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The Congestion Evil: Perceptions of Traffic Congestion in Boston in the 1890s  
and 1920s

by

Asha Elizabeth Weinstein

A.B. (Harvard University) 1993  
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in

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Committee in charge:

Professor Elizabeth Deakin, Chair  
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Professor Christine Rosen

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The Congestion Evil: Perceptions of Traffic Congestion in Boston in the 1890s and 1920s

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by

Asha Elizabeth Weinstein

Abstract

The Congestion Evil: Perceptions of Traffic Congestion in Boston in the 1890s and 1920s

by

Asha Elizabeth Weinstein

Doctor of Philosophy in City and Regional Planning

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Elizabeth Deakin, Chair

This dissertation examines how people understood the phenomenon of traffic congestion in Boston in the 1890s and 1920s, tracking the evolution of their ideas between the two periods. Then, as today, public discussions of policies to relieve congestion were based upon ideas about such issues as what causes congestion and why it matters. To understand how congestion was perceived in these eras, I used a case study approach, looking at discussions of it during two sets of planning debates. The first case is a debate from 1891 to 1894 that led to the building of a subway in downtown Boston. The second case is a debate in the mid-1920s over plans for the so-called “loop highway,” a boulevard running through the downtown.

I posed three research questions to limit and define the meaning of the term “perceptions” for this analysis: why did Bostonians think traffic congestion was a problem, what did they think caused congestion, and what policies did they think might

reduce it? To answer these questions, I analyzed the words of the people involved in the debates, using materials such as newspapers, government publications, and magazines.

Three themes stand out among the conclusions I drew about perceptions of congestion during the two periods. First, the factors people perceived as causing congestion were closely linked to the policies they favored. Second, most people didn't actually talk much about how they perceived congestion, even though they believed it was a problem. This relative silence reflects the fact that ideas about congestion were not particularly controversial. Third, many perceptions that Bostonians held about congestion were not only accepted as conventional wisdom within each time period, but they changed very little across the two periods—people understood congestion in the 1890s in many of the same ways that they did in the 1920s, even though traffic conditions had changed radically in the intervening years. For example, the favored policies were major capital projects; while regulatory approaches were proposed, opposition from interest groups or the public blocked the implementation of all but the most limited new rules.

This dissertation is dedicated to

Alan and Margo Weinstein

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**PART I**

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**INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH APPROACH**

# CONGESTION HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE

## 1.1 Introduction

Traffic congestion is one of the most prominently discussed urban issues today. In thriving cities and regions, newspapers write frequently about traffic congestion, many even dedicating ongoing columns to the topic. In some regions, residents consistently name congestion as their top policy concern. For example, in 1999 respondents to an annual poll about life in the San Francisco Bay Area identified transportation as their leading concern.<sup>1</sup> Around the country, at dinner parties and around office water coolers, people share stories about the day's congestion. This daily, casual concern with traffic congestion is poignantly reflected in a brief essay by fiction author Jonathan Franzen about the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Franzen spoke of his "deep grief for the loss of daily life in prosperous, forgetful times," and among the examples he used to illustrate the preoccupations of that pre-catastrophe daily life were not only "your date for drinks downtown on Wednesday" and "the six-three homers of Barry Bonds," but also "traffic jammed by delivery trucks."<sup>2</sup>

This concern with traffic congestion among the public is reflected in the work of city planners and transportation engineers, for whom traffic congestion it is one of the main

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<sup>1</sup> Bay Area Council, *Transportation: The issues* [web page], July 27, 2001 [cited June 3, 2002], available at [http://www.bayareacouncil.org/ppi/tpt/tpt\\_mid.html](http://www.bayareacouncil.org/ppi/tpt/tpt_mid.html).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Franzen, "The one recurring nightmare," *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2002, p. 29.

subjects of planning and research. And in addition to talk and planning, the public sector spends a substantial portion of its large transportation budget on congestion-relief measures. In many metropolitan areas there are major, ongoing projects to expand existing streets and highways or build new ones. One of the best-funded areas of transportation research is in new technologies designated “Intelligent Transportation Systems,” many of which are projects designed to use technology to move vehicles more quickly on existing roads. Planners also promote low-tech programs to squeeze more and faster-moving cars onto the roadways, such as facilitating carpools, a group of approaches collectively termed “Transportation Demand Management.”

## **1.2 Congestion throughout history**

One significant (if little-noticed) feature of today’s debates about traffic congestion is that they are firmly lodged in the context of a modern, automobile-oriented transportation system. Most people, including many professionals and elected officials specializing in the field of transportation, tend to think of congestion as a “new” problem of the twentieth century. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. Traffic congestion has been a concern as long as large groups of people have clustered into cities. Within the western world, public officials were trying to control traffic congestion as early as in ancient Rome, when Julius Caesar limited carriage travel in the city to deal

with congestion.<sup>3</sup> And this example is only one in a long line over the centuries between now and then.

London, for centuries one of the largest cities in the world, provides many examples of complaints about pre-automobile traffic congestion. For example, in 1660 traffic congestion proved enough of a concern to Londoners that the government passed regulations to control it. King Charles II issued a proclamation that began with a statement about the trouble caused by the coaches:

Whereas the excessive number of hackney coaches, and coach horses, in and about the Cities of London and Westminster, and the suburbs thereof, are found to be a common nuisance to the publique dammage of our people, by reason of their rude and disorderly standing, and passing to and fro, in and about Our said Cities and Suburbs, the streets and highways being thereby pestered and made unpassable, the pavements broken up, and the common passages obstructed and become dangerous, Our peace violated, and sundry other mischiefs and evils occasioned . . .

The king therefore commanded that coaches were not to stand in the streets when waiting for passengers, but must wait in stables or yards.<sup>4</sup> Two centuries later, traffic congestion was no less a problem in Victorian London. By the 1830s, Londoners were already counting traffic volumes and vehicle types in an effort to learn why traffic blockages occurred, and the 1830s and 1840s saw a number of Parliamentary committees concerned with congestion.<sup>5</sup> In 1863 London opened its Metropolitan line subway—the first subway in the world—which was planned as a strategy to relieve traffic congestion. A few years later, the famous French book illustrator Gustav Doré made a series of drawings illustrating the life of London's poor, one of which portrayed a street in chaotic

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome Carcopino, *Daily life in ancient Rome: The people and the city at the height of the empire*, translated by E.O. Lorimer, edited by H. T. Rowell, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1940, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> King of England Charles II, *By the King: A proclamation to restrain the abuses of hackney coaches in the cities of London and Westminster and the suburbs thereof*, London, John Bill and Christopher Barker, 1660.

<sup>5</sup> James Winter, *London's teeming streets 1830 - 1914*, London, Routledge, 1993.

confusion (see Figure 1.1). Though the picture exaggerates actual street conditions, it expresses the artist's view of congestion as an overwhelming, chaotic condition.

The fact that congestion seems to be almost eternal, an inherent aspect of large, vibrant cities, makes historical study of the phenomenon a useful foil against which to look at present day traffic congestion. A clearer understanding of congestion as an inherent urban phenomenon, independent of the transportation technologies in use, can encourage today's policy makers and researchers to think more realistically about policy goals. In addition, providing policy makers with a better understanding of the roots of current transportation policies helps to inform their current policies by highlighting concepts and techniques that may be hold-overs from earlier times.

**Figure 1.1: Gustav Doré's view of London congestion, 1872.**



Source: Transport for London, "From Omnibus to Ecobus: A Social history of London's public transport, 1829-2000," (visited December 12, 2001), available at <http://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/omnibus/pg/1851a.htm>.



### 1.3 Congestion in Boston – the 1890s and 1920s

My research into the history of congestion takes a case-study approach, presenting an in-depth look at traffic congestion in Boston in two points in history—the 1890s and 1920s. The two cases each cover a debate of several years over how to reduce downtown congestion in Boston. In the 1890s Bostonians discussed whether or not to build a subway, and in the 1920s they debated the value of building a major new street.

The subway debate began in earnest in 1891, when the state legislature established a commission to study transportation problems in the region. Proposed strategies ranged from widening streets to prohibiting horse-drawn carts from standing in the road, but the one concrete action that emerged from several years of debate over numerous policy proposals was a decision to build a short subway through the downtown in order to remove trolley cars from one of the most crowded downtown streets, Tremont. Under the subway plan, street-level trolley cars would descend into the subway to cross the most congested portion of the central business district. In 1897, just three years after approving the project, Boston opened the United States' first subway,<sup>6</sup> with five miles of tracks serving a route just under two miles long.

The second case study looks at the proposal for a “loop highway,” a six-lane road circling just around the central business district. The thoroughfare was first proposed in late 1923. It was designed to move motor vehicle traffic efficiently through the streets of

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<sup>6</sup> There were a few underground tunnels carrying trains in the United States before the Boston subway, such as a tunnel in Brooklyn built in the 1840s by the Long Island Rail Road. These tunnels, however, did not carry street railway or urban rapid transit lines, and thus are not considered “subways.”

the downtown, and also to connect the northern and southern railroad stations in Boston. The plan was rejected by the state legislature in 1926, although in 1930 it reappeared in a new form: a proposal for Boston's now infamous "Central Artery." The Central Artery is an elevated highway built in the 1950s that is currently being moved underground at great expense.

Both the subway and loop highway debates were motivated by a desire to ease traffic congestion, which the Bostonians who participated in the public policy debates perceived to be a threat to their personal well-being, as well as to that of the community at large. Records from the time show an overwhelming consensus that traffic congestion was a problem. The perception that congestion was a problem was even wide-spread enough that people parodied the matter. In 1893, the *Boston Post* published a letter from an exasperated streetcar rider who suggested that the mile or so route downtown would be much more bearable for riders if it included dining and sleeping cars.<sup>7</sup> Further, the forceful language often used to describe congestion reveals that Bostonians perceived it to be a severe problem. Speakers didn't mention the subject casually, but chose vigorous words. In 1893 the city's surveying department spoke of the "stupendous" congestion problem,<sup>8</sup> while the writer of an anonymous letter to a newspaper spoke of the "Gordian knot" of traffic congestion.<sup>9</sup> As for the 1920s, the Boston City Planning Board in 1922 said that congestion was "strangling" the city,<sup>10</sup> while a newspaper editorial from 1925

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<sup>7</sup> *Boston Post*, "Letter to the editor: Vestibule electrics wanted," February 22, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Boston Department of Survey, *1892 annual report*, 1893.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Why not try it now," March 28, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eighth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1922*, 1922, p. 59.

described street conditions as “approximating the impossible.”<sup>11</sup> The Chamber of Commerce routinely used alarmist language in its magazine *Current Affairs*, speaking of traffic in such terms as “unbearable”<sup>12</sup> and printing a cartoon that portrayed the city as a child made “sick” by congestion (see Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2: A cartoon from the Boston Chamber of Commerce.**



Source: *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” December 14, 1925, p. 9.

## 1.4 “Perceptions” of congestion: Congestion as a social construction

While Part II of this dissertation presents a general description of what traffic conditions were like in 1890s and 1920s in Boston and narrates the series of events that took place during the two debates, my real aim was to look at what the debates about traffic revealed about how Bostonians *perceived* congestion. Historians have documented many times the existence of traffic congestion in American cities in the

<sup>11</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Editorial: The street program,” February 14, 1925, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Current Affairs*, “What shall we do with a million autos in 1930,” June 22, 1925, p. 11.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and analyzed the policies used to reduce it,<sup>13</sup> but what has not been well studied are people's *attitudes* towards congestion. Thus, I have focused specifically on this aspect of traffic congestion: perceptions.

Most people today think of congestion as a “new” problem, while another common belief held is that traffic congestion is a problem that needs to be fixed. The attitude is prevalent among the public, transportation professionals, and elected politicians. However, despite broad acceptance that the United States has a “congestion problem,” it is possible to step back and consider congestion as a socially determined concept rather than an objective fact. While the numbers of vehicles traveling in a particular corridor, their speeds, and the difference between those speeds and the design speed of the road and vehicles are objective facts that can be observed, how one *thinks* about these conditions is purely subjective. For example, the belief that vehicles traveling at thirty miles per hour on a highway is a “problem” needing “fixing” is a matter of opinion—even if it may be an opinion today shared by most people in the United States. After all, one hundred years ago, people traveling at thirty miles per hour would have considered this unbelievably convenient and speedy transportation.

Even within a single time period, people experiencing the exact same traffic conditions can perceive the situation very differently. For example, in the 1850s many New Yorkers complained about traffic congestion, especially on Broadway. Nevertheless, the shop owners and omnibus companies on Broadway who opposed a

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Paul Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit: The formation of public policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983; Mark S. Foster, *From streetcar to superhighway: American city planners and urban transportation, 1900-1940*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1981; Clay McShane, *Down the asphalt path: The automobile and the American city*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

proposed railroad line down the avenue issued the following statement, which took a rather different perspective:

The more noise, the more confusion, the greater the crowd [on Broadway], the better the lookers-on and the crowders seem to like it, and the world, from the match-boy to the gentleman of leisure, resort there to see the confusion, the uproar and the sights, while all enjoy it alike. This din, this driving, this omnibus thunder, this squeezing, this jamming, crowding and at times smashing, is the exhilarating music which charms the multitude and draws its thousands within the whirl. *This is Broadway—this makes Broadway.* Take from it these elements, the charm is gone, and it is no longer Broadway.<sup>14</sup> (Italics in original.)

This statement clearly depicts traffic congestion as a beneficial condition, one providing people with excitement and giving Broadway a unique and valuable identity.

To give another example closer to home, the words “traffic congestion” describe very different conditions when used today by citizens in a town of 20,000 people to describe the extra cycle of a traffic light they must wait through at rush hour, and when used by New Yorkers driving at the speed of a block every ten minutes. New Yorkers may laugh at residents of the small town for describing their situation as traffic congestion—but who is to say which group is right? What *is* traffic congestion? Researchers from the Texas Transportation Institute have developed a system of estimating how much congestion there is in major American cities; in a 1997 paper they claimed that congestion is “an increase in travel time or delay beyond that acceptable to travelers.”<sup>15</sup> Their focus on travelers’ *own* perceptions of delay underscores that congestion is a matter of opinion, not fact.

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<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, September 8, 1852. Quoted in: Robert C. Brooks, *History of the street and rapid transit railways of New York City*, PhD thesis, Cornell, 1903, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert S. Levinson, Timothy J. Lomax, and Shawn Turner, "Traffic congestion: Past, present, future," in *Traffic congestion and traffic safety in the 21st century: Challenges, innovations, and opportunities*, New York, American Society of Civil Engineers, 1997, p. 3.

In 1967 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann published an influential book called *The Social Construction of Reality*,<sup>16</sup> which argued that societies develop certain conceptions of the world that their members understand to be “true,” even though there is no objective basis for their perceptions. Simple statements about traffic congestion often reveal multiple unstated perceptions, as well as those directly explained by the speaker. The following quotation provides a simple example. It comes from an article entitled “Clogged traffic worsened in 2000” in the *San Jose Mercury News*, in which the author says:

If you thought traffic [in 2000] was a nightmare on Bay Area freeways, you were right. . . . Traffic delays rose 38 percent over 1999. . . .Traffic experts and motorists . . . agree that the commute has improved [in 2001] since the dot-com implosion. But officials warn that this is merely a lull and horrific traffic will almost certainly return as soon as the economy revs up.<sup>17</sup>

Behind this quote lie several different perceptions about traffic congestion: that it is a problem, that it is a growing problem, that it is a condition that can be quantitatively measured, and that it is a condition linked to economic activity.

My research starts from the premise that the concept of traffic congestion is “socially constructed,” as Berger and Luckmann use the term, and I set out to learn how Bostonians constructed their perceptions about congestion. Looking at every type of perception Bostonians had about a phenomenon as complex and widely discussed as congestion would have been impossible, however. To narrow the investigation, I posed three questions that limit and define the meaning of the term “perceptions” as used for this research. These questions were:

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<sup>16</sup> Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, New York, Doubleday, 1967.

- Did Bostonians think traffic congestion was a problem? If so, why?
- What did they think caused traffic congestion?
- What approaches did they think might be used to reduce traffic congestion?

These three aspects of perceptions about traffic congestion are important because they reveal specific aspects of people's understanding of congestion that are especially relevant to public planning and policy deliberations. The findings from the examination of the Boston cases in turn provide insights into the way perceptions are shaped by the times and circumstances that offer lessons for today's planners.

## 1.5 Dissertation outline

The rest of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 describes the methods I used to answer my three research questions for the two case studies. I pieced together the series of events that took place (meetings, official reports, public referenda, etc.) by finding newspaper articles or other published materials on the subject, and analyzing the language used in those documents. Part II (Chapters 3 through 5) presents background information that provides a context for understanding the analysis of perceptions presented in Part III. Chapter 3 presents quantitative information about the traffic patterns in Boston for the two time periods, and describes both geographic factors that affected traffic in the downtown, as well as the systems of traffic regulations in place. Chapter 4 describes the politics and the planning events of the subway case study, identifying the actors involved, their positions, and the series of events that led to the

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<sup>17</sup> Gary Richards, "Clogged traffic worsened in 2000," *San Jose Mercury News*, July 1, 2001.

decision to build the subway. Chapter 5 describes the politics and planning behind the loop highway debate.

Part III (Chapters 6 through 9) presents the core analysis of the research. The four chapters present and analyze the perceptions that Bostonians held about traffic congestion—its problematic nature, its causes, and potential cures. Chapter 6 looks at why Bostonians thought traffic congestion was a problem, and Chapter 7 examines the factors they perceived as causing congestion. Chapters 8 and 9 examine the solutions that Bostonians considered. Chapter 8 is an examination of proposed solutions that involved major construction projects designed, in essence, to increase street capacity. In the 1890s these included not only the subway and proposed elevated railroads (which were perceived as “widening” the street by removing transit vehicles from the surface and putting them underground or in the air), but also proposals for a series of coordinated street improvements. In the 1920s the loop highway was the only major capital project under consideration. Such capital projects designed to increase street space were not the only proposals under consideration, however. Chapter 9 discusses proposed solutions that focused instead on the vehicles in the streets. In the 1890s there were proposals to limit the numbers of trolleys in the streets, and also to regulate the behavior of horse-drawn carts, especially those carrying freight. In the 1920s, some people advocated regulating parked cars as a way to reduce traffic congestion, as well as relying on other forms of traffic regulations such as traffic signals. Also, in both time periods a small number of people advocated reducing the level of economic activity downtown as a way to solve the congestion problem.



Chapter 10, the conclusion, reviews the different perceptions from a comprehensive perspective, presenting several broad themes that characterize the way Bostonians thought about congestion in both periods. It ends with an argument that many of the perceptions Bostonians held a century ago are still with us today, a fact that suggests several policy implications discussed briefly in the chapter.

## METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology used for this research project. I first discuss how cultural and intellectual history provide useful approaches, and follow with an explanation of what I mean by “perceptions” and why looking at them is useful. Finally, the third section explains how the two cases were selected, and the fourth describes the sources used.

### 2.2 Research approach: Cultural and intellectual history

This research project combines narrative history with an analysis of language to build a portrait of how congestion was perceived in Boston at the time of the two case studies. The narrative portion of the dissertation, presented in Chapters 4 and 5, details the sequence of events that led to the decision to build the subway in the 1890s and the unsuccessful proposal to build a loop highway in the 1920s. The “events” described include the introduction of petitions to the legislature, official government hearings, letters written to newspapers, and debates held at local clubs. In addition, Chapters 4 and 5 identify the key people and institutions involved, and describe what traffic conditions were like for the two periods. The two chapters thus provide the context in which to understand the investigation in Part III of how Bostonians perceived congestion.

The idea of analyzing language from written materials to gain insight into a past society's views on a particular topic lies along the boundary that separates the field of "cultural history" from "intellectual history" and the "history of ideas." All of these fields aim to uncover the way a particular group or society understands the world around it. Historiographers debate at length the differences among these fields, but for the purposes of this dissertation a generalized explanation will suffice.

Intellectual history and the history of ideas (for simplification, I will use the term "intellectual history" to cover both) are the study of human thought. The origins of the field lie with the history of philosophy, but intellectual history expanded that subject of study to include any of the formal, abstract ideas of interest to the academy or a society's "high" culture. The ideas studied are usually documented in the writings of academics, artists, and other self-conscious intellectuals. For example, an intellectual historian might study the literary conception of the "novel," a particular political philosophy, or an "ism" of some sort (romanticism, environmentalism, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

Cultural history is a relatively new offshoot from the field of intellectual history. Crudely speaking, one can distinguish intellectual history from contemporary cultural history by saying that the former studies the theoretical concepts of interest to social and intellectual elites, while the latter looks at the way ordinary people understand their everyday lives. In addition, while intellectual history generally addresses self-conscious ideas (i.e., "nationalism"), cultural history tends to focus on what one author described as "unspoken or unconscious assumptions, or perception, on the workings of 'everyday

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<sup>1</sup> Hajo Holborn, "The history of ideas," *American Historical Review*, February 1968, pp. 683-695; Donald R. Kelley, "What is happening to the history of ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, January 1990, pp. 3-25, and "JHI 2000," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, January 2000, pp. 153-156.

thought' or 'practical reason.'"<sup>2</sup> Methodologically and with respect to content, the cultural history of the last few decades borrows heavily from the field of anthropology. Like an anthropologist, the cultural historian treats the society under study as unfamiliar or foreign. By treating the people and situation as unfamiliar, the cultural historian is less likely to mistakenly assume that words or concepts familiar to her and her readers necessarily had the same meanings or connotation for the people being studied.<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation borrows from the traditions of both cultural and intellectual history. The fact that it focuses on a rather specific concept, traffic congestion, puts it nearer to the realm of intellectual history. (Cultural history often takes on broader subject matter, such as how a society understood the meaning of death, or the role of folktales in transmitting traditional knowledge.) On the other hand, in the periods studied, "traffic congestion" was certainly not a subject that had been formally intellectualized.<sup>4</sup> It was simply a condition that people perceived during the course of the day, even if one which some of them had decided should be the focus of government policy. In addition, the fields of planning and traffic engineering had not yet developed to the point where there was a specific "professional" approach to understanding the phenomenon. Because of this "everyday" quality, traffic congestion is thus more akin to cultural history as a subject of study.

I also borrowed the "anthropological" approach from cultural history. Even though I studied a slice of my own society, I looked at traffic congestion as an unfamiliar

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Burke, *Varieties of cultural history*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Darnton, *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history*, New York, Vintage Books, 1984, pp. 3-6, and *The kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in cultural history*, New York, Norton, 1990; Patrick Hutton, "The history of mentalities: The new map of cultural history," *History and Theory*, October 1981, pp. 237-259.

<sup>4</sup> Even today it is debatable whether traffic congestion can be seen as an academic concept. On the one hand, there is a professional planning and engineering literature that treats it as an object of study. On the other hand, traffic congestion is also a concept in good currency with the general public and used by people to describe their daily experiences.

phenomenon. As much as possible, I cleared my mind of the way that I, a California graduate student of transportation planning in the year 2002, understand the idea of congestion. The anthropological literature is full of debates about how best to approximate the impossible condition of the scholar who approaches another culture without preconceived notions about what he is seeing and its meanings.<sup>5</sup> Like any researcher I doubtless failed to create a complete tabula rasa in my mind, but I did my best to approach the texts with as few preconceived notions as possible. To achieve this, I used only the very broadest questions to guide my initial analysis of the material. In reading and rereading my data I posed only three questions to guide my exploration of the material:

1. Did Bostonians think traffic congestion was a problem? If so, why?
2. What did they think caused traffic congestion?
3. What approaches did they think might be used to reduce traffic congestion?

I did not, of course, find a single “answer” to any of these broad questions. However, for each of them I was able to develop a classification of the different ways people thought about that aspect of traffic congestion.

Up to this point I have referred to this research as an examination of how the “Bostonians” from my two time periods perceived of traffic congestion. But just who, exactly, are these Bostonians to whom I refer? Today in the social sciences a new awareness creeping into general acceptance—if not yet soundly established—is that much past research has mistakenly assumed that the perceptions or life experiences of the social elite represented those of the whole society. This mistake is easy to make, if only

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<sup>5</sup> One of the first and best-known anthropologists to write extensively on this dilemma is Clifford Geertz. See, for example: Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973.

because most written records were produced by the literate, a relatively small segment of the population who tended to be wealthy and male. In addition, collections of personal papers, journals, and other written sources were usually prepared and preserved only if the author was wealthy or socially prestigious. (And libraries have tended to focus their collections on “important” personages, as well, further limiting what is available to the researcher.)

For this dissertation I relied primarily on government documents and articles from the major Boston newspapers of the times, sources that present the views of a certain diversity of the population, though by no means everyone. I have not systematically broken down perceptions by the social class of the speaker, as many of the perceptions seemed to be held across different groups. In addition, for any one particular aspect of perceptions about congestion I did not always have enough evidence for all the groups to make such distinctions meaningful. Nevertheless, when possible I explain whose words I have relied on.

The views best represented in the materials I used are those of the prominent businessmen and community leaders who advocated for the subway and loop highway. They were the ones who served on commissions studying and reporting on the plans, and they tended to appear frequently at public hearings. Also, when they did speak at such hearings, their remarks were often the longest and the most likely to be reprinted in full by the papers.

However, their voices were not the only ones recorded. As discussed in the following sections, the newspapers I chose had different targeted readerships, including both the richer, Republican segment of the population and the more working-class

oriented Democratic Party. Also, a variety of people spoke at the many public meetings about which I have reports. The majority of speakers were prosperous businessmen and prominent community leaders who led the push for both the subway and loop highway. Small business men were less frequent contributors, but they did at times appear to speak, their language and apparent lack of familiarity with the projects indicating that they were neither particularly educated nor part of the ruling elite. In addition, a few of the letters published by the newspapers were written in a style that suggests the writers were not especially well educated or familiar with the issues. It would have been useful to find out more detail about the views of small businessmen, but they are at least marginally present in the debates.

The city councilmen and state legislators who participated in the subway and loop highway debates came from a variety of backgrounds. City councilmen in the late nineteenth century were usually neighborhood retailers, barkeepers, or other small businessmen, though on occasion they came from socially prominent families. Mayors tended to come from the respected upper classes; Nathan Matthews, the mayor who shepherded the subway project to approval, was a good example. State legislators usually came from somewhat more respected families than city councilmen, but were still not upper class. They were often young men trying to build their reputations, and usually not very politically savvy, making them easy targets for the many lobbyists involved in Massachusetts state politics.<sup>6</sup>

The “professional classes” were also represented. There were many presentations at public hearings by professional engineers who testified about the merits of—or problems

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<sup>6</sup> Jon Teaford, *The unheralded triumph: City government in America, 1870-1900*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 15, 49, 83, 98-102.

with—the projects. In the case of the subway debate, the notion of a professional city planner did not yet exist, but that had changed by the time of the loop highway proposal. The Boston City Planning Board had been in existence a number of years by then. The board members themselves were not professional planners, but the board did hire professional planning consultants and had a full-time staff.

One group whose views of traffic congestion aren't well represented but would have been interesting were those working class Bostonians whose incomes were high enough to permit them to ride the street railways. (The very poorest wouldn't have been able to afford transit rides.<sup>7</sup>) These working class Bostonians who did ride public transit, like their more prosperous fellow riders, were doubtless eager for any improvements in service—or at least those that wouldn't raise fares. However, working class people almost never appeared at public hearings to present their own perceptions about traffic congestion. The views of working class Bostonians were sometimes brought up by others who did speak at hearings, but usually not with regard to congestion directly. Instead, the working classes were mentioned in conjunction with two other (related) issues—the Boston Common and the need for jobs. Second, in the subway case, from time to time someone would argue that the subway should be built because it would provide jobs for the unemployed. Unemployment was of particular concern then, as the country was sliding into a serious depression that lasted from 1893 to 1897. In both the subway and loop highway debates various proposals were made to put streets or transit lines across the Boston Common, a public park right in the heart of the business district. These proposals generated outrage from many quarters, and one of the reasons given was

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<sup>7</sup> Eric H. Monkkonen, *America becomes urban: The development of U.S. cities and towns, 1780-1980*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 160.



that this was the only open space available to the poor who lived and worked downtown and couldn't afford to travel to the more peripheral parks.

This dissertation thus provides a variety of views, representing different kinds of businessmen, politicians, and engineering and planning professionals. It covers the range of different sorts of people who participated actively in public life, which is particularly useful because these were also the people who most influenced the public policy decisions about what to do (or not do) about traffic congestion. It is revealing to see how the policies adopted actually meshed with the perceptions of those influencing them.

### **2.3 The importance of perceptions**

As discussed in Chapter 1, traffic congestion has been written about before in a historical context. In addition, transportation is one of the most-extensively developed subjects of urban history. Scholars such as Mark Foster,<sup>8</sup> Clay McShane,<sup>9</sup> Cliff Ellis,<sup>10</sup> and Paul Barrett<sup>11</sup> have documented that crowded traffic conditions existed at various times and were of concern, and have described the public policies generated to cope with traffic congestion. Their analyses have emphasized such topics as the politics of transportation planning, the development of professional ideologies, and the relative roles of technological development and public policy in shaping urban transportation systems. A considerable number of other works also exist that focusing on the development of

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<sup>8</sup> Mark S. Foster, *From streetcar to superhighway: American city planners and urban transportation, 1900-1940*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Clay McShane, *Down the asphalt path: The automobile and the American city*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, and "The origins and globalization of traffic control signals," *Journal of Urban History*, March, 1999, pp. 379-404.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Donald Ellis, *Visions of urban freeways, 1930-1970*, PhD dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit: The formation of public policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983.

mass transit systems (such as those by Charles Cheape<sup>12</sup> and Brian J. Cudahy<sup>13</sup>) and the link between transportation systems and the decentralization of the city (e.g., Sam Bass Warner, Jr.<sup>14</sup> and Joel A. Tarr<sup>15</sup>).

What researchers have done less thoroughly is to examine traffic congestion from the angle of people's *perceptions*. Many people have written about the role of the car in popular culture,<sup>16</sup> but this only touches tangentially on perceptions of congestion.

The one piece of scholarship that perhaps most closely duplicates my own work on perceptions is a book by Robert Fogelson entitled *Downtown: Its rise and fall, 1880-1950*. Fogelson takes a similar methodological approach to mine, examining the concept of the central city "downtown" as a uniquely American idea about urban morphology. Fogelson states that he is looking at how Americans tried to shape downtowns rather than how they "felt" about them, but much of his book is devoted to describing perceptions. He also touches on some of the same subject matter as this dissertation, since transportation issues have been a central planning issue in downtowns. He describes various efforts to build rapid transit systems and subways, and how people envisioned those proposals as working (or not working), and he also discusses the concept of traffic congestion in the 1920s. However, his approach is more general than mine, oriented towards summarizing national trends on many different issues (though he also discusses

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<sup>12</sup> Charles W. Cheape, *Moving the masses: Urban public transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880-1912*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> Brian J. Cudahy, *Cash, tokens, and transfers: A history of urban mass transit in North America*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar suburbs: The process of growth in Boston (1870-1900)*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Joel A. Tarr, *Transportation innovation and changing spatial patterns in Pittsburgh, 1850-1934*, Chicago, Public Works Historical Society, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, *For love of the automobile: Looking back into the history of our desires*, translated by Don Reneau, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992.

many specific policy debates as part of this effort). Thus, his work complements but does not directly overlap with my highly detailed case-study approach.<sup>17</sup>

My research sets itself apart from the excellent existing histories by looking more exclusively at discussions of traffic congestion than other researchers have to uncover the unspoken as well as spoken ways the public understood the phenomenon. For example, it focuses specifically on why people thought congestion matters, an issue that has been little addressed. Also, I have focused on two very specific cases, which allows me to analyze the material in great detail. I have pieced together the ideas about traffic congestion present within the Boston community, taking care to identify even subtle differences between speakers. Because a large number of people's views are recorded and reported in the sources used, the data reveal the variety of perceptions that existed, as well as showing which were widely held as opposed to specific to a small number of individuals. Looking with great care at traffic congestion as a socially constructed concept provides a much more nuanced view than other researchers have presented of how one group of people thought about congestion.

One advantage of looking at perceptions with care is to uncover the unstated beliefs that shape policy. The special importance of looking at underlying assumptions is emphasized by transportation historians Paul Barrett and David Jones. Barrett discusses "policy definitions" in a book on municipal transportation policy in Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Barrett, a "policy definition" is an assumption about the nature of a problem which underlies and shapes all policies, even though the assumption may be unstated—"assumptions so fundamental that they were not even

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<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its rise and fall, 1880-1950*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001.

addressed as such.”<sup>18</sup> As for David Jones, he writes about the importance of “imbedded” policies, which he defines as the “routines, traditions and working agreements of an industry.” These traditions guide explicit policy, even though they are never formally written down as policies. For example, in the case of the transit industry Jones studied, an imbedded policy might be assumptions about the types of riders transit systems ought to serve.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.4 Case study selection

This research could have usefully been carried out in a number of American cities, since congestion was of concern in all of the larger cities during the periods studied. However, Boston has a couple of characteristics that make it a particularly good subject. There have been complaints about its streets almost from the beginning. In the 1640s, for example, the town councilmen passed regulations to reduce the number of building materials that were left in the roadways, “crowding the streetes.” In 1665 a Royal Commission spoke disparagingly of the town’s streets, and in the 1670s the state legislature spoke of the “Inconvenience of ye straightness of ye streets,” and the need to make them “wider and more accommodable to the publicke.”<sup>20</sup> Boston’s congestion problem was made especially acute because the business district lay on a spit of land mostly surrounded by water. In 1896, an article about the subway in the national magazine *City Government* noted that:

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<sup>18</sup> Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit*, 1983, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> David W. Jones, *Urban transit policy: An economic and political history*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the wilderness; Urban life in America 1625-1742*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1964 (c. 1938), pp. 15-16.

The problem of street car travel in Boston is peculiar, like the city itself. The topography of the city is such that the entire volume of travel is contracted into two narrow streets in the very heart of the city. . . . Boston has gained a very ill name among strangers for the “Boston blocks,” which occur often and result in piling up cars for several miles along the two crowded thoroughfares and delaying passengers sometimes for several hours.<sup>21</sup>

Boston also makes for a useful object of study because of the unusually rich historical resources available. Boston is fortunate to have libraries that contain old city council and state legislative records, as well as rich collections of reports and advocacy statements published by civic organizations. In addition, numerous local newspapers covered Boston at the time of my case studies, which allowed me to test whether different interest groups (as represented by different papers) had differing viewpoints. For example, I was able to look at reports both in the *Boston Transcript*, a paper serving the conservative upper-class Yankee Brahmins, and in the Democratic, working-class oriented *Boston Globe*.

A final reason for choosing Boston was that the city’s transportation and traffic has been less extensively studied than some other major United States cities. For example, Clay McShane’s book on the introduction of the automobile in the U.S. covers both the 1890s and 1920s, but he relies primarily on materials about New York City. Paul Barrett has written extensively on Chicago’s transportation policies from 1900-1930, while Scott Bottles and Ashleigh Brilliant have discussed Los Angeles in the teens and twenties in some detail.<sup>22</sup> The one author who does look in detail at Boston transportation policy is Charles Cheape, who wrote a business history of nineteenth century streetcar companies in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. However, Cheape does not look at policy in the

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<sup>21</sup> *City Government*, “The great Boston subway,” October 1896, pp. 72-74.

<sup>22</sup> Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the automobile: The making of the modern city*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987; Ashleigh Brilliant, *The great car craze: How Southern California collided with the automobile in the 1920’s*, 1st ed., Santa Barbara, Woodbridge Press, 1989.

1920s, and his work focuses on the development of corporations rather than on traffic congestion itself.<sup>23</sup>

The subway debate in the 1890s and the loop highway debate in the 1920s were chosen as cases both because they offer useful parallels and contrasts, and also because they are two important events in transportation history which have not been documented in much detail. The cases are similar in that both proposed very large, expensive capital projects to improve traffic congestion in the downtown business district. In addition, the two cases were concerned specifically with traffic moving in the north-south direction within the central business district. Both projects were also debated for a period of several years.

The most important contrast between the cases is that they occurred in different eras. Because the two plans were proposed thirty years apart, they were debated in very different contexts. Boston, like all American cities, changed substantially between the 1890s and 1920s. For example, the subway debate occurred just prior to the introduction of automobiles, when traffic congestion consisted of huge numbers of electric streetcars, pedestrians, and horse-drawn vehicles. The debate on the loop highway, by contrast, occurred when motorized automobiles and trucks were well established as part of the vehicle mix in cities. By 1920 cars were no longer experimental toys of the rich, but had become mainstream commodities.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the case studies move from the early stages of the development of city planning and transportation engineering, when these

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<sup>23</sup> Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit*, 1983; Bottles, *Los Angeles and the automobile*, 1987; Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980; McShane, *Down the asphalt path*, 1994. A brief but good description of the city's decision to build a subway is in Burton G. Brown, Jr., "The Boston subway: 1897," *The Bulletin: National Railway Historical Society*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 1973, pp. 18-27, 43-46.

<sup>24</sup> Ashley Brilliant sets the beginning of mass ownership of automobiles at 1919. Brilliant, *The great car craze*, 1989, p. 59.

didn't yet exist as organized professions, to a time when those professions were well into the process of establishing themselves as legitimate fields of study and practice. A final contrast between these case studies is that in one the proposed project was actually built, while the other wasn't.

The subway and loop highway debates were also chosen as historically significant events that haven't received a great deal of scholarly attention. The Boston subway was the first in the nation and only the fourth to open in the world. In addition, at the time the Boston subway was debated, a legislative committee produced a major transportation study that was one of the first, if not the very first, regional, multi-modal transportation study ever produced in the United States. The 1892 *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature* was a 296-page volume of sweeping scope. The commission made recommendations not just about new subways and elevated trains, but also about rearranging surface streetcar lines, changing the location of the steam railroad terminals, widening streets, and revising the city's traffic regulations.

The story of the Boston subway has been written about a little. Bradley Clarke has published a series of books on the history of Boston's subways and rapid transit system. These provide relatively little description of the events leading up to the creation of the subway, however, focusing instead on documenting the types of cars and routes, and on the later expansion of the system. In addition, the books are aimed at a popular rather than scholarly audience, and so when Clarke does discuss political and planning events, he does so briefly and without providing much documentation.<sup>25</sup> As such, these books

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<sup>25</sup> Bradley Clarke, *Transit Boston, 1850-1970*, Cambridge, Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 1970, and *Rapid transit Boston*, Cambridge, Boston Street Railway Association, 1971, and *The Boston rapid transit album*, Cambridge, Boston Street Railway Association, 1981; Bradley H. Clarke and O.R. Cummings, *Tremont Street subway: A century of public service*, Boston, Boston Street Railway Association, 1997.

are of only modest use for someone interested in learning more about the events that took place. The subway story also appears briefly in histories of mass transit or of Boston. Among these, the only truly detailed and well-documented description of events leading to the decision to build the subway is in Charles W. Cheape's *Moving the Masses*.<sup>26</sup>

It is not surprising that the loop highway hasn't attracted much scholarly attention, given that the proposal was never implemented. However, the highway's story is noteworthy as an example of an early American attempt to build a major road through an existing downtown. In addition, the loop highway proposal is the antecedent of a highway project that is currently attracting a great deal of attention: Boston's so-called "Central Artery." In 1930 the Boston City Planning Board published an extensive report prepared by consultant Robert Whitten, which proposed a complete thoroughfare plan for the city. The report stated that, "The most serious defect in the street system of Central Boston is the lack of an adequate north-south traffic route," the very same problem the loop highway had tried to address. The 1930 plan, however, called for an elevated highway through the downtown, and named the project the Central Artery. The Central Artery was eventually built in the 1950s. While it did provide new traffic capacity, the Central Artery also generated great criticism for having displaced homes and businesses and because, as an elevated highway, it created a swatch of un-used land that separated the neighborhoods on either side. In the early 1980s Massachusetts planners began to plan for putting the Central Artery underground, and eventually Congress agreed to help fund the project.<sup>27</sup> Though the final results will be highly beneficial for the city, the

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<sup>26</sup> Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> The project includes the construction of an eight to ten lane underground highway to replace the elevated highway, improvements to two interstate highways into the city, and a new tunnel connecting South and East Boston.



Central Artery has generated substantial criticism as a hugely expensive project running behind schedule and over budget.

## 2.5 Sources

Since this is a dissertation about ideas, the “data” used consists of words—the words of people talking about traffic congestion. The sources that I used consist primarily of newspapers, supplemented with other periodicals; government reports; transcripts of meetings of the city council, the legislature, and legislative committees; and a small number of personal letters and memoirs.<sup>28</sup>

The events that form the two cases examined in this dissertation had not previously been described in much detail. For this reason, much of my research time was spent piecing together an understanding of the sequence of public hearings, reports issued, city council and legislative actions, and public referenda. Once I was aware of a date on which some event occurred, I would check that date (as well the next few days) in the newspapers to find out what coverage it had generated, as well as looking for editorials and letters to the editor. While I feel confident that I found the most important events that occurred, it is likely that there are some less important ones that I missed.

Finding written material about the cases proved a substantial challenge, not because such material didn’t exist, but rather because it was mostly in sources that were not referenced in library catalogues and periodical indexes. Boston had an enormous number of newspapers and local periodicals that covered local planning issues in more or less depth. However, virtually none have any sort of index covering multiple issues, or even

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<sup>28</sup> Note that in the quotations presented throughout the dissertation, I have occasionally made small changes to standardize spelling and punctuation according to modern conventions.

tables of contents for individual issues for the period of study. Finding material was thus a time-consuming process of scanning page by page, issue by issue.

The time-consuming nature of the research process had two results. First, I had to restrict the number of serials I chose to examine. For example, I used only the most widely circulated periodicals. Second, for any specific newspaper or magazine it was in most cases impossible to look through all issues that came out during the periods of my case studies. I do not, therefore, claim to have found *all* relevant discussions of traffic congestion for the periodicals I chose.<sup>29</sup> The large number of sources and items I found give me confidence that I have enough material to make conclusions about the general tenor of perceptions during my time periods. In addition, I have enough material that I can reasonably note which ideas came up more or less frequently, or to distinguish between different speakers. On the other hand, I do not have the material that would be necessary to perform the more quantitative analyses sometimes used in textual analysis, such as counting the number of times different issues were mentioned in one newspaper as compared to another.

### **2.5.1 Public records**

One source of material was the Boston City Council. The council was involved in the debate over the subway and, to a minor extent, in the loop highway discussions. Transcripts of the regular sessions of the council were recorded and published in an

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<sup>29</sup> When it comes to major events, like public referenda, I knew the important dates to check and this limitation is less relevant. However, when it came to more minor issues, such as city meetings to discuss changes to traffic regulations, I came nowhere near finding all references to these topics.

ongoing series entitled *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*.<sup>30</sup> (These proceedings include lengthy but, unfortunately, incomplete indices.<sup>31</sup>) Much of the council's deliberation took place in meetings of regular "committees," and these were rarely recorded.

I also used reports about the activity of the state legislature and its committees, which were heavily involved in both case studies. Not only did the legislature create special committees to report on the subway and loop highway plans, but these committees held numerous public hearings at which many people presented their views. Additionally, the proposals were debated and voted upon by both houses of the legislature. Unfortunately, in most cases there are no official transcripts of either legislative sessions or committee hearings,<sup>32</sup> though one series of hearings regarding the subway was officially recorded.<sup>33</sup> The only records of these events, therefore, are the reports in the newspapers. The *Transcript*, *Globe*, *Herald*, and *Post*, however, usually reported on the legislative debates and committee hearings, often providing extensive coverage that included verbatim coverage of parts or all of the statements presented. In some cases the newspapers even reported on the questions posed by the committee and the speakers' responses.

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<sup>30</sup> During the 1890s, the *Transcript* also published the complete transcription of each meeting in the following day's paper.

<sup>31</sup> For example, I was unable to locate all instances in which the council debated changes to traffic regulations, even with a thorough search of different terms in the index.

<sup>32</sup> James Anthony Merino, *A great city and its suburbs: Attempts to integrate metropolitan Boston, 1865-1920*, PhD dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1969, p. 145. In the case of the legislative Rapid Transit Commission, member Nathan Matthews, Jr. explained that the commission had decided it couldn't afford to prepare verbatim reports, but that a report of each meeting would be made, and the public could purchase copies at the price of reproduction. *Boston Post*, "Now for rapid transit," June 16, 1891, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> This is a 15-volume set of transcripts from hearings on the subway proposal held in the spring of 1894. Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 15 vols., [Boston], [The General Court], 1894.

## 2.5.2 Newspapers

By far the most important sources were newspapers. Not only did the newspapers often provide the only recorded information about city and state hearings and legislative debates, but they also provided evidence of contemporary perceptions in the language of their own reporters, in editorials, and in letters to the editor. Both the subway and the loop highway were topics that the papers usually chose to cover in depth, making the news reports excellent sources of data.

One of the advantages of Boston as a subject of historical study is that it has a rich tradition of journalism. In 1891, for example, Boston had nine daily papers, four semi-weekly ones, six Sunday papers, and five fortnightly papers.<sup>34</sup> I relied primarily on four newspapers, the *Boston Transcript*, *Boston Herald*, *Boston Globe*, and *Boston Post*, in which I found over 900 items relevant to my case studies. These four papers all provided extensive coverage of local issues,<sup>35</sup> and they also represented a spectrum of readerships. In addition, to broaden my coverage, for the subway I looked at over 100 articles from the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, and I found about 50 articles relevant to the loop highway case in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

I located the articles I used in a number of ways. Some were referenced in secondary sources, and I also looked through scrapbooks of articles put together by two of the mayors who governed Boston during my periods of study, Malcolm Nichols and Nathan Matthews, Jr. These scrapbooks were especially useful because they brought to my attention some events that I would otherwise not have known about. I found the bulk of

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<sup>34</sup> Herbert A. Kenny, *Newspaper row: Journalism in the pre-television era*, Chester, Conn., Globe Pequot Press, 1987, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> All the papers provided much more extensive coverage of local issues in the 1890s than in the 1920s.

the articles, however, by scanning newspapers on and near the dates when specific events occurred, such as public hearings or the issuance of reports.

My scanning technique was designed to catch as many opinion pieces as possible (editorials and letters), as well as all major articles that a paper saw fit to publish on the events of the case studies, so in all cases I scanned the headlines and the editorial pages. In some cases I checked the whole paper as well. The closer examination was extremely time-consuming, but it also generated such useful items as notices about civic associations debating transportation issues. I did not always look at the whole paper, however, because I wanted to prioritize covering as many dates and papers as possible rather than creating a definitive collection of every relevant article from a smaller number of sources. It is important to note that this dissertation does not make claims about any paper's *total* coverage of the issues unless specifically noted. For example, the fact that I have used more articles from the *Transcript* than the *Globe* does not necessarily mean that the former wrote more about the issues under consideration, but simply that I found more from that paper.

For every important event I checked not only the editorials in all the papers, but also the news coverage in at least two different newspapers. This system of double-checking minimized the risk that I might rely solely on a report that was incomplete or strongly biased. Through this cross-checking I found that while the papers had somewhat different editorial positions, in general the news reports presented very similar material, with the biggest distinction being the level of detail. This similarity of coverage resulted in part, at least, because the authors tended to stick to strict description of events and

quotations of what speakers said, with relatively little independent analysis of the events covered.

More openly opinionated material came from letters to the editor and editorials. Letters to the editor were, of course, helpful in that they provided a perspective beyond that of the papers' own staff and editors. In the two periods from 1890 through 1894, and 1922 through 1926, I found over 80 letters to the editor that mentioned traffic issues printed in the *Daily Advertiser*, *Post*, *Globe*, *Herald*, and *Transcript*, with well over half of these coming from the *Transcript* and *Post*. The great majority were written in the 1890s. As for editorials, I found almost 50 in the *Transcript*, with two-thirds coming from the subway period. In the *Globe* I found 9 on the subway case, but none on the loop highway. The *Herald* had over 30 from the subway period, and 4 from the loop highway. The *Post* produced over 60 from the 1890s, and 12 during the loop highway debates.

When using newspapers to represent the ideas of their times, it is always important to consider what a paper's particular biases may be. Not only is there the question of *how* a paper covers a topic, there is also the crucial question of *what* it chooses to cover at all. Newspapers can only cover a fraction of the events that occur every day, and they tend to ignore certain types of issues while emphasizing others, based on the interests of the paper's editors and managers. The biases of the papers I used were partially based on their own editorial policies and orientation to their readers, but also on general pressures facing all newspapers of the times.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, major advertisers held considerable sway over the papers. Because cities like Boston had many daily papers, advertisers could threaten to withdraw their accounts if not given favorable treatment. In

1911, muckraking journalist Will Irwin published a series of articles in the magazine *Colliers* on the state of journalism at the time. In one of these he wrote extensively about the role of advertisers, and singled out Boston as an example of a city where newspapers were particularly susceptible to pressure from them. Irwin estimated that advertisements covered as much as 80% of the cost of production for American newspapers. He claimed that papers would do favors that ranged from omitting news that would embarrass an advertiser, to printing as “news” text that had been submitted by the advertiser.

Department stores were usually the biggest advertisers and thus held the most sway.<sup>36</sup>

Advertisers weren't the only organizations involved in buying favorable press coverage. Just before the subway debate began in Massachusetts, the state legislature was rocked by the public discovery in 1890 that the West End Street Railway Company had used inappropriate tactics to secure legislative permission to build an elevated railroad. Among other tactics, the company's owner had paid various newspapers to print favorable articles.<sup>37</sup> In 1893, the *Post* claimed that four of the other local papers had accepted money from the West End to print a speech by President Whitney describing a plan for putting a subway under the Common and elevated lines into the suburbs.<sup>38</sup>

During the final days of an 1894 legislative debate over a bill to grant one particular investor named Joe Meigs a franchise to build an elevated railroad, an opponent of the plan alleged that Meigs was paying the *Advertiser* to print columns favoring the plan.<sup>39</sup>

During the 1920s, the owners of the city's biggest department stores strongly supported

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<sup>36</sup> Will Irwin, *The American newspaper*, Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1969.

<sup>37</sup> Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980, p. 123.

<sup>38</sup> The *Post* also claimed that other papers agreed to Whitney's request that the article be held until the following Sunday for printing. *Boston Post*, "The West End's new plan," February 18, 1893, pp. 1 & 4, and "Editorial: The West End muzzle," February 20, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The Meigs bill; Still discussed, but not voted upon," June 23, 1894, p. 5.

the loop highway, a situation that may have influenced the papers to cover the story in a more favorable light than they would have otherwise.

Aside from the general advertising pressures facing newspapers, each individual paper had its own idiosyncrasies. The *Boston Evening Transcript*, which ran from 1830 through 1941, was legendary as the paper that catered to the Boston “Brahmins,” the mostly Republican Yankee elite who lived both in Boston and the surrounding suburbs.<sup>40</sup> Various writers have described the paper as “genteel,”<sup>41</sup> “a symbol of traditional, staid Boston,”<sup>42</sup> and “a house organ for the gentry of greater Boston.”<sup>43</sup> According to one writer in 1947, well-bred Bostonians were dedicated to the paper—they were highly influenced by its editorials, and would only sign letters published in the *Transcript*, using pseudonyms if they cared to write to other papers.<sup>44</sup> An enthusiastic *Transcript* employee, who wrote an account of the paper in honor of its hundredth anniversary in 1930, claimed that in the 1880s and 1890s its editors made a point of advocating for “reformatory causes” such as the exclusion of streetcar tracks from part of Tremont Street. The author argued that such editorials were often the main cause of local policy changes.<sup>45</sup> It is questionable whether they were *quite* this influential, though T.S. Eliot did write a poem entitled “The *Boston Evening Transcript*,” with the line, “The readers of

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<sup>40</sup> It also has the distinction of being widely used by historians interested in nineteenth and early twentieth century history, quite likely because it is one of the most widely available in libraries across the country.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Blodgett, *The gentle reformers: Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland era*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966.

<sup>42</sup> Donald Paneth, *The encyclopedia of American journalism*, New York, Facts on File, 1983, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Kenny, *Newspaper row*, 1987, p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> Cleveland Amory, *The proper Bostonians*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1947, pp. 332-333, 326.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, *The Boston Transcript: A history of its first hundred years*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930, p. 166.



the Boston Evening Transcript/ Sway in the wind like a field of ripe corn,” which one critic suggests is a reference to how the paper’s readers uniformly followed its opinions.<sup>46</sup>

Given its specialized orientation, it isn’t surprising that the *Transcript* had, for most of its life, a small readership. In the 1890s it issued about 20,000 copies a day, and throughout its lifetime circulation never grew above about 40,000. Nevertheless, it retained substantial influence in the community because of the status of its readers. Also, despite its limited audience, it was respected in the wider community. The *Transcript* was known for its accuracy in reporting, for example, even when the facts didn’t conform to its own viewpoints. An 1899 publication describing the Boston press from the point of view of advertisers noted that the *Transcript* was universally admired.<sup>47</sup>

The *Transcript* covered city and state government closely, with both reporting and editorials. In the 1890s, this coverage even included complete transcripts of all city council meetings. Articles on public hearings tended to include lengthy or even complete transcripts of what was said by prominent speakers. The paper provided a rich collection of material relevant to this study, with over two hundred items from the subway period and fifty from the loop highway period.

Also Republican was the *Boston Herald*, which was founded in 1846. Although the paper underwent various changes in title, and acquisitions and mergers with other papers, there has ever since been a paper with *Herald* in its title serving Boston readers.<sup>48</sup> In the periods covered by this research, the *Herald* was the premier Republican paper, at least in terms of readership. In the mid-nineteenth century it had the largest circulation of any

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<sup>46</sup> Amory, *The proper Bostonians*, 1947, 332-333; T.S. Eliot, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, London, Egoist, 1917.

<sup>47</sup> Louis Martin Lyons, *Newspaper story: One hundred years of the Boston Globe*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1971, pp. 136-137, 273.

<sup>48</sup> Boston Herald, *The history of today's Boston Herald* [web page], cited January 9, 2002, available at [http://www.bostonherald.com/bostonherald/Boston\\_Herald\\_history.htm](http://www.bostonherald.com/bostonherald/Boston_Herald_history.htm).

Boston paper, until the Democratic *Globe* finally surpassed it in 1888. During the 1890s advertisers still ranked the *Herald* in importance along with the larger *Globe*—the two papers were usually referred to together as “the leading papers.” Circulation at the *Herald* was then in the range of 150,000. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the *Herald* professed political independence, despite its Republican leanings, but in the next decades it became much more solidly partisan. By the 1920s it was well known as “the businessman’s paper.” A point about the paper that is noteworthy for the subway portion of this dissertation is that one of its editors, Osborn Howes, Jr., was a member of the Rapid Transit Commission which studied transportation and traffic issues in 1891 and 1892.<sup>49</sup>

The *Daily Advertiser* was a Republican paper I used for the 1890s only. It was established in 1813 and served a wealthy Republican audience. By the late 1890s its circulation was smaller than even the *Transcript’s*, but it had a good reputation among the most financially conservative segments of the population. It also had the reputation of being the most staunchly partisan of the papers I used.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of Democratic papers, the *Boston Globe* and *Boston Post* were the two most important. The *Globe* was formed in 1872 by a group of businessmen, who were led by Eben Jordan, the founder of Boston’s Jordan Marsh department store. The paper continues to be published to this day.<sup>51</sup> During the periods I studied, the *Globe* came out twice a day Monday through Saturday, with a single Sunday edition. Today the paper is

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<sup>49</sup> Lyons, *Newspaper story*, 1971, pp. 3, 71, 135-136, 268.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 136.

<sup>51</sup> The paper is now owned by the *New York Times*. *Boston Globe, The Boston Globe - History: 125 years of service* [web page], cited January 9, 2002, available at <http://www.boston.com/extranet/globeco/>.

the primary local paper for the Boston region, though it now prints only one edition a day.<sup>52</sup>

Although in its earliest days the *Globe* had the reputation as a high-brow literary paper,<sup>53</sup> that changed almost immediately after its inception, when it was taken over by Charles H. Taylor, who ran it for almost fifty years, until his death in 1921. Within a few years Taylor turned the paper into a highly popular one by cutting the price, shifting the paper's orientation to the Democratic Party, and adding an evening edition.<sup>54</sup> Other hallmarks of Taylor's long editorship were the considerable space devoted to local news, including local events such as meetings, dinners, and reunions. By the late 1880s, the *Globe* had become the dominant paper in the region. The *Post* in the mid-1890s overtook the *Globe* in circulation, but the *Globe* retained its status in the region as one of the two or three most widely read Boston papers.<sup>55</sup>

Taylor held distinctive notions of what his paper should publish, and he established traditions that were followed by the paper even after his death. While the *Globe* was Democratic, it was not overly partisan. Nevertheless, in the 1880s it became the first paper to write about matters interesting the Irish community and to cover labor issues. Beginning in the 1890s, Taylor moderated the paper's tone to attract wider readership. A statement of his general philosophy, which was published many times, including on the anniversary of his death for many years, was as follows:

My aim has been to make the *Globe* a cheerful, attractive and useful newspaper that would enter the home as a kindly, helpful friend of the family. My temperament has led me to dwell on the

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<sup>52</sup> Kenny, *Newspaper row*, 1987, p. 162; Blodgett, *The gentle reformers*, 1966, p. 109.

<sup>53</sup> Chamberlin, *The Boston Transcript*, 1930, p. 159.

<sup>54</sup> Paneth, *The encyclopedia of American journalism*, 1983.

<sup>55</sup> Albert P. Langtry, ed., *Metropolitan Boston: A modern history*, 5 vols., New York, Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1929, Vol. 2, p. 579; Frank Luther Mott, *American journalism: A history of newspapers in the United States through 260 years: 1690 to 1950*, New York, Macmillan, 1950; Lyons, *Newspaper story*, 1971, p. 31.

virtues of men and institutions rather than upon their faults and limitations. My disposition has been always to build up rather than to join in tearing down. My ideal for the *Globe* has been that it should help men, women and children to get some of the sunshine of life, to be perhaps a little better and happier because of the *Globe*.

In keeping with this position, Taylor tried to keep his editorials upbeat and preferred to ignore an issue until it was possible to take a constructive tone, rather than take a negative position. (One of his critics spoke of the *Globe* as an “exceedingly good-natured paper with a colorless editorial page.”)<sup>56</sup>

By the 1920s, the *Globe*'s editorial policy had changed in terms of quantity, of not quality: it was publishing only a few editorials a day. While in the 1890s the paper might have run pieces on six or eight issues a day, by the 1920s it covered only two or three. This limited editorial role at least partially explains why it printed no editorials at all on the loop highway proposal.

The *Boston Post* began as a morning paper in 1831, and continued until 1956, when it closed. In the 1870s, when the *Globe* appeared, the *Post* was the only Democratic daily. The *Post* had lackluster circulation and success until the 1890s, when it was reenergized by a new owner, Edwin A. Grozier. In just five years Grozier succeeded in building the *Post*'s daily circulation to 125,000, a feat he accomplished by targeting working class readers, including the city's large Irish-Catholic population. He cut the paper's price, took a more aggressively partisan stance than the *Globe*, and introduced a sensationalist tone to news coverage. The paper's popularity continued to grow into the new century. In 1918 its daily circulation reached around 540,000, supposedly the largest in the country; over the next decade that number fell to more like 375,000, though the *Post* still out-sold the *Globe*. By the period of the loop highway case study, the *Post* had

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<sup>56</sup> Lyons, *Newspaper story*, 1971, pp. 47-8, 111-112, 137.

become even more steadfastly Democratic, and involved itself in promoting various local issues.<sup>57</sup>

The *Christian Science Monitor* was founded in 1908 to provide the American public with nonpartisan, non-sensationalist coverage of local, national, and international news. Known for excellent foreign news coverage, it was oriented towards a national rather than local audience, though its local edition covered major Boston stories. I did not find any editorials about the loop highway for the dates I searched, but this is unsurprising, as there were virtually no editorials on any local topics. In the 1920s the paper's circulation in the Boston region was less than half the *Transcript's*, reflecting its orientation towards a national audience.<sup>58</sup>

### **2.5.3 Other periodicals**

With one exception, weekly and monthly magazines provided only a small amount of information. I did, however, find a few articles about the Boston subway and loop highway in national magazines—either popular ones such as *New England Magazine* or *Harper's Magazine*, or professional ones, such as *Street Railway Journal* or *American Architect*.

A number of local periodicals were more useful. Some business associations and clubs published annual reports that included sporadic information on the subway and loop highway, either reports on the organizations' official positions or transcripts of speeches given on those topics. The most useful local publication was *Current Affairs*, a weekly

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 4, 98, 268; Kenny, *Newspaper row*, 1987, pp. 24, 30, 53-55

<sup>58</sup> Lyons, *Newspaper story*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 272; Irwin D. Canham, *Commitment to freedom; The story of the Christian Science monitor*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1958.

publication of the Boston Chamber of Commerce that covered the period when the loop highway was debated. For this case study, *Current Affairs* was one of the best sources of information, providing not only evidence of the chamber's own viewpoints, but identifying activity by the city and state governments.

**THE CASES:  
TWO ERAS OF DEBATE OVER CONGESTION**

## DOWNTOWN GEOGRAPHY AND TRAFFIC CONDITIONS

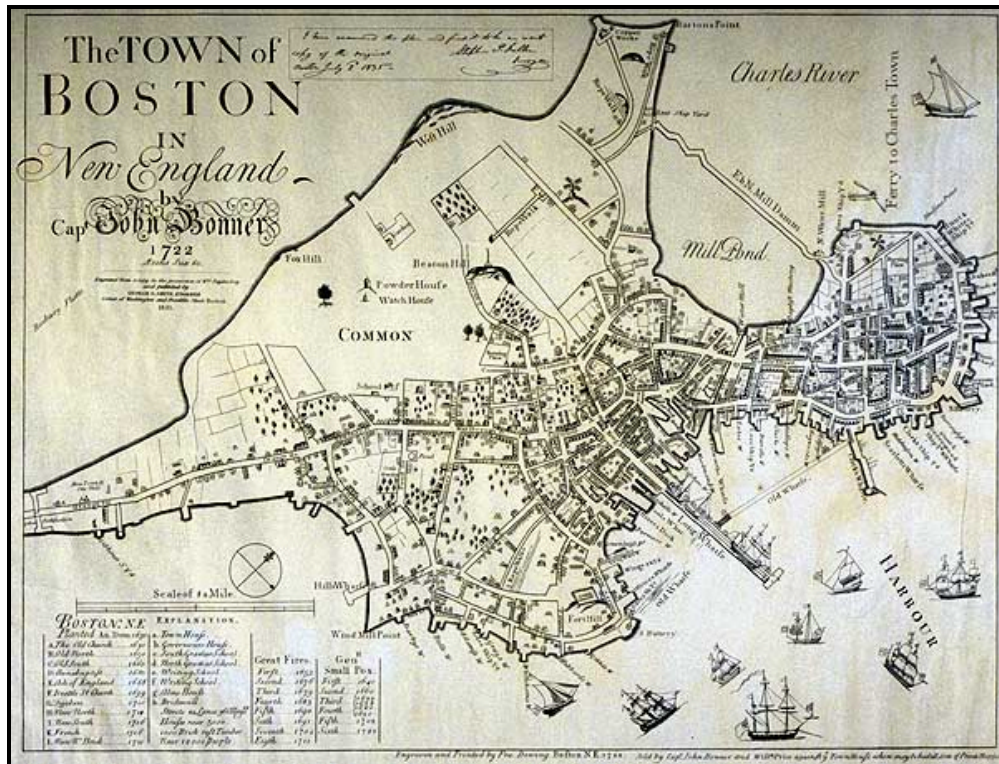
### 3.1 Introduction

The three chapters of Part II present background information that provides a context for understanding how 1890s and 1920s Bostonians perceived traffic. While Chapters 4 and 5 narrate the events in the 1890s and 1920s during which Bostonians discussed congestion, this chapter first describes the type of traffic in the downtown, and key factors affecting it. The chapter begins by describing the regional geography and population trends. The following section discusses what kinds of traffic were on the Boston streets and presents some quantitative data about the numbers of vehicles on the streets. Finally, the chapter explains what traffic regulations the city had in place that would have affected vehicles on the streets.



### 3.2 Boston and its metropolitan region

Figure 3.1: “The Town of Boston in New England” (1722).



Note: The strip of land on the left connected the peninsula to the mainland.

Source: Map by John Bonner, reproduced in Alex Krieger and David Cobb, eds., *Mapping Boston*, Boston, MIT Press, 1999.

The city of Boston was originally settled in the 1600s on a small, bulbous peninsula connected to the mainland by a very thin neck of land (see Figure 3.1). Over the next centuries, the city grew in population and economic activity, and a large metropolitan region developed around it. The outlying villages and towns were tightly bound to Boston, which was the regional center for trade, as well as being the state capital. With the introduction of steam railroads linking the city with its outlying territory, the suburban region developed rapidly. Boston’s steam railroad lines almost all led directly into the city’s downtown, making the railroads a much more convenient commuting option than was the case in other major U.S. cities. As a result, the functional region

around Boston was larger in both population and area than that surrounding many other large cities. Taking the metropolitan region as those cities and towns lying within a ten-mile radius of the state house (a definition commonly used in the 1890s), the population of the whole region rose from 171,030 in 1840 to 848,740 in 1890, an increase of almost 400%, the result of the combined effects of industrialization, decline of farming due to competition from the Midwest, and immigration. The city itself during that period grew at a somewhat slower but still rapid rate, from 120,256 to 448,477 people, or about 270%.<sup>1</sup>

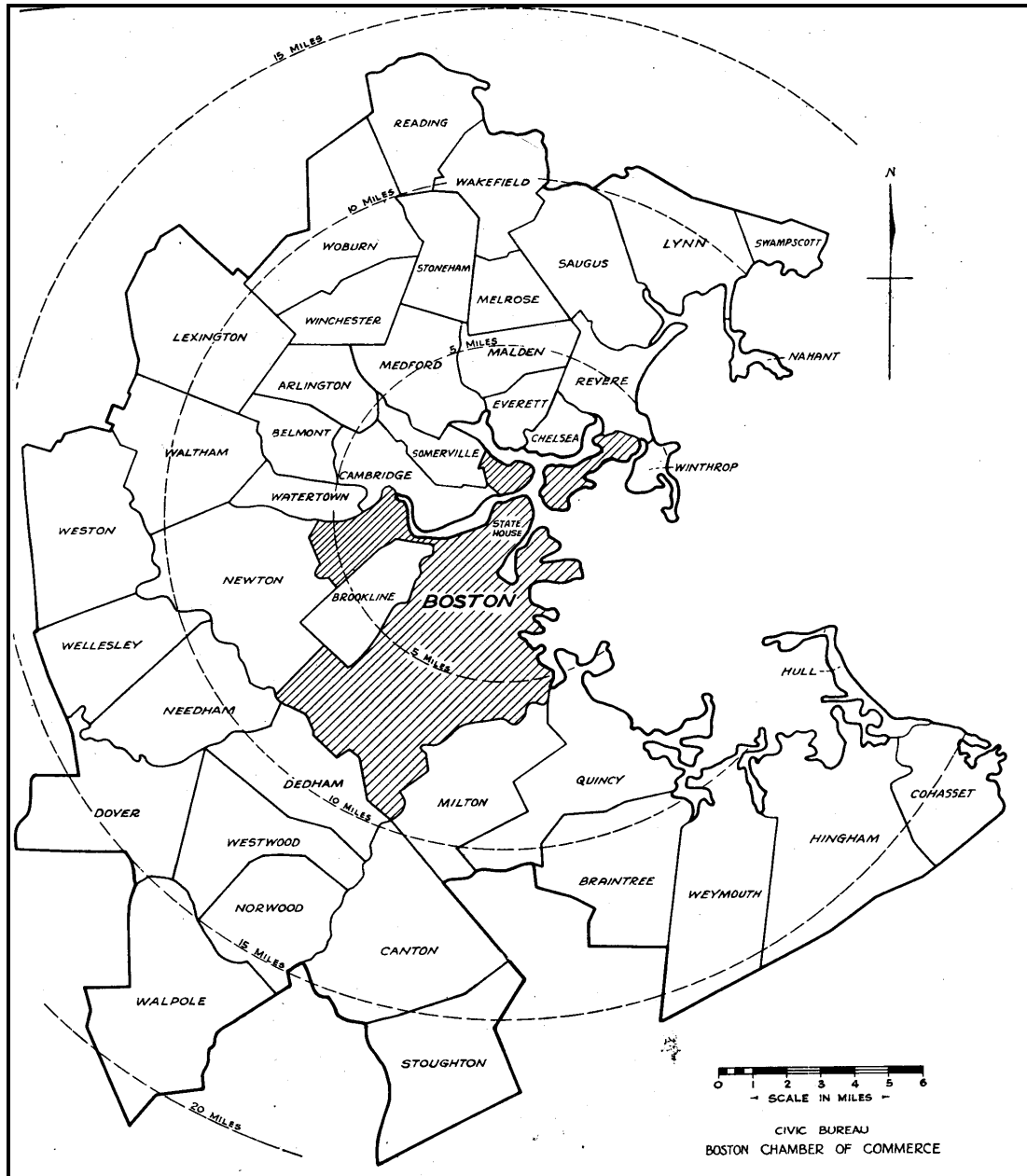
During the first part of the twentieth century, the population of Boston and its suburbs continued to expand rapidly, increasing the number of people and the business activity crowding the business district each day. By 1925 the metropolitan district of 39 towns and cities had a population of about 1.8 million (which was just under half the population of the entire state). Boston itself had a population of almost 800,000. Between 1910 and 1925 the city had grown 13.6%, while the region had grown twice as fast, at a rate of 26.6%. The metropolitan region covered 400 square miles, the farthest points lying within 15 miles of the State House in downtown Boston (see Figure 3.2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature*, [Boston], [The Commission], 1892, p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> Division of Metropolitan Planning (Massachusetts) Metropolitan District Commission, *Report on improved transportation facilities in the Boston metropolitan district*, 1927, pp. 3 & 11.

**Figure 3.2: Metropolitan Boston, showing suburbs within 5, 10, 15, and 20 miles of the State House, in downtown Boston.**



Source: Boston Chamber of Commerce, Civic Department, "Metropolitan Boston: A collection of three publications on the history and present characteristics of the region," Boston, The Chamber, 1947.

Despite the rapid growth in population of both the city and the region, the central business district remained confined to its original location. Although by 1890 landfill had increased the size of the peninsula somewhat, it was still a small and cramped location for all the people and activities it housed. Even though most manufacturing activity had moved out by 1890, the downtown still housed warehouses, the port and railroad stations, professional offices, hotels, cultural facilities, the premier retail establishments, and city and state administrative buildings.<sup>3</sup> Figure 3.3, a schematic drawing of the downtown in 1890, shows the location of the different downtown activities. The retail district was focused around Washington Street, which housed the large department stores, and Tremont, which had a number of specialized stores. To the east lay the wholesale district, which was roughly divided into neighborhoods specializing in clothing, leather, wool, dry goods, provisions, fresh produce, and meat and fish. The administrative district lay just northwest of the retail district. Financial services were located just to the west of the wholesale district, roughly between it and the retail area. In addition to these economic functions, Beacon Hill was a high-class residential district, while the North and West Ends housed large numbers of immigrants and their families in crowded tenements. This general layout of downtown activity remained substantially the same in the 1920s.

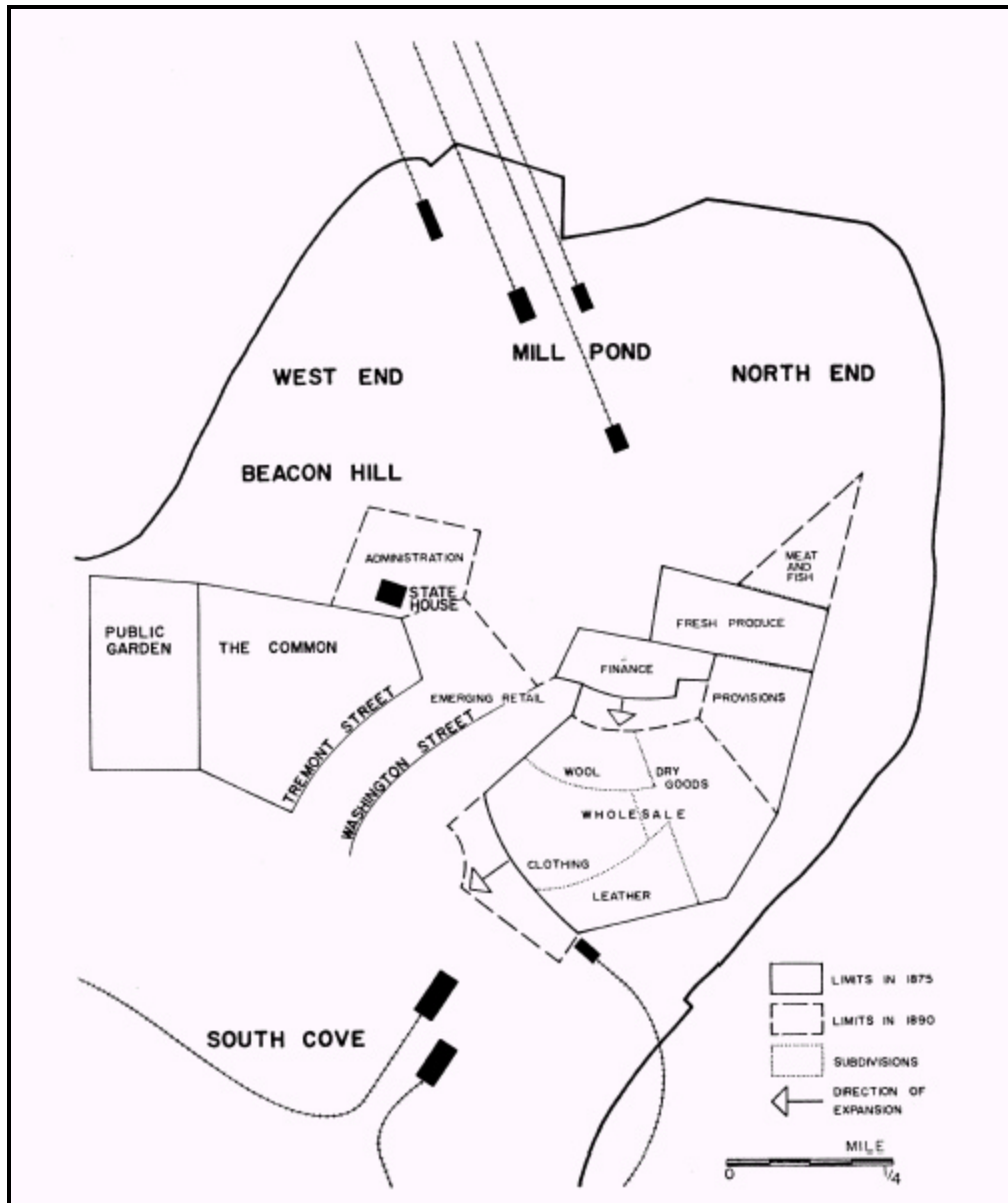
All the downtown activity generated a great deal of movement. People came downtown to work, shop, attend entertainment events, and attend civic or government functions. In addition, the major railroad terminals and the port, factories, wholesalers,

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its rise and fall, 1880-1950*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 14.

and retail businesses generated a huge number of team (later truck) trips, moving goods among the port, railroad terminals, markets, and retail stores.

