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Straighter Mass. Pike may dramatically redefine Allston

By Martine Powers | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 10, 2014



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The Mass. Pike at Allston is seen with the rail yard at left.

At first blush, the state Department of Transportation project is simple: Rebuild Allston's section of the Massachusetts Turnpike to make it less curvy, allowing for cars to travel through new, all-electronic toll plazas without slowing.

But the \$260 million construction project, scheduled to begin in 2017, has attracted the hopes and dreams of transit activists, business bigwigs, and leaders from around the region, all of whom believe the project, and the 60 acres of land to be opened up by the highway straightening, has the potential to dramatically redefine Allston-Brighton.

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In advance of the first public meeting on the project, scheduled for Thursday night, the wish list for the project and accompanying free land is as wide-ranging as it is lengthy: A network of world-class bike and walking paths. A Harvard campus expansion. Thousands of new housing units. A Boston Marathon memorial pedestrian overpass. A hulking Olympic stadium. A new West Station that could provide a rapid transit rail link between Allston and Cambridge.

“This has been eyed by a lot of people for a long time,” said Rich Parr, an Allston resident and former policy director for the planning advocacy organization A Better City. “There’s a lot of different ways this could shake out.”

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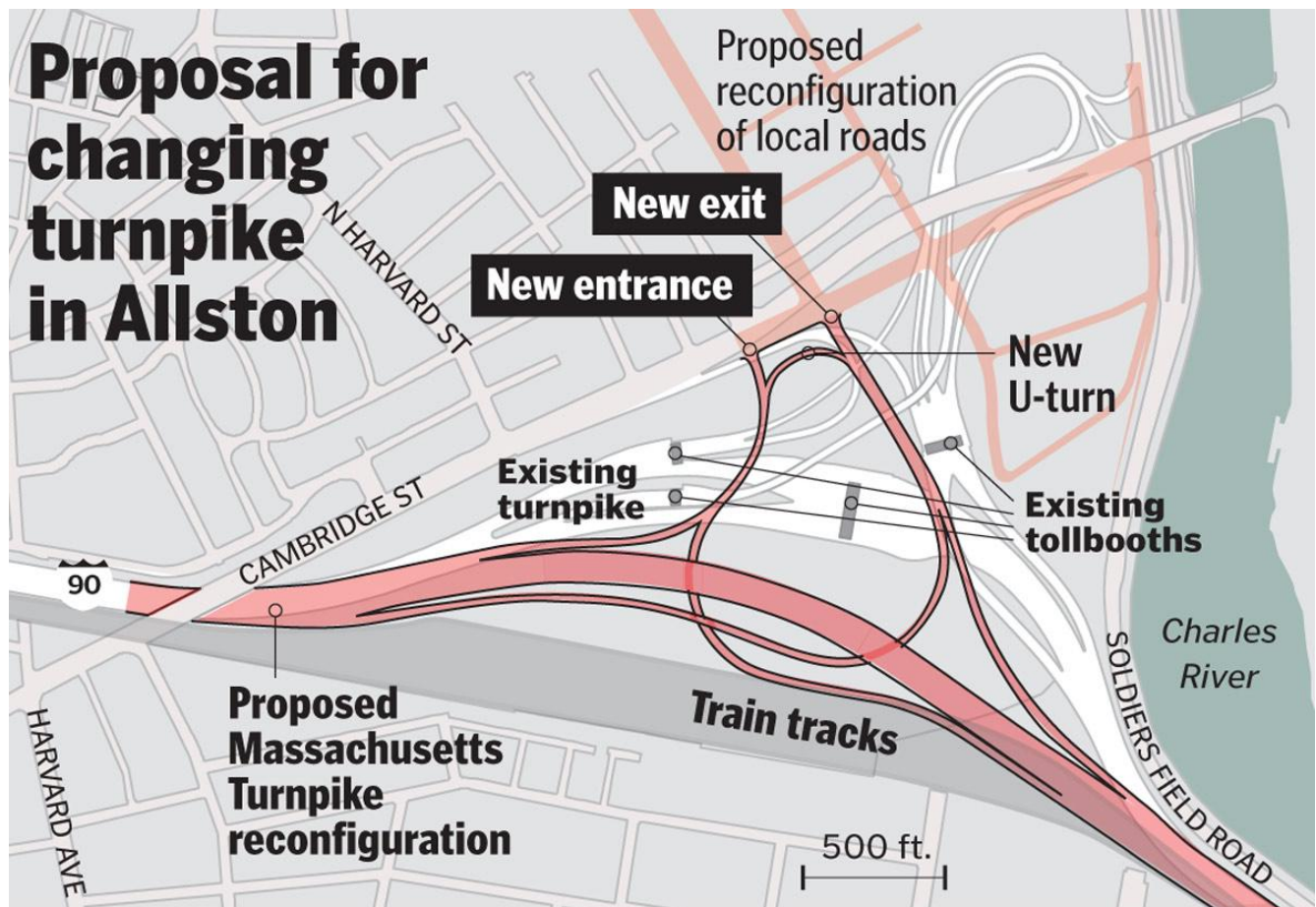
Almost everything is on the table at this point — MassDOT engineers probably will not choose a design until early 2016 — and no advocacy group wants its priorities left out.

