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DOWNTOWN , NORTH END

## North End, downtown residents speak out on proposed hazmat truck route

Posted by Jeremy C. Fox

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By Jeremy C. Fox, Town Correspondent

The tone was civil but the language dramatic as both supporters and opponents testified last night on a plan to reroute trucks carrying hazardous materials around the city on Interstate 128.

The plan under review by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation would require trucks carrying non-radioactive hazardous materials “mostly gasoline, diesel fuel, and home heating oil” to go around the city rather than through downtown, as they do now, unless the origin or destination of the trip is in Boston.

MassDOT based the proposed rules on a study commissioned by the City of Boston that says the risk to residents is four times greater if passing through downtown during the day and twice as dangerous at night. The assessment, conducted by the Battelle Memorial Institute, an Ohio-based nonprofit research group, is based on 13 criteria set by the federal government for determining the safest routes for hazardous materials.

The city imposed a daytime ban on hazmat trucking in 2006 but was forced to end it last summer after the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration concluded the city could not justify a ban without a full study. Thomas J. Tinlin, Boston's transportation commissioner, said Tuesday the results of Battelle's study were "eye-opening."

"In fact, the relative difference in risk to the public between the routes was so compelling, both day and night, that under the established federal through-routing criteria, the length of the deviation on the proposed alternative route did not have to be taken into account," Tinlin said, reading from prepared testimony. "The proposed bypass route is that much safer."

Tinlin went on to say that Battelle's study estimated the extra miles would take only an additional 22 minutes in each direction and cost less than one cent per gallon of product, numbers that trucking industry representatives later disputed.

Anne Lynch, executive director of the Massachusetts Motor Transportation Association, said the plan would "take a route, and that route would be from Boston to Braintree, that is currently nine miles long and turn it into a 53- to 57-mile one-way route."

The important issue, Lynch said, isn't the additional cost but that the extra miles would decrease safety for truck drivers and other motorists on the already-congested highway ringing Greater Boston. She said a recent study by the American Automobile Association showed that 80 percent of accidents involving large trucks were caused by car drivers.

"So our concern is for trucker safety because when those accidents occur the most likely person to die in that accident, as we've seen in recent accidents, is the truck driver," Lynch said. "Even when caused by the Honda cutting him off, the truck driver is the person who dies."

There is also concern that the highway simply can't bear the extra traffic, said Monica Tibbits, executive director of the 128 Business Council, a nonprofit group providing shuttle connections to MBTA transit hubs for workers in the Route 128 corridor.

"The capacity on this roadway is already at 130 percent, greatly impacting the flow of traffic on 128," Tibbits said. "We are already dealing with congestion that brings daily commutes to a standstill. We cannot handle any more traffic in our already overtaxed roadway."

Other advocates for the trucking industry and business interests said they shared Lynch and Tibbits' concerns, but twice as many North End and waterfront residents testified, with several describing nightmare scenarios.

Donna Freni, president of the North End/Waterfront Neighborhood Council, pointed out that there was a highly flammable leak from a truck near her home in Harbor Towers just three weeks ago.

"All it would have taken is a match or a cigarette thrown on that oil spillage that was there, and we could have had potential hazards," Freni said.

Stephanie Hogue, president of the North End/Waterfront Neighborhood Residents' Association, painted a more gruesome picture. Like several speakers on both sides of the issue, Hogue invoked the catastrophic 2007 fuel truck fire in Everett and another in Saugus just last month, asking the panel from MassDot to imagine such an event in the densely populated North End.

“The affected area from the Saugus accident was approximately one square mile,” Hogue said. “Superimpose that over the slightly larger than one-quarter-mile North End, and you have an accident that has obliterated the homes of 11,000 people and who knows how many people burned or killed, given the tourist density in our neighborhood during the day and even at night.”

Hogue then asked the MassDOT officials to picture themselves in court two years later defending a decision to route hazmat trucks through the city in the class-action lawsuit that would follow.

At Tuesday’s meeting downtown, residents were joined in their support by representatives from downtown nonprofits and three elected officials representing the North End: City Councilor Salvatore LaMattina, State Representative Aaron Michelwitz, and State Senator Anthony W. Petrucci.

The new route’s supporters totaled about 20, with fewer than 10 testifying in opposition, but the balance may be different at three upcoming meetings in communities along Route 128, to be held tonight in Quincy, Aug. 30 in Waltham, and Sept. 1 in Stoneham.

But while some see the issue as one of Boston residents versus residents of outlying communities, one speaker declared that divide an illusion. Richard A. Dimino, president and chief executive officer of A Better City, a downtown business group, said safety in downtown Boston is a statewide issue.

“The city of Boston’s population doubles every day,” Dimino said. “Those are citizens that come from every corner of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that we potentially put at risk. If this discussion does end up becoming a suburban versus Boston discussion, I hope that we remember where the workforce comes from and where those people live.”

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