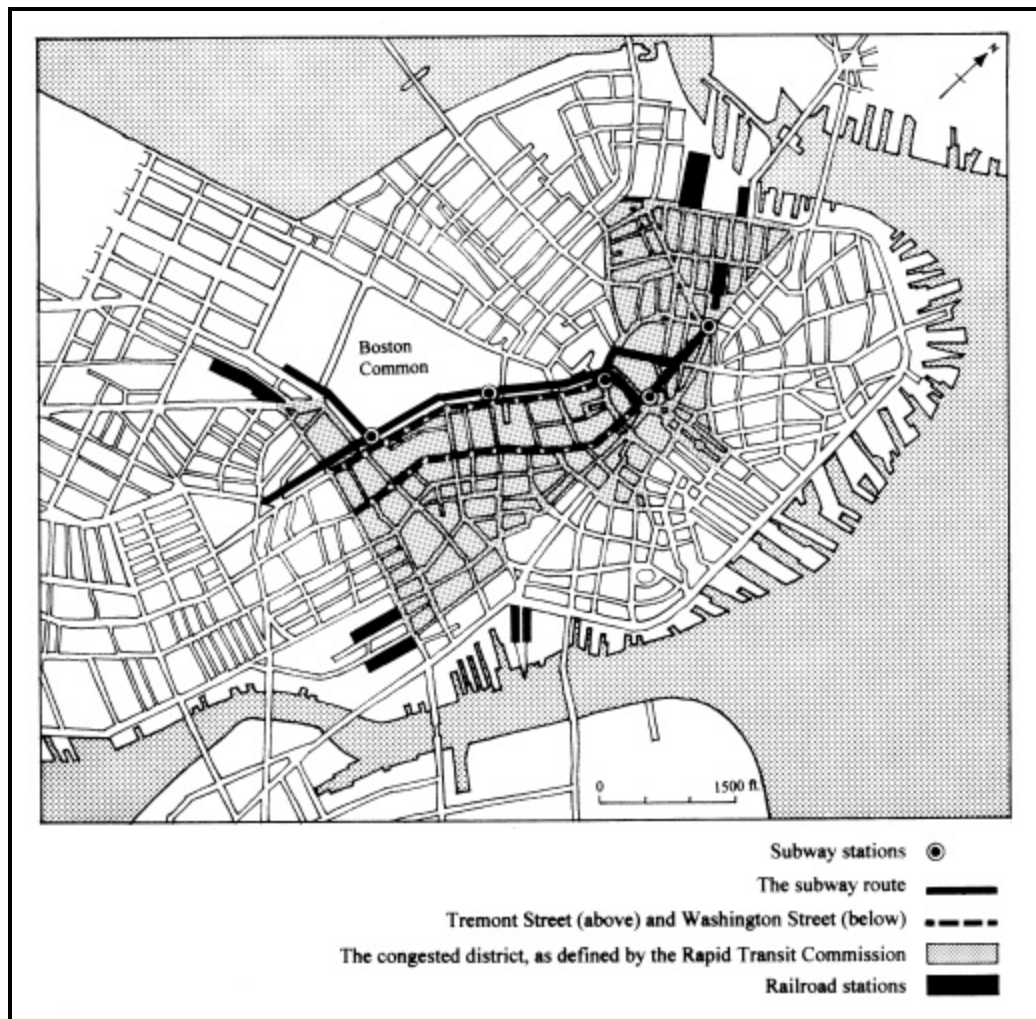
**Figure 3.3: Map of economic activity in downtown Boston in 1890, showing expansion since 1875.**



Note: The dark rectangular boxes denote railway stations. The port ran along the right-hand side of the peninsula, next to the warehouse district. Source: David Ward, "The Industrial Revolution and the emergence of Boston's central business district," *Economic Geography*, April 1966, p. 163.

Within the downtown peninsula, congestion was particularly troublesome in the retail district centered around Tremont and Washington, and in the market district. The map in Figure 3.4 shows that portion of the downtown commonly referred to as “the congested district” shaded in gray. This congested district was barely one and a quarter miles long, from 700 to 1500 feet wide, and about a third of a square mile in area.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 3.4: Downtown Boston, showing the congested district and the route of the subway.**



Source: By Michael Larice, adapted from a map by the Rapid Transit Commission, as reprinted in Charles Cheape, *Moving the masses: Urban public transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880-1912*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit of the Massachusetts legislature, April 4, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894, pp. 7-8.

The streets in the downtown district were, for the most part, narrow, though they varied from ten to sixty feet wide. Many were crooked, and discontinuous. Sidewalks in the area averaged eight feet in width. For the most part, the street layout had changed little from the original pattern laid out by Boston's early European settlers—or, as legend had it, as laid out by the cows belonging to those settlers. (The settlers supposedly used the paths favored by wandering cows as the template for their streets.) Since those earliest days some streets had been widened or straightened and a few new ones added, but these projects had been done piecemeal over the decades and had amounted to only a modest increase in street capacity.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of regional geography and the street pattern combined to send an enormous amount of traffic onto just two streets, Tremont and Washington. Only a few streets and bridges connected the downtown to the rest of the city and the greater region, and these funneled most traffic into the downtown at either the northern or southern end (see Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4). There was thus a huge demand for north-south travel through the downtown. However, the only two direct routes leading through the center of the district were Tremont and Washington. The Boston Common and Public Garden, parkland over which neither streets nor rail lines were permitted, blocked travel to the west of these streets. The many large railroad yards created other barriers to street travel. In addition, just north of the Common lay Beacon Hill, which had too steep a grade to permit most transit or freight vehicles to pass over it. (Also, the hill's wealthy residents resisted any efforts to carry more traffic past their dwellings.) To the east of Tremont and

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<sup>5</sup> Between 1822 and 1890, Boston spent about \$40 million on street widenings, extensions and changes of grade. In the seven years after 1867, it spent out about \$18 million net in street improvements. Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 166: Message of the Mayor in relation to widening of Water Street," in *Documents of the City of Boston for 1892*, 1892, p. 6.

Washington, the streets were crooked and discontinuous, making them inconvenient for travel through the district, although they were used that way when Tremont and Washington become too congested.

As a result of this downtown geography, almost all the nineteenth century streetcar lines from the suburbs converged onto Tremont and Washington.<sup>6</sup> The streets were also popular with freight drivers because of their directness. The author of a letter to the *Boston Herald* described the resulting traffic as follows: “. . .a person crossing Tremont Street from the Common has to cross first a line of carriages, then two horse car tracks crowded with cars, and then two other vehicle paths, five lines of moving vehicles in all.” Despite their heavy traffic burdens, however, neither Tremont nor Washington was especially wide. Tremont, for example, in the heart of the congested district was at points as narrow as 33 feet, though in other places it expanded to 62 feet wide.<sup>7</sup>

The size and layout of the district did not change significantly between the 1890s and 1920s, even though the number of people and vehicles in the central business district increased dramatically. The geographical features bounding the business area in the 1890s—water, Beacon Hill, the Boston Common, and the railroad yards—still proved solid borders that hemmed in the downtown business district. The one significant exception to the continued concentration was that some businesses had begun to locate around the Common and westwards out towards Copley Square, in the newly reclaimed Back Bay neighborhood.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Question of rapid transit," February 13, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Third annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1917*, 1917, p. 16.



The downtown street pattern had also not changed substantially, although the city had spent money on various widenings and extensions. The roads leading from the suburbs to the downtown were more or less adequate (though there were continual calls to improve them), but streets became seriously congested once drivers arrived in the downtown. The Boston City Planning Board in a 1917 annual report described this problem:

A large number of streets west and south of the Common, directly extending into more than one fourth of the suburban districts, have practically no inward extension. From them all travel concentrates at the corner of Tremont and Boylston Streets, where congestion is serious and increasing.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the streets running north and south were still limited and narrow.

According to a legislative commission studying the loop highway, there were only four north-south routes through the downtown. These were Tremont Street; Washington Street; a route consisting of Federal, Congress and Exchange Streets, as well as lower Washington Street; and Atlantic Avenue.<sup>10</sup> Washington Street, the primary through street, was still only fifty feet across at its widest point.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3 Traffic

The main goal of this dissertation is to describe how Bostonians *perceived* the traffic in their streets. Whether or not the traffic at those times would today be described as bad “congestion” is irrelevant to the analysis of perceptions—I am not trying to argue about whether or not the perceptions expressed were “correct.” However, it is useful to understand just what kind of traffic conditions people in the two case studies were

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<sup>9</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Third annual report*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement - p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Report on a thoroughfare plan for Boston*, Boston, 1930.

reacting to, so this section describes the typical types of vehicles and numbers of pedestrians moving through the downtown. Relatively little data exists, but there is enough to give a general sense of the situation.

### **3.3.1 Downtown traffic in the 1890s**

Traffic in the downtown was composed of three major categories: streetcars, horse-drawn vehicles (mostly for freight), and pedestrians. Streetcars brought in people from the city's outskirts, as well as the inner suburbs of the metropolis. The cars themselves took up a great deal of space in the streets, and their riders of course became pedestrians once they alighted. Steam railroads also brought in many regional commuters, as well as longer-distance passengers. Engineer Thomas Curtis Clarke, who wrote a two-part article on rapid transit published in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1892, reported that every day a total of 461,000 people came into the city, 327,000 by streetcar and 134,000 by steam railway.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the crowds of pedestrians and streetcars, the streets were filled with horse-drawn vehicles moving freight between the port, railroads, warehouses, and retailers. These "teams," as they were often called, were a major source of traffic congestion. Finally, there were in addition a small number of horse-drawn carriages transporting people—either private carriages, or else for-hire vehicles functioning much like today's taxis. The latter were called hackney carriages (hacks, for short) or herdicks.

Very few counts of traffic were made, but one engineer used a couple of days' worth of counts to estimate that in a 24-hour period in April of 1892, a total of 200,000 people

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Curtis Clarke, "Rapid transit in cities: I: The problem," *Scribner's Magazine*, May 1892, p. 576.

passed through Washington Street on foot, in streetcars, or in carriages, and that about 160,000 people passed through Tremont Street.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3.1.1 Passenger transportation and pedestrians

The majority of the people who crowded into the downtown each day arrived either by steam railroad or streetcar. In 1890 there were eight different steam railroad lines serving central Boston. Unlike most other major cities in the United States or western Europe, Boston's railroad stations were located very close to the downtown—within a half mile of the state house, which was generally considered the downtown's central point (Figure 3.3 shows most of the downtown stations). Thus, commuting to the downtown by railroad was very convenient. Passenger traffic on the railroads grew rapidly in the decades leading up to the 1890s. In 1871 the railroads carried 17 million passengers in and out of Boston, in 1881 that number rose to 25 million, and by 1891 it was 51 million. The number of annual passengers rose still further in the next few years, peaking at about 57 million, before it began to drop off.<sup>14</sup>

Boston's rates of railroad ridership were dramatically higher than those of the other major cities in the U.S. Table 3.1 compares the numbers of people and trains traveling into and out of Boston with data from the five other largest cities in the country. Despite having a population less than one third the size of New York's, for example, Boston had almost three-quarters as many daily trains. Boston also had far more daily trains than the other four cities in the table. Looking at trains coming from within a twenty-mile radius

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<sup>13</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The subway: Expert testimony in its favor," March 19, 1894, pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>14</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, p. 7; Edward Sagendorph Mason, *The street railway in Massachusetts: The rise and decline of an industry*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1932, p. 9.

of the city, Boston had far more passengers than any other city. This held true from three different perspectives: the number of “commuters” in the region, the annual number of passenger trips, and the annual number of passengers per 100 people living in the region.

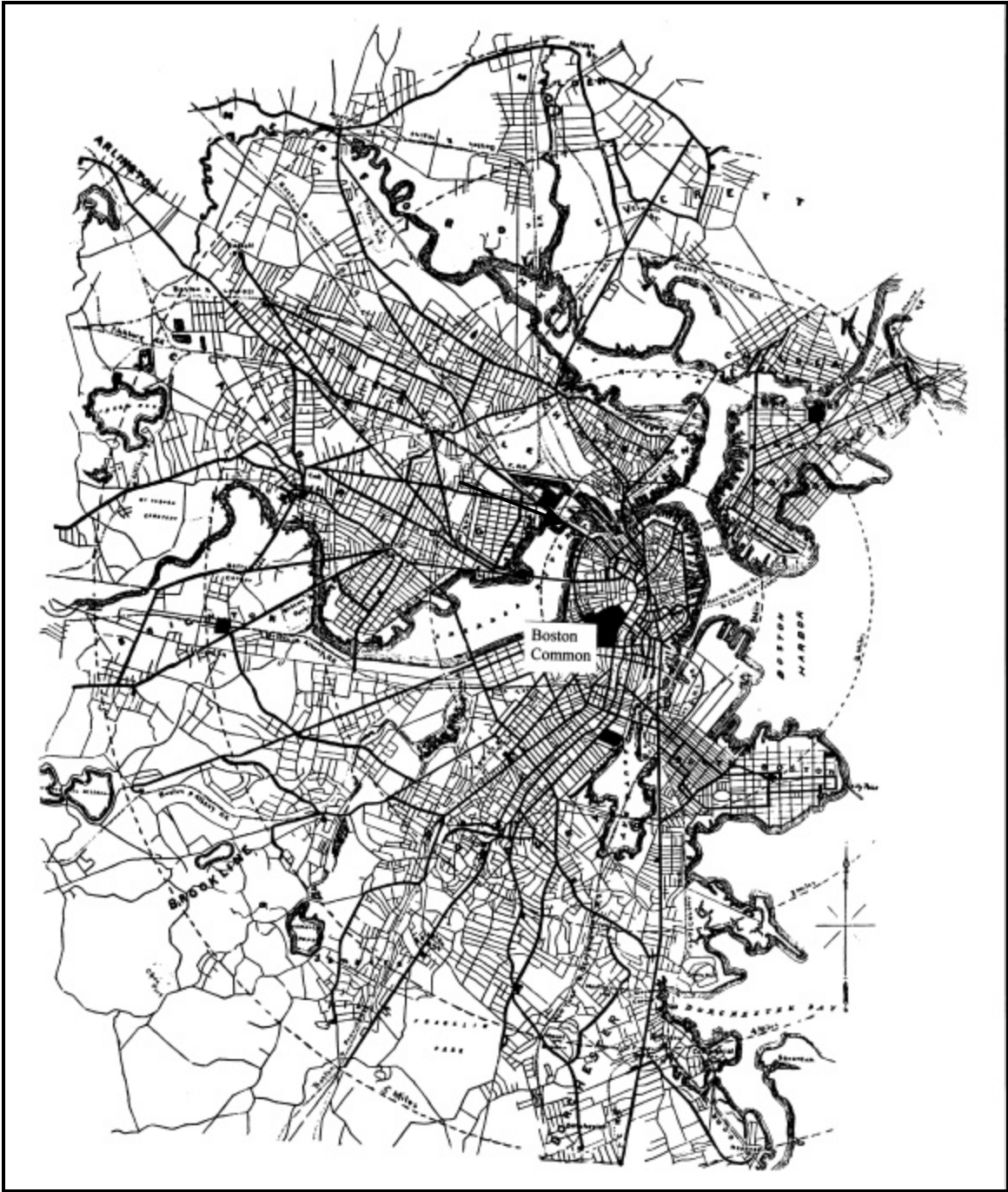
**Table 3.1: Numbers of steam trains serving the six largest U.S. cities in 1890.**

City	Population	Daily number of trains to and from the city	Suburban travel within a radius of 20 miles			
			Daily number of trains to and from the city	Annual number of passengers	Annual number of commuters	Annual number of passengers per 100 people in the region
New York City	1,515,301	1,588	1,135	32,090,623	8,643,428	2,117.77
Philadelphia	1,046,964	733	448	19,664,911	16,902,663	1,787.96
Chicago	1,099,850	790	636	15,152,999	10,713,858	1,447.33
Brooklyn	806,343	516	474	3,297,801	641,806	408.98
Saint Louis	451,770	291	179	2,855,688	2,163,829	632.11
Boston	448,477	1,152	854	39,107,897	24,587,218	8,720.16

Source: United States Census Office, *Report on the Social Statistics of Cities in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1895, p. 50.

In addition to the steam railroads bringing large numbers of people into Boston’s downtown, beginning in the 1850s a system of street railway lines was developed to bring in passengers from the outskirts of the city, as well as the inner-most suburbs. By the 1890s, the West End Street Railway Company owned all the lines within Boston, as well as most of those in the surrounding suburbs. Figure 3.5 shows the company’s routes, which converged on downtown Boston.

Figure 3.5: Lines of the West End Street Railway Company.



Source: *Street Railway Journal*, "The street railway system of Boston," April 1895, p. 209.

Like the steam railroads, the street railways saw enormous growth in the decades preceding 1891. In 1871 the street railways within ten miles of downtown Boston carried 34 million people, in 1881 they carried 68 million people, and in 1891 they carried 136 million.<sup>15</sup> Table 3.2 shows the number of passengers carried between 1880 and 1894 by the West End Street Railway Company and the companies it incorporated, a figure which increased 132% over those 15 years.

**Table 3.2: Number of passengers carried annually by the West End Street Railway Company and the companies it incorporated, 1880-1894.**

Year	Number of passengers carried*	Percent increase since 1880
1880	59,000,000	-
1881	63,000,000	6.8%
1882	69,000,000	16.9%
1883	71,000,000	20.3%
1884	76,000,000	28.8%
1885	80,000,000	35.6%
1886	86,000,000	45.8%
1887	91,000,000	54.2%
1888	97,000,000	64.4%
1889	104,000,000	76.3%
1890	114,000,000	93.2%
1891	119,000,000	101.7%
1892	126,000,000	113.6%
1893	134,000,000	127.1%
1894	137,000,000	132.2%

Sources: "Rapid transit plans in Boston," *Street Railway Journal*, January 1892, page 9; "The street railway system of Boston," *Street Railway Journal*, April 1895, page 224.

Various sources report different statistics on how many trips a year Bostonians took. However, the different sources all have one factor in common: the rate of per capita trips rose dramatically from 1880 to 1900. Looking at streetcar traffic in terms of average passengers per inhabitant of the region, one report claimed that in 1871 people made an

<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 7.

average of 99 streetcar trips, in 1881 they made 140 trips, and in 1891 they made 220 trips.<sup>16</sup> Another source claimed that the streetcar system in the Boston region averaged 118 trips per capita in 1880, 175 trips per capita in 1890, and 226 trips per capita in 1900.<sup>17</sup> Looking just at the population of Boston, in 1892 Thomas Clarke claimed that its residents made an average of 263 streetcar trips per year, a higher rate than either New York (248 trips per year) or Chicago (234 trips per year).<sup>18</sup>

In the 1890s the downtown area had 16 miles of single track laid out on 43 different streets, with between one and three tracks on any one street. Boston mayor Nathan Matthews estimated that at least 200,000 people a day used the cars within the downtown. Even though there were tracks on many different streets, almost all the streetcar lines funneled into Washington and Tremont Streets, creating an incredible density of cars on these two streets. Matthews reported that on Tremont Street, as many as 332 streetcars passed in one hour, which translated to a passing car every 11 seconds.<sup>19</sup> A former manager of the West End Street Railway Company estimated that, on weekday mornings, if all the cars entering the downtown from the southern end during one hour were placed end to end, they would form a continuous column 5,640 feet in length.<sup>20</sup>

George S. Rice, the head engineer for a study of Boston's transportation systems, testified that on a Friday in April 1893, 49,000 people were counted passing in streetcars at one intersection on Tremont Street between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., while on the following

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<sup>16</sup> Committee on Local Transportation, Chicago City Council, *Report on the transportation subway systems of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Paris, London*, 1909, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> The population data is based on the cities and towns served by the Boston Elevated railroad in 1900. Charles W. Cheape, *Moving the masses: Urban public transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880-1912*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> Clarke, "Rapid transit in cities," 1892, p. 577.

<sup>19</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews*, 1894, pp. 42-43.

<sup>20</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Another thoroughfare; Avenue between Washington and Tremont streets," March 9, 1893, p. 7.

day, Saturday, 43,000 passed.<sup>21</sup> A few years later, a count of passengers was taken on the Saturday before Christmas in 1894, an especially busy day. On one stretch of Washington, between 6 a.m. and midnight a total of 63,350 passengers alighted from streetcars, with a maximum of 3,450 people arriving during any single hour.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to passengers brought into downtown by the streetcars and steam railroads, and some people who arrived by ferry, there were also a number of downtown residents—about 160,000 in 1890.<sup>23</sup> The result was throngs of people walking through the downtown, especially on central streets such as Washington and Tremont. Regular counts of pedestrians were not recorded, but in the early 1890s the Police Commissioners arranged a 24-hour count of pedestrians at some of the city's most congested locations. Looking at three different locations, they found a low of 180,000 people in one place and a high of 225,000 people at another.<sup>24</sup> Also, Rice's survey of traffic in April of 1892 included pedestrians. Eleven-hour counts at three busy locations ranged from a low of 65,800 to a high of 100,000.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.3.1.2 Freight

At an 1893 legislative hearing about street improvements, a teaming industry representative described the annual quantity and type of merchandise handled by teams in Boston as follows:

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<sup>21</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The subway: Expert testimony in its favor," March 19, 1894, pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>22</sup> Boston Transit Commission, *The Boston subway*, Boston, Press of Rockwell and Churchill, 1895, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *The city government of Boston; Valedictory address of Hon. Nathan Matthews, Jr., Mayor of Boston, to the members of the City Council, January 5, 1895*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1895, p. 192.

<sup>24</sup> Boston City Council, "Report on the orders concerning the widening of Tremont and Beacon Streets," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1895, pp. 526-532.

<sup>25</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The subway: Expert testimony in its favor," March 19, 1894, pp. 1 & 3.



. . . 1,841,897 baskets of grapes; 602,692 barrels of apples; 238,057 baskets of peaches; 676,991 boxes of oranges; 1,775,859 bunches of bananas; 37,888,352 pounds of butter; 3617 car loads of potatoes; 17,030 car loads of hay; 5,148,664 sides of leather; 632,368 bales of domestic and 195,488 of foreign wool; 185,000 packages of tea and 213,000 packages of coffee; over 1,000,000 barrels of refined sugar; 28,065 car loads of lumber; 264,594 boxes of glass; 215,000 bales of hemp and flax-seed and 30,544 tons of salt.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the great detail in this one description of freight movement, only sketchy data exists as to the amount of travel through the downtown streets by horse-drawn wagons carrying freight (these horse-drawn freight vehicles were commonly referred to as “teams”). The following section pieces together what little direct data on teams was presented, as well as employment data on the teaming industry.

The one statistic commonly cited in the 1890s was that over 100,000 tons were carried through Boston streets daily, but no precise source was ever give for that estimate.<sup>27</sup> At an 1893 hearing, the president of the Master Teamsters’ Association was asked how many horses and men were engaged in the teaming business in Boston. He answered that he did not know at the moment, but that two years ago the figures were about 8,000 horses and 9,000 men.

In 1897, just after the subway was opened, a book about the economy and business of Boston claimed that the city had a total of 17,000 teams, broken down into the following categories:

- 5,000 teams in the city licensed for public hauling, employing about 8000 men and 9000 horses,
- 500 market teams,
- 1500 coal, lumber and ice teams,

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<sup>26</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> According to Mayor Matthews, this figure came from the Master Teamsters’ Association. (Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews*, 1894, p. 8) According to coal merchant Lamont G. Burnham, who testified before the state’s Rapid Transit Commission, the 100,000-ton figure came from a “study” done by an association belonging to the Associated Board of Trade. (Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 15 vols., [Boston], [The General Court], 1894, Vol. 6, p. 72) The number also appeared in 1897 in a book on Boston in which the author said that the number came from the “Rapid Transit Commissioner of the city.” George W. Engelhardt, *Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston, [Boston Chamber of Commerce], 1897, p. 294.

- 1000 contractors' teams,
- 4000 teams belonging to bakers, grocers etc.,
- 2000 express teams, and
- 3000 licensed carriages.<sup>28</sup>

One clue to the amount of traffic by teams and other horse drawn vehicles comes from census data on employment, or “occupations,” as it was then called. A category called “Draymen, hackmen, and teamsters” included many of the persons whose job consisted of driving vehicles.<sup>29</sup> Between 1880 and 1900 the number of people occupied in this category rose 128%. Between 1880 and 1890, directly before the period covered in this case study, the number of people employed rose 76% (see Table 3.3). The increasing number of drivers suggests that there were probably correspondingly more vehicles on the streets.

**Table 3.3: Draymen, hackmen, and teamsters working in Boston, 1880-1900.**

Year	Number of "Draymen, hackmen, teamsters, etc."	Draymen, etc., as a percent of the total occupied population	Draymen, etc., as a percent of the total population
1880	4,963	3.3%	1.37%
1890	8,724	4.3%	1.95%
1900	11,337	4.5%	2.02%

Notes: Draymen and teamsters were people who drove vehicles transporting freight. Hackmen drove hackney carriages, which were carriages available for hire, like today's taxis. Source: U.S. Census.

Boston also had a relatively high proportion of “draymen, etc.” in its workforce as compared to the other largest cities in the United States for the period from 1880-1900.

This held true both when this employment category was considered as a proportion of all

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 294.

<sup>29</sup> This census data should be taken as approximate, not definitive. Aside from general limitations of census data, such as the difficulty of finding and counting the entire population, data on occupations is especially unreliable.

occupied persons, and also as a percentage of the total population. Table 3.4 compares data from Boston plus the five other cities that, along with Boston, were the largest six cities in the country. The total number of occupied persons classified by the census as “draymen, hackmen, teamsters, etc.” for each city is expressed in two ways: as a percent of the total “occupied” population in the city, and as a percentage of the total population in the city. In every single case, the figure for Boston is higher than for any other city. If the numbers from the “% of total population” category in Table 3.4 are used to calculate the difference in percentages between Boston and other cities, then Boston had more draymen in all cases, ranging from a low of 22% more compared to Saint Louis in 1890, to a high of 77% more compared to Brooklyn in 1890. Using the same procedure with the data of draymen as a percent of the total occupied population gives a slightly smaller differential between Boston and other cities, ranging from a negligible difference compared to Saint Louis in 1880, to a 57% difference in 1890 between Boston and Brooklyn.

**Table 3.4: Draymen, hackmen, and teamsters, etc., as a percent of the total occupied population and total population, for the six largest U.S. cities, 1880-1900.**

Date	Boston		NYC		Philadelphia		Chicago		Brooklyn		Saint Louis	
	% total occ. pop.	% total pop.	% total occ. pop.	% total pop.	% total occ. pop.	% total pop.	% total occ. pop.	% total pop.	% total occ. pop.	% total pop.	% total occ. pop.	% total pop.
1880	3.33	1.37	2.94	1.25	2.43	1.00	2.54	0.97	2.29	0.84	3.29	1.31
1890	4.25	1.95	3.37	1.51	3.17	1.41	3.16	1.32	2.70	1.10	3.88	1.60
1900	4.51	2.02	3.48	1.49	3.37	1.48	3.31	1.37	*	*	3.68	1.57

\* Data not available because New York City incorporated Brooklyn in 1898. Source: U.S. Census.

### 3.3.2 Downtown traffic in the 1920s

**Figure 3.6: Corner of Washington and Bromfield Streets, 1932.**



Source: Photo by Leslie Jones, Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department.

By the 1920s, the population of the city had reached 800,000, while the region had about 1,800,000 people. The bulk of business activity in the region still took place in central Boston, which generated huge flows of people and goods in and out of the city center. The transportation system was able to accommodate this vast increase in travel because the streetcar system itself had changed. In the central city, the streetcars had virtually all been moved underground, while elevated lines had been built out into the suburbs. By moving above or below ground, transit could avoid street-level congestion, thus allowing people to live much farther out, while still preserving similar commute times.

There were few descriptions in the 1920s about just how much traffic congestion slowed travelers. Unlike the subway debates, loop highway proponents did claim to have

compared the time it took them to travel certain routes in congested versus uncongested conditions. One of the only clues to what conditions might have been like comes from an article in the *Post* that reported on “the worst traffic jam in the history of Boston.” Apparently the police had not been directing traffic as usual that day, and the paper described some blocks as being “jammed for more than 15 minutes as scores of cars suffered minor damage.” The worst problems occurred in the Back Bay, though downtown’s congestion was “almost as bad.”<sup>30</sup>

While Bostonians in the 1920s seemed just as concerned about traffic congestion as their predecessors had in the 1890s, the composition of congestion had changed over those decades in two fundamental ways. Pedestrians still thronged the streets in the 1920s,<sup>31</sup> but the makeup of the vehicular traffic had changed radically. First, the surface streetcars, which had so plagued the city at the end of the nineteenth century, had virtually disappeared from the downtown streets. By the mid-1920s, the only transit vehicles on the downtown streets were a very minor number of streetcars and buses.<sup>32</sup> However, a new source of traffic had developed that quickly absorbed whatever free road space the departing transit vehicles had left behind: the passenger automobile. The regional road network was supplied with radial thoroughfares that funneled traffic into the downtown (see Figure 3.7). Most regional traffic moving between one suburb and another was therefore funneled through the downtown, increasing the traffic there.

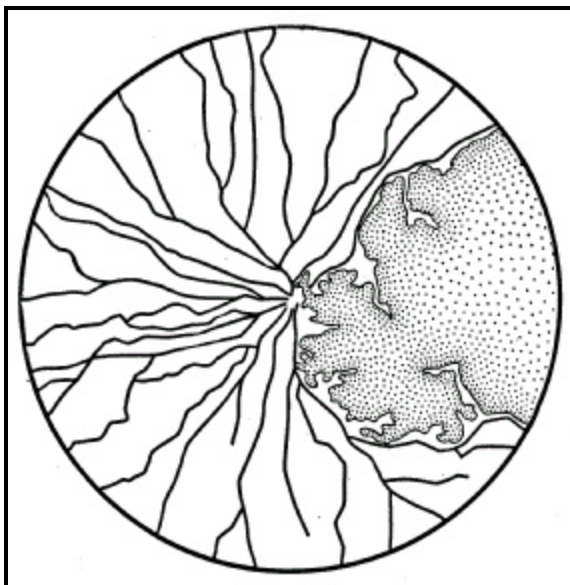
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<sup>30</sup> *Boston Post*, “Terrible tieup on streets,” April [20?] 1926.

<sup>31</sup> Planning consultant Thomas Adams wrote that he had “never seen pedestrian congestion on the street so great as [in the vicinity of Washington and Winter Streets] on a Saturday afternoon . . .” Boston City Planning Board, *Tenth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1924*, 1924, pp. 48-49.

<sup>32</sup> Division of Metropolitan Planning (Massachusetts) Metropolitan District Commission, *Report on improved transportation facilities*, 1927, pp. 3-4.

**Figure 3.7: The Metropolitan Improvement Commission's 1909 map of regional thoroughfares leading into downtown Boston.**



Source: Reprinted in Nelson P. Lewis, *The planning of the modern city*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (revised), New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1922, p. 105.

A survey of street traffic, carried out in the summer of 1924 by the Boston Chamber of Commerce and a legislative special commission studying the loop highway, provides a source of data about the traffic in Boston streets at that time. About 140,000 private vehicles entered and left downtown Boston between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. on the day of the survey (the surveyors did not count transit vehicles). Passenger cars made up 61% of the count, and 39% were freight vehicles. The latter were broken down into motorized trucks and horse-drawn teams, with trucks making up 29% of the total vehicles moving through downtown Boston and teams accounting for 10%. The legislative commission estimated that if vehicle trips internal to the downtown district were included, the total number of trips would have been between 200,000 and 250,000 per day.<sup>33</sup>

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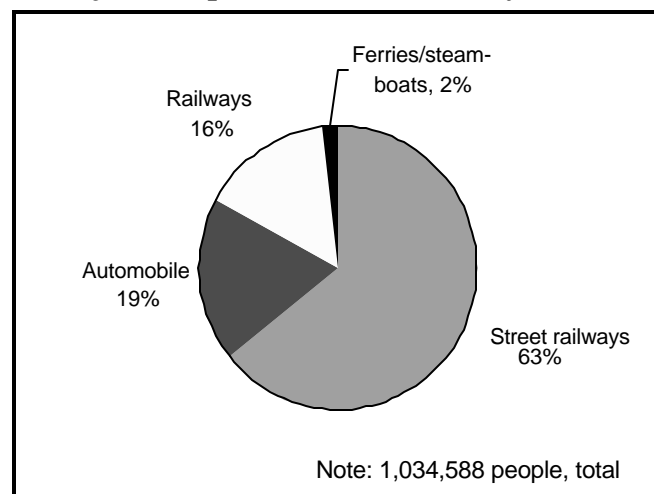
<sup>33</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested," June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7.

*Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement - pp. 1-2.

Two years later the Boston City Planning Board and Chamber of Commerce repeated these counts. The total number of vehicles counted rose to almost 170,000, a 21% increase. The number of passenger cars increased by almost one third and trucks by about a fifth, although the number of horse drawn vehicles fell by about a fifth. The overall composition of traffic was now 64.5% passenger vehicles, 29% trucks, and 6.5% horse-drawn vehicles.<sup>34</sup>

As part of the 1926 survey, estimates were also made of the total number of persons entering the downtown, including those who came by automobile, streetcar, railroad, and ferry or steamboat. A total of just over one million people were estimated to come into the city, more double the number estimated by engineer Clarke to have entered the city in the 1890s. While almost two-thirds of these people came by streetcar, the second most important mode was the auto, which brought almost 20% of the people (see Figure 3.8).<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 3.8: Percent of people entering downtown Boston by major transportation mode, on July 1, 1926.**



Source: Data from *Boston Post*, "Railroads carry less than autos," August [4 ?], 1926.

<sup>34</sup> *Current Affairs in New England*, "Traffic increase heavy; Number of vehicles in down-town district increases twenty-one percent in two years," July 12, 1926, pp. 3-5.

<sup>35</sup> *Boston Post*, "Railroads carry less than autos," August [4?], 1926.

### 3.3.2.1 Growth in autos

As the surveys showed, while the rapid transit system handled the great majority of people commuting in and out of central Boston, increasing numbers of people were traveling in their own automobiles. The development of mass-produced passenger cars meant that, for the first time in history, urban dwellers other than the very rich could transport themselves in private vehicles. And this change meant the addition of thousands of new vehicles to the city streets.

The first two decades of the century saw a veritable explosion in motor vehicle use in the United States. In 1900 there were about 8,000 automobiles registered in the United States, and these were mostly fashionable toys for the wealthy. Twenty years later, the number of automobiles in the country had risen to 8 million, or about 1 automobile for every 13 people.<sup>36</sup> Between just 1920 and 1926, the number of passenger automobiles increased 230% and the number of trucks increased by 275%.<sup>37</sup> By the 1920s automobiles were in common use both in cities and on farms, and the automobile manufacturing industry had become a key sector of the national economy. Figure 3.9 and Figure 3.10, both illustrations from the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce's annual *Facts and Figures of the Automobile Industry*, illustrate the growth of the automobile industry, as well as the industry's optimistic view of its importance to the nation.

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<sup>36</sup> John B. Rae, *The road and the car in American life*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1971, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and figures of the automobile industry*, New York, The Chamber, 1927, p. 4.

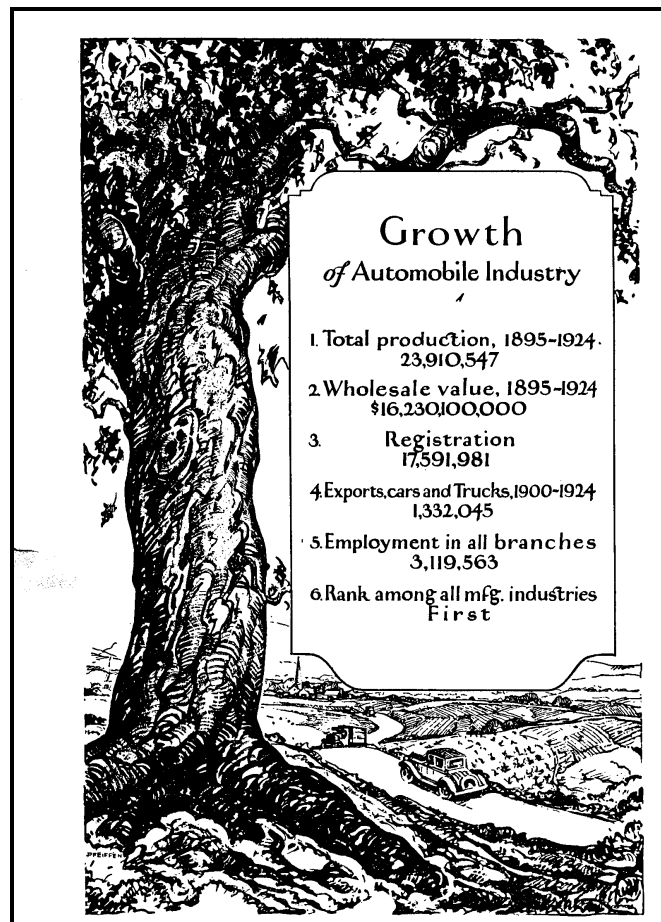


**Figure 3.9: Estimates of wholesale valuation of car and truck sales in 1920, exclusive of parts, tires, and accessories (comparison in the chart is by cubic measure).**



Source: National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and figures of the automobile industry*, New York, The Chamber, 192, p. 2.

**Figure 3.10: Growth in the automobile industry.**



Source: National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and figures of the automobile industry*, New York: The Chamber, 1925, p. 2.

While Boston wasn't one of the quickest cities to adopt motor vehicles, it nevertheless shared in the boom sweeping the country. The data available on vehicles within the city of Boston itself is somewhat sketchy. However, according to estimates the city's Chamber of Commerce furnished to the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, the number of residents per vehicle had fallen to about 9 by 1925, and there were 110,000 vehicles registered to the city's inhabitants in that year (see Figure 3.11).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The Special Commission estimated that Boston had or would soon have 150,000 registered motor vehicles. (*Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission," 1925, supplement.) For information on the rapid growth rate in automobiles in other U.S. cities, see: Clay McShane, "The origins and globalization of traffic control signals," *Journal of Urban History*, March 1999, pp. 379-404.

According to information about the region published by the Boston Globe in 1925, Boston had about 43 automobiles for every 100 families.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 3.11: Statistics on motor vehicles in Boston, 1922-1926.**

Year	Registered motor cars	Registered motor trucks	Total motor vehicles registered	People per car
1922	41,037	10,963	52,000	-
1923	56,795	13,361	70,156	-
1924	-	-	-	-
1925	89,878	18,590	110,268	9
1926	98,028	11,490	109,518	8.03

Sources: National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and figures of the automobile industry*, New York, The Chamber, 1923-1927.

The numbers of vehicles within the city itself are only part of the story, however, since so many people drove into the city from the surrounding suburbs. In 1925, the *Boston Globe* reported that in the metropolitan region surrounding Boston there were about 112,000 passenger cars, or 54 passenger cars per 100 families.<sup>40</sup> As for the whole state, Figure 3.12 presents some key statistics on motor vehicles in Massachusetts. In 1920 there were almost 275,000 vehicles in the state, or one for about every 14 people. By 1925 the total number of vehicles had risen to almost 650,000, while the ratio of people to vehicles had fallen to just over 7 to 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Boston Globe*, *Facts about the Boston sales market: The Boston globe as a newspaper and as an advertising medium: Detailed distribution of circulation as of January 9, 1925, daily, and January 11, 1925, Sunday, by cities and towns*, 1925, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Note: Author's calculation, subtracting Boston data from data for the metropolitan region. *Boston Globe*, *Facts about the Boston sales market*, 1925, p. 3.

**Figure 3.12: Statistics on motor vehicles in Massachusetts, 1915-1927.**

Year	Total Motor Vehicle Registrations	Motor Truck Registrations	Passenger Car Registrations	Persons per Motor Vehicle
1914	77,246	-	-	-
1915	102,633	10,848*	-	-
1916	136,809	16,374*	-	-
1917	174,274	24,268*	-	-
1918	193,497	29,710*	-	-
1919	247,182	39,437*	-	-
1920	274,498	51,386	223,112	13.85
1921	360,732	55,261	305,471	10.70
1922	385,231	59,924	325,307	10.00
1923	481,150	73,505	407,645	8.00
1924	570,578	83,626	486,952	-
1925	646,153	91,340	554,813	7.07
1926	690,190	96,956	593,234	-

Sources: Figures marked with an asterisk are the author's adjustments using data from records of the Massachusetts Registrar of Motor Vehicles, as reported in: Day Baker, "Freight transportation by motor vehicles," *Current Affairs*, March 10, 1924, pp. 20+. All other data is from the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and figures of the automobile industry*, New York, The Chamber, 1919 & 1921-27.

### 3.3.2.2 Freight movement

Although passenger cars comprised the majority of the vehicles on downtown streets, trucks and a few horse-drawn wagons transporting freight still accounted for over a third of vehicles. As in the case of the 1890s, little information exists about just how much freight was moved on a daily or annual basis, but there are a few hints. In 1909 the Metropolitan Improvement Commission published a report that discussed freight movement, among other topics. The report estimated that in 1907, patrons handling at least 500 tons per year traveled over 6 million miles in the city, hauling a little less than 6 million tons of freight.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Metropolitan Improvements Commission, *Public Improvements for the Metropolitan District*, Boston, Wright and Potter, 1909, pp. 70-71.

In 1926 the Metropolitan District Commission's Division of Metropolitan Planning discussed freight movement in downtown Boston as part of a special report "relative to the future development of the railroad and steamship terminal facilities and piers of the metropolitan district and the port of Boston." The Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) explained that the particulars of the freight railroad system in Boston generated large quantities of freight that had to be moved by truck or team. The railroads were organized such that much of the freight had to be transferred from one railroad yard to another over surface streets, instead of by rail. In addition, individual merchants regularly delivered and picked up merchandise themselves; since one merchant often did not have enough merchandise to fill a truck, many of the freight vehicles moving through the streets were only partially loaded. To make matters yet worse, the railroads usually required that freight bound for different destinations be deposited at different locations, even if a merchant was shipping to different destinations served by the same railroad.

The MDC did not provide any estimate of the total amount of trucking generated by the railroads, but did look at one particular source of truck trips. The report explained that the railroad freight houses received approximately 1,900,000 tons of "less than carload freight," freight in quantities too small to fill an entire railroad car. Almost all of this freight was trucked through the city streets, and the MDC estimated that it generated about 12,000 individual truck trips in the city each day.<sup>42</sup>

Another cause of increased freight movement may have been the introduction of the motorized truck. In 1908, the year Henry Ford introduced the Model T, trucks were still

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<sup>42</sup> Division of Metropolitan Planning, (Massachusetts) Metropolitan District Commission, *Special report of the Division of Metropolitan Planning relative to the future development of the railroad and steamship terminal facilities and piers of the metropolitan district and port of Boston*, Boston, Wright and Potter, 1926, pp. 15-16.

primitive and rarely used. However, that situation changed quickly. Between 1915 and 1930, the number of American trucks rose from 158,000 to 3.5 million.<sup>43</sup> Massachusetts was no exception to this national pattern. By 1920 the state had about a quarter as many trucks (50,000) as cars.<sup>44</sup> In 1923, the *Boston City Record* made reference to “the constant increase in . . . both number and size of automobile trucks.”<sup>45</sup> By 1925 Boston and Massachusetts had over 18,000 and 91,000 trucks, respectively (see Figure 3.11 and Figure 3.12).

It is unclear exactly what impact the introduction of motorized trucks had on traffic congestion in Boston in the mid-1920s. At the time, trucks were believed to generate less traffic congestion than the horse-drawn vehicles they replaced. On the other hand, scholars looking back on the period have argued that motorized trucks also may have stimulated changes in business activity that increased the total amount of freight moving through the streets.

In the teens and twenties, popular belief held that trucks would greatly reduce traffic congestion. A truck could maneuver much more easily than a horse-drawn cart. Also, trucks quite literally took up less road space—a horse and cart was a much longer affair than a truck and therefore occupied more space on the street.<sup>46</sup> In addition, a motorized truck could often haul more merchandise than a horse-drawn vehicle. In 1927, the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce published an illustration of this argument in

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<sup>43</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass frontier: The suburbanization of the United States*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 184.

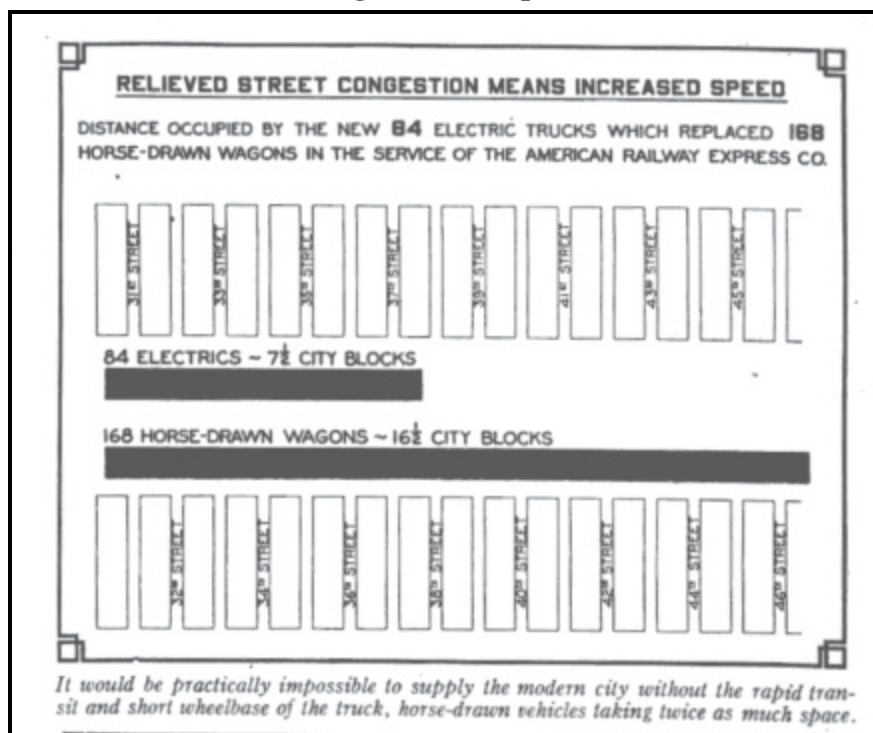
<sup>44</sup> K. H. Schaeffer and Elliott Sclar, *Access for all: Transportation and urban growth*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1975, p. 86.

<sup>45</sup> *Boston City Record*, “New two-mile thoroughfare through downtown section proposed to aid traffic,” December 22, 1923, pp. 1741 & 1745.

<sup>46</sup> For an example of early opinions of how trucks would reduce traffic congestion, see: *American City*, “Unchoking our congested streets,” October 1920, pp. 351-354.

*Facts and Figures of the Automobile Industry*. The chamber noted that the American Railway Express Company had replaced 1,688 horse-drawn wagons with 84 electric trucks, and illustrated how much less street space was consumed by the trucks (see Figure 3.13). As for the issue of maneuverability, authors K.H. Schaeffer and Elliot Sclar remind us, “Just compare the ease with which even a large trailer truck can be backed into a loading dock to the shouting, cussing and shoving that is associated with getting a cumbersome team of horses to back up a foot or two.”<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 3.13: Illustration showing that trucks take up less street space than horse-drawn wagons to transport merchandise.**



Sources: National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and figures of the automobile industry*, New York, the Chamber, 1927, p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> Schaeffer and Sclar, *Access for all*, 1975, p. 37.

Nevertheless, even though trucks may have been more efficient than horse-drawn vehicles at moving freight, more recent research suggests the introduction of motorized trucks may have generated a great deal of new freight movement. Scholars writing about the impact of trucks on urban development patterns have noted that once motorized trucks made freight transportation relatively inexpensive, factories had greater freedom in where they located. Businesses no longer needed to locate as close to a railroad terminal as possible in order to minimize the high cost of transportation by horse and cart. With the introduction of the motor truck, freight transportation became cheap enough that locating on inexpensive suburban land far from a railroad terminal was a cost-effective option. This change in land-use decisions increased trucking activity substantially.

One piece of evidence supporting the argument that motorized trucks increased the amount of freight transported comes from Schaeffer and Sclar, who looked at the growth of manufacturing jobs in the Boston region between 1909 and 1919. They found that the number of jobs in communities within two to six miles of the city's center grew much faster than employment elsewhere in the region. The growth in jobs in this part of the region probably came both from businesses leaving central Boston, and also in some cases from factories that had previously located far outside Boston near rail stations, but moved into the inner suburbs once they could use trucks to transport freight from the central city railroad stations to suburban factories.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84. Similar results were found in a study of business relocations in Chicago between 1908 and 1922. Leon Moses and Harold F. Williamson, "The location of economic activity," *American Economic Review*, May 1967, pp. 214-215.



Schaeffer and Sclar's argument about the increasing use of truck transportation is supported by a statement from the MDC's report, which commented on the shift of freight from rail to trucks:

With the growth of the motor, freight is more and more being handled from our railroad and steamship terminals to its destination within 40 or 50 miles of the city by truck, and more than half of the freight received over the wharves of the city is now sent to its final destination by truck rather than by train.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.4 Traffic regulations

The way vehicles moved around the streets, and thus their impact on congestion, was influenced by the regulations—or lack thereof—that the city imposed. In the 1890s, traffic was primarily regulated by the city council, though the state also had a few traffic regulations as well. By 1850 the Massachusetts legislature had a law ordering that when vehicles traveling in opposite directions met, they were to stay to the right hand side of the road. That basic rule was augmented by 1876 with another statute ordering that a vehicle overtaking a slower one pass to the left. Further statutes gave cities the power to make rules and regulations in relation to street traffic.<sup>50</sup>

The regulations were enforced by the Boston police, who were not under the city's control but rather governed by a board appointed by the governor. Comments made by irritated participants in the debates of the 1890s indicate that the police did not enforce the regulations very carefully.

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<sup>49</sup> Division of Metropolitan Planning, (Massachusetts) Metropolitan District Commission, *Special report of the Division*, 1926, pp. 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> Boston City Council, *Ordinances and rules and orders of the city of Boston, together with a digest of the general and specific statutes of the Massachusetts Legislature relating to the city*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1876; Peleg W. Chandler, *The charter and ordinances of the city of Boston, together with the acts of the legislature relating to the city*, Boston, John H. Eastburn, 1850, pp. 149-50.

By 1850 the city of Boston had also established basic rules designed to minimize traffic obstructions. These were to change remarkably little between that year and 1894.<sup>51</sup> Many of these laws actually had nothing to do with vehicles or even pedestrians. An elaborate set of rules regulated such activities as digging up streets for utility work, moving buildings or herds of animals through the streets, and installing signs or other items that might obstruct streets or sidewalks. Drivers were also subject to various regulations, however. Some of these were specific to drivers of any “truck, cart, wagon, sled, or dray”—i.e., those transporting freight. Loaded wagons were limited to 24 ½ feet in length, 10 feet in width, and 3 tons in weight. Wagon drivers had to limit their horses to a walking pace.

A separate set of regulations applied to all drivers, including both freight vehicles and carriages. Drivers were forbidden to drive faster than seven miles an hour. The term “parking,” was not yet in use, but there were several regulations that covered the issue of “stopped” vehicles. Drivers were not to stop their vehicles at or near intersections or pedestrian crossings. No vehicle was allowed to stop more than five minutes in the street without someone attending to it, and only up to a maximum of twenty minutes even when attended. (An exception to the twenty-minute rule was made for doctors attending to patients.) When vehicles did stop in the street, they were to be parallel to the sidewalk, and as close as possible to the curb. If the street was less than thirty feet wide, vehicles could stand in a single row along one side. On wider streets vehicles were permitted to park in one row on both sides of the street. (Given that vehicles could be up to 10 feet wide, on a 31-foot street this would have left at most 11 feet in the center for moving

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<sup>51</sup> Chandler, *The charter and ordinances of the city of Boston*, 1850.

traffic.) Drivers were also directed to stop their vehicles such that they would not prevent other vehicles from passing. The only exception to this rule was that wagons unloading or loading heavy articles were allowed to block traffic “for a reasonable time, not exceeding six minutes.”

There were only a few differences between the 1850 city regulations and those issued in 1876.<sup>52</sup> As of 1876, omnibus drivers were directed to stick to their assigned routes and not to stop longer than necessary to take on or let off passengers. Teams were added to those vehicles allowed to travel up to seven miles per hour. Two new exceptions were added to the rule about not stopping for more than twenty minutes: city carriages stopped at city buildings, and certain wagons selling produce were allowed to exceed the limit. Also, a new ordinance directed drivers not to allow their vehicle to get closer than ten feet from the vehicle ahead when crossing streets or pedestrian paths. A final change was the addition of a rule allowing coal and firewood to be placed in the street up to two hours, or up to thirty minutes after sunset, as long as it didn’t obstruct traffic.

Another addition was a set of rules for streetcars, which were now common on the streets. The horse-drawn cars were to keep at least thirty feet apart and to travel no more than five miles per hour in most of the city. They were forbidden to stop abreast of another car traveling in the opposite direction, or to stop longer than necessary to let passengers on or off when in the central city.

By 1890, the wording of some of the regulations had changed considerably, but their content was virtually identical. One of the only changes to the rules mentioned above

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<sup>52</sup> Boston City Council, *Ordinances and rules and orders of the city of Boston, together with a digest of the general and specific statutes of the Massachusetts Legislature relating to the city*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1876.

was that by 1890, the regulation on pedestrians blocking the sidewalk had been changed such that it was now illegal to obstruct foot-travelers for any amount of time. Also, the prohibition on hackney carriages stopping abreast of each other had been extended to all vehicles, and city carriages stopped at public buildings could no longer remain past the general twenty minute limit.<sup>53</sup> Over the next few years, during the course of the congestion debates described in Chapters 4 and 5, many people proposed changing the regulations. Nevertheless, by 1894 they still looked virtually the same as they had in 1890.<sup>54</sup>

The police were responsible for enforcing the regulations. There was very little discussion of how effective their enforcement was, though it was likely very spotty at best. Traffic regulations were not considered a priority for police in most cities at that time. One cartoon from the *Boston Post* suggests that most drivers did not pay them much attention (see Figure 3.14).

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<sup>53</sup> Boston City Council, *The Revised Ordinances of 1890 of the City of Boston and the Revised Regulations of 1890 of the Board of Aldermen of the City of Boston, being the tenth revision*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1890.

<sup>54</sup> Boston City Council, *The revised ordinances of 1892 of the City of Boston and the revised regulations of 1892 of the Board of Aldermen of the City of Boston: Being the eleventh revision, second edition, containing all ordinances passed between March 3, 1892, and January 30, 1894, and all regulations of the Board of Aldermen passed between July 22, 1892, and January 30, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894.

**Figure 3.14: *Post* cartoon about lack of enforcement of traffic regulations.**



Note: The heading at the top reads, "Who are the people?" The sign to the left of the figure reads, "City ordinance be hanged," and the sign to the right "The police are with us." The front two papers on the ground read, "City ordinance against fast driving," and "City ordinance against obstructing streets and walks." Source: *Boston Post*, April 24, 1894, p. 1.

By the 1920s, the city's traffic regulations had become much more complex. Just around the turn of the century many urban reformers and traffic experts began to push cities to use regulations more effectively to minimize congestion on the streets and

improve safety. Between 1900 and 1920 cities around the country adopted increasingly elaborate regulations.<sup>55</sup>

By 1920, the state had moved control over traffic regulations in Boston from the city council to the Board of Street Commissioners. The commissioners adjusted the rules regularly, although the code was only republished as a whole from every year or so. During the years of the loop highway the rules were adjusted in minor ways many times, but there were no major changes.<sup>56</sup> The following paragraphs describe the *Street Traffic Regulations and Rules for Driving* from 1919.<sup>57</sup>

The 1919 *Regulations* were published as a sixteen-page pamphlet covering thirteen articles. Copies of the pamphlet were available at the offices of the Board of Street Commissioners or at any police station. The articles set down a wide variety of rules, covering topics ranging from instructions on driving and parking, to a prohibition on mistreating horses, to the maximum permitted length and width of vehicles. As the *Regulations* explained in a paragraph buried towards the end, the rules were both “specific and general.” The general rules covered the whole city, while the specific ones designated certain streets where the rules were modified specifically to help reduce traffic congestion in the business district:

These rules are both specific and general. The specific rules are intended to apply to the congested part of the city, and are to govern in the streets and places referred to, *so as to aid the progress of business and to facilitate traffic*, while the general rules are intended to apply to all sections of the city. Drivers of vehicles should familiarize themselves with these rules, so as to

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<sup>55</sup> William Phelps Eno, *The story of highway traffic control, 1899-1939*, The Eno Foundation for Highway Traffic Control, 1939; Clay McShane, “The origins and globalization of traffic control signals,” 1999, pp. 379-404.

<sup>56</sup> There were some minor changes, such as banning parking on additional blocks, and changing twenty-minute time limits to one-hour limits.

<sup>57</sup> Boston Board of Street Commissioners, *Street traffic regulations and rules for driving*, 1919.

distinguish between the two classes, and they should also familiarize themselves with the district which is considered congested . . . and govern themselves accordingly.<sup>58</sup> (*Italics added.*)

Many of the general rules regulated driving behavior. For example, the city had one-way streets by the 1920s, and one article designated a long list of streets that were one-way between 7 a.m. and 6 pm, Sundays and legal holidays excepted. There was also a prohibition against driving any vehicle “designed or loaded so as likely to cause delay or accident.” Drivers were directed to stay to the right unless passing slow-moving vehicles, to stay away from intersections and not to block them, not to reverse direction in a street only if this could be accomplished without backing up the vehicle, and to keep vehicles off sidewalks.

With the exception of one-way street designations, the specific rules all aimed to prevent vehicles from standing in the street in congested places. Indeed, almost half the pamphlet consisted of three articles that limited vehicles from stopping in ways that might obstruct traffic. These were “Article 5 - Stopping, Standing and Turning,” “Article 6 - Receiving and Delivering Passengers and Merchandise,” and “Article 9 - Restricted Streets.” The regulations aimed to control both vehicles left unattended at the curb (parked) and also attended vehicles stopped at the curb to load or unload goods.

In the early and mid-1920s, the only available parking lots were just outside the downtown, so most drivers parked on the street. The primary rule about parking in the central business district was that no vehicle should be parked for more than twenty minutes, though police officers could, at their discretion, permit vehicles to stand for longer periods of time when this wouldn’t interfere with vehicle or pedestrian traffic. This basic rule was augmented with long lists of blocks where special rules applied,

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

however. On certain streets the board permitted longer parking between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Elsewhere the pamphlet designated streets where no vehicle could stand for more than five minutes between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., streets where vehicles could stop only to drop off or pick up passengers, and streets where there was no standing at all from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Another section of the *Regulations* identified streets where vehicles were permitted to stop and wait for passengers for up to either thirty or sixty minutes, depending on the location.

Other regulations targeted vehicles loading and unloading merchandise. On a number of designated “restricted streets,” delivery or collection of heavy items or backing of vehicles to the curb was prohibited from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. When transferring merchandise across sidewalks, skids were permitted, but only when they didn’t cause “unreasonable” obstruction and only for a maximum of five minutes at a time.

Merchandise was not to be transferred from one vehicle to another in the street, except in a small number of streets listed as exceptions.

Startlingly, perhaps, to today’s reader, is the fact that two sections of the *Regulations* specifically permitted stopped freight vehicles to block streetcars and other vehicles. One of these sections permitted vehicles, during business hours, to back up to the curb to load or unload for a maximum of ten minutes. Between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. longer stops were permitted for loading or unloading bulky merchandise, even if this congested traffic, though “in no event shall such teams or vehicles block surface cars<sup>59</sup> for a longer period than ten minutes at any one time.” The other section prohibited drivers from parking vehicles such that they would obstruct other vehicles for longer than five minutes

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<sup>59</sup> The term “surface cars” referred to streetcars.



(thereby implying that it *was* acceptable to obstruct other vehicles for up to five minute).

In the 1925 book *Street Traffic Control*, traffic expert Miller McClintock criticized the first of these provisions in a section discussing “Regulations of the Standing Vehicle.” McClintock pointed out that many cities allowed vehicles to stand perpendicular to the curb, although only if they didn’t block traffic, but he recommended against permitting this in congested areas. He also said that Boston was unusual in not only permitting this, but even allowing it when doing so blocked other vehicles:

In Boston one finds the surprising permission to drivers of loading vehicles to back to the curbing between the hours of 6 o’clock p.m. and 6 o’clock a.m. *and to block surface cars for a period not to exceed 10 minutes at one time.* In many other cities one finds explicit permission for vehicles to back to the curb to discharge or load goods, though usually with the general qualification that the position of the vehicle shall not unduly obstruct traffic.<sup>60</sup> (Italics in original.)

In addition to regulating vehicles, the regulations had a short section covering pedestrian behavior. Article 11 was entitled “The rights and duties of pedestrians.” It noted that roads were “primarily intended for vehicles,” but that pedestrians had the right to cross them in safety. Their only direct responsibility was never to cross without first looking for vehicles. In addition, Article 11 requested, though did not require, that pedestrians cross at intersections:

By crossing as nearly as possible at right angles, preferably at regular crossings, persons will greatly add to their own safety, facilitate traffic and make it much less difficult for the horses, which often have to be reined in suddenly and painfully to avoid careless and unthinking pedestrians.<sup>61</sup>

The regulations also suggested that pedestrians could increase walking speeds by keeping to the right on sidewalk, and not stopping in such a way to block other pedestrians.

In theory the police enforced the traffic regulations, and drivers caught breaking them were fined up to \$20 for each offense. The Boston police first formed a dedicated

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<sup>60</sup> Miller McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1st ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1925, pp. 154-155.

<sup>61</sup> Boston Board of Street Commissioners, *Street traffic regulations*, 1919, p. 15.

traffic squad in 1919, and by 1925 it had 180 men.<sup>62</sup> This traffic squad was responsible for both directing traffic and enforcing traffic regulations. Bostonians frequently complained about the lack of enforcement, however, especially with regard to parking restrictions. For example, in 1926 a member of the Chamber of Commerce wrote a letter to the police commissioner requesting the creation of a special group of officers charged solely with the task of enforcing parking regulations. In the letter he complained that:

The parking situation in down-town Boston is becoming increasingly acute. Due doubtless to the shortage of officers, the "one-hour" and "no-parking" regulations are not being enforced as the public would wish them to be.<sup>63</sup>

The police themselves also complained of the difficulty enforcing parking restrictions, claiming that they did not have nearly enough officers to do the job. The chamber reported that a police captain brought the problem up during a speech he gave at the chamber:

When asked what business men can do, [the] Captain says that they can pay more attention to parking. "That is a factor of the traffic problem which is giving us as much, if not more, trouble than anything else."<sup>64</sup>

In the fall of 1926 the police finally designated a portion of their newly enlarged squad to the parking problem. The chamber informed *Current Affairs* readers that, "A parking squad of about thirty-five men with roving assignments will be formed so that its efficiency will be on a high level. Their duty will be to root out the illegal parker, and particularly the 'all-day parker.'"<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Divisions 20 and 21, B.P.D.," September 28, 1925, pp. 5+.

<sup>63</sup> *Current Affairs*, "New police officers in training" July 12, 1926, pp. 4 & 16. For other complaints about lack of enforcement, see also: *Boston Transcript*, "More freedom in general parking under new rule," December 2, 1925, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Divisions 20 and 21, B.P.D.," September 28, 1925, pp. 5+. See also statement from Police Chief Wilson in: *Boston Transcript*, "Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested," June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: Literally 'no parking' henceforth," August 30, 1926, pp. 6 & 17.

One problem with enforcement was that tickets had to be prosecuted through the regular courts. This made enforcement extremely time-consuming, since the officer who issued a citation had to show up for a court trial. (Throughout the years covered by this case study, there were repeated calls to change state law so that traffic violations could be collected as simple fines instead of being prosecuted through the regular court system.) Boston police also most likely faced the problems historian Paul Barrett described in Chicago, where enforcing traffic regulations was nearly impossible, especially with regard to passenger automobiles. Barrett explained that enforcement was difficult because judges often threw out the charges, the public lacked respect for the ordinances (a situation heightened by motorists' belief that enforcement was often corrupt), and autos were quick enough that drivers could often speed away from the police and escape.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Paul Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit: The formation of public policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983, Chapters 2 & 5.

## CURING CONGESTION IN THE 1890s: THE SUBWAY STORY

### 4.1 Introduction

In 1890 the West End Street Railway Company petitioned the state legislature for a charter to build an elevated road. One supporter described the situation the road was meant to improve as follows:

Imagine for a moment—it is a fact: I will not ask you to imagine it, but to face it—that all this travel seeks an entrance into the heart of Boston through this little narrow neck between these two expanding stretches of suburb at the narrowest parts of Washington and Tremont Streets, the width of Tremont Street opposite my office, on the corner of Tremont and Pemberton square, being 31 feet. What is the result? The result is that in these two jugular veins, through which the whole blood of these connected bodies must pass, there is continually a congestion of travel, for these who ride and those who walk. Your teams, your carriages, your drays, your horse cars, all gather there in inextricable confusion.<sup>1</sup>

The speaker's sentiments were shared by many of the city's residents, who were indeed fed up with the traffic described by the petitioner. However, the private sector was not to be the source of action on the problem. Late in 1890, the city and state government finally took a new interest in the matter. Instead of relying on the private sector to bring about improvements, they set to work to try to craft a solution themselves. Over the next few years, a series of public commissions produced and studied plans for new streets, subways, elevated roads, and, to a lesser extent, traffic regulations. The solution that in

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<sup>1</sup> John Davis Long, *Argument of Hon. John D. Long on behalf of the petition of the West End Street Railway, for authority to construct elevated roads, April 8*, Boston, Daniel Gunn & Company, 1890, pp. 7-8.

1894 finally received the necessary city, state, and popular approval was for a city-built subway.<sup>2</sup>

The subway opened in 1897. It ran about two miles through the congested downtown, and connected to existing surface streetcar lines. The initial five stations were located at Boylston Street, Park Street, Scollay Square, Adams Square, and Haymarket Square (see Figure 3.4). Its opening was a major event in transportation history, as it was only the fourth subway in the world at that time, and the first in the United States.

This chapter traces the planning and political processes that led to the final decision to build the subway, as well as providing contextual information relevant to understanding the events that occurred. After discussing the major trends in planning activity of the times, it describes the chief institutions and individuals involved in the transportation planning debates. The last section details the events of the subway story itself.

## **4.2 Planning in the 1890s**

City planning in the 1890s was still a concept gathering force rather than an established profession. Most people who performed work we would today call city planning didn't use that term. Nevertheless, a growing number of people were studying cities and trying to affect their development using concepts and techniques that would soon coalesce into a recognized profession. None of them were full-time "city planners," all having other jobs. Some worked as designers and builders, having backgrounds in

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<sup>2</sup> A charter was also granted at the same time for a private corporation to build an elevated road, but the subway was the heart of the congestion relief plans.

architecture, landscape architecture, and engineering, while others came from such assorted professions as law, medicine, and the clergy.

Most historians of the city planning profession in its modern form assume it to have begun in the mid-nineteenth century, when industrialization and an influx of immigrants drawn to manufacturing jobs radically changed the form of cities. The dramatically increasing numbers of people and economic activity crowded the streets, leading to calls for better infrastructure in order to deal with the traffic congestion.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the exploding population led to the creation of large districts of tenement housing, where residents crammed into tiny, expensive, uncomfortable living arrangements. Tenement housing and what was called the “congestion of population” came to be seen as some of the greatest social problems of the day.<sup>4</sup> Tenements were believed to breed disease, and to corrupt residents’ minds as well as their bodies. These housing conditions were of concern to middle and upper class city dwellers for more than altruistic reasons. They feared epidemics of contagious diseases that put all city residents at risk, too, and worried about social uprisings from dissatisfied laborers and the unemployed. Also, they perceived tenements dwellers as physically unfit, and therefore less productive factory workers or, should the need arise, soldiers.

A second set of traditions informing the planning movement in the 1890s was the newly developing good government movement. Starting in the late 1880s, but really taking hold in the 1890s, many middle-class citizens began to advocate major changes in the political arrangements of municipal government. These reformers were reacting to

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: *Engineering News*, “The growth of city traffic,” October 15, 1897, p. 273-275; *Scientific American*, “Bridge over our downtown side streets,” February 8, 1890, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: *The Forum*, “The congestion of cities,” January 1888, pp. 527-535; *The Forum*, “The tenement-house problem,” April 1888, pp. 207-215.

what they described as “machine governments,” a system that developed after the Civil War where tightly organized urban political organizations offered jobs, money, and other personal favors in exchange for votes. Immigrant communities usually ran these machines, which was doubtless one reason they attracted the ire of the mostly Anglo reformers. The good government movement aimed to replace machine government with more professional urban governance oriented towards the “public interest” rather than individual interests. Reforms favored by the good government advocates were mostly technical changes to the structure of local government, such as the introduction of civil service exams for municipal employees, and the replacement of district elections for city councilors with at-large elections. While these procedural reforms were at the heart of the good government movement in the late nineteenth century, they did also take an interest in improvements to the physical city, such parks, utilities, and transportation systems.<sup>5</sup>

The middle class citizens who set out to improve urban living conditions took different approaches. Some, working from a public health perspective, tried to force tenement owners to provide residents with more light and air, since these were believed to keep disease at bay. Also, they encouraged cities and tenement owners to develop better water and sanitation facilities for low-income citizens.<sup>6</sup>

Another group of reformers advocated the creation of publicly accessible green space, first in the form of cemeteries, and later as public parks and playgrounds. These

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<sup>5</sup> Mel Scott, *American city planning since 1890: A history commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the American Institute of Planners*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, pp. 40-42; Robert H. Wiebe, *The search for order, 1877-1920*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1967. For a classic statement of reform ideology written around the turn of the century, see: Lincoln Steffens, *The shame of the cities*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1957 [orig. 1904].

<sup>6</sup> Jon A. Peterson, "The impact of sanitary reform upon American urban planning, 1840-1890," in *Introduction to planning history in the United States*, edited by D. A. Krueckeberg, New Brunswick, N.J., Center for Urban Policy Research, 1983, pp. 13-39.

open spaces were intended to provide recreational opportunities, as well as to have a socializing effect on the poor, who were seen to lack middle-class values. The most famous practitioner of the parks movement was Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the designers of New York City's Central Park. He later developed park and parkway plans for many other cities, including Boston.

A related reform vision was that the land around cities should be opened up for the development of inexpensive homes. Once cheap and rapid transportation linked these neighborhoods to downtown jobs, then working families could afford to live in the suburbs, where the influences of home ownership and "country" landscapes were assumed to benefit residents' morals and health.<sup>7</sup> The ideal of suburban living as an antidote to the perceived ills of the city was one of the strongest beliefs motivating city planning at the time.

Somewhat later in the century, a new interest in monumental public architecture developed, known as the "City Beautiful" movement. Architects such as Daniel Burnham drew up plans for palatial public buildings arranged around plazas and magnificent boulevards. These magnificent and imposing civic spaces, designed in the style of the grand European capitals, were meant not only to express to the world a city's wealth and prestige, but also to have an uplifting effect on residents, inspiring them to be good citizens.

Finally, a theme running through many of these urban reform movements was the need to improve transportation systems, both the congested and dirty downtown streets, and also public transportation systems that brought commuters into downtown jobs.

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<sup>7</sup> David Schuyler, *The new urban landscape: The redefinition of city form in nineteenth-century America*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.



Urban improvers looked at the narrow and twisting streets that marked most downtowns and dreamed of replacing them with grids, perhaps punctuated with sweeping diagonal boulevards.<sup>8</sup> Very few major street improvements to ease congestion were built in downtowns, but there were many plans for them. Street design was also a key concern when laying out new residential neighborhoods, with designers hoping to avoid the “mistakes” made by older communities.

Another important transportation issue was improving transit out to the suburbs, since only with good, inexpensive transit could families with modest incomes afford to live there. New York City built the country’s first elevated railroad in the late 1870s, and throughout the rest of the century, leaders in other cities tried to build these systems. Elevated railroads traveled much faster than surface streetcars and thus held the potential of speeding commutes and opening up to development more remote land. However, by 1890 Chicago was the only other city to have built elevated roads; efforts in other cities were stymied by financial problems, competition among different would-be elevated railroad developers, and public opposition to the noise, dirt, and other environmental problems associated with elevated trains.

Boston was relatively advanced in many of these urban improvement movements. The city had an unusually large number of suburban housing units, and an extensive system of streetcars and commuter railroads linking these residents to the downtown. Also, in the 1880s and mid-1890s, reformers succeeded in creating regional water, sewerage, and park commissions. The good government movement was also established

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example: *American Architect and Building News*, “Thoroughfares in great cities,” July 27, 1878, pp. 27-28; *Architectural Record*, “The street plan of a city’s business district,” March 1903, pp. 234-247; *Engineering News*, “Diagonal avenues in cities,” October 10, 1891, pp. 334-335.

in Boston, with the so-called “Citizens’ Association” of conservative businessmen advocating for reform of the municipal administration.

