

PUBLIC INFORMATIONAL MEETING MINUTES

Date: April 30, 2018
Location: Womens Club of Newton Highlands

Project: MBTA Newton Highlands Green Line Accessibility Project
Nitsch Project #: 9804.6

The meeting was held to inform the general public of the progress that has been made on the design of improvements to the Newton Highlands Station.

The Honorable Mayor Fuller opened the meeting with a statement of support for the MBTA's efforts to bring improvements to the Newton Highlands Station. She also praised the efforts of many in attendance for their hard work over several years in advocating for this project.

Thomas Rovero introduced himself as the Project Manager from the MBTA and identified the emergency exits and those in attendance certified in CPR. Tom began with a brief history of the station and corresponding railroad track. Tom presented multiple graphical slides using a laptop projector that identified the goals and objectives of the project along with anticipated improvements. Tom explained that the design is currently at a preliminary phase and may be complete approximately this time next year. Tom explained that the project is currently not guaranteed any funding for construction.

State Representative Ruth Balser thanked all in attendance for participating at the meeting and for their hard work in getting the project to this stage of development.

The following were comments given verbally at the meeting:

Comment:

The grade crossing of the track should be located immediately at the bottom of the ramp from Walnut Street.

Response:

The two grade crossings of the tracks proposed on the plans have been situated so that they are not obstructed when both a 4-car inbound and a 4-car outbound train are stopped in the station simultaneously.

Comment:

The proposed grade crossing at the center of the station will become a main crossing point for most passengers and should be widened to avoid a bottleneck especially during departures from the station.

Response:

The grade crossing will be evaluated and widened if possible.

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Comment:

What are the proposed improvements at the existing stairway from Hyde Street?

Response:

The stairs will remain and will not be altered. The walkway from the bottom of the stairs to the platform will be reconstructed and has a slope that is less than 5% and therefore will not have a canopy.

Comment:

What elevation will the platforms be constructed?

Response:

The platforms at the train boarding areas will be reconstructed to be 8-inches higher than the top of rail so that wheelchairs can (and all customers) can board the train directly without stepping up or by means of a special lift.

Comment:

Where will the ticket machines be located?

Response:

The existing shelters will be replaced with new prefabricated aluminum shelters that are heated. One of the shelters will contain new Automatic Fare Collection (AFC) machines.

Comment:

Can the ramp from Station Avenue have steps so that able bodied persons do not have to use the entire length of the ramp. Also, the proposed fence located along the edge of the tracks will prevent people from crossing at multiple locations as they do today and focus everyone in the two narrow track crossings.

Response:

Adding stairs to the Station Avenue Ramp will be evaluated. Patron safety is paramount and allowing customers to cross the tracks at multiple points and at locations that will ultimately be blocked by stopped trains is unlikely to be accepted by the MBTA.

Comment:

More crossings will increase passenger satisfaction and convenience.

Response:

Adding additional track crossing will be evaluated.

Comment:

Will the fencing at the platform edge impede the ramps that cross the tracks?

Response:

The fencing will only be installed in areas beyond the actual train boarding area and will not impede or block the ramps at the track crossing locations.

Comment:

The existing station signs will no longer be visible with the new train boarding locations.

Response:

The station signs will be relocated or replaced with new signs that are positioned in appropriate locations relative to the train boarding areas.

Comment:

Can the track crossing closest to Walnut Street be move in closer to the center of the station? Why do we need canopies on ramps?

Response:

Canopies are required for all ramps that exceed a 5% slope per building code requirements. The grade crossing has been located to avoid existing train signal post, catenary poles and other existing infrastructure which would be costly to relocate.

Comment:

Will most of the trees within the areas of the proposed ramps need to be removed? Can the canopies be painted green to blend into the surrounding vegetation? Can the lighting be designed to point downward to the surface of the platforms and not out into abutting property?

Response:

Trees will only be removed if necessary, however many trees may need to be pruned. The proposed canopies will be painted green as suggested. The lighting will be designed to point downward to the platform surface.

Comment:

Have you evaluated the condition of the existing retaining wall adjacent to the new ramp from Hyde Street?

Response:

The existing structures that are retained will be evaluated for "soundness" and will be repaired as needed.

