

Be Careful What You Wish For: How a Four-Lane Mass. Ave. Would Eliminate Parking and Harm Businesses in East Arlington

A Study By the East Arlington Livable Streets Coalition

Findings

Opponents of Mass. Ave.'s redesign have made demands for four wide travel lanes and extra-wide parking that would exceed the current width of the street by at least 8 feet. The only way to meet those demands would be to remove curbside parking from one side of the street.

Introduction

The Town of Arlington is seeking \$4.5 million in federal and state funds to rehabilitate Mass Ave from the Cambridge line to just short of Arlington Center. For nearly two years, the Town, with significant support from the community, has explored a reconfiguration option that changes Mass Ave from a de facto four-lane roadway to one that includes three travel lanes, turn pockets where warranted, bike lanes, and pedestrian-safety improvements. Multiple traffic studies (Louis Berger 2001; Cooke and Quitter 2005; FDR 2010) all conclude that such a configuration could easily accommodate traffic volumes now and in the future.

The East Arlington Concerned Citizens Committee (CCC), a vocal opposition group led by Eric Berger and others, has resisted the plan from day one. The group claims that the plan will lead to increased traffic congestion, traffic spillover onto residential side streets, and hardships for businesses, without any evidence to support these claims. Instead, the CCC has advocated the inclusion of four traffic lanes shared with bicycles along with curb-side parking.

Based on the opponents' own words, our study shows that these demands—if incorporated—would lead to the removal of curb-side parking along one side of Mass. Ave., a loss of some 100 spaces that would do tremendous damage to our neighborhood's business district.

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The Four-Lane Option

The CCC has made clear its demands for the redesign of Mass. Ave.:

- Four travel lanes, including shared lanes to accommodate bicycles
- Extra wide parking lanes so bicycles can avoid the “door zone”
- Extra wide travel lanes

Plan opponents should be careful what they wish for because these demands exceed the current width of the avenue by at least six feet. The only reasonable way to accommodate all of these demands into the existing curb-to-curb width is to remove parking from either the north or south side of the street.

The loss of more than 100 legal parking spaces would clearly harm the Capitol Square business district, radically alter the character of the avenue, and likely increase traffic and parking demands on side streets due to patrons searching for limited neighborhood parking.

Opponents to the current plan have made their position clear through letters, interviews, newspaper editorials, and public comments. Their entire vision is set forth in Romano, Berger, et al. (2009), initially submitted to the Town in late Spring of 2009. (The authors include the leadership of the CCC; four of the authors were appointed to the Town’s Mass. Ave. Review Committee where they have been part of the design process since the spring of 2009.)

Romano, Berger, et al. (2009, 6) plainly state that Mass. Ave. should be

4 lanes wide—2 lanes on each side, east and west. The lanes [should be] separated in the middle by a double yellow line, and the two lanes on each side are divided by a single white dashed line.... The 2 lanes on each side the maximum allowable width using the entire existing roadway dimensions.

It is not immediately obvious that this demand threatens any parking, because it is possible today for cars to drive two abreast in both directions on most of the corridor with parking on both sides.

However, state design requirements have changed since the road was last laid out, and the current condition on Mass Ave would not pass muster today.

Furthermore, the redesign opponents have also demanded extra-wide travel and parking lanes that together would exceed the curb-to-curb width of the corridor by at least six feet unless parking is removed.

As the Town's Functional Design Report (FDR 2010) recently submitted to MassDOT notes, the part of Mass. Ave. under redesign is 66 feet wide for most of its length; the business district widens to as much as 79 feet.

The issue is further complicated by the following state design requirement. Travel lanes design for shared use between motor vehicles and bicycles, such as those advocated by the CCC, must be at least 14 feet wide (Mass. Highway 2006, 5-23); 15 feet is preferred when adjacent to on-street parking (FDR 2010, 33).

Furthermore, with the increasing recognition of the hazards of overly wide, multilane pedestrian crossings, Mass. Highway (2006, 6-63) recommends against crossing distances greater than 50 feet. The Federal Pedestrian Facility Users Guide (Zegeer, Siederman, et al. 2002, 156), cautions against installing uncontrolled crosswalks on 4-lane roads with high traffic volumes (such as Mass Ave), unless substantial measures to reduce pedestrian exposure are also taken.

The FDR (2010, 33–34) explores a four-lane option with a 14-foot shared lane and concludes that it would be impractical and unsafe. This option, the FDR finds, is so constrained as to cause users to encroach regularly on other lanes. Consequently (FDR 2010, 34), “a marked four-lane facility would actually operate more like a three-lane facility since there would be insufficient space....”

Most significantly however, the opponents in large part *agree* that this configuration would be too cramped and call for wider parking and travel lanes. With these demands, the four-lane option will not fit into the existing 66-foot cross-section.

Wider Parking Lanes

The unsatisfactory 4-lane option explored in the FDR assumes 8-foot parking lanes. CCC leader Eric Berger (2010a), however, criticizes even 10-foot parking lanes as insufficiently wide to protect cyclist from accidents involving the open doors of parked cars:

Under the town's current plan for Mass. Ave., the parking lane is 10-foot wide (from the curb) in some places and just 8.5-foot wide in others. Positioned directly adjacent to a 5-foot bike lane, this configuration does not allow sufficient space for drivers to open their vehicle doors without intruding into the bike lane.... The consequences...can be deadly

Berger's criticism would require 11-foot parking lanes to protect cyclists from the doors of parked cars. However, the need for this width is not supported by MassBike or any other bike-advocacy organization in the region or nationally.

