

# Amid coronavirus concerns, Brookline, Cambridge adjust pedestrian buttons to reduce touching

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 26, 2020, 2:40 p.m.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Brookline and Cambridge are posting signs around each of their communities advising people not to push pedestrian buttons at crosswalks in an effort to limit the number of surfaces residents must touch when walking around amid the coronavirus outbreak.

Both municipalities say they are changing the way pedestrian signals work so that pressing the button is no longer needed to get the light to change. The lights will run on timed cycles that will allow automatically people to cross the street at regular intervals.

Brookline Transportation Administrator Todd M. Kirrane said town public works personnel reprogrammed more than 300 pedestrian buttons at 55 signals town-wide between Monday afternoon and Wednesday.

“This was done as a pro-active, precautionary measure to limit the surfaces that pedestrians needed to touch while walking throughout the Town,” Kirrane said via e-mail Thursday.

Kirrane said town officials made the move after learning of similar measures in Europe and Australia. He said officials in neighboring Newton reached out “to discuss how and why we did it,” there’s been interest on social media, and he expects other area communities may follow suit.

Cambridge Director of Traffic, Parking, and Transportation Joseph Barr said Thursday the city was in the process of making the switch and installing temporary signs. He noted people with visual impairments may still need to press the button to activate the audible pedestrian signal at locations where that feature is installed.

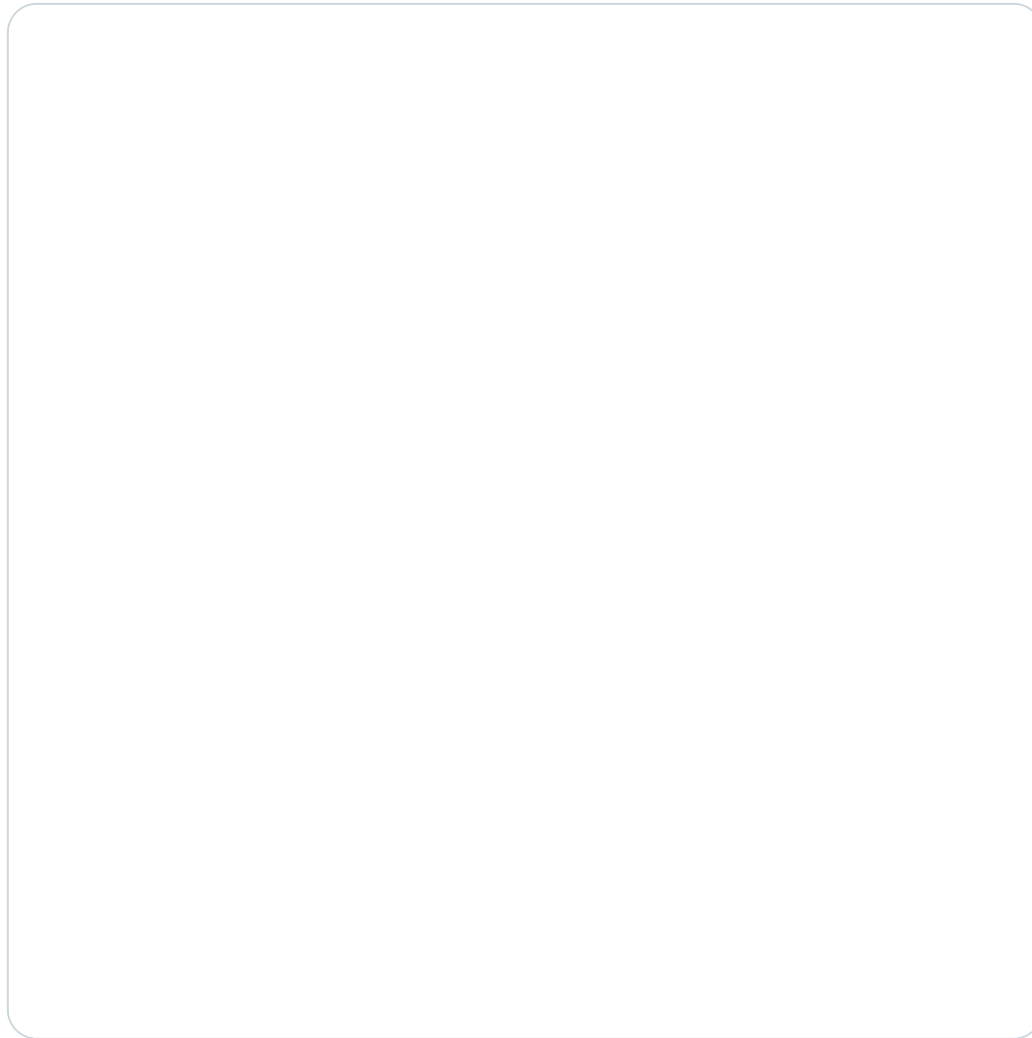


**Brookline Transportation**  
@BlineTransport



.@TownofBrookline DPW will complete placing all pedestrian signals on recall today as part of our proactive, precautionary measures to limit the number of surfaces our residents must touch when walking around #Brookline.

pc @CoolidgeShops



11:34 AM · Mar 25, 2020



58 24 people are Tweeting about this



30



24 people are tweeting about this

Well before the ongoing crisis, many signals in Boston and other cities already operated the way they now do across Brookline and Cambridge.

