

People for Riverbend Park Trust
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TO: Bethany Card, Secretary, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs

CC: Michael Paiwonsky, Stantec Consulting Services, Inc.
Rebecca Tepper, Chief of the Energy and Environment Bureau
Douglas Rice, Commissioner, Department of Conservation and Recreation
Dan Driscoll, Director of the Office of Recreational Facilities Planning

January 6, 2023

RE: Memorial Drive Phase III – Draft Environmental Impact Report EEA NO. 16495

Dear Secretary Card,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Memorial Drive Phase III Improvements.

Founded in 1975, the People for Riverbend Park Trust (the “Trust”) was created to work with the city and the former Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), now the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), to promote traffic-free recreation along the Charles River between the Eliot Bridge and Western Avenue memorialized as Riverbend Park in 1985. For almost five decades, Riverbend Park Trust has been the non-profit steward and landscaping partner of the eponymous parkland, which includes the proposed project area between Gerry’s Landing Road and the Anderson Bridge in Cambridge. Last year, the state awarded the Trust an ARPA grant to install a historic marker honoring the vision of Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Eliot whose vision resulted in the creation and preservation of parkland along the Charles River and the planting of the iconic allée of trees on Memorial Drive.

Thus, we have a longstanding and ongoing interest in preserving the historic and cultural qualities that makes this parkland uniquely appealing to recreational visitors in all seasons and especially on days when Memorial Drive is closed to vehicles. Recognizing that some improvements are needed to protect the iconic sycamore allée and the vulnerable shoreline habitat to better accommodate an ever-growing demand for quiet open space and non-vehicular movement in the face of a changing climate, our strongest desire is that any improvements prioritize making the park more inviting and safer for current and future generations of recreational users and visitors.

We support the comments submitted by the Memorial Drive Alliance (MDA) coalition of environmental advocates to which we belong. In particular, we strongly support redesigning Memorial Drive for a reduced speed limit of 25 mph and fully separating pathways intended for non-vehicular users moving at different speeds to will increase the safety and comfort of pedestrians and cyclists. An adaptive re-use of the existing roadway, as described in detail by the MDA, would also serve to make possible the restoration and protection of the sycamore allée and would preserve the historic character and beauty of the riverfront in this area. Indeed, the sycamores and the pastoral shoreline are what define this part of the riverfront and a “first do no harm” approach will be critical to preserving the park’s essential qualities.

While we welcome the addition of two new pedestrian crossings in the project area, we recommend that traffic calming design features be used to reinforce a 25 mph speed limit through this corridor; any traffic control measures installed at the crosswalks must be appropriate to the park’s pastoral character and must not make this historic area feel like a highway.

We are skeptical that viewing platforms are worth the cost to construct and maintain, and we are concerned the regrading to support them would be detrimental to the shoreline habitat and character.

Finally, we recognize that an ADA-accessible entrance to the Sekler Playlot, which the Trust landscapes and plants annually, is needed and have been in contact with DCR staff about its design and location.

As a valued DCR partner for over 40 years, the Trust remains eager to discuss our priorities and concerns as the design process continues.

People for Riverbend Park Trust,

By its Trustees,

Franziska Amacher, Anne Duggan, Jan Devereux, Terrence Doyle, Patricia Sekler