement and detailed review of the conceptual design options. We look forward to the Committee's reaction and discussion of the Updated Design. We remain open to continued comments or questions as we work toward completing the design stage of this project and move to construction of an improved Pearl Street.