



Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee

December 13, 2019

Subject: SBAC comments regarding the Broadway bus lane and bicycle lane project

Dear City Councilors, City Staff, and Traffic Commission members,

I am writing to submit comments from the Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee (SBAC) regarding the Broadway bus lane and bicycle lane project, as discussed at the December 5 SBAC meeting and previous SBAC meetings.

Overall, **we strongly support the currently implemented protected bicycle lane and 24/7 bus lane.** In particular, we support **maintaining the bus lane as 24/7** for the following reasons:

- Limiting bus lane hours would not help car traffic much, since peak hours for cars are approximately the same as peak traffic for buses
- Opening the bus lane to general traffic when traffic volumes are lower could actually encourage speeding: multiple lanes with lower congestion is an invitation to speed.
- Without the bus lane, there would be no other safe routes for biking. There are no other east/west bicycle lanes in Winter Hill, and no near-term plans to create any. Constructing equivalently safe infrastructure on any other nearby street would likely require far more parking removal.
- Opening the bus lane to general traffic during certain hours would be harder to enforce, and likely cause more confusion.
- The MBTA prefers 24/7 bus lanes when possible, because they are the most reliable to plan service around. For example, consider a transit signal priority system attempting to hold a green light for an approaching bus. If there is a bus lane, the signal can confidently predict that holding the green light for a second or two will let the bus through. Without a bus lane, it's much harder to take advantage of transit signal priority.
- Existing peak-only bus lanes (Mass Ave in Arlington, Broadway in Everett, and Washington St in Roslindale) are less relevant examples, as they convert a curbside parking lane into a peak-hour bus lane, as whereas our Broadway bus lane is mostly not curbside, and would be nontrivial to relocate. On narrower streets, peak-hour bus lanes can be a good solution; on an extremely wide street like Broadway, 24/7 bus lanes are strongly preferable.

Below, we also specifically endorse several other specific policies:

- **Maintaining the uphill protected bicycle lane segments in their current form:** The creation of a safe bicycling route in the heart of Winter Hill is imperative for many reasons. One is that there are no other east/west bicycle lanes in Winter Hill, and secondly, we believe biking uphill without a protected bicycle lane would be unsafe for people biking and unfair to anyone waiting behind them.

The last reason is that the protected bicycle lanes and safe bicycling route on Broadway is completely consistent with the goals and objectives of the City's Vision Zero initiative.

- **Viewing the existing design as a compromise:** At the Public Hearing on the Broadway bus/bike lane, there was discussion of coming to a compromise. We would submit that the bicycle accommodations on Broadway are already a compromise as bicycles have to share a travel lane with buses for the majority of the corridor. We would have ideally preferred protected bicycle lanes for the length of the project. Restricting the bus lane to only a few hours a day should not be viewed as a compromise.
- **Expanding signal engineering expertise:** The city needs to improve upon its ability to deliver signal timing changes, whether by hiring an in-house signal engineer, or by having suitable on-call contracts.
- **Improving project delivery:** The Winter Hill in Motion project was planned to be implemented over the summer, when traffic volumes are lower and change is easier. After the project was delayed until September, we believe city staff made the right decision in not allowing any further delay.
- **Reducing bus headways:** While the bus lane was more than warranted by the existing bus volumes, we are glad to hear that the bus lane has already improved bus frequency, and that the MBTA plans to allocate additional bus service hours. We encourage the city and MBTA to study what infrastructure it would take to run frequent, reliable bus rapid transit all day long, and figure out what additional bus lanes and bus service hours are necessary to achieve that goal.
- **Transit signal priority at intersections:** We applaud the city for installing transit signal priority at several intersections, and hope to see it operating at full capacity soon.
- **Extending the bus lane:** We would like to see the bus lane extended further. For example, continuing east, Broadway continues to be wider than most streets in Somerville, meaning general travel lanes could be turned into bus lanes without any parking loss.

We would also like to specifically address some concerns we have heard:

- "Motor vehicle traffic is slower now than before the bike/bus lane was installed and signal timing changed." Initial data indicates that this is not the case. Data should continue to be collected until after the closed bridges are reopened. The data can then be evaluated to isolate effects from bridge closures.
- "Reduction in on-street parking is resulting in lost revenue for retail businesses on Broadway." We believe there is opportunity to get more efficient use of existing parking spaces. We ask that the city review existing on-street parking in Winter Hill to find the right balance of short-term parking, long-term parking, and loading zones. Additionally, the city could identify underused off-street parking spaces, and provide signs at/near the businesses directing motor vehicles to those spaces.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. With the implementation of this project, Somerville is now among the regional leaders in promoting progressive transportation policies in fighting the Boston metro region's growing traffic congestion crisis, as highlighted in the recent Boston Globe Spotlight Team's Traffic Congestion report (which by the way highlighted the Broadway bus/bike lane project). There are many other streets that also need safety improvements and more reliable transit, and we hope the city will keep these lessons in mind while acting with the urgency needed on other streets.

Tom Lamar
Chair, Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee
on behalf of the Committee as a whole