Comment:

The current shelter with the fare collection machines floods during rain storms as the floor is pitched towards the back of the shelter.

Response:

The new shelters will be designed and constructed to provide drainage out of the shelter.

Comment:

Can a track crossing with a moveable fence that is up during times of no train activity and down when a train is approaching the station be provided?

Response:

The designers will evaluate widening the existing track crossings to provide extra capacity for access and egress across the tracks. A moveable fence creates additional maintenance problems and could become a safety issue if it became disabled in the "up" position.

Comment:

Have you considered lowering the tracks to provide the 8-inch separation for level boarding?

Response:

Lowering the tracks was considered earlier in the design process and determined to be cost prohibitive due to the extensive need for track work well beyond the station limits as well as relocation of track signal cable, signal equipment and catenary systems.

Comment:

Did you consider including a set of stairs from Walnut Street to the Inbound platform or stairs from the proposed ramp to the walkway behind the existing signal bungalow?

Response:

Any access from Walnut Street to the Inbound Platform would require the relocation of an existing telephone duct bank and water main currently attached to the Walnut Street bridge slightly above the elevation of the sidewalk. These two relocations were determined to be cost prohibitive during the concept phase of the design. Stairs from the new Walnut Street ramp to the walkway behind the signal bungalow will be evaluated.

Tom Rovero identified a portion of private property outlined in red on the presentation plan slide that represented a "taking" from the owner of the historic station building (18 Station Ave) needed to construct the Walnut Street ramp.

Comment:

Are there stations where similar improvements have been constructed so that we can observe what these elements look like?

Response:

The canopies at the Boston Landing commuter rail station will be similar to those used at Newton Highlands. Newton Center, Woodland, and Brookline Village all have similar platforms, and other station elements that will be used at Newton Highlands.

Comment:

Can a stairway be constructed on either side of the existing historic station building to access the platforms directly from Station Avenue?

Response:

The historic station building and surrounding property were sold to a private owner many years ago and additional property or easements would be required to construct stairs adjacent to the building.

Comment:

What is the material proposed for the raised platform?

Response:

The platforms will be constructed with a concrete paver and tactile warning edge, similar to Woodland Station and Brookline Village.

Comment:

What will the proposed platform lighting look like?

Response:

All light fixtures will be LED with a blue/white color. A specific fixture has not yet been selected. The platform light post will be 8-10 high.

Comment:

How will assure that proposed lighting will provide a uniform and consistent light throughout the entire station area?

Response:

The designers will use a lighting software program that will identify the optimum height and quantity of light fixtures given specific parameters of different lighting sources.

Comment:

Will the public announcement system be improved?

Response:

The public address system will be upgraded and improved.

Tom Rovero commented that the MBTA has different requirements for lighting levels at different areas within the station. Specifically, lighting on the platforms is required to be brighter than walkways or other areas due to the needs of security cameras that are focused on the boarding locations within the station.

Comment:

What is the schedule for incorporating extra train sets?

Response:

There is no specific time frame for expanding the train sets. The MBTA has required all station upgrades to incorporate accommodation of 4-car train sets for potential use during special events or emergency situations.

Comment:

Pedestrians crossing in front of the trains is not desirable due to the perception of a conflict between the train and a pedestrian should the train start without seeing a person trying to cross. This will force many patrons to walk the extended distance around the back of the train and ultimately may dissuade people from using the Green Line altogether. If 4-car train sets are unlikely in the foreseeable future shouldn't the MBTA rethink design elements that are focused on that concept?

Response:

The platform will be constructed for a length that accommodates 4-car train sets for use during special events and for future expanded capacity. The track crossing can only be positioned at locations that are outside of platform boarding areas as the grade crossing happens at an elevation equal to the top of rails and then must ramp up to meet the platform.

Comment:

Is the access from Station Ave required to be an "accessible" ramp if the Walnut Street ramp is made compliant?

Response:

The MBTA's policy requires constructing accessible access to stations.

Comment:

Is a list of comments going to be made available for public review?

Response:

There will be a written response to every comment made tonight and submitted in writing.

Comment:

Will there be any improvements / maintenance work done to the Walnut Street bridge sidewalks?

