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Bowker Overpass slated for \$1.8m repair project in spring 2013; state eyes eventually removing structure

Posted by Matt Rocheleau June 20, 2012 11:54 AM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

About \$1.8 million in short-term repairs to the Bowker Overpass are scheduled to start in spring 2013.

State transportation officials recently unveiled four potential long-term scenarios, all of which call for the crumbling elevated roadway to be torn down.

The construction project expected to start next spring will include structural steel repairs, rail replacement and painting, said Michael Verseckes, a spokesman for the transportation department. Bridge deck repairs may also be added to the project, which the state transportation department will put out for bid in November.

The potential impact on traffic has not yet been determined.

“We need our infrastructure to be in a state of good repair so it can continue to safely serve drivers until its future is decided,” Verseckes said in an e-mail. He

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noted that the department also does other routine maintenance to the overpass, including cleaning its drainage system and minor fixes like patching potholes that stem from age and wear and tear.

As the for the long-term outlook, state transportation officials held a meeting last week at the Central branch of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square during which they presented four alternative proposals for what the site of the 46-year-old overpass could look like in the future.

None of the ideas would keep the half-mile long structure -- at least not in its current elevated form -- that connects Storrow Drive to Boylston Street.

Verseckes called the four proposals "conceptual alternatives" that, if even necessary, still involve at least "several years" of additional planning.

The Bowker is viewed as a connector, especially by drivers and pedestrians. On an average day in 2011, it carried 52,500 vehicles over the Muddy River, Beacon Street, Commonwealth Avenue, the Massachusetts Turnpike and Ipswich Street.

But the overpass is also seen as being an unsightly barrier built over the connection between the Emerald Necklace and the Charles River Esplanade and a divider between the Kenmore and Back Bay neighborhoods.

One potential alternative would be to have the overpass and its ramps removed; the existing Charlesgate ramps would be expanded to handle more traffic, and Storrow Drive westbound would be realigned.

A second idea calls for the Bowker to become an at-grade roadway by essentially lowering the existing overpass to ground level to connect it, through a series of intersections, to the streets that currently pass underneath; the overpass ramps would be retained; the Charelsgate ramps would be removed.

A third alternative would replace the overpass with "regional access" by removing the Bowker and its ramps, adding an interchange between the turnpike and Boylston Street and realigning Storrow Drive westbound; the Charlesgate ramps would be kept.

The fourth proposal calls for a mixture of "regional and local access" to replace

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the Bowker by removing the overpass, its ramps and the Charlesgate ramps and adding an interchange between the turnpike and Boylston Street and another interchange between Storrow Drive and Massachusetts Avenue.

The state transportation department plans to work with feedback, including input from an advisory group, to explore amending each of the four proposals before proceeding with studying how each alternative would impact regional and local traffic.

[Last week's meeting](#) was the third advisory group meeting of the Back Bay Ramps Transportation Study that launched in 2008, following a similar study that was released in 1997.

The ongoing study aims to “investigate the potential for new or altered access to and from the regional express highway network in downtown Boston, with a primary focus on the Back Bay.”

Given the proximity of the overpass to the study, the state transportation department says it has decided to expand the study scope to include the Bowker.

Throughout the course of the Back Bay ramps study, there has been public interest in the future of the Bowker Overpass, including a number of community organizations and residents asking that it be downgraded to a surface road or removed entirely.

Last March, a roughly one-foot-wide, 12-foot-long pothole ruptured across the offramp of the Bowker Overpass near Kenmore Square sending debris down on the river below, forcing the ramps temporary closure and disrupting traffic in the area during the morning commute, the [Globe reported](#). At the time, state officials said the overpass is still considered safe, though the deck has been deemed structurally deficient.

[In 2009](#), a chunk of concrete fell from the overpass and smashed the windshield of a vehicle below prompting emergency repairs to be made.

Traffic analyses unveiled for potential new Mass Pike ramps in Back Bay

At last week's meeting, state transportation officials also unveiled analyses of expected traffic and other implications from four alternative proposals to build new Massachusetts Turnpike ramps in the Back Bay.

Those four alternative proposals are:

- Construction of a new I-90 westbound off-ramp to Berkeley Street with closure of the existing I-90 westbound on-ramp from Arlington Street.
- Construction of a new I-90 westbound off-ramp to Trinity Place with closure of the existing I-90 westbound on-ramps from Clarendon Street and Arlington Street.
- Construction of a new I-90 westbound off-ramp to Brookline Avenue.
- Construction of a new I-90 eastbound on-ramp from the Bowker Overpass northbound.

The next steps for those four potential alternatives include that the state transportation department determine future levels of service, refine each alternatives design based on those models and then quantify the impacts, including the estimated cost, of each idea.

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation had originally developed seven alternative proposals to build new ramp connections to and from Interstate 90 between the Allston tolls and Interstate 93. State transportation officials, with input collected during an advisory group meeting last June, selected four of the seven alternatives for additional analysis and design.

"We are at least several years out from any substantial changes that we'd embark on ... if even necessary," state transportation department spokesman Michael Verseckes said by phone before last week's meeting, referring to both long-term solutions for the overpass and new ramp projects along the turnpike in Boston. "It's still very much in the early idea stage."

For more information on the Back Bay Ramps Transportation Study, visit the project website: www.mass.gov/massdot/bostonramps.

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