

SHIRLEY LEUNG

# Easing the gridlock on the South Boston Waterfront



By Shirley Leung

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Next time you're trying to squeeze onto a Silver Line bus or find yourself stuck behind a conga line of cars on A Street, know this: there's a group furiously trying to keep everyone moving on the South Boston Waterfront.

This high-powered collection of city, state, and business leaders have rolled up their sleeves for much of this year to come up with ways to ease the gridlock in a district that is growing faster than anyone can imagine.

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The growth is staggering. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of people living in the area surged 61 percent to more than 10,800, and employment jumped 27 percent to 36,500 workers.

This group, spearheaded by business-led A Better City, has a good handle on how people are getting around and where the bottlenecks are now. Now they're culling through more than 100 ideas to come up with recommendations on how to improve commutes.

So what's bubbling to the top of the list? The need for more public transit, opening up the restricted South Boston Bypass Road, extending the Silver Line tunnel under D Street, getting the Postal Service to open up its section of Dorchester Avenue, consolidating private shuttle buses, traveling by boats and ferries.

Wow, a lot to digest. That's exactly how I felt after reading documents and the technical appendix (!) related to what's being called the South Boston Waterfront Sustainable Transportation Plan. But really, it's exciting because you get the sense this is a group that gets business and means business, with folks zeroing in on real-time solutions, not just hazy ideas that might be put in place years later. Here are some highlights:

People who work in the South Boston Waterfront like to drive, they really do. One survey found that about 53 percent of the district's employees drive alone to work. compared with 31 percent who take public transit. For workers in Boston neighborhoods with better public transit, such as the Back Bay and Chinatown, the numbers are reversed, with about 35 percent driving and up to 55 percent taking public transit.

Seaport workers are attached to their cars because thanks to the Big Dig, the area has great access to the Mass. Pike and Interstate 93. And despite all the new buildings going up, there's still plenty of parking that's cheaper than what you'll find in the Financial District.

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*Another possibility is to open up  
Dorchester Avenue in front of  
the Postal Service's building.*

One idea that has long been talked about is opening the South Boston Bypass Road to the public. Now, only commercial trucks can use the 1.1-mile road that connects the waterfront with South Bay.

But we really have to ask ourselves why truckers can't share the road. The latest stats gathered by A Better City show truck traffic — during peak hours, no less — has declined sharply since 2000 when construction companies used it during the Big Dig.

Here's an idea. I've learned rush hour for the bypass road doesn't coincide when other routes are busiest. For example, the morning peak is between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m., and the evening rush is 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. Why not let the rest of us use the bypass from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.?

The Massachusetts Port Authority has been working closely with truckers who use the road to ferry goods to and from the port, and from the maritime industrial area.

“Let's have it be data driven,” said Massport chief Tom Glynn of changes to the road. Still, he added that any plan “has to work for the trucking community first.”

Another possibility is to open up Dorchester Avenue in front of the Postal Service's building along Fort Point Channel. That stretch is restricted for post office use only. I was down there the other day and salivated at the idea of being able to drive down Dorchester Avenue from South Boston straight into the Fort Point area, which is fast becoming a hot spot for restaurants.

For a decade, the state has been trying to get the Postal Service to move from that location so it can expand South Station. The two sides are still locked in negotiations. Would it be possible to just open up Dot Ave. before a deal is done?

A Postal Service official tells me no — the road needs to be restricted out of concerns for security and safety. First, they won't move. Now they won't let us use their road. What does the post office have against the Commonwealth?

There might not be consensus on how to ease traffic on the streets, but everyone agrees on public transit. The Seaport District needs more of it.

"It seems to be universally accepted that public transit is going to be a linchpin to the improvement in the area," said Jim Gillooly, interim Boston transportation commissioner.

So how is the Silver Line doing in moving people in and out of the district? That's the rapid bus service that functions as the area's chief public transit option.

With the explosion of workers, the Silver Line is at capacity or over capacity during rush hour when there's a bus coming every two minutes, according to A Better City's report. The MBTA also runs three regular bus lines in the district, and it's hard to find a seat on the Route 7 bus, which serves the Seaport, during peak travel times.

As I've written before, don't expect the state to just expand the Silver Line. That's because the original manufacturer went out of business years ago. The state is in the process of refurbishing the current fleet of Silver Line buses, and the prospect of new — or more — buses is years away.

Knowing the Silver Line can get packed, especially with the Government Center T stop temporarily closed, Massport launched a bus service in April that takes people from the Back Bay to Logan Airport. Massport has a vested interest in this because it owns the Silver Line buses that go from South Station to Logan, and it doesn't want passengers missing flights.

The \$5 Back Bay Logan Express runs every 20 minutes and ferries about 800 people daily, though Massport chief Glynn tells me he hopes that will grow to about 1,000.

Now what about that Seaport-to-Back Bay train, the one Transportation Secretary Richard Davey trumpeted a year ago? It would take advantage of an old track that could connect the Fort Point Channel to Back Bay Station. Please don't shoot the messenger, but the Track 61 train is still coming; it's just delayed like one of our commuter trains on a freezing winter day. Instead of arriving next year, try 2019. "I was definitely optimistic," explained Davey.

