
Getting Main St. moving, any way

By John Laidler

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Melrose, Reading, and Wakefield are enlisting the help of local residents in plotting a strategy for enhancing transportation along their shared Main Street corridor.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council is conducting a \$25,000 study for the three communities on possible transportation improvements along the 9-mile route from the Reading commuter rail station to the Melrose-Malden town line.

A key focus is to promote greater use of pedestrian, bike, commuter rail, and bus transportation, and to expand connections among the downtowns, public transit stations, and other key locations.

As part of the study, three forums are planned - one in each community - to solicit public input. Organizers say they hoping for strong turnouts.

Alison Felix, a transportation planner for the planning council, said that before the agency formulates its recommendations, "We want to hear from the communities and the public about what their point of view is."

The forums, which Felix said are intended as interactive, hands-on sessions, will be held Sept. 19 at the Americal Civic Center in Wakefield; Sept. 21 at Melrose City Hall; and Oct. 4 at the Reading Senior Center, all from 7 to 9 p.m.

Each of the meetings is geared toward the host community.

"We hope that we can generate a lot of interest in our communities for people to come to our public workshops to let us know what they see as the barriers and opportunities for enhancing accessibility and connections along this corridor," said Denise Gaffey, director of Melrose's office of planning and community development.

The study area includes Main Street, the Haverhill commuter rail line, bus routes 136 and 137, and a quarter-mile on either side of those areas.

A major goal of the study is to better knit transportation assets with a goal of reducing reliance on vehicular traffic.

The study, which began in June, is being funded primarily through an annual allotment the planning council receives from the state's Direct Local Technical Assistance program.

Felix said a distinct aspect of the project is the collaboration among the three communities, which jointly applied to the planning council for its assistance.

"It's three communities working together on a vision of the Main Street corridor," she said.

"We are excited to be working with Melrose and Wakefield on this project," Reading town manager Peter I. Hechenbleikner said in a prepared statement.

"As a small region with much in common, we can accomplish more than each of us can separately. We think that the implementation of key elements of the study will improve the quality of life for the residents of all three communities, and we look forward to robust input from our residents and those from our two partner communities."

Patrick S. Glynn, chairman of the Wakefield Board of Selectmen, said the town "is always looking to partner with our neighboring communities to increase our economic development, improve our streetscapes, and in providing services."

Among the potential recommendations for its report, expected to be completed by the end of the year, are measures to make the corridor more accessible and safer for bicycling, including providing bicycle lanes and bicycle amenities such as secure parking facilities, according to Sarah Kurpiel, transportation engineer and planner for the MAPC.

The report also may include suggestions for making the corridor more walkable, including sidewalk improvements and increasing pedestrian cross times at intersections.

"A big part of what we are looking at is the connections between Main Street and other destinations, some of which are commuter rail stations, some of which are schools, some of which are residential areas," Kurpiel said.

The goal, she said, is to minimize the driving residents need to do to travel among those locations.

Planners note that the study follows other efforts the three communities have taken to improve their downtowns, including their Main streets.

Reading completed a \$6.1 million streetscape improvement program in 2009 and that same year it adopted a smart growth zoning district that includes Main Street.

Jean Delios, Reading's community services director/town planner, said that one of the goals of the town's streetscape program was to make the downtown more pedestrian-friendly.

With the help of the study, she said, the town looks forward to identifying ways to build on that project and work with its neighboring communities to expand options for walking, bicycling, and using public transit.

"We are trying to find ways to reduce our carbon footprint and improve our health," she said.

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