

August 11, 2022

Re: I-93 widening and Merrimack River access from downtown

Dear City Councilors, TPAC Committee members, Mr. Aspell,

Having lived in Concord the past 31 years and in Boscawen 15 years before that, and in Concord one year before that, I feel I have a good understanding of the community. I served 9 years on the Concord Board of Education and have been involved with numerous not-for-profit organizations in the community as well as the Concord Chamber of Commerce. I commuted to Manchester for 25 years for my profession and am certainly familiar with the stretch of I-93 and all the exits involved in NHDOT's widening etc. proposal. I worked in downtown Concord the last ten years of my professional working life.

I attended the TPAC meeting on August 9 to hear the current iteration of I-93 plans. I write to share some thoughts because I will be unable to attend the August 25 meeting when public comment will be taken.

Please make this letter part of the public record on this matter.

1. Why do we want more lanes for people to speed through Concord? Traffic jams are the City's friend—people will stop and come to downtown to get relief from sitting in their cars. That is all good for our downtown economy. I have no problem with redoing the exits and that, Gene McCarthy said, would in itself improve the flow of traffic. But we don't need to widen the lanes for more cars to speed through our city in order to reach a pinch point somewhere north of us. More lanes mean more traffic—the South End already has traffic noise—do we need to make it worse for people? More lanes just mean more cars and more traffic and in no time the traffic jam will be back. Then what? Why are we doing this? These questions have been asked over and over. Am I beating a dead horse? You can see examples of road widening effects all over the country. For example, In Los Angeles the 405 was widened due to congestion and the amount of traffic just increased. If you build it, they will come. And they will whizz right by Concord.
2. I hope that with all the planning the city has done over the years, you have carefully considered how the I-93 project connects to the findings of these planning efforts. And that you have refreshed yourselves on the goals of the city as articulated in the plans and have thought about why those goals were articulated in the first place and how the proposed changes to I-93 affect those goals. This is not a minor matter. I hope that all those plans and studies haven't been relegated to a drawer marked "plan done" and then forgotten about. Here's a list of plans I am aware of:

20/20 Vision for Concord, NH (2001)

Concord Opportunity Corridor Master Plan (2005)
Master Plan 2030 (2008)
Bicycle Master Plan (2010)
Merrimack River Greenway Trail Feasibility Study (2010)
Concord's New Front Door (2013)
Comprehensive Transportation Policy (2015)
Pedestrian Master Plan (2017)

Do the NHDOT plans meet the goals of the city as articulated in these plans?

3. In particular I want to point out the Master Plan for 2030 (2008) which provides that an important feature of the transportation-land use interface is a connection over I-93 from the "Opportunity Corridor" to the Merrimack River between exits 13 and 14. My hope is that you will find the political will to follow the terms of the Master Plan. I believe a deck park will accomplish this goal.
4. The Opportunity Corridor Master Plan (2005) provides that the Opportunity Corridor is the City's highest priority economic development effort with its focus on redevelopment and an intensive mix of land uses (e.g. offices, retail, services, institutional, high density residential, lodging). I know you are working on implementing these economic development and land use initiatives. I believe a deck park will enhance at the very least the residential aspect of such development. And it would attract more people to downtown Concord in general.
5. I believe that Concord citizens all want Concord to be competitive and not just some backwater town that happens to be the state capital because of historical circumstance. The I-93 project is not just a transportation project. This project should improve the Concord experience for people, businesses and land-use. It is a project that is very important to our city's image. We want to improve that image many people get as they drive by us on the highway. We want to be seen as innovative rather than stagnant. Furthermore, the project will affect the quality of life in Concord as well as our environment.
6. One good effect of the project would be an effort that compliments the I-93 project: to comply with the Master Plan's recommendation of river access between exits 13 and 14. The question would be how to do that in a meaningful way. I submit that connecting the MRGT to the west side of the river and the northern rail trail is insufficient, but a great idea as far as it goes.
7. The I-93 project can create new opportunities for the city. Like a deck park.
8. How about another connection between the two now-separated sides of the city via a car-free park with playground, benches, pathways, meadows, plants and shade trees? How about a significant new park in Concord that happens to lie on a deck that stretches

over the river to connect both sides and to bring people physically together? This would be akin to an old New England town common or public garden. Such a park would enhance the Opportunity Corridor development. It would draw people in and it would give residents a chance to get outside into a park environment. People do not have to live in a concrete jungle. All the years I worked in downtown Concord it was hard to find a nice lunch time walk from downtown. A park like this also would be good for less mobile people who can't get to the many boat access points for the river or who can't ride bikes any longer or who can't go on long walks to get to the river.

9. A deck park will give the City a place to bridge the space between east and west sides of the river. A way to join rather than continue to be divided. Activities might include open air films, walking, jogging, playing, sitting within view of the river to see the capital dome and catch river breezes and cooler air on hot sultry days, connecting to MRGT another way, and restoration of ties between neighborhoods divided by the highway and the river—using the river as a way to bridge the divide. That seems so poetic. And just.
10. Let's not miss this opportunity to explore the possibility of doing something terrific for the city, its residents and visitors and its economy. Let's not let money get in the way of vision. Let's have someone who knows about deck parks conceptualize a variety of alternatives. Then let's get some input on possible costs. Then let's get an experience deck park engineer to draw up a plan for whatever design is chosen, tailor it to possible federal funding source requirements and then let's see what it costs. THEN let's apply for Tiger Grants or whatever other federal funds are available to the city for this project. I believe the money can be found if the city has the will to push hard enough for it. And if nothing comes through for us, at least we tried to articulate a vision and to make it reality. No one could fault you for trying. But please do not fail to try because you are afraid of the costs.
11. As the Mayor said August 9, and many others have said it as well, including the City Manager a few years ago, "This is a once-in-a lifetime opportunity." Let's seize the time!
12. Deck parks of various scales have been built in a variety of cities in the country. We have the Hi-line in NYC. There is a deck park in southern Dallas (not that we need to emulate the size of anything in Texas). Atlanta is considering several proposals for parks to be built above congested areas downtown. Philadelphia has a park that goes over the Schuylkill River. Seattle, Phoenix, Chicago and Boston have deck parks.
13. Here's a link to an interesting article. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2018/04/more-cities-are-banishing-highways-underground-and-building-parks-on-top>

“There's been a sort of a sea change in the way people think about roads and real estate in general,” said Ed McMahon, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that focuses on land use. “If you

design a city around cars, you're going to get more cars. If you design a city around people, you're going to get more people and places and better real estate value.”

In conclusion to this long letter, I ask TPAC and the City Council to please explore seriously, in an incremental fashion the possibilities of a deck park across the Merrimack between exits 13 and 14 that is accessible from downtown. Concord has the opportunity to do something visionary and great for the future. Let's do it!

Thank you all for serving and for all you do.

Sincerely,

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