

STEP letter to the MBTA about the proposed Bus Network Redesign

Dear MBTA Bus Network Redesign project team,

The following are comments and suggestions from Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership (STEP) on the draft Bus Network Redesign (BNR) changes proposed for Somerville.

We support the MBTA's intent to modernize the bus network for the first time in many decades and its stated goal of creating a more equitable network with more frequent service, better connections, and more all-day service. We appreciate the efforts to provide high-frequency bus routes that connect Somerville with other communities, routes T96, T101, and T109. The new T39 route connecting Porter, Union, and Central Squares will be a huge benefit as well, and if the infrastructure is in place for these routes, this will be real progress.

But we're also disappointed with some aspects of this first BNR draft and encourage the BNR team to act on the concerns we've heard from Somerville's residents, outlined below.

STEP's take is that Somerville residents and businesses lose more than we gain from this proposal. The proposed redesign simply doesn't take into account the city's land use and underserves the current and near-term planned commercial districts which have vital employment opportunities. In terms of transportation equity, the proposal also underserves the neighborhoods of residents who need bus service the most. Although the proposed redesign makes it easier for riders in surrounding communities to travel in and out of Somerville, the current bus network residents rely on for traveling *within* the city for daily essential services has been gutted in the BNR proposal.

In recent years, Somerville has invested heavily in adding bus lanes and improved pedestrian safety features; it's a city that values public transit and works to provide support for multi-modal transportation. We'd like to see the highly traveled routes or route segments that residents rely on to get around *within* the city retained or modified in ways that are beneficial to Somervillians traveling to key destinations.

Our recommendations

In addition to supporting how residents get around the city for essential services and commutes, we need bus transit to support the evolving changes in Somerville over the next 20 years – where new housing and jobs will be. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- Make a direct one-seat ride between Davis and Union Squares, by having the T39 not terminate at Porter Square; have it terminate instead at Davis Square.
- Make the 90 bus route a T90 route, or at least offer headways more frequent than 30 minutes, with transit signal priority.
- Have one or more additional routes through Somerville connect to Assembly Square.
- Have the T39 go to Kendall Square, rather than to Central Square.
- Create a north/south route on McGrath Highway, including a north/south route segment on Cedar St. connecting to Ball Square that also services The Meadow Glen and Fellsway Plaza Malls and travels between Mystic Ave and Union Square on Mystic Ave.

to Temple St., to Broadway, to McGrath, to Washington St. (See STEP's suggested route concept attached to this email.)

- Put a route segment on Alewife Brook Parkway that connects area residents from Boston Avenue to Alewife T Station.

The reasons behind these recommendations are detailed below.

Concerns underlying our recommendations

Some neighborhoods and routes most in need of quality public transit are poised to see removal or reduction in bus service, which conflicts with the MBTA's stated goal of providing transportation equity in the bus network redesign. Also troubling is lack of planning for the future of land use in Somerville in areas where big changes are occurring that will need bus service are already under way.

- **Few proposed bus routes connect to the new Medford branch GLX stations.** The whole point of the lack of parking lots at the new GLX stations is so that people can walk, bike, and *take a bus* to the stations. On the Medford branch, we are pleased that the Tufts GLX station will have two bus connections, and it looks like the T109 will loosely connect with the E. Somerville stop. But there are no bus connections to Ball, Magoun, and Gilman Square stations. We appreciate the two high-frequency routes that will connect at Union Square. But some current bus routes slated for removal would connect with GLX stations such as the 89 (Ball Square station) and the 80 (Gilman Square station, not to mention the 80's usefulness connecting to City Hall, SHS, and the Central Library). We believe it is important to wait until GLX ridership is established before removing or making any changes to the Route 80 and 89 buses. In addition, all the current bus routes that connect Somerville with Lechmere station are removed in the BNR proposal. The proposed removal of these routes cuts off our neighbors in East Cambridge and West Medford from many destinations they travel to in Somerville that are not along the GLX.
- **Lack of north-south bus routes.** Somerville has long suffered from insufficient north-south connections between the major bus routes (and now the GLX). Although many north-south streets in the city are not busable due to the hill grades, we recommend that the BNR team explore possible routes on Washington St. and Medford St., incorporating Cedar St. in a route that connects with Ball Square, and adding one or more routes on the very wide McGrath Highway (which will soon be redesigned as McGrath Boulevard).
- **Eliminating east-west routes will leave residents who do not live near a GLX station stranded.** Eliminating bus routes such as the current 87, 80, and 89 routes would disproportionately impact working-class residents, seniors, disabled residents, and others without cars who aren't within a 5-10-minute walk of a GLX station. For example, tenants at Clarendon Hill and Mystic Housing complexes (who are predominantly low-income and immigrants) are concerned about how harmful removal of these routes would be to their commutes, their children traveling by bus to school, and their ability to get to medical and other services appointments, grocery stores, and so on. Many seniors use the current 87 and 88 routes to get to Somerville Council on Aging on