### **4.3 Key players**

This section describes the individuals, government institutions, and civic organizations that were dominated the debates over transportation and traffic congestion. During the period of this case study, Boston mayor Nathan Matthews, Jr. was the single most prominent advocate for improvements to the city’s transportation system, and also of the subway plan in particular. The state legislature also played a key role in the events. A series of proposals for major capital projects to reduce congestion were debated from 1891 to 1894, with most of the major public hearings and studies happening at the state level. The state legislature, which was known as the “General Court,” appointed a series of legislative committees to study the city’s transportation needs, and, voted on several proposals that the committees recommended. The official role of the city council was limited to approving some of the acts passed by the legislature, though the council also requested the legislative committees to take certain positions. In addition to official government actors, the citizens of Boston were called upon to approve or disapprove legislative acts in three different referenda. Also, various interest groups lobbied for and against particular proposals. Of these, the most active were the Master Teamsters’ Association, representing owners of teaming businesses; the Citizens’ Association, a good government group of mostly Republican businessmen; and the Associated Board of Trade, which represented many industry associations.

### **4.3.1 The city government**

In the 1890s, a mayor and a bicameral city council governed the city of Boston. The Board of Aldermen had 12 members elected by district, while the Common Council had 75 members representing 25 wards. The mayor and city council members were all elected to one-year terms. Thanks to a major revision of the city charter in 1885, the mayor had wide-ranging powers that included the right to appoint employees in the executive departments, as well as a line-item veto over appropriations by the Board of Aldermen.

Several different departments were responsible for street and traffic issues. There was an elected Board of Street Commissioners. This board had the authority to make traffic regulations (which previously the city council had done.) At the mayor's request, it also prepared various street widening plans and estimated the cost of other proposals. In 1891, Mayor Matthews also created a Board of Survey to supervise the laying out of new streets and widening of existing ones. Because it dealt mostly with streets in undeveloped land, the Board of Survey was only tangentially uninvolved in the deliberations about downtown congestion relief.

Traditionally the city government had been controlled by elite, Protestant, "Yankee" families known as the "Boston Brahmins." In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, however, the working-class Irish immigrant community became a powerful political force and helped move the city from Republican to Democratic control. There is no good data on the exact percent of the population that was first or second generation

Irish, but one 1899 writer estimated they were about half of the city's residents.<sup>9</sup> The first Irish councilman was elected in 1857, the first Irish alderman in 1870, and the first Irish mayor in 1885.<sup>10</sup> The Boston Brahmins did not withdraw from local elective politics in the face of the new immigrant power, as happened in some other American cities. Instead, a coalition developed between the Irish community and a number of younger, so-called "Yankee Democrats," enabling the party to control the mayoralty for twenty of the years between 1870 and 1900. In 1885 Boston elected its first Irish mayor, but for most of these years the coalition backed candidates from patrician Yankee families. The three mayors who served the longest (they included Matthews) were all graduates of Harvard who came from prominent families.<sup>11</sup>

The Irish Democratic political organization in Boston was not a strict machine system, as was found in some immigrant-controlled cities like New York. From the mid-1870s through the early 1890s, Patrick Maguire was as close to a single leader as the Democratic Irish had, but he was "first among equals," as one author put it, rather than a boss who controlled the whole city. Instead of a centralized machine, the Boston Irish had various personalities who controlled blocks of votes.<sup>12</sup>

Nathan Matthews, Jr., who served as mayor from 1891 to 1894, was commonly referred to as the father of the subway, and indeed his is the one name prominently linked to the plan, from beginning to end. This reputation lasted beyond the years of his mayoralty—almost all his biographers mention the subway as one of his major

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<sup>9</sup> *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, "The growth of the population of Boston," June 1899, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> *Political Science Quarterly*, "Ethnic political transition in Boston, 1884-1933: Some lessons for contemporary cities," Summer 1978, p. 222.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Blodgett, "Yankee leadership in a divided city, 1860-1910," in *Boston 1700-1980: The evolution of urban politics*, edited by R. P. Formisano and C. K. Burns, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Steven P. Erie, *Rainbow's end: Irish-Americans and the dilemmas of urban machine politics, 1840-1985*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 9, 28, 42.

achievements. His intense involvement with transportation issues began in 1891, when he served as a member on a legislative Rapid Transit Commission studying the region's rapid transit needs, and he advocated for and against various transportation improvements over the next few years, culminating his efforts with a successful push to win approval for the subway.

Matthews was born in 1854 into a Yankee family. His education included two years studying law and political economics in Germany, as well as bachelor's and law degrees from Harvard. Over the course of his life Matthews became a prominent real estate lawyer and trustee for a number of the city's large real estate trusts.<sup>13</sup> Matthews' election fit the pattern of Boston local politics during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the Irish community allied with Yankee Democrats to keep the city out of Republican hands. In the late 1880s, he became involved in the newly formed Young Men's Democratic Club of Massachusetts, an alliance of Yankee and Irish Democrats.<sup>14</sup>

Although not known for his personal appeal, Matthews was highly respected. During his campaign in the 1890s, the *New York Times* described him as "a brilliant orator, and a fearless champion of clean politics and decent methods in administration."<sup>15</sup> Matthews' administration was widely praised for efficiency and financial prudence. He consolidated or eliminated several departments in the city government, and reduced both the city's debt and notoriously high tax rate.<sup>16</sup> He appointed Republicans to a few positions such as City Auditor in order to protect himself from Republican opposition. (The Republican *Herald* praised him as a "bright and clever man," when speaking of his

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<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, "Nathan Matthews, Jr., nominated by the Democrats," November 11, 1890, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Harmond, *Tradition and change in the gilded age: A political history of Massachusetts, 1878-1893*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia, New York City, 1967, p. 311.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, "Boston's local election: A young reformer likely to be elected mayor," December 8, 1890, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, "Boston's municipal contest: An effort to overthrow good government," November 27, 1893, p. 3.

“strength and importance” as an advocate before the state legislature.<sup>17</sup>) While Matthews’ fiscal conservancy won him friends among good government reform advocates such as the Citizens’ Association, he ultimately alienated the working classes after the country sank into depression in the spring of 1893, because he refused to put the city into debt in order to fund relief payments to the unemployed, or create new city jobs for them. The one exception to his refusal to expand employment was his support for the subway.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Matthews refused to support most programs suggested as methods to provide income to the unemployed suggests that his support for the subway was based on a conviction that it was good transportation policy, rather than a desire to provide employment.

Along with the subway, Matthews was a strong promoter of better municipal administration and planning. Under his rule the city began an investigation of its inadequate water supply that led to the creation of a metropolitan water board in 1895. He created the Board of Survey to study the need for laying out new streets, had the municipality begin watering streets, paved and repaved needy street surfaces, and improved the city’s parks.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4.3.2 The state government**

The state legislature in Massachusetts was known as the General Court. It had two bodies, a Senate of 40 members and a House of Representatives with 240 members.

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<sup>17</sup> *Boston Herald*, "The mayor and Mr. Whitney; Shining stars in the firmament of legislative committee," March 19, 1893, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> *New England Quarterly*, "Nathan Matthews: Politics of reform in Boston, 1890-1910," 1977, pp. 626-643; Geoffrey Blodgett, *Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland era*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966; Blodgett, "Yankee leadership in a divided city", 1983.

<sup>19</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Mayor Matthews accepts," December 1, 1893, p. 3; Blodgett, *Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland era*, 1966.

Members were elected annually, and received only a very small salary. They tended to come from well-respected families, but were rarely members of upper class. Many were young men, not very politically savvy, who were trying to build a reputation before going on to more prestigious elected office. Few of them remained for very long in their seats.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century the city of Boston, which was largely Democratic, often found itself at odds with the General Court, which had been Republican-controlled since the end of the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> In 1895, the high point for Republican control, there were 36 Republicans and 4 Democrats in the senate, while the house had 191 Republicans, 48 Democrats, and 1 Socialist.<sup>22</sup> The Boston members, as Democrats, were usually among the least prestigious in the house.<sup>23</sup>

The legislature was well-known for its antipathy to the city of Boston. City-state conflict has been portrayed by some scholars as a nativist reaction to the rise of immigrant Irish political power in the city. However, the city and state had been feuding for far longer than the Irish had any appreciable power—at least back to the 1850s, when the General Court legislated that only authorized government agents could sell alcohol in Boston. The city was uninterested in enforcing these laws, while the surrounding suburbs tried to force Boston police to do so. Among other consequences, the conflict over alcohol led the General Court to create a state-appointed board to manage the police,

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<sup>20</sup> Jon Teaford, *The unheralded triumph: City government in America, 1870-1900*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 98-102.

<sup>21</sup> Jack Tager and John W. Ifkovic, eds, *Massachusetts in the Gilded Age: Selected essays*, Amhearst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, pp. 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Edmund Hennessy, *Four decades of Massachusetts politics, 1890-1935*, Freeport, N.Y., Books for Libraries Press, 1971 [c. 1935], p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Blodgett, *Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland era*, 1966, p. 108.

which infuriated the city. Other city-state struggles took place over issues like educational policy.<sup>24</sup>

The General Court held effective veto power over all major city improvements through laws limiting city tax rates and the amount of debt that could be issued. Thus, any expensive transportation project such as a city-funded subway or major street improvements had to be approved by the General Court. These financial controls dated from the end of the Civil War, when throughout the country, cities as well as the higher levels of government were in precarious financial positions, and states decided to reign in local spending. In addition, as the nineteenth century neared the end, the Republican legislature in Massachusetts wanted to limit spending by the Democratic city for partisan reasons.<sup>25</sup>

Lobbyists heavily influenced the state legislature. They were available to anyone with the money to hire them (no single interested dominated the legislature). The most notorious case of lobbying in the late nineteenth century involved the West End Street Railway Company. Eager to win a charter for an elevated train, the company spent tens of thousands of dollars hiring lobbyists, plying legislators with food and entertainment, and paying newspapers to print favorable articles. The whole affair was revealed to great public outrage, but little effective reform was achieved.<sup>26</sup>

The governor had relatively little influence over state legislation beyond his veto power over state legislation. He was responsible for appointing members to the

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<sup>24</sup> James Anthony Merino, *A great city and its suburbs: Attempts to integrate metropolitan Boston, 1865-1920*, PhD dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1969, Chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50.

<sup>26</sup> Blodgett, *Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland era*, 1966, pp. 109-113.



independent state boards and commissions that carried out the bulk of the state's executive affairs, but didn't hold significant influence over his appointees.<sup>27</sup>

The General Court had a system of standing committees, composed of legislators, which reviewed most legislation. In 1893 and 1894 it directed such committees to study transportation plans that had been put forward.<sup>28</sup> In addition to its own committees, the legislature had a tradition of assigning controversial bills to special study commissions, with at least some of the members of these bodies usually appointed by the governor.<sup>29</sup> In 1891 the General Court established a special Rapid Transit Commission to study Boston's transportation needs. Between the legislative standing and special committees, over a hundred public hearings were held, and it is at these that the citizens and associations made their views known.

#### **4.3.3 The Rapid Transit Commission**

In 1891 the state legislature authorized the creation of a "Rapid Transit Commission" to study passenger and freight transportation between the city and its suburbs. The commission's charge included gathering public input, and putting together a detailed plan. Its efforts resulted in a highly detailed presentation of data on transportation issues in the region, as well as comprehensive suggestions for making improvements to almost all modes of transportation. Although its recommendations were never directly implemented, the Rapid Transit Commission played a very important role in the events of the 1890s. It involved the citizenry in transportation issues by holding fifty-one public

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>28</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Will be a joint committee," January 8 (p.m.), 1894, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Massachusetts Legislative Research Bureau, *Index of Special Reports Authorized by the General Court 1900-1988*, 6th ed., Boston, the Bureau, 1989.

hearings, created a body of information and proposals for public consideration, and set the stage for specific projects that were considered in the following years.

This commission consisted of three members appointed by the governor, and three members appointed by the mayor of Boston with approval from the city council. In addition, the mayor and city engineer of Boston served as *ex officio* members. The city council appropriated \$20,000 for the board's expenses, but the members themselves received no compensation.

The governor at the time was, unusually, a Democrat, but he nominated three Republicans to the board—John Quincy Adams, Chester W. Kingsley, and Osborne Howes, Jr. Their party affiliation was intended to give the board wide credibility, since Mayor Matthews appointed three Democrats, Henry L. Higginson, James B. Richardson, and John. E. Fitzgerald. The nominations were well received on both sides of the political spectrum; the Republican *Transcript* and Democratic *Globe* and *Post* all published editorials supporting the nominees.<sup>30</sup>

None of the men had direct professional involvement with rapid transit or railroad matters. Matthews had originally wanted a commission of engineers and other men with professional expertise in the subject, but found significant opposition to the idea. Some people objected that the issues involved were not solely engineering ones, and others pointed out that it would be hard to find professional experts without any personal interests at stake. Anticipating the thrust of the budding good government movements, some citizens argued that the commissioners should be public-spirited citizens and

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<sup>30</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: *The rapid transit commission*," June 11, 1891, p. 10; *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The Rapid Transit Commission," June 11, 1891, p. 4; *Bosont Post*, "Editorial: The Rapid Transit Commission," June 11, 1891, 4.

businessmen, and that they could hire professional consultants when special expertise was needed.<sup>31</sup>

John Quincy Adams, the great-grandson of President John Adams and grandson of President John Quincy Adams, was a lawyer educated at Harvard. He had a successful law practice and was prominently involved in Massachusetts politics. Chester W. Kingsley was a businessman who had moved up in the world from obscure origins. He began his professional life as a bank messenger and teller, and eventually become the president of a bank in Brighton. He was also involved in coal business. His public service included time spent in the state Senate and on the Cambridge Water Board. Osborne Howes, Jr., worked as the secretary to Boston's Board of Fire Underwriters, and also held a position as an editorialist at the *Herald*. His political activity included time spent serving on the city's Common Council.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Kingsley and Adams, Howes continued to publicly involve himself in the city's transportation debates after the commission was dissolved.<sup>33</sup>

Mayor Matthews selected Colonel Henry Lee Higginson to represent the city's "financial" interests.<sup>34</sup> Higginson, a Civil War hero, worked for his family's stock brokerage firm, Lee, Higginson and Company. (Firm members also played an active role in the debate over the loop highway thirty years later). Higginson devoted much time to

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<sup>31</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Work for the new commission," June 12, 1891, p. 7; *Boston Transcript*, "Rapid transit: First hearing given by the new commission," June 25, 1891, p. 4; Charles W. Cheape, *Moving the masses: Urban public transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880-1912*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "To give us rapid transit," June 11, 1891, p. 10; *Boston Globe*, "Transit board: Mayor to send in names this afternoon," June 10 (p.m.), 1891, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Boston Herald*, "The invasion of the Common," February 22, 1894, p. 4, "Letter to the editor: A deep tunnel plan; Would solve the rapid transit problem," April 10, 1894, pp. 1 & 8, and "Letter to the editor: The deep tunnel project," April 16, 1894, p. 4; *Boston Globe*, "Against subway; Merchants' league is solidly arrayed," April 30 (a.m.), 1894, p. 7, and "Letter to the editor: 'Distorted' referendum," July 22 (Sunday), 1894, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., Letter to Robert Bacon (June 12, 1891), in Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Political papers*, Vol. 3., Littauer Library, Littauer Center, Harvard University.

philanthropic activities—he founded the Boston Symphony and gave extensively to various schools and colleges.<sup>35</sup> Commissioner John. E. Fitzgerald was an Irish-born immigrant who came to Boston in 1866. He served in both branches of Boston’s city council as well as in the General Court, and was known for his stirring oratory. Other public service appointments included time on the city’s school and fire commissions, and he was the collector of internal revenue for the Massachusetts district.<sup>36</sup> As for James B. Richardson, the *New York Times* described him as the “ablest lawyer on the board.” Richardson was also the only commissioner who had any experience with the railroad industry, having formerly worked as general counsel for the New-York and New-England Railroad. His public service included two years on the Boston Common Council, an appointment as the city’s corporation counsel under Mayor Hart, and a stint in the state legislature.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4.3.4 Business and civic associations**

While business and civic groups were better known for their influence in municipal government in the twentieth century, they were important players in late nineteenth century urban affairs as well. Historian Jon Teaford, who studied American urban government from 1870 to 1900, concluded that business associations and civic groups of middle-class professional citizens were powerful actors. The business groups were usually long-standing associations devoted to promoting a good commercial climate for

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<sup>35</sup> Albert Nelson Marquis, ed. *Who's who in New England*, 2nd ed., Chicago, A.N. Marquis & Company, 1916; 1st Dragoon's Civil War Site, "Index to Henry Lee Higginson's Pages," [web page]. 2001, cited February 26, 2002], available at <http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/hlh.html>.

<sup>36</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Transit board: Mayor to send in names this afternoon," June 10 (p.m.), 1891, p. 1; *Boston Transcript*, "To give us rapid transit," June 11, 1891, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, "Boston rapid transit," April 6, 1892, p. 10; *Boston Transcript*, "To give us rapid transit," June 11, 1891, p. 10; *Boston Globe*, "Transit board: Mayor to send in names this afternoon," June 10 (p.m.), 1891, p. 1.

their members. Earlier in the period of Teaford's study, they focused mainly on resolving private business matters, but as the century progressed, they became more and more involved in using city government to improve the business climate. While they didn't usually promote specific candidates, they were deeply involved in promoting legislation or projects designed to improve local infrastructure and services. By the 1890s, they were often highly involved in city affairs. The "civic" associations often pursued similar agendas as the business groups, but were more directly political, and usually organized themselves under the banner of the good government movement, which aimed to reduce corruption and increase efficiency in municipal service delivery. Their members included businessmen, as well as doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Both kinds of organizations set up committees to study topics of interest, issued reports and recommendations on proposals before city and state legislative bodies, and even at times introduced legislation.<sup>38</sup> Boston's transportation debates in the 1890s fit Teaford's model perfectly, with both trade and civic organizations playing active roles.

The Boston Associated Board of Trade was actively involved with the city's debates over rapid transit and congestion relief. Its membership was made up of delegates from other industry associations. In 1893, there were twenty-two member organizations, including the Boston Chamber of Commerce, Boston Board of Fire Underwriters, Boston Fruit and Produce Exchange, Boston Merchants Association, Boston Paper Trade Association, Boston Wholesale Grocers' Association, Clothing Manufacturers' Association, Coal Club of Boston and Vicinity, Master Teamsters' Association, New England Metal Association, New England Shoe and Leather Association, Real Estate

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<sup>38</sup> Teaford, *The unhearelded triumph*, 1986, pp. 179-190.

Exchange, and Master Builders Association. The Board of Trade's stated purpose was to publicize its opinions on matters of interest to the business community. Issues that it considered important were assigned to standing committees. In 1893, for example, it had committees on transportation, mail service, taxation, customs, lien law, and roads and highways.<sup>39</sup> The board was active in the city's transportation debates in the 1890s, debating rapid transit issues at its meetings, assigning its transportation committee to investigate the various proposals in more detail, and sending representatives to public hearings.

A more specialized interest group that involved itself heavily in transportation issues was the Master Teamsters Association. Established in 1891, it represented about 150 team owners.<sup>40</sup> It was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, and in 1893 was admitted to the Boston Associated Board of Trade. Its main objectives in the 1890s were to promote street improvements and oppose the imposition of tighter traffic regulations. It also supported the subway and a petition to limit the number of streetcar tracks in downtown Boston, but was less visibly interested in these projects.

The Citizens' Association was a group of about 400 businessmen, a membership the *Herald's* editors described as including some of the city's "largest taxpayers and most eminent citizens."<sup>41</sup> Citizens who wished to promote reform within the city government had established the association in 1887. Its members were mostly Republican businessmen, although the association was formally nonpartisan and didn't support candidates on a party basis. It did, however, did publish information about candidates

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<sup>39</sup> Boston Associated Board of Trade, *Officers and committees, constituent bodies, and delegates*, [Boston], [The Board], 1893.

<sup>40</sup> George W. Engelhardt, *Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston, [Boston Chamber of Commerce], 1897; Boston Associated Board of Trade, *Officers and committees, constituent bodies, and delegates*, [Boston, the Board], 1893.

<sup>41</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Plan of the Citizens' Association," February 25, 1893, p. 4.

and opposed those whom it deemed unfit for office. True to its nonpartisan claims, the association supported Matthews in his later campaigns for mayor.<sup>42</sup> It was also deeply interested in the transportation debates, publishing extensive commentary on them in its annual reports and making recommendation to the different legislative committees.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.4 The subway story

Although a subway was not formally studied as an independent solution until 1893, the idea was not a new one. The state legislature first authorized the construction of a subway intended to deal with congestion as early as 1887. The final decision in 1894 to build one grew out of Boston's long struggle to reduce the traffic congestion on its streets and to provide better streetcar service out to the suburbs. This narrative account of the city's subway debates begins in the mid-1880s, looking briefly at attempts to reduce congestion by modifying the downtown streetcar service. The situation temporarily improved around 1887 as a result of the consolidation of competing streetcar companies, but complaints about congestion resurfaced just a couple of years later.

In 1891 the state legislature created the Rapid Transit Commission to study the problem, setting in motion several years of vigorous public discussion over how to reduce congestion in the downtown. (These congestion relief proposals were often intertwined with proposals for "rapid transit," or providing faster streetcar transportation to the suburbs.) Dozens of solutions were proposed, but the most prominent fell into three

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<sup>42</sup> Clinton Rogers Woodruff, ed., "Citizens' Association of Boston," in *Proceedings of the ... Conference for Good City Government and the ... annual meeting of the National Municipal League*, 1894, Philadelphia, National Municipal League, pp. 310-311; Peter K. Eisinger, "Ethnic political transition in Boston, 1884-1933: Some lessons for contemporary cities," *Political Science Quarterly*, Summer 1978, p. 225.

<sup>43</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fourth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1892, and *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893.

categories: building a subway in the downtown, building an elevated road that ran through the downtown and out into the city's outer areas, or widening streets. These years from 1891 to 1894 are the focus of the narrative here. Alongside the prominent debates over major capital projects were a few other proposals, such as regulating the teaming industry and reducing the density of activity in the downtown. These non-capital projects are discussed in later chapters, as they were only tangential to most of the debates about street widenings, elevated trains, and subways.

Between 1892 and 1894 three congestion-relief plans received the most attention. In 1892 the Rapid Transit Commission called for a wide-ranging and comprehensive set of improvements that included building a subway and elevated railroad, rearranging the stream railroad terminals, widening streets, and adjusting traffic regulations. The report was, apparently, too ambitious for political realities of the time. Various elements of the report were debated individually, but the plan was never evaluated as a whole.

A year later, the citizens of Boston were asked to vote upon an "alley route" plan for an elevated railroad that would pass through the downtown in a narrow, new street cut between Tremont and Washington Streets. The city's voters rejected this plan, and so attention turned to a subway proposal that had been considered but set aside. The subway proposal went through various iterations, and in July of 1894 the citizens of Boston were again called to the polls, this time to vote upon a plan that combined a city-built subway with an elevated system to be built by a private corporation.



#### **4.4.1 1880s: Consolidation, electrification, and a subway proposal**

It is useful to consider the debates over transportation policy that occurred in the 1890s with those of the preceding decade. In the 1880s there were on-going proposals from private firms to build subways and elevated roads, but the city government focused on the idea of reducing the number of streetcars downtown as a way to reduce congestion. In the mid-1880s, Bostonians complained about traffic congestion problems along Tremont and Washington, and they defined the problem as one of too many streetcar companies running competing services along the city's few main streets. At that time, seven companies all ran horse-drawn streetcars within the city and its suburbs. Not only did the competition lead to an unnecessary number of cars in the downtown (with many cars only lightly patronized), but the streetcar drivers behaved in ways that made the situation worse. Drivers would race each other, to be the first to a stop to pick up passengers, or travel extremely slowly towards a stop, waiting for a new group of patrons to appear.

In 1885 Mayor Hugh O'Brien devoted part of his inaugural address to the city council to discussing the congestion downtown:

. . . the numerous cars, many of them almost empty, that block up Washington Street from Cornhill to Boylston Market, have become a public nuisance, interfere with public travel, and should be abated. . . . These blockades not only interfere with public travel, but are expensive to the city, as an extra force of police is required.

O'Brien called for the Boston Committee on Railroads to look into the matter.<sup>44</sup> In response, the committee prepared a series of reports proposing an elaborate regulatory system to limit the number of cars on Tremont and Washington by diverting some cars

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<sup>44</sup> Hugh O'Brien, "Document 1: Inaugural address of the Mayor before the City Council," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1885, Vol. 1, pp. 61-62.

onto new tracks to be laid on nearby streets. The committee also proposed limiting the number of cars each streetcar company could run per day or per hour on the crowded portions of Tremont and Washington.<sup>45</sup>

The plans didn't lead to much action, however, and the situation did not improve. The following year Mayor O'Brien returned to the problem in his inaugural address, remarking that the Board of Aldermen had studied the problem but failed to achieve results: "Blockades still continue, and horse-cars, partially filled, block our principal streets, to the annoyance of common carriers and citizens generally." O'Brien suggested removing control of the matter from the city council and putting it into the hands of a commissioner, appointed by the mayor, who would have the power to regulate the companies. Alternatively, he advocated consolidating the competing companies under a single management.<sup>46</sup> These radical proposals fell on deaf ears. The city's Committee on Railroads and the Board of Aldermen sent more recommendations and requests for study back and forth, with the end result that the aldermen decided not to regulate the exact number of cars each company could run, but did pass new regulations requiring that cars should not wait for passengers on the busy parts of Tremont and Washington, and that the drivers should trot their horses whenever possible.<sup>47</sup> These modest changes were not especially effective.

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<sup>45</sup> Boston Committee on Railroads, "Document 125: Report of the Committee on the subject of horse-car blockades," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1885. See also Documents 142 and 152 from the same year.

<sup>46</sup> Hugh O'Brien, "Document 1: Inaugural address before the city council, January 4, 1886," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1886, pp. 61-62.

<sup>47</sup> Boston Committee on Railroads, "Document 48: Report with orders to regulate the running of street cars in Washington and Tremont streets," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1886, and "Document 83: Majority and minority reports in regard to regulating the running of street-cars in Washington and Tremont Streets," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1886; Boston Board of Aldermen, "Document 90: Additional rules and regulations for the running of street-cars," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1886.

The following year new hope for the city's crowded streets appeared in the form of Henry M. Whitney and his West End Street Railway Company. The company was originally developed to provide transportation to a large tract of vacant land that a syndicate of Whitney and his friends planned to develop. However, Whitney's plans for a new street railway line connecting his property to the downtown were stymied by some of the other railway companies, which had no desire for yet another competitor. Whitney's response was to buy stock in the other major lines serving the downtown and then persuade the General Court to give him permission to merge the different lines into a single company. The West End Street Railway Company thus became the largest single railway company in the nation, with about 3,700 employees and 8,400 horses, as well as 200 miles of track. Whitney immediately began to coordinate the routes and schedules within his new company, and also to convert some of the lines from horse-drawn cars to electric powered ones. Within a short time, the system improved greatly, and congestion decreased at least somewhat.<sup>48</sup>

As part of Whitney's early plans for improving streetcar service in Boston he also proposed a subway. In a petition presented to the General Court in March of 1887 Whitney stated:

That the streets of Boston are and have for a long time been overcrowded with cars and vehicles, and that to remove or diminish the difficulties arising therefrom, and to furnish such further accommodation as the public requires, it has become necessary to construct tunnels under Boston Common and under Beacon Hill, so-called, in said City of Boston, running to some central point near Tremont and Park Streets, and diverging in various directions to different portions of said City.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980, pp. 107-125.

<sup>49</sup> Boston Elevated Railway Company, *Fifty years of unified transportation in metropolitan Boston*, Boston, the Company, 1938, pp. 32-33.

The legislature granted permission for the company to build a subway, but in 1889, the West End withdrew its plans.<sup>50</sup>

The issue of traffic congestion in the downtown streets of Boston was often conflated with the related issue of providing “rapid transit” and proposals for elevated railroads. Rapid transit, in the terms of the day, was usually taken to mean elevated roads providing fast connections between the central city, where most business activity occurred, and the city’s rapidly growing residential suburbs. As early as 1879 there were proposals to build elevated railroads in Boston, with advocates pointing to the success of these roads in New York (the first elevated railroad opened there in 1870).<sup>51</sup> In 1884 the legislature granted a franchise to Joe V. Meigs to build an elevated railroad, but the plan failed for lack of capital. In 1890 the West End Street Railway Company was authorized to build an elevated railroad, but it, too, never did so.<sup>52</sup> Elevated proposals continued to appear regularly until 1894, when the city finally passed a combined subway-elevated bill, providing for the city to construct a subway in the downtown and giving a franchise to the private Boston Elevated Railway Company to build a system of elevated roads. Unlike previous experience with elevated railway charters, this piece of legislation finally produced results.

Rapid transit to the suburbs became an issue in the 1880s because the population living outside the central city was increasing rapidly, largely as the result of improved streetcar service. From 1873 to 1887, the horse-drawn streetcars reached about four miles out from downtown. At the end of the 1880s and beginning of the 1890s, when

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<sup>50</sup> Bradley H. Clarke and O.R. Cummings, *Tremont Street subway: A century of public service*, Boston, Boston Street Railway Association, 1997, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example: Charles E. Powers, *Shall the metropolis of New England have an elevated railroad: Opening argument in its favor before the Legislative Committee on Street Railways*, Boston, Alfred Mudge & Son, 1880.

<sup>52</sup> *The Bulletin: National Railway Historical Society*, “The Boston subway: 1897,” 1973, pp. 20-21.

Whitney began to electrify the streetcar system, speeds in the outer areas increased, and by 1900 it was possible to travel as far out as six miles from the downtown in a reasonable amount of time, thus opening up extensive new lands for residential development. The annual number of passengers carried by the West End rose more than twenty-five percent just between 1887, when the company was formed, and 1891.<sup>53</sup>

Though at first glance the elevated railroad proposals would seem to be divorced from the problem of traffic congestion in the downtown, this was not always the case. For example, accounts of transportation debates in the late nineteenth century sometimes mix together references to elevated railroads as a means to provide rapid transit to the suburbs, and as a strategy to relieve congestion in the downtown by lifting the existing streetcars off the surface of the streets. In addition, some people felt that downtown traffic congestion was the only real barrier to swift transportation into the suburbs, so that reducing this problem would achieve adequately “rapid” transportation to the outskirts, thus eliminating the need to build an elevated railway.

At the end of the 1880s there was a flurry of activity by various companies asking for permission to build rapid transit systems. In 1889 there was a contest between the West End and a group known as the Ames-Shepard people, each vying for a charter to build a combined subway and elevated railway. In 1890 the West End defeated the Ames Shepard proposal. However, the West End then abandoned the subway charter it had and asked the General Court for an elevated railway franchise, which the company also got. The West End then abandoned that charter, saying it would be too expensive to build.<sup>54</sup> It

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<sup>53</sup> Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870 - 1900*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1978, pp. 21-29.

<sup>54</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit of the Massachusetts legislature, April 4, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894, pp. 31-32.

appears that the West End probably never intended to build a rapid transit system, but instead petitioned for the franchises as a way to prevent any other companies from getting one, thus protecting its own monopoly over transit into the downtown.<sup>55</sup>

#### **4.4.2 The Rapid Transit Commission**

By 1890 Bostonians were thoroughly fed up not only with the state of their passenger transportation facilities and crowded streets, but also with the apparent unwillingness of the West End and other private investors to make any improvements. Suburbanites were still calling for better service into the downtown, and downtown congestion was once again a constant source of complaint. Although the West End had temporarily improved conditions after its consolidation of the streetcars downtown, that improved service had generated new ridership. The metropolitan population now numbered about a million people, over half of whom lived outside the city of Boston. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the number of streetcar passengers had jumped dramatically since the mid-1880s, with the West End carrying over 350,000 passengers a day, of whom 150,000 were estimated to travel on lines that passed through Tremont Street.<sup>56</sup> The result was a rush hour with long lines of streetcars crawling along Tremont and Washington Streets. Aside from making movement through the downtown streets slow for everyone, this situation also meant that there was no way to expand streetcar service in the suburbs without increasing the downtown congestion.

In December of 1890 two events occurred that set Boston on a more promising course towards improving its transportation system. First, the citizens of Boston elected

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<sup>55</sup> Harmond, *Tradition and change in the gilded age*, 1967, pp. 195-196.

<sup>56</sup> Matthews, *Argument of Mayor*, 1894, pp. 42-43.

Nathan Matthews, Jr. as mayor, and he proved an energetic and persistent leader over the next four years in the city's quest to reduce congestion and improve connections to its suburbs. Second, several leading citizens and businessmen petitioned the General Court to create a commission to study and report on a system of elevated railways or subways to provide better transit into and within the city. The petitioners argued that the question was too important to leave to either the government of any one city, or to a private corporation, and therefore the state should take on the issue itself. Though the petition didn't mention traffic congestion per se, the *Transcript* published an editorial on the petition that did:

This will bring the whole question into the Legislature again. The necessity of tunneling Boston in order to get the required space to transport its constantly increasing thousands to and from their places of business is once more coming into prominence. New avenues under the surface will relieve the congested parts of Boston beyond a peradventure. It would be a source of satisfaction for those who advocated or supported the Beacon Hill tunnel system proposed some three years ago and beaten then, if that should be the upshot after all.<sup>57</sup>

When Matthews took office in January, he pursued the proposal for a commission, but argued that the city, not the state, should appoint the members. In the end a compromise was reached whereby the governor and mayor each appointed members to the commission, and the city authorized the commission to spend \$20,000 on its work.<sup>58</sup> By June 18 the state legislature and governor had approved legislation creating the commission, and all the members had been appointed. On June 20, 1891, the commission convened for the first time. It chose Matthews as its chairman, and decided to hold its first public hearing a few days later.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Rapid transit," December 16, 1890, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980, p. 129.

<sup>59</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The mayor is chairman," June 20, 1891, p. 2.

The first public hearing, held on June 25, attracted a crowd of entrepreneurs interested in building elevated railroads, including Henry M. Whitney and Joe V. Meigs. Matthews gave a speech in which he explained the commission's origins and its goals. He pointed out that there had been a number of failed charters for rapid transit, that the public was demanding better transit service, and that there was a lack of good information on the topic. The only information on the city's transit needs came from interested parties, said Matthews, and so one of the commission's goals was to conduct an investigation centered around the public interest. He explained that the commission would begin by holding as many public hearings as necessary to gather the community's input.<sup>60</sup>

Between June and August the commission held a total of 51 public hearings, at which a wide variety of proposals were presented.<sup>61</sup> These ranged from a scheme for an improved railroad engine, to consolidating the steam railroad stations, to building elevated roads and subways (one of the latter proposals called for a glass-covered tunnel under the sidewalks).<sup>62</sup> Another set of hearings was held in September and October to gather comments from municipalities in the region about the ease of transportation to and from Boston. The commission also sent members to study rapid transit elsewhere in the United States and in Europe.

In April of 1892 the commission released its report. For its time, the plan was an extremely complex, sophisticated document, being well over a hundred pages and supplemented with extensive appendices and foldout maps. The commissioners defined

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<sup>60</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Rapid transit: First hearing given by the new commission," June 25, 1891, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature*, [Boston], [The Commission], 1892, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Rapid Transit Commission at work," June 29, 1891, p. 1.



their area of study as the region within a ten-mile radius of the state capitol, and further defined a subsection of the downtown as the “congested district.” They explained that they wanted to plan to accommodate the next fifty years of growth, and predicted that railroad and streetcar travel would roughly double every decade. They defined the three “chief factors of the problem” as the steam railroads, the street railways, and the streets, and made lengthy and detailed recommendations under each of these topics.

In the introductory chapter the commissioners explained that they had begun by seriously considering plans for “tunnels” on the model of the early London system, which had underground transit lines located fifty or sixty feet underground. However, based on the reports of the two commissioners who visited Europe, the commission had rejected the “tunnel” system used in London as too expensive, inconvenient because of the time needed to descend and ascend such a distance, and unhealthful. However, the commissioners distinguished these tunnels from “subways,” or underground streetcar lines built just under the street surface. Subways, they felt, avoided the problems of the tunnel system and could be used.

The introductory chapter also argued that much of the downtown congestion arose from the lack of adequate street control regulations, and that before embarking on costly street improvements, “a vigorous effort should be made to render those we now have as effective as possible.” The commission compared Boston to London, saying that excellent police supervision of strict regulations allowed London streets to handle with “very little friction” many more vehicles than those accommodated on streets of

comparable width in Boston. The report recommended that Boston adopt several of the street regulations common in Europe to make the best use of the existing street capacity.<sup>63</sup>

In terms of the steam railroads, the commission recommended consolidating the downtown railroad stations used by the eight companies, building a new terminal just across the water from the downtown to handle freight coming in on the northern lines, adding lines into the suburbs, and reducing grade crossings. As part of a general recommendation to separate freight and passenger traffic, the commission also included in this chapter a recommendation for a new street to be used chiefly for teams traveling in the northern end of the congested district.

The following chapter treated street improvements. The commissioners declared that the streets were “inadequate” and that increasing their capacity was the “only effectual” remedy. In addition, the commissioners believed a study of street widenings was necessary as part of any investigation into building elevated rapid transit lines, as the existing streets were too narrow to accommodate elevated lines. They also emphasized the importance of making any street expansions part of a comprehensive system of improvements (as opposed to the “sporadic” widenings of the past), and stressed the value of concentrating on just a few major improvements rather than many smaller, scattered ones. They proposed a series of improvements that included the new freight route recommended above and the creation of an “ample” north-south route running the length of the whole congested district. This route would include Tremont Street, which was to be widened by taking a strip of the Common and could be used for elevated tracks and/or a subway. In order to finance the proposed widenings, the commission urged the

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<sup>63</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 11-12.

General Court to pass a law allowing Boston to collect more revenue through betterment assessments raised from property owners.<sup>64</sup>

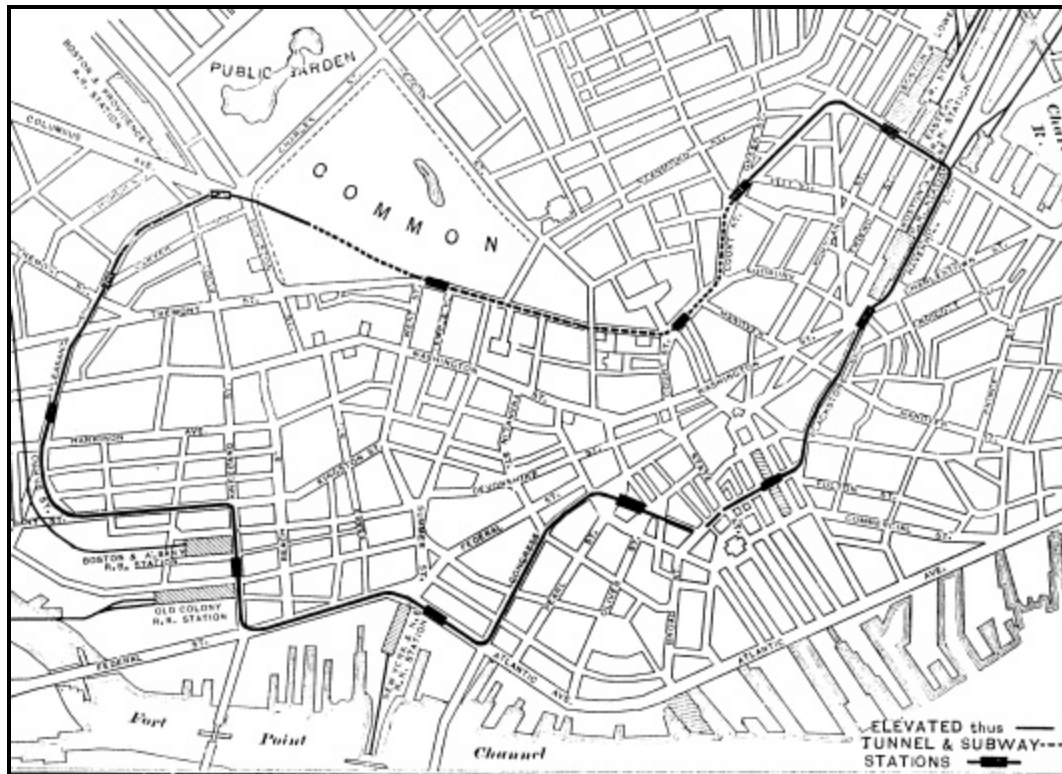
The next two chapters dealt with the streetcar system. The commissioners believed that although in the long run Bostonians might decide to remove the streetcars in crowded districts throughout the suburbs, it was necessary to do so immediately within the congested downtown. The commission recommended building a double line of tracks around the edge of the congested district, which were to be connected at either end and would connect almost all the downtown railway terminals (see Figure 4.1). Service thus could be run as a circuit line, two independent routes, or a combination of both. The tracks would be elevated, except for passing through a subway under Tremont Street and the Common. This circuit system of tracks would be preferable to a single, central elevated line through the downtown, the commission argued, because it would draw traffic away from the over-crowded center of the district and into the less busy portions of the business district where increased traffic would actually be a benefit. The commission also recommended reducing and adjusting the routes of the remaining downtown surface cars, and extending two elevated lines into outlying districts of the city and adjacent suburbs.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-63.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-94.

**Figure 4.1: Map showing the Rapid Transit Commission’s proposed elevated and subway system for downtown Boston.**



Source: *Street Railway Journal*, “Rapid transit in Boston,” February 1892, p. 75.

In conclusion, the commissioners acknowledged that their plan was expensive, but said that such a comprehensive approach was the only feasible way to secure a complete solution to the region’s problems:

Such, gentlemen of the General Court, is the kind and amount of relief which we are ready to recommend to your honorable bodies. If some object that it is uncalled-for and excessive, we can only reply that we rather dread that it may prove insufficient almost before it is completed. We have sought a cure which, if radical, is yet permanent and thorough and complete. . . . If the magnitude of the plan seems inordinate, let any man who is ready to condemn it off-hand on that account first give a little study to the history of similar public works in this country. He will find a long line of precedents to show that almost all of our great State and municipal undertakings of this character have failed in foresight and in adequate allowance for the future. . . . [S]urely there is no lesson which ought to have been more thoroughly learned by this community . . . than that, of all senseless extravagances, none is so absolutely foolish as to fritter away the public funds in fragmentary and disconnected attacks upon large and complicated evils.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 105-106.

Appended to the main report was a “Dissenting report” prepared by Commissioner James B. Richardson. He agreed with almost all of the commission’s proposals, but strongly objected a couple, especially its plan to construct a circuit line of elevated roads (or elevated roads and tunnels) circumscribing the congested district. He felt that the proposed routes were too far from the areas where people wanted to be, and that riders would refuse to walk the extra distance to their destinations and insist on using the existing surface lines instead. As a result, the double-line routes would bring no congestion relief to the downtown. Richardson urged the city instead to build an elevated road running north-south as near to Washington Street as possible.<sup>67</sup>

The report made front-page headlines in all the newspapers<sup>68</sup> and garnered editorial comment. The *Globe*, *Herald*, and *Transcript* editorials all had at least something positive to say about the report, though their sentiments ranged from high enthusiasm to strong disapproval. The papers did not treat the report as a partisan issue—for example, the Democratic *Post* and conservative *Herald* were both highly complementary. The *Herald* was full of praise, describing the report as “perhaps the most important document, so far as the interests of Boston are concerned, that has ever been presented to the Legislature of this state.” The editors declined to comment on the proposals for the steam railroads and street railways without time for more thorough reflection, but they did commend the street widening plans, particularly the one for a street dedicated for use by teams. This idea they found “deserving of unstinted commendation.”<sup>69</sup> The editors at the *Post* said that the report was “one of the ablest and most important papers ever presented

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 107-115.

<sup>68</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Rapid transit: Report of the Commissioners out at last,” April 5, 1892, pp. 1 & 3; *Boston Globe*, “New hub: Boston to be made over for speed,” April 5, 1892, p. 1; *Boston Herald*, “Rapid transit; Report of the Special Commission,” April 6, 1892, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Editorial: The rapid transit report,” April 6, 1892, p. 6.

to the Legislature.” They went on to say that it was a “masterpiece” worthy of consideration, even if its plans were were not the only ones worth reflection.<sup>70</sup> The *Globe*’s editors complimented the commission on the thoroughness of its work and spoke of the “permanent” value of the report as a reference to data on the subject. As for the report’s proposals, the editors gave neither praise nor criticism beyond describing them as “at once radical and practical,” and saying that given the complexity of the problem, the proposals would likely face a lengthy debate.<sup>71</sup> The *Transcript*’s editors were the most critical, arguing that the plan would desecrate the Common and that the commission had failed to provide details about exactly what organization would be able to build the circuit streetcar route proposed. Nevertheless, the editors thought the report was “interesting” and provided useful suggestions that might be followed up in the future.<sup>72</sup> A separate editorial praised the minority report as “lucidly stated,” though didn’t take a clear position on the proposals in it.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the immediate flurry of attention that the report attracted, its direct impact was short-lived. In the conclusion to their report, the Rapid Transit Commissioners had urged the legislature to appoint a “Metropolitan Transit Commission” to carry forward further study and implementation of the report’s proposals. The commissioners had warned that if this were not done, further progress was unlikely:

We have of necessity arrayed powerful individual and corporate interests in opposition to our plan. To simply deliver it to the Legislature, with the request that it make such use of it as it sees fit, is almost equivalent to an acceptance of its defeat. Our term of life ends with this report; but some other body must be immediately formed, with power to execute what we have planned; for it is only by such organized, progressive action on the part of the representatives of the people

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<sup>70</sup> *Boston Post*, “Editorial: The rapid transit report,” April 6, 1892, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Editorial: The rapid transit report,” April 6, 1892, p. 10.

<sup>72</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Editorial: The rapid transit report,” April 5, 1892, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Editorial: Mr. Richardson’s minority report . . .,” April 6, 1892, p. 4.

that the forces in opposition can be held in check, and that these plans of improvement can be carried through to a successful completion.<sup>74</sup>

Their words were prophetic. In June the General Court formally dissolved the body<sup>75</sup> and the question of how to follow up on its work was put over to the next year's legislative session.

#### **4.4.3 Hearings of the Rapid Transit Committee**

In January of 1893 the new legislature appointed a special Committee on Rapid Transit headed by Senator Kittredge to consider the Rapid Transit Commission's recommendations. From late January through March, the committee proceeded to hold another series of public hearings.<sup>76</sup> At these hearings, a whole variety of new proposals were presented, every one of which ignored the comprehensive approach that the Rapid Transit Commission had taken. Even the commission's specific proposals were mostly ignored, as each petitioner presented his or her own proposal for new streets, elevated railways, tunnels, or rearrangement of the surface streetcar tracks. Only a very few speakers, such as the West End's Whitney and representatives from the Boston Associated Board of Trade, bothered to respond directly to any of the commission's proposals.<sup>77</sup> (In February, Mayor Matthews announced that he had yet to find anyone who had read the report.<sup>78</sup>)

Some proposals came from individual citizens or firms. For example, Arthur Wellington, a civil engineer who was the editor of the publication *Engineering News*,

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<sup>74</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 98.

<sup>75</sup> Massachusetts General Court, *An act to dissolve the rapid transit commission*, 1892.

<sup>76</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893. , pp. 6-7.

<sup>77</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Mr. Whitney's plan for rapid transit in Boston streets," February 20, 1893, p. 2 & 8; *Boston Herald*, "New plan of rapid transit; It is discussed and approved by the Board of Trade," February 21, 1893, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Time to act," February 10, 1893.

proposed changing the downtown streetcar routes to reduce congestion in the short run, and building a subway under Tremont in the future.<sup>79</sup> Dr. Ira L. Moore, who spoke as the representative of a real estate trust holding over \$100,000,000 worth of property along Washington Street, opposed any elevated road and favored a subway under the Common, a plan he said he first suggested twelve or thirteen years ago.<sup>80</sup> Charles Carleton Coffin, who had been a noted Civil War newspaper correspondent for the *Boston Journal*, proposed a broad new north-south street running between Tremont and Washington Streets, with an elevated railroad running along it.<sup>81</sup> The American Express Company sent a representative who proposed opening streets across the Common.<sup>82</sup> Joe V. Meigs came to advocate once more for his elevated railroad proposal, and one H.K. Hanna proposed elevating the sidewalks and giving over the whole street surface to teams and streetcars.<sup>83</sup> The West End also joined the fray, proposing a plan that included immediate street widenings, a subway under the Common with openings every thirty feet, and an elevated railroad to follow at some undetermined later date.<sup>84</sup> At the very end of the series of hearings, a group of Boston citizens proposed removing many of the streetcar tracks from the congested district.<sup>85</sup>

Only two business associations proposed plans, although the Merchants' Association did debate the issue at one of its regular meetings.<sup>86</sup> The Master Teamsters' Association presented a plan to build a new thoroughfare to serve freight vehicles traveling among the

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<sup>79</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Wet and dark and notoriously bad, said Wellington, describing a tunnel under Common," March 7 (p.m.), 1893, p. 1; *Boston Herald*, "Ways that are dark; Tunnels and subways for rapid transit," March 8, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> *Boston Herald*, "In favor of the tunnel; Dr. Ira L. Moore says it will secure rapid transit," February 22, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Call for a new street," March 8 (p.m.), 1893, p. 3; *Boston Herald*, "Another thoroughfare; Avenue between Washington and Tremont Streets," March 9, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The legislature," February 16, 1893, p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Mr. Whitney's plan for rapid transit in Boston streets," February 20, 1893, pp. 2 & 8.

<sup>85</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Too many cars: Back Bay view of downtown travel," March 31 (p.m.), 1893, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Time to act," February 10, 1893.



steam railroad stations.<sup>87</sup> The Associated Board of Trade based its proposals on a review of the Rapid Transit Commission's report, sending a representative to testify before the legislative committee on various elements of the 1892 plan, most of which it supported.<sup>88</sup>

The Boston Street Commission and Mayor Matthews presented a new scheme of street widenings for the downtown and suburbs that included widening Tremont Street by taking part of the Common, and building a thoroughfare for teams carrying freight between the different railroad stations (the route differed from the one proposed by the Master Teamsters Association).

While there was a certain amount of debate over some of the proposals, the main source of controversy was the general question of using the Common for transportation purposes, whether for street widenings or surface, subway, or elevated railway tracks. Those who supported using the Common were mostly individuals. They included some residents from Boston's suburbs who wanted more direct transit from downtown their neighborhoods,<sup>89</sup> ex-mayors of Boston Hart and O'Brien,<sup>90</sup> ex-state senator and railroad executive Moody Merrill,<sup>91</sup> some of Boston's city council members,<sup>92</sup> and Massachusetts Institute of Technology president and noted economist and statistician Francis A. Walker.<sup>93</sup> The *Daily Advertiser's* editors didn't quite go so far as to outright advocate use of the Common, but they strongly suggested as much in a couple of editorials that

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<sup>87</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Rapid transit: The order of the day on Beacon Hill," January 27, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Boston Herald*, "New plan of rapid transit; It is discussed and approved by the Board of Trade," February 21, 1893, p. 8; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Not in the Common," February 21, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The old Common; At the mercy of utilitarians," February 2, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Views on street widening: Several Ex-Mayors of Boston give their opinions on the subject," January 26, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Once for all; Mayor wants transit problem so settled," February 9 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>92</sup> Boston City Council, "Encroachments on Common - protest," *Reports of proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, pp. 124-130.

<sup>93</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "To save the Common," February 10, 1893, p. 5.

stressed the need to solve the congestion problem quickly and for the disputing parties to come to a compromise.<sup>94</sup>

Opposition to using the Common for transportation purposes also came from a wide variety of sources, but they also included representatives from many organizations. Aside from individuals who spoke before the legislative committee or wrote letters to the newspapers, there were protests from the Associated Board of Trade, the American Socialist Labor party, the New England Women's Committee, the Appalachian Club, the First Nationalist Club, the District Assembly 3 Knights of Labor, and a group of residents from the town of Dorchester. There were petitions, too—one signed by 93 doctors, another by the “master builders” of Boston, and a third by the “Women of Boston,” which claimed to over 2500 signatures. The Boston Common Council also passed a resolution opposing use of the Common. The *Transcript*, however, was perhaps the most ardent defender of the Common, using its editorial page between late January and mid-March to print no fewer than nine items opposing any proposal to touch the Common.<sup>95</sup>

In mid-March a new focus arose out of the chaotic hearings. While individuals still continued to propose a wide variety of solutions, the committee's attention focused on the idea of building an elevated line running north-south, either through Tremont Street or through a new street to be cut between Washington and Tremont. Two plans for a new

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<sup>94</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: To take the common?," February 3, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: Rapid transit," February 22, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 4, "[Editorial: The legislative committee on rapid transit . . .]," January 30, 1893, p. 4, "A common spoil (from the Boston Pilot)," February 8, 1890, p. 4, "Editorial: The vote in the Common Council," February 10, 1893, p. 4, "Editorial: As we suggested . . .," February 11, 1893, p. 12, "Editorial: Everybody whose business . . .," February 11, 1893, p. 12, "Editorial: The mayor and the common," February 13, 1893, p. 4, and "The genesis of the Common," February 13, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Herald*, "New plan of rapid transit; It is discussed and approved by the Board of Trade," February 21, 1893, p. 8, and "Save the common," February 10, 1893, p. [1]; Boston City Council, "Encroachments on Common - protest," 1893, pp. 124-130; *Boston Herald*, "Save the common," February 10, 1893, p. [1?].

street had been proposed by Charles Carleton Coffin and Parker C. Chandler.<sup>96</sup> The legislative committee responded by asking Mayor Matthews to prepare a plan for such a scheme, along with a cost estimate.<sup>97</sup> Matthews and the city street commissioners went to work and returned a few days later with a plan for an elevated road running down a Tremont Street widened by extending into the Common, plus some other related street widenings. Matthews explained that Tremont was a better route than the proposed new street between it and Washington because his preferred route would create less congestion. He said that because Tremont was slightly to the west of the most congested area (along Washington Street), an elevated railroad along it wouldn't land all its passengers right in the area of densest traffic. An elevated road along the new street, however, would deposit its passengers into the heart of Washington Street.<sup>98</sup>

On the second of May, the legislative committee made public the draft of an ambitious bill; the next day a slightly amended bill was reported to the legislature. Senator Kittredge was acknowledged to be the primary author of the bill, which was entitled "An Act to Provide for Rapid Transit in Boston and Vicinity." The bill was not as ambitious as the Rapid Transit Commission's plan, but still quite comprehensive. It would have created a "metropolitan transit commission," appointed by the governor and confirmed by the city council, with wide ranging powers. The commission was to oversee the construction of an elevated railroad running down a specified route through Boston, including a new street cut between Washington and Tremont Streets. The elevated line was to replace the cars running along several of the existing surface routes. If a subway

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<sup>96</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Call for a new street," March 8 (p.m.), 1893, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Our betterment laws; Mayor Matthews thinks they ought to be changed," March 10, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Proposed rapid transit avenue would cost \$12,000,000," March 14 (p.m.), 1893, p. 2, and "Hub's spine: Matthews would raise Boston's back bone," March 16 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 2; *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Mayor Matthews' plan," March 17, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The Mayor's plan," March 18, 1893, p. 3.

seemed desirable for some portion of the route, the commission could choose to include it. The new commission was to work with the Board of Street Commissioners, who would be responsible for laying out and constructing the new street. The state was to help finance the project by issuing \$15 million in bonds, which the city would repay. The new commission was responsible for designing the elevated system, and then choosing a private corporation to build and operate the line. If additional elevated lines into the suburbs seemed desirable, the commission was to study them and report its findings to the next session of the General Court. The commission would also be given the power (normally reserved for the Board of Aldermen) to determine the location of all surface street railway tracks in the downtown, with the exception that the new street must remain free of all tracks. Finally, the bill also dealt with street regulations. The rule that all vehicles keep to the right was to be made a city ordinance, and the commission was to be given the power to make additional regulations as it saw fit.<sup>99</sup>

The committee also reported a second bill, which called only for the establishment of a board of subway commissioners, on approval by the city council, to oversee the construction of a short subway under Tremont Street that would be used by the surface railway cars. The bill was reported to the General Court, on behalf of the legislative rapid transit committee, by committee member Representative John Quinn. Quinn was one of three committee members who had dissented from the committee's main proposal, his objections being that it gave too much power to an un-elected commission, and that teamsters and other vehicle drivers would object to giving the proposed metropolitan transit commission power to limit their use of the streets. According to Quinn, he

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<sup>99</sup> *Boston Globe*, "L' bill: Rapid transit at last in sight," May 2 (a.m.), 1893, p. 1 & 7, and "Over or under: Elevated road and subway bills reported," May 3 (p.m.), 1893, p. 7.

submitted the competing bill “in case the rapid transit bill should be knocked out.” The legislature passed this bill on June 10, just before it dissolved for the year, but the press paid no attention.<sup>100</sup>

Instead, public attention focused on the so-called “rapid transit bill.” The Boston city council reacted with outrage to the fact that the bill took away from the city control over most of the proposals, including the issuance of debt to be repaid by the city, the location of surface car tracks, and traffic regulations.<sup>101</sup> The editors of the *Herald*, however, praised the bill as “perhaps the most important measure that has been brought or will be brought before the year’s Legislature.” The editors objected to the choice of route through a new street on the grounds that it would increase congestion in the long run, but supported the general lines of the report. They saved their highest praise, “unqualified approval,” for the proposed powers of traffic regulation that the bill gave to the new commission.<sup>102</sup> The *Transcripts’* editors also praised the bill for giving the new commission power to regulate street traffic, but had a rather different take on the proposed capital projects. They supported the plans for the new elevated and its route, but objected strenuously to some of the street widening provisions in the draft version, especially a plan to widen Park Street by taking a part of the Common (this was removed in the final version). The editorial concluded with the warning that the legislature should not waste any more time in deliberation over Boston’s transportation plans, for “To put

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<sup>100</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Over or under: Elevated road and subway bills reported,” May 3 (p.m.), 1893, p. 7; *Boston Transcript*, “The subway act; Summary of what Chapter 478 of the Acts of 1893 provide,” December 21, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Loud protest: Common Council against the new “L” bill,” May 5 (a.m.), 1893, p. 8; *Boston Transcript*, “City government; Common Council meeting last night,” May 5, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Editorial: The rapid transit bill,” May 5, 1893, p. 6.

this subject over to the next General Court would be construed as an acknowledgement of the legislative inability to cope with it.”<sup>103</sup>

The General Court turned the rapid transit bill, which involved the state in financial issues, over to its Committee on Finance, which held yet more hearings. In late May and early June, as the legislative session drew to its annual close, activity on the rapid transit proposals heated up. There were long debates in both the House and Senate, and dozens of amendments were proposed. In the last hours of the year’s session, a bill was finally passed that called for a very watered down version of the legislative committee’s original proposal. Gone were the provisions for state financing assistance and for a new commission with powers to regulate street traffic and the location of surface railway tracks. Instead, the bill authorized the citizens of Boston to vote in a referendum on a plan for building an elevated road to run north-south through the city and passing through a new 25-foot street cut between Washington and Tremont. In addition, the bill authorized the city to improve or replace the bridge crossing from the downtown into Charlestown. The city was allowed to issue up to \$9 million in bonds beyond its normal debt limits to finance the project. In reference to the narrow new street to be built, the bill was referred to as the “alley plan.”

In October the city began to see active campaigning around the alley plan—all of it in opposition. The Master Teamsters’ Association,<sup>104</sup> Citizens’ Association,<sup>105</sup> Associated Board of Trade,<sup>106</sup> Boston Merchants’ Association,<sup>107</sup> Mayor Matthews,<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The rapid transit bill," May 2, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Appeal to teamsters," November 5, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Objections to the bill; Rapid-transit scheme should be rejected," October 28, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> *Boston Herald*, "To help business; Resolutions adopted by Board of Trade," October 17, 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>107</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Not the best plan; Mayor's views of the rapid transit bill," October 27, 1893.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

*Herald*,<sup>109</sup> *Transcript*,<sup>110</sup> *Globe*,<sup>111</sup> and *Post*<sup>112</sup> all opposed the measure. When the rapid transit bill was finally voted upon at the November 7 election, it lost, although not by much—it lost by only about 3,000 votes, out of over 51,000 votes cast. The editors of the *Transcript* and *Herald* expressed surprise at this turn of events, given the overwhelming publicity against the bill. The explanation suggested by the *Herald* editors was that the voters were so desperate for better transportation, that they were willing to adopt even such a bad scheme as the one up for vote:

The obvious conclusion drawn from this showing is that a very large number of people of Boston are so desirous of obtaining rapid transit that, rather than submit to the further delay of the needed improvement, they would be willing to impose a tremendous debt burden upon the city for the purpose of obtaining it. In fact, we doubt whether a more significant illustration has ever been given in Boston of the popular demand, for some improvement of this kind, and, judging by the results of this appeal to the people, we are inclined to believe that if, the plan of the rapid transit commission of a year and a half ago had been submitted to popular vote, or could now be submitted to popular vote, it would be approved by an immense majority.<sup>113</sup>

The *Transcript* reported that Matthews gave a similar explanation for why the bill garnered so many votes.<sup>114</sup> The editors of the *Transcript* suggested that the voters were afraid that if this plan failed, no alternative would be forthcoming. The paper singled out Matthews' opposition as the cause of the bill's defeat and said that this obliged him to propose something better.<sup>115</sup>

Matthews wasted no time doing so, immediately turning to the idea of a subway, which had been the alternative bill proposed by the legislative rapid transit committee. The subway act had been passed by the General Court in June, but then languished as

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<sup>109</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Mayor Matthews and rapid transit," October 27, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: Vote 'no' on the rapid transit bill," November 7, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The citizens of Boston will be . . .]" October 27, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: The peculiar election of next week," November 1, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: Much too costly a scheme," October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: The rapid transit scheme," November 5, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The rapid transit vote," November 9, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The old bay state," November 8, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The municipal issues," November 8, 1893, p. 4.

attention focused on the alley plan. The subway act called only for the establishment of a board of subway commissioners, appointed by the mayor, to oversee the construction of a short subway under Tremont Street. The subway commission would have the authority to compel the West End Street Railway Company to run its cars through the subway and to charge the company a fee. To finance the project, the city was allowed to issue up to \$2 million in bonds. The act was to take effect upon its acceptance by the Boston City Council.

Just a few days after the rapid transit bill had been defeated, the *Advertiser* reported that Matthews had raised the possibility of a subway project providing jobs. This comment came up during a discussion about how the city could provide employment to the many people suffering from the depression sweeping the country.<sup>116</sup> A few days later, Matthews sent a letter to the city council praising the subway proposal and informing them that the city engineer was at work preparing a more detailed cost estimate.<sup>117</sup> Matthews had apparently been thinking about the subway possibility for several months before the alley plan failed, as in early August he wrote to city engineer William Jackson, asking him to sketch out various rapid transit plans, one of which was for a four-track subway under Tremont Street.<sup>118</sup>

At noon on December 18, over a hundred of the city's businessmen converged on city hall to urge Matthews to support the subway bill. The *Transcript* claimed that the meeting had not been advertised, being rather a "spontaneous movement on the part of those present." The "spontaneity" was likely influenced by the fact that the Board of

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<sup>116</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "More public works," November [12?], 1893,

<sup>117</sup> *Boston Herald*, "On the breakers of debate; Whitney and heavy seas in the Board of Aldermen," November 14, 1893, p. 10.

<sup>118</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., Letter to William Jackson, Esq. (August 5, 1893), in Nathan Matthews, Jr., Political Papers, Littauer Library, Littauer Center, Harvard University.



Alderman was to meet that afternoon. After the noontime meeting ended, Matthews promptly sent a letter to the aldermen, asking them to pass an order adopting the subway bill.<sup>119</sup> He explained that the order was a matter of some urgency. The state authorizing legislation might need modifications, which the General Court would have to approve, and the new subway commissioners had only until early February to introducing new items to that year's General Court. If the council didn't adopt the subway act immediately, Matthews warned, the subway commissioners might not have time to recommend a new bill to the General Court that year.

The aldermen's meeting turned into a heated debate, though the disagreement had little to do with the transportation-related merits of the plan. Several aldermen attacked it as a plot to increase the profits of the West End Street Railway Company, whose cars would use the tunnel. However, despite the long and animated debate, the order passed eleven to one.<sup>120</sup>

Three days later the subway act was presented to the other branch of the Boston City Council, the Common Council. Two topics raised several times during the debate were the protection of the Common and the likelihood of providing jobs for the unemployed. One councilman presented two different petitions supporting the subway act. One of these was signed by about a hundred individuals, many of them prominent in city affairs, and a number having spoken out in the past couple of years over rapid transit issues. Signatories included Henry Lee, one of the leaders of a petition to remove surface tracks from Tremont and Washington Streets; Charles U. Cotting, a major real estate owner;

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<sup>119</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Tremont Street subway," December 18, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Boston Herald*, "With bitter debate, subway order passed by the Aldermen," December 19, 1893, pp. 1 & 4; *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The order accepting . . .," December 19, 1893, p. 4; Boston City Council, *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, Boston, the Council, 1893, pp. 765-775.

Amos Towle, a prominent member of the Master Teamsters' Association; Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Francis A. Walker; Henry H. Sprague, a former president of the state senate; George B. Upham, a lawyer and one of the most ardent defenders of the Common; and Charles H. Dalton, a prominent businessman and real estate owner who had served as a city parks commissioner. The other petition was presented by Thomas J. Gargan and Arthur Lyman, lawyers who had earlier petitioned the council to reduce the number of streetcar tracks on Washington and Tremont. This petition was signed by a hundred companies and individuals who owned or rented property on Tremont Street, and were among the 8,000 signatories on the original petition about streetcar tracks that Gargan and Lyman had presented to the council. In the end, the subway act passed by sixty-two to two, with eleven members either absent or abstaining, and the mayor signed the act that night.<sup>121</sup>

The editors at the local papers were lukewarm in their support of the subway. The *Post's* editors were perhaps the most positive. They were enthusiastic about its potential for reducing congestion downtown, but stressed that it would not bring the region real rapid transit.<sup>122</sup> The editors of *Transcript*, during the week when the subway act was under consideration, declined to give the subway a straightforward endorsement. Highway, they wrote two editorials that supported the subway act indirectly, saying that the plan was a good one because the city's businessmen wanted the project, public sentiment called for it, and the matter had been thoroughly studied. Following their usual pattern of defending the Common at every opportunity, the editors also mentioned

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<sup>121</sup> Boston City Council, *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, Boston, the Council, 1893, pp. 781-791.

<sup>122</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: The rapid transit scheme," November 5, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: A beginning of rapid transit," December 19, 1893, p. 4.

approvingly in both editorials that the act would spare the Common.<sup>123</sup> The *Herald's* editors were inconsistent in their support of the subway. In an editorial after the Board of Aldermen (but not yet the Common Council) had passed the act, they argued that even though the subway wouldn't solve the whole matter of rapid transit, it should be passed on congestion relief grounds—it would provide a “speedy means for passing through the congested district, . . . a passage whose tediousness constitutes one of the greatest annoyances to which the people of Boston are now subject.” However, after the Common Council had adopted the act, another editorial appeared entitled “Improved but not rapid transit.” This time the *Herald's* editors changed their focus, stressing that while subway would improve conditions for teams and pedestrians on Tremont Street, it would most definitely not meet the more important need of more rapid transit to the suburbs.<sup>124</sup>

#### **4.4.4 The Board of Subway Commissioners and the Joint Special Committee on Transit**

Matthews, meanwhile, lost no time in hustling along the subway plan. On January 1 he announced his choice of subway commissioners—Thomas Gargan, George Swain, and Charles H. Dalton—and they were confirmed by the Board of Aldermen a week later. Gargan was a prominent Irish-American lawyer who actively supported the political coalition between the Irish and Yankee Democrats. He had served briefly in the General Court, and had sat on a number of city boards and commissions. In his professional work he represented a number of the property owners along Tremont Street, and was the leader

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<sup>123</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The order accepting . . .," December 19, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: The subway adopted," December 22, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>124</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The Tremont street subway," December 21, 1893, p. 6, and "Editorial: Improved but not rapid transit," December 27, 1893, p. 4.

of the recent effort to convince the Board of Aldermen to prohibit most or all streetcar tracks within the congested district. The single engineer on the board was Swain, who was the head of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In addition to his work as a faculty member, he provided expert consulting on engineering matters for the state's railroad commission. Dalton was a businessman and real estate dealer who came from a prominent New England family, and had served the city as a member of the parks commission. He was selected to chair the subway commission, and appeared frequently to represent it at legislative hearings. The *Transcript*, *Herald*, *Advertiser*, *Globe* and *Post* all spoke of the appointees in complimentary terms, both in editorials and news reports.<sup>125</sup>

The subway commissioners held their first meeting on January 11, and began work immediately to see what amendments to their authorizing legislation might be needed. They also appointed as secretary George B. Upham, a young lawyer who had been very involved in the city's transportation debates. He had helped to organize the ongoing protests against taking any part of the Common, supported the proposal to remove most of the streetcar tracks in the congested district, and supported the subway proposal as well.<sup>126</sup>

Despite the city council's almost unanimous support for the subway and the promptness with which the Board of Subway Commissioners was formed, the subway

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<sup>125</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Swain, Gargan and Dalton; Mayor Matthews appointees as subway commissioners," January 2, 1894, p. 6; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Swain, Gargan and Dalton are the subway commissioners," January 2, 1894, p. 1, and "Editorial: The subway commission," January 2, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The Mayor's nominees for subway commissioners," January 4, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Globe*, "Speed away: Matthews hustles rapid transit," December 27 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5; *Boston Post*, "Subway commissioners," January 2, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>126</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Save the common," February 10, 1893, p. [1?]; *Boston Globe*, "Stop the cars: Women propose to walk to the stores," March 3, 1892, p. 4, and "Present system a disgrace; City government blamed for congested streets," October 28, 1893, p. 6; *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The subway adopted," December 22, 1893, p. 4, and "Letter to the editor: It is too late to belittle the subway," December 27, 1893, p. 4.

plan was subject to a continuing stream of criticism. In addition to the late December *Herald* editorial criticizing the subway plan for failing to provide rapid transit, a January 1 *Advertiser* editorial made the same point, giving the subway only lukewarm praise: “The Tremont St. subway is, of course, only a temporary relief in the direction of rapid transit, but it is presumably an advance upon existing conditions.”<sup>127</sup> A couple of days later the new Republican governor, Frederic Thomas Greenhalge, gave an address that mentioned rapid transit, but gave no indication of support for the subway. He said that rapid transit was of great importance to the state’s people and businesses, but merely mentioned the subway as one among the many plans that had been suggested.<sup>128</sup> The newspapers also printed various letters or articles reporting on alternative proposals.<sup>129</sup> One of the state representatives from Boston even submitted legislation calling for the repeal of the subway bill.<sup>130</sup>

In something of an about-face, Matthews also began to express reservations. At the end of January he was invited to discuss Boston’s future at the Beacon Society, where he said, “As to the proposed subway, I don’t advocate it particularly, and I am not opposed to it. I believe we shall never have real rapid transit until we have an elevated road.” He continued on to say that the subway would remove the streetcars from the surface of the streets, but that the savings in time for passengers would “not be much—perhaps from

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<sup>127</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: A preview," January 1, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>128</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The Governor's address," January 4, 1894, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>129</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: A rejoinder in the matter of the subway," January 5, 1894, p. 4, "Still another subway scheme," January 13, 1894, p. 8, and "An eminent architect's view," January 17, 1894, p. 5 *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Cost of the subway," January 6, 1894, p. 4, and "Tunnel instead of subway; An architect thinks it better for Tremont street," January 5, 1894, p. 8.

<sup>130</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "May be killed; A bill to repeal the subway scheme to be introduced in the House today by Rep. McCarthy," January 31, 1894, p. 1.

five to 10 minutes in the trip through the heart of the city.” This advantage, he felt, did not justify building the subway.<sup>131</sup>

On February 12 the subway commission introduced a bill to the legislature proposing amendments to its authorizing legislation. Among the changes requested were permission to spend up to \$5 million (instead of \$2 million), to put a station under the Common, and to extend the proposed route.<sup>132</sup> The General Court turned over the proposed amendments to a Joint Special Committee on Transit, which was given the task of studying the subway proposal as well as any other related matters. Over the next months the joint committee gave fifteen public hearings,<sup>133</sup> at which about sixty people spoke,<sup>134</sup> before turning the matter over the legislature’s Committee on Finance, which held an additional thirteen hearings.<sup>135</sup>

At the hearings both opponents and supporters continued to press their points. Most of these were arguments that had been heard before—objections to using the Common, preference for an elevated road or a broad highway running through downtown, etc.—and came from individuals and groups that had spoken previously. However, during late March a new source of opposition arose, captured by the *Globe* in the title of one of its articles on a committee hearing: “Subway scare; Merchants fear injury to their trade.” Up to this point objections to the subway plan had mostly come from individuals. Now, however, some of the merchants along Tremont Street appeared before the committee and wrote letters to it expressing their opposition on the grounds that the construction

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<sup>131</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Subway useless if the surface cars come back again,” January 29, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Boston’s subway: Hearing before the Transit Committee,” February 27, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> These hearings were transcribed and are available at the Massachusetts State House Library. Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 15 vols., [Boston], [The General Court], 1894.

<sup>134</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “For the subway: Argument of Mayor Matthews in its favor,” April 5, 1894, pp. 1 & 10.

<sup>135</sup> Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1895.

process would ruin their businesses.<sup>136</sup> One of these, a merchant named John W. Wilson who employed about a hundred people, protested to the committee that its hearings were unbalanced, because the merchants doing business on Tremont hadn't been heard from. When a committee member remarked that the hearings had all been advertised in the newspapers, Wilson responded that the merchants weren't people who had experience giving such testimony.<sup>137</sup> The merchants went on in the next weeks to form a "Merchant's Anti-Subway League," which continued to protest the subway. The league put together a petition calling on the General Court to reject the subway and instead provide an elevated railroad, a position that they claimed was supported by about 12,000 residents of Boston and its suburbs.<sup>138</sup>

At the same time that the public was commenting on the subway, Matthews was advocating the incorporation of an elevated railroad into the plan. A couple of weeks after the subway commission's bill was submitted, Mayor Matthews gave a long presentation to the committee in which he emphasized that the subway would be a great help to building an elevated road, because it was impractical to build elevated tracks in the congested district. At the hearing were displayed plans drawn up by the city engineer showing a combined elevated railroad and subway.<sup>139</sup> A few weeks later Matthews appeared again, this time to present his formal proposal for an elevated railroad.<sup>140</sup> Then,

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<sup>136</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Subway scare; Merchants fear injury to their trade," March 26 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>137</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 9, p. 57.