Response:

The current project is limited to work within the MBTA property which stops at the back of sidewalk on Walnut Street, Station Avenue, and Hyde Street. The MBTA has met with the City about work beyond the current project limits but has not committed to expanding the scope of work beyond the MBTA property at this time.

Comment:

Will the presentation be available online?

Response:

The presentation will be given to the City for posting online.

Comment:

When will the next meeting be held?

Response:

The 75% public meeting will likely be around the end of 2018.

Comment:

Were elevators considered as a means of providing accessibility to the platforms?

Response:

Elevators were evaluated during an earlier phase but cannot be the only accessible means of access as they are disabled in emergencies.

Comment:

If people want a direct response should they send in a written comment?

Response:

Tom Rovero encouraged attendees to contact him directly via the email address shown on the handouts.

The following are responses to written comments received prior to May 14, 2018.

Comment from Patricia Riggan:

As a resident who abuts the station, I would hope for green canopy covers in order to be less intrusive, especially since there will no doubt be loss of foliage. As someone who is also concerned with light pollution and its effect on people, animals, and our planet, I hope that the lighting will be focused downward. Of course, there is also a concern about the bottlenecks for commuters during the peak trains.

Response:

The station canopies will be painted green. The new light fixtures will direct light to the walking surfaces to minimize light pollution. The designers will evaluate the possibility of widening the track crossings to reduce the potential for "bottlenecks" at those locations.

Comment from Linda Morrison:

Hello Mr. Rovero—thanks for your presentation last night. As I think about the proposals, I am most concerned by the large amount of fencing envisioned. Some fencing is desirable, but I caution against over doing it. Using the example of bad incidents at the Fenway stop could be misleading, as that is a very poorly lit and difficult area. Too much fencing to corral transit riders could easily add enough frustration to the situation that tempers will flare and co-operative behavior could easily deteriorate. Somehow a balance between safety for passengers with all kinds of impairments (some temporary), and the convenience of an open and welcoming station needs to be struck. Too much fencing will make the station unwelcoming to many people.

I think it is also important to decide on “grade crossings” of the tracks not only on where the T wishes people to cross, but also on where riders will naturally want to cross. Instead of deciding on paths across open space arbitrarily, we generally find that allowing people to create pathways which make sense to them, and following that lead for deciding where to pave or grade, results in far better compliance and significantly less stress for all involved.

Is there any engineering problem to installing grade crossings between two areas of raised platforms? How realistic is it going to be to have the shorter trains we will be using for quite some decades use such a distant part of the station for loading and discharging passengers?

Is it absolutely necessary to have a ramp from Hyde Street to bring the station into compliance with the ADA? we do have two other entrance/exits with ramps, since the Station Avenue access does not require stairs.

And I do hope that the flooding into the heated shelter with the fare machines can be mitigated sooner, rather than waiting for this entire project to start.

Too much fencing makes public areas unwelcoming!

Thank you for your consideration!

Response:

The proposed fencing along the edge of walkways adjacent to the tracks is only in areas that are non-boarding locations. The MBTA believes that this fencing is an important safety feature to discourage pedestrians crossing of the tracks at locations other than the designated grade crossings and also provides persons with visual and mobility challenges a means of locating the correct location to cross the tracks. The MBTA cannot support constructing grade crossings in areas where trains may be stopping. Routine use of 4-car train sets may be in the distant future, however multiple train sets may need to stop simultaneously at either platform during emergencies or special events. The MBTA is committed to providing a ramp from Hyde Street to the inbound track platform.

Comment from Joshua Herzig-Marx;

I'm very excited about the possibility of improvements! I have two comments as someone who lives less than 1/4 mile from the station and uses it daily to commute.

For the new ramp heading to Walnut, on the outbound side, it would be great to have some stairs that cut off the long path for people traveling to the inbound side (and back). In the mornings you often see people running from the bus to the train - without the stairs I suspect many will end up hopping the railing.

Similarly, it was hard to tell but there seems to be a lot of fencing around the boarding area. This might prevent people from crossing in the middle, making runs to/from buses harder.

Response:

We will investigate the possibility of adding stairs to the Walnut Street ramp to shorten the walking distance for persons without mobility impairment.