Holland St. The proposed removal of the 80 and 89 routes leave a gap in coverage on the west end of Broadway and Powderhouse neighborhoods to connect *anywhere* in Somerville, including to schools, Davis Square, Dilboy Stadium, and other sporting facilities. Removal of the 80 route also leaves our neighbors in West Medford and East Arlington unable to access Tufts and destinations in Somerville.

Lechmere connections from Somerville have all been eliminated in this proposal. The MBTA BNR team stated in a recent public meeting that the 80, 87, and 88 routes are all duplicates for the GLX route, thus their proposed elimination. We disagree with this blanket assertion and we encourage the BNR team to examine the ridership data of these routes (not merely limited cell phone data) and explore ways to restore or incorporate portions that are not directly in the path of GLX. The current 87 and 88 routes are used heavily not only by Somervillians but by East Cambridge residents as well, for a variety of essential services along Somerville and Highland Aves, including grocery shopping and medical appointments, etc, outside the path of GLX. Also, several major lab and residential developments are being planned just outside of Lechmere along Msgr O'Brien and McGrath Highways on the Somerville/Cambridge line. Again, thinking about the future and the eventual McGrath Boulevard should inform the bus service in this area.

- **Rides that will require taking 2 buses require smooth reliable timed transfers.** The proposal requires a rider to take two-seat rides to reach many destinations, including some within the city. (Traveling between Union Square to Davis Square is one extreme example; what was a one-seat ride would become a two-seat ride. This is why we make the T39 recommendation listed earlier.) Such transfers are onerous in the current system due to unreliability of bus schedule adherence on top of the hassle of transferring, long wait-times, particularly in inclement weather. This kind of situation discourages riders from relying on buses for routine transportation in a city of 4 square miles. We wonder whether the MBTA will be able to meet this burden to riders by delivering reliable, timely transfers. We would hate to see this situation force people to take their trips within Somerville by car instead.
- **Union Square**, rapidly becoming one of the largest commercial centers in the city, would lose several bus routes in the proposal that could connect with the new GLX station. According to the BNR proposal:
 - No more direct bus between Union and Davis Squares, hence our suggestion about having the T39 terminate at Davis Square.
 - No more direct bus between Union and Kendall Square; a critically important need, along with the connection to LMA; hence our suggestion about having the T39 stop at Kendall Square rather than Central Square.
 - No direct service to Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS) in Union Square from many parts of the city for low income, immigrant clients who travel by bus (such as aforementioned Davis Square, Mystic Ave., Clarendon Hill).
- **Winter Hill**, particularly residents living on and around **Mystic Avenue**, an environmental justice neighborhood, would lose service to Davis Square with the removal of the 89 bus (which is one of many issues with removing that bus route). They would still have no bus access to Union Square and GLX station, and to destinations

along Somerville Ave. including Market Basket. Mystic Ave. is a major east-west connection with a bus lane built for encouraging more ridership on this busy, high speed road, which is dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists and has seen a number of crashes and pedestrian deaths.

