



Sept 17, 2026

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Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) - Highway Division
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116
Attention: Major Projects, PROJECT FILE NO. 612634

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the proposed Squire's Bridge Replacement Project. We commend MassDOT for its proactive public engagement, including the July 2026 Public Information Meeting, and its commitment to replacing this deteriorating structure with a modern bridge that welcomes all modes of transportation. The new design offers a tremendous win for pedestrians, cyclists, and public transit users, and we appreciate your team's early design choices for most of the corridor.

As MassDOT continues design development, we want to highlight where the current preferred bridge design diverges from the local multimodal goals formalized in the City of Somerville's adopted Brickbottom Plan (September 2024), as well as opportunities to reimagine the pedestrian and public transit experience on the bridge. This letter outlines the specific gaps between the current state-level proposals and our municipal plan. It offers concrete suggestions to ensure this once-in-a-generation infrastructure project successfully heals the neighborhood's historic physical isolation.

1. Critical Priority: Preserve and Modernize All Pedestrian Access Points to the Bridge

Squire's Bridge is a significant barrier, forcing pedestrians to navigate extremely narrow sidewalks and climb a neglected, non-ADA-compliant concrete staircase to reach the bridge from within the neighborhood. Historically, the Brickbottom neighborhood has relied on three concrete staircases (northeast, northwest, and southwest) to connect low-lying residential and commercial streets directly to the bridge's elevated sidewalks. These staircases serve as vital localized portals that prevent severe pedestrian detours. More importantly, they are not redundant: each reflects an actual travel path residents use to reach different transit routes on the bridge. MassDOT's current preferred concept outlines a vague "accessible connection from Linwood Street to Route 28." While we appreciate the commitment to accessibility, the implied

consolidation or abandonment of the remaining stair connections is unacceptable. The replacement bridge must provide access at least as good as what residents have today: preserve every existing connection point and add at least one fully accessible connection. Consolidating the remaining stair connections into a single access point would be a step backward. At a minimum, all staircases must be fully integrated into the bridge replacement design and rebuilt to modern code, preserving local travel patterns and neighborhood safety.

Beyond the stairs, we urge MassDOT to pair these connections with genuinely accessible vertical transitions. The ideal solution is the one the Brickbottom Plan already specifies: a combined public staircase and elevator tower at the Linwood/Fitchburg corner, integrated with a galleria or community art space. An elevator minimizes spatial footprint, preserves green space, and creates an architectural gateway that reflects the neighborhood's active arts community. We are equally amenable to other ADA-compliant solutions, including ramps adjacent to the bridge that serve wheelchair users, strollers, cargo bikes, and delivery carts alike. MassDOT has done this extremely well before: the Frances Appleton Pedestrian Bridge, built as part of the Longfellow Bridge rehabilitation, replaced a stair-only crossing to the Esplanade with a fully accessible ramped structure, and the North Bank Bridge connects North Point Park to Charlestown with gentle ramped approaches. Whatever form the accessible connection takes, the design should not preclude a future elevator. We strongly recommend working with private developments (as at North Point Park and the Union Square GLX station) and the City of Somerville to build and maintain such structures.

2. Bridging Brickbottom and Twin City Plaza

The railroad right-of-way and elevated highway have historically severed Brickbottom from the Twin City commercial plaza and East Cambridge. Even though the straight-line distance from the Linwood/Fitchburg intersection to the front of the stores is just ~450 ft, pedestrians and cyclists have to either take a ~2500 ft detour to the east, using the staircase on McGrath, or a ~3200 ft detour through Scary Way and Medford St to buy some groceries. We urge MassDOT to partner with commercial developers from Twin City Plaza and the City of Somerville and utilize this bridge design as a catalyst to bridge these historically separated neighborhoods by introducing high-quality, continuous protected bicycle and pedestrian pathways. Specifically, reallocating excess pavement width on the southern approach toward Cambridge to establish raised, physically separated bike lanes and street trees will create a safe, inviting, and dignified connection. This alignment will allow Brickbottom residents to safely access vital commercial services at Twin City while integrating the plaza into Somerville's and Cambridge's active multi-modal transportation network.

