

March 7, 2001

Mr. Thomas F. Broderick, P.E., Chief Engineer
MassHighway
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA

RE: Comments Regarding MassHighway

Dear Mr. Broderick:

Attached you will find detailed information regarding the comments of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission regarding the North-Central Berkshire Access Study draft materials submitted by MassHighway on February 2nd. We have been reviewing the materials and evaluating the recommendations in order to determine what is supported by the technical information. The Commission met on Thursday, March 1, 2001, and approved these comments by a vote of 12-1.

Regional Access Improvements

Based on the study data provided, two regional access improvement alternatives should advance to the Preliminary Engineering/Environmental Assessment stage as “preferred alternatives”:

1. A new access to the Mass Pike from Route 7 in the vicinity of Stockbridge and the Lee town line but with a modified configuration to minimize the impacts while retaining the travel benefits, such as building only two ramps providing access to and from the east, coupled with purchase of development rights on properties along that portion of Route 7. This alternative also eliminates the need for two other MassHighway recommendations for Route 20 in Lee and Lenox: 1) a climbing lane in Lenox; and 2) a widening and realignment in Lee around Laurel Lake. The Canal Street extension in downtown Lee is not supported by the data provided as it does not significantly improve regional access and has significantly greater negative impacts than other alternatives based on the information provided.
2. The data in the Study for the immediate Pittsfield area indicates that a bypass on the west side of Pittsfield shows the best cost-benefit ratios and the most benefits per building impacted. This is consistent with all previous studies. Therefore, this project should move into the required Preliminary Engineering/Environmental Assessment phase that will include a more detailed alternatives analysis which fully documents the travel time, safety, environmental impact, economic impact, and neighborhood impacts of a western Pittsfield Bypass versus an eastern route and the MHD approach of widening existing streets.

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3. Unfortunately, there is insufficient data in the study to select any alternative for either Route 8 north of Pittsfield or the Route 7/20 corridor in Lenox. Therefore, Corridor Management Plans will need to be developed for these areas to identify optimal solutions.

MassHighway has recommended a number of other projects, such as bridge replacements. Many, if not all, of these are useful in maintaining the existing transportation system but do not make meaningful improvements in the long-standing deficiencies with regional access. Attached are more detailed comments on the study.

Quality of the Study

The work done by the consultant is incomplete and does not live up to the expectations we had for this study. Nonetheless, it has produced some useful information that helps filter out a few of the least viable alternatives and suggestions and identify some that may be viable. We have concentrated on recommendations that are supported by the information provided. There are other recommendations that are perfectly logical projects but that do not actually address regional access issues. We have identified those and are not opposed to them; the issue with those projects becomes primarily one of limited financial resources to accomplish them and where they fit in priority with the locally developed existing list of desired projects.

Some MassHighway recommendations are not consistent with the information provided. We have identified those and have noted alternatives that are supported by the data, wherever possible. We are disappointed that the study has not provided analysis showing how various alternatives either improve safety or reduce travel times. This is a major deficiency that will need to be corrected during the preliminary engineering/ environmental assessment phase required for the regional access improvements.

The level of concern we are hearing from a variety of sources regarding different MassHighway recommendations demonstrates that public involvement has not been conducted in a fashion that meets the goal of the study, for an informed public decision-making process. Before any specific access improvements can be included in the Regional Transportation Plan, we will need to have public involvement in a more constructive and useful manner than has occurred to date.

Sincerely,

Lois A. Lenehan
Chair

Attachments

Cc: Matthew J. Amorello, Commissioner, MassHighway
Edward T. Morehouse, Chairman, Berkshire Regional Transit Authority
Kevin J. Sullivan, Secretary of Transportation and Construction