



Somerville Community Path Feasibility Study

School Street to Cambridge Line

Prepared for:
City of Somerville, Massachusetts
Strategic Planning and Community Development

July 14, 2006

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section 1

Study Summary



1.0 Study Summary

This project examines the feasibility of constructing a proposed section of the Somerville Community Path along the Southern New Hampshire Main Line. This corridor currently serves active rail traffic that includes the MBTA Lowell Commuter Rail and Guilford freight operations. This study focuses on an extension of the existing Community Path running along the ROW from School Street to the Somerville/Cambridge line. Ultimately, this path is envisioned extending north from School Street to Central Street where the path departs the active ROW and connects with sections of the path that are either built or in the final stages of design. A future section of the proposed trail from School Street to Central Street is not included in this study (due to study funding limits) but is assumed to be along the western edge of the corridor at the top of the embankment.

In the past, MBTA policy has been unfavorable to the construction of trails within or directly adjacent to active rail corridors (so called "rails-with-trails"). Recently however, the MBTA has shown a greater willingness to consider path construction where clear separation of pedestrian and rail is demonstrated. A relevant example is the proposed Cedar Street to Central Street segment of the Somerville Community Path, where grade separation of the path from the active right-of-way within the right-of-way is moving forward.

While the initial premise was to construct the entire Community Path (from School Street to the Cambridge line) upon the right-of-way embankment, further analysis has shown that this is not entirely feasible. Therefore, in certain locations, the concepts consider alignments within portions of the active rail corridor. Where sections of the proposed path are conceptually shown to push within the active rail bed area, the final design should anticipate that the path would be elevated a minimum of 3'-4' in height above the track grade and should be provided with secure fencing or railing acceptable to the MBTA. This grade separation is intended to improve the safety of pedestrians as well as the quality and character of the path, without interference to rail operations.

This study builds on the 2001 report, prepared by Rizzo Associates, that recommended an entirely off-road path using embankments along the corridor and relocation of an existing freight track.

1.1 Overview of the Green Line Extension Project

The Green Line extension is one of several mitigation projects proposed by the State as part of the Big Dig environmental process. In 2004, the MBTA hired a planning team to study the feasibility of extending the Green Line from Cambridge into Somerville and Medford (See Appendix B for typical sections). This study indicates that this extension provides a number of benefits for the costs. Subsequently, in May of 2005, the State announced their intent to move forward with the project. This study finds that the Green Line extension Project provides a number of advantages that should facilitate development of the Community Path, and that the path provides benefits to the extension project as well.



1.2 Alternatives

In light of MBTA policies related to trails near active Right-of-ways and the future Green Line, this study focused on three alternatives:

- Alternative 1: A trail utilizing embankments and inactive rail sections beyond Washington Street that avoids the development of any elaborate structures.
- Alternative 2: A trail utilizing embankments and inactive rail sections beyond Washington Street including a structure to bridge the gap between Cross Street and Washington Street.
- Alternative 3: A trail utilizing embankments and some portions of the active ROW after McGrath Highway (as proposed by Rizzo Associates).

Based on an examination of the constraints, construction issues, estimated costs, and pending projects, the third alternative was further advanced and is provided in this study as the Recommended Plan.

- The proposed Green Line Project is moving forward and is slated to be built to the western side of the rail corridor. The westerly side is also the preferred location of the Community Path. Construction of the path adjacent to the light rail service is preferred over location next to the heavy rail operations.
- Extension of the Green Line will require relocation/removal of the freight track from Lowell Street to Washington Street. The onus of relocating the freight track is removed from the community path project.

1.3 Study Conclusions & Recommendations

The Recommended Plan is provided in Chapter 6 of this study. Based on input from the City, advocate groups, and the MBTA; a number of conclusions can be drawn from this study. These include the following:

- According to the MBTA study, the bridges at Medford Street and School Street are substandard in width (to accommodate the Green Line) and will need to be rebuilt. Reconstruction of the Medford Street Bridge provides opportunity to run the path beneath Medford Street, thereby improving path alignment and avoiding crossing Medford Street where the vertical crest of the bridge makes sight lines poor.
- MBTA stations are under consideration at City Hall/Gilman Square and at Washington Street. These stations are slated for important points of arrival and destination that compliment the path.
- The rail bridge over the Fitchburg Line (former Red Bridge) has been removed. Installation of a new pedestrian structure will need to consider the MBTA's plan to elevate the Fitchburg Line to alleviate flooding issues. Further consideration of a possible Union Square extension of the Green Line will also need to be considered.
- Location of a new Light Rail storage yard is being considered at the Yard 8 location.



- The rail yard operations south of the Fitchburg Line will be replaced by the North Point development. The North Point Development includes plans for a path that extends to the Charles River.
- The new Lechmere Station is an elevated station with tail tracks leading north out of the station. Extending this elevated structure north over the Fitchburg Line would allow the potential for the path to cross (west to east) under the Green Line to the North Point connection. This structure would also allow the development of a new connection into the Southern Inner Belt district, something recently explored by the City of Somerville.
- Construction of the path in conjunction with the Green Line improves construction access to the corridor and thereby feasibility of path construction.
- Creation of the path in conjunction with the Green Line extension provides greater access to the proposed MBTA stations.
- Location of the MBTA station at City Hall/Gilman Square may require relocation of the electrical sub-station. Final location should be based on costs of relocation and the need for maintenance access. The path is viewed as a means of both maintenance and emergency access to both the electrical sub-station as well as the MBTA station.
- The highest and best use of the embankment at Chester Street is for ramped connections to/from the McGrath Highway and Cross Street.
- Location of the Washington Street station (as shown on the Recommended Plan) on the south side of the bridge provides greater room for the station with fewer impacts to adjacent residences. This location also provides potential access to buses from Joy Street. This location will require some property taking.
- Location of the path along the westerly edge of Yard 8 should consider the active freight track as well as potential staging of Green Line cars.
- A path connection from the north side of Washington Street (behind Cataldo Ambulance) allows pedestrian access via the path to the proposed MBTA station, thereby alleviating the need to cross Washington Street at-grade.