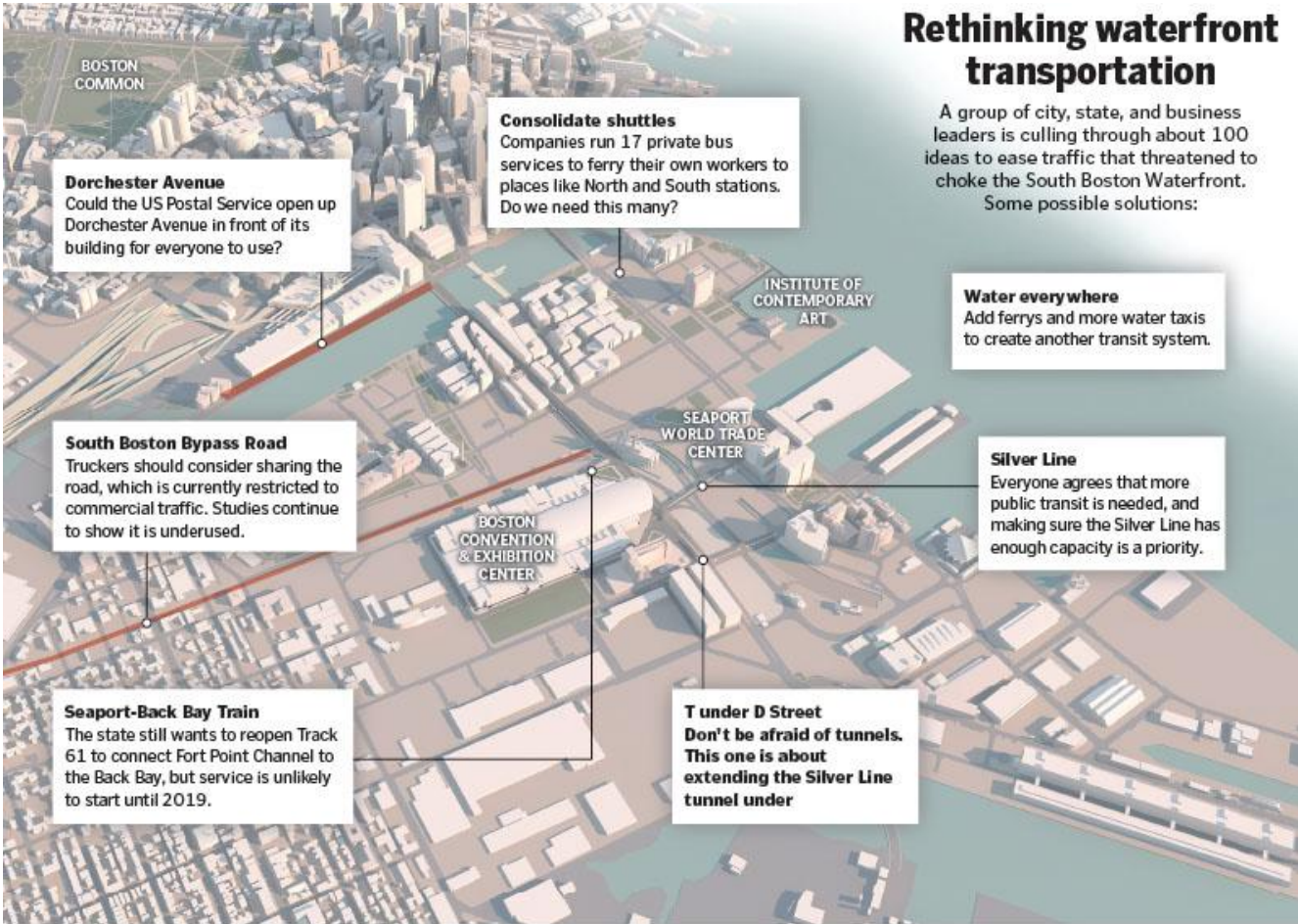
Here's what happened. Davey was counting on a new shipment of a more affordable rail car known as a diesel multiple unit, or DMU. The state has the money, but the soonest the cars can be delivered is 2018.

It's too bad because Jim Rooney, who runs the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, had started to squirrel away \$20 million to build a Seaport District Station just outside the Southie convention center. Obviously, that plan is on hold. "I remain an enthusiastic supporter of creating the connection between the convention center, the waterfront, and the Back Bay," said Rooney, but "I am not building a \$20 million station to nowhere."

This is a town where we rarely agree on anything, but here we're seeing eye to eye: Public transit is desperately needed in what has become a crown jewel of our region. So please take note, new governor, whoever you are.

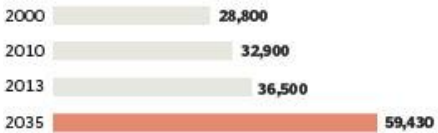
# Rethinking waterfront transportation

A group of city, state, and business leaders is culling through about 100 ideas to ease traffic that threatened to choke the South Boston Waterfront. Some possible solutions:

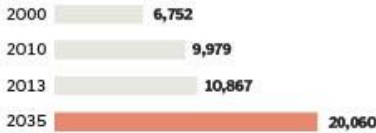


## Projected growth in the South Boston Waterfront

EMPLOYMENT



POPULATION



TOTAL SQUARE FOOTAGE



SOURCES: South Boston Waterfront Sustainable Transportation Plan, Bing maps

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