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Gary Christenson, Mayor

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 13, 2022
TO: Malden City Council
FROM: Mayor Gary Christenson
RE: Centre Street Bus and Signalization project

At the prior City Council meeting, you had requested that City Engineer Yem Lip appear to provide an update on the Centre Street Bus and Signalization project. This memo is intended to provide a complete history on the project along with the status so that you have an opportunity to read and digest it prior to the meeting tonight. Mr. Lip will be available to answer any specific questions or provide any additional information not covered in this overview.

History

In February of 2021, Councillor O'Malley approached my administration about support for several grants the MBTA was looking to secure to execute a Transit Signal Prioritization & Bus Prioritization project. There was some sense of urgency to the project as Councillor O'Malley indicated that it would be completed by May 31, 2021, if we signed off in support. I indicated to Councillor O'Malley that such an impactful project absolutely required input from both the public and other city officials, particularly the Traffic Commission, and directed that the request be docketed and discussed at a public meeting of the Traffic Commission.

On March 2nd of 2021, Councillor O'Malley presented to the Traffic Commission the proposed project. Although the proposal also included Salem Street at that time, that component was eliminated early on. Therefore, this memo is focused on the aspect of the project contained within Centre Street. As proposed, the Centre Street project would entail several different components.

Transit Signal Prioritization

Through a Community Connections Grant to the MBTA, an investment of approximately \$350,000 was to be made to provide equipment upgrades that would allow for the prioritization at traffic signals of Buses and Public Safety Vehicles, with the additional ability for the Police and Fire Departments to control traffic signals.

Centre Street Bus Accommodations

Through a MassDOT Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program, an investment of approximately \$491,000 was to be made to restripe Centre Street from Franklin Street to the MBTA Station. This work included a dedicated bus lane and bike lane.

The overall project as proposed was to be completed by May 31, 2021.

Toole Design Input

A memo dated February 21, 2021, from Toole Design related to the proposed changes noted that the current COVID impacts made the collection of current traffic counts not helpful. Therefore, observations were made based upon prior studies within the area. Toole Design felt that the impact to these changes would be minimal. They noted the most impactful part of the project would be to the eastbound approach to Main Street, with an estimated extension of the current queueing of approximately five vehicles and noted that this may be alleviated by coordinating the signals along Centre Street.

Traffic Commission and City Council Input

The Traffic Commission requested that the proposal be presented with an opportunity for the public to be engaged. A subsequent special meeting was set up and held by the Traffic Commission on March 11, 2021, which included a Zoom link for public participation. At that meeting, the Traffic Commission voted in favor, but subject to a majority vote by the City Council in support of the project, and the requirement that the same be done with the opportunity for additional public feedback.

On March 30th the City Council docketed and discussed a resolve that would support the project. Councillor O'Malley presented the project to the City Council, providing similar information as had been provided to the Traffic Commission. The Council voted to hold a Public Hearing on April 6th to allow for more public input. Following the Public Hearing, the City Council ultimately voted to support the project on April 13th. At the same meeting, Councillor Crowe also proposed to create an evaluation committee tasked with creating criteria for evaluation after four months. The Council voted in support of this committee, and Councillor O'Malley was chosen to chair the committee.

Initial Delays

Prior to the proposed striping of the impacted streets, the city desired to complete some work. It made sense to complete this work prior to striping. Specifically, the city paved portions of roadways and upgraded handicap ramps contained within the project area. This work was completed by the July timeframe.

The initial proposed timeline didn't consider the fact that certain work would need to and should take place prior to the markings being made. In addition to the work the city desired to complete, the MBTA's contractor, K5, wasn't fully procured and ready to do the necessary work until approximately mid-September 2021. Looking back, the May implementation date wasn't a realistic one and set an expectation that couldn't be met.

Striping Work Completed - Problem Identified

In or around late November of 2021, the markings were made on Centre Street. Initial work focused on the lane markings and was followed up in the spring of 2022 with the bus lane markings. It was during this spring marking work that the signals were to be retimed and adjusted to work in conjunction with the newly designed roadway. Unfortunately, this work led to the discovery that the signal hardware was antiquated and couldn't support the timing upgrades required.

Solution Identification with MBTA

With public feedback coming in on the perceived impact of the project on traffic on Route 60, not completing the signal timing and coordination required to work in conjunction with the lane changes was not an option. The city and the MBTA identified that the necessary work to upgrade the hardware to support the ability to make the necessary timing improvement would cost approximately \$240,000. The MBTA has agreed to fund the hardware upgrades. However, the contractor who can perform the work, Pine Ridge, is under contract with the City of Malden. Therefore, the most expeditious way to accomplish the end goal is for the city to hire Pine Ridge to perform the work, and for the MBTA to reimburse the City for the same.

MOU Development

The additional work necessitated by the required hardware upgrades requires an MOU between the MBTA and the City. The MOU will ensure that there are no misunderstandings relative to the roles of each party. It's fair to say that in exchange for the additional funding by the MBTA, they want to make sure the project remains viable to make that a good investment.

In or around the August timeframe, we received a draft proposed MOU from the MBTA and began discussions around the terms. The proposed MOU requires that the City and MBTA execute an Operations and Maintenance agreement relative to the project area. The MBTA provided a draft of that MOU in November, and the parties are also in discussions on key terms. In particular, the City is working with the MBTA on the ongoing maintenance requirements and costs that will be borne by the City relative to the paint and lane markings. If we can finalize the terms within the next few weeks, the current estimate is that the resulting work will take place between April and July of 2023.

Postmortem

The current focus is on the negotiation and execution of the MOU necessary to move forward with the hardware upgrades and subsequent signal timing changes, and we will continue to do that while not shortchanging our responsibility to represent the City's best interests. It's also important to step back and ask ourselves what we could have done better as a city.

Projects of this nature, both due to complexity and public interest, require the early involvement of the appropriate city departments and officials. By the time this project became known in any detail to our Engineering Department and our Traffic Commission, Councillor O'Malley had already spent months with the MBTA in discussions on the project. As a result, our City Engineer didn't have the ability to participate in the way that he should have early on. Early participation from the right City officials would have allowed us to provide the MBTA with a more complete picture of the work we would need to support the project. Our Traffic

Commission was rushed in being asked to approve the project without the requisite public input, and it's likely the City Council subsequently felt the same in being asked to support the project. This has led to understandable frustration with the MBTA over the appearance that we aren't well coordinated internally on roles and responsibilities. Future similar projects should immediately involve the right parties to ensure the ability of the City to do its due diligence and provide the transparency the public expects on substantial changes within our city.