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Cambridgeport fears new buses

By Sarah Andrews/ Chronicle Staff

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Opposition to a state plan to bring public transportation to areas underserved by the T is mounting in Cambridgeport, where residents say current proposals will only clog neighborhood roads with more buses.

Because the subway lines all run in straight lines out from downtown Boston, the MBTA's Urban Ring proposes connecting the areas in between with more transit alternatives. Federal funding issues and a need to review the current plan mean it could be a while before many details about the project see light in Cambridge.

Recently, the state kick-started a new, two-year public process to gather feedback from municipalities for adjustments to the three-phase project, which is now planning its second phase.

Cambridgeport residents hope one adjustment will be the elimination of an express bus route slated to run up and down Western Avenue and River Street. It was planned in the first phase, but has yet to be implemented.

The route would connect commuters in Newton with Central and Kendall squares. It's one issue expected to come up at a public hearing on the Urban Ring scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Morse School, 40 Granite St.

"There are people living here with families," said Carolyn Shipley of Laurel Street. "These roads are not expressways."

John Carlisle, spokesman for the state's Executive Office of Transportation, said there are no immediate plans to put that bus, or two other cross-town bus routes proposed for Cambridge, on the road. He said it was uncertain whether elimination of them would be on the table.

Changes, however, may be possible.

"That's one of the great things about bus routes ... you have the kind of flexibility that can adapt with population trends and dynamics," he said.

While some Cambridgeport residents have disdain for extra buses on neighborhood roads and in Central Square, supporters of the Urban Ring say one extra bus could mean many fewer cars.

Cambridge officials support the Urban Ring for its intent to reduce the number of car commuters, but Susanne Rasmussen, the city's director of environmental and transportation planning, said there are some concerns about proposed routes.

One suggestion for the second phase is to guide what the MBTA calls "Bus Rapid Transit" - a vehicle like the Silver Line in Boston - over the BU Bridge and along a route near the Grand Junction railroad tracks in Cambridgeport.

"We would like to take another look at the river crossings," said Rasmussen.

An issue that is also likely to arise Tuesday is the state's characterization of these BRT vehicles as "rapid transit."

"It's a bus, it's a bus, it's a bus," said City Councilor Craig Kelley. "It's another missed opportunity to give Cambridge the kind of mass transit it needs."

Though the Grand Junction route would feature a designated bus lane for a portion of the southbound trip through Cambridgeport, the vehicle would travel on city streets across the BU Bridge and northbound on Albany Street.

Jeff Rosenblum, a Bishop Allen Drive resident and the founder of Livable Streets, was recently selected to be a member of the Urban Ring's Citizen Advisory Committee. He agreed with Kelley that current terminology was misleading.

"I would say the major issue is making sure that when people are talking about rapid transit, they keep the word rapid in it," he said. "People talk about 'Bus Rapid Transit,' but if you're going to put it on the street and across the BU Bridge, why bother?"

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Carlisle said, however, that the combination of both dedicated and street lanes gives BRTs flexibility. "The Silver Line is the most heavily ridden bus line in the MBTA system," he said. "So obviously something is attracting people to it."

Currently in Cambridge, the Urban Ring calls for the express bus route up Western Avenue and down River Street, the bus rapid transit route along the Grand Junction Corridor, and two new cross-town bus routes that would connect Kendall Square to Chelsea and Allston, respectively.

While Rasmussen admitted concerns about the Grand Junction route, she said the express bus route could be easily absorbed. Express buses have fewer stops and run less frequently - about every 12 minutes during peak travel times.






"I don't think there's a capacity problem for [that route]," she said. "[It's] only adding one extra vehicle every 12 minutes."

But neighbors have doubts.

"To anyone familiar with actual traffic on these streets, especially during peak hours, this seems more like a fantasy than professional transportation planning," Bette Denich of Chalk Street said at a recent City Council meeting.

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