

Conservancy President Renata von Tscharner's spoken remarks to the Board of MassDOT, September 7, 2011

My name is Renata von Tscharner, president of the Charles River Conservancy. We are an advocacy group with over 20,000 volunteers and supporters.

I am speaking today about the accelerated bridge program, and in particular about the three bridges over the Charles River that are currently in the planning stage: The Anderson Bridge, the Western Avenue Bridge and the River Street Bridge and the underpasses that we feel should be included in this effort.

I understand that at the August 10th Board meeting there was some discussion about the underpasses and I understand that the board members have received Secretary Mullen's letter to elected officials. I have handed you the rebuttal to that letter. I also understand that the Board members have been promised a briefing on the underpasses.

The Charles River Conservancy has been advocating for underpasses since 2006, and as you can see from the handout, 29 elected officials, 31 groups and over 600 individuals have joined the advocacy effort. And both the Boston and the Cambridge City Councils have passed resolutions in favor of underpasses. The advocacy groups have a combined email network of about 140,000 people.

What is the Issue?

All three bridges should have underpasses added as part of their restoration. The underpasses would run perpendicular to the bridges, parallel to the river and allow pathway users to stay on the river's edge uninterrupted, just as is already possible at the Eliot Bridge.

We appreciate that MassDOT staff is concerned about staying on track and on budget, but restoring bridges that will most likely not be touched again for 50-75 years, and not adding pedestrian underpasses that can also serve recreational and commuter bicycling, would be missing a great opportunity. Both the safety factor and the "healthy transportation compact," as well as the environmental concerns are the reasons why so many have joined this advocacy effort.

Just as MassDOT's innovative "fast 14 effort" on I -93 has been a great success, we suggest that the three bridges over the Charles could be combined into a design/build contract, which would speed up the process, and reduce the cost. Because there is a political will for underpasses, a technical solution can -and must be- found

Since the underpasses will come up again at this board meeting, I wanted you to be aware how strong the support is and give some of the other advocates a chance to speak.

In the handout you also find MassDOT's own numbers on the large number of pathway users and why they want underpasses. These numbers are current users, and these numbers would of course greatly increase with underpasses offered.

A great opportunity has already been missed at the BU bridge, where an underpass on the Cambridge side would have been easily possible as part of the renovation.

This is a chance at the three upriver bridges not to be missed.
Since we did not want to take too much of your time, I have statements by some advocates who could not be here today.

Thank you your consideration.