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Casey Overpass to be torn down, replaced with surface roads

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 09, 2012

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The state announced Thursday that it will not rebuild the aging Casey Overpass that carries the Arborway over the Forest Hills MBTA station in Jamaica Plain but instead will replace the deteriorating structure with surface roads.

The move is expected to save taxpayers money - the surface plan is \$21 million cheaper - while replacing a hulking vestige of 1950s highway construction with something more attractive and more conducive to walking and biking as well as driving, transportation officials and advocates said.

“The traditional freeways of the past focused always on the motorist, but now we’re finding that better-designed streets for all users give better results for cities and their taxpayers,” said Caitlin Ghoshal, of the Congress for the New Urbanism, a Chicago nonprofit organization that promotes reclaiming the kind of neighborhoods that flourished before the era of highway construction.

Still, on the streets of Jamaica Plain, there was far from unanimous support Thursday for the Department of Transportation’s decision.

Jeffrey Ferris, owner of Ferris Wheels Bike Shop on South Street for the past 30 years, said he would still prefer a bridge over the surface-street option.

“We’re not surprised,” the 56-year-old said, “but certainly disappointed.”

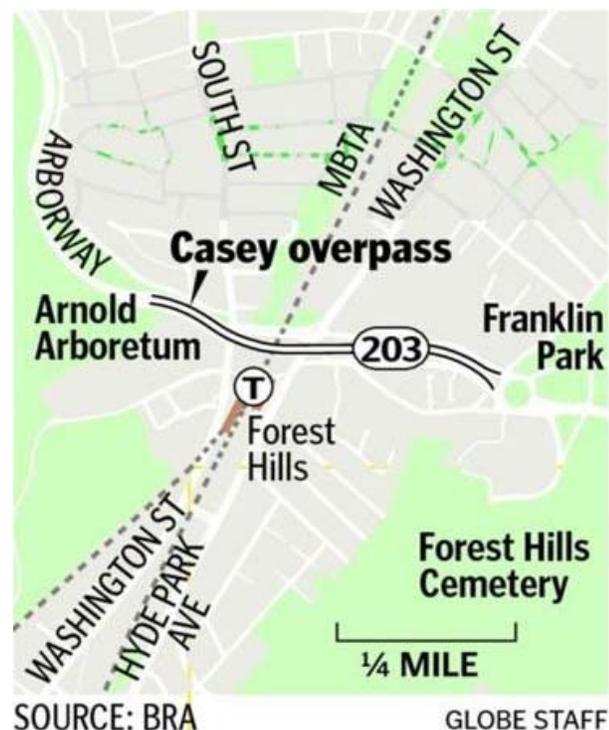
He promised to keep pressing his opposition to the surface-street option, while blasting the state’s decision-making process. Ferris also challenged assumptions that a bridge would be less attractive.

“The problem with Forest Hills over the years is not that there’s a bridge there, but the traffic congestion to get through there,” he said. “A lot of people call the bridge a divider. We call it a connector. A six-lane mini-highway is not a connector.”

Construction should begin in October 2013, state transportation authorities said. Razing the Casey Overpass and transforming the terrain below into a surface street is projected to cost \$53 million. A replacement bridge was estimated to cost \$74 million.

When it was built 58 years ago, the existing 1,650-foot-long, 80-foot-wide bridge was designed to carry four lanes of traffic. But as the overpass deteriorated, state officials in fall 2010 limited travel to two lanes, one in each direction.

Time is critical, state officials said, because construction must start soon enough to make sure the project qualifies for funding that expires in 2016.



Another cause for urgency: While the existing bridge used by 24,000 vehicles each day remains safe for vehicular travel, the state's top transportation official said in a recent letter that "we do not know how much longer it will be able to carry traffic."

The state originally planned to announce its selection more than two months ago. But the decision was stalled by a group of concerned residents, advocacy groups, and local elected officials, led by state Representative Elizabeth A. Malia, a Democrat from Jamaica Plain, and US Representative Michael E. Capuano, a Democrat from Somerville. They said data are missing from the state's traffic assessment and choosing either option without complete information would be irresponsible.

The state has denied that its traffic analysis is incomplete.

Supporters of the street-level option, including bicycling advocates, have said removing the bridge would allow traffic to move nearly as well as over a bridge and would result in more green space and improvements to the Forest Hills Orange Line station.

For the past two decades, 61-year-old Sarah Freeman has lived along the Arborway. A member of an advisory group the state selected to oversee the project's planning, she said that as time passed, she became more confident in the street-level option.

"I hope people can make the most of this opportunity to work together to develop an outcome that fits for all users," she said. "How often does the state come along and say they want to do a \$50 million project in your neighborhood? This is a huge investment for J.P."

Eric Moskowitz of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached mjrochele@gmail.com.

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