3. Target Speed Design and Physical Traffic Calming Infrastructure

This isolated stretch of McGrath already invites dangerous speeds through a dense, transit-oriented neighborhood. The proposed single-span bridge straightens the roadway as it crosses the railroad corridor. That improves sightlines, but straight, wide geometry is a proven speed inducer and will likely worsen the existing hazard. We request that designers establish a desirable target speed —specifically 30 mph (or 25 mph in adjacent residential transition zones) — and engineer geometric elements of the roadway around that target. This requires integrating physical traffic calming infrastructure, including narrowed vehicular travel lanes, raised pedestrian crossings and speed tables at ramp terminals and slip lanes, curb extensions (bulb-outs) to shorten pedestrian crossing distances, textured or colored pavement at key conflict points, and automated radar speed feedback signs. Designing roadway geometry specifically to enforce safe operating speeds is essential to protect pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders navigating the bridge corridor and crossing McGrath, with special attention to older adults, families carrying groceries, and kids on bikes.

4. 1 McGrath Redevelopment & Grand Junction Connector

MassDOT's presentation slide on 'Coordination with Relevant Projects' rightfully lists the redevelopments at 1 and 15 McGrath Highway, alongside the Grand Junction to Community Path Connection. We expect the Grand Junction Connector to evolve into a high-volume path for pedestrians and cyclists commuting between East Cambridge and Somerville. MassDOT must ensure the southern end of the Squire's Bridge integrates seamlessly with those redevelopments. Specifically, the proposed raised bike lanes and pedestrian buffers must align with 1 McGrath's commercial design and establish a high-capacity, direct active-transit connection. This integration is critical to safely manage high multi-modal volumes as a regional gateway rather than a pedestrian bottleneck when crossing McGrath from/into Cambridge. Since the 1 McGrath site has been delayed several times, we ask that MassDOT consider paving and opening the connector's ramp and bridge segment as part of this project, rather than leaving it dependent on the private development's timeline.

5. Grade-Separated Southern Active-Transit Underpass (Rufo Road Crossing Bypass)

Pedestrians and cyclists coming from the Community Path and the Grand Junction Path must cross McGrath at Rufo Road, a hostile and dangerous at-grade intersection today and, largely, in the new design. With both paths feeding into this point, we expect it to become one of the highest-volume active-transportation crossings in the corridor. While we acknowledge MassDOT's proposal to redesign the intersection with separated, at-grade two-way crossings, we strongly urge the department to replicate the "Scary Way" access point here: a dedicated,

grade-separated pedestrian and bicycle underpass beneath the southern side of the tracks. This underpass would link both sides of McGrath Highway, connecting East Cambridge and the Grand Junction Path directly to the developments at 1 and 15 McGrath. It would provide a fully protected, off-street corridor with no conflict with high-speed traffic, ideal for kids and families riding from the Community Path.

MassDOT's presentation includes a "Future Shared-Use-Path" on Slide 28 but provides no further description. We explicitly request that MassDOT fully construct, pave, grade, light, and complete this path as part of the primary Squires Bridge project, so that it opens as a fully operational, high-quality multi-use path rather than an unpaved or deferred conceptual note.

If an underpass proves infeasible, the at-grade crossing at Rufo Road must be redesigned for the crossing volumes it will carry, not as a standard highway intersection with painted crosswalks added. At a minimum, we ask for:

- a protected-intersection layout with tight corner radii and no free-flowing slip lanes;
- single-stage crossing timed so that pedestrians and cyclists clear the 5 lanes of McGrath without waiting on a median;
- ADA-compliant refuge islands wide enough for cargo bikes, trailers, and strollers wherever a median wait is unavoidable;
- dedicated bike signals with leading intervals and no turns on red;
- raised intersections to minimize speeds on green lights;
- signal timing that serves steady path traffic, rather than forcing path users to push a button and wait a full cycle.

