

Newton and Needham's Best Opportunity for Smart Growth

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The best option for “Smart Growth” in Newton and Needham may lie in the unused rail bed that runs parallel to Needham Street and Highland Avenue. A proposal to restore light rail service between Newton Highlands and Needham Heights would create significant opportunities for further modest-scaled growth in the corridor. In addition, the new light rail extension would have significant environmental benefits to our communities by reducing energy consumptions and traffic pollutants in this otherwise congested part of our community.

The rail line behind Needham Street and Highland Avenue was formerly part of the old Charles River line that was used to haul fill from Needham to the Back Bay in the late 1800's. Once used as a passenger line, it remained active for freight use until several years ago. The unused rail bed connects the Riverside “D” line just west of Newton Highlands to the existing commuter station at Needham Heights for a distance of about 2 miles, extending across the Charles River and Route 128.

The proposal to reestablish rail service calls for a dual track, electrified light rail line, similar to the existing Green line, that would use modern, quiet, environmentally sensitive light rail vehicles. Passengers would be able to board the line at 4 stations: Needham Heights, the Needham Business Center, Newton Upper Falls, and Needham Street. They would then be able to take the line to stops on the existing Green line, including Newton Highlands, Newton Centre, Reservoir, Brookline Village, Longwood, Fenway, and into Copley and Park Street Stations. Connecting the Needham Street – Highland Avenue corridor and the Needham Business Park to employment and population centers in the central core of Boston would place our area “on the map” for fast, frequent light rail transit service.



Many municipalities have recognized the positive benefits that light rail has on local and regional economies and on the environment. New light rail systems have been built in places such as Portland (Oregon), New Jersey, Baltimore, Dallas, San Francisco, San Diego, and most recently Phoenix, Arizona. The effects of having light rail include new and expanded business opportunities, increased employment, a stronger local tax base, higher real estate values, greater perceived safety, decreased air pollution, and heightened tourist revenues.

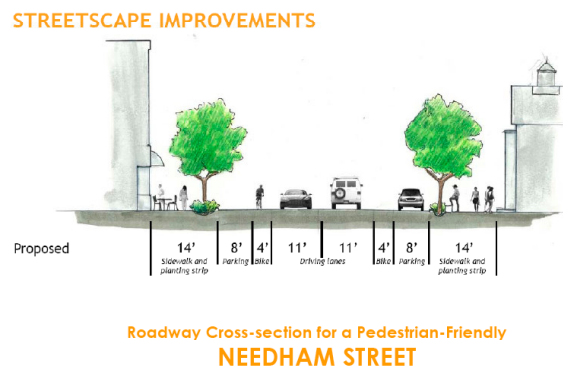
Rail facilities can enhance economic activity in a number of ways. Light rail offers improved access to businesses for a potentially significant pool of customers. The public senses that a community with light rail is a desirable place to live and work, which tends to attract new businesses and new jobs. In addition, people and businesses which are near a light rail line have an alternative option to using automobiles, which helps combat auto congestion on

roads. Having fast and frequent transit alternatives is one strategy to combat major forms of air pollution and is environmentally “green.”

Newton’s recently approved Comprehensive Plan projects a build out potential of approximately 2 million square feet of commercial real estate in the Needham Street corridor. Needham has projected at least 2 million additional square feet of commercial real estate to be developed in the New England Business Center, in addition to the existing 2.5 million square feet. Both communities have been open to residential uses in the corridor, which now includes the Avalon Bay apartment complex (294 units) and the planned Charles River Landing complex (350 units). And the Northland Corporation has indicated that a large mixed-use project may be developed on the 21-acre Marshall’s Plaza – IVEX site in Newton.

However important this new growth may be to the economic health of these two communities, there are significant concerns about increased traffic congestion. Full build out of the corridor may increase traffic by more than 10,000 trips per day along Needham Street and Highland Avenue. Many believe that the corridor simply cannot handle this additional traffic and fierce opposition to further development may result, reminiscent of the Stop and Shop battles of the 1990’s. Rehabilitating the rail line would offer a way to offset traffic increases from desired new growth while allowing economically sustainable projects to get approved. Ridership on the new rail line would be at least 6900 daily riders, which is estimated to reduce travel times and air pollution while reducing annual energy consumption by about 50,000 million BTU’s. Having light rail in the corridor will facilitate a new Needham Street to take shape, one that respects the “complete streets” concept that calls for streets to be equally accessible to pedestrians, bicyclists, transit, as well as cars.

(see: www.completestreets.org).



The new rail extension would initially run light rail vehicles every 15 minutes, taking about 30 minutes to get to central Boston. Trips would cost the same as on the rest of the rapid transit system, \$2.00 each way or \$59 for a monthly pass, which is a significant cost savings over the existing commuter rail line. The capital costs of building the line are estimated at approximately \$100 million, and the project could very well be eligible for federal funding. Federal stimulus funding is intended to support projects that expand public transit and that will increase economic activity. However, Newton and Needham will not receive any of that funding unless our communities and our public officials advocate for projects that are eligible. Transportation accounts for about a third of our overall carbon footprint. The Newton-Needham rail extension represents a significant opportunity to reduce the environmental impacts of growth and traffic. The rail proposal also represents a significant opportunity for our business community and would be a great economic stimulus package for our two municipalities.