“The Big Dig was the transportation project of the 20th century,” said Glen Berkowitz, who served as traffic manager for the Central Artery/Tunnel Project for 17 years. “This could very well be the most important transportation project of this century.”

The primary goal is to reconstruct the Allston interchange, which was built about 50 years ago and is reaching the end of its lifespan. Repairs on the elevated stretch of highway have become increasingly expensive, said Michael O’Dowd, a MassDOT design engineer and manager of the project, and it is becoming clear that the existing structure was not designed to handle the traffic volume and heavier trucks it now carries.

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Moreover, engineers are seeking to soften the interchange’s sharp curves and serpentine on- and offramps that state Transportation Secretary Richard A. Davey has said look “like someone just threw spaghetti in a plate.”



“Right now, we have less-than-desirable geometry out there for an interstate,” O’Dowd said. “This is an opportunity for us to address those safety issues, by realigning and flattening some of the curvature out.”

By straightening the turnpike so that the lanes are moved south, closer to the train tracks near the Allston-Brighton tolls, officials hope to free up 60 acres of land, much of which stretches toward the Charles River.

The land where the highway would be relocated is owned by Harvard, which purchased it from CSX Transportation a decade ago. The state is seeking an easement to use that property for the straightening project, according to MassDOT.

“We will continue our discussions with the Commonwealth about the many issues associated with this parcel, including its transportation goals of straightening the turnpike,” said Harvard spokesman Kevin Casey.

As for the use of that land, among the ideas put forth by interested observers: Housing, academic facilities, parkland, entertainment venues. Some have even privately suggested that an Olympic stadium go in the spot, as part of Boston’s still-evolving idea

of bidding for the 2024 Olympics.

“It’s been a planner’s dream for a long time,” Parr said.

Ironically, the highway project may be sparking the most buzz among the no-car set, with bicycle, pedestrian, and public transit advocates pushing their own ideas.

Many Allston residents have expressed hope that the highway makeover will bring changes to Cambridge Street, the busy thoroughfare that divides the community. They want new entrance and exit ramps from the Pike that will prevent vehicles from entering the street at highway speeds. They want a new pedestrian overpass and better bike facilities to allow people to ride from Allston onto the Esplanade. They also want the highway to be built closer to the ground, so the barrier between Allston and the river is less pronounced.

“That entire part of BU’s campus has had a Berlin Wall, i.e., that stretch of the turnpike, that’s separating it from the Charles River,” said Berkowitz, a member of the transit advocacy group LivableStreets Alliance. “We’re hopeful MassDOT will explore something that’s less of a barrier.”

Others have a grander vision: A standalone bike path along the Grand Junction rail line, a disused rail line that runs from Kendall Square through Cambridge and down into Allston over the Boston University Bridge, that would allow cyclists to sail unfettered from the campus of Boston University up through Central Square and into the heart of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“The idea of creating more connectivity between those campuses alone is a huge benefit to the city, and for innovation,” said Pete Stidman, director of the Boston Cyclists Union.

That could potentially lead to West Station, an idea that MassDOT spokesman Mike Verseckes said the agency is considering and which has caused murmurs of excitement among transit enthusiasts. Using diesel multiple units, which operate like rapid transit trolleys on commuter railroad lines, the T would link Central Square and Allston.

“You could have a subway-like line bringing people from Allston and Brighton right into Cambridge,” Parr said. “It could really change everything.”

It is likely that not all those ideas will end up in the project. It is unclear, for example, who would pay for some of the grander ideas.

“There’s definitely going to be a long line of people who want their thing to be included,” Parr said. “If they can lay the groundwork for a longer-term discussion, where some of the things that don’t get addressed in the initial discussion could get integrated in the longer term, that could be a good outcome, too.”

Thursday’s public meeting hosted by MassDOT will be held at 6:30 p.m. at the Jackson Mann Community Center in Allston.

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