

Dear Town Councilors--

I am writing to express my concern over a number of transportation and development issues that face our town.

As you may know, I have been an advocate for better mass transit in Watertown since I moved here five years ago. I opposed the removal of bus stops as proposed in the T's Key Bus Initiatives on the grounds that there was little improvement in service to be gained on this particular route and much inconvenience to customers, particularly older folks, the mobility impaired and customers who use the T for shopping.

The work on Key Bus Initiatives has been completed, a decent interval has passed, and I believe that I have been proven correct: Although a number of stops were removed, service on the 71 bus line has not improved noticeably.

Removing bus stops has done nothing to solve the biggest problem plaguing the line, which is overcrowding. Overcrowding is a delay problem that far overshadows the number and spacing of stops. This works in two ways: First, an overcrowded bus takes far longer to board and un-board. Secondly an overcrowded bus generally becomes delayed and as it becomes increasingly late, riders accumulate at stops and the bus has to stop more often and pick up more riders than if it were running on schedule.

Presently, overcrowding during the morning rush often results in inbound buses being unable to take on passengers after Bigelow Avenue. 20-25 minute trips from Bigelow to Harvard Station are not uncommon. Outbound buses are regularly overcrowded by the T's own standard (140% of seated capacity) until 10:30 or 11pm on weeknights.

The bus stop solution was attractive to the T because it was quick and easy and required little change or effort on their part. The customers bear the burden of change and inconvenience. Often the T's solutions to problems are based on this type of rationale. But there are solutions for the 71 bus line that will yield far greater improvements and enhanced customer satisfaction. Some of these are:

- Increase the number and frequency of buses on the route
- Provide real time management of the route (*e.g.* when buses bunch, make some express to restore spacing)
- Increase Watertown availability of Charlie Card sales (slow cash fare collection on board is a huge delay factor)
- Install a fare card machine at Watertown Square (and Watertown yard)
- Work with cities of Cambridge and Watertown on expediting buses through traffic signals
- Specifically work with Cambridge Traffic and DCR to improve bus movement through signals at Coolidge Road and Fresh Pond Parkway
- Consider altering fare collection in outbound direction, perhaps collecting fares on the Harvard Platform

If the T pursued these solutions, the improvement in service would be dramatic. The people of Watertown deserve better bus service than they are currently provided.

To examine the larger view: Watertown at present does not have enough mass transit capacity, and the state of service--which was quite good 10-15 years ago--is now approaching dismal. At the same time, traffic at some of our major intersections is nearly gridlocked at peak hours. If we are to undergo significant new development, these problems will get far worse. If we do not act proactively on these transportation issues, the quality of life in our community will be degraded substantially by new development.

Recently at a neighborhood meeting I proposed a transit solution for the Arsenal area that I argue is feasible: light rail on the former Watertown spur. Many expressed negative reactions, but I ask those folks and others to please show me some other reasonable alternatives. I have heard talk of the Red Line extension from Central to Watertown Square. We should examine a good number of transportation expansion propositions for Watertown and debate their relative benefits and feasibility. Boat service on the Charles River is another interesting idea. The important thing is to get moving on *something* soon and to make the MBTA and our state government aware of our needs.

As far as development is concerned, I believe that we must be proactive, rather than reactive. That is, the dog should wag the tail and not vice-versa. Development in Watertown is inevitable because we have more developable real estate than most surrounding communities. Though we need to expand our tax base, we should not worry about saying "no" to bad development, because there will be no shortage of ensuing proposals. We must create an impression that we will work productively with developers who present quality projects that will be an enhancement to our town, are green and are pedestrian, bicycle and transit oriented. We must be equally clear that we will not allow any more schlock. Because we are sitting on so much developable real estate, I believe we are in a good position to dictate the terms of future development.

In consideration of the above, I propose the following:

1. That the Town Council appoint a Task Force on the Future of Mass Transit in Watertown, numbering 24 members, to be composed equally of Citizens, Business Owners and Town Officials. This Task Force shall examine transit issues, present and future, research solutions, and make recommendations to the Town Council for discussion with the MBTA.
2. That the Town of Watertown officially adopt a development process that formally incorporates greater public participation and mandates meetings with relevant neighborhood groups and a minimum of two presentations of larger projects (above a certain square footage) to the public for input and comment before any permits and/or variances are issued.

Thank you for reading this lengthy tome. I hate to place such a burden your time, but I am convinced of the urgency of the situation. It is essential that we act effectively and expeditiously on these problems if we desire to leave a better Watertown to those who will follow us.