<sup>138</sup> *Boston Herald*, "An anti-subway league; Tremont street merchants meet and organize," April 11, 1894, p. 6, and "Merchants' anti-subway league; important meeting of the executive committee at the Parker House yesterday," April 17, 1894, p. 4; *Boston Globe*, "To fight the subway; Merchants organize the save their business," April 11, 1894, p. 5, "Merchants' anti-subway league," April 11 (p.m.), 1894, p. 10, and "Against subway; Merchants' league is solidly arrayed," April 30 (a.m.), 1894, p. 7.

<sup>139</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Boston's subway: Hearing before the Transit Committee," February 27, 1894, p. 1; *Boston Globe*, "Ripe time to rush rapid transit through Boston," February 27 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>140</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Up in air: Boston people may spin to and from work," March 17 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 6.

at one of the committee's last hearings, Chairman Kittredge of the legislative committee asked Matthews to draft a new bill incorporating the elevated proposal.<sup>141</sup> On April 11 Matthews presented his new bill, which called for the subway commission not only to build a subway, but also to lay out and secure the land for an elevated route, which would then be leased to a private corporation to build and operate the elevated railway.<sup>142</sup> Matthews' new support for an elevated road may have been a ploy to gain political support. The *Globe* claimed in late March that transit committee chair Senator Kittredge was "so wedded to the elevated road idea that he would never consent to the subway plan if the scheme of an elevated road . . . were not tacked on to the bill."<sup>143</sup>

On April 30, the committee on transit finally voted on what to recommend to the General Court. To most people's surprise, the committee voted against recommending Matthews' combined subway and elevated bill, and instead voted to have a subcommittee look further into a bill for an elevated railroad that had been introduced by entrepreneur Joe V. Meigs.<sup>144</sup> The bill now reported by the transit committee would have given his charter the right to build elevated roads through 36 miles of streets in Boston and its suburbs, including along Tremont Street in the downtown.

A few days later the committee reported the Meigs bill to the General Court. The subway advocates, led by Senator Kittredge, tried to enter a minority report in favor of Matthews' plan, but were prevented from doing so.<sup>145</sup> The Meigs bill was assigned to the finance committee, which proceeded to hold a series of hearings.

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<sup>141</sup> *Boston Herald*, "The mayor on the subway; He argues for it before the legislative committee," April 6, 1894, p. 6.

<sup>142</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Solved by the mayor; Matthews' bill provides subway and elevated combined," April 11 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>143</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Subway annex; Elevated railroad to be tacked on," March 29 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>144</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Against the subway; Committee on transit rejects bill," May 1, 1894, pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>145</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Reported the Meigs bill; "Leave to withdraw" on the subway matter," May 3, 1894, p. 12.



The revival of the Meigs bill set in motion a new whirlwind of accusations. Matthews immediately condemned it, and the *Transcript* began a series of almost daily editorials denouncing it. The *Herald's* editors condemned the plan as well, despite their general interest in an elevated railroad.<sup>146</sup> The criticisms of the Meigs bill varied, but the basic objections were to putting an elevated road through the downtown, to provisions for state financing, and to the lack of any provision for paying damages to the owners of property abutting the system. In addition, the bill was perceived as a corrupt effort for the members of Meigs' corporation to make money at the public expense.

The Meigs bill was eventually sent to the House, where on June 15 it passed by 122 to 36.<sup>147</sup> It was then debated in the Senate for several days. Among other objections was the argument that the downtown property owners (and the newspapers in which they advertised) objected to the Meigs bill because they benefited from the traffic congestion, which raised their rents. Meigs' supporters claimed that the bill's opponents were major advertisers in the newspapers, which caused the newspapers to reject the bill. On July 28, at a time when most of the Meigs' supporters were out of the room, the Senate passed an amendment to the bill that required the voters of Boston to vote upon the bill. But that was not the end of the day's surprises. A recess was called, and as the *Herald* described the scene, "When [the house] reassembled, a new programme was disclosed, to the almost comical bewilderment of the senators who had not taken part in arranging it. The Meigs bill dropped down the trap, and then bobbed up again with a big subway attachment." The new, radically different bill was a compromise between the two sides: it eliminated the referendum requirement, but tacked on to the Meigs bill a version of

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<sup>146</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The rapid transit report," May 1, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>147</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Now the Senate; Final vote in House on Meigs bill," June 16 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 6.

Matthews' recent subway plan for Tremont Street and a clause forbidding any elevated railroads on Washington and Tremont Street in the congested district.<sup>148</sup> Despite outrage of the part of the Meigs' supporters, the Senate passed the bill and sent it to the House for concurrence.<sup>149</sup> House supporters of the original Meigs bill were none too pleased with the new subway element of the bill, but the House finally passed the bill, with the amendment that the referendum requirement be reinstated. A conference committee between the House and Senate was set up to resolve the matter, and at 1:40 in the morning on July 2, the last day of the legislative year, the two branches finally passed a bill, which was sent to the governor and signed later that day.<sup>150</sup>

Mayor Matthews announced his support for the compromise bill and set the referendum for a special election to be held on July 24. As the election approached, Matthews was asked to make a public declaration of his views. He prepared a statement of his approval in which he stressed its benefit as a measure to relieve downtown congestion:

I shall vote for the bill and shall advise others to do the same, because I believe that on the whole it furnishes a reasonable and practicable means of securing rapid transit and relief for congestion in this city, and, furthermore, because I fear the adoption of desperate and extravagant remedies if the whole matter is allowed to remain unsettled for another year. . . .

A part of the subway could be used for elevated railroad purposes, but the chief merit of the subways is that by means of them a large part of the streets in the business section of the city can be freed from the encumbrance of surface cars and tracks, and thus be restored to their legitimate purpose as highways for foot passengers and teams, while the subways themselves will

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<sup>148</sup> *Boston Globe*, "To the people; Referendum accepted on Meigs bill," June 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 5; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "To third readings; The Meigs bill is ordered by the Senate," June 29, 1894, p. 1; *Boston Herald*, "Subway tacked on; Senate gives Meigs bill a new guise," June 29, 1894, pp. 1 & 5, and "Editorial: With a subway attachment," June 29, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>149</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Meigs bill passed," June 30, 1894, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>150</sup> The bill as finally passed contained not only provisions allowing the city to build a subway and granting the Meigs company a charter for an elevated railroad, but also provisions for the city to build a tunnel to East Boston and a new bridge to Charlestown. *Boston Globe*, "Clock set back; Busy closing hours of the legislature," July 1, 1894, pp. 1 & 8, and *Boston Globe*, "Meigs subway: Belief that the governor will sign bill," July 2, 1894, pp. 1 & 2; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The new Bell bill," July 2, 1894, p. 8.

accommodate several times the number of cars that can now pass through the city, and at about double the rate of speed.<sup>151</sup>

There was some opposition to the bill, but none of it focused on direct criticism of the subway or congestion issues. Indeed, the subway was barely mentioned at all, except by the *Advertiser*, which supported the Meigs plan but not a subway. The *Post* was the only major paper to oppose the bill, but its editors were vigorous opponents on many grounds. Among other reasons, they objected that the bill's provisions had not been carefully enough studied because the process by which the legislature had approved the bill was one of trading political favors rather than careful planning, that the bill was unlikely ever to lead to the creation of an elevated train, and that it was too complicated for people to have formed a good judgement in the few weeks between the legislature's approval and the referendum.<sup>152</sup> They ran several cartoon urging voters to reject the bill. One of these portrayed Boston as a young woman who should reject her two "suiters," Matthews representing the subway and Meigs representing his elevated railway scheme (see Figure 4.2). The Citizens' Association was another prominent opponent, stating that it supported the subway provision but could not support the current bill because of the problems with the Meigs elevated railway provision.<sup>153</sup> Osborne Howes, Jr., argued that it was ridiculous to ask voters to pass judgment on a bill that paired such different plans as the subway and Meigs elevated system.<sup>154</sup> Two days before the referendum, a meeting of members of the Building Trades Council unanimously voted against the bill. Though

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<sup>151</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Mayor's vote; It will be 'yes' on the rapid transit bill," July 21 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>152</sup> See, for example: *Boston Post*, "Editorial: Better vote 'no,'" July 21, 1894, p. 4, "Editorial: Handicapped by its methods," July 22, 1894, p. 12, and "Why you should vote 'no,'" July 24, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>153</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Pros and cons; Divergent views on Meigs bill expressed," July 22, 1894, p. 20.

<sup>154</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Letter to the editor: 'Distorted' referendum," July 22 (Sunday), 1894, p. 20.

the members who spoke had widely differing reasons for their opposition, these all centered on the elevated railway provision rather than the subway.<sup>155</sup>

**Figure 4.2: A *Post* cartoon opposing the combined subway and elevated bill.**



Note: Man to the left is elevated railway proponent Meigs, and the man to the right is Mayor Matthews, representing the subway. Source: *Boston Post*, July 22 (a.m.), 1894, p. 1.

In the end, the bill passed by a margin of 1,278 out of just under 30,000 votes cast.<sup>156</sup>

The *Globe* printed the cartoon shown in Figure 4.3 and ran editorials urging the city to get to work at once on implementing the voters' decision. The editors stressed that the fact that the vote passed, even given such a convoluted plan, demonstrated the residents'

<sup>155</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Won't vote for Meigs; Building Trades Council so resolves," July 23 [p.m.?], 1894, p. 2.

<sup>156</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Won by 1278," July 24 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

intense desire for improved rapid transit.<sup>157</sup> The *Advertiser* stuck to its guns in opposing the subway, running an editorial saying that the vote in favor would have been much higher had the Meigs bill not suffered the “heavy handicap” of the subway plan.<sup>158</sup>

Figure 4.3: Illustration from the *Boston Globe*.



Source: *Boston Globe*, July 25 (a.m.), 1894, p. 1.

Within a few days a new Boston Transit Commission was formed to oversee the subway project, being composed of the members of the subway commission plus two gubernatorial appointees.<sup>159</sup> The commission got speedily to work. The authorizing legislation did not require the commission to build the subway, but rather that it should

<sup>157</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: Yes, say Boston's freemen," July 25 (a.m.), 1894, p. 4, and "Editorial: Now for rapid transit work," July 26 (a.m.), 1894, p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: Boston votes 'yes'," July 25, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>159</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Subway theirs: Governor appoints new commissioners," July 27, 1894, p. 1.

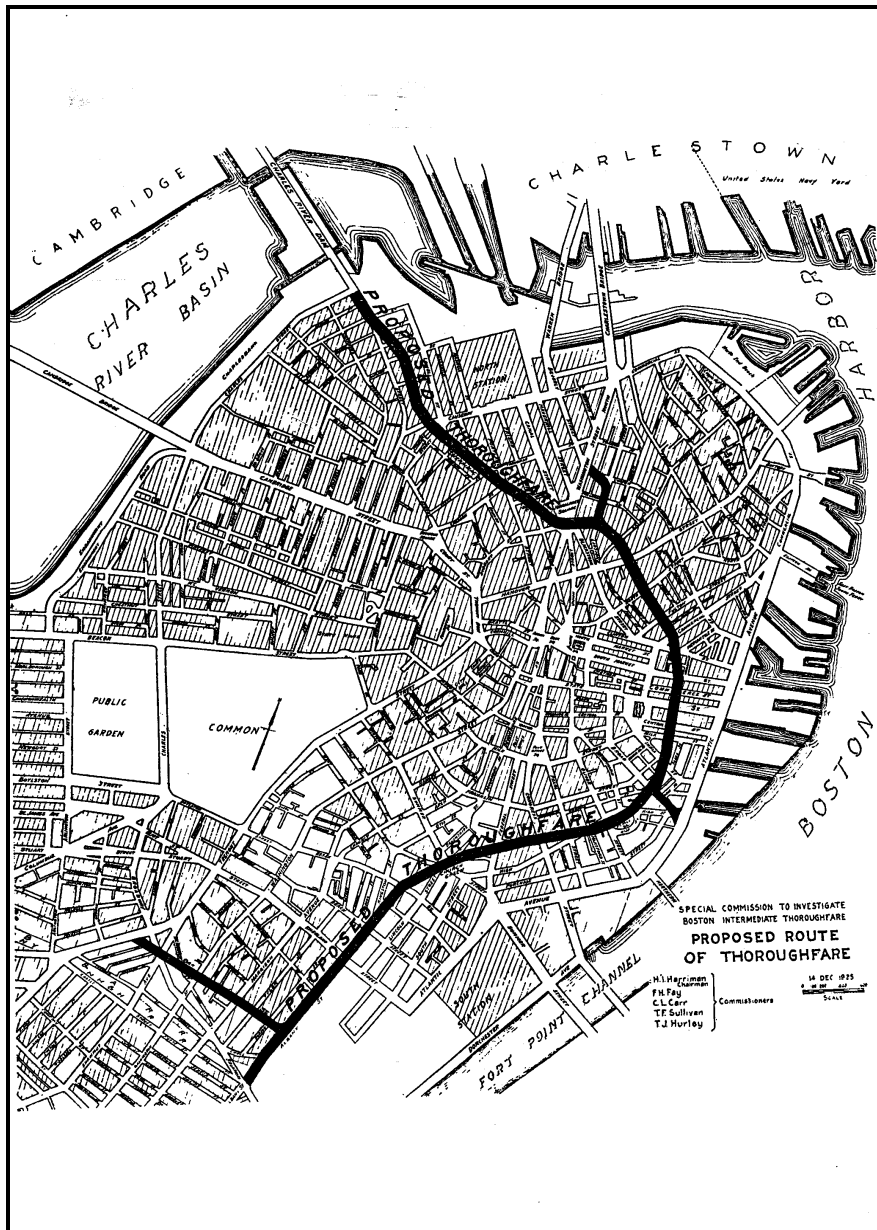
build the project only if further study demonstrated that the project would be beneficial. The commission decided that the subway should be built, and continued to move the project forward. During its first year it had to fight off an unsuccessful attempt to repeal its authorizing legislation. As the subway finally neared completion, the commission also arranged an exclusive twenty-year lease of the subway to the West End, which agreed to run all its Tremont Streetcars through the subway. In September of 1897 the first leg of the subway opened to great fanfare and festivities, and within a year the entire project was completed. The subway even came in under its \$5 million budget.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Cheape, *Moving the masses*, 1980, pp. 143-145.

## CURING CONGESTION IN THE 1920s: THE LOOP HIGHWAY STORY

Figure 5.1: Map of the loop highway as proposed by the Special Commission.



Source: Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare, *Final Report*, [Boston, the Commission], 1925, p. 3.

## 5.1 Introduction

Three decades after the decision to build the subway, traffic congestion remained a prominent issue in Boston. Of specific concern was congestion in the very same location that had prompted the city to build the subway: the downtown business district. Also unchanged from the 1890s was concern over the lack of adequate facilities for traveling north and south through the district. In the 1920s, however, the proposed solution that attracted the most favorable and sustained attention was not an underground facility, but a new, at-grade boulevard known alternately as the “Intermediate Thoroughfare” and the “loop highway.” It was conceived of as a quick way for vehicles to access the various downtown districts, and it also was to serve traffic passing directly through the downtown without stopping, since it connected two major entry points onto the peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

The loop highway was also known as the “Intermediate Thoroughfare” because it was designed to be the central of three major thoroughfares leading north and south through the downtown. The inner and outer roads were already largely complete. The “inner” thoroughfare, running just east of Beacon Hill and the Common, consisted of Boylston, Tremont, Court, and Cambridge Streets, while the “outer” one ran along the very eastern edge of the downtown, primarily along a stretch of Atlantic Avenue.

The loop highway was to start in the north, where the Charles River Dam bridge led into Boston. At that time, vehicles from the suburbs of Cambridge and Somerville coming over the bridge had no major thoroughfare to take them directly to (or even near) the downtown retail or market districts. The loop highway would travel south and pass to

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<sup>1</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Boston’s traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution,” May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.



the east of the retail district before turning west and heading to South Station. The route combined existing streets (which would be widened) and entirely new road segments. The highway would be a hundred feet wide for its entire length, with a roadway of seventy-six feet and sidewalks of twelve feet on each side. The plan called for a lane for parking or standing vehicles along both curbs, plus three lanes of moving traffic in each direction. No surface street railways were to be allowed on the thoroughfare.<sup>2</sup> While the exact route and size of the highway changed slightly over the next three years as the plan went through various incarnations, it never varied substantially from the initial layout. Figure 5.1 shows the route for the loop highway chosen in December 1925 by a legislative commission that studied the plan.

This chapter chronicles the series of events that the proposal went through. As background, the chapter begins by outlining the major national trends in city planning and transportation planning in the 1920s, and then describes the people and organizations most active in the loop highway debate.

The sources and methods used are discussed in depth in Chapter 2, but a few additional points should be made that are specific to the loop highway story. As with the subway case, I relied primarily on a mixture of newspaper reports and government reports as data. However, a key difference between my sources for the subway and the loop highway stories is that for the latter I found a large collection of articles in *Current Affairs*, a weekly publication of the Boston Chamber of Commerce. In addition, I found a number of articles in the *Christian Science Monitor*, which provided relatively non-partisan reporting on the events at hand, though no editorial content.

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<sup>2</sup> *Boston City Record*, "New two-mile thoroughfare through downtown section proposed to aid traffic," December 22, 1923, pp. 1741 & 1745.

## 5.2 City planning in the 1920s

By the early 1920s, the city planning movement in the United States was in full swing. Cities around the country had appointed planning commissions, professional planning associations and conferences had appeared, and universities were offering courses in planning. A number of nationally recognized planning firms had been established, too. Cities around the country hired them to draw up transportation and other plans, since most cities didn't have staff capable of doing such work.

Still, despite these signs of energy, the planning movement had its limitations. While city planning was beginning to be recognized as a profession, there was still a great deal of uncertainty as to what planning actually meant. Most of its practitioners had formal training in other fields such as landscape architecture, engineering, or law. As for city planning boards, they were usually staffed by private citizens who did not necessarily have any experience in planning or municipal government. Also, planning boards had limited influence. City councils usually allocated them meager funds, and the boards generally had only advisory power. Thus, there was a tendency for the city councils and executive departments to ignore the plans drawn up by planning boards.<sup>3</sup>

Parallel to the planning activity going on within city governments—and often much more influential—were important activities undertaken by the private sector and civic groups. In many large cities, chambers of commerce or other downtown business groups organized their own planning projects, often partnering with automobile clubs and utilities. In many cities, these private groups made surveys of downtown traffic, and

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<sup>3</sup> Mark S. Foster, *From streetcar to superhighway: American city planners and urban transportation, 1900-1940*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1981, Chapter 2.

proposed street improvements, rapid transit plans, and new traffic regulations. In some cities like Chicago and Los Angeles, business groups hired professional planning consultants to draw up these plans.

Furthermore, along with creating and commissioning plans themselves, businessmen were very active in promoting the implementation of their plans. They did this through lobbying, and also through serving on advisory commissions. For example, in 1922 a Los Angeles Traffic Commission was established to advise the city government. On the commission sat representatives of the city's largest business and civic groups, utility companies, newspapers, and city departments. Its stated purpose was to "assist the city authorities in solving the traffic problems of Los Angeles." The commission began by putting out its own comprehensive street survey, but when this failed to achieve results, it put together a committee of twenty-three men who contributed \$1,000 each towards the cost of hiring consultants Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Harland Bartholomew, and Charles H. Cheney to prepare a regional highway survey.<sup>4</sup>

The subjects of interest to city planners in the 1920s had shifted somewhat from the 1890s. Improving the condition of tenement houses was still of interest, especially by facilitating the development of affordable housing in the suburbs, but tenement reform was less central to the profession. Many cities were beginning to do extensive regional plans, elaborating on the approach used in the 1892 report of the Rapid Transit Commission, which looked at the whole region's transportation needs from a multi-modal perspective. The most famous of these was the *Regional Plan of New York and its Environs*, an eight-volume work released in pieces between 1927 and 1931. The plan

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<sup>4</sup> Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the automobile: The making of the modern city*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, pp. 100-105.

addressed many topics, including the many modes of transportation, land-use regulations, locations for new cities, and open space needs. Most plans of the time were much less ambitious than New York's, but they were often still large, comprehensive efforts. In addition, the concept of zoning had become popular, and many cities were beginning to ask their planning boards to draw up city-wide zoning codes. In fact, in many communities planners focused on zoning to the exclusion of comprehensive planning, even though a zoning ordinance was theoretically best used as a tool to implement a general plan.

Transportation planning was at the heart of many 1920s plans. By then, some planners were thinking in terms of regulatory and construction policies as two complementary strategies for congestion relief. Nelson P. Lewis, in his influential book *The Planning of the Modern City*, described regulatory and construction policies as the “two general remedies” for congestion. Planners tended to take one or both of these approaches to the problem. Most major cities drew up plans for major infrastructure improvements, such as new arterial streets, subways, or elevated trains. In addition, cities hired consultants to study how they could use traffic regulations to improve traffic flow and how to implement new traffic control devices, street lights and stop signs being two of the most common. Some plans covered both regulatory and construction approaches, though not all. Nelson concluded that since building major new streets in the existing business districts would be so costly, cities would first apply regulatory solutions.<sup>5</sup> (This reasoning held only partially correct for Boston. While it is true the city ultimately rejected the expensive loop highway project, it adopted regulatory changes only slowly.)

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson Peter Lewis, *The planning of the modern city: A review of the principles governing city planning*, 2nd ed., rev., New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1922, pp. 213-214.

Transportation planning was a good subject for the nascent planning movement for a couple of reasons. First, transportation issues were of great concern in cities around the country. Traffic congestion was a complaint in downtowns everywhere, with the mass introduction of automobiles flooding cities with new problems, among them the issue of where to park all the vehicles. Given the prominence attached to traffic issues by city elites, it is not surprising that planning gravitated towards traffic as a subject of study.

Second, transportation planning fit well with the so-called “progressive movement” of urban reform. The good government reform movement of the late nineteenth century blossomed into the highly influential “progressive” movement. Progressives continued the effort to bring a business-like approach to municipal government, as opposed to the perceived system of patronage politics that had controlled cities in the late nineteenth century. A central goal of the progressive philosophy was order—quite contrary to the chaos and disarray that characterized most large cities. Cities were to be run on principles of efficiency, like corporations, and to be staffed by competent professionals with specialized expertise. While physical city planning was only one of many municipal affairs that concerned progressives, it was nevertheless a subject of great interest to the reformers. They often portrayed the urban problems of the day as resulting from careless, selfish, citizens in earlier decades who failed to think intelligently about how to build for their city’s long-term future. Progressives wanted to avoid making the same mistakes as older were cities rebuilt, and as new ones were settled. They believed that with a rational, far-seeing approach, people could design healthier, more economically efficient cities for the future.

Planners developed professional techniques that fit the progressive model of orderly, scientific study, and transportation planning was especially suited to these principles. For one thing, congestion symbolized the perceived irrational, wasteful confusion that the progressive movement aimed to tame. Also, early methods of transportation planning, taken from traditions in the fields of municipal and railroad engineering, meshed well with the progressive enthusiasm for scientific investigation. Transportation planners expanded the use of surveying and planning methods that had been developed by railroad and rapid transit engineers. The planners took elaborate surveys of vehicles, passengers, and existing road infrastructure, and then analyzed the data to predict economic costs and benefits associated with different policy scenarios, such as proposed new roads or transit lines.<sup>6</sup>

Boston's planning experience fit these national trends. For example, it had one of the first planning boards in the country. Like most planning boards of the era, however, it was poorly funded and had no formal power to implement its plans. The business community was deeply involved in promoting planning for the city, especially through the auspices of the Boston Chamber of Commerce, which was a tireless advocate of the loop highway. Though the chamber itself it did not go so far as to hire consultants to draw up plans, its affiliated Retail Trade Board did hire a nationally known engineer to critique the loop highway plan. The Boston Real Estate Association also hired another engineer for the same purpose. As for the types of transportation planning common in the 1920s, Boston was both typical and a little behind the times. Like other cities it

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<sup>6</sup> For an early statement of progressive views about cities, see: *The New England Magazine (New Series)*, "What a great city might be--A lesson from the White City," March 1896, pp. 3-13. A good description of how planning fit into the larger progressive movement can be found in: John D. Fairfield, "The scientific management of urban space: Professional city planning and the legacy of progressive reform," *Journal of Urban History*, February 1994, pp. 179-204.

experimented with new traffic control devices and traffic regulations, but was not especially quick to implement many of them. The loop highway plan was typical of other cities that looked to build major new streets to accommodate automobiles. Boston in the mid-1920s was less ambitious than some cities, however, in that it did not develop the loop as part of a larger, multi-modal and comprehensive plan.

### **5.3 Key players**

Many individuals, interest groups, and government bodies were involved in the loop highway debate, but a few key players appeared again and again. This section provides background information about these institutions and people. The city council played only a minor role, while the two mayors who presided during the years of the loop highway debate played low-key but influential roles. The state legislature held ultimate veto power over the loop highway, and set up a special commission to study it. Outside the legislature, the people and organizations that were most vocal on the subject of the loop highway were those most heavily involved in promoting it. Included in this group were the Boston Chamber of Commerce and its subsidiary Retail Trade Board, and the Boston City Planning Board.

#### **5.3.1 *The city and the state***

Although the loop highway project was a city-initiated project that would have been entirely within city boundaries and paid for by the city, the real debate over the project took place in the context of state commissions and committees. Furthermore, it was the state government that ultimately stopped the project. The state had this power because,

as with the subway, the funding provisions for the loop highway would have required legislative permission.

The plan was crafted by the city's planning board, which is discussed in more detail below. The city council played no role at all in the loop highway discussions, except that at one point it passed a formal statement of protest against the plan. (Had the legislature approved the loop, the city council would have been required to approve the financing plans, but the project never got that far.) Parallel to the loop highway debates were proposals to change the city's traffic regulations, and here the city was more involved, as regulations were under the control of its Board of Street Commissioners.

The role played by the two mayors during the loop highway was very different from that of Mayor Matthews during the 1890s. Mayor Matthews was a leading proponent of transportation improvements in the city, but the loop highway did not find such active championship in either James Michael Curley or Malcolm Nichols, the mayors presiding during the loop highway debates.

Curley, who spent decades serving in various city and state elected offices, was elected Boston's mayor (for the second time) in 1921. He served through 1925, when term limit rules forced him to leave office. He was an Irish Democrat, and his support came from the working classes, whose interests he championed. He made every effort to serve his constituency by building infrastructure that would benefit them, and by creating large number of municipal jobs to employ them, actions that alienated the Yankee middle class who saw him as profligate and corrupt.<sup>7</sup> Curly seems to have supported the loop

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Planning the city upon a hill: Boston since 1630*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, pp. 129-154; Thomas H. O'Connor, *The hub: Boston past and present*, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 2001.



highway, but there is no indication that he took on the project as central to his mayoralty. Although he was a strong supporter of city planning, and the number of construction jobs that would have been created to build the loop highway must have appealed to him, he did not advocate often for the project, at least in public. While he did speak occasionally in positive terms (for example, saying in 1925 that he was, “for it first, last and always”<sup>8</sup>), but if he was actively pushing the loop highway, it was mostly behind the scenes.

Nichols succeeded Curley by winning a race in which the Democrats fielded nine candidates. A Republican, Nichols was reputedly a product of the state’s patronage system, his victory being credited to support by a Republican party boss named Charles Innes. A tax lawyer by profession, Nichols had been elected to offices in both the Boston City Council and General Court. During the mayoral campaign of 1925, Nichols acknowledged that traffic congestion was a serious problem, but said he couldn’t take a stand on the loop highway because the plans were still being studied by the legislature’s special commission. Once elected, however, he came out against the loop highway on the grounds that it was too expensive, and that before the city undertook such a costly project, it should try to reduce congestion through changes to parking and traffic regulations.

Debates over the loop highway all took place at the state legislature and its committees, because legislative approval was needed for the city to issue bonds beyond its state-imposed debt ceiling. Although city planning was not a particularly partisan issue in the 1920s, the loop highway was an expensive project, and that made it subject to

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<sup>8</sup> *Boston Post*, “Favors \$25,000,000 hub street development plan,” February 14, 1925, p. 2.

the continuing squabbles between the mainly Democratic city and the Republican-dominated General Court. State politics still organized themselves in large part around the conflict between the white, Protestant “Yankee” vote for the Republican Party and the Irish-backed Democratic Party.

Within the legislature, one politician openly led the opposition to the loop highway. This was Henry L. Shattuck, a leading Republican member of the House of Representatives. As chairman of the House’s Committee on Ways and Means, he had direct influence over any bill like the loop highway that involved financial issues. Shattuck was an independently wealthy man with a reputation for staying studiously clear of patronage politics, and dislike both Curley and Nichols’ patron Innes for this reason.<sup>9</sup> According to one admirer, Shattuck “enjoyed the reputation of one of the leading authorities on State and municipal finance in the Commonwealth and a high type of legislator.”<sup>10</sup> Shattuck repeatedly criticized the loop highway plan as too expensive, and at times also suggested that it would not effectively reduce congestion. He argued that the city should first try adjusting its parking regulations as a solution for the congestion problem. His objections were likely central to the loop’s ultimate defeat.

### **5.3.2 *The Boston Chamber of Commerce and the Retail Trade Board***

Boston’s Chamber of Commerce and its affiliated Retail Trade Board were enthusiastic supporters of the loop highway proposal. Since 1909 the chamber had functioned as an “all-inclusive” business organization (as opposed to its predecessors and

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<sup>9</sup> John T. Galvin, *The gentleman Mr. Shattuck: A biography of Henry Lee Shattuck, 1879-1971*, Boston, Tontine Press, 1996; Louis Martin Lyons, *Newspaper story: One hundred years of the Boston Globe*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1971, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Edmund Hennessy, *Four decades of Massachusetts politics, 1890-1935, 1935*, Freeport, N.Y., Books for Libraries Press, 1971 (c. 1935), p. 324.

the other business organizations present in Boston at the time, which represented only single sectors of the business community). In a 1926 article on the chamber's history, a member explained that the "present-day Chamber of Commerce aims to protect and promote the interest of business men in general, and to do it in a way which will also be for the benefit of people of the community in general."<sup>11</sup>

The Retail Trade Board, an affiliate of the chamber, consisted of "[n]inety-two of the outstanding retail firms of Boston selling merchandise of every known type and variety."<sup>12</sup> Although the Retail Trade Board was closely affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce, and firms who belonged to the board also were chamber members, the board acted independently. It was one of the very earliest advocates for the loop highway, including at a time when the chamber itself expressed reservations about the project. In addition, the board commissioned a special report of its own in support of the loop highway.

The Retail Trade Board's membership included three major downtown department stores, Filene's, Jordan Marsh, and R.H. White. The owners of these department stores were particularly enthusiastic supporters of the loop plan from the beginning, and they sent representatives to various public meetings. Edward Filene, one of the brothers who owned the Filene's department store, was very active in local planning issues. He was most famous for his "Boston-1915" project, an unsuccessful effort from 1908 to 1913 to stir Bostonians into reforming their city government and improving planning for the city.<sup>13</sup> Interest in traffic issues also extended to Louis E. Kirstein, a vice president of

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<sup>11</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Our Chamber and its predecessors," November 29, 1926, pp. 34+.

<sup>12</sup> *Current Affairs*, [Add for the Retail Trade Board], December 10, 1923, pp. 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> James Anthony Merino, *A great city and its suburbs: Attempts to integrate metropolitan Boston, 1865-1920*, PhD dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1969, pp. 81-83.

Filene's, who donated one of the city's first traffic signals. The Jordan Marsh Company's George W. Mitton also supported the loop highway, though for reasons not, apparently, shared by others. Mitton argued that Washington Street should be closed to vehicles, even though it was a major north-south route, because the street was overcrowded with pedestrians. He argued that it was more important to serve pedestrians than to allow vehicles to come directly to the store.<sup>14</sup>

Though the Chamber of Commerce took a little longer than the Retail Trade Board to endorse the loop highway, the chamber soon became a powerful supporter. When the City Planning Board's plan for the loop highway first appeared, the chamber reserved judgment, calling for further study of the proposal. However, soon after the chamber switched its message and became an ardent advocate for the road. Chamber representatives spoke in favor of the road at many legislative hearings, and the organization covered the project extensively in its weekly periodical, *Current Affairs*. In late 1924 the chamber set up a subcommittee of its Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs to work specifically on promoting the loop plan.<sup>15</sup>

It is not surprising that the chamber supported the loop highway, given how involved the organization was with traffic issues. The pages of *Current Affairs* were filled with articles about plans for all the major road widenings in the region, installation of the first traffic signals (a project led by one of the chamber's members), and debates over parking regulations and the introduction of streets signs. In the December 2, 1923, issue of *Current Affairs*, the chamber even used the issue of traffic congestion as a lure for new

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<sup>14</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Urge value of in-town 'loop' thoroughfare," April 1, 1925, pp. 1 & 3; *Boston Globe*, "Loop hearing speakers are entirely in favor of project," March 31 (p.m.), 1925, p. 23. Mitton's views may not have been popular at the time, but in later years the city did indeed pedestrianize a few blocks around the Filene's and Jordan Marsh department stores.

<sup>15</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Your opinion of the Intermediate Street," December 8, 1924, pp. 5+.

members. The magazine printed an advertisement showing a photograph of a wide street crowded with autos and a couple of trucks, and with pedestrians weaving among the vehicles (see Figure 5.2). The text advised that readers enraged by traffic congestion should find new members to support the chamber, so that it would have more backing for its “scientific” work addressing the problem. The advertisement is very upbeat, suggesting that the problem can be solved: “All [the chamber] needs is workers and support to do it.”<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 5.2: Advertisement in *Current Affairs* calling on members to recruit new people.**



**ARE YOU IN THIS PICTURE?**

If you are you were mad, ugly, you told your wife about the rotten traffic conditions. You “balled out” the driver next to you for not pulling over. You wondered why the traffic cop was so slow giving you the signal to go ahead. You thought of an apology you would offer your waiting friend.

**YOU DID, DIDN'T YOU? DID IT DO ANY GOOD? NO!**

Did you know that the best thing you can-do to relieve traffic conditions down-town is to give the Boston Chamber the support it needs.

That means get one new member, then watch your work bear fruit.

The Chamber is scientifically working out the traffic problem for you. All it needs is workers and support to do it. As proof of what the Chamber is doing; it is responsible for the Cambridge street widening and the Metropolitan Planning Board, both passed by the last legislature. The street widening will tap down-town Boston, the other is charged with working out a system of high-ways leading in and out of the city. Pretty good work, but only a start.

Source: *Current Affairs*, “Are you in this picture,” December 3, 1923, p. 29.

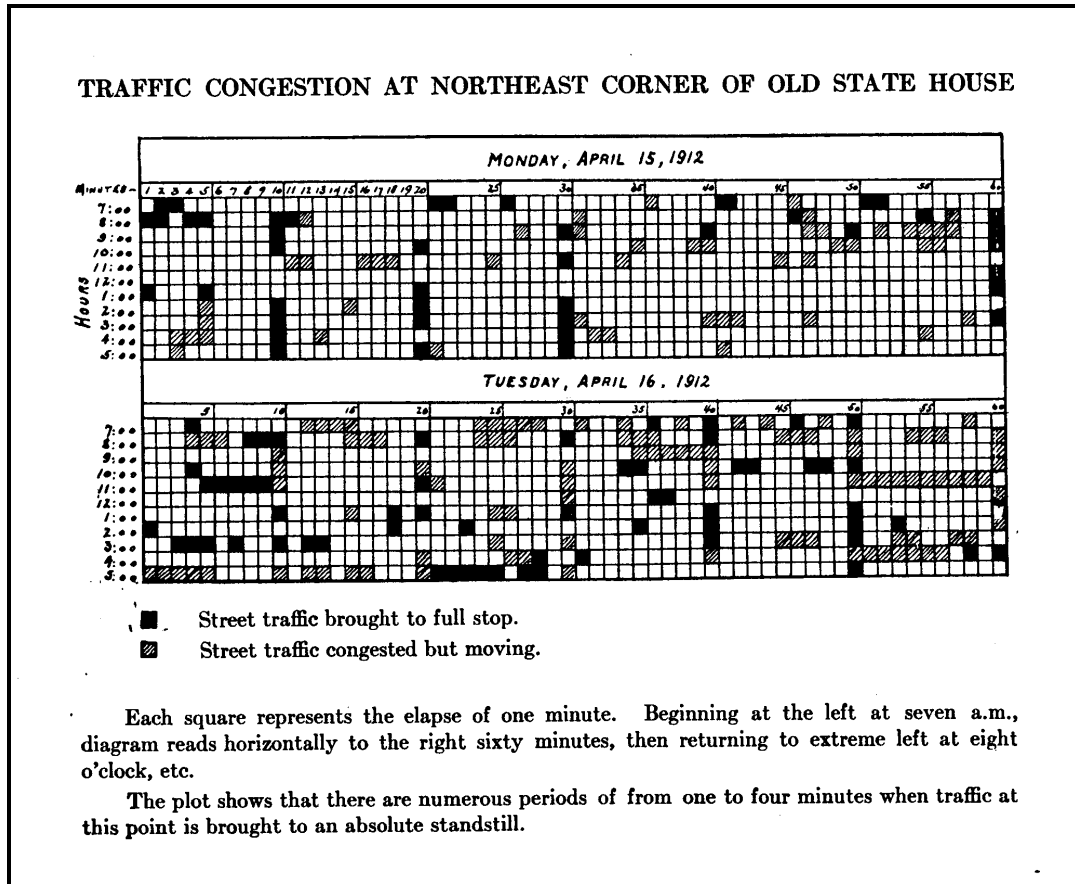
<sup>16</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Are you in this picture,” December 3, 1923, p. 29.

As suggested by the advertisement, the chamber's involvement in traffic issues extended beyond public advocacy of certain projects. For example, the chamber organized and carried out surveys of traffic conditions. In 1914 the chamber published an elaborate survey of the city's traffic conditions, *Street traffic in the city of Boston; A study made under the direction of the Governing board of the Under Forty Division, Boston Chamber of Commerce*. This report was the result of a year and a half of work by the Under Forty Division. The authors explained that they had found no comprehensive data on the traffic conditions in Boston, and therefore had undertaken the study "to ascertain, as far as possible, the actual facts as to traffic conditions in our streets." The results were to be used as "a foundation of facts from which conclusions can be drawn." The Under Forty Division was amazingly thorough. Not only did it make counts of vehicles and pedestrians, but it also conducted personal interviews with representatives from the Master Teamsters' Association, truck drivers, and city and railway officials; sent out a questionnaire to 350 leading team owners; and observed the conduct and effectiveness of police directing traffic at certain intersections. The results of all these investigations include detailed counts of traffic, as well as lists of particularly congested intersections and an analysis of the problem at each one.<sup>17</sup> Figure 5.3, which shows traffic conditions at one intersection for each minute between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m., illustrates the report's extraordinary level of detail.

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<sup>17</sup> Boston Chamber of Commerce, *Street traffic in the city of Boston; A study made under the direction of the Governing board of the Under Forty Division, Boston Chamber of Commerce*, Boston, E.L. Grimes, 1914.

Figure 5.3: A sample of the data presented in the 1914 report  
*Street traffic in the city of Boston.*



Source: Boston Chamber of Commerce, *Street traffic in the city of Boston; A study made under the direction of the Governing Board of the Under Forty Division*, Boston, E.L. Grimes, 1914, Exhibit 17.

In 1922 the chamber collaborated with the City Planning Board, the Boston Real Estate Exchange, and the Massachusetts Real Estate Exchange on a survey of parking in downtown Boston. The survey was directed by the Chamber's Joint Committee on Street Traffic Conditions.<sup>18</sup> In the summers of 1924 and 1926, the chamber conducted surveys of all vehicles entering and leaving the downtown district. The 1926 survey was a

<sup>18</sup> *Current Affairs*, "The traffic survey," December 11, 1922, p. 10, and "Boston traffic conditions," December 11, 1922, p.16.

community effort, carried out with the help of high school students and members of the Veterans Bureau.<sup>19</sup>

*Current Affairs* not only covered traffic issues in articles and editorials specific to the particular events, but the subject also appeared regularly in a weekly column called “City Planning Notes.” These “Notes” reported on items of interest to the chamber’s Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs “in its continuous survey of street traffic and city planning matters.” On October 5, 1925, the weekly column was re-titled as “City Planning and Street Traffic Notes,” further emphasizing the chamber’s interest in traffic issues.

“City Planning Notes” initially included a heading showing two small, rather blurry overhead photographs of congested streets (see Figure 5.4). In one the street is filled with two lines of parked cars and a single line of moving traffic down the center. The other photograph shows a narrow street with parked cars along one side and a truck backed up perpendicular to the curb, blocking the single lane of moving traffic. On December 14, 1925, the photographs were replaced with a line drawing (see Figure 5.5). The image portrays a city street congested with passenger vehicles and a truck, as well as a few tiny pedestrians dwarfed by the vehicles. The choice of these illustrations for the headings shows that a key concern of the committee’s was not just traffic in general, but traffic congestion in particular.

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<sup>19</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Editorial: Chamber takes new traffic count,” July 5, 1926, p. 6.



**Figure 5.4: Illustration used until December 7, 1925, as a heading for the weekly column "City Planning Notes" in *Current Affairs*.**



Source: *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," July 6, 1925, p. 14.

**Figure 5.5: Illustration used as a heading for the weekly column "City Planning and Street Traffic Notes" in *Current Affairs*, as of December 14, 1925.**



Source: *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," December 14, 1925, p. 9.

The first mention of the loop highway in *Current Affairs* came on February 18, 1924, when an article about another highway plan, the so-called "Northern Gateway," mentioned the loop plan in passing.<sup>20</sup> The first article specifically about the loop highway appeared a month later, on March 17, 1924. It was an editorial entitled "The Intermediate Street—Now or next year?"<sup>21</sup> Between that first article on February 18, 1924, and December 28, 1925,<sup>22</sup> *Current Affairs* printed 35 articles that were either solely about the

<sup>20</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Progress of the Northern Gateway," February 18, 1924, pp. 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: The Intermediate Street - Now or next year," March 17, 1924, pp. 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," December 28, 1925, p. 7.

loop highway or discussed it for at least a full paragraph, as well as at least seven other articles that mentioned the loop highway in passing.<sup>23</sup>

### **5.3.3 The Boston City Planning Board**

The Boston City Planning Board drew up the initial plan for the loop highway, and over the coming years the board continued to lobby actively for the project. Board members also vigorously opposed proposed modifications that would have substantially scaled back the scope of the project. In addition to sending members to speak in favor of the plan at public hearings, the board published additional supportive documents. In the winter of 1925 the board, along with other advocates of the loop highway, published a “Progress Report” urging authorization of the highway.<sup>24</sup> In 1926, the board also put out an informal report on the cost of traffic delays as calculated in other cities.<sup>25</sup> While this report did not speak directly to the loop highway, it was undoubtedly aimed at bolstering the argument that traffic congestion was a problem that the city needed to address, and thus indirectly supported the loop highway plan.

The City Planning Board had been created in 1914 in response to a state law requiring that all cities with populations over 10,000 set up a planning board to study the needs and possibilities for the community, especially with respect to housing and public health.<sup>26</sup> In response to this state mandate, the Boston City Council set up a planning board with five unpaid members. The membership of the board didn’t change frequently,

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<sup>23</sup> A methodological note: I scanned *Current Affairs* from December 1923 through 1926, looking at articles related to street traffic. In addition, I scanned articles on general topics that I thought might mention the highway (e.g., “Boston’s needs for the coming year”). I may have missed additional mentions of the loop highway in articles on topics outside those I was specifically scanning.

<sup>24</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, Boston, the Board, 1925.

<sup>25</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Cost of traffic delays*, Boston, the Board, 1926.

<sup>26</sup> Chapter 494 of the Acts of 1913—Chapter 41, General Laws, sections 70, 71, and 72.

and remained the same throughout the period covered in this case study. The members were:

- Mary A. Barr of the M. Barr Contracting Company (a trucking company);
- Frederic H. Fay, chairman of the firm of Fay, Spofford & Thorndike, Engineers;
- E.A. Johnson, president of the Boston Central Labor Union;
- William Stanley Parker, architect in the office of R. Cipson Sturgis; and
- John J. Walsh, lawyer and former state senator.

Of the five board members, Parker took the most public role in promoting the loop highway. He initially presented the plan to the public in December of 1923 and later appeared at various legislative hearings to defend the plan. In 1926, after the loop highway proposal had finally died in the General Court, an article in *Current Affairs* referred to Parker as the “father” of the loop highway.<sup>27</sup>

The City Planning Board used its modest city-allocated budget to hire both permanent staff and temporary consultants. The board began with a “secretary,” a position filled by Elizabeth Herlihy. Herlihy was a remarkable woman who would go on to serve as secretary to the board for over twenty years and then as a board member for almost twenty more. She became a nationally recognized figure in the city planning movement, and was the first woman to join the American City Planning Institute.<sup>28</sup> As for the board’s consultants, these included people of national reputation in the planning field, such as civil engineer Nelson P. Lewis and landscape architect Arthur C. Comey.

In its early years, the board’s budget limited it to preparing surveys and reports on specific topics, as opposed to beginning work on any kind of comprehensive plan. The

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<sup>27</sup> Frederic H. Fay, “The planning of a city,” in *Fifty years of Boston: A memorial volume issued in commemoration of the tercentenary of 1930*, edited by E. M. Herlihy, Boston, Subcommittee on Memorial History of the Boston Tercentenary Committee, 1932; *Boston Transcript*, “Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board,” December 17, 1923, p. 7; *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” November 8, 1926, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, *Planning the city upon a hill*, 1992, pp. 126-127.

board worked on a number of different topics, such as zoning, the location of public buildings, and housing surveys. During the period of this case study, one of its major achievements was the creation of a zoning plan for the city, which was approved by the General Court in 1924.<sup>29</sup>

Although the board dealt with many different problems, transportation issues were a primary feature of its work—it reported on numerous proposals for street openings, widenings, and extensions. Its actual impact as a transportation planning institution was less impressive, however. Anthony Green, researching the board’s impact, explained that it was limited because the members had little planning experience and also because the only potential source of funding for its plans was the cash-strapped city government, with the state and surrounding communities unwilling to contribute. As Green put it, “The result of these restrictions was that the [Boston City Planning Board] would construct few new streets but volumes of plans.” The board also suffered from the fact that it lacked any authority to implement its plans, merely being authorized to submit recommendations to the Board of Street Commissioners and the city council.<sup>30</sup> The loop highway thus proved to be only one of many cases where the City Planning Board failed to achieve its plans. The board’s lack of direct influence, however, should be taken in context. As mentioned above, city planning boards in the United States were almost always advisory and rarely exercised any direct power over local affairs.

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<sup>29</sup> Fay, “The planning of a city,” 1932. A summary of all the Boston City Planning Board’s first nine annual reports can be found in: Boston City Planning Board, *A compendium of reports and studies relating to the commerce and industries of Boston*, Boston, the Board, 1924.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony David Green, *Planning the Central Artery: Constraints on planners and the limits of planning in Boston, 1909-1979*, A.B. Honors Thesis, Harvard University, 1979, pp. 39-40.

### **5.3.4 The Special Commission**

Because the city needed permission from the General Court to borrow any sizeable amount of money, the loop plan was immediately submitted to the legislature. The General Court responded by setting up a special commission to study the highway. The Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare<sup>31</sup> was composed of representatives of five public bodies. These were the state-appointed Metropolitan District Commission's Division of Metropolitan Planning, plus the Boston City Planning Board, Boston Finance Commission, Boston Transit Commission, and Boston Board of Street Commissioners. Over the course of its life, the Special Commission issued three main reports. In February of 1925 it issued the first major report, and produced a second, revised report in December of the same year. In March 1926 it issued a final report in response to a request from the General Court for more detailed information on its financial plans.

The chairman of the Special Commission was Henry Ingraham Harriman, and it was he who most often appeared publicly to represent the board's positions. Harriman was a lawyer and prominent businessman who involved himself in many city and state affairs. Positions he held over the course of his lifetime included the presidency of the Boston Chamber of Commerce (1917-1919 and 1928-1931), and trusteeships at the Metropolitan Transit District in Boston, the public board regulating the Boston Elevated Railway Company, and Wesleyan University. In his professional life he worked for the New

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<sup>31</sup> The commission's name changed slightly over the next years.

England Power Association as its first president, and for the New England Power Company as chairman of its board of directors.<sup>32</sup>

The City Planning Board was represented by Frederic H. Fay, a civil engineer. Fay was for a time the head of Boston's Bridge and Ferry Division, and after 1914 he worked for the engineering firm of Fay, Spofford and Thorndike. He also served as president of both the American Institute of Consulting Engineers and the Boston Society of Civil Engineers.<sup>33</sup> His involvement in Boston government and planning lasted for decades. In 1901 he published a pamphlet on *The population and finances of Boston: A study of municipal growth*, and in 1932 he wrote a chapter on the history of planning in Boston for a memorial volume on the city's history. Traffic issues were also of ongoing interest to him. A short biographical note published on him as part of the memorial history noted that, as a City Planning Board member, he had been "earnest in promoting the proposed Central Artery, the East Boston Traffic Tunnel and other major improvements designed for the relief of congestion."<sup>34</sup>

The Boston Finance Commission was represented by Judge Michael H. Sullivan. On behalf of the Finance Commission, Sullivan initially opposed the loop highway at the highway's first public legislative hearing in March of 1924, before the legislative Special Commission had been created. Sullivan argued that the Boston Street Commission, the body proposed to manage the project, would be unable to handle this added work load. He also expressed concern that the cost of taking property would be higher than

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<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Herlihy, ed. *Fifty years of Boston: A memorial volume issued in commemoration of the tercentenary of 1930*, Boston, Subcommittee on Memorial History of the Boston Tercentenary Committee, 1932, p. 757..

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 753.

<sup>34</sup> Frederick Harold Fay, *The population and finances of Boston: A study of municipal growth*, Boston, 1901; Fay, "The planning of a city," 1932; Herlihy, *Fifty years of Boston*, 1932.

predicted.<sup>35</sup> However, by the time the Special Commission issued its first report in 1925, Sullivan had apparently changed his position. When the *Herald* reported on the plan, it noted that:

One of the strongest arguments heard for the new project yesterday was that it apparently has the approval of the Boston finance commission, for Judge Michael H. Sullivan, chairman of that body, signs the report. He has been opposed to the project from the start, and indicated only a few weeks ago that he would refuse his approval to any program of such magnitude. Apparently his colleagues on the committee have won him over, however.<sup>36</sup>

Shortly after co-authoring the February report, Sullivan resigned from the Finance Commission in the spring of 1926, thus also losing his place on the Special Commission. He was replaced on both bodies by a Republican lawyer named Charles L. Carr. Carr had been active in local politics for years, serving on the city's Common Council and Board of Aldermen, and in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.<sup>37</sup> He was serving in the House in 1925, when he resigned his seat in order to join the city's Finance Commission. Carr played an outspoken role as a member of the Special Commission, refusing to sign the report issued in late 1925, and appending a dissenting view on the grounds that the loop highway would actually increase congestion in Boston.

The remaining two seats on the Special Commission were filled by people who had less public involvement with the loop project. John H.L. Noyes represented the Boston Board of Street Commissioners until just after the release of the first report. He became ill and died during 1925, and was replaced on the Board of Street Commissioners and Special Commission by Thomas J. Hurley. The seat given to the Chairman of the Boston Transit Commission was occupied by Thomas F. Sullivan.

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<sup>35</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive," March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6; *Boston Herald*, "Debate Mayor's big street plan," March 11, 1924, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Boston Herald*, "\$25,000,000 street plan finds favor," February 14, 1925, pp. 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> Albert Nelson Marquis, ed. *Who's who in New England*, 2nd ed, Chicago, A.N. Marquis & Company, 1916.

## 5.4 Predecessor plans to the loop highway

In the summer of 1923, City Planning Board member William Stanley Parker submitted a proposal for a number of thoroughfares within the city of Boston, one of which was to run along the route of what would later become the loop highway. In discussing the road Parker explained that, “No continuous thoroughfare of this general description has been previously suggested, but various parts of it have been separately and variously suggested.”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, there had been many calls for relief from congestion along the line of the loop highway. During the subway debates, many people suggested the need for a street connecting the north and south railroad stations.<sup>39</sup> The construction of the Tremont Street subway in the 1890s may have temporarily improved traffic conditions along that street, but within just a few years Bostonians were once again complaining not only about traffic congestion in the central district in general, but specifically about the difficulty of traveling north-south. Throughout the period between the two case studies, there was a steady stream of recommendations that the city do something to improve traffic congestion for vehicles traveling north and south. The recommendations varied from street improvements to underground tunnels for teams, freight, or passenger rail.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Tenth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1924*, 1924, p. 56.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: *Boston Transcript*, "Many valuable suggestions: Rapid transit report full of interesting matter - a minority report by Commissioner Richardson," April 6, 1892, p. 7; Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 166: Message of the Mayor in relation to widening of Water Street," in *Documents of the City of Boston for 1892, 1892*; *Boston Transcript*, "Views on street widening: Several Ex-Mayors of Boston give their opinions on the subject," January 26, 1893, p. 5, and "Rapid transit in Boston: Some plans that may transform parts of the town," January 30, 1893, p. 3; *American Architect and Building News*, "Boston's new opportunities," January 17, 1894, pp. 21-22.

<sup>40</sup> A detailed description of transportation planning events during this period can be found in: Green, *Planning the Central Artery*, 1979, Chapter 2.



In 1900 Mayor Hart singled out this issue in his annual address to the city council when he spoke about the need to improve the streets in the business district:

All our business streets should be put in the best condition; unusual efforts should be made to facilitate traffic, to regulate and relieve heavy business teaming, to systematize street-car facilities, to accommodate pedestrians, and to effect an improvement by widening certain streets and sidewalks. Perhaps the first of these great works to be undertaken by the City is in the direction of north and south lines in the heart of the City.<sup>41</sup>

Six years later, Mayor John Fitzgerald brought up the same issue in his inaugural address to the council. Fitzgerald said the city should improve the conditions for teams as a way to “bring to Boston business which would otherwise go elsewhere.” To achieve this, he called the city’s attention to “the absolute necessity of providing for construction of a new cross-city teaming transportation thoroughfare between the North and South Stations.”<sup>42</sup>

In 1907 the General Court passed an act directing the Boston Transit Commission to investigate traffic congestion in Boston’s streets. The act directed the commission to focus on delay to teaming traffic and to consider whether tunnels constructed for freight transfer would be advisable. The thirty-page report that the commission completed in 1908 was full of detailed analyses of the existing conditions and a variety of recommendations. Part I of the report detailed traffic conditions, and included discussions about the nature and amount of teaming traffic, causes of street obstructions, and existing traffic regulations. Part II, entitled “Possible Remedies and Experience in Other Cities,” looked at regulations in other cities, street widening options, and the possibility of building a tunnel dedicated for use by teams. The sections on widenings and tunnels focused specifically on facilities for north-south movement.

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Norton Hart, "Document 1: Mayor's address to the city council," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, Vol. 1, 1900, pp. 6-7.

<sup>42</sup> John Francis Fitzgerald, "Document 1: Inaugural address of the mayor," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1906, Vol. 1, p. 26.

The report's conclusions emphasized operational improvements rather than major capital projects. The commissioners decided that tunnels would be too expensive to build and maintain. As for street expansions, the report concluded that while these would indeed help to relieve congestion, "The Commission does not under present financial conditions advise carrying out any such widenings as above described." The authors added that, "This conclusion is enforced by the fact that there are various other ways in which there may be relief of congestion in the near future." Their recommendations for alternatives to street expansions were to increase the use of motor vehicles to transport freight; to make and enforce new street traffic regulations; to reduce the number of streetcars on certain streets; and to encourage railroad companies to coordinate their deliveries and pickups so as to reduce the total number of teams in the streets. Finally, the report suggested it might be possible in the future to build tunnels to move freight by railroad underground and to connect two of the main railroad systems.<sup>43</sup>

Also in 1907, the legislature passed an act creating a Metropolitan Improvements Commission. The authorizing legislation directed the commission to make a wide-ranging study of physical planning for the region:

Said commission shall investigate and report as to the advisability of any public works in the metropolitan district which will tend to the convenience of the people, the development of local business, the beautifying of the district, or the improvement of the same as a place of residence. It shall consider the establishment of a systematic method of internal communication by highways, the control or direction of traffic and transportation, and the location of such docks and terminals as the interests of the district may demand.<sup>44</sup>

In 1909 the commission presented its 300+ page report. Scholars looking back on this report have noted that it was unusual for its time—in a period when the City Beautiful

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<sup>43</sup> Boston Transit Commission, "Report to the Legislature on the investigation of congestion of traffic," in *Fourteenth annual report of the Boston Transit Commission for the year ending June 30, 1908*, Boston, E.W. Doyle, 1909.

<sup>44</sup> Metropolitan Improvements Commission, *Public Improvements for the Metropolitan District*, Boston, Wright and Potter, 1909, p. 1.

movement was still popular in the United States, the commission prepared a report that eschewed aesthetic considerations and beautiful drawings and instead focused on questions of economy and infrastructure planning.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the authors themselves concluded the report with a statement that they had tried to be practical and to “avoid the visionary.”<sup>46</sup> Transportation issues were at the core of the report, and its proposals ranged from better regional road connections to improved conditions at the railroad terminals and port. One of many recommendations in the report was that the North and South railroad stations should be connected. The engineer for the study drew up a plan for a tunnel connecting them.<sup>47</sup>

That year the General Court decided to follow up on the Metropolitan Improvement Commission’s report by establishing a Joint Board on Metropolitan Improvements to further investigate some of the issues addressed by the 1907 body. In 1910 the legislature passed an additional resolution specifically requesting the Joint Board to investigate the idea of a tunnel, with or without a highway above it, between the North and South stations. In its 1911 *Final Report*, the Joint Board concluded that such a tunnel should be built:

The advantages of a short and speedy connection between the two great terminal stations of the city of Boston are manifest. Such a connection must necessarily be made through the most congested section of the city proper, and a tunnel on a proper route presents the most feasible method of securing this result. Such a tunnel should be of sufficient capacity for the proper movement of both passenger and freight traffic. . . It would also tend to the speedier movement of freight, and would to some extent relieve the congestion of city streets so far as due to the transfer of passengers and baggage by vehicles.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Alex Krieger and Lisa J. Green, *Past futures: Two centuries of imagining Boston*, Cambridge, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1985, pp. 13-17; Kennedy, *Planning the city upon a hill*, 1992, pp. 116-117.

<sup>46</sup> Metropolitan Improvements Commission, *Public Improvements for the Metropolitan District*, 1909, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Joint Board on Metropolitan Improvements, *Final report of the Joint Board on Metropolitan Improvements, pursuant to chapter 113 of the Resolves of 1909, and chapters 112 and 134 of the Resolves of 1910*, Boston, Wright and Potter, 1911, p. 40.

In a section of the report that proposed highway improvements, the Joint Board also recommended building a highway connecting the North and South stations along the route of the proposed tunnel:

Between the North and South stations existing streets are indirect, and at many points inadequate even for present needs. A cross-town traffic street between these important points has been urged by merchants and teamsters for many years. Travel from all parts of the district north of Charles River gathers at Causeway Street near the North Station, and, in common with that from the North Station and freight terminals, suffers from the inconvenience of the present streets leading to the South Station and freight terminals and to the southern portions of the District; while, on the other hand, much of the travel from the south portion of the District gathers about the South Station, and, in common with travel from that station and freight terminals, is inconvenienced in reaching the North station and terminals and portions of the District to the north and west.<sup>49</sup>

In the past, explained the Joint Board, such a highway had been prohibitively expensive. However, if constructed in conjunction with a tunnel financed by the railroad companies, the cost became feasible.

In 1911 yet another commission was established by the legislature, this time a “Metropolitan Plan Commission.” The commission was directed to recommend on the feasibility of a metropolitan plan, as well as the manner in which it should be carried out. While the commission’s 1912 report did not specifically propose a north-south facility, it did complain that congestion was a serious problem that would benefit from metropolitan planning and that Washington Street was inadequate to serve as Boston’s main thoroughfare:

. . . the main thoroughfare of Boston is Washington Street. On it are the great retail stores which serve more than a million and a half of people; yet through its most valuable section the roadway reaches its greatest width at 40 feet, and is as narrow as 26 feet, while the sidewalks are only from 7 to 10 feet in width, and the street is congested by two lines of cars and an immense volume of business teaming. Fifth Avenue in New York, without cars and with no business teaming, is 100 feet wide. The roadway of State Street in Chicago, its main business thoroughfare, is 80 feet wide and has 25-foot sidewalks. Washington Street is only typical of our narrow and discommodious streets. The crowding of our sidewalks, the jamming of our

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

roadway, has cost Boston an incalculable loss in growth. And it is a loss in which all the municipalities of the Metropolitan District indirectly share.<sup>50</sup>

Around the same time Fitzgerald was again elected mayor, and he continued to advocate a north-south street improvement. In 1911 an article in *New Boston* reported that Fitzgerald wanted to:

. . . drive through the cluttered blocks bounded by School, Tremont, Winter and Washington Streets, a new street parallel with Tremont and Washington Streets. Not only would it wipe out a dangerous fire hazard that menaces the safety of down-town Boston, but he believes it would be financially advantageous to the city and would relieve, in part at least, the congested traffic conditions on streets now jammed beyond their capacity through the busy day hours.<sup>51</sup>

The following year Fitzgerald wrote a letter to the Boston Finance Commission and Boston Chamber of Commerce in which he explained that he had submitted to the legislature two bills, one with plans for a teaming highway between North and South Stations, and the other with plans for a new street between Washington and Tremont Streets:

While the street plan of Boston has been commended for its picturesqueness and some experts have even professed to see in it a certain fitness to our particular needs, it is generally regarded as anything but a model in respect to comfort and convenience. The down-town streets are crooked, the roadways and sidewalks are narrow, and the whole scheme seems ill-adapted for the travel and traffic which it is compelled to bear. . . . The congestion in the business section of this city is all but intolerable, and it is generally agreed that the remedies which should be applied are of a heroic character. . . . The value of a great teaming thoroughfare between the North and South Stations need not be emphasized, and the street paralleling Washington and Tremont Streets, midway between the two, has been urged as perhaps the most radical remedy of all for the congestion of traffic in this center of the retail trade and high valuation.<sup>52</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce was also concerned with traffic issues. In its annual report for 1911, it discussed various street projects it supported or opposed. The chamber's Committee on City Planning reported that it "heartily endorsed the proposed highway between the North and South Stations, the need for such a highway being amply

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<sup>50</sup> Metropolitan Plan Commission, "Report of the Metropolitan Plan Commission," in *Documents of the House of the Massachusetts General Court; House No. 1615*, Boston, Wright and Potter, 1912, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> *New Boston*, "Boston's need for a city plan," July 1911, p. 108.

<sup>52</sup> John Francis Fitzgerald, *Letters and speeches of the Honorable John F. Fitzgerald, Mayor of Boston, 1906-07, 1910-13*, Boston, City Printing Department, 1914, pp. 99-100.

demonstrated by the congestion of traffic on many of the narrow street leading to the North Station.’<sup>53</sup>

In 1914 the chamber published its study on *Street traffic in the city of Boston*. As part of the analysis of congestion in the market district, the authors sent out questionnaires to team and truck owners asking about the routes they used to transfer goods between the North and South freight terminals. Respondents were asked what problems they had with each possible route, and also for suggested improvements. According to a brief summary of the 105 responses, relatively few suggestions for improvement were made. However, the second most popular suggestion, proposed by eight people, was a new north-south street, either a teaming thoroughfare between the two stations or else a new shopping street between Washington and Tremont Streets.<sup>54</sup>

In 1921, the Planning Board and Street Commission jointly reported to the city that there was a need for a broad highway running north-south through the central district.<sup>55</sup> In addition the Boston City Council involved itself in the north-south traffic problem by ordering the City Planning Board and Board of Street Commissioners to investigate the idea of widening Washington Street by eliminating the present sidewalks and arcading the area. The City Planning Board responded less than three weeks later with a statement that the arcading proposal was infeasible. In its report, the board explained that the widening “would undoubtedly give some relief which would be apparent for a few years, but if traffic is to continue to grow apace, as it has in the past ten years, some further

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<sup>53</sup> Boston Chamber of Commerce, *Report of the Boston Chamber of Commerce for 1911*, 1912, p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Boston Chamber of Commerce, *Street traffic in the city of Boston*, 1914, Exhibit 4. The most popular suggestion, with eleven proponents, was to widen Exchange Street and move streetcars tracks off Devonshire Street and onto the widened Exchange Street.

<sup>55</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Plan \$35,000,000 highway in city," December 4, 1923, p. 24.

costly expenditure would have to be made in another decade.”<sup>56</sup> This statement that future gains in traffic would lead to congestion even in the *widened* street is noteworthy because the argument was rarely made in discussions of the loop highway.

## 5.5 The loop highway debate

Even though the loop highway was never built as envisioned by the City Planning Board in the mid-1920s, the plan was seriously debated for several years. During that time there were public hearings, commissions studied the plan, and loop supporters organized promotional activities. The rest of this chapter narrates this series of events.

The loop highway proposal began life in 1923, a year when the City Planning Board received a major increase in funds. Until then, its budget had been limited by city ordinance to \$7,500. However, in 1923 the city council granted the board a supplemental appropriation of \$25,000 to be used for “Special Investigations.” The board used this additional money to survey other cities about their planning activities, to prepare an annotated bibliography of the last thirty years of planning studies in Boston, to hire well-known planner Nelson Lewis as a consultant for the board,<sup>57</sup> and to begin work on a comprehensive plan for the city.

William Stanley Parker took the lead in developing a strategy for a general plan. In addition to this larger work, however, he suggested that the Intermediate Thoroughfare be developed at once as a smaller project. The board’s annual report for the year explained the purpose of the project as follows:

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<sup>56</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eighth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1922*, 1922, pp. 35-36.

<sup>57</sup> Lewis died before he completed all the work he planned to do for the City Planning Board.

As a single feature upon which to focus attention and effort Mr. Parker suggested a complete inclusive scheme, calculated to solve the traffic problem fairly effectively and to establish a principle against which all suggestions might be tested.<sup>58</sup>

In December of 1923 the Boston City Planning Board publicly unveiled plans for the loop highway. On December 3, Mayor Curley called a conference to discuss options for relieving traffic congestion either by building a major new thoroughfare or by adopting new parking regulations. Attendees at the meeting included John Noyes of the city's Street Commission, planning board members, and representatives of the three downtown department stores. At the conference, Parker announced that the City Planning Board was completing a proposal for a 100-foot wide road running north-south through downtown Boston. The proposal would soon be ready to submit as a bill to the legislature. He explained that the road was estimated to cost \$35 million, but did not reveal the exact location of the route. Parker emphasized that the board had discussed the highway plans with numerous business and civic groups over the past months. In addition to discussing the highway proposal, during the meeting Parker also said that the board planned to make an "intensive study of the automobile parking problem."<sup>59</sup>

On December 14 the City Planning Board officially submitted to the Mayor its plan for the loop highway, and three days later Parker presented it to the public. He explained the goals of the plan as follows:

An analysis of the traffic congestion in the downtown district has confirmed the City Planning Board in its belief that relief is needed in certain definite directions, *i.e.*:

An adequate approach to the Charles River dam from the business district.

The further development of Stuart Street to reach the business district.

A better trucking road between the North and South Stations.

The relief of congestion in the retail district, between Washington and Tremont Streets.

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<sup>58</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Tenth annual report*, 1924, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Plan \$35,000,000 highway in city," December 4, 1923, p. 24; *Boston City Record*, "Proposed new \$35,000,000 highway through city to relieve traffic," December 8, 1923, p. 1685; *Boston Globe*, "Discuss proposed downtown highway," December 3 (p.m.), 1923, p. 13; *Boston Transcript*, "Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board," December 17, 1923, p. 7.



Relief of congestion in the market district.<sup>60</sup>

The thoroughfare was to be at least a hundred feet wide throughout, with sidewalks of twelve feet and a seventy-six-foot roadway providing three lanes of traffic in each direction, plus parking along both curbs. The street would run about two miles, and intersect with twenty cross streets leading into various sections of the downtown. The total cost was estimated at \$32,850,000, including land acquisition and construction costs. The plan suggested that a significant fraction of the cost could be assessed as betterments against property owners along the route.<sup>61</sup>

Though the loop highway was the plan's centerpiece, the board also recommended some additional street widenings and improvements. These included a proposal to improve Dock Square, in was the city's main market area, and to widen Exchange Street, a short street in the financial district. Over the next few years the Exchange Street and Dock Square proposals advanced along with the loop highway. I have tried to separate out the loop highway debate from these other projects, though occasionally it is hard to determine whether speakers were referring to just the loop highway, the whole set of proposals, or just the Dock Square plans.

As with the subway, the city needed permission from the General Court to borrow money, since Boston couldn't afford to build the road without issuing bonds that would take it far beyond its legislatively imposed debt limit. The City Planning Board therefore attached to its plan a proposed legislative bill authorizing the city to construct the loop highway. The mayor immediately submitted the bill to the General Court of 1924.

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<sup>60</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board," December 17, 1923, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Boston City Record*, "New two-mile thoroughfare through downtown section proposed to aid traffic," December 22, 1923, pp. 1741 & 1745; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor favors \$32,000,000 plan for proposed thoroughfare," March 10 (p.m.), 1924, p. 15.

The legislature turned the matter over to its Municipal Finance Committee. On March 10, 1924, Mayor Curley and members of the Boston City Planning Board presented the loop highway plan to the Municipal Finance Committee, petitioning for permission to borrow outside the city's debt limit. Two members of the Boston City Planning Board spoke in favor of the plan, as did the city's corporation counsel and representatives of the state department of public works, "truck owners," the Retail Trade Board, the Boston Society of Architects, "the automobile interests," the Master Builders Association, the New England Shoe and Leather Association, and the Jordan Marsh Company.<sup>62</sup>

However, not all speakers present supported the immediate authorization of the bill. Caution was voiced by Chamber of Commerce representative Claude Allen. Allen explained that even though the chamber's members agreed on the need for some such improvement, the chamber wanted to see additional study before undertaking so expensive a project. More opposition came from representatives of the Boston Real Estate Exchange, the Finance Commission of the City of Boston, and the powerful banking firm of Lee, Higginson & Co.

The *Transcript* and *Herald*, in their reports of the hearing, described this opposition as "surprising." In particular, the papers found the chamber's opposition unexpected, given that the affiliated Retail Trade Board strongly supported the plan. The *Transcript*

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<sup>62</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Debate Mayor's big street plan," March 11, 1924, p. 15; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor favors \$32,000,000 plan for proposed thoroughfare," March 10 (p.m.), 1924, p. 15, and "Want \$32,000,000 for a new highway," March 11 (a.m.), 1924, p. 7; *Boston Transcript*, "Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive," March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6.

also expressed surprise to find any opposition at all, given that the City Planning Board had met frequently with local interests groups as it developed the plan.<sup>63</sup>

Apparently the Municipal Finance Committee agreed with the position of those speakers who advocated further deliberation. On May 19 the committee transmitted to the House of Representatives a recommendation that the General Court establish a “Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare.” On June 3, 1924, the General Court approved the creation of such a commission. It was given the task of investigating “the matter of laying out and constructing a new thoroughfare in the city of Boston and the extension and widening of certain streets in connection therewith.” In addition, the commission was instructed to pay special attention to the Boston City Planning Board’s loop highway plan, and to prepare a detailed financial plan. Commission members were to be unpaid, but the city of Boston was to provide \$5,000 for the commission’s expenses. The commission was directed to report its findings to the General Court at the beginning of the following year.<sup>64</sup>

On February 13, 1925, the committee released its so-called *Further Report*.<sup>65</sup> This presented what the commissioners called preliminary findings, and they requested yet another year to work, because the proposals did not yet constitute a “complete and adequate solution of the downtown highway problem.”

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<sup>63</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive,” March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6; *Boston Herald*, “Debate Mayor’s big street plan,” March 11, 1924, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Massachusetts Committee on Municipal Finance, “House Document No. 1775: Resolve providing for a Special Commission to investigate the matter of laying out and constructing a new thoroughfare in the City of Boston and the extension and widening of certain streets in connection therewith,” in *Massachusetts Legislative Documents*, 1924; Massachusetts General Court, “Resolve providing for a special commission to investigate the matter of laying out and constructing a new thoroughfare in the city of Boston and the extension and widening of certain streets in connection therewith,” in *Laws and resolves of Massachusetts passed by the General Court in the year of 1924*, Boston, Secretary of the Commonwealth, 1924.

<sup>65</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, “House Document No. 1160: Further report of the Special Commission,” in *Massachusetts Legislative Documents*, Boston, 1925.

The eight-page *Further Report* opened with an explanation of the committee's assigned task, which had been "to investigate traffic conditions as they now exist in down-town Boston, and to submit a comprehensive plan for the improvement of street traffic in that section of the city." The authors then went on to discuss the existing traffic conditions, remarking that the "narrow and crooked" streets of Boston had long been recognized as inadequate, given the introduction of the automobile and motor truck. They presented the results from studies on the numbers of vehicles entering and leaving the downtown, parking activity, and enforcement of local ordinances. The study of traffic activity had been conducted by the Boston Chamber of Commerce at the request and direction of the commission. The commission noted that parking had reduced the capacity of most downtown streets to a single lane of moving vehicles in either direction, and concluded that in conjunction with any major improvement projects, the city should further limit parking and assist the police to enforce traffic regulations more effectively. To improve enforcement, the commission recommended that the police be allowed to issue tickets that could be paid directly at the police headquarters, instead of the existing system where traffic violations were processed through the regular courts.