- **Broadway** is a major road that spans West Somerville, Winter Hill and East Somerville (the latter two are environmental justice areas) with a new bus lane built for encouraging more ridership to rely on dependable bus service. This important east-west connection is currently serviced by several bus lines in the bus lane, but in the draft BNR, Broadway will lose all current bus routes, and gain one high-frequency T101 route that does not connect with any GLX stops (but should!) as it connects with Sullivan. We are puzzled by the MBTA's proposal to remove bus routes from Broadway. For example, the loss of the 89 bus leaves a transit gap for residents who live around the western end of Broadway to get to many places, such as Dilboy to the west, Davis Square to the south, and schools to the east. Changes of this kind will require residents to start relying more on car trips within the city, something no one wants to see happen.
- **Somerville's schools** would be less connected for students than they are now. Somerville is a rare example of a Massachusetts city with no dedicated school buses; as a result students rely heavily on MBTA service, so these changes matter a lot, especially for younger children who might be more comfortable riding a bus than the Green Line.
 - Somerville High School: Removing the 80 and 88 will remove the ability of a huge number of high school students living in West Somerville to get to/from school. At a minimum, the 90 will need to run as frequently to/from Somerville High School to North St./Clarendon Hill as the 88 currently does, to transport high school students after school dismissal.
 - Capuano Early Childhood Center, Winter Hill Community School, and the East Somerville Community School: again, removal of the 80 and 89 buses means removing access to students across a large swath of the city. These are some of the City's schools with the largest numbers of students! Communities like the Mystic Housing Development will have limited access to any school other than the Healey School.
- **Davis Square** has long been a major commercial and entertainment destination for bus riders within and outside Somerville. And there are office/lab development projects in planning stages to provide jobs five years from now. Direct connections from Union Square and Broadway/Winter Hill are needed in the BNR.
- **Highland Ave.** is home to many important destinations, such as Somerville Hospital, City Hall, Central Library, many medical services, and small businesses, as well as the previously mentioned Somerville High School. With the proposed removal of the 88 route, the 90 route will need to pick up the schedule slack along Highland Ave with better frequency than the proposed 30-minute frequency.
- **Somerville Ave.** is home to Market Basket, Target, and other shopping destinations. It is also a location of growing innovative economy employment, and is frequented by

Winter Hill residents and riders from outside the city, such as from East Cambridge and Arlington. Somerville Ave. needs connections from Davis Square, Winter Hill, and Lechmere.

- **Alewife Brook Parkway** still has no bus route in the BNR proposal. Buses traveling directly to Dilboy could save hundreds of car trips every week and deliver children and adults safely to the Stadium, turf and grass fields, tennis and basketball courts, swimming pool, and to the Mystic River paths there. In addition to carrying riders to Dilboy stadium and pool, Alewife Brook Parkway could provide a link between the future Route 16 Green Line station and Alewife Red Line station and the neighborhoods of West Somerville, East Arlington, and Medford. And putting Alewife Brook Parkway on a road diet with bus lanes would help bring much needed traffic calming.
- **Assembly Square** still has no additional bus service beyond the 90 route in the BNR proposal. Long-needed additional service would unlock for Somervillians the huge number of employment opportunities at Assembly now and thousands of future jobs as many new developments come on line. Like Union Square/Boylston Yards, Assembly is quickly becoming a significant commercial district in the region with a great employment potential for Somervillians – if they could get there. Assembly should have the same level of bus service as planned for Union Square and currently in Davis Square. Also important, better bus service would enable residents of Assembly Square to access the rest of Somerville. We were glad to hear in an MBTA BNR public meeting that the 90 bus stop will be moved geographically closer to the Assembly Orange Line stop. We hope good wayfinding signage and a bus shelter will be installed at the new location.
- The BNR draft calls for increasing the length of the **90 bus route** and increasing its frequency to every 30 minutes. Given the proposed removal of the 88 route and the 90 route's history of poor schedule adherence due to traffic congestion (with a much shorter route), we strongly recommend this bus route be given a frequency of more than 30 minutes, with transit signal priority. If possible, we'd like to see it become a T90 route.
- **More frequent routes would get bogged down in traffic.** Without dedicated bus lanes or transit signal priority, it's hard to imagine how some of these new ambitious high-frequency routes connecting communities are not going to be bunched up or stuck in traffic. We hope the MBTA works with municipalities to fast-track the building of bus lanes on these new routes within the next few years of the BNR rollout.
- **Bus stops need shelters.** In Somerville, bus shelters are badly needed at many bus stops. Many current locations are situated far from trees/buildings or any kind of refuge from the elements.

In closing, we appreciate the opportunity to give feedback to the draft BNR. We are mindful of the MBTA's promise to not eliminate any bus service in Somerville until after the full GLX service opens, so that changing ridership patterns can be collected and studied.

Attached to these comments is a JPG of a recommended north/south bus route created by STEP to address some of the concerns we have raised in our comments. We would be happy to further discuss our recommendations with the BNR team.

Best regards,

Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership (STEP)
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