

**ROAD
WORK
AHEAD**





FIRST, WE NEED A PLAN

BY DAVID DIXON FAIA

In 2012, Greater Boston needs to stop resting on the laurels of the past and start investing in the future. The enduring message of the Boston Transportation Planning Review is the imperative to create a comparable visionary agenda for our time. With the same kind of bold leadership, engaged citizenry, and creative thinking that marked the effort 40 years ago, the Commonwealth can once again lay the groundwork for an era of genuine progress.

Should we doubt our foresight and political courage, look at what we accomplished 40 years ago. Consider how far the anti-highway forces moved public dialogue. The people they had to convince—professionals, government officials—saw cities and transportation very differently than we do today. Architects and planners dismissed Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* as drollly quaint. They praised Robert Venturi for an exhibit he designed that toured major American museums proclaiming the television-centric family room the new public square, and the backyard the public park of the future.

The elected officials who backed the activists' assertion that the costs of building the planned highways outweighed the benefits stood nearly alone in a world that believed that highways represented the economic salvation of declining cities like Boston—then an economic basket case with a median household income barely 60 percent of the national median. "Cities of the future" like Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta were paving their way to prosperity.

Yet the activists' vision turned out to be right. Their new transportation agenda set us up well for the rise of an innovation economy and the rediscovery of urban living. Today, Boston's per capita GDP is roughly 25 percent greater than the average of those "cities of the future," and only the Washington, DC, region has a lower unemployment rate. Today, architects and planners cite Jane Jacobs to describe best practices.

As in 1972, neighborhood activism can still move us today. Grassroots campaigns to replace Jamaica Plain's Casey Overpass and Somerville's McCarthy Overpass (on the McGrath-O'Brien Highway) with landscaped urban boulevards have won broad support. Boston mayor Tom Menino endorsed the Casey's replacement as "Boston's next Big Dig"; Somerville mayor Joseph Curtatone has relentlessly promoted the social, economic, and environmental benefits of bringing the McGrath Highway down to grade. The state Department of Transportation has committed to dismantling the Casey now, and the McGrath when funding permits. It also began studying replacement of the Bowker Overpass between the Back Bay and Kenmore Square. Skeptics have raised concerns about slowing through-traffic, but we understand today that an urban neighborhood's quality of life outweighs moving cars more quickly through the city.

Still, we can no longer rely solely on neighborhood activists. After all, 1972 was pre-Internet, pre-iPhone, and pre-Barbara Lynch. Today, we face less visible but potentially more consequential challenges.

We can already foresee dramatic changes over the next 40 years that

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Photo: Kevin Day.

by themselves compel new ways of thinking. Sea levels may rise by three feet in that time, requiring at the very least a comprehensive retrofit of the MBTA. The majority of population growth will be among people 65 and older, greatly expanding dependency on transit. Rising energy costs and environmental barriers will force growth toward the core after six decades of sprawl. Roughly half the buildings we will inhabit have not yet been built, offering an extraordinary opportunity to reshape our region.

Dramatic changes over the next 40 years compel new ways of thinking.

As it stands, regional development patterns have already made life in Greater Boston too expensive. We worry about the high cost of housing, but the cost of transportation promises to become a greater burden. Households in car-dependent suburbs already spend close to one-third of disposable income on transportation, fast approaching what they spend on housing and roughly three times what comparable urban households with access to transit spend. As more than a billion residents of developing countries enter

the middle class and bid up the cost of fossil fuels, that gap will only widen.

We take pride in our innovation-driven knowledge economy, but our failure to invest in transit threatens our competitive edge. America faces a shortage of educated workers, projected to last at least 20 years. Economic engines like Kendall Square and the Longwood area grew up around major research universities because they pump out skilled workers. Knowledge industries are mobile and will follow their educated, creative workforce to survive. Groups like CEOs for Cities have shown that today those workers decide where to live based on lifestyle, and the places they choose are overwhelmingly walkable, urban, and served by public transit.

We profess to believe in social equity, but changing demographics are forcing lower-income households—for whom operating a car is prohibitively expensive—from cities to auto-dependent suburbs, a move that restricts their access to jobs, healthcare, and education. In 1972, white married couples with children constituted the majority of Boston-region households; in 2012, roughly two-thirds of all households comprise singles and childless couples, and the region is far more diverse. This shift is powering the growing desirability of transit-

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served urban neighborhoods, driving up their cost.

Today's BTPR must call for a radical shift away from existing patterns toward the creation of an integrated and energy-efficient pedestrian, bike, bus, and rail transportation network. We need to provide people of every income affordable access to job centers like Kendall Square (underserved by transit) and the Longwood Medical Area (even worse).

Our economy cannot afford a system that requires solitary 90-minute automobile commutes—each way. We need a strategy that ensures that people of any age or income can choose to live in any neighborhood from Boston's waterfront to I-495—a broad spectrum of walkable, amenity-rich choices for living, working, and learning.

Facing the same problems, cities like New York City, Denver, Seattle, and Los Angeles (Los Angeles!) have begun work on comprehensive initiatives to improve mobility by expanding transit. Washington, DC, will build 37 miles of new streetcar lines that connect to its Metro system. Over two decades, this plan increases the share of Washington households within a five-minute walk of premium transit from one-sixth to one-half.

How do we make this happen at a time when deficits and conventional wisdom say that vanishing federal

funding—which underwrote the transportation agendas of four decades ago—dictates lowered expectations?

The experience of regions building ambitious streetcar systems suggests looking to local-value capture to replace scarce federal dollars. Washington's streetcar plan relies in part on the new real-estate development spurred by its construction. The city's K Street Business Improvement District will chip in \$50 million because office rents, already high, will rise further with better transit access.

New households attracted to transit-served neighborhoods will boost local Main Streets and sales tax revenues. Tens of thousands of existing households will be able to go "car light"—reducing car ownership because they can count on transit—and saving roughly \$5,000 per year as a result. All these changes generate income streams that the District will tap to pay most or all of the system's costs.

The Boston Transportation Planning Review prepared our region well for the closing decades of the 20th century. We have the ability to reset a course that will carry us into the 21st. We can all share the benefits of building our region's future—if a far broader coalition of elected, institutional, business, professional, and community leaders step up. Let's get started. ■



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