Only then did the report turn to the issue of the project for which it was named, the loop highway. The commissioners recommended modifying the City Planning Board's plan. In particular, they suggested that the city build the northern and southern portions of the loop highway, but postpone building the central section. This would be viable, the commissioners explained, because the route would in reality be mostly used to distribute downtown traffic, and not as a through-route bypassing the downtown. The City Planning Board had actually argued that the route would be used as by through traffic in

their original plan, despite the fact that the Special Commission claimed otherwise in the following statement:

It is their opinion and also ours that if this intermediate thoroughfare is built very little traffic will pass from end to end over the thoroughfare. The street will serve as a great distributing artery for various sections of the city rather than as a through route. It is, therefore, entirely feasible to build this thoroughfare by sections and it is not necessary to entirely build the way in order that the parts that are constructed may be of real use. We are not at this time prepared to recommend the construction of the entire thoroughfare though we are heartily in sympathy with the construction of certain parts of that way as hereinafter indicated. Our studies of the downtown area have convinced us that there are many street alterations and improvements which should precede the construction of the entire intermediate thoroughfare.<sup>66</sup>

The Special Commission also deviated from the plan prepared by the City Planning Board in suggesting a slightly narrower street (eighty-five feet instead of a hundred feet) as a way to save money, and in laying out an alternate route for the southern portion of the road.<sup>67</sup> Finally, the commission also recommended the construction of the associated Dock Square and Exchange Street improvements.

The commission estimated that its plan would cost about \$25 million dollars and stated that it was “unalterably” opposed to long-term financing. The report instead proposed financing arrangements that commission members felt were as close as possible to a “pay-as-you-go” system. The city was to issue fifteen-year bonds (these were considered short-term) and pay them off with revenue raised from three sources: (1) the personal property and excise taxes on automobiles that the city collected; (2) a city-wide special assessment of 50 cents on each \$1000 of property; and (3) an additional assessment of 50 cents per \$1000 of property in the district benefited by the plan. In conclusion, the Special Commission recommended that the plan be implemented by a commission made up of the three members from the City’s Street Commission, plus two members appointed by the governor and approved by the city council.

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Intermediate Thoroughfare hearing” March 30, 1925, p. 6..

The Special Commission's *Further Report* generated front-page coverage from the *Transcript*, *Globe*, *Herald*, and *Post* as well as editorials. The articles mostly just described and quoted from the plan, though the reporters did add a few comments of their own. The *Globe* article described the report as "one of the most important documents submitted to the attention of the General Court in recent years." The *Herald* titled its article "\$25,000,000 Street Plan Finds Favor" and noted that, among legislators, "the first reaction was distinctly favorable." In addition, the *Herald* praised the report as "a far more comprehensive plan than the original" and observed that the new proposal eliminated two "of the principal objections to the Curley scheme." According to the article, the General Court of 1923 had objected to the fact that the Boston City Council would have been in charge of the project, and also to the size and length of the debt schedule. The *Herald's* editors warned that there were "specific phases" of the plan that they didn't like, but said it was an intelligent plan that deserved carefully consideration.<sup>68</sup> As for the *Transcript*, it printed an editorial lavishly praising the commission's "comprehensive fiscal plan."<sup>69</sup> In the *Post*, the editors were full of praise, saying that the new plan had common sense and vision, though they felt some portions of the route needed more work.<sup>70</sup>

The next flurry of activity occurred at a March 11 hearing on the report, held before the legislature's Joint Committees on Municipal Finance and Metropolitan Affairs. According to the *Transcript*, the room was "filled to overflowing." The *Globe* noted that,

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<sup>68</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The street program," February 14, 1925, p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Plan to spend \$24,500,000 to relieve Boston street congestion," February 13 (p.m.), 1925, pp. 1 & 12; *Boston Herald*, "\$25,000,000 street plan finds favor," February 14, 1925, pp. 1-2; *Boston Transcript*, "Indorses vast downtown street building plan," February 13, 1925, pp. 1 & 4, and "Editorial: The \$25,000,000 report," February 13, 1925, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: A sensible report," February 14, 1925, p. 10.

“The hearing attracted a large gathering of men prominent in Boston’s commercial life.”

Speakers presented strong arguments both in favor of and against the plan. The day began with a presentation in favor of the Special Commission’s report by Chairman Harriman.<sup>71</sup>

The next speaker was General George W. Goethals, an engineer famous for having managed the construction of the Panama Canal. After the canal was completed, he served a short stint in active military service during World War I, and then settled in New York City, where he had an engineering firm and also served as Advisor and Consulting Engineer to the Port Authority of New York.<sup>72</sup> In late 1924, the Boston Retail Trade Board had hired Goethals to study Boston’s street highways and traffic congestion, and the loop highway proposal in particular. He had been also been asked to respond to proposals that the retail district in Boston be moved to the southern edge of the city, and much of his testimony addressed this question. Goethals presented the text of his report at the March hearing. He spoke at length about the role of transportation in city development, and recommended that Boston handle the congestion caused by the recent influx of auto and truck traffic by adding two new highways running north-south through the central district. Washington Street already provided an “inner” thoroughfare, he said, but the city should build “intermediate” and “outer” thoroughfares to complement it. Further, he thought that the intermediate one should be addressed first, and supported the City Planning Board’s loop highway plan. He made clear that he favored building the

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<sup>71</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Battle opens over new city traffic artery," March 11, 1925, pp. 1 & 4; *Boston Globe*, "Great protest on Exchange St. plan: Many leading business men condemn highway proposal," March 12 (a.m.), 1925, pp. 1 & 14.

<sup>72</sup> Autoridad del Canal de Panamá, *El Canal de Panamá - George Washington Goethals* [web page], March 8, 2001 [cited January 25, 2002], available at <http://www.pancanal.com/eng/history/biographies/goethals.html>.

entire thoroughfare at once, and did not agree with the Special Commission's plan to begin by building only the north and south ends of the highway.<sup>73</sup>

Dissenting speakers followed Goethals, although none of them objected to the general concept of the loop highway. Planning Board member Parker objected to the idea of building only sections of the loop highway. Boston's Assistant Corporation Counsel and City Auditor both argued that the financing proposal had serious problems, though they said they approved the general plan. Most of the opposition, however, had nothing to do with the loop highway itself. The most widespread objection was to the related proposal to widen Exchange Street, a short street in the financial district (it was a few blocks north-east of the Common). Property owners in the area argued that the widening would increase the level of truck traffic in the financial district, and that this traffic was incompatible with the large number of pedestrians. These speakers also objected to the Special Commission's realignment of the southern end of the loop highway into the financial district.<sup>74</sup>

At the end of the day, members of the legislative Joint Committees asked if the opposing parties present believed that they could come to a compromise. They agreed to try, and met the following day at the Chamber of Commerce. The twenty or so participants at the meeting included the members of the Special Commission as well as the city auditor and representatives from the Boston City Planning Board, the Chamber of Commerce, the Retail Trade Board, the Boston Real Estate Exchange, the Massachusetts Real Estate Exchange, the Boston Fruit and Produce Exchange, the Team Owners'

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<sup>73</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Gen. Goethals testifies," March 23, 1925, pp. 9+.

<sup>74</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Battle opens over new city traffic artery," March 11, 1925, pp. 1 & 4; *Boston Globe*, "Great protest on Exchange St. plan: Many leading business men condemn highway proposal," March 12 (a.m.), 1925, pp. 1 & 14; and "Vast street changes proposed for Boston," March 11 (p.m.), 1925, pp. 1 & 8; *Boston Herald*, "Financial men fight widening of Exchange St.," March 12, 1925, pp. 1 & 10.



Association, the Boston Motor Truck Club, the Boston Society of Landscape Architects, and financial and banking interests. After the meeting ended, Chamber of Commerce Secretary James A. McKibben announced to the public that progress had been “satisfactory,” but that the group needed to meet again, and that no decision would be announced until the mayor had been consulted.<sup>75</sup>

On March 18 the meeting participants met with Mayor Curley at the city hall and proposed a new, compromise plan, which Curley formally approved. A *Globe* article from that evening reprinted part of a statement prepared by the Special Commission that outlined the new, \$29 million compromise plan. The statement declared that the Special Commission members were “glad to report an entire agreement on all essential matters.” Along with the new report, the Special Commission submitted a signed statement from the various organizations that had endorsed the compromise plan.

The new plan called for immediate construction of the complete Intermediate Thoroughfare, though some controversial routing issues were left undetermined. The Special Commission explained its position on restoring the middle link of the loop highway as follows:

The organizations represented at the conferences are the largest civic and business organizations of the city, and may well be assumed to represent the sentiments of the taxpayers of Boston; and as the taxpayers of the city have thus unmistakably expressed themselves in favor of the immediate authorization of the entire route, and as it our feeling that such a complete thoroughfare is desirable and must be ultimately constructed, we gladly accept their views.

The width was to be slightly narrower than what the Boston City Planning Board had originally proposed. Of the various other street projects that had been suggested in the *Further Report*, the Dock Square project was approved, the controversial Exchange

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<sup>75</sup> *Boston Globe*, "To renew parley on Exchange st; Conference yesterday was 'satisfactory,'" March 13 (a.m.), 1925, p. 36; *Boston Herald*, "Hope to settle traffic issue," March 13, 1925, p. 11; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor Curley commits city; Early start on great work is now planned," March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 12.

Street widening was postponed indefinitely, and some smaller projects were modified or postponed. The financial plan was also modified: the idea of a special tax on downtown properties was eliminated, and a different type of bond finance was substituted. Finally, the conference approved the recommendation to help police better enforce parking regulations.<sup>76</sup>

The next day the *Globe* ran an article saying that, "The long-discussed \$29,000,000 downtown loop highway for Boston became a prospective certainty yesterday." The article also said that the legislature was "expected [to] . . . now proceed to pass the enabling law which it had promised."<sup>77</sup> The *Post's* editors were equally enthusiastic, saying there was no further obstacle to legislative approval, and that they hoped to see work begin that summer.<sup>78</sup> *The Herald* was less confident. Its article on the compromise was entitled, "\$28,000,000 street loop plan strikes snag in Legislature," and the author warned that:

The new agreement had been in existence only a few hours, however, when it struck a snag in the announcement of Representative Henry L. Shattuck of Boston, chairman of the House ways and means committee, that he is emphatically opposed to a scheme of such magnitude, unless its proponents can prove that it is the city's most important problem, or unless some financial scheme can be devised to levy the entire cost on those benefiting directly from it.

Shattuck's criticisms were directed specifically at the Harriman plan, as he had not at the time studied the new agreement. His objections apparently apply, however, with equal force to the Curley plan, which he opposed last year.

As Shattuck is one of the most influential men in the Legislature, and is generally looked to by the Republicans for leadership in matters affecting Boston, the new street plan apparently still has stony paths ahead of it. In his statement Shattuck indicates he will oppose any action this year on the entire program.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Mayor Curley commits city; Early start on great work is now planned," March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 12; *Boston Herald*, "\$28,000,000 street loop plan strikes snag in Legislature," March 19, 1925, p. 2; *Boston Transcript*, "Give unanimous support to loop thoroughfare," March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 7; *Christian Science Monitor*, "Wider streets plan indorsed," March 19, 1925, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Mayor Curley commits city to plan for \$29,000,000 thoroughfare," March 19 (a.m.), 1925, p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: Now to work," March 19, 1925, p. 20.

<sup>79</sup> *Boston Herald*, "\$28,000,000 street loop plan strikes snag in Legislature," March 19, 1925, p. 2.

A similar warning about Shattuck's opposition appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor's* coverage.<sup>80</sup> These warnings were likely based on the fact that the *Transcript* on March 18 printed a letter from Henry Shattuck in which he cast doubt on the value of the loop highway. Shattuck argued that the proposal required much more study, because it was not clear that it was the city's best use of \$25 million dollars, especially since the loop would only be a "partial solution of the downtown vehicular traffic problem."<sup>81</sup>

The Joint Legislative Committees met again on March 23 and debated what to do about the compromise proposal. Some members wanted to put the matter off entirely until the following year. However, in the end the committees decided to hold another hearing on March 31. During the morning of that all-day hearing, a stream of proponents spoke in favor of the new plan, and the papers characterized the hearing as one of unanimity. One *Globe* article was entitled "Loop hearing speakers are entirely in favor of project," and another "Business interests urge loop highway." The *Herald* headline ran "Urge value of in-town 'loop' thoroughfare," with a subheading of "Practically All Speakers at Legislative Hearing Are in Accord."

Despite these encouraging headlines, in the afternoon several individuals spoke in opposition. Engineer L.H. Kunhardt argued that the city should build his alternate plan, which called for a railroad tunnel between the North and South Stations. Finally, at the very end of the day, Martin M. Lomasney attacked the project in vigorous language, arguing that it would unduly burden taxpayers and destroy the small businesses whose property would be taken to build the loop. In addition, he asked that the plans for both the loop highway and the Dock Square improvements be put to a popular referendum,

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<sup>80</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Wider streets plan indorsed," March 19, 1925, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Car-rider or automobilist," March 18, 1925, p. II-2.

predicting that they would be soundly defeated.<sup>82</sup> A couple of others people spoke in opposition as well, though their remarks were not reported fully. One, an attorney named John F. Cronan, claimed that the people seeking the legislation were the ones responsible for the city's congestion.<sup>83</sup>

On April 7 the Joint Legislative Committees decided to support the Special Commission's earlier request for further time to study the loop highway plans. The Joint Committees did, however, vote to allow the Dock Square improvements to begin at once.<sup>84</sup> The General Court approved these recommendations and ordered that:

The said commission shall report a comprehensive layout for street improvements in and leading to the down-town section of said city shall consider whether any of the crossings of main thoroughfares should be by means of vehicular subways, and shall state the order in which in its opinion, said improvements should be made. In its layout of street improvements, it shall also consider the possible construction under said streets of freight or passenger subways connecting the north and south sides of the business district. The commission shall further investigate the general subject of traffic regulation and the parking of vehicles in said city.<sup>85</sup>

On October 14, 1925, the Special Commission held its first meeting of the new legislative year.<sup>86</sup> At the hearing, the Chamber of Commerce presented a letter supporting the loop highway. A couple of other business groups that had been supporting the project also spoke in favor. However, Shattuck voiced his opposition, arguing that if Boston first regulated parking downtown, the congestion problem might improve enough

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<sup>82</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Committee on tour considers proposed street widenings," March 24, 1925, p. 4; *Boston Globe*, "Loop hearing speakers are entirely in favor of project," March 31 (p.m.), 1925, p. 23, and "Business interests urge loop highway," 1925, p. 14; *Boston Herald*, "Urge value of in-town 'loop' thoroughfare," April 1, 1925, pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Boston Post*, "Debate on hub's new loop plan," April 1, 1925, 3. He was probably referring to the downtown retail community.

<sup>84</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Committees vote Dock Sq. widening," April 8, 1925, p. 7.

<sup>85</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Thoroughfare up again," October 14, 1925, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> The membership of the Special Commission had changed slightly. Mr. Noyes had died and been succeeded by Thomas J. Hurley. Judge Michael H. Sullivan had resigned from the Boston Finance Commission and been replaced by Charles R. Carr. *Boston Transcript*, "Vote to postpone loop thoroughfare for another year," April 8, 1925, p. 14.

that the loop would be unnecessary. He also argued that the expense of the loop highway would place an unreasonable tax burden on Boston homeowners.<sup>87</sup>

In December of 1925 the Boston City Planning Board issued a report entitled *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*. The title page stated that the report had been issued with the cooperation of an “Advisory Committee on Public Improvements.” In the preface, the authors explain the purpose of the report:

In order that there may be a general and complete understanding of the entire situation an attempt has been made to bring together at this time within the pages of this pamphlet, a statement of the major considerations in the development of the plan, the progress thus far made and a summary of some of the more outstanding reasons for its adoption.<sup>88</sup>

In mid-December, the Special Commission released its final report.<sup>89</sup> The commissioners repeated their recommendation to build the complete loop highway. After considering the possibility of putting the highway underground at key intersections, they rejected the idea, though thought it might be a useful plan in the future. They also responded to their mandate to consider a comprehensive plan of street improvements by saying that they hadn’t had sufficient time to draw one up, but believed the loop highway would fit well with any future set of street improvements. In terms of financing, they made a new proposal, suggesting that the state consider enacting a two-cent gas tax. The proceeds were to be returned to the locality in which they were generated, and Boston’s proceeds to be used for the loop highway.

Member Charles Carr refused to sign the report and instead issued his own minority opinion. He argued that the loop highway would serve to worsen congestion downtown in the long run by further concentrating activity in the district. He said that the city

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<sup>87</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Thoroughfare up again,” October 14, 1925, p. 7; *Boston Globe*, “Merchants ask loop highway,” October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7; *Current Affairs*, “Chamber again urges loop highway,” October 19, 1925, p. 9.

<sup>88</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, 1925, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement.

needed to do a regional study of economic activity and population before producing any plans, should encourage a spreading out of the retail district, and should encourage drivers to leave their cars outside the downtown.

In early January, the *Globe* published a perky opinion piece in which author Edwin F. Collins spoke of the loop highway's chances for success in the new year. According to the article, "Another big change with the new year was the arrival of the new Republican mayor, Malcolm Nichols." Nichols was known to be interested in traffic issues (a pamphlet about him released before the mayoral election mentioned them prominently<sup>90</sup>), and the *Globe* columnist predicted that the Republican-dominated legislature would now approve the loop highway, since the city had a Republican mayor:

Far and away the biggest single public improvement now quite assured under the Nichols regime is the North-South loop highway across the city's eastern wing, to be executed on a bond issue of more than \$25,000,000. A dominantly Republican Legislature, eager to cooperate in a program of accomplishment in Boston while the town's destin[i]es are in Republican hands, is expected to [e]ntrust Mr. Nichols with entire responsibility for this undertaking, of scale unprecedented in Boston. . . .

Mr. Nichols has large ideas of his own in the back of his head, about which he hasn't yet become publicly articulate. The pesky local traffic muddle challenges him and he and his advisers are known to be pondering some equally large-scale solutions for it.<sup>91</sup>

Unfortunately for the loop highway supporters, the comment that the mayor had "large ideas of his own" was to prove more accurate than the author's predictions about legislative support for the bill. The new year brought two major challenges to the loop highway, one of which came from Nichols.

When the 1926 legislative session opened in January, the loop highway issue came up immediately. On January 7, Representative Shattuck introduced an order calling for

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<sup>90</sup> Malcolm E. Nichols, *The truth about Malcolm E. Nichols*, Boston, [s.n.], 1925.

<sup>91</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Tomorrow sees the curtain . . .," January [3?], 1926.

the Special Commission to provide additional information on how it arrived at its financial plan. On January 8, the House adopted the measure.<sup>92</sup>

Two weeks later the project received a vote of no confidence from Malcolm Nichols as well. Nichols was interested in traffic issues, but, as would become apparent, he favored parking restrictions as a first step. On January 21, Nichols spoke at a luncheon hosted by the Chamber of Commerce and publicly stated for the first time that he was not ready to support the loop highway. (During the mayoral campaign, Nichols had refused to give an opinion about the loop, saying only that plans needed to be perfected before he could make a judgment.) Nichols began his speech by declaring that the city's finances should be of primary concern, since the city had recently gone through a difficult fiscal period. In addition, because the city needed many more improvements than it could afford, all projects had to be carefully evaluated. When Nichols moved to the topic of traffic, he spoke at some length about the need to improve conditions, but said that he thought the loop highway might actually increase traffic congestion within a few years. He proposed that Boston first try regulating traffic more carefully, a reference to a new proposal of his to charge drivers a fee to park downtown (the proposal is discussed in Chapter 8). The speech was not well received—the *Transcript* noted that none of the 800 attendees at the luncheon applauded at any point.<sup>93</sup>

Yet more opposition to the loop highway came from the Boston City Council, though it is unlikely that the council had much influence on the legislature. In January

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<sup>92</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Thoroughfare up again," October 14, 1925, p. 7; *Boston Globe*, "Seeks information on proposed Loop Highway," January 8, 1926, p. 9; Massachusetts House of Representatives, "House Document No. 436," in *Massachusetts Legislative Documents*, 1926.

<sup>93</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Traffic regulation prior to improvements, says Mayor," January 22, 1926, p. 15; *Boston Transcript*, "Thoroughfare up again," October 14, 1925, p. 7; *Boston Transcript*, "Nichols is not ready to support 'loop' highway," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5.

the council passed a resolution requesting that the legislature allow the people of Boston to vote in a referendum on any loop highway plan.<sup>94</sup>

In March the joint legislative committees held a series of several more hearings on the loop highway. The first of these occurred on March 18. According to the *Transcript*, around a hundred people showed up for the meeting, with opinions evenly divided. The legislative committee members were most interested in the project's financing, focusing their questions on this topic. Representatives of fourteen organizations spoke in favor of the loop, but there were many opponents as well. A vice president of the Boston Real Estate Exchange said that even though his organization had formerly supported the loop highway, the membership was now divided upon the issue. The exchange had therefore hired an expert, Henry M. Brinckerhoff of the New York engineering firm of Parsons, Klapp, Brinckerhoff and Douglas, to give his analysis of the loop highway. Mr. Brinckerhoff would present his analysis at the committee's next meeting. The exchange representative also argued that his organization was "the most representative body of tax payers in the city."

More passionate opponents included one Joseph A. Conry, who described the loop highway as an "insatiable tape worm, sprawling its voracious length over the business vitals of the city." Conry argued that the loop would cost far more than estimated, that small property owners shouldn't be taxed for an improvement that would mostly be used by wealthy out-of-town automobile owners, and that the Chamber of Commerce leadership was incorrect to claim that its membership favored the plan, because it had refused his suggestion that members be asked to vote upon it. Finally, Martin Lomasney

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<sup>94</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Executive's supporters lack three votes-referendum on loop highway urged," January [21?], 1926.



advocated a substantial change to the route of the loop highway where it went through the West End (his political base). The heart of his proposal consisted of running the highway over a large parcel of vacant land formerly used by the Boston & Maine Railroad for freight storage. Lomasney felt the railroad ought to donate the parcel to the city. This route would, he argued, greatly reduce the number of small businesses and homes condemned, and thus lower the cost of the highway.<sup>95</sup>

On March 22 the legislative committees held a second meeting. The *Transcript*, in its coverage of this hearing, spoke of the “confusion” of new ideas presented. Among the various proposals, engineer H.L. Kunhardt once again proposed to put sections of the loop highway underground, and Henry M. Brinckerhoff presented the report he had prepared for the Boston Real Estate Exchange. Brinckerhoff explained his plan in some detail. He deviated significantly from the Special Commission’s plan mostly in recommending that two short portions of the loop highway be replaced with elevated and underground sections. In one portion of his presentation he spoke about the large number of trucks traveling between the wharves and freight terminals, arguing that the loop highway would greatly free up the market and downtown sections by taking care of this traffic. Brinckerhoff qualified his recommendations by noting that he had not been asked to study alternative routes, and that his studies were based on the traffic counts made by the Chamber of Commerce. At the very end of the meeting, Lomasney spoke again, pleading with the committee to remember the small business people in the North and West Ends who would be evicted under the Special Commission’s plan, and again explaining his alternative route. Finally, in addition to new proposals, various speakers

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<sup>95</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Loop highway conflict has quiet start," March 18, 1926, pp. 1 & 11; *Boston Post*, "Lomasney raps loop highway," March 19, 1926, p. 17.

opposed the loop highway without presenting alternative highway plans. Special Commission member Charles Carr, for example, reiterated his opposition to the loop highway.<sup>96</sup>

The following day the *Transcript* published an editorial summing up the paper's view of the two days of hearings. The editors argued that the opposition was not convincing, although it had gained more publicity, since opposition always makes for better press than consensus. The proponents were more convincing, felt the editors, because they were unified on the idea that

. . . the Loop as a planning project is soundly conceived, vital to the city's future prosperity, and urgently needed as a remedy for traffic congestion in the downtown district, "bad yesterday, worse today, and bound to become still worse tomorrow," unless some such major constructive operation is soon undertaken.

The editors also concluded that the loop's opponents were less credible than the supporters because the opponents were mostly independent citizens, without the backing of any organization. Furthermore, they all proposed different plans, with the result that "their whole case was left weak and disjointed." Nevertheless, the editors qualified this assessment by saying that there may have been additional opponents who hadn't appeared to speak. In particular, the editorial pointed out that the position of the Boston Real Estate Exchange was unclear, since the exchange had voted flatly against one section of the thoroughfare, yet produced an expert opinion by Brinckerhoff saying that seven-eighths of the route was desirable. In the end, the editors concluded that "the Loop as a planning project has well withstood the test of these hearings, and survives today as

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<sup>96</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "More confusion of ideas for 'loop' highway," March 22, 1926, pp. 1 & 6; *Boston Herald*, "Spare North End, Lomasney pleads on loop," March [23?], 1926; *Boston Post*, "Changes for loop highway," March 23, 1926, p. 9.

the stronger case” and that it should now be up to Mayor Nichols to decide if the city could afford to begin building the loop.<sup>97</sup>

On March 29 the Committee on Municipal Finance held a separate hearing that was not on the loop highway, but on a new proposal to widen Exchange Street. At the hearing, various loop highway proponents showed up to object. The proponents of the Exchange Street widening said that it was needed independently of the loop highway, while the opponents argued that the loop highway would draw traffic away from Exchange Street and thus eliminate any need for widening. In addition, by adding capacity at that point and possibly attracting traffic, a wider Exchange Street might actually bring more congestion into the area and undermine the benefits of the loop.<sup>98</sup>

In late April the loop highway issue again surfaced in the General Court. On April 22, the Joint Legislative Committees on Municipal Finance and Metropolitan Affairs reported to the Senate a bill for construction of the loop highway. Apparently sixteen of the twenty committee members voted in favor of the measure. The bill appeared to give the Boston mayor an unusual amount of power. According to its terms, the project could only begin upon approval of the mayor, and city council approval was not required. However, in reality council approval was still necessary, because it would have had to approve the taxation measures required to pay off the loans financing the project. The specific elements of the bill gave the mayor of Boston three years to approve a plan for a ninety-two-foot or wider, continuous highway, and the project had to be completed within ten years of passage of the bill. Either the Boston Street Commission or a new

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<sup>97</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Upshot of the loop hearings," March 23, 1926, p. 14.

<sup>98</sup> *Boston Post*, "Ban Exchange St. widening," March [30?], 1926; *Boston Transcript*, "More protests against wider Exchange St.," March 29, 1926, pp. 1 & 5.

special commission was to oversee construction. A few additional, smaller projects were added as options that the mayor could authorize. As for financing, the Street Commission was to assess betterments over as wide an area as it deemed suitable, and the city was to issue 20-year bonds for up to \$30 million beyond the city's debt limit. Boston was also required to increase taxes to help pay off the loan. On April 26 the Senate, without debate, ordered the bill to a third reading. The next day the Senate passed the bill after amending it to say that the mayor would have only one year instead of three to authorize the project.<sup>99</sup>

In the House, however, the measure died after three days of deliberation, which the *Transcript* called "one of the longest debates of the year." Debate on the bill began on the afternoon of April 27, and continued on the afternoon of the next day as well. On April 29, after an hour of debate, the House voted 87 to 55 against the bill. This vote came after what the *Herald* described as "an afternoon largely spent in oratory." Representative Shattuck, one of the main opponents, argued against the bill on various grounds, saying that the bill "showed lack of consideration of all the phases of the situation" and that the highway's advocates had "had their eyes fixed so steadily upon that one proposition that they have neglected to look either to the right or the left." He also argued that the loop highway should not be even considered until "until every means of regulating traffic under present conditions has been exhausted." Shattuck offered an amendment to the bill that required further study of the traffic situation in Boston before taking any action. (He later withdrew this amendment in favor of a similar one

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<sup>99</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Boston loop highway bill is reported," April 22 (p.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 24; *Boston Herald*, "Reports loop highway bill," April 23, 1926, p. 17; *Boston Globe*, "Loop measure passes Senate," April 28 (a.m.), 1926, p. 17; *Boston Post*, "\$33,000,000 highway to cross city," April [23?], 1926; *Boston Transcript*, "Loop highway bill is advanced in Senate," April 27, 1926, p. 4, and "Loop highway bill is passed by the Senate," April 28, 1926, p. 6; *Christian Science Monitor*, "Loop highway project passed by committee," April 22, 1926, p. 1.

introduced by someone else.) The following day a loop supporter raised a motion to reconsider the vote, but by 110 to 64 the House refused to do so.<sup>100</sup>

There is no definitive evidence as to why the loop highway bill failed in the House, but mostly likely its expense was the crucial feature. This was certainly one of the arguments raised most often against it over the several years it was debated. Also, the editors of the *Post* raised cost prominently in the bill's last days. The editors had championed the loop steadfastly up until April 23, when they suddenly ran an editorial claiming that the loop was too expensive, and that cheaper street improvement projects (it included underground roads as an example of cheaper projects) would be better.<sup>101</sup> Also, although almost nobody except for Martin Lomasney mentioned the destruction of property that would be required to build the road, quite likely there were objections from property owners in the area. Around the country plans for expensive transportation improvements—major streets, subways, and elevated railroads—failed because communities decided that even though congestion was a problem, these “solutions” were not worth the price in terms of dollars and destruction of property. In Boston's case, the Republican legislature's deep-seated suspicion of expensive city projects no doubt contributed to the bill's failure, but it is likely that even without that hostility the loop highway might never have come to pass. Additional reasons for its failure may have been Mayor Nichols' refusal to support the loop.<sup>102</sup> The financial community's objections to any route that would have increased traffic in that neighborhood may also have

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<sup>100</sup> *Boston Advertiser*, "Sees 'dictator' in Boston's loop bill," April [28?], 1926; *Boston Herald*, "Loop road bill loses in House," April 30, 1926, pp. 1 & 14; *Boston Globe*, "Delay is sought on loop scheme," April 29 (a.m.), 1926, p. 8; *Boston Globe*, "Loop' measure killed by House," April 30 (p.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 11; *Boston Globe*, "House stands by its vote; Refuses to reconsider on 'Loop Highway'," April 30 (p.m.), 1926, p. 14; *Boston Post*, "Loop bill doomed in the House," April [30?], 1926; *Boston Transcript*, "Reconsideration of loop highway refused, 64 to 110," April 30, 1926, pp. 1 & 7; *Christian Science Monitor*, "Loop highway bill defeated in House vote," April 30, 1926, p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: The new 'loop highway' bill," April 23, 1926, p. 26.

<sup>102</sup> *Boston Post*, "Big loop highway plan dead," April 30, 1926, pp. 1 & 30.

convinced some legislators that it would have been impossible to find an acceptable route.

After the loop highway proposal died, for the rest of the year the city focused its efforts to improve traffic on proposed changes to parking and regulations rather than major street improvements.<sup>103</sup> Mayor Nichols tried sending out a letter to major business owners asking that employees be requested not to park at the curb all day, and there was an effort to increase police enforcement of parking regulations. Also, there were several calls to ban all parking in the downtown, though the Chamber of Commerce did a survey of downtown business owners on the proposal and found the overwhelming majority opposed the idea.<sup>104</sup> City Planning Board member Parker proposed changing the direction of Washington Street and various connecting streets, but this idea also raised strenuous objections.<sup>105</sup>

In mid-November, however, the situation took a new twist when Nichols announced the formation of a traffic advisory body charged with making an “exhaustive study of Boston’s traffic situation.”<sup>106</sup> The “Mayor’s Traffic Advisory Board” was composed of representatives from business and civic organizations, as well as public officials and interested individuals. Soon after, traffic expert Miller McClintock and his new Erskine Bureau at Harvard University were engaged to direct a major study of Boston’s traffic.<sup>107</sup> His study, which came out in 1928, focused on policies that could be accomplished

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<sup>103</sup> In the few days after the loop highway plan was killed by the legislature there was an effort to get approval to widen Exchange Street, but the plan was defeated quickly.

<sup>104</sup> *Boston Post*, "Oppose ban on parking downtown," November [12?], 1926.

<sup>105</sup> *Boston Post*, "See great menace to pedestrian," November [12?], 1926, and "Battle on direction of traffic," November [19?], 1926.

<sup>106</sup> *Boston Post*, "New body to study traffic," November [16?], 1926.

<sup>107</sup> *Boston Post*, "McClintock will study hub traffic," December [23?], 1926, and "Nichols to ask \$25,000 for survey," January 9, 1927.

without major construction, such as proposed changes to the city's traffic regulations and traffic control devices, reorganization of the departments in charge of traffic matters, and provision of more off-site parking.<sup>108</sup>

Two years later, however, the city returned to more ambitious plans. In 1930 the Boston City Planning Board, with the help of consultant Robert Whitten, put out an ambitious *Report on a thoroughfare plan for Boston*.<sup>109</sup> This plan presented a series of “expressways” designed to relieve traffic congestion. One of them, the so-called Central Artery, was to be an elevated expressway running more or less along the route of the loop highway plans.

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<sup>108</sup> Miller McClintock, Fitz-Henry Smith, and [Boston] Mayor's Street Traffic Advisory Board, *A report on the street traffic control problem of the city of Boston*, Boston, 1928; Civic Bureau Boston Chamber of Commerce, *Memorandum for Committee on Traffic Control and Safety*, Boston, 1928.

<sup>109</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Report on a thoroughfare plan for Boston*, [Boston, the Board], 1930.

**INTERPRETING THE PERCEPTIONS**



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## CONGESTION AS A PROBLEM

### 6.1 Introduction

In 1895 the author of a book of pictures of Boston extolled the city's congested streets as a picturesque feature that would appeal to tourists:

Boston, the historic, quaint, beautiful, artistic and literary metropolis of New England, is the most interesting city in the United States to visit and revisit. Let New York boast of its crowded thoroughfares; they will not compare with Boston's Washington Street and Tremont Street, or Winter Place, when Boston shoppers are launched on their errands and the day's business is at its height. Where this dense mass of people all come from excites the stranger's wonder; but he will also observe the endless procession of electric street cars which more often clog than move, then, obtaining leeway, swing around a corner and shoot away.<sup>1</sup>

While this author may have perceived Boston's traffic congestion as interesting, the city's residents observed the clogging of their streets with a good deal less wonder and a great deal more irritation than did the book's author. Indeed, with virtually one voice, Bostonians complained endlessly about their traffic congestion. Their complaints about congestion provide the material for this chapter, which explains just why Bostonians in both the 1890s and 1920s thought congestion was a serious problem.

Chapters 4 and 5 laid out the story of the events that provide the context for the discussions of congestion analyzed in this and the following three chapters. Using the material from these 1890s and 1920s debates over congestion, Chapters 6 through 9 address my three research questions about Bostonians' perceptions of congestion: if and why people thought congestion mattered, what they thought caused congestion, and what policy responses they considered and favored.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Wittemann, *Boston photo-gravures*, New York, A. Wittemann, 1895.

This chapter addresses the first of these three questions about perceptions: Did Bostonians think that congestion was a problem, and if so, why did they think it mattered? The first half of the question is straightforward to answer. During both case studies, there was virtually unanimous assent that congestion was a problem worthy of public consideration and government intervention. Aside from the sheer volume of different speakers stating that congestion was a problem, only the tiniest minority of people ever stated otherwise (Section 6.2). In addition, many people warned that traffic congestion was a condition that would worsen over time (Section 6.3).

While there was no genuine controversy in Boston over the perception that congestion was a problem, far fewer people bothered to explain why they perceived this to be so. Indeed, the infrequency with which people explained why congestion mattered, and their brevity when they did give do so, indicate that Bostonians perceived congestion as a condition widely assumed to be a serious problem. This observation that most people didn't bother to explain or justify their perception that congestion was a problem is, in and of itself, perhaps the single most notable aspect of participants' perceptions about congestion.

Nevertheless, enough people did give at least brief explanations about why congestion worried them that it is possible to discern the general patterns of concern. This chapter looks in detail at these explanations given as to why people thought traffic congestion mattered, comparing perceptions from the two periods. The reasons put forward ranged widely. A few were unique to a particular individual, such as one speaker in 1893 who warned that the city's traffic congestion was "breaking down the constitutions of the people" and that "the strain is too great, and our people will soon

collapse; insanity and lunacy are on the increase, due to this congestion.”<sup>2</sup> However, most of the explanations as to why congestion mattered fell into just a few categories. A minor concern in both time periods was that congestion increased fire danger (Section 6.5.1). In the 1890s, when streetcars still ran on the surface streets in the downtown, people also perceived congestion as a problem because it slowed down passengers (Section 6.4). Two perceptions often expressed in both case studies were that congestion caused traffic accidents, especially endangering pedestrians (Section 6.5), and that it harmed the city’s economy (Section 6.6). Finally, two additional arguments made in the 1920s were that congestion raised the cost of living for all of the city’s residents (Section 6.7), and that it imposed some total, quantifiable dollar cost on them (Section 6.8).

## 6.2 The lonely skeptics

I found absolutely no evidence of any strong lobby involved in the traffic debates—even among those who opposed the subway and the loop highway—making a sustained argument that congestion was *not* a problem meriting public intervention. Out of the more than thousand articles and other documents I scanned, and the hundreds of speakers who were quoted in them, only a handful of people argued that congestion didn’t exist or that it should not be of concern.

During the subway debates, I found only a single statement that the streets were *not* congested. This came in October of 1893, when the *Herald* ran an editorial saying that the sidewalks, but not the streets, were congested.<sup>3</sup> This statement is not very convincing as a statement of the editors’ perceptions, highway, because on other occasions they did

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<sup>2</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Save the common," February 10, 1893, p. [1?].

<sup>3</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The elevated railroad," October 17, 1893, p. 4.

claim that the streets were congested. This particular editorial likely argued that congestion was not a problem as a strategic piece of advocacy, because the editors wanted to shift the focus of attention away from the streets towards their major congestion concern, overcrowded sidewalks.

As for the loop highway case, I found only three statements suggesting anything other than that congestion was present in downtown Boston. The first appeared in the Police Commissioner's annual report for 1923, which described traffic as "reasonably fluid" in the downtown,<sup>4</sup> although elsewhere it talked about the great efforts the police were making to deal with congestion. The second statement qualifying the perception that congestion was a problem came from the legislative Special Commission studying the loop highway. Though the report's overall message was that congestion was indeed a serious problem needing attention, the report qualified that view in one case. This occurred in a section of the report where the commissioners rebutted the arguments that congestion was caused by overly intense use of the land downtown, that the best remedy for congestion would be to reduce the activity downtown, and that the loop highway would actually worsen congestion by bringing in additional vehicles into the downtown. The commissioners claimed that overall the downtown was not overly dense, and that Boston was actually less intensively developed than cities like Chicago and New York, which had many more skyscrapers. Instead, argued the commissioners, there were still many places in downtown Boston where the land wasn't used intensively and the streets *weren't* particularly crowded:

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<sup>4</sup> Boston Office of the Police Commissioner, *Annual report of the Police Commissioner for the City of Boston for the year ending November 30, 1923*, Boston, the Office, 1924.

Again we find that the downtown section of Boston is not as a whole crowded. It is true that there is congestion in small areas in the retail, financial, and market districts, but the section as a whole cannot be considered crowded as compared to other great cities.<sup>5</sup>

In November 1926, a representative of the Jordan Marsh department store, the management of which had strongly supported the loop highway, said that congestion was not a special problem. He made the claim in the context of arguing that a proposed plan to make Tremont and Washington one-way was unnecessary.<sup>6</sup>

During the subway debates, a few people who stood to benefit from congestion acknowledged that it existed, but challenged the notion that it was an unmitigated “evil.” In 1892 a butcher explained that he opposed any transit system that would displace the streetcar passengers who currently walked by his shop. He said that he “should like to see the street crowded with people all the time, and other shopkeepers in this locality feel the same way.”<sup>7</sup> In 1893 the *Herald* also quoted elevated railroad proponent Captain Meigs as saying that merchants wanted to encourage heavy pedestrian congestion by their stores (an argument that the *Herald* editors ridiculed).<sup>8</sup> A few months later the *Transcript* reported that during a meeting of the Merchants’ Club, one member said that congestion “was not altogether an unmixed evil, as he noticed that storekeepers were always anxious to establish themselves in the congested district.”<sup>9</sup> When in the same year petitioners asked the city council to remove surface streetcar lines from the downtown, the editors of the *Transcript* noted that “the retail dealers living in the central portions of the congested district are fearful that relieving Tremont and Washington streets . . . of street cars would

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<sup>5</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement.

<sup>6</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Parker plan to undergo study,” November [18?], 1926.

<sup>7</sup> *Boston Herald*, “A circuit road; Portion of the scheme of rapid transit,” January 14, 1892, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Editorial: Congesting congestion,” March 10, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “The rapid-transit bill hotly assailed,” October 27, 1893, p. 5.

relieve them of no small part of their trade.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, in 1895, after the Boston Transit Commission had been established to develop the subway project, the city council debated a proposition to widen Tremont and Beacon streets. Alderman Martin Lomasney’s arguments against this plan included the claim that congestion benefited retailers, and so the widening might harm retail businesses:

Also, it has been a fact in Boston that where you have widened certain streets it has driven the trade away. Some of the best retail streets in Boston are narrow streets. Take Winter Street—they claim that its value as a retail street is largely because of its being narrow. You can take many a congested spot and see that that is where the property is more valuable.<sup>11</sup>

During the loop highway debates a generation later, these arguments that congestion benefited retailers by bringing in more shoppers were no longer made. The absence of this argument in the 1920s may have reflected the fact that downtown retailers faced new competition from suburban shopping, stimulating them to make the downtown appear as convenient as possible for shoppers.

The scarcity of people arguing that congestion did not exist or did not matter indicates a broad consensus among those involved in transportation debates that congestion in downtown Boston was a public concern requiring government action. The perception that congestion was a problem was taken as conventional wisdom. Both the subway and loop highway proposals faced organized and politically powerful opposition, but these interests largely avoided challenging the claim that congestion was a serious problem with adverse consequences. They instead relied on other arguments, such as the risks of public debt or economic losses during project construction.

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<sup>10</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: How the streets do their work," December 16, 1893, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Boston City Council, "Report on the orders concerning the widening of Tremont and Beacon streets," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1895, pp. 526-32.

### 6.3 A worsening condition

In both case studies a number of speakers warned that congestion was not only an existing problem, but also one that would grow worse. In August of 1891, a *Herald* editorial warned that the number of streetcar passengers would double in the next ten years, aggravating existing congestion.<sup>12</sup> The Rapid Transit Commission published a short report at the end of 1891 that documented the past increases in streetcar and steam railroad ridership and, like the *Herald*, warned of a doubling in ten years:

To-day we are informed that the steam cars and tram cars transport in and out half a million persons in every twenty-four hours, who have to traverse ways that are still substantially unchanged. The result is what it is the fashion to call, accurately enough, an acute congestion in certain parts of the most popular streets in the central region of the city. While this is the condition to-day, we have no reason to suppose that we have reached the limit of the stress to which these thoroughfares are to be exposed in the future. The street traffic seems to have doubled within the last decade; but *we see no temerity in anticipating an equal increase in the ten years to come, with, of course, the inevitable aggravation of the difficulty.*<sup>13</sup> (Italics added.)

Other speakers indicated that they saw the problem as a growing one not by giving direct predictions about the future, but by describing how congestion had been continually increasing over the past years, and implying that the growth would continue. This point was made by various merchants and businessmen over the years.<sup>14</sup> The Subway Commissioners also used the argument to justify amending the authorizing legislation for building the subway,<sup>15</sup> as did Matthews when he advocated for adopting their plan.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: A ring road," August 14, 1891, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commissioners, "Document 15: Report (in part) and legal opinion," in *Documents of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 1892, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3; *Boston Herald*, "A circuit road; Portion of the scheme of rapid transit," January 14, 1892, pp. 1 & 7, "They like the plan; Citizens on the rapid transit report," April 7, 1892, p. 10, and "Letter to the editor: Question of rapid transit," February 13, 1893, p. 5; Boston City Council, "Petitions referred," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1895, pp. 492a-b; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Mr. Whitney's plan for rapid transit in Boston streets," February 20, 1893, pp. 2 & 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Subway bill at last," February 12, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Ripe time to rush rapid transit through Boston," February 27 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 4.

The editors of most of the newspapers at some point stressed the growing nature of the problem. The *Advertiser* in January 1893 spoke of congestion as “burdensome conditions [that] are increasing right along.”<sup>17</sup> In February of that year the *Herald* ran an editorial that said that congestion was “growing to be an intolerable nuisance.”<sup>18</sup> A few months later another *Herald* editorial repeated its claim about traffic doubling: “[W]e know that transportation is constantly growing, that the demand of this year is hardly more than half as much as the demand of ten years hence.”<sup>19</sup> In February 1893, the *Transcript* warned that the increasing population and business in the region would aggravate the existing congestion. A year later, in March 1894, the paper published an editorial favoring the subway as a way to deal with congestion, “a condition daily growing more onerous and really obstructive.”<sup>20</sup> As for the *Globe*, its response to the Rapid Transit Commission’s 1892 report repeated the commission’s statistics on the growth of steam railroad travel to show “the steadily increasing difficulties” of coping with the rapid transit problem.<sup>21</sup>

This perception that congestion was a growing problem appeared repeatedly in the loop highway case as well. In 1926 the *Transcript* made this point in a report on a meeting to discuss new parking regulations. Unlike most of the paper’s news articles, this one had a named author and took the form of an opinion piece (as opposed to straight reporting). The author opened the article aggressively: “With frank admission by the

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<sup>17</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: The rapid transit problem," January 27, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Congesting congestion," March 10, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The rapid transit bill," May 5, 1893, p. 6. See also *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Cars on transportation and Washington streets," October 27, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: As we suggested . . .," February 11, 1893, p. 12, and "Editorial: The legislative hearing on the subway . . .," March 22, 1894, p. 4. See also *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The fate of rapid transit," May 10, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: The regular growth of street travel," May 7, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: The rapid transit report," April 6, 1892, p. 10.



traffic police that downtown congestion is daily growing worse . . . the Street Commissioners admit that the time is not far distant when drastic action must be taken.’<sup>22</sup>

The *Christian Science Monitor*, a paper less given to hyperbole than some of its competitors, said in a discussion of an upcoming March hearing on the Special Commission’s 1925 report, that “The increasing need of relief for the street traffic of Boston’s downtown section has been acutely felt long [sic].”<sup>23</sup> When General Goethals publicly presented his report on the street traffic situation in Boston a few days later, he referred to the “ever increasing congestion in the retail district” and predicted that, unless steps were taken, “this beginning will probably make worse what is already bad.”<sup>24</sup> At a hearing on the loop highway the March of the following year, Special Commission member Henry Harriman argued that one of the “fundamentals upon which there should be agreement,” was that the city had “serious traffic congestion in the downtown district . . . which is bound to grow worse.”<sup>25</sup>

A number of other speakers who argued in the 1920s that the congestion problem was mounting did so in the context of explaining what they thought caused congestion. The Boston City Planning Board presented one of the more complicated such explanations. The board argued that congestion was caused by the three factors of “general progress,” the “constantly increasing” number of automobiles, and a 1923 increase in permitted building heights. The Board warned that these factors “may be

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<sup>22</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Merchants ask relief as auto parking grows," April 24, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "\$25,000,000 traffic relief plan for Boston scheduled for hearing," March 9, 1925, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Build intermediate belt highway, says Goethals in report," March 11, 1925, p. II-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Loop highway conflict has quiet start," March 18, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

generally relied upon to continue the process of congestion to a point of absolute block unless relief is provided.”<sup>26</sup>

While the statement by the City Planning Board was one of the only ones I found that went so far as to predict that congestion would increase to the point of completely halting traffic, other speakers echoed its fear about the expanding number of autos. For example, the author of a 1923 book on the history of city government in Boston said that with the building of the subway in the 1890s to deal with street traffic, the city had “embarked upon an enterprise which is not yet completed, for the congestion still continues, growing with the increase in population and the multiplication of the ubiquitous automobile.”<sup>27</sup> The Chamber of Commerce also predicted several times that increasing automobile use would worsen congestion. For example, the chamber published a short piece noting how fast the number of automobile registrations in Massachusetts was growing and warning that future growth would worsen congestion problems. The piece was illustrated with a graph showing the total registration of passenger cars and trucks in Massachusetts from 1902 to 1923 (see Figure 6.1). The accompanying text warned:

Automobile traffic congestion upon our down-town and outlying highways is unbearable. But the real problem is just beginning. The present problem is caused by 672,000 autos. The Chamber’s Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs prophesies that “the total registration of automobiles in Massachusetts should reach 1,000,000 by 1930.”<sup>28</sup>

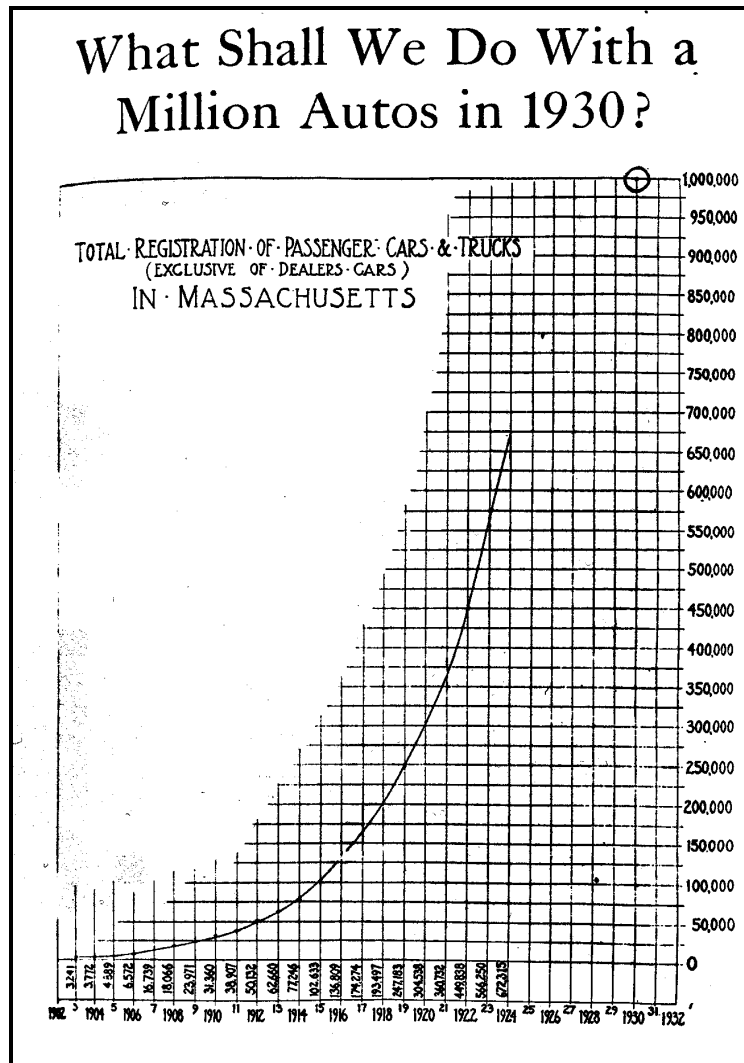
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<sup>26</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, Boston, the Board, 1925, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> John Koren, *Boston, 1822 to 1922: The story of its government and principal activities during one hundred years*, Boston, City of Boston, 1923, p. 171.

<sup>28</sup> *Current Affairs*, “What shall we do with a million autos in 1930,” June 22, 1925, p. 11. Other examples where the Chamber of Commerce made this point are: *Current Affairs*, “We can’t dodge traffic problems; So the Chamber puts in much time and effort trying to solve them,” October 26, 1925, pp. 52+, “Boston’s traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution,” May 25, 1925, pp. 5+, and “The traffic survey,” December 11, 1922, p. 10.

Figure 6.1: Graph of automobile registration in Massachusetts.



Source: *Current Affairs*, "What shall we do with a million autos in 1930," June 22, 1925, p. 11.

In both cases, speakers characterized congestion as an accelerating crisis. Two things are striking about this portrayal. First, no effort was made to explain in what way the experience of congestion was worsening. For example, they did not argue that it would spread to a greater number of streets, that it would last for a longer portion of the day, or that it would slow existing speeds still farther. The lack of effort to explain *how*

congestion was worsening suggests that the speakers assumed that the belief was so widely held that it did not require elaboration.

A second surprising feature of this debate is that the assertion of a worsening crisis went unchallenged. Congestion was never described as a persistent or perennial problem inherent in economically active cities—it was always presented as an acute or deepening crisis. While advocates of public investment might have had an incentive to frame the debate this way in order to promote the urgency with which the problem was perceived, the lack of alternative voices taking a long view on the issue is striking, and it suggests the perception was a genuine one, and not just an argument made for political expediency.

Two factors explain why it would have made sense to Bostonians that congestion would continue to worsen. First, the population, economy, and travel in the region (as in most major metropolitan areas in the country) had been steadily expanding from the mid-nineteenth century on, and in both the 1890s and 1920s contemporaries assumed that the growth would continue. To the extent that speakers assumed growth and congestion were related, it made sense to assume that if growth continued without any changes to the transportation system, congestion would worsen.

## **6.4 Congestion and streetcar travel**

In the 1890s, the most frequent arguments about why congestion mattered centered on its impacts on streetcar service downtown. The *New York Times* in 1897 ran an article describing in graphic terms how congestion affected streetcars:

On any evening, a stranger standing at the corner of Tremont and Boylston Streets and watching the cars destined toward the West, or Brighton, district, or Jamaica Plain, South West, will see a

string of perhaps twenty-five heavily loaded trolley cars poking its way along at a snail's pace. Sometimes the whole line will remain at a standstill because a couple of truck drivers are sweating and jangling on the tracks. Then there will be a jerk, and the cars bump a rod or so ahead only to be brought up for another long halt. . . .When the army of people that pours itself into and out of the city day by day is confronted by blockades of from five minutes to a half hour in length or by transfer that even when the cars are moving is slower than a walk, imperative demands for conveyance more expeditious and less annoying are naturally heard.<sup>29</sup>

The perception that congestion was a problem because it impacted streetcars appeared only in the subway case study. By the 1920s the main streetcar lines through downtown Boston had all been put underground, and so complaints about congestion's impacts on streetcar service vanished from debates about congestion in downtown Boston. The fact that there was not much street level transit downtown in the 1920s made Boston unusual in two ways. In most American cities there was great concern about the automobile-generated congestion slowing streetcars in the 1920s.<sup>30</sup> The loop highway debates about congestion were also unusual for the times because streetcars were no longer seen in downtown Boston as a major cause of congestion.

Along with general complaints about how congestion slowed streetcars, some 1890s speakers made more specific complaints about why such delays mattered, such as that the slow cars "wasted time" and left riders uncertain how long a trip would take, that the congestion seriously reduced both the quality and frequency of streetcar service into the suburbs, and that the streetcars prevented the "normal" use of the streets by pedestrians and other vehicles.

The perception that congestion was a problem because it slowed streetcars was expressed in many different contexts and by multiple interests. It was voiced not only in testimony in support of elevated roads, street widenings, and subways, but also in

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<sup>29</sup> *New York Times*, "Rapid transit in Boston," March 7, 1897, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example: *Boston Transcript*, "Man, motor and trolley fighting for a place in the street," March 8, 1924, p. III-3.

testimonial opposing all of those. The perception was also articulated by every interest group involved in the transportation debates. For example, while the Rapid Transit Commission's report didn't directly describe the slowness of the streetcars, the idea obviously underlay many of the commission's recommendations. Commissioner Richardson, author of the dissenting minority report, made the point more directly. He objected to the elevated railroad proposal, but agreed that slow-moving streetcars were indeed the problem to be addressed:

One of the objects of the construction of such a road in this part of the city, all agree, is the abolition or removal of a condition which is popularly and aptly described as a "congestion" in a certain district therein, where the narrow streets, notably Washington Street, are so crowded with cars and vehicles of all kinds and pedestrians, that travel in or through said district is slow, uncertain, often dangerous, sometimes almost impossible.<sup>31</sup>

A member of the Common Council, advocating passage of the subway act in December of 1893, complained that on Tremont Street at five or six in the evening, the streetcars "cannot go along at even a snail's pace."<sup>32</sup> The *Boston Herald*, in an editorial written around the same time, described "a long line of cars . . . packed up in almost an immovable state."<sup>33</sup> The *Globe's* editors, for their part, in the same year remarked tartly that, "It would unquestionably be better to have fewer cars on Washington and Tremont streets than to have so many cars that don't move."<sup>34</sup> As for the *Post's* editors, they described, "The line of cars longer than a circus parade which blocked Tremont Street late yesterday afternoon, in common with a majority of afternoons for years past."<sup>35</sup> In 1894, during the continuing subway debates, Matthews spoke of the "very slow rate of

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<sup>31</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature*, [Boston, the Commission], 1892, p. 108.

<sup>32</sup> Boston City Council, "Acceptance of the subway act," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, p. 786.

<sup>33</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Improved but not rapid transit," December 27, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial points," October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: Plan of the Tremont Street subway," December 20, 1893, p. 8.

speed” of the surface cars,<sup>36</sup> and later described the streets at busy hours as nothing more than “yards for the storage of cars.”<sup>37</sup>

#### **6.4.1 How slow was slow?**

While many people merely complained about “slow” streetcars, a few tried to describe more precisely just how slowly the cars moved. Occasionally speakers mentioned the rate per hour at which they thought streetcars traveled. Mayor Matthews, in a speech promoting an ambitious street widening plan, suggested that sometimes the streetcars could only go a half mile in two hours.<sup>38</sup> This rate is considerably slower than those described by other people, however, and was probably an exaggerated rhetorical flourish rather than an honest attempt to describe actual conditions.

Most people didn’t speak in terms of specific speeds, but simply claimed that the speed of the streetcars was as slow as—or even than slower than—a walking pace.<sup>39</sup> Given that electric cars could travel eight or ten miles an hour in uncongested suburban conditions,<sup>40</sup> a “walking pace” of three or four miles an hour was a considerable slowdown over the streetcars’ maximum possible speed.

In February of 1893, at a legislative committee hearing to gather public comment on whether or not the city should put streetcar facilities across the Boston Common, one

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<sup>36</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>37</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit of the Massachusetts legislature, April 4, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894.

<sup>38</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Time to act," February 10, 1893.

<sup>39</sup> A similar argument also appeared in the loop highway debates, though only once. In 1923 the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities published a report on transportation facilities in the Boston region. When discussing downtown Boston’s traffic congestion, the authors described the extent of the problem concisely but powerfully when they said that, “There are many parts of Boston where one can still make quicker time by walking than by riding in an automobile.” Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, "House Document 1110: Report on the transportation facilities within the metropolitan district," in *Documents of the General Court*, 1923, pp. 79-80.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Curtis Clarke, “Rapid transit in cities: Part II: The solution,” *Scribner's Magazine*, June 1892, p. 746.

petitioner living in the suburb of Brookline, who said he spoke for his neighborhood, complained that the streetcar ride downtown took him twenty minutes, when he could have walked in ten.<sup>41</sup> A short while later, at another hearing before the same committee, a physician named Reginald H. Fitz who advocated for a subway said that:

... I have personally suffered from the difficulties in the way of getting from the Back Bay section of the city to the northern section, and that not infrequently, taking a car, the blockade has been such on the way I have been compelled to get out at Scollay Square, jump into a herdic<sup>42</sup> and go the rest of my way as rapidly as possible around to the station in order to make connection there; that such inconveniences have repeatedly been my experience, and that not infrequently I have made quicker time by walking than I could by means of such transit as the West End provides. That experience of mine is of course the common experience, and for that reason I feel justified in approving as a citizen any steps which within reason should favor a more rapid transit at the least possible cost.<sup>43</sup>

Others who complained about walking faster than the streetcars traveled downtown included a businessman advocating for an elevated railroad in 1890,<sup>44</sup> the Rapid Transit Commission,<sup>45</sup> Mayor Matthews,<sup>46</sup> businessman Thomas Livermore,<sup>47</sup> and lawyer and ex-state Senator Henry Parkman.<sup>48</sup>

Some speakers indirectly illustrated the perceived slowness of the streetcars by describing how much a subway could speed up travel times by eliminating congestion. The perceived time “saved” by the subway would have been equivalent to perceptions about how much time congestion slowed the streetcars, since the subway was not designed to go faster than the streetcars could travel on uncongested streets. In

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<sup>41</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The old Common; At the mercy of utilitarians," February 2, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> A herdic was a horse-drawn carriage for hire.

<sup>43</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 5, pp. 33-34.

<sup>44</sup> John Davis Long, *Argument of Hon. John D. Long on behalf of the petition of the West End Street Railway, for authority to construct elevated roads, April 8*, Boston, Daniel Gunn and Company, 1890, pp. 7-8.

<sup>45</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Tremont Street subway," December 18, 1893, p. 1. Livermore had been a well-known Civil War general. After the war, he had worked as a lawyer, and his civic service included serving on the city's parks commission. During the 1890s, he appeared at various public events to advocate for preserving the Common.

<sup>48</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 6, p. 12.



December of 1893, a city council member who was advocating passage of the subway act on the mayor's behalf said that the city engineer had told him that the subway would save people fifteen minutes on one particular journey.<sup>49</sup> A month later the *Transcript* printed an editorial saying that the subway would "materially shorten the time occupied in traversing [the congested district]."<sup>50</sup> Also optimistic were the subway commissioners themselves; their February 1894 statement in support of the subway said that the current rate of travel would more than double with a subway.<sup>51</sup> Mayor Matthews often alleged that the subway would speed up travel times, though he wasn't consistent about this. In one case he specified that his combined subway and elevated railroad scheme would reduce travel times by a third to a half,<sup>52</sup> sometimes he made only vague comments about how running time would be quicker with the subway,<sup>53</sup> and once, when he was briefly downplaying his support for the subway, he said in a speech to the city's Beacon Society that, "The actual saving in running time of the cars by the subway will not be much—perhaps from five to ten minutes in the trip through the heart of the city."<sup>54</sup>

Most of the comments about how slowly the streetcars traveled, or about how much time the subway might save riders, were general statements. Even the few that mentioned a specific improvement (i.e., a ten minute savings) usually didn't give any supporting evidence, a point that the *Herald's* editors complained about just after the Subway Commissioners issued its February 1894 report :

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<sup>49</sup> Boston City Council, "Acceptance of subway act," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, p. 782.

<sup>50</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "[Editorial: Some people are canvassing the suggestion . . .]," January 30, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Subway bill at last," February 12, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The mayor's 'New Year'," January 2, 1893, p. 1. See also: Nathan Matthews, Jr., Letter to Hon. James Donovan (November 29, 1893), in Nathan Matthews, Jr., Political papers, Littauer Library, Littauer Center, Harvard University, Vol. 5, pp. 15-18.

<sup>54</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Subway useless if the surface cars come back again," January 29, 1894, p. 5.

. . . if the transit system of Boston could be greatly improved by means of the proposed subway, an outlay of \$5,000,000 for the purpose of securing this end would be a relatively slight contribution to make. But where it seems to us the report of the subway commission is lacking is in this practical question of what is to be gained by means of the work. . . . This is a mathematical problem which can be figured out by a competent engineer. . . . Now what we should like to have the commission do before committing ourselves to this plan is to give a carefully worked out analysis of these questions: Is there to be a decided saving in the time of transit, and, if so, how much? Not a conjectural saving, but one based upon a computation which would include the passengers carried, the speed at which the cars were run, the number of cars and their detention at the several stations.<sup>55</sup>

The *Herald's* request apparently fell on deaf ears—or at least it did not produce results.

This was unsurprising, however, given that throughout the several years of debates about congestion-relief projects there were very few attempts to quantify the impact congestion had on streetcars. Even the Rapid Transit Commission's 1892 report, which presented detailed statistics on the numbers of streetcar and steam railroad passengers traveling downtown, didn't present data on the speeds of the cars.

However, a few people did try to quantify the impact congestion had on streetcars.

In 1894, an engineer named William Rice who had worked for the Rapid Transit Commission reported to the legislative committee on rapid transit that he had made counts of traffic from 7:00 a.m. to 6 p.m. for four days (Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday) in April of 1892. Rice had carried out these counts for the Rapid Transit Commission, although, curiously, he made the counts just after the commission's report came out. He included a few estimates of how fast the streetcars traveled. For example, for a half-mile stretch of Washington Street, he found that on Monday, April 11, the streetcars ran at an average speed of about 3 miles an hour (about walking speed), while the maximum speed was just under 5 miles an hour and the minimum speed 1.14 miles an hour. He also noted that on the same day, a portion of Tremont Street was free from

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<sup>55</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The subway project," February 13, 1894, p. 4.

teams due to an accident, and that during this “unusual” congestion-free period, the streetcars actually ran at 9.3 miles an hour.<sup>56</sup>

Other individuals demonstrated how congestion slowed travel by comparing the time it took to travel a certain route under varying traffic conditions. For example, a *Globe* reporter tried this on a Saturday evening in March of 1893. He found that it took him thirty-one minutes to travel by streetcar a route that he covered in just twenty minutes in the return direction, thus implying eleven minutes of congestion-induced delay.<sup>57</sup> In 1893 an elevated railroad advocate said that for ten consecutive evenings he had taken a two-mile streetcar journey between the post office in downtown and his home in southern Boston. He said the average trip took twenty-nine minutes, with the shortest time being twenty-five minutes and the longest thirty-eight minutes.<sup>58</sup> In February 1894, the members of the subway commission reported that they had “personally experimented” on the existing surface streetcars. Commissioner Gargan made his test on a trip between two of the railroad terminals, finding that when there was no congestion the streetcar trip took 19 minutes, but during business hours it took him 32 minutes.<sup>59</sup> Commissioner Dalton found that a route that he could walk in five minutes took eighteen minutes by streetcar when there was congestion caused by the large number of streetcars, though no particular accidents.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “The subway: Expert testimony in its favor,” March 19, 1894, pp. 1 & 3; Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 8, pp. 67-73.

<sup>57</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Travel on Tremont street,” March 6 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Boston Herald*, “The needs of South Boston set forth at rapid transit committee hearing,” February 11, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Its defects; Subway commissioners explain in detail,” February 12 (p.m.), 1894, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 1, p. 46.

## 6.4.2 *Why slow streetcars mattered*

Although many of the people who complained that congestion slowed the streetcars did not explain why that delay was a problem, a number of others went the extra step to explain why slow streetcars mattered. Their perceptions of the issue ranged across many different concerns. Some worried about the economic impacts on the city, while others argued that the slowness of downtown streetcars seriously impacted streetcar service between the downtown and the city's outskirts and the suburbs.<sup>61</sup> However, the greatest number of complaints about slow streetcars fell into the categories of worries about wasted time and uncertain trip length times.

### 6.4.2.1 Wasted time

A scattering of people framed the problem of congestion slowing streetcars as one of “lost” or “wasted” time that could be “saved” through superior transportation facilities.<sup>62</sup> These arguments focused on the inconvenience and delay for the individual streetcar rider.

In 1881 an elevated railroad proponent told a legislative committee that slow streetcar service cost commuters years of their lives, time that might otherwise have been put to productive business use:

There are thousands of business men who are doing business in Boston and living outside the city, and who use from half an hour to an hour's time every morning in going to their business and returning to their homes in the afternoon. Now, if we could have in place of those horse-cars, cars which could be run on elevated roads by steam or compressed air, that time would be

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<sup>61</sup> They claimed that streetcars traveled at a sufficient pace outside the downtown, and only the downtown traffic made travel times unreasonably long for those coming from some distance.

<sup>62</sup> The concept of “time” was also used by the *Herald* in an editorial on pedestrian congestion, in which the paper responded to a claim that merchants liked crowded sidewalks because they were good for business with the comment that most people did “not appreciate this loss of valuable time.” *Boston Herald*, “Editorial: Congesting congestion,” March 10, 1893, p. 4.

reduced at least two-thirds. . . . I now call your attention to the fact that if a man could save half an hour in the morning and afternoon in going and coming out of town, consider what a proportion of a man's life-time would be saved to his business. It would make one hour a day, two months in a year, and in a business man's lifetime, it would make a difference of five or six years.<sup>63</sup>

The quotation above is unusual in that not only does it refer specifically to lost time and quantifies that time, but also suggests that the time had value (in this case, as productive work hours). More common were vague statements, such as that in a *Globe* article about the reporter in March of 1893 who timed his travel between Scollay Square and Boylston Street. The paper merely described him as "wasting" time on the journey.<sup>64</sup> The Subway Commission and its successor Boston Transit Commission also spoke of the slow streetcars as causing "a serious waste of time to passengers" in statements they issued.<sup>65</sup> At a legislative hearing in the spring of 1894, a speaker suggested that it might be worth using the Common for transportation purposes to remedy the "loss" of time (and comfort, and patience) due to congestion.<sup>66</sup>

A couple of people argued that lost time was of particular concern to the working classes. At a hearing in February of 1893 to discuss a plan to widen streets downtown, one R.W. O'Toole, who claimed to speak for the "laboring classes," testified that they found "their time wasted in getting to and from work" and that their salaries were often docked "on account of tardiness caused by blockades."<sup>67</sup> The interest of working class people in prompt streetcar service was also brought up by Alice N. Lincoln, a woman

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<sup>63</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Committees, *Hearing in the matter of the elevated railroad, opening argument and evidence on the petition of Joe V. Meigs et al.*, 1881, p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Travel on Tremont street," March 6 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894, pp. 11-12; Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895, p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 10, p. 70.

<sup>67</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Once for all; Mayor wants transit problem so settled," February 9 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

who served on the board that oversaw dozens of tenement houses.<sup>68</sup> She testified in 1894 that slow streetcar service was not such a problem for someone like her who could afford to wait or to take a carriage, “but when it comes to poor people who have got to use those street cars, I think the delay is a serious matter and makes a great difference to them.”<sup>69</sup>

The flip side of “losing” time was, of course, “saving” it, and a few speakers promoted a transportation plan on the basis that it would save time. These included a resident of Brookline who in 1893 advocated putting streetcar service across the Common,<sup>70</sup> the Boston Transit Commission,<sup>71</sup> a speaker testifying in 1894 that the subway would only save passengers four or five minutes,<sup>72</sup> Mayor Matthews when promoting the subway,<sup>73</sup> and proponents of the “Boynton Bicycle” elevated railroad system, who said their plan could save passengers an hour a day.<sup>74</sup>

The idea that time wasted had a direct monetary value to an individual came up twice.<sup>75</sup> The *Advertiser*, in a February 1893 editorial about whether or not the city should put streetcars across the Common, hedged its position on the Common question, but didn’t mince words in describing the problem of slow streetcars:

The need of Boston for better means of rapid transit is so great and pressing that something evidently must be done and done quickly to relieve this city of the inconveniences to which most passengers over the street car lines are subjected. The congestion of travel along Boylston and Tremont Sts. from the neighborhood of Park Sq. to the Tremont House is now so great as to entail a loss of time seldom less than 20 minutes, and often extending over half an hour, to the passengers traveling from Brighton, Brookline, Roxbury and Dorchester into the city by the

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<sup>68</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Unsafe streets; Contention made before the Aldermen,” October 26 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 6, p. 58.

<sup>70</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “The old Common; At the mercy of utilitarians,” February 2, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895, 11-12.

<sup>72</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, Vol. 9, p. 36.

<sup>73</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Subway useless if the surface cars come back again,” January 29, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Hyde’s legislative bill,” April 6, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> The idea that time lost to congestion had a monetary value goes back at least as far as the 1830s, when London engineers made this claim. James Winter, *London’s teeming streets 1830 - 1914*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 19.

Tremont St. route. "Time is money" to most city men, and a half hour a day means much to the thousands who experience the constant delay.<sup>76</sup>

This editorial generated a tart response from a letter submitted by "a suburban reader" who objected to using the Common and the emphasis on speed:

When will those persons calling themselves "practical" recognize, with the so-called "sentimentalists" that there are other considerations of importance equal to that of arranging for the utmost *rapidite* in the conduct of human affairs. If "time is money," "haste makes waste," and the latter proverb is as well worth the study of the truly practical man as the former.<sup>77</sup>

This letter was the only example I found suggesting that "lost" time not a particularly serious problem.

#### 6.4.2.2 Unpredictable travel times

Another reason that some people perceived congestion along streetcar routes as a problem was that travel times on the streetcars became uncertain.<sup>78</sup> The report issued by dissenting Rapid Transit Commission member Richardson spoke of this concern, for example.<sup>79</sup> Mayor Matthews, in a speech defending his subway plan, argued that the uncertainty in travel time was actually worse than the slowness in and of itself:

I take it that one great reason why people do not take the cars down town today is not so much that they feel that they can walk faster. They cannot. The cars go on the average about as fast as a man can walk through the heart of the city; but there is a painful uncertainty as to whether they will do at that rate or not. You may get through from Causeway St. to Park Sq. to Eliot St. in from 15 to 17 minutes—you probably will, but there is a chance that it may take 20 or 25 minutes, or even half an hour, and people who are in search of trains or are pressed for time for other reasons do not like to take that risk. The result is that a large part of the population that would like to be carried in the surface cars, in horse cars or electric cars through the heart of the city, do not dare to take them today.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: To take the common," February 3, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Letter to the editor: A costly savings in time," February 6, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Uncertainty was mentioned once in conjunction with freight travel, as well. In January of 1892 a speaker, described as a businessman with large experience in real estate and city affairs, was asked if the congestion was a problem for team drivers. He said this was undoubtedly true, and elaborated that: "Time was when you could count with certainty on the transportation of so many loads a day; but now, when a truck goes out for or with a load there is no certainty as to when it will return, and instead of delivering its four or five loads a day, it will deliver but two or three." *Boston Herald*, "A circuit road; Portion of the scheme of rapid transit," January 14, 1892, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>79</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 108.

<sup>80</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Subway plan hearing," February 28 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

After the subway had finally been approved, the newly formed Boston Transit Commission issued a report praising the subway that claimed it would relieve:

. . . the absolute uncertainty which now exists owing to street blockades. Within the subway the cars will run on schedule time. They will move with the same certainty as trains on a steam railroad. The passenger who wishes to take a train will know that it will take just so many minutes to reach the station.<sup>81</sup>

When the subway first opened in 1897, the *Globe*'s article about the event stressed that certainty was an even bigger benefit than speed:

But the speed was not after all the greatest advantage noticeable in the operation of the subway, although it was by no means unimportant. The regularity with which the cars were run, the haste with which they were occupied and emptied at the Park St. terminal and the machine-like precision with which they arrived and departed were undoubtedly wonderful.<sup>82</sup>

A few years later, the Boston Transit Commission was still praising the subway's regular travel times in its annual report.<sup>83</sup>

#### 6.4.2.3 Poor service between the downtown and suburbs

A number of speakers perceived a different slant on the streetcar congestion problem, claiming that because congestion slowed down streetcars, it prevented the West End from expanding service to the suburbs. There was simply no room on the streets to put additional cars. Speakers felt this was a problem both because of current unmet demand, and because they expected the regional population to expand and thus generate more travel. These problems were a major theme among the arguments put forward by subway proponents during the legislative committee hearings held in the spring of 1894. The subway commissioners themselves brought the matter up in a public statement that

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<sup>81</sup> Boston Transit Commission, *The Boston subway*, Boston, Press of Rockwell and Churchill, 1895, pp. 14-15.

