
BEACON HILL , CAMBRIDGE , NORTH END

Long-awaited Leverett Circle pedestrian overpass is on the way

Posted by Sara Brown

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By Sara Brown, Town Correspondent

One person likened the evening to LeBron James' announcement about where he would play next. State Department of Transportation officials said they've had trouble keeping the secret for the last few weeks.

And when Frank DePaola, MassDOT's acting highway administrator finally made the announcement earlier this week about plans to build a pedestrian bridge over Leverett Circle, most of the 30 or so audience members at the Amy Lowell House stood up in a round of applause.

"It's not often I get that reaction," DePaola joked.

But for those at the public meeting Tuesday evening to hear plans for adding a pedestrian bridge to Leverett Circle, a high traffic area between the West End and North Station, the news culminated years of advocacy for the overpass, which they said will increase safety and make their streets more navigable for walkers and bikers.

A previous Leverett Circle overpass was removed in 2005.

Louise Thomas, a West End resident, said she's been involved in overpass discussions "since the beginning--since the Big Dig."

"We never thought it would happen, so we're thrilled," she said after the meeting. With three highways converging in the area and visitors (including kids) trying to get to the nearby Museum of Science, she said, "it really is a no-brainer."

Some elderly people in the area, she said, "are just afraid to cross [the street]."

At the meeting, John Romano, a MassDOT municipal liaison, and Amy Getchell, a project manager with MassDOT, stressed that the project is still in the planning stage, with decisions to come about what the bridge will look like and how it will function.

Some audience members expressed concern about the mandated height--16 feet and 6 inches--and the long accessible ramps that would have to be built. Officials said there might be some leeway in the height of the bridge.

The pedestrian bridge will come before the public again in late fall 2011, with 30 percent design expected to be complete by fall 2012, with final design coming another six months after that.

Getchell said the "very roughest" estimate for the project's cost is between \$8 million and \$10 million, with an application in for a federal highway grant.

She added that the department will talk with the community about noise mitigation during construction, noting that she does foresee some nighttime work.

Public officials in attendance praised the proposal and the involvement of community groups, including the West End Civic Association, the Downtown North Association, and A Better City.

"This process shows when a neighborhood gets organized and fights for what it wants, sometimes it gets what it wants," said state Rep. Marty Walz.

City Councilor Mike Ross said the bridge will be an important asset to connect the West End with the Charles River Esplanade, providing access to elders, joggers, and kids.

"Congratulations, West End," Ross said. "It's a good victory for all of you, so enjoy it."

"We're so happy to come tonight," Getchell told the audience. "I've been keeping the secret for weeks."

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