



BCBS Island Run powered by Boston.com

# The pedestrian buttons at crosswalks? They don't actually do anything.

E-MAIL

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

GOOGLE

LINKEDIN

146



By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF JULY 24, 2017

As cars poured through the intersection at Congress and Sudbury streets in downtown Boston, Megan Reilly paused at the curb and pressed the walk button.

Then she patiently waited, and waited. Like other pedestrians, she assumed the button worked some

behind-the-scenes magic to change the light and allow her to cross.

Not so, it turns out.

The button at that intersection, like the vast majority of those that dot downtown neighborhoods, doesn't actually do anything. That's by design. Officials say the city's core is just too congested — with cars and pedestrians — to allow any one person to manipulate the cycle.



# The pedestrian buttons at crosswalks? They don't

## Get Fast Forward in your inbox:

Forget yesterday's news. Get what you need today in this early-morning email.

Sign Up

That news surprised some pedestrians navigating the city.

## Partial list of intersections where the buttons don't do anything

Don't bother pressing these buttons.

"I feel like I've been duped," said Reilly, who lives in Newton and works in Boston. For years, she said, she has pushed the buttons because, as a driver, she gets frustrated when pedestrians jaywalk.

In areas of the city packed with pedestrians — including parts of Back Bay, downtown, and the North End — the city sets most traffic signals, 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.

[Other](#) major [cities](#) around the [world](#), including New York, Seattle, and London, follow similar protocols.

While pedestrians may be irked to learn they have been pressing what amount to placebo buttons, Boston officials say the setting is actually aimed at making life easier for walkers by eliminating the need to push a button at all.

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.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

**The vast majority of pedestrian buttons in downtown Boston neighborhoods don't actually do anything — by design.**

“A lot of these intersections were at some point designed more for motor vehicle movements, and later on cities said, ‘Oh, we want to make this more for pedestrians,’ ” said Alex Engel, of the National Association of City Transportation Officials.

Now, traffic lights at many busy intersections are programmed to assume that pedestrians are constantly looking to cross.

“Ideally, the signal functions in such a way that you minimize the wait time for pedestrians,” said Gina Fiandaca, commissioner of the Boston Transportation Department. The city did not provide a complete list of affected intersections.

“

*It's very frustrating. People sit there pushing the buttons and nothing happens. It sort of teaches disrespect for pedestrians.'*

Wendy Landman, executive director of the pedestrian advocacy nonprofit WalkBoston

Some in Boston believe the city should get rid of push-to-walk buttons that don't serve a purpose.

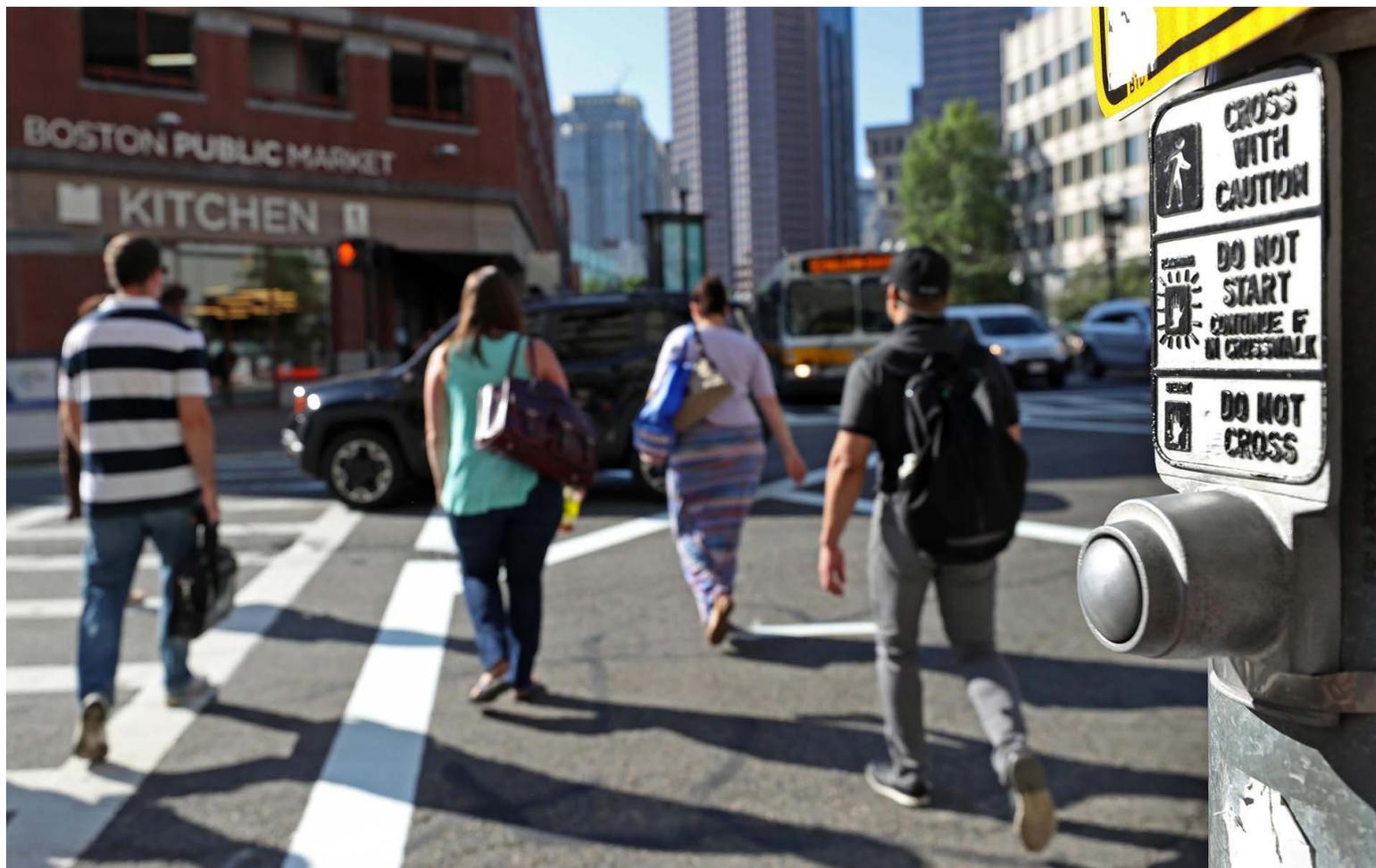
“It's very frustrating. People sit there pushing the buttons and nothing happens. It sort of teaches disrespect for pedestrians,” said Wendy Landman, who is executive director of the pedestrian advocacy nonprofit [WalkBoston](#).