<sup>82</sup> *Boston Globe*, "First car off the earth; Allston electric goes into the subway on schedule time," September 1, 1897.

<sup>83</sup> Boston Transit Commission, *Fifth annual report*, 1899, p. 7.



they issued in February 1894 as part of a petition asking the legislature to change their authorizing legislation:

It is understood that the loss to the West End Railway Company due to its overcrowded tracks, frequent blockades, and interference by other traffic, amounts to a large sum annually, and is constantly increasing, *and that this condition is a bar to meeting the pressure for more suburban service.*<sup>84</sup> (Italics added)

The legal counsel for the West End, Henry Hyde, also testified on the company's behalf that there was constant demand for the West End to increase service, but it simply had no place to put any additional cars.<sup>85</sup> The Boston Transit Commission continued to press the point during and after construction of the subway.

Mayor Matthews made this point in speeches he gave during the legislative hearings in the spring of 1894. He predicted substantial growth in the number of streetcar passengers by the year 1900 and warned that the system of surface cars had reached its "maximum development" due to crowded streets.<sup>86</sup> He argued that the subway would not only reduce congestion downtown, but that transit to the suburbs would be improved because the West End would be able to increase the number of cars it ran once the subway reduced downtown congestion.<sup>87</sup> To prove his point, he quoted West End officials who had used the same argument when petitioning for a subway charter some years back:

The number of cars that fill Tremont Street at the busy hours of the day is so great that in fact we are rather hindering than helping in that vicinity. . . . It is growing simply from worse to worse. . . . And yet the people don't all ride that wish to.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission*, 1894, pp. 11-12. Subway Commissioner Gargan also testified to this point on his own at a legislative hearing. *Boston Globe*, "Subway plan hearing," February 28 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>85</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 8, pp. 94-97.

<sup>86</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Ripe time to rush rapid transit through Boston," February 27 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>87</sup> Matthews, *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit*, 1894, p. 9.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

When Matthews publicly endorsed the 1894 combined subway and elevated bill put up to a referendum in July of 1894, he said one of the chief merits of the bill was that the subways would accommodate several times the number of streetcars currently run.<sup>89</sup>

The Boston Transit Commission noted in its first annual report that congestion was “a bar to meeting the pressure for more suburban service.”<sup>90</sup> In an annual report made a couple of years after the subway opened, the commission proudly announced that prior to the completion of the subway, only about 200 cars per hour per direction could pass down Tremont Street, but in October of 1898, 282 cars per hour per direction could pass through the subway.<sup>91</sup>

One reason that rapid transit was of concern during the 1890s was that cities were commonly perceived to suffer from a “congestion of population” that could best be cured by making suburban housing affordable and accessible. Urban reformers saw the crowded tenements that housed the poor in the central cities as a terrible problem that could most effectively be solved by moving the residents out to the suburbs. A necessary component of this plan was cheap and convenient transportation to the suburbs. The concern over congestion of population was likely one reason that Bostonians wanted to improve streetcar service to the suburbs, although the argument only came up occasionally in the material I looked at.

In March of 1893, Matthews spoke to the issue during his presentation of an elevated railroad proposal:

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<sup>89</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Mayor's vote; It will be 'yes' on the rapid transit bill," July 21 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>90</sup> Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895, p. 61.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

A system such as is proposed here, in connection with extensive street widenings, is the only thing which will tend to obliterate the Tenement House Evil in the northern part of the city proper, and induce the people living there to migrate to healthier homes in the suburbs.<sup>92</sup>

In June of 1894, the *Advertiser* published an editorial entitled “The tenement house problem” that argued that “the only reason why there should be congested tenement house districts in Boston is to be found in the lack of rapid transit here.” The editorial continued on to say that slow streetcar service was almost solely responsible for the city’s congestion of population, and that this was one reason for “the overwhelming demand of the people of Boston for the passage of the rapid transit bill.”<sup>93</sup>

#### 6.4.2.4 Economic impacts

A frequent complaint about congestion of streetcars was that, like congestion in general, it was bad for the city’s economic health. These comments, unlike those discussed with connection to the streetcars wasting time for individuals, focused on the impact congestion had on businesses and employers. The subway commissioners, the editors of the *Advertiser*, and Henry Curtis Spalding all argued that congestion was a problem because it raised the costs of running the West End streetcar system.<sup>94</sup> In addition, Tremont Street merchant John W. Wilson testified in March of 1894 that the slow and unreliable streetcar service had forced him to change his employees’ work hours:

Gentlemen, I employ something like 100 people. It is a continual complaint every little while, “Oh, Mr. Wilson, my car was blocked, and I could not get here.” . . . Even today, gentlemen, I have been obliged to re-arrange my time schedule . . . on account of trains and on account of the

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<sup>92</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Hub’s spine: Matthews would raise Boston’s back bone,” March 16 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Editorial: The tenement house problem,” June 20, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Henry Curtis Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston: Comprising swift transit by tunnel railways connecting together the tracks of all the steam railroads and rapid transit by the aid of subways*, Boston, Press of Brown Brothers, 1891, p. 18; *Boston Transcript*, “Tremont Street subway,” December 18, 1893, p. 1; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Editorial: Subway amendments,” January 29, 1894, p. 4; *Boston Transcript*, “Subway bill at last,” February 12, 1894, p. 1; Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895.

congested condition of the streets, so that these people can get into my stores. They came to work at 7 or 7:50, they have so many minutes for dinner, they get through at 6:10, and I have been obliged to turn it all around so that they can get into my stores.<sup>95</sup>

A more frequent complaint was that congestion of streetcars, like congestion in general, was bad for the city's overall economic health. Since this point was not unique to streetcars, it is discussed in more detail later in Section 6.6.

## 6.5 Congestion and safety

Another prominent set of concerns about congestion, this time voiced across both case studies, had to do with safety. In the loop highway debates, one idiosyncratic safety concern came from W. Irving Bullard, the vice president of a bank, who warned that congestion was “encouraging” robberies and holdups by making it harder for the police to “handle the situation in a preventive way.”<sup>96</sup> While Bullard was the only person to argue that congestion facilitated crime, several people in each case study perceived traffic congestion as a problem because it slowed down the fire department's response to fires. Even more people in both time periods focused on traffic congestion as a direct cause of traffic accidents that killed and injured road users, especially pedestrians.

### 6.5.1 Congestion and the fire department

A handful of persons in both the 1890s and 1920s worried that congestion increased the severity of fire damage by delaying the fire department's response to alarms. This point was made by a city councilor advocating for the subway in 1893.<sup>97</sup> His concerns

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<sup>95</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 9, pp. 60-61.

<sup>96</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Loop highway conflict has quiet start," March 18, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>97</sup> Boston City Council, "Acceptance of subway act," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, p. 786.

were echoed by a letter to the editor of the *Herald* who worried that “narrow streets” worsened the fire problem.<sup>98</sup> The editors of the *Herald* took the unusual step of responding to this letter (they almost never commented on letters printed) with an editorial praising the arguments and concurring with the author’s concern about narrow streets and fires.<sup>99</sup> In addition, one representative of Tremont Street property owners objected to a 1895 proposal to widen the street on the grounds that this *wouldn’t* reduce the fire danger (although their real objection to the widening may have had less to do with fire than with concern about losing their property through eminent domain).<sup>100</sup> The Citizens’ Association in 1899 issued a statement urging the city to resist demands to let streetcars back onto Tremont Street, saying that the fire department greatly benefited from having one central street through which it could travel rapidly, without encountering “blocks.”<sup>101</sup>

Fire came up slightly more often in the loop highway debates, although unlike in the subway era, it was mostly mentioned by those directly involved with fire protection. For example, in December of 1922 *Current Affairs* reminded its readers that, “Chief Tabor of the Boston Fire Department declared that the traffic congestion in the down-town streets constituted an ever-present fire menace in the delay entailed to the fire apparatus.”<sup>102</sup> The fire chief’s concerns later resurfaced in a 1923 *Boston Transcript* article on the loop highway, which reported that he thought the thoroughfare would be “invaluable” in reducing the city’s the fire hazard.<sup>103</sup> In August of 1926, the *Globe* published an article

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<sup>98</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Big tubes in the ground," March 13, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>99</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: An interesting letter," March 13, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> Boston City Council, "Petitions referred," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1895, p. 492c.

<sup>101</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Save Tremont Street; Reasons for voting NO on restoration of surface tracks*, 1899.

<sup>102</sup> *Current Affairs*, "The traffic survey," December 11, 1922, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board," December 17, 1923, p. 7.

entitled “Selfish Autoists a Real Peril to City, Whose Ordinances Will Be Enforced,” which reported that the fire commissioner had issued a formal complaint about the congestion and illegally parked cars that delayed the city’s response to fires.<sup>104</sup> In January of 1926, the owner of a parking garage and so-called “Motor Mart” opposed a proposed parking tax, questioning whether it would do “anything towards lessening our street congestion which gives concern to all business men of the city, including the Board of Fire Underwriters.”<sup>105</sup> Later in the year, the Boston Board of Fire Underwriters itself spoke out on the issue, warning that it was considering raising premiums in the downtown to compensate for the increased risk caused by congestion and illegally parked cars.<sup>106</sup>

### **6.5.2 Congestion and traffic accidents**

In the subway case, traffic accidents was one of the problems mentioned most often in conjunction with the various congestion relief projects. Speaker and after speaker spoke of how dangerous the streets were, and virtually every proposed congestion relief project was at some point defended as a way to reduce the danger in the streets.

Although teams were sometimes mentioned as a cause of the safety problem during the 1890s,<sup>107</sup> safety concerns were most often raised in conjunction with electric streetcars. The switch from horse-drawn to electric streetcars in the late 1880s and early 1890s brought welcome advantages such as increased speeds in the suburban

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<sup>104</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Fire commissioner had complained of parking," August [27?], 1926.

<sup>105</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Garage owners oppose plan of city to levy parking tax," January [26?], 1926.

<sup>106</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Claims traffic aids fire loss," September [16?], 1926. The author of the article implied that “congestion” was the cause of the trouble, though quotations from board’s representative emphasized that unattended parked cars were the biggest problem.

<sup>107</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Improved but not rapid transit," December 27, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: A conservative citizen's query," December 21, 1893, p. 5; Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 7, p. 13.

neighborhoods and a reduction in the amount of horse manure in the streets, but people also perceived the electric cars as more of a safety hazard than their horse-drawn predecessors. Although electric cars eliminated accidents caused by kicking or bolting horses,<sup>108</sup> the electric cars were more dangerous in other ways. Not only could electric cars move faster (although that factor was irrelevant in the congested downtown), but electric motors, unlike horses, had no innate instinct to avoid collisions. One of the most frequent arguments made in favor of removing streetcars from the streets, or at least reducing their numbers, was to increase safety.

The subject of electric streetcars and safety elicited considerable passion. One letter writer published in the *Transcript* described streetcars as a “death and destruction dealing machine,”<sup>109</sup> while another said that, “surface cars make life nearly unendurable in our crowded ways, killing and wounding more or less inevitably.”<sup>110</sup> A lawyer who advocated reducing streetcars downtown declared that “Tremont Street might as well be used for a target ground, saying ‘We won’t hit anybody,’ and then fire down the streets.”<sup>111</sup> The *Post* published a letter in which the outraged writer complained of the West End streetcar company, “They are worse than the highwayman of the last century. He only demanded ‘Your money or your life.’ These people insist upon having both.”<sup>112</sup>

While the language used in these cases may have been exaggerated, available statistics suggest that the problem was a real one. During the year ending in September of 1892, for example, the number of accidents to West End passengers or others hit by

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<sup>108</sup> Clay McShane, *Down the asphalt path: The automobile and the American city*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 49-50.

<sup>109</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Simplicity and economy vs. intricacy and extravagance," April 9, 1892, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Subway system best," December 1, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> *Boston Post*, "Save the Common pleaded Boston women at State House," February 10, 1893, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>112</sup> *Boston Post*, "Letter to the editor: Save the Common," February 14, 1893, p. 8.

the streetcars was 297, and 21 more people were killed.<sup>113</sup> The real injury numbers were probably even higher than those reported, since accidents were likely underreported as frequently then as they are today.

Fear of the electric streetcars usually focused on pedestrian safety, and, especially, on the difficulty of crossing the street. In the 1890s, pedestrian use of the streets had not been limited by law or custom, and people routinely crossed midblock as well as at intersections. The author of a letter to the *Herald* objected to widening Tremont Street because that would make the already hazardous crossing yet more difficult and dangerous:

Everybody admits that the transit means in Boston is today unsatisfactory; that the streets are crowded, that travel is impeded, and crossing dangerous . . . . Because as matters now are, a person crossing Tremont Street from the Common has to cross first a line of carriages, then two horse car tracks crowded with cars, and then two other vehicle paths, five lines of moving vehicles in all, while if the street were 20 feet wider, he would have to cross in addition at least two more lines of vehicles or moving cars.<sup>114</sup>

Concern about streetcars as a safety problem was widespread among the different participants in the debate. Virtually every plan put forward was justified in safety terms, whether the proposal in question was to widen streets, build a subway or elevated train, or ban surface tracks. Even the Rapid Transit Commission's report, which only occasionally described any of the specific "problems" its plans aimed to solve, spoke in the chapter on surface cars about "the dangers which attend the passage of the street today."<sup>115</sup> Mayor Matthews mentioned safety at various points over the years, such as in February of 1893, when he urged that streetcar tracks be removed so that the streets would be "rendered once more safe for foot passengers, carriages and teams."<sup>116</sup> The

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<sup>113</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Street railways: Interesting statistics," January 26, 1893, p. 10.

<sup>114</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Question of rapid transit," February 13, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>115</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892.

<sup>116</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Once for all; Mayor wants transit problem so settled," February 9 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5.



*Transcript* was very outspoken on the subject, hitting the issue especially hard in May of 1893, when the paper published no less than five editorials urging the state legislature to do something— anything—to reduce the danger on the congested downtown streets.<sup>117</sup> A letter writer to the *Herald* argued in favor of an elevated road on the grounds that it would make the downtown “safe” again.<sup>118</sup> As for the ongoing petition to the city council to remove streetcars from the downtown streets, the petitioners argued that improved safety was their primary goal. The *Globe* described the petitioners as saying that “protection to human life is urgently needed, and this must be their excuse for circulating the petition.”<sup>119</sup> The Boston Merchants’ Association, which in January of 1894 supported the subway proposal only cautiously, did concede that the subway was “one of the wisest methods of relieving the center of the city from the delay and danger.”<sup>120</sup> The Boston Subway Commissioners, in their formal statement urging the General Court to pass new authorizing legislation, said that with the subway, “safety and comfort to citizens will take the place of danger, discomfort and anxiety.”<sup>121</sup> Even the *Herald*, in a late December 1893 editorial dismissing the subway as inadequate because it would not provide rapid transit to the suburbs, did grant that the subway would “remove some of the dangers which now threaten pedestrians on that thoroughfare.”<sup>122</sup> In the 1892 and 1893, the *Post*

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<sup>117</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: It is a good time now . . .," May 15, 1893, p. 4, "Editorial: Street-car victims increase . . .," May 17, 1894, p. 4, "Editorial: How pleasing it is . . .," May 18, 1893, p. 4, "Editorial: Obstruction of rapid transit," May 18, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: The legislature may be compelled . . .," May 23, 1893, p. [3?].

<sup>118</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: The 'common sense route'," February 24, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Too many cars: Back Bay view of downtown travel," March 31 (p.m.), 1893, p. 1. See also *Boston Globe*, "Unsafe streets; Contention made before the Aldermen," October 26 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9, and "Less cars on busy streets," October 25 (p.m.), 1893, p. 6; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Danger in streets; Too many car tracks in our roadways," May 23, 1893, p. 2; *Boston Transcript*, "Reduce the cars; Petitioners for one track argue their point," January 31, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The wise policy of Boston Merchants' Assn. shown," January 11, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894. The board's successor, the Boston Transit Commission, made the same argument in its first annual report. Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895, p. 62.

<sup>122</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Improved but not rapid transit," December 27, 1893, p. 4.

made a campaign out of the safety problem associated with electric streetcars running many editorials on the subject<sup>123</sup> and printing the cartoon shown in Figure 6.2. Some of these pieces blamed the West End for not doing more to prevent accidents by improving its equipment, and others called for removing all cars from the surface of the streets as the only way to make the streets safe.

**Figure 6.2:** *Post* cartoon on accidents caused by electric streetcars.



Source: *Boston Post*, "What the West End needs," April 4, 1892, p. 1.

Although danger to pedestrians was the typical focus of concern, occasionally the occupants of horse-drawn vehicles were mentioned as well. Mayor Matthews, in his arguments for the subway, often spoke of how it would improve safety for teams and carriages as well as pedestrians. In October of 1893, two different men in the business of

<sup>123</sup> For example: *Boston Post*, "Editorial: Death at the wheel," January 26, 1892, p. 4, "How long will they stand it," April 4, 1892, p. 8, and "Editorial: Make the streets safe," January 28, 1893, p. 4.

renting carriages, who supported the movement to have the city council limit streetcars downtown, testified that some of their patrons refused to ride in carriages in the congested district for fear of being hit by an electric streetcar.<sup>124</sup> In March of 1894, a merchant spoke of team drivers “slaughtered” by electric cars.<sup>125</sup>

It is not always easy to identify the extent to which people perceived that congestion itself caused the danger, as opposed to electric streetcars in and of themselves being the cause. It might seem easy to assume that people perceived just the electric streetcars themselves as the source of danger.<sup>126</sup> However, some of the speakers used language that indicates that they perceived the congestion of streetcars, rather than the mere fact that such cars existed, as the cause of the danger.

The mostly explicit statement that congestion caused danger to pedestrians came from rapid transit commissioner James B. Richardson. Richardson, in his minority report, included danger as part of his definition of traffic congestion:

. . . a condition which is popularly and aptly described as a “congestion,” . . . where the narrow streets, notably Washington Street, are so crowded with cars and vehicles of all kinds, and pedestrians, that travel in or through said district is slow, uncertain, *often dangerous*, and sometimes almost impossible.<sup>127</sup> (Italics added)

In March of 1893, a real estate dealer who supported an elevated road said that some people were no longer taking their carriages downtown to go shopping because they were “more than half afraid to trust themselves and their turnouts in our terribly crowded

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<sup>124</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Dangerous streets: Petitioners for one track on busy portions of Tremont and Washington Sts. have another hearing,” October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 3.

<sup>125</sup> For other statements which included carriages or teams, see: *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Danger in streets; Too many car tracks in our roadways,” May 23, 1893, p. 2; Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 9, p. 67.

<sup>126</sup> One speaker did directly distinguish between safety and congestion as two separate problems. In October of 1893 a petitioner in favor of limiting streetcars downtown said he “was heartily in favor of the . . . idea, more from the fact that the present arrangement was in his opinion very dangerous than because it would relieve the congestion.” *Boston Globe*, “Dangerous streets: Petitioners for one track on busy portions of Tremont and Washington Sts. have another hearing,” October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 3.

<sup>127</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 108.

streets.”<sup>128</sup> In May of that year a *Transcript* editorial spoke of “crowding and danger attached to passage through the congested districts of Boston.”<sup>129</sup> In October of 1893, when the two men in the business of renting carriages testified that their patrons were sometimes too afraid to ride in a carriage downtown, they specifically identified the congested district as the place of concern.<sup>130</sup> A former West End general manager, in a speech supporting the 1893 alley plan for an elevated railroad, spoke of “the present dangerously overcrowded condition of Washington and Tremont Streets.”<sup>131</sup> The following year Matthews, in a long speech about his combined subway and elevated proposal, described the congested condition of streetcars and then said, “I need not refer to the amount of personal danger which these conditions create.”<sup>132</sup> Several other people indirectly indicated that they thought congestion caused safety problems by identifying the most congested places as the most dangerous ones.<sup>133</sup>

The fear that congestion created safety problems came up much less often in the 1920s. The argument was noticeably absent from the loop highway debates, only coming up during discussions of other proposals such as parking restrictions. Nevertheless, a diverse group of people did make the connection, suggesting that it was still a common perception.

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<sup>128</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Up in air: Boston people may spin to and from work," March 17 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>129</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The fate of rapid transit," May 10, 1893, p. 4. The *Transcript* made a similar statement linking congestion and safety. *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The order accepting . . .," December 19, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>130</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Dangerous streets: Petitioners for one track on busy portions of Tremont and Washington Sts. have another hearing," October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 3.

<sup>131</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Another thoroughfare; Avenue between Washington and Tremont streets," March 9, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>132</sup> Matthews, *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit*, 1894.

<sup>133</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Tunnels vs. elevated roads," February 15, 1893, p. 6; Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 6, pp. 59-60; *Boston Globe*, "First car off the earth; Allston electric goes into the subway on schedule time," September 1, 1897.

Although by the 1920s a few cities required pedestrians to cross only at intersection, these ordinances were rarely obeyed or enforced. Traditionally, pedestrians had had the right to use any portion of the street, and they gave up that right only slowly and under protest.<sup>134</sup> Figure 6.3 shows a 1924 cartoon from the *Globe* that illustrates the danger pedestrians were perceived to face—dangers in the 1920s created by automobiles rather than streetcars. In the cartoon the pedestrian crosses midblock, with cars and trucks passing by her in both directions. The intent, aggressive faces of most of the drivers reveal their focus on the road and lack of attention to the pedestrian.

**Figure 6.3: Cartoon from the *Globe*.**



Source: *Boston Globe*, "The minute that seems a year," January 3 (a.m.), 1924, p. 21.

<sup>134</sup> Miller McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1st ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1925, pp. 159-166.

A city council member brought up concern about congestion causing accidents during a council debate on whether or not to restrict trucks from certain downtown streets during business hours.<sup>135</sup> Mayor Curley linked congestion and safety in a 1923 effort to persuade the federal government to fund the restoration of Boston's pneumatic tube system for delivering mail. In December of that year, the *Boston City Record* published a letter from the mayor to the U.S. president, objecting to the federal government's recent decision not to allocate money for restoring the system. In the context of arguing that the pneumatic tubes were needed to reduce congestion, Curley linked congestion with safety issues:

The President of the United States is thoroughly familiar with conditions in this city; he knows that millions have been invested here in subways to relieve traffic congestion, expedite transportation, *safeguard human life* and make possible the transaction of the many activities of its commercial and industrial life. The more the streets of the city are relieved from vehicular traffic and their activities placed underground the greater the gain in the efficiency of business and transportation and in *the elimination of dangers to those who must use the streets*. Thus the pneumatic tubes.<sup>136</sup> (Italics added.)

Also in 1923, the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities published a report assessing the available transportation facilities within the metropolitan region. The report focused on railroad and transit service, but mentioned that if traffic kept growing as fast as it had, the region would need tunnels or highways to deal with the traffic congestion. In this discussion of congestion, the authors argued that pedestrians as well as automobile users would demand such facilities, because congestion made walking "slow and dangerous."<sup>137</sup>

In January of 1925, *Current Affairs* reported that the Massachusetts Safety Council had issued new advice to pedestrians on how to cross streets safely. The magazine

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<sup>135</sup> Boston City Council, "Prohibition of use of trucks," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1923, p. 61.

<sup>136</sup> *Boston City Record*, "Mayor appeals for pneumatic tube system," December 1, 1923, pp. 1672-1673.

<sup>137</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, "House Document 1110," 1923, pp. 79-80.

explained that congestion (in addition to high vehicle speeds) created a hazard for pedestrians:

The need for a change in the manner of crossing busy streets, has developed only in the past few years, *owing to the congestion* and necessarily increasing speed of downtown motor traffic. . . . Traffic conditions have become revolutionized and *more perilous conditions still arrive daily*.<sup>138</sup>  
(Italics added)

The article was accompanied by a photograph of a congested street full of automobiles and streetcars. The caption read: "A glance at this picture causes one to marvel that no accident is taking place. It is a scene of Main Street, Springfield, where the problems of pedestrian safety are as grave as in Boston." A few months later *Current Affairs* again brought up the link between congestion and pedestrian safety, this time in an article entitled "Boston's traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution." Gifford LeClear, chairman of the Chamber's sub-committee on Street Traffic, explained that the large and growing congestion problem needed to be "handled in a broad way, with consideration for all classes of our population, including not merely those who ride in automobiles but those who attempt on foot the somewhat dangerous crossing of our city streets."<sup>139</sup>

A final link between congestion and safety was made in a letter to the *Transcript* from one J.R. Clair, Director of Safety for the Checker Taxi Company. He wrote in response to a Street Commission hearing where parking regulations were discussed. The letter rambled without clear logic as he lumped parking, congestion, and pedestrian safety together, but ended with the statement that, "Parking in the business section absolutely

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<sup>138</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Watch out! New Year brings increased efforts to avoid accidents," January 5, 1925, p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Boston's traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution," May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.

makes for congestion. The more congestion we have, the more accidents we will have.”<sup>140</sup>

In sum, during both the subway and loop highway case studies Bostonians expressed concern that traffic congestion endangered pedestrians and other road users. However, a notable change across the case studies was a declining emphasis on congestion as a source of traffic accidents and danger by the 1920s.

## 6.6 Congestion and the economy

Across both case studies, the most common perceptions about why congestion mattered focused on concerns about how congestion might impact businesses and the health of the local economy. Worry over this point was widespread. In the 1890s, those making the argument included Rapid Transit Commissioner Osborne Howes, Jr., Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Francis A. Walker, the Master Teamsters’ Association, and the Subway Commission. As for the 1920s, although the theme was expressed most often by the Chamber of Commerce, it was in no way a complaint exclusive to that organization. The Boston City Planning Board described congestion as an “obvious handicap to the business of the city.”<sup>141</sup> Mayor Curley at one point said that business was “suffering” from congestion,<sup>142</sup> and elsewhere he used the word “stagnation” to describe its effect.<sup>143</sup> In an article reporting on parking questions, the *Christian Science Monitor* described congestion as a “detriment to business.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Down-town parking and public safety," June 9, 1925, p. 14.

<sup>141</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eighth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1922*, 1922, p. 58.

<sup>142</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive," March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>143</sup> James M. Curley, "Third annual address of Mayor James M. Curley," *Boston City Documents*, 1924, p. 23.

<sup>144</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Merchants give more car space," April 29, 1926, p. 4.



Though many people in the 1920s made arguments about congestion and the economy, these worries about growth were almost always brought up in the context of debates about the loop highway and did not often come up in discussions about the other proposals put forth, such as parking and other traffic regulations.

Only one speaker emerged from either time period who questioned the impact that congestion was having on Boston's business growth. In 1894 Herbert L. Harding, the secretary of the Citizens' Association, explained that the association would support the subway bill only if the cost stayed below \$5 million and if there was a guarantee that surface cars would be removed from Tremont. Although he testified that he thought congestion was keeping some retail customers away from the downtown, when asked if he thought the "rapid transit question" was seriously affecting the city's growth, he responded, "Well, no, Mr. Chairman, I do not know that it is. I think there are many other things that are stopping the growth of Boston a great deal more, for instance, our iniquitous tax laws."<sup>145</sup>

Though there was widespread concern over congestion's effect on the economy, the nature of the problem wasn't often discussed. One speaker who did explain himself in detail, however, was General Goethals. His 1925 report on the loop highway began with a lengthy discussion of the importance of transportation as a vital factor in the economy. He explained that:

The cost of transportation is an important element in our economic life. Expeditionary, regular transportation is a fundamental necessity and anything that will facilitate transit or eliminate delays in movement from origin to destination reduces costs; conversely, whatever impedes or retards free movement disjoins production and distribution, interferes with the proper transaction of business and is reflected ultimately in increased costs. . . .

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<sup>145</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 5, pp. 31-32.

The street is the natural channel of all primary means of public circulation and service. A good street system is of first importance to healthy and economic growth. That Boston is not provided with a good system through the downtown business section, particularly the retail trade and market districts, is a well known fact and the resulting congestion must be remedied if business is to continue to grow and prosper.<sup>146</sup>

No one else in either the 1890s or 1920s came anywhere near the care with which Goethals explained why congestion was bad for business. Many speakers, in fact, were extremely vague. A typical example is a comment from the Board of Subway Commissioners, who declared that after the surface tracks on Tremont Street were moved into the subway, "The increased value of these thoroughfares to the business of the city at large is incalculable, but must be enormous."<sup>147</sup> As for the 1920s, the Chamber of Commerce at various times stated that congestion was a "menace to the prosperity of the city,"<sup>148</sup> had a "detrimental effect upon everyone who does business or resides in the city,"<sup>149</sup> and "impair[e]d the prosperity and welfare of every business firm and inhabitant of the city."<sup>150</sup>

Along with these very general worries about congestion and business activity, however, some speakers did speak in more specific terms. They described congestion as a threat to the city's economic growth or to its competitiveness relative to rivals. (These were often described as other large eastern cities such as New York, though in the 1920s Boston faced increasing competition from its own suburbs, especially in terms of retail business.) The statements about the city's competitiveness were sometimes made as descriptions of existing conditions, and at other times as warnings about what would happen in the future if congestion were not reduced. Also, two specific industries

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<sup>146</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Build intermediate belt highway, says Goethals in report," March 11, 1925, p. II-3.

<sup>147</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission*, 1894, p 13.

<sup>148</sup> *Current Affairs*, "The Loop Highway and Dock Square Improvements," April 6, 1925, cover.

<sup>149</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: Merits careful study," December 21, 1925, p. 8.

<sup>150</sup> Boston Chamber of Commerce et al., *The proposed loop highway and dock square improvements for the relief of street traffic congestion in Boston*, [1925?].

mentioned as suffering from congestion were the retail industry, though it came up only sporadically, and the freight delivery industry, which was mentioned frequently.

### **6.6.1 Congestion and economic growth**

The threat congestion posed to economic growth was brought up by Henry Curtis Spalding in his 1891 plan for putting steam railroads and streetcars into tunnels. He warned that the surface streetcar lines obstructing the business district “must soon become an intolerable nuisance, unless the growth of Boston is arrested.”<sup>151</sup> In the same year, Osborne Howes, Jr., a member of the Rapid Transit Commission, warned that:

Congestion of travel in a city is almost as unfortunate in its effects as the congestion of blood in the human system. The veins and arteries of the cities must permit of a free movement, if healthy development is to take place.<sup>152</sup>

In March of 1894, Massachusetts Institute of Technology president Francis A. Walker urged the legislature to approve an amended subway bill on similar grounds. He acknowledged that there was reasonable disagreement on the best method to relieve congestion, but said there could be “no question” but that congestion was “restricting” the city’s business growth. When asked if the subway would be worth a \$5 million price tag, he replied:

I have not any question about it . . . . The city’s business represents so many hundreds of millions of dollars; it is today suffering in its business, it is still more suffering from the restriction of its normal growth, because of the painful, extravagant, absurd obstruction to business and travel which occurs through this district. Whatever is necessary to relieve that congestion will pay for itself amply in the growth of the city.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston*, 1891, pp. 11-12.

<sup>152</sup> Osborne Howes, Jr., *Report on the transportation of passengers in and around the cities of Europe, made by Osborne Howes, Jr., to the Rapid Transit Commission of the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston, November 10, 1891*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1891, p. 47.

<sup>153</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 6, pp. 46-49.

In the 1920s, worries that congestion stifled growth usually (though not exclusively) came up in the context of support for the loop highway. One of the few exceptions was a city council member who made this argument in a discussion about prohibiting trucks on certain downtown streets during business hours.<sup>154</sup> Two other people also brought it up in the context of general statements about congestion in the city. One of these was Malcolm Nichols. In his mayoral campaign at the end of 1925, Nichols warned that, "Traffic congestion presents one of its most serious problems in the growth of our city."<sup>155</sup> (Nichols at that point had not yet taken a position on the loop highway, and in fact went on to oppose it after his election.) President S. St. John Morgan of the Retail Trade Board, in a 1925 statement about what the city most needed in the upcoming year, made a similar argument. He chose to focus on traffic congestion and the general need for street improvements, arguing:

Like all cities, Boston needs many things. Such needs are the companions of Progress. Unless they are reasonably met Progress soon fades and dies. Adequate means of communication between people, and transportation of people and goods are the sine qua non of present-day life.

There is nothing that this community needs more than greatly-improved transportation.

*Congestion along arteries of transportation is an aspect of growth and size. It must be relieved in order that more growth may be permitted.* The productive mental and physical energies of our people await the opportunity for greater expression.<sup>156</sup> (Italics added)

The Chamber of Commerce and its members were among the loop highway supporters who made the argument about stifled growth. The argument came up in the pages of *Current Affairs*,<sup>157</sup> and in December of 1925 member Fitzhenry Smith, Jr. made it in a piece he wrote advocating the loop highway published in *Our Boston*, the official

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<sup>154</sup> Boston City Council, "Prohibition of use of trucks," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1923, p. 59.

<sup>155</sup> Malcolm E. Nichols, *The truth about Malcolm E. Nichols*, Boston, [s.n.], 1925, pp. 16-17.

<sup>156</sup> *Current Affairs*, "What Boston needs for New Year; Brief suggestions from prominent citizens as to city's needs," January 5, 1925, p. 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: Merits careful study," December 21, 1925, p. 8.

publication of the Women's Municipal League of Boston.<sup>158</sup> The *Herald* reacted to a legislative hearing on the loop highway with an editorial that stated that, "No one can walk through the retail section of Washington Street today without realizing that if Boston is to grow, some relief must be provided."<sup>159</sup> When the compromise loop highway plan of April 1925 was presented to the legislative committee, several supporters brought up the issue of stifled growth. One of these was Dugald C. Jackson, a member of both the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Public Improvements and the Affiliated Technical Societies of Boston. He said:

It has impressed us more and more for several years past that, unless Boston did something such as is illustrated by this plan, there would be *a serious damper placed upon the growth of the business of the city*, that is, not only the general retail business but also wholesale business, upon which the life of the city to a considerable degree depends.<sup>160</sup> (Italics added.)

### **6.6.2 Congestion and Boston's competitiveness**

An additional group of arguments about congestion centered on the fear that congested streets made Boston's businesses less competitive compared to their rivals in other cities. Intercity-competition had long been a key concern of American cities, going back to competition among colonial port cities vying for their share of maritime trade. In the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, Boston vied not only for port trade, but also to attract railroad traffic, industry, and capital.<sup>161</sup> In the 1920s, Boston also faced increasing competition from its own suburbs, though speakers did not often mention this.

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<sup>158</sup> *Our Boston*, "The loop highway: What it is and why it is needed," December, 1925, pp. 23-25.

<sup>159</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The loop plan hearing," April 1, 1925, p. 22.

<sup>160</sup> *Current Affairs*, "United aid for compromise plan," April 6, 1925, pp. 5+.

<sup>161</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its rise and fall, 1880-1950*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 37-38.

In 1897, the author of a book describing Boston's business climate quoted the Master Teamsters' Association as saying that congestion was damaging the city's competitiveness:

Transportation is now the most important factor of all in the exchange of products, which is to say in commerce. Rapid transit of merchandise is of as great importance to a commercial center like Boston as rapid transit of passengers; and whatever tends to increase the cost of the transportation of merchandise in this age of close competition and narrow margins of profit will inevitably tend to drive business from that city in which the cost of handling is unduly increased by delays and extra expenses.<sup>162</sup>

In February of 1894, Matthews defended his subway plan with the dire warning that if the city didn't do anything, the congestion would become "so great that it bursts and business goes somewhere else, . . . a migration which would be an immense disadvantage to the city of Boston."<sup>163</sup> Similar arguments came from a state legislator urging the passage of the alley plan for an elevated railroad in June of 1893,<sup>164</sup> and a city councilor who, in December of that year, said the city should support the subway act as a way to make itself more competitive.<sup>165</sup> The Boston Surveying Department's 1893 annual report warned that the city's congested streets were a problem and that Boston needed to improve its freight delivery system if it was "to attract, in competition with other seaport cities, the largest possible share of national as well as international commerce and intercourse."<sup>166</sup>

Most speakers describing how delay to vehicles harmed Boston's competitiveness focused on freight movement, but in two cases delay to passengers riding the streetcars came up as well. In 1890 the *Transcript's* editors suggested that if the city didn't improve the congestion slowing down streetcars, it risked driving its 300,000 daily

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<sup>162</sup> George W. Engelhardt, *Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston, [Boston Chamber of Commerce], 1897, p. 298.

<sup>163</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>164</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Bright outlook for passage of rapid transit bill," June 1, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>165</sup> Boston City Council, "Acceptance of subway act," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, p. 790.

<sup>166</sup> Boston Surveying Department, "Document 36: Annual report for the year 1893," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1894, p. 17.

streetcar riders “out of the city to places where public policy might be under the influence of a stronger common sense than sometimes rules here.”<sup>167</sup> A few years later, in 1893, Mayor Matthews used his inaugural address to the City Council to warn that future trade would be “diverted to our competitors” unless the city provided better transportation to the suburbs.<sup>168</sup>

During the loop highway debates, in March of 1925, General Goethals warned that business would move to other cities if Boston didn’t improve its transportation facilities to cope with the growth in automobile and motor truck traffic.<sup>169</sup> When the new compromise loop highway plan came out shortly thereafter, the president of the Boston Real Estate Exchange said his organization supported the plan because “Real estate is dependent upon the prosperity of its tenants, and if they cannot make a success in their present location, owing to transportation conditions, they are going elsewhere.”<sup>170</sup>

The *Transcript* also worried about the city’s competitiveness. In one editorial the paper said the loop highway addressed “a pressing Boston problem” and would “give certain promise of remedying ills which must be remedied if Boston is to remain in the class of modern cities.”<sup>171</sup> Then, in January of 1926, the *Transcript* published two letters from members of the community who argued that since other cities were spending considerable sums to improve their streets, Boston needed to build the loop highway to stay competitive with other port cities. Businessman Frederick O. Woodruff wrote:

*How is Boston to compete with other cities in this particular line when her waterfront and market district by its impossible congestion impedes import and delivery by teams or truck of goods,*

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<sup>167</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Something about monopolies," December 20, 1890, p. 4.

<sup>168</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 1: Inaugural address to the City Council, January 2, 1893," *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1893, p. 9.

<sup>169</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Gen. Goethals testifies," March 23, 1925, pp. 9+.

<sup>170</sup> *Current Affairs*, "United aid for compromise plan," April 6, 1925, pp. 5+.

<sup>171</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Start the thoroughfare at once," April 8, 1925, p. II-2.

especially goods which are perishable? . . . Men of intelligence know that “To make money, you must spend money.” Other large cities are spending millions of dollars to improve and enlarge their thoroughfares for business purposes, *that their merchants and manufacturers may compete in similar lines with merchants of other cities*. Therefore, if Boston is to live, if her business is to survive, she must progress and not allow one of her more valuable business districts and her waterfront properties to lapse into decay and become a blot not only upon the city but upon the business intelligence of her citizens.<sup>172</sup> (Italics added)

The other letter writer, Howard Coonley, was more specific, pointing to the amount of money spent on street improvements in other major cities:

Those who view with alarm the cost of [the Loop Highway] would do well to look at what other cities are doing for their future development. I am told that St. Louis is spending \$50,000,000 on better streets, that Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago all have comprehensive schemes costing millions, so that the business of the future can be handled expeditiously and the destructive effect of congestion can be avoided.

Is not this a challenge to Boston? Surely our problem is as bad, if not worse.<sup>173</sup>

### **6.6.3 Congestion and the retail and freight delivery industries**

Retailing and freight delivery were two specific industries whose fortunes were perceived to be particularly effected by traffic. In both case study periods, a few people warned that when congestion became too bad, customers would stop shopping downtown, reducing retail sales.<sup>174</sup> As for the freight industry, many people argued that congestion increased the cost of delivering freight, which not only was bad for that industry, but also raised costs for all businesses that depended on moving goods through the city.

#### **6.6.3.1 Retailing**

Downtown Boston, especially along Washington and Tremont, was a major regional retail center, with several large department stores as well as many specialty shops. In

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<sup>172</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: The loop as a profit-making investment," January 21, 1926, p. II-2.

<sup>173</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Howard Coonley for the loop," January 7, 1926, pp. I-2.

<sup>174</sup> The speakers usually didn't state where shoppers would go instead, though it would probably have been to the suburbs, especially by the 1920s.



both the subway and loop highway periods, a handful of people warned that the downtown congestion kept potential customers away.

In the subway case, these warnings came from one retailer, the real estate businessman mentioned above, and the president of an association representing prominent Boston businessmen. In June of 1894, the *Herald* reported that it had interviewed a Washington Street merchant, William H. Allen, who said that if the number of surface cars were reduced on Washington and Tremont, this would “enabl[e] the retail business to be done much easier and more satisfactorily to the merchants of these streets.”<sup>175</sup> In March of 1893, real estate dealer J.M. Wade testified before the legislative committee on rapid transit in favor of an elevated railroad, in the course of which he made the improbable claim that many people who came by carriage to shop downtown were afraid of the danger caused by congestion and so had started shopping in New York City instead of Boston.<sup>176</sup> A year later, the Secretary Herbert L. Harding of the Citizens’ Association said that:

It is a matter of common knowledge, . . . certainly within my knowledge, that there are today a great many ladies who will not shop in the congested section; they absolutely refuse to go down in carriages, to be driven about in carriages, and the sidewalks are so crowded that they prefer not to shop in that section, and the number of people who feel that way is growing very rapidly day by day.<sup>177</sup>

In the case of the loop highway, the only speakers to specifically warn about the danger congestion posed to the shopping district were retailers themselves. For example, Daniel Bloomfield of the Retail Trade Board, writing in *Current Affairs*, said that:

The interest of merchants in problems of street traffic is directly tied up with their business. . . . The retail business section of a city locates itself as near the central point of the city’s arteries of transportation as possible in order that it may take advantage of the large numbers of people who

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<sup>175</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Will the governor veto it? A timely question regarding the Meigs bill,” June 22, 1894, p. 8.

<sup>176</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Up in air: Boston people may spin to and from work,” March 17 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>177</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 5, pp. 23-24.

use those arteries. In other words, the success of a retail business depends on how easy of access it is to its customers.

If congestion makes it difficult for customers to get to and from a store, that store will not be able to grow in a healthy manner. It may even lose its patronage to the point where it no longer is profitable to conduct that business.<sup>178</sup>

President George F. Johnson of the downtown department store R.H. White made a similar point during a speech he gave to a dinner for long-time employees. The *Globe* reported that he urged his listeners to consider the loop highway as a way to relieve the retail district because “unnecessary traffic congestion tends to keep prospective customers of retail stores away from the district.”<sup>179</sup>

The fact that congestion and the retail industry were not more often linked during the 1920s may be due to a new focus on parking shortages as a factor diverting customers away from downtown shops. In the 1920s many middle and upper class people had access to automobiles for shopping, and there was great concern around the country that lack of easy parking encouraged these customers to seek out stores in suburban locations with easy parking. Worries about parking likely overshadowed concerns over congestion.

#### 6.6.3.2 Freight delivery

While the retail industry was only mentioned occasionally as suffering from congestion, and in the 1920s only by those with a direct interest, a wide variety of people from both time periods warned of the impact of congestion on the freight delivery industry.

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<sup>178</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Group action brings results," November 29, 1926, pp. 136-138.

<sup>179</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Johnson frowns on parking tax," February [5?], 1926.

Many complaints about streetcar-generated congestion emphasized the delays imposed on freight vehicles. In January of 1892, when the Rapid Transit Commission issued its tentative proposal for a circuit railroad around downtown Boston, one businessman complained that the surface cars were a problem because “the rights of other citizens who have a business use for the streets are very seriously interfered with.” He explained that removing the streetcars would “be most heartily welcomed, not only by the trucking interests, but by the business firms of the city, who have goods to be moved all the time, and who are seriously affected by the present condition of obstruction on our streets by electric and horse cars.”<sup>180</sup>

More frequent than descriptions of how the streetcars blocked teams, however, were the many explanations of how a plan that removed the streetcars would *improve* facilities for teams. The Rapid Transit Commission asserted that removing streetcars from the downtown streets would improve mobility for teams, carriages, and pedestrians.<sup>181</sup> The subway commissioners also made this argument in the public statement they issued in February of 1894, saying that the primary purpose of building a subway was to “restore the streets to ordinary city traffic.”<sup>182</sup> In March of 1894, the president of the Board of Trade testified in favor of the subway, saying that, “there were 100,000 tons of merchandise carried through the streets of Boston daily, and that the subway would give more room for trucking of merchandise.”<sup>183</sup> Former Boston Mayor Thomas Hart, who opposed the subway, in March of 1894 testified that the subway would provide new street space for teams (though he dismissed this benefit as insufficient to make the subway

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<sup>180</sup> *Boston Herald*, "A circuit road; Portion of the scheme of rapid transit," January 14, 1892, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>181</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 65.

<sup>182</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Subway bill at last," February 12, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>183</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Conversions on advisability of the Boston subway," March 13 (p.m.), 1894, p. 1.

worthwhile, because he thought what the city really needed was faster transportation out to the suburbs).<sup>184</sup> The *Transcript*, *Globe*, and *Herald* all printed editorials or articles with variations on this argument, too.<sup>185</sup>

Mayor Matthews argued many times that removing the surface cars would make the streets safe and convenient for other users.<sup>186</sup> In these statements he also added a twist to the argument, stating that teams and pedestrians were more “proper” users of the streets. In January of 1894 he said that the subway would put streetcars underground, “thus giving the streets up wholly to their legitimate object, pedestrianism and driving.”<sup>187</sup> Unfortunately, in most of his speeches Matthews did not explain the logic behind his claim that streetcars were less “legitimate” users of the streets. However, in one case he did clarify that the streetcars are less proper because they were not used by *all* types of people, and also because streetcar companies were making a profit off their use of the streets, which he felt was inappropriate.<sup>188</sup> This statement suggests that his comment arose from the general distrust of streetcar companies that characterized both the 1890s and the first decades of the twentieth century. The companies were widely perceived to be greedy monopolies that overcharged riders and failed to provide satisfactory service.

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<sup>184</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Subway scare; Merchants fear injury to their trade," March 26 (p.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>185</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The fate of rapid transit," May 10, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Globe*, "In sight at last: Subway scheme as aid to rapid transit," December 23 (a.m.), 1893, p. 10; *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Improved but not rapid transit," December 27, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>186</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Once for all; Mayor wants transit problem so settled," February 9 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5; *Boston Herald*, "On the breakers of debate; Whitney and heavy seas in the Board of Aldermen," November 14, 1893, p. 10, and "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, p. 1 & 7; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The mayor's 'New Year'," January 2, 1893, p. 1, and "Subway useless if the surface cars come back again," January 29, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>187</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Subway useless if the surface cars come back again," January 29, 1894, p. 5. He also used the word “legitimate” in a public statement in July of 1894 in which he urged Boston voters to accept the combined subway-elevated act. *Boston Globe*, "Mayor's vote; It will be 'yes' on the rapid transit bill," July 21 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>188</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *The city government of Boston; Valedictory address of Hon. Nathan Matthews, Jr., Mayor of Boston, to the members of the City Council, January 5, 1895*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1895, pp. 95-96.

In the 1890s, a number of proposed transportation plans either called for new or improved streets designed specifically to serve the teaming industry, or else noted that the teamsters in particular needed better facilities—further evidence that the impacts of congestion on teams were of concern to the community. For example, the Rapid Transit Commission’s report discussed street improvements designed to improve freight transfer,<sup>189</sup> and the Boston Street Laying Out Department’s annual report of 1893 listed truckers’ needs for better north-south travel facilities as one of three reasons why the city should improve its streets.<sup>190</sup> The *Transcript* published an editorial claiming that, “The question of broad avenues for teaming, and also of methods to expedite conveyance across the city, receives more and more consideration among those who measurably voice public opinion in this city.”<sup>191</sup>

Aside from plans calling for better teaming facilities, various speakers complained directly about the harm being done to the industry. A January 1892 *Herald* article interviewed various merchants to learn their reaction to a tentative proposal from the Rapid Transit Commission for a circuit elevated railroad. One of these businessmen, described by the paper as having experience in real estate, complained that the surface streetcar lines needed to be removed to make room for teams, which were greatly delayed:

“Would you abolish the surface lines?”

“Yes—that is the longitudinal ones. I would take off the lines that now run on Washington and Tremont Streets and use only cross city lines . . . . In this way the obstructions on these streets which are thoroughfares north and south in the city would be removed, and teamsters will have some kind of fair play in doing their business.”

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<sup>189</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892.

<sup>190</sup> Boston Street Laying Out Department, "Document 35: Annual report of February 1, 1893," *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1893. The other two needs they mentioned were better streets connecting downtown with the suburbs, and better streets for surface cars to travel across the city.

<sup>191</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 4.

“Are present obstructions to their easy movement through the streets detrimental to the interests of truckmen?”

“Undoubtedly they are, and these people are all the time complaining that they are doing business at a loss on account of the hindrances they meet with continually from the crowding of the streets by the cars of the West End railway.”<sup>192</sup>

A year later, in January 1893, the legislative committee on rapid transit heard testimony by various members of the Master Teamsters’ Association describing why the city should improve the street facilities available for teaming. Clinton White reported that he knew of several ships that no longer stopped at Boston because the ship’s cargo could not be removed from the wharves as fast as it was unloaded from the ship on account of traffic congestion.<sup>193</sup> Another detailed explanation of how congested streets interfered with freight delivery was given on March 6, 1894, by a merchant who had been in business in Boston for forty years. Jerome Jones told the legislative committee on rapid transit that “the trucking facilities of Boston are badly hampered by this congested condition,” and described the problem as follows:

The Boston and Maine [railroad company] have moved their freight houses away over to Rutherford Ave., and orders that come in to the thousand and one business houses in Boston by mail and telegraph oftentimes have to be left over until another day because the trucks get in line, and they get detained on their way in jams, so that that truck load has either got to come back to the warehouse and be unloaded, or it has got to go to the truckman’s stable and take the risk of fire and all that sort of thing over night, and go to the freight house the next day. That fact can be demonstrated by many merchants who lose trade by this congested condition, in my judgment.<sup>194</sup>

Jones was one of a number of speakers who moved beyond complaining about the harm to the teaming industry itself, and pointed out that when congestion affected the teaming industry, all businesses that needed to move merchandise through the city suffered. In January of 1892, the above-mentioned businessman involved in real estate

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<sup>192</sup> *Boston Herald*, "A circuit road; Portion of the scheme of rapid transit," January 14, 1892, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>193</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, VI. 4, pp. 29-30.

told the *Herald* that any system of rapid transit that removed surface cars “would be most heartily welcomed, not only by the trucking interests, but by the business firms of the city, who have goods to be moved all the time, and who are seriously affected by the present condition of obstruction on our streets by electric and horse cars.”<sup>195</sup> The Rapid Transit Commission supported its proposed new avenue for teaming with the claim that it would bring “immense advantage” to trade and business in Boston.<sup>196</sup> The problem of delayed freight deliveries even received attention from an out of town newspaper—the *New York Times* commented that the commission’s schemes to widen streets and reduce surface streetcar tracks would be beneficial because, “At present business interests suffer seriously from the jams and blocks which close up the avenues to the northern stations, causing expensive delays in transporting merchandise.”<sup>197</sup> The point was also made by the Board of Trade,<sup>198</sup> as well as by the teamsters themselves.<sup>199</sup>

In the loop highway debates, many speakers also focused on the effects of congestion on freight delivery. These arguments came mostly from businessmen and their organizations, but also were heavily emphasized by the Boston City Planning Board. Several such statements focused on the particular problems of transporting perishable foods.

A 1924 article in *Current Affairs* reported on a study of wastage of produce at freight terminals and markets that the Chamber of Commerce had conducted in cooperation with

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<sup>195</sup> *Boston Herald*, "A circuit road; Portion of the scheme of rapid transit," January 14, 1892, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>196</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 52.

<sup>197</sup> *New York Times*, "Rapid transit the problem: Boston's big share in coming legislation in Massachusetts," December 25, 1892, p. 11.

<sup>198</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 6, pp. 69-70.

<sup>199</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Mr. Whitney's plan for rapid transit in Boston streets," February 20, 1893, pp. 2 & 8; Engelhardt, *Boston, Massachusetts*, 1897, p. 298.

the federal Bureau of Agricultural Economics. The report looked in detail at the different causes of that delay in Boston. The culprits mentioned ranged from slow transfers of freight between railroad lines, to improper freight packing, to congestion slowing the transportation of freight between the railroad station and the origin or final destination of the goods. Though the article did not focus on congestion, it concluded with a statement singling out congestion as “a constant trouble-maker to carriers [that] serves to delay many shipments of perishables sufficiently to start decay.”<sup>200</sup>

The specific problem of slow food deliveries came up several times. In early 1923 *Current Affairs* published an article on “Metropolitan Planning Problems” that criticized both the lack of good road connections between the city and its suburbs, and also the congested streets within the central city. In describing the downtown congestion, the author argued that, “Many deliveries of perishable freight are now carried by truck over the highways and with these especially ‘time is money,’ so every delay hinders the economic life of the city.”<sup>201</sup>

In February of 1925, this concern received its most dramatic support in the context of advocacy for a plan to improve the streets around the city’s market area.<sup>202</sup> More than sixty members of the Boston Fruit and Produce Exchange assembled a brass band and marched to the state house to present a petition to the legislative Committee on Municipal Finance. The chairman of the committee refused to allow the band into the meeting room and the musicians had to wait in the corridor, but the leaders were allowed to verbally present their request for congestion relief in the market district. According to the *Globe*,

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<sup>200</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Wastage in marketing produce; Delay in transportation; Part I,” January 21, 1924, p. 30.

<sup>201</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Metropolitan planning problems,” February 5, 1923, p. 9.

<sup>202</sup> These improvements were packaged together with the loop highway plan until the summer of 1925.



the head of the exchange argued that crowded streets made the market district “almost impossible” and that these conditions were “one of the greatest reasons why the food cost in Boston is the highest in America.” Another petitioner, from the Boston branch of the National Butchers’ Association of America, said that delays to deliveries sometimes were as long as two or three hours.<sup>203</sup> The *Transcript* article on the event, entitled “Promise lower food cost if relieved of traffic congestion,” reported that President W. Franklin Burnham of the Massachusetts Real Estate Exchange testified that the railroads received thousands of complaints annually about food that had spoiled before it reached its final destination.<sup>204</sup>

## 6.7 Congestion and the cost of living

During the 1920s, a series of speakers extended the argument that congestion harmed the business community by linking the issue to the average citizen’s pocketbook. They contended that the increased costs of doing business in a congested city were passed directly on to consumers through higher prices, thus raising the cost of living. While this argument often came up in the context of higher freight transportation costs, a few people made the argument more generally, as well. In Goethals’ March 1925 presentation, for example, he argued that:

Any means taken to relieve congestion facilitates business and reduces costs. Anything that impedes the free movement of commodities or passengers increases the costs. And so, as this congestion increases, costs are constantly being increased, and *those costs must be borne by the public.*<sup>205</sup> (Italics added)

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<sup>203</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Brass band not allowed in hearing on Dock Sq. changes,” February 26 (p.m.), 1925, p. 23.

<sup>204</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Promise lower food cost if relieved of traffic congestion: Market men march to state house in rain, headed by a brass band,” February 26, 1925, p. 6.

<sup>205</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Gen. Goethals testifies,” March 23, 1925, pp. 9+.

The City Planning Board and its chair, William Stanley Parker, were the most persistent people in pressing the argument about congestion and consumer costs, doing so consistently over the years of the loop highway debates. At the end of 1923, a *Transcript* article on the loop highway proposal reported that the City Planning Board had learned from the trucking interests that congestion was forcing the industry to consider passing on to consumers a “tariff” of eight or nine million dollars.<sup>206</sup> The following year Parker testified that the trucking industry was considering raising its rates by an amount that was, in total, greater than the cost of building the loop highway. The *Globe* highlighted this by giving its article on the hearing the sub-heading “Great Cost If Truckmen Raise Rates.”<sup>207</sup> Some months later, *Current Affairs* printed a quote from former chamber president Frederick S. Snyder, who told the legislative committee that the loop highway would improve traffic conditions and reduce the cost of doing business, a benefit that would be “reflected automatically in a saving to the general public.”<sup>208</sup>

The Boston City Planning Board’s 1925 “Progress Report” on the loop highway, published in cooperation with the so-called Advisory Committee on Public Improvements, emphasized the link between congestion and freight costs in unusual detail. In a summary of nineteen reasons to adopt the loop highway, the issue of congestion and trucking costs appeared three times. The board estimated that congestion added six or seven million dollars a year to the cost to freight transfer, costs passed on to the consumer. In addition, the board noted that in New York City, only thirty-six of every hundred hours of truck service were estimated to be “productive of service,” and

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<sup>206</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board,” December 17, 1923, p. 7.

<sup>207</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Mayor favors \$32,000,000 plan for proposed thoroughfare,” March 10 (p.m.), 1924, p. 15. Parker himself repeated the argument in a letter to the *Transcript* in 1925: *Boston Transcript*, “Letter to the editor: Let the Community Have What it Wants,” March 21, 1925, p. III-3.

<sup>208</sup> *Current Affairs*, “The loop highway will benefit business,” September 28, 1925, p. 7.

that Boston truckers estimated that the loop highway would save one to one and a half hours in the time needed to transport goods from the market district to outlying districts.

Grimly, the board warned that:

Representatives of the market interests in Boston stated that they are slowly being strangled to death; that perishable goods are sometimes delayed for two or three hours or more in the day; freight connections are missed, resulting in delay and damage and injury to goods by the hot sun in the summer and the frost in winter; all of which results in extra cost to Boston consumers.<sup>209</sup>

The perception that congestion increased consumer costs was also expressed by other individuals and groups. Trucking and warehouse industry representatives made the point often.<sup>210</sup>

When the Special Commission held its meeting in October 1925, the concern about the cost of living came up in a presentation by W. Franklin Burnham, chairman of the civic committee of the Massachusetts Real Estate Exchange. Burnham argued that even though the loop highway would require a tax increase, this cost would be offset for taxpayers by the decrease in the cost of living that would follow construction of the highway:

Relative to the charge that small property owners would be called upon to bear a considerable part of the improvement, Mr. Burnham said that these would receive a "real benefit through a lower cost of living," *One of the great contributing causes making the cost of living in Boston the highest in the country, said Mr. Burnham, was the congestion of traffic.*<sup>211</sup> (Italics added)

The Special Commission apparently agreed, for the report it released in December 1925 included mention that:

Many experts have testified that one of the important items adding to the cost of living in Boston is the difficulty and delay of trucking in the downtown district. Anything that will relieve this situation should tend to lower the cost of living.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, 1925, pp. 23-25.

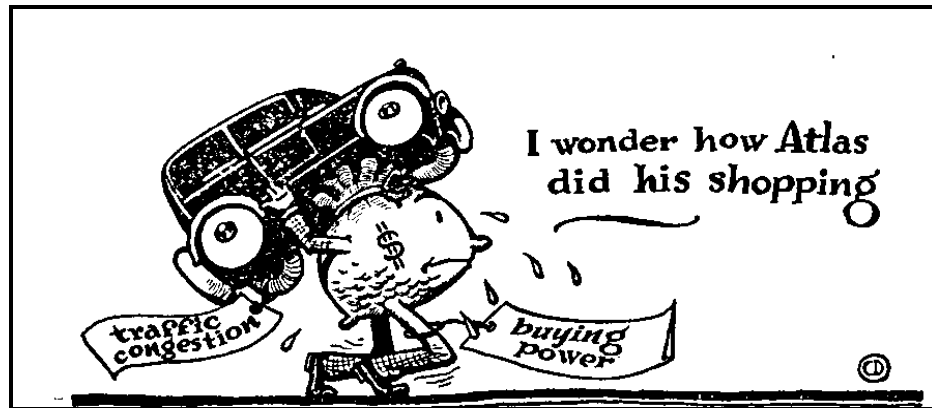
<sup>210</sup> *Current Affairs*, "United aid for compromise plan," April 6, 1925, pp. 5+; *Boston Transcript*, "Loop highway conflict has quiet start," March 18, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>211</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Merchants ask loop highway," October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

<sup>212</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement - pp. 4-5.

As for the Chamber of Commerce, in December of 1925 it illustrated the argument about congestion and consumer costs with a cartoon printed in *Current Affairs* (see Figure 6.4). The city's residents, portrayed as a sack of money labeled "buying power," are shown staggering under the weight of an automobile that represents traffic congestion.

**Figure 6.4:** A cartoon from *Current Affairs*.



Source: "City planning and street traffic notes," *Current Affairs*, December 14, 1925, p. 9.

## 6.8 Congestion costs money

During the early and mid-1920s a new argument began to appear: that congestion "cost" the community some overall sum of money. The general idea of comparing costs and expected benefits from public infrastructure projects dates back to an 1844 paper by French engineer Jules Dupuit.<sup>213</sup> The idea of quantifying the cost of congestion in particular appeared in London in the nineteenth century, and in 1905 London engineers, as part of a massive study of the city's transportation needs, published a paper

<sup>213</sup> Jules E. Dupuit, "On the Measurement of the Utility of Public Works," R.H. Barback, trans., *International Economic Papers*, 1952, pp. 83-110.

quantifying “the loss caused to inhabitants by want of proper traveling facilities.”<sup>214</sup> By the 1920s, the concept was starting to be used in many of the more elaborate transportation studies in the United States. For example, in 1922 the Automobile Club of Southern California published a report arguing that in Los Angeles, the “delay caused by congestion cost the people, by very conservative estimate, more than \$12,000 every day or nearly \$4,000,000 a year.”<sup>215</sup> In 1924, a report from the Regional Plan of New York claimed that congestion was costing Manhattanites about \$500,000 a day.<sup>216</sup>

During the subway debates, a few speakers spoke of time as having “value” to an individual,<sup>217</sup> but only one person took the idea a step farther, aggregating the lost time across all members of the community to produce a total “cost” to the city. Henry Curtis Spalding’s 1891 plan for a system of tunnels for both the steam railroads and streetcars included statements that “time is money” and, “The waiting longer than is necessary [for transfers] for swift transit means the loss of millions of dollars to the city of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.”<sup>218</sup>

The idea that congestion imposed an overall cost to the city was raised in Boston a number of times during the years of the loop highway debates, even though only by a limited group of people and organizations. The Boston City Planning Board and Chamber of Commerce were the main advocates for this idea, though in March of 1926

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<sup>214</sup> Royal Commission on London Traffic, “Report of Advisory Board of Engineers,” in *Report of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into and report upon the means of locomotion and transport in London*, London, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1905, Vol. 8, pp. 675-677.

<sup>215</sup> Automobile Club of Southern California, *The Los Angeles traffic problem: A detailed engineering report with photographs and maps, showing the causes of congestion and recommending measures for relief*, [Los Angeles, the Club], 1922, p. 5.

<sup>216</sup> *Greater New York*, “Traffic congestion is subject of conference,” May 26, 1924, pp. 7-8.

<sup>217</sup> For example, engineer Thomas Curtis Clarke referred to time as money in an article about rapid transit in American cities, saying that, “all large cities, where time is of any value, are now in like distress.” Thomas Curtis Clarke, “Rapid transit in cities: I: The problem,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, May 5, 1892, p. 567.

<sup>218</sup> Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston*, 1891, p. 8.

the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Transcript* both published pieces talking about the cost of traffic congestion in a national context.<sup>219</sup>

In 1922 the Boston City Planning Board raised the idea of a city-wide cost of congestion in its annual report. The board took the approach of saying that the cost to the city was incalculable in dollar terms, but must be substantial:

No single phase of the planning problem has attracted more attention and been more fully discussed than that of street traffic. The obvious handicap to the business of the city, resulting from congestion in the streets due to the transport through them of goods and materials which had better be carried around the city, and the large proportion of the time of vehicles of all kinds consumed in standing still and waiting when they should be moving, *while they cannot be expressed in dollars with any degree of accuracy*, would justify a very large expenditure in order to free the streets of the city for business which must be done in and through them.<sup>220</sup>

Though it is true that the Board refrained from making a specific estimate, the passage nevertheless introduced the idea that the impacts of congestion could be represented as some particular number of dollars.

This idea that the cost of congestion to the city was real, if not quite calculable, was echoed in Mayor Curley's annual address to the city in 1924. He warned of "a congestion that represents stagnation which, if permitted, will result in losses many times in excess of the sum recommended for the creation of Boston's new artery, namely, thirty-two million dollars."<sup>221</sup>

By the end of 1925, the City Planning Board was taking a further—if still tentative—step in the direction of quantifying the cost of congestion. The argument appeared in its *Progress Report on Proposed Intermediate Thoroughfare*, under a section where the board presented a list of 19 reasons why the loop highway should be built. In the fourth point the board provided a specific estimate for what congestion cost Boston in terms of

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<sup>219</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Dollar values of traffic facilities," March 22, 1926, p. 15; *Christian Science Monitor*, "Traffic faults called costly," March 22, 1926, p. 5.

<sup>220</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eighth annual report*, 1922, p. 58.

<sup>221</sup> Curley, "Third annual address," 1924, p. 23.

added trucking costs. Then, in the fifth point, the board reported on estimates of the total cost of congestion in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Montreal, and London. The board did not present a dollar value for Boston, but concluded that “Boston may still be in the day of postponement, but the day of reckoning will surely come.”<sup>222</sup>

In 1926, the City Planning Board produced a typewritten memo entitled “Cost of Traffic Delays.” The twelve-page report presented a string of quotations taken from other studies and reports that attempted to quantify congestion costs, mostly reprinting the methods used by other studies to do the calculations. The author of the memo did not use the methods described to make any estimate for Boston, but it seems likely that it was produced in the interests of doing so later.<sup>223</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce energetically pursued the notion of an aggregate community “cost” of congestion. In 1925 *Current Affairs* provided a specific estimate of how much congestion was costing the city as a way to show that the loop highway would be a good investment for the city:

*Does Boston Lose \$200,000 Daily from Traffic Congestion?*

Traffic experts are now trying to compute in dollars and cents the value of proper city planning and efforts to relieve traffic congestion. They are going at it by estimating the cost of the loss from the lack of properly developed traffic facilities and control. They are figuring in the loss of life, accidents, loss of time from congestion and depreciated real estate values. In Worcester, it is estimated that the cost is \$35,000 a day, while in Cincinnati, it is \$100,000 a day and in New York \$1,000,000 a day.

From these figures, can we make a conservative estimate that Boston loses \$200,000 per day? If you will accept this figure, the cost per year of about 300 business days would be about \$60,000,000.

And still there are some who say that projects for improving street traffic conditions, such as the Loop Highway, are not worth the price paid.<sup>224</sup> (*Italics in original.*)

In two pieces that appeared later that same year, the chamber apparently backed off from this precise estimate, although not from the concept. In one case the chamber submitted a

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<sup>222</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, 1925.

<sup>223</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Cost of traffic delays*, Boston, the Board, 1926.

<sup>224</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” September 28, 1925, pp. 7+.

letter to the Special Commission that argued that congestion imposed on Boston taxpayers and businessmen “a loss of dollars and cents . . . which must total millions each year.”<sup>225</sup> A pamphlet advocating the loop highway, that was put out by the Chamber of Commerce in cooperation with a number of other advocacy groups, warned that congestion brought businesses “losses that total millions of dollars annually.”<sup>226</sup> By the end of 1926, however, the chamber was once again using a precise estimate, though one considerably lower than the \$60 million figure it used before. In an article discussing the different civic areas in which the chamber was active, “Traffic” appeared as one of the topics. The author claimed that “Traffic congestion in Boston is costing the business interests \$10,000,000 a year, and this expense is rising.”<sup>227</sup>

The fact that the perception of congestion costing the city a quantifiable dollar value came mainly from the two organizations (the Chamber of Commerce and the City Planning Board) that most strongly supported the loop highway, suggests two interpretations. First, the fact that more people did not express similar sentiments indicates that the perception was, within the Boston community, not yet widely accepted. Secondly, since it was the brought up by loop supporters, it was likely used as a strategic political tool: the cost of the loop highway to the city looked very reasonable when compared to estimates that the city was losing millions of dollars a year from congestion.

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<sup>225</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Chamber again urges loop highway,” October 19, 1925, p. 9.

<sup>226</sup> Boston Chamber of Commerce et al., *The proposed loop highway*, [1925?].

<sup>227</sup> *Current Affairs*, “And below the surface: Few business men realize the vast scope of the Chamber’s activities,” December 6, 1926, p. 5.



## 6.9 Conclusion

The public debates about congestion in the 1890s and 1920s generate a fairly consistent picture of why Bostonians perceived congestion to be a problem. The growth in congestion and its impacts on public safety, transportation services, the economy, and the cost of living were key themes. Looking comparatively across the two time periods, the most striking feature is the relative continuity. The economy was a primary focus in both periods, and even many of the specific perceptions about the business climate were the same—for example, fears that congestion hampered growth and made the city less competitive, and that the freight delivery industry was particularly hard hit. Also, in both cases pedestrian safety was a serious concern, while worry over the effect of congestion on fire department response times was present, although limited to a few individuals.

However, there were also several changes during the intervening decades. Concern about congestion impacting streetcars disappeared by the 1920s, since almost all the surface-level tracks had been removed within downtown Boston. Also, there were subtle shifts in the perceptions about how congestion affected the local economy. By the 1920s, the perception that congestion damaged the community's economic vitality had grown more prominent, and was buttressed with related arguments about congestion raising the cost of living for all residents or imposing some overall dollar “cost” on the community as a whole. As for pedestrian safety, this concern received more attention in the 1890s than the 1920s, despite growing numbers of people injured in traffic.

Why might these shifts in perceptions have occurred? One obvious place to look is to the changes in the composition and nature of traffic on the streets. One possible change might have been a change in the number of “congested” streets in the downtown,

loosely defining these as streets with either heavy vehicle flows or vehicle speeds below the speeds attained on streets with little traffic. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know for sure whether or not there were any such changes, because very little data about traffic conditions exists from either time period. However, given how slow documented streetcar speeds were on Tremont and Washington in the 1890s, it seems unlikely that speeds there could have dropped much by the 1920s. More likely might have been an increase in the hours of the day when downtown streets were congested, or an increase in the number of congested streets, but this is only speculation. Or, possibly, conditions could have actually been a little less congested in the 1920s.

Other possible explanations for the shifting perceptions of congestion are the two dramatic changes in transportation technology that took between the case studies: the removal of the trolleys from the streets and the introduction of the passenger automobile. The introduction of subway technology certainly explains why the concern about streetcar congestion vanished, but the other changes in perceptions are not so clearly linked to changing technologies.

For example, there are few obvious reasons why the introduction of passenger automobiles should have changed people's perception about how traffic congestion impacted the city's business climate. After all, business deliveries would have been equally delayed whether the streets were blocked by parked cars or streetcars, motorized trucks or horse-drawn wagons.

As for the decreasing focus between the 1890s and 1920s on traffic congestion as a cause of traffic accidents, this change also does not correlate with the disappearance of streetcars and introduction of automobiles, since autos in no way reduced the danger of

accident. In fact, along with the introduction of the automobile came great increases in the numbers of people injured and killed in the streets (see Table 6.1). According to data from the Boston police department for 1925, in that year vehicles of some sort killed 117 people and injured 4,356 more. The streetcars (which were still used on surface streets outside the downtown), were responsible for only 12 of those deaths and 127 of the injuries. Automobiles, on the other hand, were responsible for almost 90% of the deaths and 95% of the injuries.<sup>228</sup> Compared to 1892, when streetcars (the main source of danger) killed 21 people in Boston and injured 297 more,<sup>229</sup> the 1925 figures are a shocking increase. Even in per capita terms the increase is staggering, since the population of the city had approximately doubled, but the numbers of deaths and injuries went up about 5.5 and 20 times, respectively.

**Table 6.1: Fatalities and injuries in Boston caused by vehicles, 1892 and 1925.**

	1892	1925	% change in absolute numbers, 1892-1925	% change on a per capita basis, 1892-1925
People killed by vehicles	21	117	600%	300%
People injured by vehicles	297	4356	2000%	800%
Sources: (Massachusetts) Metropolitan District Commission, Division of Metropolitan Planning, <i>Report on improved transportation facilities in the Boston metropolitan district</i> , [Boston, the Commission], 1927, pp. 3 & 11; Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, <i>Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature</i> , [Boston, the Commission], 1892, p. 231.				

One explanation may have been that safety concerns shifted from a perception that *congestion* caused accidents, to a belief that automobiles themselves (in any number) were the problem. The national literature on transportation planning is full of concern about accidents caused by automobiles, which supports the argument that congestion per

<sup>228</sup> Boston Office of the Police Commissioner, *Twentieth annual report of the Police Commissioner for the City of Boston for the year ending November 30, 1925*, Boston, the Office, 1926, pp. 85-86.

<sup>229</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Street railways: Interesting statistics," January 26, 1893, p. 10.

say was no longer perceived as the cause of accidents. Still, in the 1920s at least some people outside of Boston perceived a direct link between congestion and accidents. At a national conference on motor vehicle traffic, that focused particularly on safety, the president of a street railway company explained:

It may seem that the automobile problem is divided into two phases, that of the accident hazard and that of street congestion; in reality, however, the two are closely related. A lessening of vehicular congestion in the city centers will, of course, reduce the actual accidents.<sup>230</sup>

The speaker went on to explain that most of the accidents were collisions with pedestrians which caused only minor injury, and that these were of less importance than the “inconvenience” caused by congestion.

One significant change that the automobile’s introduction would have had on the business community was on retail sales. In the 1890s, only the wealthiest families had their own carriages, and while the middle classes could rent carriages providing taxi-like service, these were not a primary mode of everyday transportation for many people. With the introduction of automobiles, however, many middle class households, as well as the very rich, had the option using a personal vehicle for shopping trips. Autos also made it easy for their users to reach outlying shopping districts that would formerly have been inaccessible—or would not have existed at all. New outlying shopping districts developed along with the rise of automobiles. The national literature on parking problems in downtowns in the 1920s was full of concern that lack of parking was inducing customers to shop in outlying shopping districts where parking was plentiful. Thus, it may be that Bostonians were more worried about parking shortages than

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<sup>230</sup> Lucius S. Storrs, "Street railways and motor vehicle accidents," in *Proceedings of a conference on motor vehicle traffic, held under the joint auspices of Yale university and the state of Connecticut in New Haven, Apr. 9, 10, and 11, 1924*, edited by R. S. Kirby, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1924, pp. 145-146.

congestion as a factor inducing people to shop outside the downtown, and so didn't focus their attention as closely on the link between congestion and a loss of retail customers.