In short, if MassDOT doesn't build the underpass, path users must be able to cross McGrath safely at the surface in a way that works for older adults, kids, and families walking or riding from the safe Community Path.

6. Expanding the Urban Tree Canopy and Improving Pedestrian User Experience

Brickbottom currently has a particularly low tree canopy cover compared to the rest of the city, presenting a severe urban heat island risk and leaving pedestrians and cyclists exposed on unshaded concrete. Trees are vital municipal infrastructure that moderate extreme temperatures, improve air quality, and manage stormwater. To protect pedestrians and cyclists using the elevated bridge sidewalks, MassDOT must prioritize planting a continuous row of street trees alongside all rebuilt sidewalks and pathways. Trees placed in the center median are primarily aesthetic. Moving these plantings to the outer edge creates a vital active-transit shade canopy and helps combat the urban heat island effect. By collaborating with the City's Public Space & Urban Forestry division, MassDOT should implement the 'right tree, right place'

methodology of the Urban Forest Management Plan, ensuring robust planting beds that provide a healthy canopy buffer for active transportation users.

Additionally, MassDOT must allocate physical space and utility connections on the public right-of-way for unified, highly visible active-transit wayfinding signage pointing users toward the East Somerville GLX Station, the Community Path, and the Grand Junction Path, and dedicated Bikeshare docks directly adjacent to the Fitchburg/Linwood accessible connection, the future Poplar Street plaza gateway and/or on the east side of the corridor, potentially on north and south sides of McGrath. We insist that MassDOT incorporate high-quality, pedestrian-scale architectural lighting both along the elevated bridge sidewalks and underneath the new structure to make it a safe and inviting experience for nighttime use. These spaces should be activated with decorative vertical elements, public art projections, or community gallery spaces to transform a potential urban void into a safe, celebrated neighborhood gateway.

7. Enhanced Safety on Somerville Avenue Extension

Currently, the Somerville Avenue Extension ('Scary Way') brings fast-moving, high-volume vehicular traffic directly to the southern residential corner of the neighborhood, creating an inhospitable and unsafe environment. We applaud MassDOT's proposed design, which realigns this extension to route vehicle traffic away from the Linwood/Fitchburg intersection, maintains a safe one-way motor vehicle flow, and incorporates a new sidewalk and a two-way separated bike lane. This is a massive step forward in multi-modal safety that directly aligns with our local goals.

The Brickbottom Plan envisions a distinct linear green space and pocket park to buffer the historic cobblestone-paved Fitchburg Street from the realigned extension. A wide physical buffer zone (trees/park) must protect the historic cobblestone pavement. Furthermore, while MassDOT's plan safely routes commercial vehicles from the future 200 McGrath redevelopment directly onto Route 28 via a new driveway, we must ensure the grading and curb-cut controls on the realigned Somerville Avenue Extension are designed to prevent U-turning car and truck spillover onto Linwood Street's residential sections.

8. Facilitating Pedestrian Access to Bus Stops

The Brickbottom Plan highlights that local mass transit connectivity must extend to the regional bus network. Currently, residents walking from the neighborhood's core to the active bus stops at McGrath @ Medford Street, McGrath Hwy @ Poplar St, and McGrath @ Twin City Plaza (both northbound and southbound) must navigate hostile, high-speed vehicle lanes, narrow shoulders, and poorly timed pedestrian signals. We urge MassDOT to work with the MBTA to design direct, safe, continuous, and fully ADA-accessible pedestrian pathways and sidewalks

connecting neighborhoods directly to these key bus stop platforms. This includes incorporating pedestrian refuge islands, high-visibility crosswalks, pedestrian-signalized crossings, pedestrian-cyclist barriers, and weather-protected bus shelters and benches with real-time transit arrival displays to ensure a dignified, safe journey for local commuters, including at nighttime.

