

The Right View: Traffic calming comes to Huron Avenue

By Peter Wilson – 11/8/2012

Boston — Cambridge is under court order to separate storm water from sewage, and has budgeted \$145 million for sewer reconstruction over the next five years. This month the two-year Huron Avenue phase of the Alewife Sewer Separation Project began, with \$15 million allocated in the 2013 budget. Happily no sewer rate increases are planned for 2013.

Since Huron Avenue will be dug up and repaved, the City has chosen to redesign the entire street. Bus stops will be moved or eliminated, raised crosswalks added, and “traffic calming” devices like sidewalk bump-outs and center islands will be installed. In brief, a straight broad avenue will be transformed into a sinuous obstacle course.

I attended two of the packed public meetings conducted by Jeff Rosenblum of the Community Development Department and have found the design team to be thoughtful and interested in public feedback. It remains to be seen how willing they are to make design changes; for example, the removal of the traffic light at Lakeview and Huron has met with public resistance.

The proposed redesign will bring some obvious benefits like new trees and benches. Sidewalk bump-outs make it easier for pedestrians--especially the young and old--to cross wide intersections.

The Wikipedia entry for traffic calming defines it as having two objectives: “engineering and other measures put in place on roads for the intention of [1] slowing down or [2] reducing motor-vehicle traffic.”

Regarding “slowing down”: I am as annoyed as anyone with the Mario Andrettis who think the light at Fresh Pond Parkway is a drag strip green light (assuming they bother to stop for the red light). We used to have frequent speed traps on Huron Avenue that sent a clear message to speeders. Shouldn't we punish speeders rather than make driving more difficult for everyone?

Rather than excessive speed, I'm more concerned that traffic will slow from its current rush hour crawl. If you take the same amount of traffic and narrow the travel lanes, and you move bus stops out from the curb so cars can't pass a

loading bus, and eliminate the lane that allows you to loop around cars waiting to turn left, it seems logical that traffic will become more congested, which means more cars idling, more exhaust emissions and more road rage.

Mr. Rosenblum reassured me that the City was able to remove a lane from Mass Ave around Central Square without creating congestion; the secret was maintaining a steady slow flow of traffic. It sounded good, but does this make sense in the real world? After the traffic calming on Concord Avenue, I changed by route home and cut through neighborhood streets, especially if I saw a bus ahead. Perhaps Mass Ave drivers simply found other ways around Central Square.

Arguments in favor the second goal of traffic calming, reducing traffic, are alluring:

[Traffic calming] was mainly justified on the grounds of pedestrian safety and reduction of noise and local air pollution which are side effects of the traffic. However, it is now recognized that streets have social and recreational functions which are severely impaired by car traffic. The Livable Streets study by Donald Appleyard (1981) found that residents of streets with light traffic had, on average, three more friends and twice as many acquaintances as the people on streets with heavy traffic which were otherwise similar in dimensions, income, etc. [Wikipedia]

These are wonderful goals. I'd love to be able to talk across the street to my neighbors without screaming over the traffic. Traffic on Huron Avenue might be worse today because of prior street calming projects, but it is and has been a major travel artery that is part of the transportation infrastructure of the greater metropolis. People from Belmont and Arlington have every right to drive on a public street. Making it into a "livable street" would benefit our neighborhood, but it might just push traffic onto smaller residential streets, making someone else's street less livable.

Critics of traffic calming, like Randal O'Toole at the Cato Institute, argue that:

the prime causes of our ailing [road] system are a government transportation planning philosophy whose primary goal is to diminish auto use—hence, personal mobility—in combination with federal budget incentives that perversely encourage transportation planners to increase congestion.

This is clearly a priority of elements of Cambridge government, laid out for example in the Cambridge Climate Action Plan. The theory is that if you make driving and parking such a miserable experience, people will abandon their cars and take public transportation. This can work in places like Harvard Square, but a

participant at one of the meetings summed up these schemes for getting people out of their cars: "Good luck with that!"

Peter Wilson is the Secretary of the Cambridge Republican City Committee. He lives on Huron Avenue but might be interested in a house exchange for the next two years.