The fencing is intended to prevent patrons from crossing the tracks at locations other than designated crossings. The fencing also has a secondary use for those with visual impairment allowing them to “feel” the fence until they find the opening at the grade crossing.

Comment from Schuyler Larrabee:

Philosophical approach for accessibility

I am aware that the underlying philosophy for designing accessible facilities calls for making all access paths the normal path of travel. Ideally that can be done. However it is nonsensical to design accessible pathways that do not permit the majority of the population, who are not disabled, from walking in a direct line to where they are going, by eliminating the provision of steps.

Requirement for canopies over walkways

During the meeting I challenged the idea that canopies over accessible walkways are required by code. I later learned that they were originally a requirement of the MAAB, which is a part of the building code, but this requirement is not presently a part of 521CMR, the Massachusetts Building Code. There are many examples of accessible walkways in the Commonwealth which do not have canopies over them.

Please advise where this “requirement” originates.

Security impeded by the canopies

Because the canopies have a solid partition on one side of the walkway they will obscure the visibility of the platforms from the adjoining streets. Currently, both platforms are highly visible from the streets, and this provides a sense of security. Anyone walking or driving on the streets can see what is happening on the platforms, and could intervene or call the police in the event of a mugging or fight. Similarly, a person who fell, from ice or from a medical problem, could be seen. If the intent is to use Lexan for glazing the solid wall, that will not remain transparent for any appreciable time, either crazing or being covered with graffiti.

The canopies will not protect the walkways from the accumulation of snow, and will make snow removal more difficult because of the solid partition on the one side.

Length of walkways

The Walnut to outbound platform walkway scales out to be roughly 100 feet long; the Hyde to inbound platform scales out to be roughly 150 feet long. Consultants in the accessibility field consider ramps over 100 feet to be too long to be functionally useful for people in manual wheelchairs.

An elevator

Because the walkways are too long for most people in a manual chair, an elevator should be seriously considered at the Walnut end of the station. The Newton Highlands station doesn't have much of a presence at the street level; the headhouse of an elevator would provide visible evidence of where the station is, and much better accessibility. I recognize that an elevator is an expensive option (though it also permits some reduction in other features of this design), and is an operational and maintenance expense, but it is a far superior solution. It would, unfortunately, require removal of several trees.

Fences along the platform edge

I am quite familiar with the concept involved here, of preventing people from crossing the

tracks other than at the at-grade crossings, or accidentally falling into the path of the train. However, again, this is a real problem when it snows in the winter. When the snow is deep enough to require the T to plow the snow on the tracks, where does it go? When the snow has to be shoveled from the platform, will it not accumulate against the fence and make clearing it more difficult?

Railroads have long controlled where people cross the tracks by installing a moderately tall fence between the tracks from one crosswalk to the next.

The location of the train stops

Related to the platform fencing, the idea of making the outbound trains stop at the eastern end of the platform, forcing the substantial majority of passengers to walk roughly twice as far to get to Walnut Street is simply counterproductive. Locating the stops for both inbound and outbound adjacent to the station building, similar to the current condition, makes a good deal more sense. Even if we are designing for four-car trains, if the location of the train stops is approximately one half car length further inbound, then the crossings at the Walnut street end can be just inbound from the signal bungalow, and the inbound crossing can be located more sensibly at the bottom of the Station Avenue access path. However, I understand that the issue that arises with this location for the train stops is:

Clearance beneath the station canopy

While the existing clearance beneath the canopy is not generous, it is what exists. It is not clear from the drawings whether the intention is to maintain the existing platform elevation or if it will be raised 8". If maintained as it exists, it appears that the T's approach is not to make an existing situation worse.

However, it would be possible to maintain (or improve) the current clearance AND achieve the required 8" difference between the rails and the platform if the tracks were to be lowered eight or ten inches.

Lowering the tracks

Lowering the tracks is clearly a major undertaking, and the MBTA referenced wires and cables that are buried alongside the tracks. But if the tracks were to be lowered, say, 16-18 inches, the clearance beneath the station's lower canopy would be greatly improved, and the location of both the inbound and outbound train stops would be better located for access from Walnut Street and Station Avenue. Additionally, the outbound platform, which now extends much further toward Hyde Street than is necessary, could be removed and returned to open space, and the expensive excavation and retaining wall required to extend the inbound platform toward Walnut Street could be substantially reduced.