The increasing focus in public debate on how congestion impacted business—and declining focus on safety—is most likely the result of the business community's increasing interest in and organization around the issue of traffic congestion. Individual businessmen and business associations certainly played a role in the debates of the 1890s, but they did not appear to shape the debate to the extent that the Chamber of Commerce did in the 1920s. In the 1890s some business groups such as the Merchants' Association and Master Teamsters' Association sent representatives to legislative hearings and in a few cases issued position papers on various proposals, but in the 1920s the chamber was endlessly energetic in promoting its views on congestion. Since the chamber was an organization devoted to the interests of the city's business community, it is not surprising that it promoted perceptions about how congestion affected commercial activity. In addition, in the 1920s the business community may have used the idea congestion raising living costs (for everybody) as a public relations tool in order to broaden support for the loop highway outside the business community. During the 1890s, Bostonians of all but the poorest households used the downtown streetcars, and thus would have perceived themselves as personally inconvenienced by congestion. Once the transit system was moved under and above ground, however, these people would have lost this direct, daily experience of congestion. Now, only users of automobiles and trucks would have regularly experienced vehicular congestion as slowing their travel downtown. By linking congestion-imposed business costs with residents' cost of living, the business community

found a new way to try to convince all citizens that they should support policies to reduce congestion.

A final, important element of how Bostonians debating transportation policy perceived the problem of congestion lies in what they did *not* say. Across both time periods, their descriptions of why they perceived traffic congestion to be a problem were far less eloquent than was their general silence on the subject: most speakers did not explain why they perceived congestion to be a problem. Indeed, the most remarkable fact about the mass of statements complaining about traffic congestion was how little people in either time period bothered to elaborate on why they perceived it to be a problem.

Matthews, in an 1894 speech defending his proposal for a subway plus an elevated system, ended his brief description of the large numbers of streetcars congesting the streets with the dismissive comment, “I will not go into these matters in detail, because they are admitted by everybody.”<sup>231</sup> The great majority of the participants in the traffic debates apparently shared Matthews’ perception that there was no need to describe the difficulties associated with congestion. The sheer quantity of people who mentioned congestion as a problem—as well as the virtual absence of anyone claiming otherwise—leaves no doubt that the community of people debating traffic issues perceived congestion to be widely-understood problem.

In addition to a universal perception that congestion was a problem the city should address, the wider community, like Matthews, apparently perceived congestion as a problem that needed no explanation. The strongest evidence for this is that, across both

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<sup>231</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit of the Massachusetts legislature, April 4, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894. To give a similar example from the 1920s, at a time before the Chamber of Commerce had decided to support the loop highway, it publicly stated that the need of relief was so obvious as to need no discussion. *Boston Transcript*, “Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive,” March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6.

case studies, the majority of speakers who complained about congestion made little or no effort to describe the nature or magnitude of the problem, or to justify its significance. Most speakers merely spoke in passing of the “congestion problem” or the “terrible” congestion, and then left the matter. For example, when the *Boston City Record* reported in 1923 on a meeting to discuss whether the loop highway or new parking regulations would be the better strategy to relieve congestion, the article simply stated that the various parties had gathered “to consider ways and means of relieving the city streets of the present congestion.”<sup>232</sup> Among those speakers who did elaborate further about why congestion mattered, they often made only vague statements, such as an 1893 *Herald* editorial that argued that free-flowing streets were “absolutely essential for healthful municipal existence.”<sup>233</sup> Finally, when speakers did point to a particular impact of congestion, like traffic accidents or the cost of doing business, they usually spent at most two or three sentences on the topic. Even the Rapid Transit Commission, which documented its plans in great detail, wrote very little about why congestion mattered. While the report did present statistics showing the growth of passenger traffic, the authors seemed content to let those numbers speak for themselves. They spoke of such generalities as “large and complicated evils,” but only gave only a few hints about why they perceived those “evils” to be just so evil.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> *Boston City Record*, “Proposed new \$35,000,000 highway through city to relieve traffic,” December 8, 1923, p. 1685.

<sup>233</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Editorial: Defenders of the common,” February 11, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>234</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 105-106.

## CAUSES OF CONGESTION

### 7.1 Introduction

A key element of understanding how Bostonians perceived traffic congestion is to understand what factors they thought *caused* congestion. Their perceptions of causes are important because these are closely linked to understanding what policies Bostonians thought would alleviate traffic congestion. Indeed, in the public debates about transportation projects, perceived causes and proposed solutions were often so tightly wound together that it is not always easy to separate the two. In almost every case the arguments about what caused congestion were made by someone advocating for a particular policy, and thus the explanations of what caused congestion and why the proposed policy would work often blended together. Some speakers never gave a direct explanation of what they thought caused congestion, although one can reasonably assume that the policy a speaker supported correlated with his understanding of the cause. Such reasoning would indicate that the many people who advocated for a subway thought that the numbers of streetcars on the surface streets were at least a partial cause of congestion, while loop highway supporters must have believed that insufficient streets were a cause of congestion. In this chapter, however, I have mostly looked at direct statements about what caused congestion, only occasionally supplementing this material with indirect evidence coming from people's proposed solutions.



Using this material, I developed a typology of the major factors that concerned the participants in the two debates. In both case studies, people perceived that congestion was caused by factors that fall into three broad categories: an over-concentration of activity downtown, inadequate streets, and too many or ill-mannered vehicles and drivers. While some speakers focused on just one of these factors, many others viewed the problem as a combination of two or more. For example, some people focused solely on the street system as the problem, while others blamed a combination of static streets and increasing numbers of vehicles.

The number of people who argued that over-concentration of activity downtown caused congestion was limited, though they included many of the more informed participants, including government officials and members of special study commissions, as well as the more actively involved business groups. Individuals with no professional or civic connection with transportation issues usually not did bring up this argument. For the speakers who did mention over-concentration, they perceived this intense use of downtown land to result from such factors as population and economic growth in the region, a local geography and street patterns that funneled a large suburban population into a very small downtown, and the introduction of taller buildings in the downtown. The arguments about concentration of activity and geography appeared more often in the 1890s than the 1920s, while the argument about building heights was more common in the 1920s, probably reflecting the greater number of taller buildings downtown in the latter period.

However, none of these arguments about intense activity were nearly as common as the remaining two broad categories of perceived causes: that inadequate streets caused

congestion, and that vehicles and drivers caused congestion. The arguments about the street system ranged from complaints that the streets in general were insufficient, to specific complaints about a lack of good north-south routes through downtown.

As for the third category, that vehicles and drivers caused congestion, the numbers of vehicles were usually singled out as the problem. In the 1890s, streetcars were perceived as the vehicles clogging the streets, while in the 1920s the newly arrived automobile attracted the focus of criticism. The numbers of both moving and parked passenger automobiles were described as problematic. Along with numbers of vehicles, however, a smaller but still healthy share of people in both time periods focused on driver behavior. Some people in the 1890s perceived that inconsiderate behavior by the drivers of horse-drawn vehicles, especially freight vehicles, caused congestion. In the 1920s, truck drivers came in for little complaint, but there was lots of debate about whether certain parking behaviors caused congestion.

## **7.2 “Concentration” and congestion**

Some Bostonians in both the 1890s and 1920s perceived traffic congestion as the result of overly dense development of the downtown. In other words—too many people and too much activity in too small a space. In the 1890s, people mentioned this perception only occasionally, though in the 1920s it received wider attention, especially in the form of more vigorous opposition.

In the 1890s, central members of the transportation debates argued that concentration of activity caused congestion, although the argument was only raised occasionally. The perception that concentration of activity in the small downtown caused congestion came

up most repeatedly in the context of opposition to an elevated railroad in the downtown. The argument also tended to focus specifically on concentration of the retail district centered around Washington and Tremont Streets, rather than on the whole downtown. The Rapid Transit Commission, Citizens' Association, *Herald's* editors, and Matthews at times all argued that concentration in the retail district caused congestion, though Matthews at one point also argued the opposite position. In addition, an 1890 *Transcript* editorial indirectly argued that over-concentration of activity caused congestion by suggesting that a new street to expand the business district would relieve congestion.<sup>1</sup>

The rapid transit commissioners raised the argument that further concentration of activity in the downtown would worsen congestion in their 1892 report, doing so in the context of discussing their recommended elevated railroad circling the downtown. The commissioners spoke of the "the heaped up tide of humanity which now chokes Tremont and Washington Streets," and argued that any plan that increased that density of activity would worsen traffic congestion. It was for this reason that they preferred a circuit route skirting the downtown to an elevated line running right through the center:

The serious defect in every scheme contemplating one central line through the middle of the congested region, seemed to be that it merely penetrates, but does not disperse the congestion. Nay, it seems more likely to intensify and perpetuate the existing complications than to modify and alleviate them. It compels every one who wishes to come or go quickly to crowd into the already over-crowded zone, and forces men to crush in where there are too many already.<sup>2</sup>

The Citizens' Association and the *Herald's* editors both agreed with this logic about a circuit route being preferable, because a central one would further concentrate activity and thus increase congestion.<sup>3</sup> The dissenting member of the Rapid Transit Commission,

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<sup>1</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Always re-making Boston," December 18, 1890, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature*, [Boston, the Commission], 1892.

<sup>3</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893, p. 7; *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: A ring road," August 14, 1891, p. 4.

James B. Richardson, also agreed with the theory that concentration created congestion, although he disagreed that the circuit railroad would achieve a reduction in activity around Washington and Tremont.<sup>4</sup>

In March of 1893, the editors of the *Herald* used the same logic about density and congestion to oppose a proposed elevated railroad to be built on a street running between Tremont and Washington Streets. In an editorial entitled “Congesting Congestion,” they argued that:

It is possible to build a midway railway system, that is, between Tremont and Washington Street, that would provide, for a time at least, the means of rapid transportation; but such a plan would tend to draw added scores of thousands into the district that is now crowded nearly to repletion.<sup>5</sup>

Three days later, the paper published an unusually lengthy letter from Edward Atkinson, an industrialist and well-regarded commentator on economic issues of the day. Atkinson described in detail the process by which, in the last several decades, the retail district in Boston had gone from a small number of high-class specialty shops to a major center, with multiple department stores and specialty shops catering to different classes of shoppers. He argued that this concentration of retail activity was a major cause of congestion.<sup>6</sup> The *Herald's* editors took the unusual step of responding to Atkinson's letter (they rarely responded to letters) in an editorial printed the same day. The editorial praised Atkinson as a man whose views should be seriously considered. As for his arguments about density and congestion, they remarked that, “He knew this trade in its

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<sup>4</sup> James B. Richardson, "Dissenting report of commissioner Richardson on elevated railroad routes," in Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Congesting congestion," March 10, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Big tubes in the ground," March 13, 1893, p. 4.

day of small things, and he has watched its marvelous increase, so that he speaks as an expert on the congestion of street traffic which it has caused.”<sup>7</sup>

In October of 1893, the Citizens’ Association issued a formal statement against the alley plan, arguing that the elevated road running between Tremont and Washington would:

. . . serve to pour additional throngs of people into the same limited retail center as now, necessitating still more trucks, express wagons and vehicles of every description to serve the increased business. The bill will thus increase the overcrowding, delay and danger from which we are now suffering.<sup>8</sup>

Association President Herbert L. Harding repeated the argument in March 1894, in a speech supporting the subway, saying, “We have long felt that our retail district is already too narrowly confined. We should have more room so that people can go there without crowding.”<sup>9</sup> The repetition of the point over many months indicates that the association perceived this to be an important cause of congestion.

As for Matthews, he too argued against the alley plan on the grounds that it would aggravate congestion by increasing the concentration of activity around Washington and Tremont Streets, but he was less committed to the argument than the Citizens’ Association. At a speech to the Merchants’ Club in October 1893, he said of the plan:

Its chief disadvantage, considered from the transportation standpoint merely, is that it would tend to aggravate and increase the existing congestion of travel in the business section of the city. Additional crowds would be poured upon the narrow sidewalks of the cross streets between Washington and Tremont Streets; and if the road were to succeed in carrying a large number of passengers daily . . . this result would be attained only by increasing very much the congestion of trade and travel in that section of the city that lies between Causeway and Eliot Streets.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Boston Herald*. 1893. Editorial: An interesting letter. *Boston Herald*, March 13. Also, around the same time, one John Griggs who opposed the plan testified that, “the great trouble is, Boston’s business is altogether too big to be carried on in the territory covered by the business portion of the town.” *Boston Globe*, “Up in air: Boston people may spin to and from work,” March 17 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Objections to the bill; Rapid-transit scheme should be rejected,” October 28, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Globe*, “175 stations making grand circuit around Boston,” March 8 (p.m.), 1894, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “The rapid-transit bill hotly assailed,” October 27, 1893, p. 5.

Earlier, in February, however, in a speech to the same club he had argued that concentration of business was *not* the reason for Boston's congestion. In this speech he said that the streets themselves, not the concentration of activity, caused congestion. As evidence of this fact, he noted that Chicago's business district was not congested, even though it was smaller than Boston's. The reason for the difference in congestion between the cities, he said, was that Chicago had wider streets and fewer streetcar tracks downtown than did Boston.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that he changed his mind between February and October, but it also seems likely that in October he simply found the argument a useful one to bring up against a project he disliked for other reasons. (In addition, his audience in October would have included many downtown merchants, an audience unlikely to be sympathetic with arguments that they should encourage business to move out of their neighborhood.)

Even though the subway plan called for a very similar route as the alley plan—the alley plan would have run a train between Tremont and Washington, while the subway plan called for a route under Tremont—most subway opponents did not mention the same argument about concentration and congestion.<sup>12</sup> Only one subway opponent in 1894 argued that the subway would worsen congestion by further concentrating activity downtown. Milton Chase, a self-described mechanic, argued that:

. . . I have come to the conclusion that the cause in the first place of the congested district is the concentration of business—I don't think that will be disputed, the concentration of business. Now, then, I cannot see, taking that as a premise, how a still further concentration of business will relieve the congested district. . . . Mr. Alexander S. Porter, stated here before this committee that real estate would increase in value on the route of the rapid transit. That means, or course,

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<sup>11</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Time to act," February 10, 1893.

<sup>12</sup> Neither did the opponents of the Meigs elevated railroad plan, which was ultimately approved in 1894 along with the subway. The Meigs plan was bitterly opposed, mostly because it was seen as a scheme intended to benefit the corporation rather than the citizens. Despite this intense opposition, however, the argument that it would increase concentration downtown didn't feature among the many criticisms.

still further concentration of business, provided my premises are correct, and I will repeat the premises, that congestion is due to concentration of business and nothing else.

Chase went on to advocate that the city relieve congestion by building a broad avenue connecting the northern and southern railway stations that would send people around, rather than through, the congested district.<sup>13</sup>

Although the *Herald* wrote many editorials objecting to the subway on various grounds, it never raised the argument about concentration. Matthews never did either, though this is less surprising, since he was actively campaigning in its favor. As for the conservative, business-oriented Citizens' Association, when its president testified in favor of the subway, he never suggested that it might worsen congestion by bringing in more people, even though in the same speech he mentioned again that concentration caused congestion in the retail district.<sup>14</sup>

There are three likely explanations for this apparent inconsistency in perception about concentration and congestion with regards to elevated roads and the subway. First, one possibility is purely political. The Citizens' Association and Matthews both supported the subway plan, but objected strenuously to the high cost of the alley plan. Their opposition to the latter may have led them to voice all the objections they could come up with, including the one about concentration, in order to ensure its defeat. This explanation would not have held for the *Herald's* editors, however, since they did not support the subway with the same conviction, and might therefore have been expected to keep making the concentration argument against it. A more likely explanation has to do with the different ridership impacts of the alley plan and the subway proposal. Under the

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<sup>13</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 15 vols., [Boston, the General Court], 1894, Vol. 9, pp. 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, Vol. 5, pp. 14-15.

alley plan, an elevated railroad was to be added to the existing surface streetcar system, with no diversion of cars from the surface. Therefore, the elevated road would have been expected to bring in many *new* riders, assuming that there was pent-up demand for rapid transportation into the downtown. The subway, however, was to be combined with a requirement that the surface streetcar tracks be pulled off Tremont Street. Even if the subway allowed the West End to increase somewhat the number of cars it ran, the total number of expected new riders would have been much lower than under the alley plan. A final explanation is that the speakers may not have wanted to draw attention to congestion as a drawback of a highly concentrated downtown, since they probably believed that such concentration was good for business in other ways.

In the loop highway case, thirty years later, the idea that concentration caused congestion was raised by many of the key actors. While the perception that concentration of activity caused congestion only appeared a moderate number of times in the written records, a couple of people in the loop case who opposed any effort to deconcentrate the downtown referred to it as an idea had been widely discussed. Another distinction between the time periods was that, in the 1920s, there were several people arguing that concentration *didn't* cause congestion, which wasn't a prevalent theme in the 1890s.

The editors of the *Christian Science Monitor* issued a rare editorial on traffic issues in 1925, at the time of an International City and Regional Planning Conference being held in New York City. In a passing comment, the editors mentioned that growth in population and business activity (as well as in vehicles) caused congestion when it took place in limited space:

In recent decades the intensive development of industry and the resulting growth of great industrial cities have rendered the problem of city planning, or replanning, an acute one. *With*



*the increased volume of business handled and density of population within limited areas, with the concurrent multiplication of motor vehicles and the consequent acceleration of vehicular traffic, the saturation point in the capacity of numerous city thoroughfares has been reached and exceeded.*<sup>15</sup> (Italics added.)

Another forceful warning that concentration of activity caused traffic congestion (and should therefore be discouraged) came from Charles Carr, who joined the Special Commission after it had released its February 1925 report. When the commission released its report in December of that year, Carr appended a dissenting minority report opposing the construction of the loop highway on the grounds that it would increase the concentration of activity downtown and thus worsen congestion:

Boston spreads over approximately fifty square miles of territory, but the greater part of its business is still carried on in the down-town section having an area of less than two square miles. Increasing business has held tenaciously to these narrow limits. Consequently the sidewalks have become crowded with people who have been compelled to flock into the district and the streets have been filled with traffic.<sup>16</sup>

Carr went on to propose that the city reduce concentration downtown as a way to improve congestion.

The other members of the Special Commission clearly took note of Carr's argument, because their majority report explained why his deconcentration proposal was a bad idea. In these arguments against any policies to deconcentrate the downtown, however, they did not directly contradict his argument that concentration caused congestion.<sup>17</sup>

Like the majority of the special commission, there were a number of other speakers who opposed policies to deconcentration the downtown in order to reduce congestion, but never actually challenged the perception that congestion caused congestion. It may be

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<sup>15</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Editorial: City and regional planning," April 23, 1925, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement - p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

that they believed deconcentration would be ineffective as congestion relief, but more likely they believed the benefits of concentration outweighed the congestion impacts.

In both the 1890s and 1920s, some people looked deeper into the issue of concentration and explained what factors they thought were causing increasing congestion. These explanations fell into three groups. Some Bostonians perceived that regional growth in population (and the corresponding growth in passenger trips to the downtown) increased congestion and therefore congestion. Another explanation was that concentration resulted from factors of local geography and land use, which combined to pack activity from a growing region into a very small downtown area of unchanging size. Finally, a few people perceived that the downtown was becoming more concentrated because taller buildings permitted more intensive use of the land.

### **7.2.1 Regional population growth**

A few people in the 1890s argued that the city's streets were becoming congested because regional population growth was pouring more and more people into them. Though increasing numbers of vehicles were mentioned more often than population in conjunction with growing congestion, a few speakers specifically mentioned a growing population as the factor generating increasing numbers of pedestrians and economic activity downtown. (Vehicles themselves are discussed as a cause of congestion in Section 6.3.) This perception was relatively rare, however. Only the Rapid Transit Commission, the *Globe's* editors, and a few individuals mentioned it.

In 1891, Henry Curtis Spalding published a complex plan of how the city could reduce congestion through construction and regulatory strategies. In his plan, Spalding

explained that such a plan was necessary because future population growth would otherwise bring city traffic to a standstill:

It is certain that the tramway lines, which already are so great an obstruction to the use of the streets in the business district, must soon become an intolerable nuisance, unless the growth of Boston is arrested.

When the million of population inhabiting the city and suburbs shall have become a million and a quarter, and the movement of other sorts of wheeled vehicles and of pedestrians shall have proportionally increased, a state of chronic dead-lock must ensue.

In fact, it so often occurs now, that everybody can understand that a slight increase will make it impossible for either class to use the streets, except with an enormous sacrifice of time and comfort of man and beast.<sup>18</sup>

The Rapid Transit Commission's report also described past and expected future population growth as a serious cause of congestion. The commissioners presented statistics on the rapid growth of steam railroad and streetcar passengers in the preceding decades. They said that the number of passengers had doubled every decade and predicted the trend would continue in the following decades.<sup>19</sup> The argument about increasing population leading to increasing travel apparently struck a chord with the editors of the *Globe*, for they highlighted the argument in an editorial about the report, quoting the report's statistics on growing passenger travel.<sup>20</sup>

In 1893, two more speakers voiced the perception that continued population growth would increase traffic pressures. Charles Carleton Coffin pointed to this as a reason the city needed a broad new street,<sup>21</sup> and the *New York Times* printed an article on the proposed alley plan for an elevated railroad which warned that, "Travel in Boston doubles every fifteen years, and it is estimated that if history repeats itself the

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Curtis Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston: Comprising swift transit by tunnel railways connecting together the tracks of all the steam railroads and rapid transit by the aid of subways*, Boston, Press of Brown Brothers, 1891, pp. 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: The rapid transit report," April 6, 1892, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "License law good," March 9, 1893, p. 5.

considerable number of 252,000,000 passengers a year will require transportation fifteen years hence."<sup>22</sup>

Another new twist on the perception that increasing population caused congestion was the argument that a growing regional population and regularly improving streetcar service created a positive feedback loop generating continual increases in both regional population and downtown traffic. As streetcar service improved (in travel speed and by extension of routes into undeveloped areas), more people located at the urban fringe. This increase in suburban population in turn created pressure for more and better transit service, and the cycle continued. In 1890, West End railroad supporter John D. Long, advocating that the General Court give the company permission to build an elevated railroad, made this point. He noted that the region's population had been increasing, and that:

To partially meet this situation [of population growth] there has come in, of late, the electric motor street car system. But it has resulted in increasing the very difficulty it was intended to relieve, because it has largely increased the amount of travel to and from our northern suburbs and to and from our southern suburbs.<sup>23</sup>

The argument was well known among planners outside of Boston. For example, in an 1892 article on rapid transit in *Scribner's Magazine*, engineer Thomas Curtis Clarke described the cycle as follows:

The better the service of street railways, the faster does the city population grow, the more do the people ride, and the greater is the congestion of traffic, and the louder the complaints of the public. The demand for rapid transit facilities increases faster than the supply. . . .

Street lines, subways, elevated railways, and other means of conveyance, have so greatly increased the population of cities, by making the outlying districts available and accessible, that they cannot carry the people who want to ride. This is not only the case in the greater American cities, but also in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, Liverpool, Glasgow, etc.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, "A new Boston avenue: Project to construct one between Washington and Tremont Streets," March 12, 1893, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> John Davis Long, *Argument of Hon. John D. Long on behalf of the petition of the West End Street Railway, for authority to construct elevated roads*, April 8, Boston, Daniel Gunn and Company, 1890, pp. 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Curtis Clarke, "Rapid transit in cities: I: The problem," *Scribner's Magazine*, May 1892, p. 569.

Although the regional population roughly doubled between the 1890s and 1920s, the argument that population growth was responsible for intensified activity downtown was heard less frequently in the 1920s than in the 1890s. When the City Planning Board issued its 1925 *Progress Report* urging adoption of the loop highway, the board mentioned population growth as a cause of congestion, but assigned less prominence to this factor than to the factors of “general business progress,” increasing numbers of automobiles, and increasing building heights.<sup>25</sup> The *Christian Science Monitor*, in its editorial on city planning, indirectly implied that population growth was responsible for traffic congestion, but again the comment was not a focal point of the editorial.<sup>26</sup> Finally, General Goethals’ report for the Retail Trade Board included an elaborate description of the many factors he perceived as contributing to the congestion problem, one of which was the rapid regional growth:

The rapid transit railways come most closely in touch with the masses and are built to serve and satisfy their needs, which in the main consist in being carried to and from their places of work or business, and to and from the markets and retail trade districts in the city. Naturally these transportation lines converge toward the business centers and this very convergence, *due to the rapid growth that has taken place*, has been a contributory factor to the present congestion.<sup>27</sup> (Italics added.)

## **7.2.2 Downtown geography and congestion**

Another occasional argument in both time periods was that the local geography caused the over-concentration of downtown activity, and thus congestion. Even though the regional population grew rapidly in the second half of the 1800s and early decades of the 1900s, the physical size of the downtown serving that region didn’t expand at the same rate. Because the downtown was almost entirely surrounded by water, its total area

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<sup>25</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, Boston, the Board, 1925.

<sup>26</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Editorial: City and regional planning," April 23, 1925, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Build intermediate belt highway, says Goethals in report," March 11, 1925, p. II-3.

was limited—it could only have been enlarged through very expensive and/or controversial public works projects.<sup>28</sup> Over the centuries, Boston had substantially increased the size of its downtown through landfill, and had leveled many of the hills on the original peninsula. One of the largest of these projects was the filling of the Back Bay area (west of the downtown), a project that stretched from the 1850s into the 1880s. Despite the city’s history of making major changes to its topography, in the periods of the two case studies there was no serious consideration of increasing the downtown’s land area or leveling Beacon Hill (a pricey residential neighborhood) to create better street access. Also, although in the 1890s there was serious discussion of putting transportation infrastructure across the Common, public outrage at the idea squelched all such proposals.

Despite the downtown’s small size, the peninsula was still the primary focus of government, retailing, and wholesaling activity, and a major source of jobs. In addition, vehicles and streetcars traveling from the city’s outskirts and suburbs were funneled into just a few routes entering the downtown. Most of them entered from either the north or south of the peninsula, thus creating a need for lots of road capacity running north and south. However, there wasn’t much capacity in that direction. Beacon Hill and the Common prevented creation of streets traveling north and south on the western side of the peninsula. On the eastern side, the existing streets were extremely narrow and discontinuous, making them slow and inconvenient for through travelers. As a result, Tremont and Washington were the only two continuous thoroughfares running north and south through the center of the downtown. These conditions led people to point to the

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Muir Whitehill and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A topographical history*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2000 (c. 1959).

city's geography as a cause of congestion in the 1890s, and for the most part they still held in the 1920s. Yet, in the latter period Bostonians rarely focused on geography as a cause of congestion.

John D. Long, the 1890 petitioner who asked the legislature to grant the West End an elevated franchise, described how the local geography contributed to congestion on Tremont and Washington. He spoke of the millions of people who came downtown each year, "all surging and crowding into this narrow space between the northern and southern depots," and then asked his readers to:

Imagine for a moment—it is a fact: I will not ask you to imagine it, but to face it—that all this travel seeks an entrance into the heart of Boston through this little narrow neck between these two expanding stretches of suburb at the narrowest parts of Washington and Tremont Streets, the width of Tremont Street opposite my office, on the corner of Tremont and Pemberton Square, being 31 feet. What is the result? The result is that in these two jugular veins, through which the whole blood of these connected bodies must pass, there is continually a congestion of travel, for these who ride and those who walk.<sup>29</sup>

The rapid transit commissioners made the same point, though they used an hourglass analogy instead of veins to describe how the local geography caused congestion by funneling traffic into a very small downtown:

This little spot may well be called the heart of the city. It is so literally, as well as metaphorically. Hither, every morning, the great arterial streams of humanity are drawn, and thence every evening they are returned to the extremities of the city and its suburbs, as the blood pulses to and from the human heart, or the tides ebb and flow in the bay. It is necessary to emphasize this feature in our conformation, as it renders the problem in Boston essentially unlike that of New York. There the flood runs mainly up and down along a narrow channel morning and night. Here the tide presses in from every point of the compass toward a common center when the day is young, and falls back again as the sun goes down. . . . [T]he territory assumes roughly the shape of an hour-glass. The bulbous extremities, north and south, taper into a wasp-like waist between Tremont and Washington Streets, near Court Street. This compression has a somewhat analogous effect upon the traffic to that which the slender glass tube connecting the bulbs has upon the sand in the hour-glass. The human tide from north and south compressed into this narrow strait is gorged and dammed and struggles slowly through. And the difficulties of the case are increased by the fact that this congested district, though shaped like an hour-glass, is not built symmetrically upon a central axis, but is bent by Beacon hill into a curve.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Long, *Argument of Hon. John D. Long*, pp. 5-8.

<sup>30</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 10-11.

In 1893, a member of the Boston Common Council used a similar analogy, describing how the regional flood of people poured into Tremont Street, where it was “as though they were in the neck of a bottle, and the traffic is greatly congested.”<sup>31</sup>

Two articles from the national press also argued that Boston’s unusually constrained downtown contributed to its congestion. Engineer Thomas Curtis Clarke, in an article on rapid transit, said that throughout the country regional population increases had caused congestion when combined with a small downtown: “As everybody wishes to go to the heart of the city, which is small, congestion of traffic must come sooner or later to all.” Speaking of Boston in particular, he noted that, “owing to the small size of its business center, the city of Boston is probably suffering more from congestion of traffic than any other American city.”<sup>32</sup> An 1894 article in the *Street Railway Journal* also described how the geographic constraints on the size of the downtown contributed to congestion:

At the bottom of the whole discussion are the geographical features of the situation. . . . In Boston, Beacon Hill and the Common, on one side, and the Charles River and the Harbor, on the other, so reduce the general business area that this particular district is restricted to the narrowest limits.<sup>33</sup>

Two other people singled out the Common as a geographic feature causing congestion. They felt that if it were not protected park land, it could have been used to provide additional road space, and that its location forced traffic to congregate on Washington and Tremont. One of these was R.C. White, a citizen from the outlying neighborhood of Roxbury, who spoke before the 1893 legislative committee on rapid transit when it was considering proposals to use the Common for transportation purposes. He described the Common as “jutting out like a rocky promontory” and pushing traffic

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<sup>31</sup> Boston City Council, “Encroachments on Common - protest,” *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Curtis Clarke, “Rapid transit in cities: Part II: The solution,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, June 1892, pp. 743-758.

<sup>33</sup> *Street Railway Journal*, “The chronic agitation of rapid transit,” May 1894, pp. 299-300.



into Tremont and Washington, thus obstructing “the natural course of travel.”<sup>34</sup> In March of 1894, Alexander S. Porter, the president of the Real Estate Association, said to the legislative commission on transit that he believed there would be no congestion if it weren’t for the Common, because then traffic could be dispersed throughout the downtown.<sup>35</sup>

It isn’t surprising that people would have perceived the Common in particular as a cause of congestion. The Common was essentially a “man-made” barrier, and one that could be cheaply and easily removed. Therefore by focusing on it as the cause of congestion, speakers were implying an inexpensive solution to the problem. Removing other geographic barriers, such as by leveling Beacon Hill or filling major new sections of the surrounding river and bay, would by contrast have been extremely expensive, and the community in that era didn’t seem interested in such projects.

### **7.2.3 Tall buildings**

One variant on the general idea of a concentrated downtown causing congestion was the more specific idea that new, taller buildings were causing congestion by intensifying activity in the business district. Starting in the late 1870s and 1880s, architects and engineers developed the technologies necessary to erect buildings taller than the four to six stories that previously had been feasible. A combination of better elevator technologies and new construction techniques, combined with new demands for bigger buildings, led to the introduction of skyscrapers ten and fifteen stories high. These taller buildings allowed more people and industry to make use of downtown land, thus

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<sup>34</sup> *Boston Herald*, "For wider streets; Mayor Matthews' plan for rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, Vol. 7, p. 25.

increasing activity and congestion. The perception that tall buildings led to congestion was raised a couple of times in the subway case, but came up more often in the loop highway debates.

In the 1890s there were still only a few tall buildings in Boston's downtown, though the city's residents were concerned enough about their effects on light and fire safety, as well as congestion, that the city had imposed a maximum height of 125 feet. The argument about tall buildings and congestion came up a few times during the subway debates. The subway commissioners described this problem in their February 1894 report, in a section entitled "High Buildings Increase Congestion."<sup>36</sup> Subway Commissioner Charles B. Dalton also explained the argument at more length at a legislative committee hearing:

As the growth of high buildings goes on, which is only in its infancy at present, we cannot help seeing that the lack of accommodations in the congested districts will grow more and more intolerable. As an illustration of this growth I will call your attention to what is known as the Exchange Building, at 53 State Street. I am told that there are 4000 people located therein; and that not less than 25,000 persons a day use the elevators, while 5000 people enter who do not use the elevators, making 30,000 in one building. These high buildings are increasing in number. As we tear down three and four-story buildings and put up others of ten and twelve stories, how can we expect that our narrow streets will accommodate the increasing number of people.<sup>37</sup>

Charles Carleton Coffin made the point more succinctly at a hearing a month later, saying "The modern elevator has made this congestion here, and it is going to keep it up. We are putting eight or more Bostons on top of the old one right here in this congested district, and you cannot stop it."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894, p. 9. The Boston Transit Commission, which succeeded the Subway Commission, made the same argument as well. Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895, p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The subway plan," February 28, 1894, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 9, p. 45.

If the perception that tall buildings caused congestion was relatively rare in the 1890s, it had become a bit more widespread in the 1920s, doubtless reflecting the increasing number and taller heights of such buildings, as well as growing national concern over the effects skyscrapers had on city traffic. In Boston, however, there was less concern over tall buildings as a cause of congestion than in some other U.S. cities at the time, such as Chicago.<sup>39</sup> During the same years as the loop highway planning was underway, the City Planning Board was finishing a zoning plan, which was adopted in 1924. The plan made occasional reference to traffic congestion, but never in connection to tall buildings. The City Planning Board made the connection between tall buildings and congestion in the context of loop highway debates, however, as did the Chamber of Commerce and a few others. The Special Commission, for its part, argued that this perception was incorrect.

In March of 1924 the *Transcript* published an opinion piece by James Ernest King, who claimed:

Everywhere the skyscraper is being exposed as an important primary cause of the unbearable street congestion, tending as it does to concentrate within itself a far greater number of human beings, coming afoot and by automobile, than the contiguous street space can provide room for.<sup>40</sup>

The Boston City Planning Board brought up the issue of tall buildings once, in its 1925 *Progress Report*, where it listed the recent increase in maximum allowable building height as one of several factors causing congestion.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For concern in other cities, see, for instance: August Gatzert, *Limitation on building heights in the City of Chicago*, 1913; Zoning Committee Chicago Real Estate Board, *Studies on building height limitations in large cities with special reference to conditions in Chicago*, Chicago, the Board, 1923; Ralph W. Robinson and I.S. Shattuck, "Effect of high buildings on street traffic congestion," *Transactions of the Commonwealth Club of California*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1930, pp. 131-135.

<sup>40</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Man, motor and trolley fighting for a place in the street," March 8, 1924, p. III-3.

<sup>41</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, 1925.

The Chamber of Commerce mentioned tall buildings twice in its many articles on the loop highway and parking issues, both in the same 1926 issue. In one piece it quoted members of a Baltimore commission looking at the causes of traffic congestion. The members cited five causes, the first of which was “High buildings, causing concentration of large numbers of people in small areas.” (The other four reasons were insufficient roadway and sidewalk space on streets with tall buildings; the increasing numbers of motor vehicles; failure to pave and maintain streets; and use of road space for parked vehicles.)<sup>42</sup> In that same issue, an editorial about a traffic count the chamber had just taken mentioned tall buildings. The editors stated that despite recent street improvements and added traffic regulations that had somewhat eased traffic in the downtown, congestion persisted, in part because of the opening of larger office buildings. (The other reasons mentioned were the increasing number of automobiles and the “general advance” of business.)<sup>43</sup>

At the very end of the case study period, *Current Affairs* also singled out tall buildings as a cause of congestion in two short reports about planning activity elsewhere in the county. On November 15, 1926, the magazine quoted J. Rowland Bibbins (whom it described as a self-styled “transportation engineer”) as saying that:

There is only one escape from this traffic concentration, with its appalling problems of capital expenditures for transportation, traffic facilities and thoroughfares; that is decentralization, both for the city and the nation. *Until downtown business men stop building skyward*, city budgets will grow with appalling speed. In spite of billions invested in rapid transit, street and sidewalk capacity has become the acute problem, which finds no solution where half a city’s working population is dumped into the mile circle each day.<sup>44</sup> (Italics added.)

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<sup>42</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” July 5, 1926, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Editorial: Chamber takes new traffic count,” July 5, 1926, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” November 15, 1926, p. 3.

The following week the magazine printed a note entitled “The Skyscraper Evil,” about a meeting of the National Municipal League in St. Louis. A member of the City Club of New York was quoted as saying:

The worst enemy of the American city today is the skyscraper. New York is the most acute case. In that city, the skyscraper has so multiplied, at the hub of the business and manufacturing congestion in Manhattan Island, that the streets can no longer hold with comfort the crowds of workers that mill to and fro in the labyrinth.

In New York it is the collective skyscraper at the city’s workaday hub that breeds more subways, less money for other needs, and more motor vehicles in the roadways between “The Sidewalks of New York.” Many American cities, in fostering their own clumps of skyscrapers, are at the present moment embarking upon this mistake that New York has already made.<sup>45</sup>

The only dissent to the view that tall buildings contributed to Boston’s congestion came from the Special Commission. The commission did not dispute the theoretical link between tall buildings and congestion, but disagreed that this was a problem in Boston. In the course of arguing that the downtown wasn’t congested in all parts, the commission argued that there actually weren’t very many tall buildings in Boston, at least as compared to other cities:

. . . but the [downtown] section as a whole cannot be considered crowded as compared to other great cities, especially when it is noted that the average height of buildings in the downtown area below Arlington Street is approximately five stories. In the portion of the downtown section bounded by Tremont Street, Kneeland Street, Atlantic Avenue, and State Street, there are only 140 buildings, the height of which equals or exceeds eight stories. One building in New York City has more floor area and accommodates more people than all of the high buildings in the financial district of Boston and five buildings in lower New York are larger and have more floor area than all of the above enumerated high buildings in Boston. A comparison of downtown Boston with the loop district of Chicago would be only less striking than the comparison with downtown New York.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the fact that at least a few of the major actors perceived that tall buildings caused congestion, none of them called for height limitations as a solution to the congestion problem. Then, as now, planning may have suffered from the functional division of transportation and land-use matters. The two subjects were usually

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<sup>45</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” November 22, 1926, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement - pp. 4-5.

considered independently of each other, often by different people, making it difficult to coordinate planning across both issues.

### 7.3 Streets and congestion

A second group of perceptions about how the downtown's geography and street layout contributed to congestion focused on attributes of the streets themselves. The streets of the business district were very narrow and, for the most part, discontinuous. The widest were about sixty feet, while some were as narrow as ten feet.<sup>47</sup> The street layout was also irregular.

According to Mayor Matthews, Boston's streets had been inadequate for centuries. In a speech promoting the subway to the legislative committee on transit in February of 1894, he said that:

For two hundred years the people of Boston have recognized the fact that their streets were narrow, irregular, and otherwise inadequate to the needs of public travel. As early as 1655 a royal commission appointed by the crown visited the town of Boston and commented with much severity upon the laying out of its lanes, streets and passages; and from that time until this the subject has been one of constant complain and of constant suggestion.<sup>48</sup>

Matthews' claim that the streets were a constant source of complaint held very true for his contemporaries in the 1890s—and though he didn't know it, would continue to be true for the 1920s as well. The complaints about streets were far more frequent than expressions of the perception that the regional population or economic growth caused congestion. In both time periods, speakers endlessly singled out the city's narrow, crooked, and discontinuous street layout as a primary cause of congestion. Also,

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<sup>47</sup> *Street Railway Journal*, "The chronic agitation of rapid transit," May 1894, pp. 299-300.

<sup>48</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, Vol. 1.

absolutely nobody argued that the streets *were* sufficient,<sup>49</sup> further underscoring how widely shared was the perception that inadequate streets caused congestion.

The perceptions expressed about insufficient streets causing congestion sounded quite similar in the 1890s and 1920s, and often even interchangeable. Three themes about the streets ran through both periods: that the downtown streets in general were too narrow and crooked, that the city in particular lacked adequate north-south streets, and that the city's earlier residents were to blame for congestion because of their lack of foresight in street planning.

### **7.3.1 Inadequate streets throughout the downtown**

In both time periods, speaker after speaker complained about the narrowness of the city's streets. In the 1890s, for example, John D. Long spoke of Boston's "extremely narrow streets, causing inextricable confusion."<sup>50</sup> Henry Curtis Spalding described them as a "straight jacket" upon the city.<sup>51</sup> Rapid Transit Commissioner Osborne Howes, Jr., in his report on transportation in European cities, named Boston's narrow streets a cause of congestion.<sup>52</sup> The commission's report described the streets as "painfully inadequate" and "ludicrously narrow."<sup>53</sup> Later, the commissioners argued that the three causes of traffic congestion were the steam railroads, the street railways, and "the streets themselves." Mayor Matthews, in an early speech in 1892, said that if the city's narrow streets were not improved, then not even better surface and elevated rapid transit facilities

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<sup>49</sup> A few people did, however, focus on factors other than streets as more important causes of congestion.

<sup>50</sup> Long, *Argument of Hon. John D. Long*, 1890, pp. 7-8.

<sup>51</sup> Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston*, 1891, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Osborne Howes, Jr., *Report on the transportation of passengers in and around the cities of Europe, made by Osborne Howes, Jr., to the Rapid Transit Commission of the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston, November 10, 1891*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1891, pp. 46-47.

<sup>53</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commissioners, "Document 15: Report (in part) and legal opinion," in *Documents of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 1892, pp. 3 & 13.

could reduce congestion.<sup>54</sup> Clinton White of the Master Teamsters' Association testified to the legislative committee in 1893 that, in the market district, streets sometimes as narrow as ten feet "occasioned many delays." At the same hearing, Amos Towle of the association also said that Boston's streets were "much too narrow to accommodate the business which is increasing every day."<sup>55</sup> A day later, the *Advertiser* ran an editorial about the hearing saying that, "It was shown that an immense amount of traffic is now forced to find its way through a few streets and it is not a matter for surprise that under such conditions these arteries of the business life of the city become congested."<sup>56</sup> The *Street Railway Journal* emphasized the way Boston's geography and street layout funneling traffic into a small downtown as the core of the congestion problem, but also mentioned the narrow streets as another cause:

When [the streetcars] come from all parts of the vast system into the worm like lanes and narrow streets of this "congested district," they have to thread their way as best they can.<sup>57</sup>

By the 1920s, the same complaints about inadequate streets were still being made. In general, these came up in the context of discussions about the loop highway, though occasionally people debated parking or other transportation policies also referred to the streets as the cause of congestion.

The City Planning Board made the argument a couple of times, for example. When the board began promoting the loop highway plan in December of 1923, William Stanley Parker's explanation of it included a discussion of how the city's inadequate streets caused congestion. He spoke of "a tangle of small streets which give no real outlet" and "narrow, winding streets." The roads in the surrounding region leading to the downtown

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<sup>54</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Business men's influence," January 28, 1892.

<sup>55</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: The rapid transit problem," January 27, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Street Railway Journal*, "The chronic agitation of rapid transit," May 1894, pp. 299-300.



from the outskirts were in many cases adequately wide, he said, but the downtown streets were a “critical strain at the bottleneck.”<sup>58</sup> In a 1925 *Progress Report* on the loop highway, the planning board also described streets that had been “inadequate” for the past fifty years as a cause of congestion, although in this instance the board portrayed narrow streets as a secondary causal factor, putting more emphasis on other factors such as “general business progress,” increasing numbers of automobiles, and increasing building heights.<sup>59</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce made many similar statements about the streets as a cause of congestion. For example, one *Current Affairs* article on the loop highway said that, “The proverbial maze of streets in Boston are totally inadequate for the immense flood of traffic.”<sup>60</sup> Chamber member Gifford LeClear, writing in *Current Affairs* about the city’s new traffic signals and recent counts of vehicles downtown, argued that wide streets could handle much more traffic than narrow ones. Speaking of what he described as the city’s busiest intersection, at Commonwealth and Massachusetts Avenues, he said:

Despite the large number of cars going by this intersection, there is little actual congestion. The reason is evident. This section of the city was laid out according to a definite plan. Both streets are broad and comparatively straight, and capable of holding a tremendous burden of traffic.

When we turn to the traffic counts for down-town intersections, as set forth in graphic form in the charts, we are also able better to realize how much depends upon the street lay-out. . . . [Here] often-times congestion is very acute, for the streets are narrower, there is more turning from one street to another, and some of the sidewalks are not capable of holding the pedestrian traffic.<sup>61</sup>

*Current Affairs* also ran an article about its efforts to solve the city’s “traffic problems” that stated, “It has been said that fundamentally the cause of Boston’s problem is the insufficiency of its streets and the labyrinthic layout, so the fundamental cure must be

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<sup>58</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board,” December 17, 1923, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, 1925.

<sup>60</sup> *Current Affairs*, “An important program of work: Chamber’s Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs announces plans for coming year,” November 9, 1925, pp. 6 & 18.

<sup>61</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Signal lights to aid street traffic in Boston,” March 10, 1924, pp. 26+.

new or widened streets.’<sup>62</sup> Another article in the magazine promoting the loop highway warned that,

The [traffic] problem has many ramifications. Of first and fundamental importance is the question of the street layout. The proverbial maze of streets in Boston are totally inadequate for the immense flood of traffic.<sup>63</sup>

In 1923 the Boston Police Commissioner stated that the combination of the yearly increase in automobiles being driven and parked downtown, combined with narrow streets, created congestion problems.<sup>64</sup> Loop supporter Howard Coonley, writing to the *Transcript* in January of 1925, focused solely and succinctly on the street system as the cause of congestion: “Boston has enough streets, but the disadvantage is that they’re too narrow and they are laid out in such [a] way as to cause traffic congestion and confusion.”<sup>65</sup> The *Herald* in the same year advocated widening a particular downtown street on the grounds that the automobile era had put new pressures on the city streets, and only more “street space” would allow the city prosper.<sup>66</sup>

The only person with anything good to say about Boston’s narrow streets was James Ernest King, who wrote an article for the *Transcript* about the competition for street space between automobiles and streetcars. Even he claimed that the city’s narrow streets caused congestion, but he saw a silver lining to the cloud. He felt the bad congestion had stimulated the city to adopt major improvements like the subway system. “The unfortunately narrowness of many of [Boston’s] streets,” he argued, “had led the city to early adoption of useful measures like parking restrictions, building height restrictions,

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<sup>62</sup> *Current Affairs*, “We can’t dodge traffic problems; So the Chamber puts in much time and effort trying to solve them,” October 26, 1925, pp. 52+.

<sup>63</sup> *Current Affairs*, “An important program of work: Chamber’s Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs announces plans for coming year,” November 9, 1925, pp. 6 & 18.

<sup>64</sup> Boston Office of the Police Commissioner, *Annual report of the Police Commissioner for the City of Boston for the year ending November 30, 1922*, Boston, the Office, 1923, pp. 10-11.

<sup>65</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Letter to the editor: Howard Coonley for the loop,” January 7, 1926, p. II-2.

<sup>66</sup> Reprinted in: *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” September 28, 1925, pp. 7+.

and, especially, subways.” He also noted that congestion was equally bad on narrow and wide streets, once they became saturated with traffic.<sup>67</sup>

### **7.3.2 Lack of through streets**

One variation on the subject of inadequate streets was the perception that the central business district in particular lacked through streets running north and south. Tremont and Washington were the only two streets running directly through the center of the downtown, and they were not particularly wide. Thus, some people who complained about inadequate streets singled out one or both of these streets as a source of congestion problems.

During the 1890s, a handful of speakers focused especially on Washington and Tremont. For example, Rapid Transit Commissioner Richardson, in his minority report, defined the congested district as one where “narrow streets” were so crowded as to make travel slow, dangerous, uncertain, and “sometimes almost impossible.” He picked out Washington as the street where this was most true.<sup>68</sup> The magazine *Engineering News*, in a March 1893 article on Boston’s congestion problems, pointed specifically to Washington and Tremont Streets as inadequate:

For some years past the people of Boston have been in an agitated state of mind over the question of transit facilities and the relief of their “congested district” . . . Through this district run lengthwise two main thoroughfares—Washington Street [and Tremont Street]. . . Both of these thoroughfares greatly need relief, since both of them, but especially Washington Street, are rather narrow and crooked.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Man, motor and trolley fighting for a place in the street,” March 8, 1924, p. III-3.

<sup>68</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Many valuable suggestions: Rapid transit report full of interesting matter - a minority report by Commissioner Richardson,” April 6, 1892, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> The article was reprinted in: *Boston Herald*, “The views of engineers; Rapid transit in Boston may be simple and cheap,” March 19, 1893, p. 4.

Boston's "Street Laying Out Department" pointed to the need for a better north-south through street in its annual report for 1893. Although the department didn't name Tremont or Washington, the report is clearly referring to their inadequacy in the following statement:

(A) great artery is needed to carry the traffic between the North and the South End of the city. The volume and character of this travel is too well known to call for elaborations. Heavy and light teams, carriages, street-cars, and pedestrians struggle to pass through the heart of the city, with its narrow, crooked streets congested almost to stagnation. Along this line is the greatest amount of travel and the most inadequate provision for it in the entire city. The solution of the problem presented is the most serious with which we have to deal.<sup>70</sup>

In March of the same year, President Harding of the Citizens' Association complained that the retail district—which centered on Washington and Tremont—was too confined, and he pointed to the inadequacy of the two streets to meet the demand: "It is, of course, impossible to expect to direct, through the two narrow ways through the retail district all of the people who need to pass through the retail section of the city."<sup>71</sup>

In February of 1893, Felix Rackemann wrote a letter to the *Herald* calling for the city to widen Tremont Street. In complaining about narrow streets and congestion, he raised a slightly different argument. He complained that the street's variable width caused congestion by generating bottlenecks:

Everybody admits that Tremont Street is crowded, and that something ought to be done about that . . . Tremont Street at West Street is 62 feet wide between curbs. At Winter Street it is 54 feet wide between curbs. At Hamilton Place, however, it is only 38 feet wide between curbs, and in front of King's chapel burying ground it is only 33 feet wide. . . . Is it so difficult to see that a great thoroughfare is but little broader than it is in its narrowest part? . . . A wide street with but a narrow outlet is worse than a uniformly narrow street. It attracts travel in its wider part only to squeeze and jam and block it in its narrow outlet.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Boston Street Laying Out Department, "Annual report for the year 1893," in *Documents of the City of Boston for 1894*, 1894, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> *Boston Globe*, "175 stations making grand circuit around Boston," March 8 (p.m.), 1894, p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Question of rapid transit," February 13, 1893, p. 5.

By the 1920s, the perception that the city needed better through streets running north-south received even more notice. This is not surprising, as this was the very problem the loop highway was designed to cure. Some advocates for the loop highway believed that much of the downtown congestion was caused by vehicles passing through the city without a downtown destination. These vehicles were forced onto the same streets serving local traffic, there being no good alternative routes for them. City Planning Board member William Stanley Parker made this argument when first publicly presenting the loop highway plan:

Parker says [that] . . . except for the Northern Gateway, there are fair main avenues of approach to the downtown from every direction, but once arrived in the center of Boston traffic has no satisfactory way to move across it.

Parker continued on to describe congestion in various specific places downtown, including the retail district, where the paper quoted him on the problem of through traffic forced onto local streets:

In addition to this, there is almost as bad a condition in the retail shopping district along Tremont Street, because all traffic now coming in from the west and south uses Tremont Street to get across town even though a great part of it is not seeking to reach any part of the retail district. What it wants is a way around this district, and that is precisely what it is not offered today.<sup>73</sup>

Another variation on the idea of through traffic congesting local downtown streets was that freight vehicles in particular needed a direct route through the downtown. The City Planning Board, in a 1922 report issued before the loop highway plan had been completed, argued that much of the through traffic causing congestion was truck traffic:

Much of the vehicular traffic troubles on Washington and Tremont Streets are now due to the fact that commercial vehicles of all sorts, from small trucks to huge vans, are using these highways as cross-town ways, when they ought to be reserved for a different class of traffic.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board," December 17, 1923, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eighth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1922*, 1922, pp. 35-36.

This argument about truck traffic was indirectly echoed three years later by the Special Commission in its 1925 *Final Report*. The commission didn't speak directly of through truck traffic as a cause of congestion, but made the argument obliquely by saying the loop would reduce congestion by removing freight vehicles from the downtown streets:

In our opinion it will also be feasible after the thoroughfare has been constructed to prohibit through trucking on certain streets like Washington Street, Congress Street and Exchange Street, diverting such trucking to the loop highway and thus affording great relief and benefit to the retail and financial districts.<sup>75</sup>

### **7.3.3 Past citizens to blame**

Criticism of the streets as inadequate often came coupled with blame laid on the city's founding fathers for their failure to foresee the need to build wider, straighter, comprehensively planned streets. Not only was this perception expressed by almost all the major interests in the subway debates, but it was a subject that inspired lengthy and dramatic descriptions. In the 1890s, almost all the main players in the debates made this complaint at some point. As for the 1920s, there was less emphasis on this perception, but General Goethals, the City Planning Board, and the Chamber of Commerce did bring it up.

Henry Curtis Spalding, in his 1891 plan for railroad tunnels and other improvements, described the selfishness and shortsightedness of past property owners as responsible for the inadequate streets in Boston and other American cities.

All of these cities had grown up just as Boston has; narrow and crooked streets and lanes were the rule. There were no thoroughfares. Every landholder cut up his parcel to suit himself, and was intent upon laying out his land in a way to obtain the most shapely lots and the largest number of them. It is left to us to provide means whereby our city shall free itself from the

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<sup>75</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement - p. 2.

strait-jacket into which, in common with those other cities, we have been thrust because of the lack of foresight in our predecessors.<sup>76</sup>

Property owners also came under attack during an April 1895 Common Council debate about whether or not to continue supporting the subway plan. Councilor O'Reidy, who opposed the subway on the grounds that the city should instead widen its streets, said:

Now, it seems me, gentlemen, that the whole story of congestion in the city of Boston resolves itself into this—that the people, with all due respect to them, who governed Boston fifty years ago were not good, decent honest citizens as they ought to have been, and I say that the geographical style of our city proves it. New York, which was originated under the Dutch government, had the backing of a government across the water behind it, and we see a proper city, a city that is laid out on good, straight, proper lines. But this city, as Edwin Burke says, “thrived under a salutary neglect,” and certain people who had property had streets built to accommodate the property, instead of the property being accommodated to the streets. The result is that we are left with the most peculiar looking city on the face of the globe.<sup>77</sup>

The Rapid Transit Commission's 1892 report was less harsh in its criticism, pointing out that the city's early residents could never have imagined that their village streets would have to cope with the traffic of a large city, including a flood of electric streetcars. Nevertheless, the commissioners did compare Boston's forefathers unfavorably to New Yorkers, whom the commission praised for having the foresight to lay out streets according to a comprehensive system.

... this great rushing flood of modern traffic is forced, for the most part, into little, old-fashioned ways which were never expected to cope with any such a state of things. Boston, less prescient than New York, where the policy of laying out streets by public officials on a comprehensive system was recognized as early as 1807, had no Board of Survey until 1891. In addition to all this, the necessities of transportation have forced new uses upon the streets for which they never were designed, and to which they are not adapted at all. The quiet little town of 1800 little dreamed of the scene which a century would unfold. Her primitive lanes had been traced by the cows, and were worn by a few foot-passengers and an occasional cart. They are now traversed continually by electric monsters which would have astonished our ancestors, and which render the old-time ways almost impassable to their descendants.<sup>78</sup>

The descendants of those early New Yorkers apparently agreed that Bostonians had been unusually poor street planners. The *New York Times*, in an April 1892 article on rapid

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<sup>76</sup> Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston*, 1891, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, "Subway [e]ndorsed," 1895, p. 382.

<sup>78</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 8-9. The commission made the same point in: Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commissioners, "Document 15: Report (in part) and legal opinion," 1892, pp. 2-3.

transit in Boston, made fun of the city fathers as eccentric men who left street planning to their cows:

The difficulties with which Boston has always had to contend whenever she undertook to expedite or facilitate travel within her borders arose in part from her topographical characteristics and partly from the oddities and eccentricities of her citizens. Everybody who has studied the history of the town is aware that its early streets were constructed along the lines of the cowpaths that wound their serpentine ways among the three hills and the intervening valleys. Depending largely upon bovine intelligence or instinct for the outline and location of her highways, it is not strange that Boston, in some of her older sections, is an interminable mass of "places." Alleyways, and lanes, beginning nowhere and, as Emerson said once, "running into a squirrel track and up a tree."<sup>79</sup>

In February of 1893, at a speech to the Merchants' Club about the city's crowded streets, Mayor Matthews dwelt at length on the city's past failings with regards to its streets. "We all reached the conclusion that the difficulty rested in the streets," he said, and then went on to lament the fact that the city did not seize the opportunity to improve its street system after a fire destroyed large swatches of the downtown in 1872. Looking farther back in time, he noted:

The history of Boston, as shown by its public documents, records that your second mayor, and the one you consider greatest, Mr. Quincy, once congratulated the citizens upon the fact that \$12,000 was all the city needed to spend for street widening.

Since then some \$40,000,000 has been spent, and today you find yourselves confronted by a very serious problem.

You can't mention a city of any importance in the East where there is so poor street service as in Boston.

He went on to say that Chicago's downtown owed its success to good streets that allowed citizens to conduct their business in half the time it took in Boston.<sup>80</sup>

The *Transcript*, *Globe*, and *Herald* were also all critical of the city's past, too. For example, in 1890 the editors of the *Transcript* lamented that:

Boston, old Boston, that part of the city where most of its business is transacted, was wrongly laid out at first. No provision was made or thought taken for a constant growth of population requiring greater trade facilities and increased means of transportation to the center.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *New York Times*, "Boston rapid transit," April 6, 1892, p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Time to act," February 10, 1893.

<sup>81</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Always re-making Boston," December 18, 1890, p. 4.



The editors went on to blame the generations that came after the founding fathers, too, saying that they failed to take advantage of opportunities to add and widen streets. The *Herald's* editors responded to Matthews' street widening proposal in February of 1893 with praise, saying it was needed because of past mistakes. "At the present time," they said, "there is an admitted need for highways of this character, due to the failure of the people of Boston in the past to adequately estimate the demands that would later on be put upon our public streets."<sup>82</sup> The editors of the *Globe* were a bit kinder to the city's earlier inhabitants. In an editorial printed after the Rapid Transit Commission's report came out in April of 1892, they, like the *New York Times*, poked fun at early Bostonians for using the "cow standard" to lay out streets, but relented a bit, acknowledging that at the time Boston was merely a village and the settlers couldn't have known how much it would grow:

Boston has been built with too little regard for the future. It has been said that her crooked streets were originally cow paths. Where the cows turned out to go around a clump of trees, or a boulder, the first street builders followed their example. "The cows," they might have reasoned, "find no trouble in going around these rocks today; then why should we?" So the streets were laid out according to the cow standard that prevailed at that time. But the cow standard was not large enough to fit the future, and Boston has lamented her crooked streets for many generations. . . . The founders of Boston, perhaps, ought not to be blamed for their contracted policy in laying out the city. They built their streets according to a village standard, because Boston was nothing but a large village then, and they had no means of fore seeing that it was to become one of the large cities of the world. . . . But there is no excuse for Boston men of today going on laying out the city according to those standards.<sup>83</sup>

If Bostonians in the 1890s complained that streets laid out before the days of the electric streetcar were inadequate for that new mode, in the 1920s a parallel argument was made about the city's colonial streets being insufficient to cope with automobiles. Chamber of Commerce member Fitzhenry Smith, Jr. writing in favor of the loop highway in *Our Boston*, in February of 1925, said:

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<sup>82</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Street improvements," February 10, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: Shall we build for today or tomorrow," April 9, 1892, p. 10.

Boston is an old city. Its peculiar maze of streets in the downtown districts, laid out at a time when the automobile and the growth of a greater Boston were not dreamed of, found us less prepared than most American cities to take care of the great increase in travel which suddenly came with the motor vehicle. And today we have a traffic congestion in down-town Boston which seriously interferes with the transaction of business by all people of the city and is a great obstacle to the development of the city.<sup>84</sup>

General Goethals, always detailed in his explanation of how the transportation system functioned, spoke eloquently about the city's inadequate streets, a problem that he said Boston shared with other American cities. He faulted the city founders for laying out streets that weren't appropriate even for the traffic at the time they were built:

That Boston is not provided with a good [street] system through the downtown business section, particularly the retail trade and market districts, is a well known fact and the resulting congestion must be remedied if business is to continue to grow and prosper.

The existing streets in the portion of the city between Charles Street and the water front are in part portions of the old roads and lanes traversed in bringing agricultural products to the markets, and the streets through the earlier residential areas. They originally conformed to the topographic features of the terrain and not the needs at the time they were laid out. They are narrow, crooked and in many instances not continuous.<sup>85</sup>

The City Planning Board's 1924 zoning plan for Boston described how the city's "winding and disconnected" streets were the result of the city's slow development, and said that they had been expanded over time "with little or no thought of future requirements so far as a comprehensive street plan was concerned."<sup>86</sup> The board's secretary, Elizabeth Herlihy, was more biting in her criticism. In an article she wrote in 1925 for the national magazine *City Planning*, which *Current Affairs* reprinted in part, Herlihy discussed how previous generations' eagerness to save money had condemned the city to inadequate streets and housing:

Here in Boston we have waked up none too soon to a realization of the truth that the sin and ignorance of the fathers are visited on the children; and in our inheritance of slums, alleys, narrow and congested ways, a restricted and torturous expansion, and a policy of penny wisdom

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<sup>84</sup> *Our Boston*, "The loop highway: What it is and why it is needed," December, 1925, pp. 23-25.

<sup>85</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Build intermediate belt highway, says Goethals in report," March 11, 1925, p. II-3.

<sup>86</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Zoning for Boston: A survey and a comprehensive plan*, Boston, Printing Department, 1924, pp. 17-18.

and pound folly, we have begun to see how the greed, ignorance, timidity and indolence of one generation can penalize the living conditions of another.<sup>87</sup>

## **7.4 Vehicles (and drivers) and congestion**

Along with over-concentration of activity downtown and inadequate streets, the third major perceived cause of congestion was the vehicles using the streets. Among these speakers, some focused merely on the present (large) numbers of vehicles as the problem, but many others perceived the problem as a combination of static street space and a growth in vehicle numbers. In the 1890s, the great numbers of streetcars were usually perceived as the cause of congestion, while in the 1920s the newly-arrived automobile was singled out.

Along with the sheer number of vehicles, however, driver behavior was perceived to worsen congestion. The behavior of team drivers came in for a great deal of criticism in the 1890s. As for the 1920s, some people perceived that certain kinds of “selfish” parking behavior worsened congestion. The perceptions about driver behavior causing congestion are unusual in that they generated a bit of controversy. While there was also disagreement about the role of concentration in causing congestion, the other perceived causes were almost never directly challenged.

### **7.4.1 1890s: Streetcars**

During the 1890s, the most common explanation given for what caused congestion was that the numerous streetcars downtown were to blame. The explanation was given by the widest possible range of speakers and organizations. Not only did many people

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<sup>87</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” August 17, 1925, p. 9.

state this perception explicitly, but presumably the view was shared by the many people who argued that the subway would relieve congestion and also by a group of thousands of people who throughout 1893 petitioned to have streetcars in the downtown removed or limited to one track each on Washington and Tremont Streets.

The members of the Rapid Transit Commission described streetcars as a cause of congestion, speaking of the “electric monsters which would have astonished our ancestors, and which render the old-time ways almost impassable to their descendants.”<sup>88</sup> The commissioners also mentioned that their engineering consultants were convinced enough that the streetcars caused congestion to urge a complete ban on the cars downtown.<sup>89</sup> Mayor Matthews frequently blamed the streetcars for causing congestion, saying in one speech, for example, that “This street railway problem is at the bottom of the whole trouble.”<sup>90</sup> The Boston Board of Survey described streetcars on Tremont as “making haste slowly and causing other traffic to be tardy.”<sup>91</sup> The author of an article in the *Globe* emphasized that streetcars congested travel to the point that even pedestrian travel was restricted: “Sometimes the line of cars would reach from Scollay Sq. to the Granary burial grounds, standing almost [*sic*] close together, not only blocking the street travel, but leaving no openings for pedestrians who wanted to cross the street.”<sup>92</sup> Other Bostonians who made the argument included letter writers to the *Transcript*,<sup>93</sup> *Post*,<sup>94</sup> and

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<sup>88</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>90</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Time to act,” February 10, 1893. Matthews gave a more detailed arguments about how streetcars obstructed traffic in: Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit of the Massachusetts legislature, April 4, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894.

<sup>91</sup> Boston Board of Survey, *Annual report of the Board of Survey for the year 1894*, 1895, p. 26.

<sup>92</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Travel on Tremont street,” March 6 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Letter to the editor: Another plan,” February 8, 1890, p. 8, “Letter to the editor: Subway system best,” December 1, 1893, p. 6, and “Letter to the editor: It seems to me . . .,” December 30, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> *Boston Post*, “Letter to the editor: Save the Common,” February 14, 1893, p. 8.

*Herald*,<sup>95</sup> the editors of the *Herald*,<sup>96</sup> the Boston Street Commission,<sup>97</sup> the Boston Street Laying Out Department,<sup>98</sup> the Boston Subway Commission,<sup>99</sup> the Citizens' Association,<sup>100</sup> and the group of 8000 petitioners asking the city to limit the West End's tracks on Washington and Tremont Streets.<sup>101</sup> In addition, the argument that Boston's congestion was caused by streetcars appeared in publications from outside the city, such as the *New York Times*,<sup>102</sup> the magazines *City Government*<sup>103</sup> and *Engineering News*,<sup>104</sup> and a book about Boston's business climate.<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps the strongest evidence that the community was unanimous in its belief that streetcars caused congestion was the rarity of people arguing otherwise. Indeed, they were almost as rare as the people who argued that congestion was not a problem. Only one dissenting voice was heard, and it came from a streetcar representative defending his company's business interests. A West End official protesting a plan to charge the company for the right to use the streets argued that there is no other way the 300,000 people riding the cars near Boston could be transported that would have caused less congestion. He concluded that not only did streetcars *not* cause congestion, but that they were actually "an efficient agent in preventing obstruction."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: The 'common sense route'," February 24, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: The advantages of tunnels," February 21, 1893, p. 6, and "Editorial: The sidewalk congestion," February 12, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> *Boston Herald*, "For wider streets; Mayor Matthews' plan for rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Boston Street Laying Out Department, "Document 30: Annual report for the year 1895," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1896, p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894.

<sup>100</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893; *Boston Globe*, "Blind alley is what Boston is liable to run into if it adopts the alley L plan," October 27 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>101</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Unsafe streets; Contention made before the Aldermen," October 26 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> *New York Times*, "Boston rapid transit," April 6, 1892, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> *City Government*, "The great Boston subway," October 1896, pp. 72-74.

<sup>104</sup> *Boston Herald*, "The views of engineers; Rapid transit in Boston may be simple and cheap," March 19, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> George W. Engelhardt, *Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston, [Boston Chamber of Commerce], 1897, pp. 35-36.

<sup>106</sup> Louis P. Hager, *History of the West End Street Railway*, Boston, Louis P. Hager, 1892, p. 59.

People had different perceptions about why there were so many—too many—streetcars downtown. One explanation was simply that the substantial growth of population in the suburbs had required the West End railroad to increase the number of cars downtown. In the preceding decades the regional population had expanded dramatically, especially in the outskirts of the city and in the suburbs, growth that created rapidly increasing demand for streetcar service into the downtown.

Another perception was that so many streetcars were required only because of the lazy habits of the “riding public.” The argument went that the streetcars running through the downtown were mostly empty by the time they made it to the center, but that it was impossible to remedy this situation because passengers expected door to door service and would refuse any changes to the system that would have required them to transfer lines or walk the slightest extra distance. The Rapid Transit Commission, for example, explained that its consulting engineers and many citizens had suggested having all passengers transfer from surface cars at the edge of downtown onto an elevated train running through downtown, but the commission had rejected this plan. The commissioners said they personally agreed this suggestion “was an ideal solution of the problem,” but believed the public wouldn’t accept it, having been accustomed to direct transportation right to the downtown shops and theaters.<sup>107</sup> The following year Matthews, in a speech to the Merchants’ Association in which he said that the streetcars were the cause of all the congestion problems, agreed with the Rapid Transit Commission that the ideal solution would be to stop all cars at the edge of downtown and require passengers to walk the final few blocks to their destinations, but that such a plan was impossible because “the

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<sup>107</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 64-65.

people have been educated up to the idea that they are entitled by law to take a car within two minutes of their houses and be landed within two seconds of their offices.”<sup>108</sup> Others who complained that lazy citizens unwilling to walk were a cause of congestion included the editors of the *Transcript*,<sup>109</sup> and the *New York Times*.<sup>110</sup>

While most people perceived that the sheer number of streetcars was the cause of congestion, some also pointed to the details of how the West End company ran its operations. Perceptions that the streetcar corporations were to blame for congestion had been prominent in the 1880s, when numerous people argued that competitive behavior by rival companies created congestion. After the West End bought out its competitors in the mid-1880s and coordinated routes and schedules for the regional system, complaints that the streetcar routing system caused congestion largely disappeared. However, a few people in the 1890s still perceived that the routing system created congestion.

For example, in 1891 a couple of people pointed to the lack of space between the streetcars as a cause of congestion. They said the streetcar operators drove their cars so close to one another that other vehicles could not maneuver between them. At one of the Rapid Transit Commission’s first hearings, Dr. Ira L. Moore (who went on to testify many times against elevated roads and in favor of a subway) made this argument when presenting a plan for rerouting many of the downtown cars. He said that his plan would allow the cars to run fifty feet apart, “and thus prevent blockades.”<sup>111</sup> At the end of the year, the Boston Board of Aldermen passed a resolution that streetcars must stay fifteen feet apart, instead of the current ten-foot requirement. One of the aldermen explained the

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<sup>108</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Time to act," February 10, 1893.

<sup>109</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: How the streets do their work," December 16, 1893, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> *New York Times*, "Boston rapid transit," April 6, 1892, p. 10.

<sup>111</sup> *Boston Globe*, "All a question of time," July 14, 1891, p. 8.

benefits of the policy, saying that at times when there were long strings of cars, “If there were a space between these cars of fifteen feet, these heavy trucks and other express wagons, crowded together at that time on the street, could cut between the cars, and that would often be the means of breaking a blockade.”<sup>112</sup>

Other people perceived that the system of routing the streetcar was to blame: it created points of congestion where tracks crossed each other’s paths. Many of the cars came into the downtown and then turned around to return to the city outskirts. These turning procedures required that streetcars cross each other’s paths, right in the most congested part of the downtown. In 1894 the Subway Commissioners made this point, arguing that the subway would improve congestion because it would avoid “two great sources of delay, one is crossing the tracks at the corner of Boylston and Tremont Sts., and the other is the large amount of shifting at the Tremont house.”<sup>113</sup> The author of an article about subways, printed in 1895 in *New England Magazine*, reported on estimates in Boston that each time a car crossed another’s tracks, this caused as much delay as if four more cars had been added to the track being crossed. He calculated that in the case of the streetcars switching direction at the Granary burial ground,<sup>114</sup> the crossing routes created as much congestion as if 402 cars an hour were passing along the track.<sup>115</sup>

A few people complained that the West End’s particular arrangement of routes led to unnecessary, empty cars running through the downtown. These cars were especially objectionable because they added to the congestion without actually providing any

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<sup>112</sup> Boston City Council, “Space between vehicles,” in *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1891, pp. 1215-1216.

<sup>113</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Subway bill at last,” February 12, 1894, p. 1; *Boston Globe*, “Subway plan hearing,” February 28 (a.m.), 1894, pp. 1 & 5. The Boston Transit Commission also repeated this argument in its first annual report. Boston Transit Commission, *First annual report*, 1895, p. 62.

<sup>114</sup> The burying grounds were located on Tremont Street one block north of the Common.

<sup>115</sup> *New England Magazine*, “The Boston subway and others,” October 1895, p. 204.



service. In 1893, the editor of the New York journal *Engineering News* testified before the rapid transit committee on the city's downtown transportation plans. When asked what improvements he recommended, he mentioned the problem of cars looping in the downtown, saying:

Why, the main trouble at present in the congested district is that, while a few of the cars simply go through it as if it were a way station, a great many of the lines come in and loop about from the interior of the congested district. . . . That makes two cars where one car would do the work just as well. That costs the street railway money. They cannot run two cars to do one car's work without losing money, and it doubles the congestion in the congested district, doubles the numbers of cars that are in it.<sup>116</sup>

In January of the following year, the *Transcript's* editors made a similar point about empty cars filling up the downtown streets. The piece began, "A most palpable cause of the Tremont-Street blockades is the line of cars running empty one way to accommodate the freight [i.e., passengers] on their return run." The editors went on to argue that the cars that were only needed during congested hours were running into or out of the center empty (in the direction that they were not needed), thus contributing to the congestion. In addition, the editors described the cars switching directions at the Granary burying grounds as "interfering" with the "smooth running" of the streetcars.<sup>117</sup>

#### **7.4.2 1890s: Inconsiderate drivers**

The streetcars were not the only vehicles that came in for criticism, however. In 1894 the *Herald* editors warned that the subway would not necessarily improve street travel, even if the streetcars were all removed. They explained that:

It is clear that if the street cars are entirely removed from Tremont Street that thoroughfare will be open to vehicular use in the way that it has not been for a number of years past. If this added space is to be employed as additional standing room for wagons and hacks, if we are to have the street at all times partly, and at certain times almost wholly, blockaded and obstructed by teams,

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<sup>116</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Ways that are dark; Tunnels and subways for rapid transit," March 8, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: A most palpable cause of the Tremont-Street blockades . . .," January 10, 1894, p. 4.

express wagons and hackney coaches, by these standing indefinitely at the sidewalks, the added space secured at an expenditure of millions of dollars will be an exceedingly expensive purchase. No matter how wide a street may be upon which a considerable amount of traffic takes place, unless proper regulations are adopted, the space will not be well utilized.<sup>118</sup>

In complaining about the behavior of horse-drawn vehicle drivers, the *Herald's* editors hit upon another widely perceived cause of congestion. Throughout the 1890s, the drivers of horse-drawn vehicles were often singled out and accused of causing congestion. Of particular concern was not so much the number of these vehicles as their behavior. One objectionable behavior was "standing" at the curb for long periods of time, either to wait, to feed their horses, or to unload goods. Team drivers were singled out for complaint more often than the drivers of hacks and private carriages. Unloading was a particular problem, since many commentators felt the team drivers did this slowly, in ways that blocked more of the street than necessary. Also, wagons were often unloaded during busy times of day. People who complained about the drivers' behaviors often described the problem at length, and with irritation that showed they considered the drivers to be unreasonable.