By itself, the demand for four traffic lanes with extra-wide parking lanes translates into a 72-foot profile for a four-lane Mass. Ave. consisting of:

- two standard-width 11-foot travel lanes, one east-bound and one west-bound;
- two 14-foot shared travel lanes, east and west;
- two 11-foot parking lanes, east and west.

The only way to fit these demands into the 66-foot dimension is to eliminate a parking lane along one side of Mass Ave from end to end.

Wider Travel Lanes

However, the opponents also want more width in the travel lanes. In a 2009 leaflet (CCC 2009) they criticize the proposed 11-foot travel lanes as “narrower car lanes increasing the likelihood of accidents.” The CCC still distributes this leaflet as an expression of its requirements.

While project opponents do not say what widths they prefer, adding 1 foot to 11-foot-wide lanes would bring the cross section to 74 feet—8 feet more than the standard 66-foot width today. Curb-side parking on one side of the street would need to be removed to fit four travel lanes within the 66-foot-wide sections of Mass Ave; see Figure 1 below.

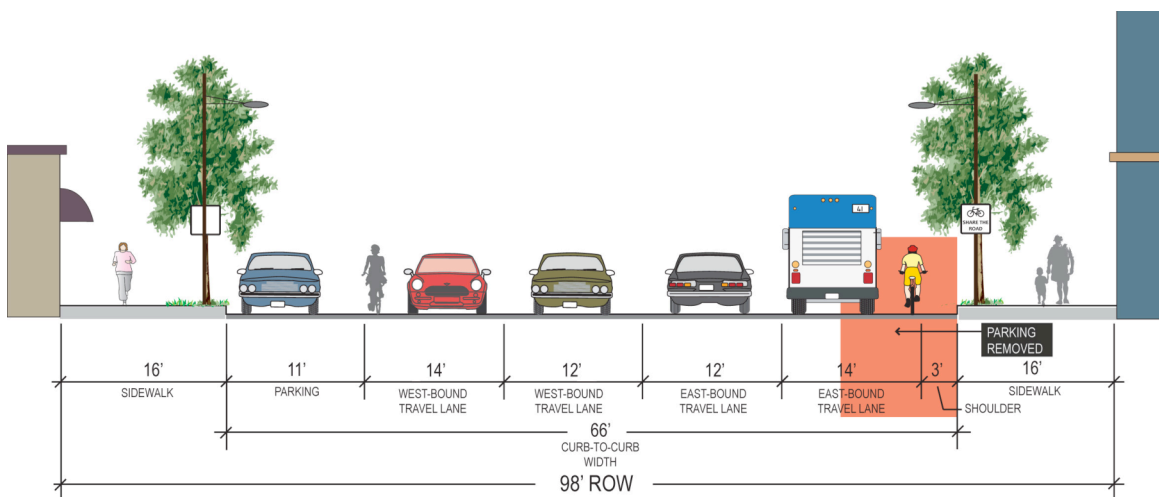


Figure 1: Project opponents’ vision for four lanes plus extra-wide parking and travel lanes leaves no room for parking on one side of the street.

In the core of the Capitol Square business district, where the road is 79 feet wide, the proposed four-lane plan would still not fit without removal of parking. At this busy signalized intersection, the State requires a left-turn lane to Lake Street to

safely accommodate the demand for vehicle turning movements.¹ At another 11–12 feet, this additional lane would trigger the need for a roadway width of 85–86 feet, far wider than the existing curb-to-curb width of 79 feet. Again, the only recourse is parking removal in order to continue four thru-traffic lanes along Mass Ave.

Conclusion

Mass. Ave. is an urban thoroughfare replete with small businesses and residences. Parking space is already at a premium for much of the corridor. Had the *Town* even hinted at a change that would have resulted in the removal of half of the parking, public opposition would have been universal.

The authors do not know, and do not conclude, that the CCC consciously plans to eliminate parking to make room for more and wider lanes than the Town has proposed. However, as project opponents' own statements show, their demands cannot be met without losing parking and transforming Mass. Ave. from a place that is itself a destination to a mere means of getting someplace else as fast as possible.

The plan proposed by the Town of Arlington has been subject to rigorous analysis by consulting engineers and the staff of MassDOT, and has undergone an intensive public process. It fully accommodates all vehicle traffic, bicycles, buses, and pedestrians, and maintains all legal curb-side parking spaces.

Public hearings on the design are likely early this year. The authors of this study suggest that Eric Berger and the Concerned Citizens Committee have not fully thought through the consequences of their demands. Did they consider the actual width of the street when pushing for extra-wide parking and travel lanes? Are they willing to sacrifice curb-side parking for an additional traffic lane that all studies have determined is unnecessary?

¹Mass Highway (2006, 6-50, Exhibit 6-23) requires exclusive left turn lanes at signalized intersections with turning demands of 100 or more motor vehicles per hour. FDR (2010, 7) reports 168 left turns onto Lake St. during AM peak, 174 during PM peak, and 117 during mid-day Saturday.

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