There's also concern the lack of response from buttons might entice pedestrians to jaywalk.

So why are the devices still there?

Some of the buttons do still work throughout the day, particularly in neighborhoods beyond downtown where pedestrian traffic is lighter.

The thinking is there are not enough people walking around those areas to justify stopping traffic every time the light cycles, unless someone presses the button.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

**Some pedestrian mechanisms simply give an audible signal when it's safe to cross. Above: Pedestrians cross at Congress and Sudbury streets during morning rush hour.**

Similarly, some buttons, including those in downtown areas, are set so that they don't do anything during waking hours but work overnight when there are few pedestrians and it's OK to stop traffic every so often.

In other instances, push buttons have been replaced with mechanisms that don't change how the signal functions but do broadcast an audible message or chirp to tell visually impaired pedestrians when it is safe to cross.

The rest remain because removing them costs money.

“Obviously, cities have finite budgets,” Engel said. “Maybe that money is better spent building a crosswalk somewhere.”

New York City removed several hundred nonfunctioning buttons in recent years in areas that

underwent major construction but kept others in place because of cost concerns, [The New York Times has reported](#).

The Canadian city of Winnipeg — as part of the terms of a 2008 [settlement](#) of a lawsuit filed by a human rights agency over complaints by disabled pedestrians — was required to remove most pedestrian buttons from its downtown and elsewhere. It instead added the newer buttons that play audible messages.

Michael Cantor, traffic signals engineer in Winnipeg, said much of that work has been completed.

In Cambridge, transportation director Joseph Barr said, officials have been working to install audible signals. But, compared to Boston and some other cities, Cambridge has relatively few of the old-style buttons.

“It’s not so much that we’ve been removing them but that we just hadn’t put many in,” Barr said.

In Boston, not everyone professed to being fooled. A few said they have suspected that many of the downtown buttons were more or less there for show.

“Everybody knows that,” said Lucy Jefferson, as she walked by a busy intersection near the border of the Back Bay and South End neighborhoods last week.

“They’re there to calm the tourists.”

## Related

- **‘You think you are leaving early, but it is never early enough’**

*Matthew Rocheleau can be reached at [matthew.rocheleau@globe.com](mailto:matthew.rocheleau@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](#).*

SHOW 146 COMMENTS

Stay updated, right in your news feed.

## Top 10 Trending Articles

Most Viewed

Most Commented

Most Shared

Nick Cafardo: Which players may be available in trade after...

---

Trump forsakes scenic traditions to vacation in the land of ...

---

What's it like be an NFL quarterback at 40? We asked Warr...

---

Storms could bring hail and severe winds Saturday

---

Trump administration advances religious researchers' birth...

---

Dick Albert, former Channel 5 weatherman, dies  
**My Account**

---

Trump increasingly isolated as disillusionment grows withi...  
**Manage my Account**

---

There's one month left of summer. Here's what you can't m...  
**Mobile Customer Service**

---

**Sign Up For Newsletters**  
Real estate housing 'hard stop' triumphs over turmoil

---

**Contact**  
Jaylen Brown's trip for the NBA Africa Game continues his ...

Help

FAQs

Globe newsroom

Advertise

**Social**

Facebook

Twitter

Google+

**More**

ePaper

News in Education

Archives

Privacy policy

---

[Terms of service](#)

---

[Terms of purchase](#)

---

[Work at Boston Globe Media](#)

---

© 2017 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC