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Development of the Boston Area Highway System

Michael Passanisi

"The plans of dreamers and skilled engineers alike, voiced from many sources during the past twenty years, have failed to make visible progress in straightening the snarl of Boston traffic."¹ Was that an editorial from a local newspaper in 1985? Was it part of a campaign speech by a politician in 1975? No. In order to properly identify that quotation, it is necessary for us to go back about thirty more years, to a Boston newspaper's view of the 1945 traffic situation. In the 1940s, Boston faced a similar situation to the current one — what seems to be an incredible traffic problem. And there were dire predictions for the future. The ultimate solution, then as well as now, was for the construction of more and wider roads.

In the 1940s, Boston's commuters had a tough life. The trip from Melrose to Boston, for instance, took at least two hours. Taking that trip, the driver would travel down Route 1, which was six lanes wide. Suddenly, in Malden, the road ended. Then, it was necessary to take a slow and difficult ride through the heart of Everett. Going past Everett Square, through air heavy with chemical emissions from the factories to the south, traffic would suddenly come to a complete stop. The way into the city was an obstacle course, with many bottlenecks, including the V-shaped intersection of Broadway and the Revere Beach Parkway. Sullivan Square was also a problem, with the Mystic Avenue traffic from Medford creating an even greater hazard. From that point, it was necessary to go down Rutherford Avenue, at a slow pace, passing the gritty and dusty truck terminals. At City Square in Charlestown, there was another bottleneck, another rotary with

1. Boston Traveler, December 15, 1945.

cars coming from Chelsea over a narrow bridge. Leaving the City of Boston, drivers could take either of two bridges, the high Charlestown Bridge or the low Warren Bridge. In either case, however, they would proceed very slowly, often coming to a complete stop. Once over the bridges, the driver would reach Commercial Street, with a mass of cars passing pedestrians, and zig-zagging around cars which were double-parked. The trip had already taken two hours, and the driver had not yet arrived in downtown Boston!

During that time period, the local newspapers continued to report about promises to relieve the angry and frustrated commuters. During the next fifteen years, there would be many proposals for new highways, but things would get worse before they got better. Prewar Boston was an insular place. Residents of the various neighborhoods were clannish and suspicious. The North Shore was the North Shore, and the South Shore was the South Shore. The Irish of Charlestown not only hated the Italians of the North End, but they did not care too much for the Irish of the South End either. The Jews in Roxbury and the Italians in East Boston were more than a world apart. The Irish, according to John F. Kennedy, found it difficult to own property on the North Shore, so they established their "Riviera" to the south. It took three hours to get from Malden to Quincy. In addition, "many people didn't come into Boston," according to Metropolitan District Commission historian Captain Al Swanson, "because they used to get lost."²

The building of the Sumner Tunnel to East Boston in the early 1930s, one of the earliest but most necessary links between different sections of what was becoming known as Greater Boston, alienated many East Boston residents because of landtaking and increased traffic problems in the area. The fact that the tunnel was only two lanes wide underscored the problem. Commuters from the south and west were in the same situation as those from the north and south. A six-lane roadway would narrow to a two-lane bridge on McGrath Highway, for instance. Modern highways would simply end in the woods, when money ran out.

The veterans of World War II returned to find Boston choked with traffic. The downtown area had a constant traffic jam. A 1947 survey reported that the average speed for vehicles downtown was about seven miles per hour, going down to three

2. Interview with Captain Al Swanson, July 14, 1987.

miles per hour during the rush hours. Adding to the problem was the fact that parking restrictions were enforced only sporadically. One breakdown or accident would paralyze the entire area. And there were predictions that things were going to get even worse. "I almost shudder when I think of what traffic tie-ups will be in highly congested areas . . . of parts of Greater Boston in 46-47-48, with unlimited supplies of gasoline and thousands of new motor vehicles on the road," said Massachusetts Governor Maurice Tobin right after V-J day. "Right now when motor vehicle registration is at its lowest point in many years, the slightest rainstorm creates tie-ups in all parts of the city."³ E. Perkins Maguire, president of R. H. White's, a popular downtown department store, predicted that "Boston traffic will be hopeless five years from now unless immediate steps are taken to cope with the problem."⁴

Other parts of the city fared little better. On November 1, 1947, when college football games were scheduled at the same time at Fenway Park, Braves Field, and Harvard Stadium, officials were so fearful of huge traffic jams that hundreds of extra police were assigned to direct traffic. Boston's neighborhoods, such as Charlestown, Brighton, and South Boston were turned into parking lots during the rush hours, because of traffic congestion which was compounded by narrow streets and illegal parking.

East Boston, with the ever-expanding Logan Airport, saw its tiny streets clogged both by airport patrons and North Shore commuters; the two-lane Sumner Tunnel was already carrying more than its intended capacity. In addition to these problems, the existing roads, allegedly based on cowpaths of the 1600s, had no logical coordination. In late 1947, the *Boston Herald* reported that "a Medford man who drives to work in Milton can't travel a straight line . . . because of intown and urban tie-ups. Instead, he takes a long and circuitous route through Somerville, Cambridge, Boston, part of Brookline, through Boston and again into Milton."⁵

Highway building in Massachusetts had gone into decline in the 1930s. Between 1894 and 1935, the Bay State averaged 103 miles of new construction per year, but this declined to 34 miles per year between 1936 and 1941, an effect of the Great

3. Boston Traveler, December 15, 1945.

4. Boston Post, April 7, 1947.

5. Boston Herald, December 4, 1947.

Depression. During the 1939-1940 term of Governor Leverett Saltonstall, a moratorium was declared on road building. The war then intervened, and the years 1947 and 1948 saw a modest total of 33 and 40 miles. During 1947, Metropolitan District Commissioner William Buracker admitted that of thirty million dollars available for highways that year, only nine million was going to be spent.

The Legislative Committee on Highways and Motor Vehicles issued a scathing report in October of 1947, which spoke of "hundreds of miles of outmoded highways, insufficient sight distances, curves with improper elevations, crowned surfaces, [and] broken pavement with little or no markings."⁶ The report added that there was no proper way to take care of the extremely heavy North-South traffic, and that no one road crossed the Commonwealth. Metropolitan District Commission (M.D.C.) highways, like the Arborway, had been built for the traffic of the 1930s. Rotaries, which were constructed as a space-saving device in the crowded Bay State, were the scenes of many traffic jams, which threw fear into the hearts of drivers from other states who happened to find themselves in the midst of one.

The problem was at its worst in Boston, with an immense auto flow and a relatively small area of forty-nine square miles. Thus, the Master Highway Plan of 1948, submitted by a joint board to Governor Robert Bradford in February of that year, received a great deal of publicity. It called for eight radial highways out of the city — a Southeast Expressway, Southwest Expressway, Northeast Expressway, East Boston Expressway, Northern Expressway, and Route 9 Expressway. Those highways would radiate, like spokes from a wheel, out of an Inner Belt which would extend from Somerville through Cambridge and Brookline, and around to the Fort Point Channel area. There, they would become part of a Central Artery through the downtown area, past North Station, and to Somerville again. It was reported that the projected cost to the Commonwealth would be seven hundred million dollars, with the initial stages paid for by a one hundred million dollar state bond issue. The automobile age had finally come to Boston, in full force.

The Artery proposal was hardly new. Incredibly, plans for a wide thoroughfare through Boston went back to 1911, when

6. "Report of Legislative Committee on Highways and Motor Vehicles," December, 1947.

a legislative committee studying a proposed subway linking the North and South Stations included as a desirable by-product a surface artery through the downtown area. Other proposals had been made in 1923, 1926, 1930, 1940, and 1947, but nothing had come of them because Bostonians protested that they could not afford such a roadway. Now, with state assistance, it finally seemed possible.

The plan seemed the answer to Boston's beleaguered commuters, but for the next few years, it was little except a promise. Construction of the East Boston Expressway had already begun, and soon the East Boston residents had a little relief. It took much more time to get going on the rest of the roads. The *Herald* called it a "staggering job," and predicted that construction costs would rise sharply. A "Committee to Save the North End" prophetically labelled the elevated artery a "Chinese wall" which would cut off their community, and urged that the proposed route be relocated to the Atlantic Avenue area. There was little unified opposition, however, and most of the forecasts were bright. The *Boston Globe* predicted that the Artery would be carrying sixty thousand vehicles a day when completed.⁷ Department of Public Works head William Callahan, later to become the controversial chairman of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, envisioned a future of traffic moving on the Artery at thirty-five miles per hour or more, with no delays caused by jaywalkers or traffic lights. There was talk that the job could be completed in two or three years.

While the planners promised, the traffic congestion became worse. The Mystic River Bridge, from Chelsea to Charlestown, a toll structure built with private funds, opened in 1950, but without its connecting highways the structure had huge traffic jams at both ends, and it was under-used. A highway along the south bank of the Charles River, which had been proposed in 1948, was tied up in controversy for months, with community groups concerned over the loss of Esplanade land.

With traffic jams worsening and relief slow in coming, mass transit planning seemed in order, but little of it was being done. Commuter rail lines like the Boston and Albany were beginning to lose money. When the Metropolitan Transit Authority was created in 1947, the legislative commission proposed that it be extended both over the Boston and Albany

7. This was a major miscalculation, as the real figure would be twice that prediction.

main line and the Highland Branch to Riverside. These moves, however, were very slow in coming. "Only a few dreamers were thinking rapid transit at that time," said A. S. Plotkin, *Boston Globe* transportation writer, "and there was little coordination with highways. The business community was very strong pro-highway. Pro-transit groups came much later."⁸ Frank Colcord, co-author with Alan Lupo of the book *Rites of Way*, described rapid transit as being discussed "as if it had nothing to do with highways."⁹ Off-street parking in Boston was also inadequate. "The best idea," said Captain Swanson, "would have been public transportation with parking areas on the outskirts of the city. But people were not willing to leave their cars."¹⁰

In January of 1951, at long last, construction of the Artery began, but it was to be a slow process. The projected cost of thirty million dollars seemed well worth the amount if it could relieve the pressure on the downtown area. The bridge over the Charles River to Charlestown came first. Because the road had to be financed with yearly bond issues, it was done in a somewhat piecemeal fashion. The route cut a swath out of one of the business sections of Boston. Many buildings in the market district had to be demolished. Steel girders stood alone for long periods of time. City streets were blocked, further adding to the congestion. By late 1953, the Charles River bridge section was standing alone. With no interchange, ramps were left unused, and the opening of the first section, from the Mystic River Bridge to Haymarket Square, was still months away.

The Embankment Highway, renamed Storrow Drive, finally was begun, with the first section open in 1951. The completed road, from Soldiers Field Road to Leverett Circle, was opened the following year. The expected relief for roads such as Commonwealth Avenue and Beacon Street did not materialize, however. It was soon apparent, moreover, that twice the expected number of cars were using Storrow Drive each day. The four lanes of traffic proved totally inadequate, especially from Kenmore Square into the Back Bay, where many crossing patterns of traffic had to be made.

8. Interview with A. S. Plotkin, July 23, 1987.

9. Interview with Frank Colcord, July 14, 1987.

10. Swanson interview, July 14, 1987.

In September of 1952, a harsh editorial in the *Herald* complained: "If all the rush hour traffic from the Embankment Highway were stalled bumper-to-bumper, it would reach from the Hatch Shell to the Eliot Bridge behind Harvard Stadium. What's more, it does. Twice a day, in fact. . . . This is the highway that was going to speed commuters to the suburbs. All it did was to get them into trouble for being late to work in the morning and late getting home at night."¹¹

The M.D.C.-built highway was also found to have been constructed several feet too low, as it had been depressed to afford Beacon Street residents an unobstructed view of the Charles River. This allowed a large amount of water seepage during rainstorms. Within two years, the necessary repairs had been made, and the Back Bay section of the road had been widened, to ease the congestion, but not until half a million dollars had been lost, along with valuable time. It was obvious that the newly-constructed highways were creating the need for even more highways.

In other parts of the area, improvements progressed slowly. The airport was tied into McLellan Highway. South of the city, an overpass was built at Forest Hills, to alleviate a terrible bottleneck where Washington Street came together with traffic from the south, on Routes 1, 3, and 28. The Arborway, Seaver Street, and Blue Hill Avenue were improved and widened. Bypasses and underpasses were constructed. In-town roads, such as Cambridge Street, were widened, and unused trolley tracks were removed.

By 1953, the initial stage of the Artery was nearly completed, but more problems were developing. The route of the second leg, between an area known as Fort Hill Square, near High Street and Broadway in South Boston, became a hotly-contested issue in the fall of the year. Merchants in the leather and garment districts did not want the road cutting through their area, while the residents of Chinatown did not want their community divided by the highway.

The Dewey Square area was also a subject of controversy. Would there be a tunnel, as most planners wanted, or would the Artery be elevated over South Station? There were marches protesting different routes, and innumerable plans and variations of plans were developed. Within a 650-yard area, in fact, fifty-

11. *Boston Herald*, September 24, 1952.

eight different plans for the Artery rout were proposed. A compromise was finally reached; it necessitated only the removal of a few buildings in Chinatown.

The bottlenecks north and south of the city were still worsening in 1953, despite the promises that relief would soon be on the way. Commercial traffic had increased substantially. "The trucking industry," recalled Captain Al Swanson, "had literally taken over the highways since the war."¹² South Shore commuters were forced through a terrible bottleneck in Quincy Center, and Morrissey Boulevard in Dorchester was the second most heavily-travelled road in the state. To the north, things were no better. Without connecting highways, the Mystic River Bridge was rendered nearly useless. The *Traveler* reported in early 1952 that

A situation of fantastic sloppiness has developed on the Charlestown approach to the \$27 million Mystic Bridge. When the Bridge was opened, police agreed to keep Chelsea Street free of parking. This they did — for about a week Today the four-lane street is often compressed into one lane as it approaches one of the largest bridges in the world. . . . During the rush hours, the congestion is so great that cars seeking to go from North Washington Street into City Square and then to Chelsea Street are unable to do so, even though they may carry Mystic River Bridge stickers. . . . The police will therefore let the first lane through and divert the other two lanes to other routes.¹³

Things were not much different on the other end of the structure, either, as the bridge came to a stop on a Chelsea side street, and traffic had to weave its way through the tiny roads of that already congested city.

By 1954, however, construction seemed to be moving. The Northwest Expressway, which would tie the Mystic River Bridge to Route One, was finally begun. The widening of Storrow Drive eased that roadway's congestion, at least to some extent. The construction of the Southeast Expressway, one of the major

12. Swanson interview, July 14, 1987.

13. Boston Traveler, January 23, 1952.

spokes of the Master Highway Plan of 1948, was started in Braintree. At the end of October of that year, the first leg of the Artery, from the Mystic River Bridge to Haymarket Square, was at long last opened to traffic. It was a huge event. Since the roadway was being named for former Mayor John F. Fitzgerald, it seemed only fitting that the ribbon be cut by his 84 year-old widow, who was accompanied to the ceremony by her grandson, Edward M. "Ted" Kennedy. Much was made of the fact that average travel time from the Bridge to such points as Blackstone Street and Storrow Drive had been cut from an average of twenty-five minutes to two minutes. In the general state of euphoria, however, it was little noted that the streets around Haymarket Square, where the Artery began and ended, were still severely jammed; the bulk of traffic had not yet tested it. Though he hailed the road as symbolic of "the rebirth of Boston as one of the world's major cities,"¹⁴ M.D.C. Commissioner John Volpe knew that there would be difficulties. "I could see way back then that the design would cause problems," he later recalled, "particularly at the intersection of Routes 95 and 93 as they came into the Central Artery."¹⁵ When he became Commissioner in January of 1953, the foundations were already in, structural steel was being manufactured for the project, and it was too late to change.

Boston was not alone in its one-sided attitude. Urban planning in the late forties and fifties was generally automobile-oriented. "In the postwar years," said Ralph Gakenheimer in *Transportation Planning as Response to Controversy: The Boston Case*,

the pent-up demand for automobile travel was resulting in the very rapid increase of car ownership. . . . In view of the circumstances — and with some help from the industry's advertisers — highways became an image of progress and transition to a more affluent life pattern following the rigors of wartime. For elected representatives seeking political advantage, highways were obviously a good investment to promote. . . . Furthermore, highways were relatively easy to

 14. *Boston Globe*, October 29, 1954.

15. Letter from John Volpe, September 25, 1987.

build. . . . Eminent domain laws could be invoked with relatively little trouble. . . . Finally, of course, all this was sustained by the famous highway lobby, representing some of the largest unions in the country, which ultimately accounted for one in seven jobs in the U.S."¹⁶

In Boston, with its small land area, however, the need for more than new highways was even greater.

The Dewey Square area, part of the second Artery link, was still making headlines in early 1955. John E. Powers of South Boston, long a force in the State Senate, came out against the idea of a tunnel under South Station; he called instead for an elevated road over Atlantic Avenue. Powers, who was running for Mayor of Boston at the time, claimed that the tunnel would destroy the value of property around South Station, and that the tunnel would be the scene of many accidents caused by motorists driving from daylight into the poorly-lighted tunnel. Though Powers' ideas were dismissed by many as political rhetoric, he succeeded in getting a resolution passed in the Senate calling for an elevated road. His project got no further, but it succeeded in causing more delays. The projected cost of the entire Artery had been thirty million dollars; fifty-seven million had already been spent on the first leg alone.

By October of 1955, traffic was opened up as far as Fort Hill Square. This terminus to the traffic soon became a bottleneck in itself, but public statements from officials were still generally optimistic. In November of 1955, ground was broken for the Dewey Square Tunnel. There were grand predictions about the rebirth of the downtown area, then already suffering from the impact of the recently-built suburban malls. "One of the most glittering opportunities," the *Traveler* editorialized in October of 1955, "lies in Dewey Square. There the Central Artery will go underground, leaving a large, open plaza above ground, rich in possibilities for beautifying development. There is no lack of possible parking facilities, some developed by the Artery itself and some by roofing over the South Station tracks. . . . Summer Street ought to be the key to a great shopping center having the attractions of the big suburban shopping area plus much more

16. Ralph Gakenheimer, Transportation Planning in Response to Controversy: The Boston Case (Cambridge, 1976).

besides." The editorial went on to paint a dreamlike portrait of a suburban housewife spending her day in an idealized Boston:

She arrives by car, train or rapid transit at Dewey Square. If by car she finds easy parking. . . . In the square itself, she finds an attractive green, pleasantly landscaped, with benches, perhaps a play area for children. Walking up Summer Street, under cover, she passes a succession of exciting window displays. She is undisturbed by street traffic, which is funneled elsewhere."¹⁷

"Officials estimate," said another *Traveler* article, "that the Central Artery will give tens of thousands who drive to work one to two more hours a day of leisure time at home,"¹⁸ and would save three to five dollars in gas. John Volpe, while admitting that the final cost of the Artery would be about one hundred million dollars, proclaimed that it would "make Boston one of the few cities in the world where the airport is within 10 minutes travel distance from major railroad stations, hotels, buses, and retail districts."¹⁹

While work on the Artery proceeded, progress on the other spokes in the wheel of the 1948 Master Plan was very slow, if at all. William Callahan, by then the chairman of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, was, in the words of A. S. Plotkin, "ramming the highway across Massachusetts." Controversy over its extension into Boston stalled the "Western Expressway Plan." The "Northern Expressway," or "new Route 28," was still in the planning stages. The second tunnel under the Harbor, a proposal bandied about since the late 1940s, still was tied up in planning. One exception to the rule was Route 128, a project begun in the early 1950s (though not part of the Master Plan) and moving smoothly toward completion, while already attracting many companies to relocate in the area.

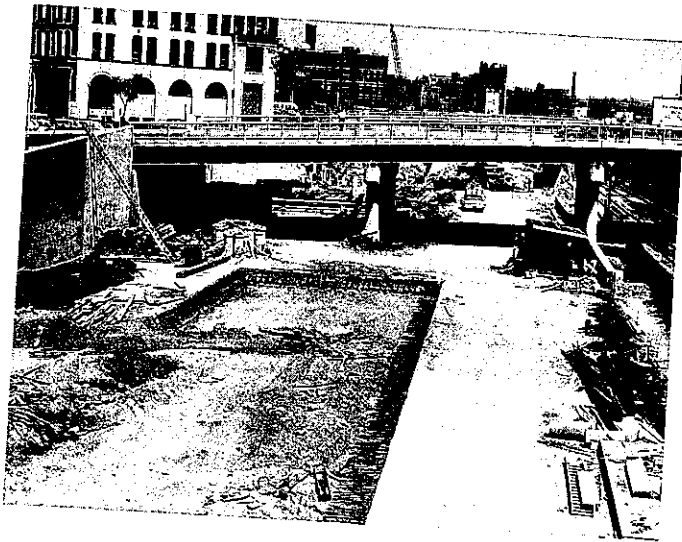
While the new roads were few, traffic was increasing at an unbelievable rate. The growth in the number of cars on the road between 1945 and 1955 exceeded the estimate of the 1970

17. *Boston Traveler*, October 25, 1955.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, October 26, 1955.

projection by fifty-five percent. Despite the widening of many highways, travel time had not changed appreciably since the 1940s; and on some roads it was worse. In the summer of 1956, the *Globe* ran a series entitled "Our Worst Bottlenecks." The top ten, in order, were Neponset Circle (two or three lanes being fed by about sixteen lanes of five incoming roads), Wellington Circle (Routes 28 and 16 being the major culprits), Leverett Circle, Brookline Village, the Prison Point Bridge in Charlestown, Columbia Circle in South Boston, McGrath Highway (five major intersections plus a two-lane bridge), the Sumner Tunnel, and the Everett Junction (Broadway and the Revere Beach Parkway). The articles went on to explain what was being done to remedy each situation; overpasses were in the process of being built at the McGrath Highway and the Everett Junction. The opening of the Expressway, however, was still three years away.



Construction of Mass. Turnpike Extension, 1964, photo courtesy of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority.

Would it be the answer, though? A Revised Master Plan came out in 1957, and it was alarming. It stated that by 1975 the traffic in the Central Artery-Sumner Tunnel region would reach approximately 325,000 cars per day — three times the capacity of the Artery. The new plan called for two more tunnels to be built

between 4:05 and 4:25 p.m., for example, 200 persons crossed the northbound lane of the expressway at the point in Charlestown where it becomes an approach to the Mystic River Bridge. They were mostly Navy yard workers who preferred to risk their lives than to use the tunnel designed for pedestrian crossing.²⁹

On November 24, a four-car collision at 4:30 p.m. caused southbound traffic to be backed up all the way to Saugus. The dream of the artery and expressways providing free access in and out of the city was becoming a nightmare.

As the decade ended, it had been twelve years since the Master Highway Plan of 1948. The Artery, Northeast Expressway, Southeast Expressway, and East Boston Expressway had been built. The "Northeast Expressway" was taking shape as Interstate 93. The "Western Expressway" had become the Massachusetts Turnpike Extension, and it was still six years away from completion. The "Northeast Expressway" was nowhere, but a partial one would emerge in the late 1960s, as Route 2. The "Southwest Expressway" was encountering great opposition, and it would never be built. The second Harbor Tunnel, fifteen years after its proposal, was nearly finished, but by the time it would open in 1962, a third one would be needed. Finally, the Inner Belt, the key to the plan, was in limbo and would remain there before being scrapped in the early 1970s. The downtown area was still jammed with traffic. Off-street parking was still inadequate. A commuter's ride into Boston was somewhat better than it had been fifteen years before, but it did not at all approach the many promises which had been made. Again, things would get worse before they got better.

It took thirty years to find a remedy — the present Central Artery project — for what was supposed to be a remedy in itself. It remains to be seen if the Artery project will be any more than another failed solution to what has proven to be a most difficult problem.

29. Boston Herald, October 18, 1959.