There is adequate run for the slight grades (1%) required at either end to lower the tracks in the stretch where the actual train stop would be at both ends of the station.

Cost reallocation

Increased cost would come from

- Lowering the tracks
- Lowering the platforms
- Building an elevator

Cost savings would come from

- Less complex construction of the Walnut Street ramp
- Shortening of the unnecessarily long outbound platform in favor of a simple pathway to the Hyde Street steps, separated and fenced from the track
- A 40' shorter inbound platform at the Walnut Street end, which also eliminates a

good deal of expensive excavation and retaining wall construction adjacent to buildings on Walnut Street.

- Potentially shortening by 25-30' the opposite end of the inbound platform as there is space for four cars without that longer platform

Other improvements

- Aligning the eastern crossing with the end of the Station Avenue access to eliminate the frustration of being diverted from a straight path
- Improved clearance beneath the station canopy
- Addition of steps to the Walnut Street ramp construction to provide a more direct route for physically able passenger
- Better protection of pedestrians between the platform and the Hyde Street stairs A sketch of this proposal is provided.

Response:

Canopies are specifically required for all access ramps under 521CMR Section 18.5.1 for newly constructed stations. While the Newton Highlands station is not technically a “new station” the MBTA routinely requires the addition of canopies over all new ramps and stairways as outlined in the 1990 MBTA Guide to Access manual.

At this time the canopies are not intended to have a solid wall of any kind, thereby allowing for maximum visibility into and out from the ramp.

The ramps are designed with “level landings” every 30-feet as required by 521CMR. This requirement provides a space for individuals to rest, if needed, as they travel along the ramp. An elevator was considered during the concept phase of the project and was determined to be cost prohibitive.

The fence has been proposed along the edge of the tracks and not between the two tracks for two reasons.

1. The fence along the edge provides persons with visual impairment a more definitive way to find the at-grade track crossing. The fence along the edge also provides protection from patrons accidentally slipping or falling into the adjacent track area.
2. The area between the tracks is already occupied by a track signal/power cable which would require relocation to install a fence in this location.

Lowering the tracks to maintain the current station boarding locations was investigated during the concept phase of the project and this option was eliminated by the MBTA after careful consideration of several design issues.

Comment from Nathaniel Lichtin on behalf of the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council:

The Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council is pleased to see that the Newton Highlands Green Line Accessibility Project is moving through the design process and hope to see the project completed as soon as possible. We are an official city body elected by residents of Newton Highlands during municipal elections to provide advice about the views of the area residents and advocate on behalf of the neighborhood.

Having reviewed the design and the community reaction at both the public meeting on April 3, 2018 that you held and our own meeting on May 3, 2018 we believe that the project could be improved by making the following modest changes.

- (1) Provide direct access from the base of the Walnut Street ramp to the inbound side. This involves adding a crossing at the western edge of the historic station building. On the diagram provided, this crossing would be approximately immediately behind the second car of the inbound 4 car train set that is depicted. Adding this grade crossing will reduce congestion at the crossing near the bottom of the Station Avenue ramp, reduce the likelihood that people will run in front of the inbound train in order to try and catch the train, and make the station more user friendly. Reducing the number of people running directly in front of the trains and reducing congestion at the Station Avenue crossing will increase the safety of the station. We understand the desire of Green Line Operations to have the capacity to at some point in the future run 4 car trains on the line. However, it is our understanding that there is not currently any plan to do so and nor is there a plan to make it feasible to do so in a defined time period. The addition of a crossing is a relatively minor change that if necessary could be easily removed if 10 years in the future the MBTA finally gets the capacity to run 4 car train sets. The need for a future minor change is more than offset by the increase in safety and convenience for the indefinite period of time until the MBTA gains the capacity and desire to run 4 car train sets.
- (2) Provide stairs to the platform from both the Station Avenue and Walnut Street ramps. The proposed design does not align the track crossings with the ends of the ramps because of the design specifications for ADA compliant ramps and the placement of platforms. This both inconveniences non-mobility impaired users of the MBTA by making them walk additional distance and will result in people using the station in ways that it was not designed for by creating shortcuts where the design does not anticipate. The Newton Center station provides a prime example of people creating an unanticipated shortcut where people jump over the side of the ramp to reach the outbound most crossing rather than travel the extra distance to reach the end of the ramp and double back. It will not be possible to prevent people from creating these types of shortcuts in the Newton Highlands station and we believe the MBTA should provide stairs from the ramps that more closely align with the grade crossings.
- (3) The proposed track edge fencing is not in use at other Green Line stops and its inclusion, especially if the proposed ramp and grade crossing designs are maintained, will result in significant congestion at the Station Avenue crossing where all of the people will be attempting to fit through a single opening in the fencing. The congestion could result in people getting pushed into the fencing or disrupt the flow of users through the station.

