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A Wheel for Our Spokes

Tired of going in to go out on the T? It's been that way for a hundred years. But sit tight. An old solution is being revived (and this time, some mighty deep pockets are behind it).

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How's this for an "if only" prediction? One day, the T commute from, say, Somerville to the Longwood Medical Area will be a snap. Fenway Park will be just a few stops from Harvard Square, and an Allston train stop will be as bustling as South Station. If that sounds crazy, it's only because you're used to living in a city with spokes and no wheel, a city with a plethora of subway lines that head in and out of downtown, but no single circular outer route linking them all together. No Urban Ring.

Sure, there's Route 128 and, farther out, Interstate 495. Those are highways linking suburbs. Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Somerville, Medford, and other nearby suburbs have long needed an inner public-transit loop to join their spread-out neighborhoods. Planners will tell you we "lack connectivity." This is design-speak for the simmering rage you feel when you have to go from Roxbury to Cambridge during rush hour, or even get from Jamaica Plain to its neighbor Brookline. It's either two buses. Or a bus and a train. Or two trains. There's no direct way to make these journeys, and it's a problem that city planners have been grappling with in one form or another for a century.

The solution that has been floating out there for years is the Urban Ring, a necklace of public transit around Greater Boston. Planners love the idea.

In a 1994 Globe story, support was said to be "astonishing." Back then, George Thrush, the director of the architecture program at Northeastern University, figured this was an idea that elected officials from both parties could appreciate. "And I was quite depressed to find out," he now says, "that they so often didn't." The problem was equal parts money and timing. The Urban Ring would be a multibillion-dollar project, and Boston already had one of those well underway, and it was not exactly a model of efficiency. But now, with the Big Dig behind us -- at least sort of -- the Urban Ring idea is once again beginning to gain momentum. A coalition of business leaders formerly known as the Artery Business Committee, first organized during the Big Dig, has renamed itself A Better City and listed the Urban Ring among its priorities. The state Executive Office of Transportation is analyzing the use of dedicated bus lanes -- like the ones used by the Silver Line -- in certain parts of the ring and is also exploring the possibility of building a tunnel beneath Longwood Avenue. Richard A. Dimino, president of A Better City, says the city's institutions are beginning to realize the value of a transit ring.

But maybe the biggest hope for Urban Ring supporters is this: Harvard University wants in, and if there is one institution that has the big money needed to make things happen in these parts, it's Harvard. With its plans to expand into Allston, Harvard has proposed a new stop, called West Station, on the existing commuter rail line in Allston and would like to reconfigure old Urban Ring plans to have Allston, and West Station, included. Alex Krieger, senior adviser to Harvard's planning effort in Allston, says creating a life-sciences corridor between Longwood and Cambridge, via Allston, only makes sense. "It's necessary," he says. "That's where more facilities will be built, are being built." Such proposals are cause for excitement among Urban Ring proponents. "We're out of the gates running," says Dimino. Still, actually building the Urban Ring -- even just a piece of it -- will take time. Inside every neighborhood, there are those who will see new transportation tools options as both bane and boon, and that could mean protracted battles. "It may not be done in my lifetime," says US Representative Michael Capuano of Somerville, who has supported the Urban Ring from the start. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try." ■