At busy urban intersections, pedestrian buttons [often don't actually do anything by design](#). Officials say such areas are too congested — with cars and pedestrians — to allow any one person to manipulate the cycle. Instead, traffic signals are set, particularly during the hectic daytime hours, to a schedule that gives people on foot a chance to cross at regular intervals, while ensuring that drivers get their turn, too.

It's that way in downtown areas of Boston, for most of Cambridge, and in other cities, including New York, Seattle, and London. Brookline also had a few such signals, Kirrane said.

Amid the virus outbreak, some have taken to social media to remind others how there's often no need to touch the buttons.

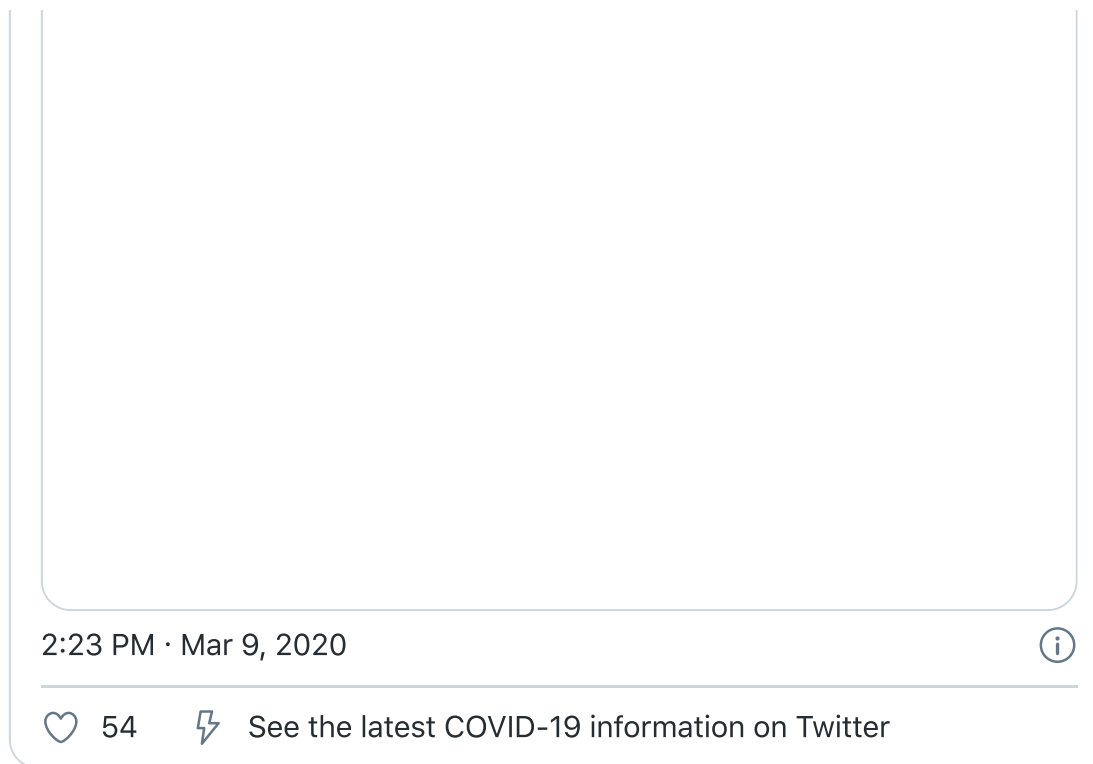
**Jonathan Berk**

@berkie1



Seems like a really good time to remind Boston's pedestrians that there's probably no need to touch that pedestrian "beg button." [#COVID2019](#)

[bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/07/...](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/07/...)



There was a time when pedestrians needed to press the device to ensure they got their turn. That's because many buttons were installed decades ago, when both vehicle and pedestrian traffic were lighter. But as cities' downtown areas have become more congested, it has made less sense to require that buttons be pressed for pedestrians to get a turn.

Some buttons remain in place because they are located in areas where pedestrian traffic is light enough either overnight, or all day long, that they still need to be pressed to get a walk signal. In other cases, the buttons remain because they serve another purpose: broadcasting an audible message or chirp to tell visually impaired pedestrians when it is safe to cross. The rest remain because removing them costs money.

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