

Text from ABP Council Meeting On January 7th, 2013

Charles River Bridge Underpasses: Remarks to the Accelerated Bridge Program Council, 1/7/2013.

1) Renata von Tscharnner, President and Founder, Charles River Conservancy. With over 25,000 supporters and volunteers, the CRC advocates for renewal of the Parklands along the Charles River Basin.

Thank you for this opportunity to give you an update on our underpass proposal. When the ABP first declared its intention to renovate the three bridges that span the Charles River Basin, the Charles River Conservancy saw an opportunity to improve the use of the Parklands by including pedestrian underpasses at the bridge intersections. Many obstacles loomed: existing conditions mandated that underpasses be built on the Boston side only; initial estimates showed greatly inflated construction costs; and permitting along a waterway was understood to be a long and complicated process.

Public interest in the project, however, made it hard to ignore. Gradually the Conservancy built a coalition of elected officials, now numbering 28; 44 civic organizations signed on as supporters. Meanwhile the Commonwealth recognized the public health interest in encouraging healthy exercise, long part of the Conservancy's mission. The Governor announced his Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2020. MassDOT responded by setting a formidable goal of tripling alternative mode share, and carbon-free bicycle commuting gained support on all sides, especially from the City of Boston, which became a strong supporter of the underpasses. The chance to encourage both the recreational use of the river paths, and to facilitate bicycle commuting, safely separated from traffic along the river, made the underpasses seem like an obvious feature of bridge restoration.

Nonetheless, work began on the Anderson Memorial Bridge without any specific accommodation for underpasses, and both the Western Avenue and River Street bridges reached the 25% design stage without including them. Part of the complexity came from the fact that the underpass project is really two projects: tunnels under MassDOT's bridges, and approaches on DCR's land. Neither agency was comfortable moving ahead without the encouragement of the other.

Finally this fall, through a series of productive conversations, we achieved a small breakthrough: MassDOT's engineers acknowledged that decking for the bridges can be supported in a way that allows space for the underpasses. A change order was issued for the Anderson Memorial Bridge project to reflect this structural change, and agreement was reached to accommodate eventual underpasses in designs for the other two bridges. We now understand that the underpasses are on their way to becoming a reality, though many questions remain.

One question is cost: the Conservancy hired a consulting firm, Gill Engineering, on the advice of MassDOT, whose preliminary cost estimates for all three tunnels and their connecting paths are in the range of \$5 million, roughly one third of the previous estimate. Gill is also producing conceptual designs for the connecting paths. We hope that these studies will make the underpass idea both more affordable and more tangible.

Meanwhile, as MassDOT has moved to accommodate the underpasses in its bridge designs, it has made clear the fact that DCR has to take responsibility for the approaches. Representatives of our supporting coalition met in December with Secretary Sullivan and Commissioner Lambert, who expressed interest in seeing more specific conceptual designs for approaches and cost estimates

for the permitting. In the next few weeks we hope to have those details, and will meet again with the Secretary and the Commissioner to move forward with 25% design work and permitting. The Conservancy plans to raise funds for those parts of the process. With MassDOT's willingness to accommodate tunnels in its designs; with plans in hand for approaches on DCR lands, and permitting accomplished for those approaches, we believe that the underpass project will be 'shovel-ready' in the foreseeable future, ready to serve the urgent need of the Commonwealth for safe, efficient carbon-free commuting and welcoming recreational and fitness uses. That is our vision, and we hope it is shared by all in this room.

2) Alicia Nugent, Cambridge Running Club, daily bicycle commuter

I am here today to speak on behalf of the many runners, cyclists, skaters, and walkers who regularly use the Paul Dudley White paths along the Charles River. That system of paths is one of the glories of our urban infrastructure; it makes an essential link in the recreation, exercise routines, and commuting routes of thousands of users.

Bridge intersections are one of the truly unpleasant realities of the river paths. Anyone who uses them knows that crossing at grade is slow and dangerous, with cars making unpredictable turns and creating gridlock at peak hours. Dealing with those intersections is a current fact of life. Leaving this major impediment in place, though, while renovating the bridges makes no sense to any of us who use the paths, particularly when the Commonwealth is actively promoting healthy exercise and carbon-free commuting.

That is why support for this project runs deep with runners like me. More than 1400 users of the paths signed a letter to Governor Patrick and other key officials, urging them to add underpasses to the bridge project. That number represents a small fraction of the users who would benefit from enhanced paths, now and long into the future. We runners are an energetic, well-organized community, known for our staying power. We look to our government to do the sensible thing, and we are confident that a project that serves the needs of so many people at a relatively small cost will be achieved. We are determined to work with the Conservancy and the many other advocates to make these underpasses a reality.

3) Kenneth E. Kruckemeyer

Good afternoon. I am Ken Kruckemeyer. I have been cycling along the Charles River since I arrived in Boston 50 years ago. I have also been a Highway Commissioner for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in charge of highway and bridge design. And third, I am a founding member of the Livable Streets Alliance, a citizens organization that works with government agencies to improve conditions for walking, cycling and public transportation.

This is a particularly auspicious moment to move forward with underpasses at River Street, Western Avenue and the Anderson Bridge in order to provide continuity of the Paul Dudley White path along the Charles River.

First, the logic of the importance—I might even say imperative of a continuous path is well understood and broadly supported.

Second, there is a very straightforward way of building the underpasses as part of the accelerated bridge program that can be efficient, safe and easily cared for.

In my work in other parts of the world I see many cities that are out in front with their efforts to become more livable: by reducing the use of fossil fuels, lowering noise levels, increasing the opportunities for healthy exercise, and having a beneficial impact on climate change. Wherever possible, these cities are building underpasses to provide continuity of path systems for non-motorized users.

As leaders of the Commonwealth's agencies, you should join this bandwagon. The good news is that these underpasses can be built now so that they are gracious, serviceable and require little maintenance. The citizens are there and the public agencies have the capability. Now is the time to join in support at all levels.

4) Jason Lederer, Director of Projects, Charles River Conservancy

We at the Conservancy have come to appreciate over several years of advocacy how deceptively simple these underpasses look on a schematic plan, and how very complicated they are in reality. It has taken many conversations to reach an understanding with MassDOT on how to accommodate even the space for underpasses in its bridge designs. Bringing MassDOT and DCR together on this collaborative project has been a challenge, as has finding the funding for the preliminary studies that point to the real possibility of achieving it. But we have persevered. With funding from the Barr Foundation and matching donations from other foundations and individuals, the Conservancy has formed a strong group of advocates, and has hired Gill Engineering to help with technical aspects of the proposal. It has gained the attention of many officials both at MassDOT and DCR, and despite the complexities, we are ready to move forward with the next steps.

What are those steps? We hope in the near future to present detailed cost estimates to DCR for the approaches to the underpasses. Our next goal will be to raise funding for 25% level design and permitting work. With those steps accomplished, we will be close to having a 'shovel-ready' project in search of funding. Will more stimulus funds become available? Can Transportation Bond funds be used? Will some of the many institutional and corporate neighbors of the Charles River Basin, whose employees and affiliates stand to benefit greatly from enhanced pathways, step up to support the project? We are hopeful that having brought this project this far, we can carry it the rest of the way. We have come this far because of the wise counsel of many of you in this room, along with the enthusiastic, urgent support of the many, many people who use and cherish the Charles River Parklands. Their desire for healthy, sensible, safe, car-free routes through the center of our metropolitan region will not go unanswered forever. We will continue our advocacy, step by step, until the underpasses are there for all to use and enjoy.