The modest improvements that we propose will provide benefits for the >1000 riders who use the station daily, while not impacting the primary goal of making the station ADA and MAAB compliant. I hope that you will listen to the desires expressed by many in the community that will use this station everyday to not degrade the transit experience for non-mobility impaired riders as you make the station friendly for those who are mobility impaired.

Response:

Since the April 30, 2018 meeting date the MBTA Board approved and publicly released a new plan to upgrade existing Greenline track infrastructure and purchase new larger Greenline cars that are 116-feet long. The MBTA would ultimately anticipate two car train sets and require platform lengths of approximately 240 feet. The conceptual implementation plan presented to the MBTA Board indicates new vehicles could begin arriving within 8-years of initiation of the

plan and full funding. The design team will investigate the need for 300-foot long platforms as was shown in the public presentation and may be able to reduce this length slightly with approval from MBTA Greenline operations.

The design team will investigate the feasibility of adding stairs to the Station Avenue and Walnut Street ramps.

The fencing provides an important safety feature to keep patrons from accidentally falling into the track area and is helpful for visually impaired patrons trying to find the at-grade track crossing location.

Comment from Lucia Dolan:

I hope this is the right place to send public comments about the Newton Highlands T Accessibility project.

I am very excited about the Newton Highlands T becoming fully accessible. I am a friend of Robert Solomon and have a son with a genetic disability, Freidreich's Ataxia, that requires him to use a scooter or wheelchair. Accessibility is very important to me and I am thrilled that some of the ramps to the platform will be covered too.

That said, I am concerned about the fencing and additional length of the walkways. I would be very happy if the T could run 4 cars, but it seems this possibility is a very distant one and who knows what might change in the years ahead.

Please do not degrade the experience for pedestrians unnecessarily and create resentment toward accessibility improvements. Please keep the pedestrian walkways similar in distance (perhaps steps between the ramps and a shorter platform?).

Response:

The addition of stairs to each ramp will be investigated to reduce the length of travel for able bodied individuals. The fencing proposed provides an important safety feature to keep patrons from accidentally falling into the track area and is helpful for visually impaired patrons trying to find the at-grade track crossing location. Shortly after our public meeting the MBTA Board released concept plans for Greenline track improvements and new longer fully accessible Greenline cars. If funded, new Greenline cars may be entering service within 8-years after program implementation.

Comments from Adam Peller:

I'd like to reiterate my comments from 2015. After seeing the latest designs from the T and hearing comments from the last meeting, I am deeply concerned that the design does not take into account all users. Accessibility done right would not degrade the station. While it is laudable (and of course required) to satisfy ADA, the design should take into account the usage patterns of all of your customers, their desire lines, their safety as they dash to trains, and yes, their convenience also. This is a major investment. Please do not make the same mistakes made in the ADA design of Newton Centre years ago, and please come back to the community and explain the latest discussion of longer cars instead of 4-car trains and how that might impact your decision to fence off and remove crossings that would greatly inconvenience your customers and make the station less operational before moving these plans forward and investing millions.

Response:

The MBTA is committed to working with all stakeholders including the City of Newton and its citizens to develop plans that provide safe and efficient access to the station. The MBTA is committed to continuing the discussion with the public at a third public meeting to be held at a date to be determined once 75% plans have been submitted and reviewed by the various MBTA departments.

Prepared by: Stephen Farr

SDF/sdf

cc: All Attendees

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