

Dorchester Reporter

Back in harness: Planning to upgrade Columbia Road

By Daniel Sheehan, Reporter Staff

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Columbia Road as it is, and as it could one day be. Rendering courtesy of LivableStreets.

A greener, safer, and more accessible Columbia Road may be on the horizon. The LivableStreets Alliance is asking residents along the route to help shape what that future might look like. Talk of a redesign has persisted for years, but with a new survey, the Cambridge-based non-profit is hoping to use community feedback to turn that speculation into a broader, more concrete vision.

In an initial design meeting three years ago, LivableStreets met with a number of design firms to begin the conversation about a comprehensive redesign of Columbia Road, the busy thoroughfare that connects several Dorchester neighborhoods, including Uphams Corner, Grove Hall, and Franklin Park. The process stalled shortly thereafter, largely due to a lack of funding. Now, thanks to a recent injection of \$10 million from the city, using funds allocated as part of the \$102 million sale of a

Winthrop Square garage to private developers, the organization is moving to get the ball rolling again.

In an interview with the Reporter, Tony Lechuga, the Emerald Network program manager at Livable Streets, said he hopes the organization's new online survey will jump start the planning process. "Our thinking with the survey," he said, "was that we want it to be a community-driven process. So, to start, what are the concerns and the values that people all along the corridor share? Where is there common ground?"

The survey, which came about through a collaboration with a group of graduate students studying design at Northeastern, represents the first step in a process that Lechuga hopes will add a final jewel - a parkway connecting Franklin Park to Moakley Park in South Boston - to legendary landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted's "Emerald Necklace" of parkland that now rings the city from the Boston Common and the Public Garden through the Fens and the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain down to Franklin Park. The very nature of Columbia Road with its run through several business districts presents challenges when it comes to gathering input, he says.

"It's a long corridor with a lot of different communities, so there's obviously some inherent difficulty in coming up with a consensus about what it should look like," Lechuga noted. As a result, many of the survey questions were designed to be flexible and nonspecific, allowing residents from various sections of the route to provide unfiltered input. "It is very free-form," he said. "It's open-ended to let people write instead of prompting them with leading questions."

The survey includes queries like, "What destinations do you go to on and near Columbia Road?" and "What prevents people from biking or walking more on Columbia Road?" Just by asking these questions, the survey acknowledges that the street's low walkability reality is compounded by a dearth of walk-to destinations along stretches of the corridor.

Lechuga said he thinks that more pedestrian and cyclist friendly locations— such as the old comfort station currently undergoing renovations in Uphams Corner— could encourage the natural development of such an environment.

"One goal is to use the wonderful model of the forthcoming Sip & Spoke bike kitchen - in other words, taking an undervalued commodity and turning it into a community

asset,” he said. “And try to figure out, you know, what are some other areas that we could use as placemaking sparks to get interest...if more places like that can emerge intermittently, it creates a sort of sense of linear clarity along the corridor.”

In the survey’s development stages this summer, Lechuga and LivableStreets staff spent a lot of time at community meetings with neighborhood associations up and down Columbia Road like Four Corners Main Streets, Grove Hall Main Streets, Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, the Hancock Street Civic Association, the Uphams West Side Association, and more.

Lechuga said he started off the conversation at many of the meetings with a simple question: “What do you like or dislike about Columbia Road as it is?” Often, the simplicity of the question revealed nuance beyond logistical concerns.

“A lot of times people’s biggest priorities didn’t have to do with the look of Columbia Road; they had to do with the feeling of it,” Lechuga said. “A lot of people talked about just feeling unsafe.”

Columbia Road is home to several schools, including the Russell School and the Lilla G. Frederick Pilot in Grove Hall, and yet the route at times feels troublingly like a highway. Re-tooling the road to better meet the needs of pedestrians and using road design to “create a sense of place” could transform the corridor and residents’ relationship to it, Lechuga said.

He added that everyone at these community meetings agreed about the need for a Columbia Road Working Group— a “unique task force” made up of representatives from the various neighborhood associations focused singularly on the redesign process. “The logical next step is the formation of this working group, which would be about trying to formulate a single narrative for the strategy, he said, but would also include voices from all these different places.”

Such a group will likely materialize in the coming months as survey results are compiled and a collective vision for the plan starts to take shape. Other next steps will include a formal memo put together by LivableStreets detailing the results of the

survey. After that, Lechuga expects a request for proposals will be submitted sometime in 2019.

With many Bostonian expressing loud concerns about how the onrush of development and construction around the city is making familiar places and the housing around them almost unrecognizable, and very often unaffordable for the residents, Lechuga says LivableStreets is wary of altering the character or the makeup of the communities on either side of Columbia Road.

“There are always a lot of fears about gentrification anytime you try to beautify a particular area,” he said. “The community wants to make sure there are some established policies to allow improvements, but also ensure that we aren’t taking steps to displace people along the corridor. That’s one of the biggest fears, and also one of the biggest challenges. With a project like this, there are lots of opportunities to meet the needs of people where they’re at.”