Additionally, the Brickbottom Neighborhood Plan supports the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign and future Silver Line service beyond Sullivan Square to Kendall Square, which the MBTA's Silver Line Extension Alternatives Analysis deferred for further study. McGrath is a natural corridor for that connection, and the bridge cross-section should not preclude dedicated bus lanes.

9. Designing Sidewalks for Reliable Winter Maintenance and Snow Clearance

The Brickbottom Plan highlights the critical importance of keeping our active transportation network functional year-round. Too often, newly designed bicycle lanes, sidewalks, and transit facilities become unusable during winter because snowplows push snow directly onto them, or because they are too narrow for standard municipal/state clearing equipment. We request that MassDOT design all sidewalks, staircases, underpasses, separated cycle tracks, and pedestrian bridge landings with adequate widths to accommodate snow-clearing vehicles and purposeful designs to host snow piles during storms. Furthermore, bus shelter layouts must be strategically configured so snow-plowing operations do not block passenger loading zones, and MassDOT, the MBTA, and the City of Somerville must establish clear maintenance responsibilities to ensure rapid, coordinated snow removal of sidewalks and bus stops.

10. Integrating Green Stormwater Infrastructure and Coordinating Sewer Separation

Redesigned streetscapes should align with the City's Complete Streets Ordinance and SomerVision 2040 resilience mandates by integrating active green infrastructure—such as bioretention basins, rain gardens, bioswales, and permeable paving—directly into the roadside buffers. This is a critical safety and mobility requirement; historically, the nearby Medford Street underpass suffers from severe precipitation-induced flooding during heavy rainstorms, rendering surrounding active-transit corridors impassable and trapping residents. Furthermore, the City is actively executing an underground sewer and stormwater separation project to modernize its ancient combined sewer system and minimize polluted Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) events into the adjacent Mystic and Charles Rivers. We formally request that MassDOT's design team coordinate directly with the Somerville Mobility and Engineering Divisions to verify that the Squire's Bridge layout, drainage conduits, and construction staging do not conflict with, and instead actively facilitate, the completion of this vital regional sewer separation work, ensuring no additional design retrofits are required later.

11. Minimizing Green Line and Transit Service Interruptions During Construction

Because the bridge spans the active MBTA Green Line (Union Sq branch) and the Fitchburg Commuter Rail line, multi-year bridge construction presents a severe risk of service disruptions. Prior GLX work closed the Union Square branch for roughly a month; a full bridge replacement over the tracks could exceed that. We ask MassDOT to publish expected outage durations as early as possible and, because construction staging is expected within Brickbottom, to coordinate staging, truck routing, and work hours with residents. We urge MassDOT to establish a binding operational plan that minimizes downtime for MBTA trains and buses. Rail outages must be strictly limited to off-peak night and weekend windows to preserve daily commuting patterns. In addition, local bus routes through the corridor must have dedicated priority bypass lanes and uninterrupted, ADA-accessible temporary boarding platforms throughout construction.

Moving Forward in Partnership

The Squire's Bridge Replacement Project is a monumental step forward for MassDOT and a crucial opportunity to correct past car-centric urban design mistakes. By addressing these discrepancies during the ongoing 2026–2027 design phase, MassDOT can deliver a bridge that is not only structurally sound but also serves as a model of neighborhood-scale multimodal connection, with thoughtful user-experience improvements for pedestrians and cyclists.

Decisions made in this project will dictate street safety and neighborhood cohesion for decades to come. We respectfully ask that you prioritize pedestrian and micromobility experiences for summer and winter, daylight and nighttime, while keeping in mind our most vulnerable and inexperienced users, including children, seniors, and people with disabilities, in the final design.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with your design team and the City of Somerville's Mobility Division to discuss these adjustments in detail. Thank you for your hard work, dedication, and continued partnership in shaping a safer, more connected Somerville.

Sincerely,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

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