The Boston Board of Aldermen responded to suggestions from the Rapid Transit Commission that the city adopt tougher traffic regulations by ordering its Committee on Rules and Order to study the suggested new regulations. Alderman Lewis, who proposed the order, explained the problem as follows:

. . . if you should go this afternoon down Portland Street, one of the great avenues to two or three of the depots, certainly you would find men there engaged in repairing vehicles right in the street; you would find there dealers in horses using the street to show off the animals and doing their business virtually in the street; you would find heavily loaded teams going through streets which should be restricted to the use of light vehicles. . . . I believe we have all observed from five to ten horse cars with perhaps several hundred people on board waiting from three to five minutes for coal to be discharged into a coal hole. Now it is simply ridiculous that on our great business thoroughfares for traffic and transportation travel should be interrupted in that way in the business hours of the day. You will sometimes see a man moving in a safe right in the

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<sup>118</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The subway," March 1, 1894, p. 4.

middle of the day upon a great thoroughfare, where he obstructs and greatly inconveniences a large number of people. . . . [Y]ou have seen, too, many instances where a board or plank is laid from the tail-end of a wagon or cart across the sidewalk to a store, for the moving of merchandise, greatly obstructing travel.<sup>119</sup>

In January of 1894 the editors of the *Transcript* described another example of the problem:

A perfect example of injudicious street regulation, or rather, no regulation, which leads to the frequent blockades in our streets was the action of a teamster on Washington Street shortly after eleven o'clock today. He was in charge of a huge brick-wagon and, stopping opposite the Old South, deliberately dumped his load—as many bricks as two horses could in reason drag—in the gutter and such other parts of the street as they naturally spread to. The heap made an obstruction which two men leisurely proceeded to remove to the cellar of a neighboring building. For nearly an hour more than half the vehicles passing that way were obliged to turn onto the car tracks to get by. This is one of the narrowest sections of the business street in town.<sup>120</sup>

Although teams moving freight were the vehicles usually singled out for criticism, occasionally there was mention of either private carriages or horse-drawn carriages for hire (“herdics” and “hackney carriages”). An 1890 *Transcript* editorial, for example, mentioned as one cause of congestion the “long stretches” of hacks waiting at the curb near hotels in congested Washington Street.<sup>121</sup> In 1892, a *New York Times* article about rapid transit in Boston noted tartly that “Boston has herself to blame for much of the street annoyance, being lenient to the point of laxity in allowing individuals and companies to carry on traffic in the city streets.” The article named as causes of congestion both the unloading of freight from wagons and the “line of carriages that is allowed to stand near large hotels.”<sup>122</sup>

In early 1894, several hack drivers were punished for behaviors that added to congestion. In January a group of them were fined for obstructing traffic. One driver

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<sup>119</sup> Boston City Council, “Standing regulations of the board,” in *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1892, p. 631.

<sup>120</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Editorial: A perfect example of injudicious street regulation . . .,” January 17, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Editorial: Something about monopolies,” December 20, 1890, p. 4.

<sup>122</sup> *New York Times*, “What Boston talks about: The great problem of rapid transit receiving attention,” December 11, 1892, p. 14.

was fined for leaving his carriage on Washington Street for almost an hour while he stopped at a bar, and another for refusing to move his carriage at a policeman's request.<sup>123</sup>

In March, twenty hack drivers had their licenses revoked by the police for causes that included what the *Globe* termed "chronic parading." The police inspector in charge of their licenses reported that:

The men whose licenses have been revoked are drivers who have made Washington St. in the congested district the field for their operations. They have all been warned repeatedly that if they did not desist in driving up and down the crowded thoroughfare their licenses would be revoked, and they all know the reason for the board's action.<sup>124</sup>

The fact that these incidents were deemed newsworthy suggests that hacks were widely considered a traffic nuisance.

While most the criticisms were leveled at drivers themselves, some people accused the city of having lax regulations, and of failing to enforcing those already on its books.

The *New York Times* article quoted above stated just that. The Rapid Transit Commission's report also criticized the city for failing to adopt European-style regulations:

In carrying on an investigation into the question of street travel as part of the general subject of rapid transit in and through Boston, it has been found that the frequently complained of delays in this form of movement are due, in no slight degree, to readily preventable causes. Travel in our principal streets is congested and progress impeded, not merely because the roadways are narrow, but because, in consequence of not enforcing the regulations that control street traffic in most of the cities of Europe, we fail to secure from our highways the measure of service we have a right to expect.<sup>125</sup>

In February of 1893, Rapid Transit Commissioner Colonel Higginson told the legislative committee that, "The use of the streets for stabling purposes is a crying evil. This would not be so if our policemen performed their duties as they ought."<sup>126</sup> In June of 1894 the

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<sup>123</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Herdic drivers arraigned before the Police Board," January 22, 1894, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Kept blocking the street," March 5 (p.m.), 1894, p. 5. See also *Boston Transcript*, "Herdic drivers taught a lesson: They must not block the streets while waiting for business," March 6, 1894, p. 10.

<sup>125</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 11-13.

<sup>126</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Once for all; Mayor wants transit problem so settled," February 9 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

police commissioners held a hearing to determine if the public thought the department was contributing to congestion by failing to enforce regulations properly. Among the speakers, the president of the Master Teamsters' Association and a representative from the Boston & Maine railroad both stated that they felt there was nothing more the police could do. Several other individuals, however, argued that the lack of police officers was a cause of congestion.<sup>127</sup>

The few people (other than the teaming industry) to argue that the behavior of vehicles drivers was *not* a cause of congestion did so in the context of opposing the subway. Speaking of Washington and Tremont Streets, an anonymous letter writer to the *Transcript* in December of 1893 said "The chief trouble now is not obstruction of cars by teams, but by each other."<sup>128</sup> The *Herald's* editors also argued that teams were not the cause of congestion on Tremont and Washington in a February 1894 editorial opposing the subway. They said that there were only a small number of ill-behaved team drivers on those streets, and that "there is not the interference by them with the quick movement of street cars that is commonly believed." The real cause of congestion, the editors argued, were the streetcars themselves.<sup>129</sup>

By the 1920s, people were no longer complaining much about the behavior of truckers as a cause of congestion, even though the traffic regulations had detailed rules about how and where vehicles could stop to load and unload merchandise. In fact, the claim was only raised once in the materials examined for this period. *Current Affairs* published an article entitled "Boston's Parking Problem," that provided a number of

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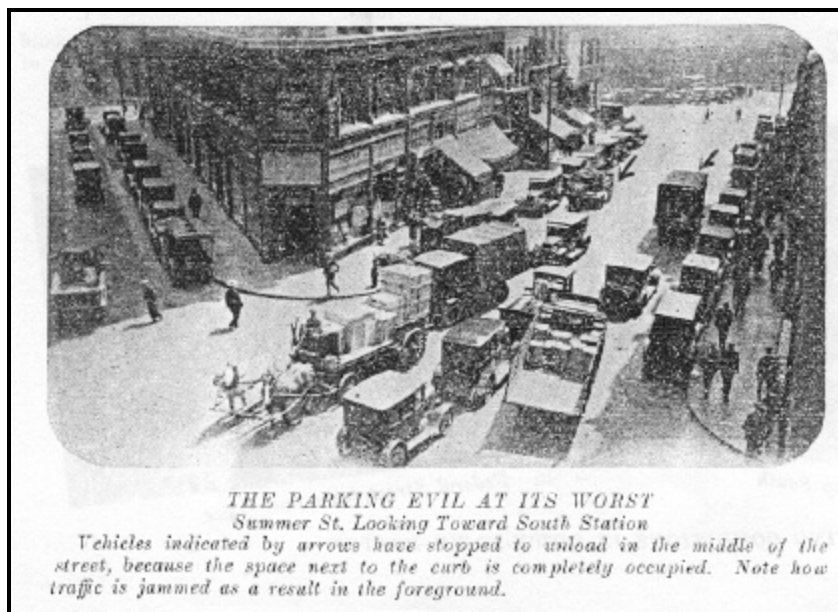
<sup>127</sup> *Boston Globe*, "To raise blockades: Police commissioners give a hearing on the matter and hear some practical suggestions," June 23, 1894, p. 9.

<sup>128</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: It seems to me . . .," December 30, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>129</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The sidewalk congestion," February 12, 1894, p. 4.

photographs illustrating the parking problem. Most of these focused on passenger cars, but one showed double-parked trucks backing up traffic (see Figure 7.1). The magazine's caption to the photo, which was entitled "The parking evil at its worst," instructs the reader to note that double-parked trucks unloading freight (in the upper right corner) have "jammed" traffic.<sup>130</sup>

**Figure 7.1: Illustration from an article about parking in *Current Affairs*.**



Source: *Current Affairs*, "Boston's Parking Problems," June 15, 1925, p. 6.

The number and nature of traffic ordinances regulating trucks, however, suggests that they were causing congestion, even if the issue was not perceived as worthy of discussion in the press. The city's *Street Traffic Regulations and Rules for Driving* had a number of regulations for truck drivers. For example, they designated streets where heavy items couldn't be unloading or collected during business hours. In most streets, goods could not be transferred from one vehicle to another other. Another regulation

<sup>130</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Boston's parking problems," June 15, 1925, pp. 5+.

permitted vehicles during business hours to back up to the curb to load or unload goods, even if they blocked traffic, for a maximum of ten minutes. Outside of business hours, trucks being loaded or unloaded were permitted to block traffic for up to ten minutes. Miller McClintock, in his book *Street Traffic Control*, complained that Boston's lax ordinances allowed trucks to block traffic.<sup>131</sup> The complaints about trucks blocking traffic probably disappeared from view in the 1920s not because people no longer perceived freight vehicles as a cause of congestion, but because personal automobiles had come to be perceived as so serious a problem that this concern dwarfed concern over freight vehicles.

### **7.4.3 1920s: Automobiles**

In the 1920s many Bostonians blamed congestion on the introduction of the automobile. As explained in Chapter 4, during the previous decade passenger automobiles had suddenly become an important part of the urban transportation system, and their numbers grew exponentially. Cities around the country struggled to cope with this sea change in their transportation system, and Bostonians were anything but unique in focusing on automobiles as a cause of congestion.<sup>132</sup>

The Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, in a 1923 report on transportation facilities in the metropolitan area, stated that, "This enormous increase in the use of automobiles has created a serious situation which requires immediate and careful study and prompt and wise relief."<sup>133</sup> A local cleric even made the point during a talk at a

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<sup>131</sup> Miller McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1st ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1925, pp. 154-155.

<sup>132</sup> See, for example: Fifth Avenue Association, *Annual Report for the Year 1922*, New York, the Association, 1922.

<sup>133</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, "House Document 1110: Report on the transportation facilities within the metropolitan district," in *Documents of the General Court*, 1923, p. 75.

church—the Reverend A.Z. Conrad advocated widening several downtown streets by taking land from the Common in order to deal with the congestion “resulting from the great inundation of motor vehicles in recent years.”<sup>134</sup> The Boston Police Commissioner in 1923 explained that congestion was inevitable, what with the combination of narrow streets and “the yearly increase in the number of automobiles.”<sup>135</sup> The *Post*, in an article about a 1926 count of vehicles downtown, spoke of “the passenger automobile . . . with its attendant evils of street congestion and parking problems.”<sup>136</sup> The *Herald*, responding to a proposal to widen one the downtown streets, made this point, too:

The automobile era has brought new burdens for the street surfaces, and if Boston is to grow and prosper and hold its place among the great cities of the country—and we now have abundant evidence that its future is thus insured—we shall need more street space and so should take measures to obtain wherever the cost is not prohibitive, additions such as these.<sup>137</sup>

A *Current Affairs* article describing what the Chamber of Commerce had done to help Boston cope with traffic made the same point with more elaboration:

From the time when the first automobile crawled along the highways preceded by men with red flags, the battle of the streets had increased in intensity. Today it shows no signs of abating,—rather the future holds only the prospect of greater congestion and the need for more heroic efforts to keep apace . . . .<sup>138</sup>

As for the City Planning Board, in a 1924 zoning plan for Boston, it described the problem on the region’s major arterial streets as follows:

Although conditions have been far from satisfactory for years, as is evidenced by reports as far back as 1894, it is a fact that until the beginning of the present century, the horse-drawn vehicular traffic of the earlier days presented a far less serious problem than that which has accompanied the invention and almost universal use of the automobile, when traffic troubles have multiplied in rapid proportion to the annual increase of thousands of motor vehicles, both pleasure cars and trucks.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Urges need of slicing Common,” [May 31?], 1926.

<sup>135</sup> Boston Office of the Police Commissioner, *Annual report of the Police Commissioner*, 1923, pp. 10-11.

<sup>136</sup> *Boston Post*, “Railroads carry less than autos,” August [4?], 1926.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in: *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” September 28, 1925, pp. 7+.

<sup>138</sup> *Current Affairs*, “We can’t dodge traffic problems; So the Chamber puts in much time and effort trying to solve them,” October 26, 1925, pp. 52+.

<sup>139</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Zoning for Boston: A survey and a comprehensive plan*, Boston, Printing Department, 1924.



The board's reference to history illustrates the fact that it perceived the introduction of automobiles to have created congestion problems on a new scale of magnitude.

When the Special Commission released its second report in 1925, the commission also described the introduction and growth of automobiles as a cause of congestion. Here the writers focused on the swiftness with which automobiles had been introduced:

Every great American city is facing the problem of traffic regulation and parking and Boston is no exception to the rule. Within ten years, in fact largely within five years, the entire traffic situation of our cities has changed and in place of each former horse drawn vehicle there are today ten or possibly fifteen motor vehicles carrying passengers and freight. This has resulted in enormous congestion.<sup>140</sup>

#### 7.4.3.1 Parked cars

In the 1920s, some Bostonians perceived that passenger automobiles caused congestion not just when traveling through the streets, but also when parked. The perceptions was expressed by most of the major actors, including the Special Commission, City Planning Board, Chamber of Commerce, and a couple of city commissions. Also, in addition to the people who directly stated that parked cars caused congestion, many people indirectly implied this by suggesting that changing parking regulations would reduce congestion. (Their views will be treated fully in Chapter 9, which examines those policies proposed to reduce congestion by reducing the number of vehicles on the streets.) Bostonians concerns about parking were not unique. In *Street Traffic Control*, Miller McClintock described parked vehicles as “one of the most serious causes of congestion.”<sup>141</sup> In Atlanta, the authors of a 1923 survey documenting the

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<sup>140</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement.

<sup>141</sup> McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1925, p. 40.

problem of parked cars noted that on the day of the survey, 14 acres of the downtown's 35 acres of street surface were taken up by 2,236 parked vehicles.<sup>142</sup>

The perception by some Bostonians that parked cars caused congestion is particularly interesting because not only was it mentioned often, but because parked cars were the only perceived cause of congestion over which there was lively debate in the 1920s. Although there was also some debate over whether or not concentration caused congestion, the issue received much less attention. People cared about the link—or lack thereof—between parking and congestion because the issue was closely linked with the two proposed policies that received the most attention, the loop highway and parking restrictions. The perception that parked cars were a cause of congestion was raised as the only prominent argument as to why the loop highway wouldn't reduce congestion.

(Other objections to the loop mostly focused on its cost.)

In the 1920s, there was little off-street parking available downtown, so most drivers left their vehicles in the streets, parked at the curb. As explained in Chapter 3, the city's street regulations contained numerous parking rules. The primary rule about parking downtown was that no vehicle should be parked for more than twenty minutes, though police officers could, at their discretion, permit vehicles to stand for longer periods of time when this wouldn't interfere with vehicle or pedestrian traffic. This basic rule was augmented with long lists of blocks where special rules applied. In some places vehicles could park for longer periods between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., while in other streets no vehicle could stand for more than five minutes between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Yet more rules singled out specific streets where vehicles could stop only to drop off or pick

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<sup>142</sup> Howard Lawrence Preston, *Automobile age Atlanta: The making of a southern metropolis, 1900-1935*, Athens, University of Georgia, 1979, pp. 125-126.

up passengers, where there was no standing at all from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., or where vehicles were permitted to stop and wait for passengers for up to either thirty or sixty minutes.

At the very beginning of the public discussion about the loop highway, the question was raised as to whether congestion could instead be better reduced by changing regulations for parked cars. As the *Boston City Record* reported, a conference of department store representatives and city officials met “to consider ways and means of relieving the city streets of the present congestion either by the establishment of a new traffic thoroughfare or through the adoption of regulations governing the parking of cars in Boston.”<sup>143</sup> The fact that parking regulations were presented as an alternative congestion relief proposal indicates that parked cars were widely perceived as a cause of congestion. Throughout the debate on the loop highway, various people argued that the loop highway would not succeed in reducing traffic congestion because parked cars were the real cause of the problem.

Two different city committees examining parking policy supported the idea that parked cars caused congestion.<sup>144</sup> The Boston Ways & Means Committee’s Subcommittee on Revenue, which was chaired by Harvard government professor William Bennett Munro, proposed an annual fee for the privilege of parking on downtown streets. While the primary goal of the fee was to raise revenue, reducing congestion was mentioned as an added benefit. The *Globe* reported that the subcommittee emphasized that parked cars on downtown thoroughfares “impeded” flowing traffic and greatly increased congestion:

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<sup>143</sup> *Boston City Record*, “Proposed new \$35,000,000 highway through city to relieve traffic,” December 8, 1923, p. 1685.

<sup>144</sup> My data collection efforts focused less heavily on articles specifically about parking policy than those on the loop highway. Examination of additional materials on parking policy would likely reveal far more people claiming that parked cars caused congestion.

“It is clear, therefore,” the report continues, “that Boston streets are largely and regularly used as parking places, for long and short periods, by thousands of non-residents who contribute nothing to the revenue of the city. This use of the streets accentuates congestion, increases the difficulty of handling traffic, and necessitates the maintenance of an enlarged force of traffic officers, thus imposing an additional burden on Boston taxpayers.”<sup>145</sup>

As for the city’s Street Commission, just five days before the state legislature voted down the loop highway plan, Commissioner Charles T. Harding publicly stated that parking was a major problem restricting movement on the streets.<sup>146</sup>

The 1922 annual report of the Boston Police Commissioner, in a discussion entitled “Traffic,” said that parked cars on the city’s narrow streets were the main source of congestion problems:

When the yearly increase in the number of automobiles, both for pleasure and business purposes, is compared with the permanency of the width of the streets of Boston, the irrefutable conclusion is that there is an imperative need of an increase in the number of policemen for traffic duty, and the creation of suitable sites for parking purposes. Once the parking problem in Boston is solved, congestion of traffic will be eliminated.<sup>147</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce devoted a great deal of time to the issue of parking, a sign in and of itself that parking was of great interest and concern to the business community. In *Current Affairs* the chamber weighed in often and with conviction on the issue, opposing most restrictions on parking. Over the years of the loop highway debates, the magazine raised the subject of parking, at least in passing, in sixty-three articles. The chamber even featured the topic on the cover of one of its issues (see Figure 7.2).

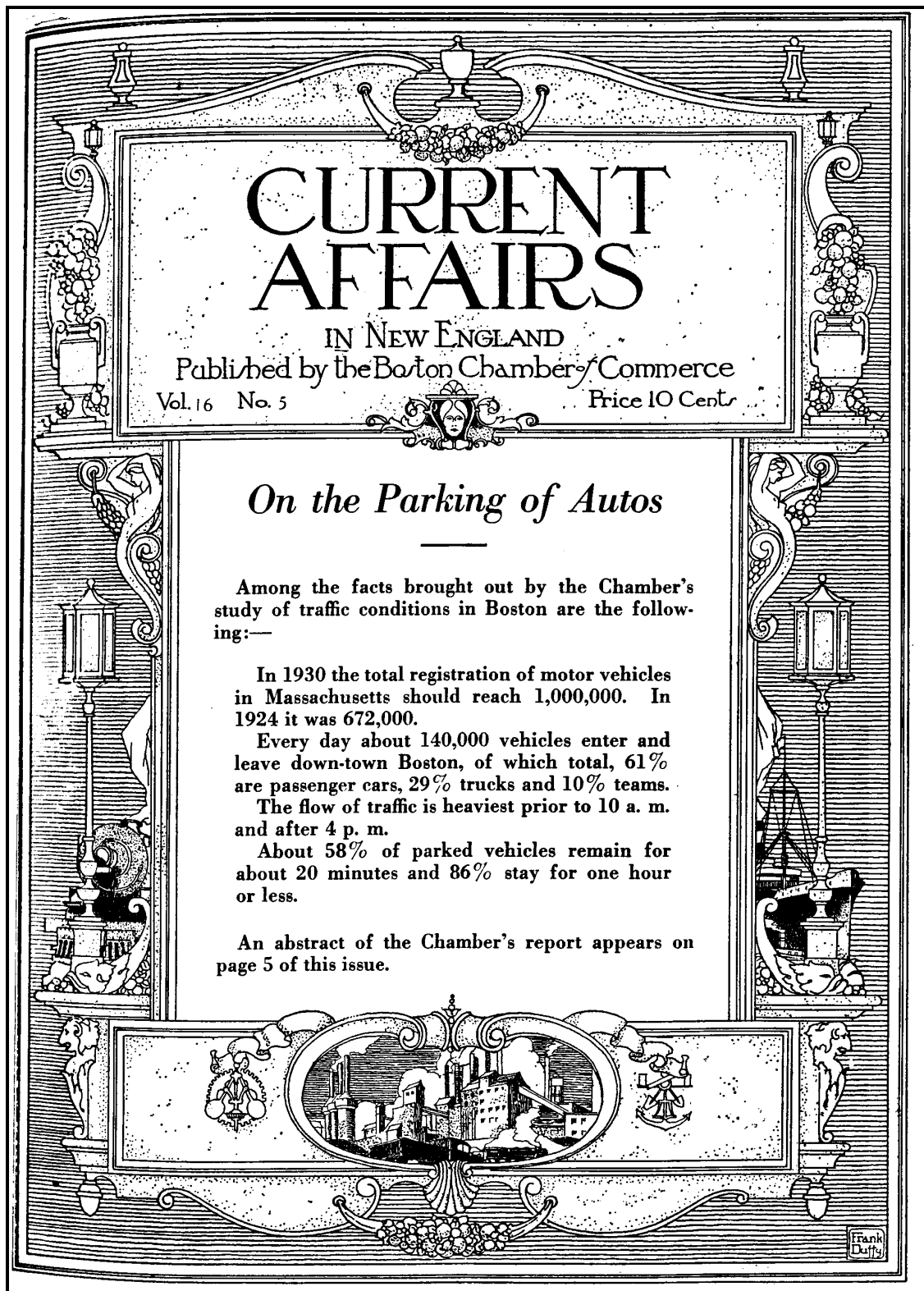
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<sup>145</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Plan to make autos pay for parking in Boston streets," January 21 (a.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>146</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Merchants ask relief as auto parking grows," April 24, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>147</sup> Boston Office of the Police Commissioner, *Annual report of the Police Commissioner*, 1923, pp. 10-11.

Figure 7.2: Cover of *Current Affairs* for June 15, 1925.



A scan through the chamber's writings about parking in the specific context of traffic congestion reveals a widespread view that parked cars did indeed contribute to traffic congestion, though there was some disagreement as to whether or not parking was the chief cause of congestion. Though the chamber never denied that parked cars caused some congestion, its emphasis on them varied over the course of the period studied.

In December of 1922, the chamber discussed parking in an article about a traffic survey it had carried out along with the City Planning Board, the Boston Real Estate Exchange, and the Massachusetts Real Estate Exchange. The article explained that anybody walking through the downtown would see "the narrow aisle of moving vehicles which flow slowly bordered by standing machines that block and hamper the movement of traffic."<sup>148</sup> An article entitled "Boston's Parking Problem," published in the issue with parking on its cover, provided several overhead photographs showing parked passenger cars blocking traffic. In another article, member Fitzhenry Smith, Jr., said:

The recent hot spell has recalled to mind Mark Twain's saying that everybody complains about the weather but nobody does anything about it. The situation is much the same with respect to parking in down-town Boston. Conditions are getting worse and worse; many remedies are suggested, but nothing seems to be done. Rules are made but not enforced.<sup>149</sup>

The magazine often qualified its position that parking caused congestion, however, stressing that this was not the sole or even the most important cause. The position taken in these articles was doubtless a direct reaction to specific events that the chamber opposed. For example, in June of 1922, the Boston Board of Street Commissioners held a hearing at which they proposed that the parking of "pleasure vehicles" be prohibited in the downtown before 10 a.m. and from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. The chamber sent representatives to the hearing to present the chamber's strenuous opposition to such a

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<sup>148</sup> *Current Affairs in New England*, "The traffic survey," December 11, 1922, p. 10.

<sup>149</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Our parking problem," August 2, 1926, p. 1.

prohibition.<sup>150</sup> Less than two weeks after the hearing, the chamber published the issue of *Current Affairs* that featured parking issues. The main article on the topic, entitled

“Boston’s parking problem,” argued that parking was not the *key* cause of congestion:

The parking problem is only a part of the general problem of traffic congestion in Boston. We reiterate our belief that while some improvement can be effected by a better enforcement of existing parking regulations and the judicious imposition of new regulations, the fundamental solution lies in the provision of more street space, the diversion of traffic away from present centers of congestion, and the spreading out of business districts.<sup>151</sup>

A few months later, in October, *Current Affairs* published an editorial making a similar point. Like the June piece, this editorial was written in the context of a public meeting that threatened the chamber’s twin desires to see the loop highway built and to avoid stringent new parking regulations. On October 14, the Special Commission held a public hearing at which Senator Shattuck argued that the loop highway should be postponed until the city dealt with the parking issue. The loop highway supporters at the meeting all protested.<sup>152</sup> A few days after the hearing Fitzhenry Smith, Jr., one of the chamber’s most active supporters of the loop highway, wrote an editorial entitled “Parking prohibitions not a substitute for Loop Highway.” In this piece he protested that even if parking were an “evil,” it was not the sole cause of traffic congestion:

The Chamber’s Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs is alive to the evils of parking, and so also are the Street Commissioners. The Committee has advocated an addition to the list of streets where no parking is allowed, and the Commissioners are working on new regulations with that end in view. But it is a mistake to believe, and we will deceive ourselves if we hold to the belief, that parking alone is the cause of the present congestion of traffic in down town Boston and that its elimination will accomplish the results which all well wishers of the city desire.<sup>153</sup>

Although the chamber clearly wanted to de-emphasize parking as a cause of congestion, it did give the opposition viewpoint space in its magazine. In August of

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<sup>150</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested,” June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>151</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Boston’s parking problems,” June 15, 1925, pp. 5+.

<sup>152</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Merchants ask loop highway,” October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

<sup>153</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Editorial: Parking prohibitions not a substitute for Loop Highway,” October 19, 1925, p. 10.

1926, *Current Affairs* published an article by William H. Winkley, the manager of the Boston Board of Fire Underwriters, that took the opposite position. He argued that congestion prevented the fire department from reaching fires quickly, and that parking was at the root of the problem. Not only did parked cars sometimes directly block fire trucks, but they also created congestion that slowed the fire department response:

No one can truthfully assert that parking is solely responsible for the increase in the fire waste, but after consideration of these facts I think it cannot be called an exaggeration to say that the loss to be ascribed to this cause must be measured in millions of dollars, and that its reduction is one of the most important results to be sought in any consideration of the traffic problem. Such remedies as street widening, installation of street signals warning of the approach of the apparatus, and more efficient traffic direction, are helpful, but they do not reach the root of the trouble, which is the unattended car parked at the curb.<sup>154</sup>

Winkley went on to advocate a complete ban on all parking downtown. Just a few weeks later, perhaps in an effort to stave off further calls for severe parking restrictions, *Current Affairs* published a short piece entitled “Obey the parking rules.” In it the chamber urged members to obey parking rules because “The congestion caused by parked cars has slowed up transportation through the down-town business district and has made the transaction of business more difficult.”<sup>155</sup>

As for the Special Commission, its members thought the parking problem was severe enough to devote portions of its reports to the subject. In its February 1925 report, the commission explained that it had looked at the number of vehicles entering the downtown and the numbers of parked cars in order to determine if the existing streets could be used more efficiently. The commission explained its findings as follows:

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<sup>154</sup> *Current Affairs*, “An insurance man looks at parking,” August 30, 1926, p. 3.

<sup>155</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Obey the parking rules,” September 6, 1926, pp. 4 & 5.



[I]t takes only a cursory examination of our street conditions to note the very serious blockade of traffic caused by parking. It is a fact that the carrying capacity of our down-town streets is materially reduced by the present practice of parking.<sup>156</sup>

When the Special Commission published its next report, in December of 1925, it did not specifically state that parked cars cause congestion, but it did discuss parking regulations. The commissioners indirectly argued that parking was not causing downtown congestion by objecting to claims that a downtown parking ban would eliminate the need for the street improvements:

The statement is frequently made that if parking were prohibited in the downtown district there would be no need of radical street improvements. Our answer to this statement is that parking is already prohibited on one or both sides of very many streets in the downtown section and particularly on the streets paralleling the proposed Intermediate Thoroughfare and for the relief of which the thoroughfare is to be constructed. . . . It is thus evident that . . . the entire prohibition [of parking] in the downtown district would do little to relieve north and south bound traffic.

The commissioners did support more restrictions on parking from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on main north-south thoroughfares and some east-west streets, saying that, "Those additional restrictions, if made, would only slightly reduce the parking area and would much help the traffic situation in the downtown section."<sup>157</sup>

Three people who supported additional parking restrictions before building the loop highway were Governor Fuller, State Representative Henry Shattuck, and May Malcolm Nichols. All three suggested that tighter parking restrictions would reduce the congestion problem, though they did not always say directly that parking *caused* congestion. In October of 1925 the Governor implied that parking caused congestion in an address he made to the twelfth annual conference of Massachusetts Planning Boards.

[The Governor] pointed out that the removal of standing cars from Boston streets would "widen" the streets at least 18 feet, without expense.

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<sup>156</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, "House Document No. 1160: Further report of the Special Commission," in *Massachusetts Legislative Documents*, Boston, 1925, p. 3.

<sup>157</sup> Special Commission to Investigate Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, *Proposed intermediate thoroughfare with related widenings and extensions*, Boston, the Board, 1926, pp. 8-9.

The Governor urged the planning boards to give serious consideration to the parking problem, which he termed the most important one facing cities today, and he attacked the theory which provides free parking space in some of the most important and valuable city streets. Provision of parking spaces off the highways, and the routing of more one-way streets, were among the important steps toward the solution of the traffic problem mentioned by the Governor.<sup>158</sup>

Shattuck and Nichols both argued that with more parking restrictions, the loop highway might not be needed at all. Shattuck, who consistently opposed the loop highway, raised parking as an issue at an October 1925 hearing about the plan. The *Globe* reported that he said the parking question should be dealt with before any final loop highway plans were made. “The presence of large numbers of automobiles on the streets, he thought, adds to the congregation, and if these could be eliminated the problem would not be so complex.”<sup>159</sup>

In January of 1926, the new Boston mayor, Malcolm Nichols, made a similar argument in an address to the Boston Chamber of Commerce. Like Shattuck he said that removing parked cars would reduce congestion. After talking about the need to limit traffic in the downtown streets through regulations, Nichols ended his discussion of the loop highway and traffic issues with a discussion of parking, which he implied might be the key to solving the traffic congestion problem.<sup>160</sup>

In June of 1926 (after the loop highway proposal had been rejected by the General Court), Nichols returned again to the idea of parked cars as a cause of congestion. He also raised the specific issue of the “all-day parker,” as people who left their cars parked on streets all day were known. All-day parkers—as opposed to short-term parkers—were considered by some to be the real cause of congestion. There was little unanimity as to

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<sup>158</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Low-cost street 'widening' with parking ban suggested," October 5, 1925, p. 2.

<sup>159</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Merchants ask loop highway," October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

<sup>160</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Nichols is not ready to support 'loop' highway," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5.

how many of these “all-day parkers” really existed and how much they actually contributed to traffic congestion, although there seemed to be general agreement that the all-day parker was a selfish individual.

In an attempt to improve traffic, Nichols sent a letter to downtown business owners requesting that they ask their employees not to leave vehicles parked all day in the city streets. In the letter Nichols stated that congestion was one of the most serious problems for businessmen, and that he was sure they would therefore approve of any plan to relieve it. He requested their help because, “An analysis shows that one of the obvious factors is the problem of the all-day parkers who use the streets for garage purposes.”<sup>161</sup> The belief that the all-day parker was of particular concern came up in August of that year, too, when the police department announced a new drive to enforce time limits on street parking. The Police Commissioner, Herbert A. Wilson, issued a statement that mentioned all-day parkers as a cause of congestion:

Starting Sept. 1, 1926, a vigorous campaign to enforce the rules relating to parking in the downtown section of Boston will be inaugurated by this department. Parking violators and especially continual illegal all-day parkers are to be prosecuted. To allow valuable land taken by the city of Boston for the purpose of widening narrow streets to become practically free open-air garages is both futile and unnecessary.

Time limits for parking in the various downtown streets can be easily ascertained before the police start activities to prosecute those who, either because of selfishness or indifference clog the free passage of vehicular traffic in parts of this city where traffic should be especially fluid.<sup>162</sup>

The emphasis on the all-day parker as the cause of congestion shifted the blame onto individual drivers, unlike general complaints that parked cars cause congestion, where the abstract phenomenon of automobility was instead perceived as the culprit. The Chamber of Commerce ran an editorial in 1926 that referred to all-day parker as “the person who

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<sup>161</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Mayor seeks help to reduce parking," June [22?], 1926.

<sup>162</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Strict enforcement of parking rules planned," August [25?], 1926.

has no consideration for the rights of others, and whose attitude towards traffic rules is that of the hog.”<sup>163</sup>

In May of 1925, Gifford Le Clear argued in *Current Affairs* that the prevailing sentiment that there would be no traffic congestion if it weren't for the all-day parker was an example of “snap judgment and hastily formed . . . opinion.” LeClear pointed to a chamber survey of vehicles downtown that found most vehicles parked for less than twenty minutes. He said that eliminating the all-day parker would have little effect, explaining his position as follows:

The benefits to be expected from the elimination of parking are less than might be anticipated. In the first place, the elimination of parking is not really an elimination; trucks, machines for delivering and receiving goods still can stop and the eliminating of this privilege is one that wants to be thought over before acceptance. With one, two, or three cars stopping in a block the avenue of travel that begins against the curb is an effectively blocked as if the cars extended the whole length of the block. The value of a properly enforced restricted time of parking will produce even less results.

It must be remembered that the only advantage in forcing twenty minute or a ten minute or half hour limit is that more people could be accommodated. The spaces would still be occupied; and bear in mind also that the time required for parking and unparking, if I may coin the term, causes a greater blocking of traffic than would cars located quietly all day at the curb.<sup>164</sup>

The report the chamber issued in June of that year with recommendations about coping with parking reiterated these arguments against a parking ban. (Though a member of the affiliated Retail Trade Board did argue that he felt the all-day parker should be eliminated.)<sup>165</sup> These arguments of the chamber's were repeated in *Current Affairs* in the article on “Boston's Parking Problem.”<sup>166</sup> In April of 1926, the *Transcript* reported on disagreements over the all-day parker. The article reiterated the chamber's arguments, but said that the police department disagreed with the chamber's statement that there

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<sup>163</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Editorial: More parking space for shoppers,” September 13, 1926, p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Boston's traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution,” May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.

<sup>165</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested,” June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>166</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Boston's parking problems,” June 15, 1925, pp. 5+.

were few all-day parkers, claiming that thousands of cars were left parked all day at the curb.<sup>167</sup>

## 7.5 Conclusions

Just as with Bostonians' perceptions about why traffic congestion mattered, many of their perceptions about what caused congestion remained constant from the 1890s to the 1920s. For example, in both periods people expressed concerns that fell into the three conceptual categories of over-concentration of downtown activity; inadequate streets; and too many vehicles and inconsiderate drivers. However, there were greater changes during the intervening decades in perceptions about the causes than consequences of congestion, largely because people's perceptions of what caused congestion were more closely correlated with transportation technologies than were their views of why congestion mattered.

In both time periods, intensifying activity downtown, as well as the characteristics of the street system, were singled out for complaint. The first of these perceptions concerned the combination of the downtown's small, fixed land area and a region growing rapidly in population and economic activity. People perceived that the congestion occurred because more and more people and businesses were crowding into the downtown peninsula. This intensifying activity downtown was attributed not only to regional population growth and geographic factors, but also to the introduction of taller buildings, which permitted more activity to occur on a given plot of land.

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<sup>167</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Merchants ask relief as auto parking grows," April 24, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

There was a shift between the 1890s and 1920s in the emphasis placed on which of these three underlying factors caused increasing concentration and thus congestion. In both time periods the factor of population growth received only a little attention, though it was mentioned slightly more often in the 1890s than the 1920s. Geographic constraints were slightly more popular argument in 1890s, but still rare in the 1920s. As for the issue of taller buildings, this was mentioned occasionally in the 1890s, but more often in the 1920s.

The argument about tall buildings causing congestion doubtless became more pervasive in the latter period not only because more such buildings were being constructed, but also because, by the 1920s, there was a well-developed national debate about skyscrapers and congestion. At the same time, the fact that tall buildings were not a primary focus for Bostonians worried about congestion in the 1920s likely reflects the fact that Boston had far fewer such buildings than some other cities, most notably New York and Chicago.

Overall, the perception that concentration caused congestion was expressed much less often than others described in the chapter, though it became a little more prominent in the 1920s. Probably reflecting that increased prominence, it also attracted more opposition in the 1920s (in the 1890s, nobody bothered to argue that concentration did not cause congestion). This opposition mostly came from people objecting to proposals to reduce congestion by “deconcentrating” the downtown. It seems likely that their objections to the idea that concentration caused congestion may have arisen less from genuine conviction than from a desire to avoid the proposed deconcentration policies. In the 1890s, nobody bothered to argue that concentration did not cause congestion (though

they disagreed about what policies would cause additional concentration and thus congestion).

The second category of perceived causes of congestion had to do with the physical street system. The perception that narrow, crooked, and discontinuous streets caused congestion, the second class of perceptions discussed in this chapter, was widespread in both time periods. Also, in both cases people made similar arguments about the streets being particularly inadequate for vehicles traveling north and south, and they frequently blamed Boston's forefathers for not foreseeing the need to build larger and more convenient streets.

The third type of argument about what caused congestion focused on vehicles. If only a few people complained about the underlying population and economic growth bringing new people into the downtown, many people complained about the vehicles those people traveled in. Passenger vehicles bore the brunt of criticism in both time periods. In the 1890s, the most commonly mentioned cause of congestion (along with the state of the city's streets) was the number of streetcars. By the 1920s, that focus had shifted to passenger automobiles. The replacement of automobiles for streetcars as the passenger vehicle of concern also raised a new issue: parking. Streetcars kept moving—hopefully—but automobiles not only took up road space as they moved through the city, but also were perceived to create congestion when parked.

In neither time period was the number of freight vehicles singled out for much criticism, though in the 1890s the behavior of team drivers was a constant source of complaint. In the 1920s there was less focus on driver behavior, but some people did

argue that certain inconsiderate parking practices such as all-day parking caused congestion.

Thinking at an abstract level about the three major factors people perceived as causing congestion, it is curious that people focused on the numbers of vehicles without paying as much attention to the growth in regional population and economic activity that generated those additional vehicles. The most likely explanation has to do with the link between perceived causes of congestion and implied solutions to the problem. Indeed, the link between perceived causes and solutions provides explanations for why particular causes received more or less attention. These issues are discussed in Chapter 9, after Bostonians' perceptions about congestion-relief policies have been presented.



## BUILDING AWAY CONGESTION

### 8.1 Introduction

In both the 1890s and 1920s, a wide variety of plans were proposed as methods to reduce the city's traffic congestion. Although the subway and loop highway plans received the most public attention and political support, during both periods many other ideas were proposed as well. These varied from street improvement plans, to policies designed to shift some economic activity out of the downtown, to stricter traffic regulations. This chapter covers those proposals that required major new construction—capital projects that were designed to reduce congestion by increasing the capacity of the transportation network. Chapter 8 will then examine vehicle and driver-oriented proposals designed to remove vehicles from the street or else to restrict particular driver behaviors. The most frequently discussed of these in the 1890s were proposed new regulations for teams in the 1890s and a reduction of the number of streetcar tracks. By the 1920s, when passenger automobiles had replaced streetcars as the vehicle perceived to clog the streets, people frequently discussed new parking regulations, with lesser amounts of attention focused on new traffic control techniques, such as traffic signals and stop signs.

In the 1890s, city residents proposed a series of physical improvements that included subways, elevated trains, and major street widenings. During the 1920s, the only major construction project debated was the creation of new road capacity in the form of the loop

highway.<sup>1</sup> Subways and elevated trains were no longer relevant to downtown congestion in the 1920s, because in the intervening years most of the surface streetcars had been replaced with subways or elevated trains.

The chapter is organized by solution, beginning first with the elevated trains and subways proposed in the 1890s, and then moving to the street improvements proposed in the 1890s and the 1920s. Organizing this and the following chapter by solution in some cases obscures the fact that many individuals and organizations proposed a combination of two or more solutions. For example, in the 1890s the Citizens' Association and Mayor Nathan Matthews, among others, argued that street improvements would only be useful if combined with new regulations on team drivers. However, I have chosen the thematic organization by policy to best highlight the range of perceptions about particular policies present among the community at large. To avoid distorting speakers' perspectives, I have noted when someone emphasized that only a particular combination of policies would relieve congestion.

## **8.2 Transit in the 1890s: Up and over or down under?**

At the same time Bostonians were considered expanding their street space in the 1890s, they were also debating a series of proposals to deal with traffic congestion by putting public transit lines either underground or on elevated tracks. Between 1891 and 1894 a whole host of elevated and subway plans were put forward. Individuals proposed

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<sup>1</sup> The loop highway was proposed in conjunction with a series of improvements around Dock Square, in the market district. The arguments made about congestion and the Dock Square improvements did not differ significantly in terms of perceptions about congestion raised in the loop highway discussions, so I have focused in this chapter just on the loop highway, for simplicity's sake.

dozens of them, though the ones officially studied came from government departments and committees.

These subway and elevated proposals were generally perceived to be effective congestion relief for two reasons. First, subways or elevated tracks would be unencumbered by the congestion in the streets. Thus, transit passengers in the downtown would no longer have their journeys slowed by street congestion. In addition, supporters argued, subways and elevated tracks would essentially “widen” the existing streets by freeing up the space formerly occupied by the streetcars, thus reducing congestion in the streets for horse-drawn vehicles and pedestrians. Subway Commissioner Dalton, for example, described the subway as a way to “double” the city’s street space, making two streets out of one. The Rapid Transit Commissioners, in their 1892 report, made a similar statement. Speaking of inadequate streets, they said:

The choice of remedies is small. Increase of capacity is the only effectual one, and this can be had only by widening, which is lateral extension, or by duplicating the surface by raised or depressed subsidiary platforms, which is perpendicular expansion.<sup>2</sup>

In *New England Magazine*, an 1895 article on subways explained that no system of surface transit could have met Boston’s needs, and, therefore, “The logic of the situation compelled a two-story street; but it was disputed whether the added story should be above or under the surface.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts legislature*, Boston, the Commission, 1892, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Foxcroft, “The Boston subway and others,” *New England Magazine*, October 1895, pp. 194-195.

### **8.2.1 Elevated trains**

Elevated roads had been proposed in Boston as early as 1881,<sup>4</sup> and proponents continued to advocate them throughout the years of the subway case study. The Rapid Transit Commission, for example, considered elevated roads one of its primary options, and during its public hearings various people proposed some sort of elevated plan.<sup>5</sup> In 1893 the General Court authorized Boston voters to vote on an elevated railroad, the so-called “alley plan.” Bostonians voted against that particular plan, but in the summer of 1894 the General Court finally authorized a bill providing for both a subway and an elevated railroad, and city voters did approve this joint proposal.

Proposals for elevated roads sometimes were presented as congestion relief, but not always. The primary goal of the roads’ proponents was usually to speed up transportation between downtown and the suburbs. In some cases, a perceived secondary benefit of an elevated railroad in the downtown was the removal of streetcars from the street surface, a result many people believed would relieve congestion. This congestion-relief argument was not made about every elevated plan, however. Elevated roads and ideas about congestion were also connected in the minds of a few people who argued that if the existing streetcars could move quickly through the downtown (in a subway or on an elevated track), then the existing surface streetcars could travel between the downtown and outskirts fast enough to provide “rapid” transportation.

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<sup>4</sup> Committees Massachusetts General Court, *Hearing in the matter of the elevated railroad, opening argument and evidence on the petition of Joe V. Meigs et al.*, 1881.

<sup>5</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Scoot under sidewalk," June 29, 1891, p. 2, and "All a question of time," July 14, 1891, p. 8.

Of the elevated plans, the one that was most obviously debated in terms of whether or not it would provide downtown congestion relief was the alley plan of 1893.<sup>6</sup> It called for a regional elevated railroad that, in the downtown, would run along a new street to be cut between Washington and Tremont. Protest that this particular location would create new congestion came immediately from the editors of the *Herald*,<sup>7</sup> the Citizens' Association,<sup>8</sup> and Mayor Matthews. They all argued that the area between Tremont and Washington was one of the most congested downtown, and that the alley plan would worsen this situation by depositing many additional pedestrians right in the thick of the congestion. Matthews, for example, said:

... the city is not big enough to accommodate the increased crowds. You would simply have more congestion. Instead of relieving it, you would aggravate it. The experience of every other city that has introduced elevated roads have been, not to place the road through the middle of the congestion, along the line of greatest travel, but a little to one side. You will notice that the West Side elevated railroad in Chicago is being laid out, not in the middle of Milwaukee Avenue, but nearly a quarter of a mile away from it. It is better to draw the travel away. The streets between Tremont and Washington are not large enough today for the travel that it is them, and if you would load them with 100,000 or 200,000 passengers more a day, they would be unable to move.<sup>9</sup>

Less than a week later, Matthews gave a long speech before a legislative committee in which he presented his own plan for an elevated road. This plan, Matthews insisted, was offered merely for discussion and not as a final solution. It called for a twelve-mile, two-track elevated railroad running out into the suburbs. In the downtown, the road would run next to Tremont Street, just over the Common. This elevated railroad route was much preferable to a route between Tremont and Washington, Matthews argued, because it would run *alongside* the most congested area instead of right through it. Even

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<sup>6</sup> In this last debate during 1894, it was very clear that the elevated bill was aimed to provide rapid transportation to the suburbs rather than to remove downtown congestion.

<sup>7</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Congesting congestion," March 10, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893, pp. 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Our betterment laws; Mayor Matthews thinks they ought to be changed," March 10, 1893, p. 7.

though Matthews' plan only moved the elevated about a half block over from the alley plan route, he argued that his proposal would reduce rather than increase congestion.<sup>10</sup>

Not everybody agreed with Matthews that moving the elevated over onto Tremont would avoid creating new congestion. Engineer William Jackson, who favored the alley plan, responded to Matthews' proposal with a letter to the *Globe* objecting. Matthews' plan, said Jackson, would add to downtown congestion just as much as a new street between Tremont and Washington. On the question of whether moving the elevated road a half block over would reduce congestion, Jackson said:

His honor says that the streets from which we gain access to this middle way are too narrow and would be congested with the travel getting to it; but these same streets must take the same people to the mayor's way, and all would be going in one direction instead of proceeding by two ways to the center.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately the General Court approved a bill for an elevated road along the "alley plan" route, and sent it to the voters of Boston for approval. The bill was attacked from all sides when it came up for public referendum in the fall of 1893. One major objection, and perhaps the most influential one, was that it would cost an enormous amount. Objections to the plan's cost came from the Citizens' Association,<sup>12</sup> the Associated Board of Trade,<sup>13</sup> Matthews, and the editors of the *Globe* and *Herald*.<sup>14</sup> However, almost all the alley plan's opponents also argued that the route along a new street between Tremont and Washington would increase congestion in the retail district lying along those streets.

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<sup>10</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Hub's spine: Matthews would raise Boston's back bone," March 16 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 2, and "Favors Tremont Street route," March 18 (a.m.), 1893, p. 2; *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Mayor Matthews' plan," March 17, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Post*, "Additional explanations," March 16, 1893.

<sup>11</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Letter to the editor: Common must be preserved," March 25 (a.m.), 1893, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Objections to the bill; Rapid-transit scheme should be rejected," October 28, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Boston Herald*, "To help business; Resolutions adopted by Board of Trade," October 17, 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Not the best plan; Mayor's views of the rapid transit bill," October 27, 1893, "Editorial: Mayor Matthews and rapid transit," October 27, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: Vote 'no' on the rapid transit bill," November 7, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Transcript*, "[Editorial: The citizens of Boston will be . . .]," October 27, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: Much too costly a scheme," October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 4.

Matthews, in a speech at the Merchants' Association where he attacked the alley plan on many fronts, argued that the bill wouldn't help with the city's congestion problem:

Its chief disadvantage, considered from the transportation standpoint merely, is that it would tend to aggravate and increase the existing congestion of travel in the business section of the city. Additional crowds would be poured on the narrow sidewalks of the cross streets between Washington and Tremont Streets; and if the road were to succeed in carrying a larger number of passengers daily, that is, in really giving rapid transit between Charlestown and Roxbury, this result would be attained only by increasing very much the congestion of trade and travel in that section of the city that lies between Causeway and Eliot Streets.<sup>15</sup>

Other opponents echoed Matthews' perception that the plan would increase congestion. The businessmen of the Citizens' Association prepared a public statement of their opposition to the rapid transit bill, which was published in the *Transcript*. The association acknowledged that the city needed relief from the overcrowding of its streets, but listed eight objections to the bill at hand. Among these, they argued that it would add additional people and activity to the over-crowded streets without removing any of the surface streetcars. (A better plan, argued the association, would situate new transit lines so as to draw business and traffic away from the crowded areas.)<sup>16</sup> The Associated Board of Trade unanimously adopted a resolution opposing the bill, registering particular opposition to the designated route between Tremont and Washington Streets. The board felt the route would not materially improve traffic conditions because the existing surface cars would remain.<sup>17</sup> The *Herald's* editors told voters to vote "no" because the plan "will

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<sup>15</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Not the best plan; Mayor's views of the rapid transit bill," October 27, 1893

<sup>16</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Objections to the bill; Rapid-transit scheme should be rejected," October 28, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Boston Herald*, "To help business; Resolutions adopted by Board of Trade," October 17, 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

increase the congestion in our streets.”<sup>18</sup> The *Globe*'s editors advised its readers that Matthews was correct to argue that the alley plan would not reduce congestion.<sup>19</sup>

The alley plan for an elevated road was somewhat unusual in that it received a fair amount of criticism (as well as some support) based on perceptions about its effects on congestion. The question of how well it would reduce congestion received more widespread attention than did any of the street widening plans in the 1890s, though the congestion issue did also come up somewhat often during the 1893 and 1894 debates about the subway.

### **8.2.2 Subways**

Various versions of a subway were proposed throughout the early and mid-1890s. The Rapid Transit Commission heard plans for such schemes during its public hearings, and ultimately included subways for both streetcars and elevated trains as part of its 1892 plan. In 1893, the General Court passed a bill for a subway under Tremont Street. Perceptions about this last plan, which was debated in 1894 and ultimately approved by voters, are the subject matter of this section.

The wide range of individuals and groups who supported the subway plan in 1893 and 1894 based their advocacy around the claim that the subway would relieve congestion. These supporters generally claimed that subways had two main advantages in terms of congestion relief. First, putting the cars underground would eliminate interference from pedestrians and horse-drawn vehicles, thus speeding up streetcar service. When the subway bill came up for city council approval in December of 1893,

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<sup>18</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Mayor Matthews and rapid transit," October 27, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: Vote 'no' on the rapid transit bill," November 7, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: Much too costly a scheme," October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 4.



the *Herald's* editors initially praised the plan on this account (though they were later to change their minds), saying:

The great service of the subway, however, will lie in the speedy means for passing through the congested district, which it will furnish, a passage whose tediousness constitutes one of the greatest annoyances to which the people of Boston are now subject.<sup>20</sup>

The *Transcript*, for its part, ran an editorial entitled "What the subway is," explaining that a subway speeded up traffic by separating modes, just as sidewalks improved carriage speeds by removing pedestrians from the roadways:

In some of the old cities of Europe busy streets may still be seen without sidewalks, the pedestrians being mixed indiscriminately with the vehicles. The result, of course, is a detention of carriages, which are unable to proceed faster than a walk, and a danger to foot passengers. A division of the foot and carriage traffic by the adoption of sidewalks is an advantage which is clear to everyone. A further division of the traffic by placing street cars in a lower story of the street, where they cannot possibly conflict with the vehicles, or run down foot passengers, and where they may proceed much more rapidly than upon the surface, is obviously as advantageous in its way as the construction of sidewalks in order to separate foot passengers from the vehicles.<sup>21</sup>

In 1894 the subway commissioners made a similar argument,<sup>22</sup> while Matthews, for his part, said:

This subway would, of course, be free entirely from all blockades, and the numerous temporary delays caused by teams, by the presence of snow and ice and by the slipping of the cars upon the rails in wet weather, would be done away with, the number of stops would be diminished by at least one-half . . . We shall show to your satisfaction that . . . the time of transit will be reduced from two-thirds to one-half of the present time.<sup>23</sup>

The *Advertiser's* editors predicted that the subway should reduce "blockades" by three-quarters.<sup>24</sup> The *Globe's* editors were only lukewarm in their support, but they did once say, "If that subway was only in operation today what a multitude might journey in peace

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<sup>20</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The Tremont Street subway," December 21, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: What the subway is," December 21, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Editorial: That subway rental," January 27, 1894, p. 4.

and comparative comfort who now must take to the streets if they wish to get anywhere in less than 60 minutes by the clock.”<sup>25</sup>

However, a few people countered that the subway would not, as claimed, speed up service. The most common explanation for this claim was that congestion was caused by interference among the streetcars themselves, rather than interference by horse-drawn vehicles; putting the streetcars underground wouldn’t improve congestion, since the streetcars would delay each other in the subway as much as they did on the surface. This argument was made repeatedly by the editors of the *Herald*,<sup>26</sup> by Tremont Street merchants who were worried about losing business during the subway’s construction, and by a couple of anonymous letter writers to the *Transcript* and *Herald*.<sup>27</sup>

Subway supporters argued that a second way in which their plan would improve congestion was by removing streetcars from the surface, which they perceived as one of main causes of street-level congestion affecting other street users. Herbert Harding of the Citizens’ Association testified that the subway would “restore the surface of Tremont St. to its proper and normal use for pedestrians and vehicles other than street cars,”<sup>28</sup> and Matthews and the Subway Commissioners used similar language numerous times.<sup>29</sup> President Samuel B. Capen of the Boston Municipal League said that, in his opinion,

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<sup>25</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial: If that subway was only in operation today . . .," December 19 (a.m.), 1893, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: The advantages of tunnels," February 21, 1893, p. 6, "Editorial: Improved but not rapid transit," December 27, 1893, p. 4, "Editorial: The sidewalk congestion," February 12, 1894, p. 4, and "Editorial: The subway and rapid transit," March 10, 1894, p. 4. In one case, however, the editors appear to argue that the subway *would* speed up streetcars. *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The Tremont street subway," December 21, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: It seems to me . . .," December 30, 1893, p. 6; *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: A rapid transit suggestion," February 16, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 15 vols., Boston, the General Court, 1894, Vol. 5, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> For example: *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The mayor's 'New Year,'" January 2, 1893, p. 1; Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894, pp. 3-4.

removing the streetcars in the congested area would make the streets much safer.<sup>30</sup>

Lamont Burnham, president of the Board of Trade and a coal merchant whose business relied heavily on delivery teams within the downtown, testified that the subway would be one strategy to remove the congestion that interfered with teams.<sup>31</sup>

A few subway opponents, on the other hand, contended that far from relieving traffic congestion, the Tremont Street plan would actually increase congestion. This argument came from people who believed that concentration of activity downtown caused congestion. They feared the subway (like the alley plan) would worsen congestion by concentrating yet more activity into the already overcrowded downtown. For example, one mechanic testified in 1894 that he believed concentration of business activity to be the main cause of congestion, and thus he opposed a subway that would bring yet more people into the area around Tremont and Washington. (He instead preferred a “broad avenue” that would send people around the congested district.) The fact that a real estate businessman had argued that the subway would increase property values along its line, the speaker argued, was evidence that the subway would add to congestion.<sup>32</sup> The *Herald's* editors implied the same perception in an editorial on “The sidewalk congestion,” where they argued that the overcrowded sidewalks on Tremont and Washington were the downtown’s real congestion problem, and the only realistic solution would be to move the center of retail trade to some new area. Though the editors didn’t

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<sup>30</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 7, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>32</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, Vol. 9, pp. 70-71.

actually say so directly, they implied that a Tremont Street subway would have discouraged such relocation and thus failed to reduce congestion.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, there was both support and widespread opposition to the subway on grounds that had nothing to do with congestion. Some subway supporters argued that the plan would help provide rapid transit, either by providing a route for an elevated line to take through the downtown, or else by speeding up existing surface transit enough to make for satisfactory speeds out to the suburbs. A few people also mentioned that the subway would provide jobs (sorely needed, as the country was sliding into a depression), but this argument actually came up surprisingly infrequently. Much of the opposition came from people who preferred some alternative scheme, such as Joe V. Meigs, who wanted permission to build an elevated system. The West End changed its position on a subway constantly, but mostly opposed any subway that it would not build itself—though the company didn't seem genuinely eager to build one, either. More opposition came from individuals who supported schemes for street widenings, elevated trains, or rearrangements of the surface tracks that they felt would make the subway unnecessary. In 1894, some of the most organized opposition came from a group of Tremont Street merchants who feared that the subway construction process would keep customers away and ruin their businesses. The *Herald* mostly opposed the subway, perceiving that it would not reduce congestion downtown much.

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<sup>33</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The subway project," February 13, 1894, p. 4.

### 8.3 Proposed street improvements in the 1890s

For the many people in the 1890s who perceived the city's narrow and crooked streets to be the cause of its traffic congestion, street improvements were a logical solution to propose.<sup>34</sup> Suggested improvements ranged from widening or extending existing streets, to taking private property to build an entirely new street. However, even though numerous people proposed major street widenings either as an independent solution or as part of a larger comprehensive set of policies, no major street improvements were ever implemented.

Street improvements were a popular topic throughout the country in the 1890s. People looked to a couple of models at the time. Some wanted to increase use of the grid pattern, which had been adopted in New York City in the early nineteenth century, to much acclaim. The grid pattern was perceived to provide good, functional streets. Others looked to the grand boulevards of European cities and wanted to cut such sweeping arterials through existing cities, often to provide a diagonal counterpart to any existing grids. These diagonals were proposed both as efficient transportation and also as civic embellishments to a city. Bostonians did not specifically refer to either the grid or diagonal boulevard theories in their own debates, but at least some of the participants would have been aware of them. In their own proposals, the Bostonians were probably most influenced by the more pragmatic writers who emphasized efficient transportation. Almost none of the participants spoke about street improvements in terms of civic

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<sup>34</sup> I have looked only at proposals for major street improvements intended to have area-wide effects on congestion. During the years of the case studies, the city continued to make modest improvements to its streets, with funding from annual appropriations and the state-allowed debt. These improvements, however, were for the most part conceived, debated, financed, and implemented separately from the larger public debate over Boston's downtown congestion problem and the projects discussed in this chapter.

beautification, despite the fact that the Columbian exposition of 1893, which publicized this approach to city planning, was well publicized in the local papers and many Bostonians made the trip to visit it.

Many people proposed street widenings throughout the early and mid-1890s. These included numerous individuals who testified at public hearing and wrote letters to the newspapers, as well as most of the major players in the transportation debates. The Rapid Transit Commission's 1892 report called for extensive street widenings, and Rapid Transit Commission member James B. Richardson wrote in his dissenting report that the commission's proposed elevated railroad would probably be unnecessary if the city widened and extended streets in combination with improving its traffic regulations and rearranging the steam railroad terminals.<sup>35</sup> The legislative rapid transit committee of 1893 held special hearings to discuss the Rapid Transit Commission's street widening plans,<sup>36</sup> and Mayor Matthews had the city's Street Commission draw up a major plan of street widenings at the same time.<sup>37</sup> The Citizens' Association recommended street widenings on the condition that they be combined with other strategies,<sup>38</sup> and the *Herald's* editors twice spoke approvingly of street improvement plans.<sup>39</sup>

By far the strongest supporters of street improvements were the teamsters. Members of the teaming industry discussed their views on what caused congestion only infrequently, but when they did, they usually mentioned inadequate streets. Thus, it is

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<sup>35</sup> James B. Richardson, "Dissenting report of commissioner Richardson on elevated railroad routes," in Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "At the state house," February 8, 1890, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Make a new city: Big scheme in streets sent to legislature," February 8 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>38</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fourth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1892, p. 68; Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893, pp. 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The rapid transit report," April 6, 1892, p. 6, "Editorial: Street improvements," February 10, 1893, p. 6.

logical that they would have perceived street widening plans as good congestion relief policy. Street widening plans were also the only congestion relief policy that they consistently and energetically pursued. Though they signed petitions requesting that the city council reduce the number of streetcar tracks downtown, they never appeared to be particularly prominent supporters of the initiative. It also makes sense that they would have supported street widening, since such projects would not have had any negative impact on them. (They did, on the other hand, strongly oppose all efforts to improve congestion by regulating teamsters' behavior.)

The strongest evidence that the teamsters perceived street widening as beneficial was the energy with which they supported such plans, appearing frequently to speak at public hearings. In January of 1893, the Master Teamsters' Association sent its counsel before the legislative rapid transit committee to request the widening of a designated group of streets, as well as any other street improvements that would "tend to facilitate the rapid and economical transfer of merchandise."<sup>40</sup> When Matthews released his own street widening plan a couple of weeks later, the teamsters protested to the committee that the plan didn't include particular projects the teamsters wanted.<sup>41</sup> The next year, the teamsters sent a member to a police board hearing to testify that the police were already enforcing city regulations effectively, and that only better streets would improve congestion.<sup>42</sup>

The teamsters did not limit themselves to public advocacy, however. Not only did newspapers from the era describe the teamsters' direct participation in public hearings,

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<sup>40</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Broad avenues: First step toward rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "The mayor's plan: How he would secure rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Boston Globe*, "To raise blockades: Police commissioners give a hearing on the matter and hear some practical suggestions," June 23, 1894, p. 9.

but they also reported on individuals and groups who described teamster advocacy outside the public arena. For example, an 1892 message Matthews sent to the city council referenced the demands of the teaming interests for better streets,<sup>43</sup> and the Citizens' Association in an 1893 report referred to a "strong effort" by the teamsters and others to permit or compel the city to spend \$10 to \$12 million on street widenings.<sup>44</sup> When the Rapid Transit Commission and Matthews put forward street improvement plans, they specifically mentioned how these would benefit the teamsters, indicating that the industry's lobbying efforts were on going and influential.

The Rapid Transit Commission advocated major street improvements in its 1892 report. Unlike the teamsters who seemed content to advocate just for street improvements, however, the Rapid Transit Commission perceived street widenings as essential, but only part of a comprehensive strategy. The commissioners had not originally intended to look at street widenings, but ultimately decided it was necessary that they do so. The commission argued that Boston's streets were inadequate, and that increasing their capacity was the only "effectual" remedy for the city's transportation problems. Widened and straightened streets, the commission believed, were needed not only to provide horse-drawn vehicles with more road space, but also because the existing narrow and crooked streets could not accommodate elevated railroads.

The commissioners' discussion of street widenings is a useful summary of the most important perceptions about street widenings then present among community members. Their report raised all of the key ideas that were applied to widening proposals during the

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<sup>43</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 166: Message of the Mayor in relation to widening of Water Street," in *Documents of the City of Boston for 1892*, 1892, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893, p. 13.



1890s, such as perceptions about why past widenings hadn't been useful, the kind of widening plan the city should adopt, and the difficulties with financing major street improvement plans.

The Rapid Transit Commission emphasized several times that widenings would relieve congestion only if done as part of a comprehensive plan of street improvements. As evidence for this argument, the commission pointed to the city's history of "piecemeal" widenings that, despite having cost a reported \$37 million in land damages alone, hadn't achieved much congestion relief. Speaking of past widenings, the commission said that:

[T]he chief reason was that the attacks have in great part been isolated both in time and place, instead of combined and continuous, and guided by a single and clearly-defined purpose. The Commission were impressed with the importance of framing and adhering to, a uniform policy in dealing with this part of their task, and this policy it seemed to them should be rather to concentrate their effort upon a few arterial avenues than to dissipate their strength in scattered attempts to give a little relief at a great many disconnected points. To try, in a word, as far as they went, to effect a cure rather than apply a palliative.<sup>45</sup>

A few other people also argued that only a comprehensive system of street improvements would improve congestion. This perception was expressed by former Boston mayor Thomas N. Hart,<sup>46</sup> in a *Transcript* editorial commenting on a plan for a new street between Washington and Tremont,<sup>47</sup> by Matthews when commenting on a plan to widen Water Street,<sup>48</sup> and in a *New York Times* article about a street widening plan for Boston.<sup>49</sup>

The fact that some people were calling for comprehensive street plans shows that they were familiar with the literature of the nascent planning movement, which

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<sup>45</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 47.

<sup>46</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Views on street widening: Several Ex-Mayors of Boston give their opinions on the subject," January 26, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Mr. Robert Treat Paine's proposed . . .," November 4, 1893, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 166: Message of the Mayor in relation to widening of Water Street," in *Documents of the City of Boston for 1892*, 1892.

<sup>49</sup> *New York Times*, "Problems in Boston streets," September 18, 1892, p. 14.

emphasized the importance of thinking systematically about a city's streets. Many of those writers focused on the need for a comprehensive approach to street planning, combining a grid plan combined with wide diagonal roads for traffic moving longer distances.<sup>50</sup> Boston's street improvement proponents didn't take this particular approach—probably because the street pattern downtown was so highly irregular that thinking in terms of grids and diagonals didn't make much sense—but the people who advocated a comprehensive approach must have absorbed the more fundamental perception that streets improvements needed to be considered systematically.

The Rapid Transit Commission's specific proposed street improvements was to widen Tremont in order to provide the city with one "ample" street running through the center of the congested district, from north to south. The proposal called for taking land from the Common. Because so much of Bostonians' concern over congestion focused on north-south travel, widening Tremont and Washington Streets were two projects that were often considered. However, in the case of Washington, the property on both sides of the street was so expensive that the cost of condemning it was perceived by policy makers to be prohibitive. Tremont would have been much cheaper to widen, since the city-owned Common bound it on one side, so this idea attracted more attention.

Widening Tremont into the Common was proposed over the years by many people beyond the Rapid Transit Commission, including former mayors Thomas N. Hart and Hugh O'Brien,<sup>51</sup> the editors of the *Herald*,<sup>52</sup> Subway Commissioner Charles H. Dalton,<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For early writers calling for planned street systems, see, for example: *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, "On the best arrangement of city streets," April, 1877, p. 252-257; *Engineering News*, "Diagonal avenues in cities," October 10, 1891, p. 334-35; Josef Stübgen, "Practical and aesthetic principles for the laying out of cities," *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers (advance copy)*, Vol. 29, 1893.

<sup>51</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Views on street widening: Several Ex-Mayors of Boston give their opinions on the subject," January 26, 1893, p. 5.

and dozens of individuals speaking at public hearings or writing letters to the newspapers.<sup>54</sup> However, enough Boston citizens protested any use of the Common for transportation purposes that widening Tremont into the park proved impossible. As described in Chapter 4, a wide variety of associations and individuals rallied against any use of the Common. Indeed, the Rapid Transit Commission was concerned enough about this opposition to spend a full three pages of its report explaining why using the Common to widen streets would be justified, despite the land's traditional role as open space.<sup>55</sup> The *Transcript's* editors were also ardent defenders of the Common. In fact, the editors' vehement opposition to any street widening that would take part of the Common obscured their opinions on the value of street improvements for congestion relief. When comprehensive street widenings were proposed (such as by the Rapid Transit Commission, or by Matthews and the street commissioners in early 1893), the editors focused exclusively on their objections to using the Common and expressed no opinion whatsoever on whether or not the widenings would relieve congestion.<sup>56</sup>

Another concern about how well street widenings might relieve congestion, which was raised by the Rapid Transit Commission,<sup>57</sup> was a perception that street widenings would be useless if the West End railroad were allowed to put tracks into the improved streets. This perception was expressed several more times during the following years. In 1893, Matthews and the Street Commissioners both stressed that the comprehensive

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<sup>52</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Defenders of the common," February 11, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "The subway: Expert testimony in its favor," March 19, 1894, pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Rapid transit: The order of the day on Beacon Hill," January 27, 1893, p. 5. *Boston Herald*, "For wider streets; Mayor Matthews' plan for rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 1, and "Letter to the editor: Plan for rapid transit," March 13, 1893, p. 7; *Boston Transcript*, "The subway project: Continued hearing at the State House," March 6, 1894, p. 1; *Boston Post*, "Letter to the editor: Save the Common," February 14, 1893, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 54-57.

<sup>56</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The rapid transit report," April 5, 1892, p. 4, "Editorial: Rapid transit," January 26, 1893, p. 4, and "Editorial: The mayor and the common," February 13, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 64.

street widening plan they proposed would fail to improve congestion if the surface tracks in the downtown weren't rearranged and reduced. The Street Commissioners, for example, said:

. . . we desire emphatically to approve the stand taken in the report of the Rapid Transit Commission, that money expended in extensive street widenings in the heart of the city would be practically thrown away unless such improvements are accomplished by a complete readjustment of the track surface of the street-railway company.<sup>58</sup>

Parker Chandler, in proposing a new street, also said that whatever the route, any new street running north-south would be “unsatisfactory” unless the streetcars were removed from both Tremont and Washington.<sup>59</sup>

Bostonians had reason to fear that newly widened streets would simply fill up with additional streetcar tracks. For decades they had seen more and more of the tracks encroach on their streets. And since many people perceived the streetcars as a primary cause of traffic congestion, they would have assumed that if any new streets acquired tracks, these too would quickly become congested.

The real reason that a major street improvement like widening Tremont was never undertaken had nothing to do with perceptions about congestion, however—it was cost. The Rapid Transit Commission estimated that the total cost of its proposed street improvements would be \$12 to \$15 million dollars, an amount that it acknowledged the city couldn't afford under its existing system of street finance. At the time, the city's system of street finance allowed it to assess part of the cost of improvements against abutting landowners, whose property was assumed to gain value after the improvement. However, given the way these “betterment” laws were set up, the city only recouped a fraction of its costs. (From 1886 to 1891, for example, Boston succeeded in recovering

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<sup>58</sup> *Boston Herald*, "For wider streets; Mayor Matthews' plan for rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Another thoroughfare; Avenue between Washington and Tremont streets," March 9, 1893, p. 7.

only 8% of its street improvement costs through betterment assessments.<sup>60</sup>) Soon after the Rapid Transit Commission's report came out, Matthews argued that spending \$15 million on street widening was not unreasonable, given that city had spent \$40 million on street improvements since its incorporation in 1822.<sup>61</sup> However, the high cost of street improvements downtown remained a real barrier to such plans, being raised at various times by many other people.<sup>62</sup> The Rapid Transit Commission and Matthews suggested that the state allow the city to increase the money the city could assess against abutters, or that the city be allowed to use a system called excess condemnation, but neither of these proposals attracted favorable attention. Thus, the city would have had to pay itself for any major street widening program.

## 8.4 The loop highway – street widening in the 1920s

While plans for major street widenings were of only secondary interest in the 1890s as a way to relieve congestion, street improvements were the focus of debate in the 1920s. During the mid-1920s, the loop highway received far more attention from the press than any other proposed remedy for traffic congestion, and the Boston City Planning Board and General Court studied it more carefully than any other proposal. Also, numerous individuals and organizations participated in the official policy discussions about it. Despite the fact that the highway was ultimately rejected by the General Court in the spring of 1926, most of the press coverage of the debates was highly

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<sup>60</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 59.

<sup>61</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Boston interests: Considered by her business men," April 19, 1892.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example: John Davis Long, *Argument of Hon. John D. Long on behalf of the petition of the West End Street Railway, for authority to construct elevated roads*, April 8, Boston, Daniel Gunn and Company, 1890, p. 3; Osborne Howes, Jr., *Report on the transportation of passengers in and around the cities of Europe, made by Osborne Howes, Jr., to the Rapid Transit Commission of the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston, November 10, 1891*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1891, p. 47; *Boston Transcript*, "The subway plan," February 28, 1894, p. 8.

favorable, and supporters far outnumbered opponents at many of the legislative hearings. The following discussion begins with an explanation of the “theory” advocated by those who thought the loop highway would help to solve congestion. Following this description of the proponents is a similar look at the opponents and their perceptions of the loop highway.

While no major capital plans competed with the loop highway for support, the idea of creating more restrictive parking regulations received sustained attention, even if nowhere near as much as the loop highway. In many cases parking regulations were discussed on their own, without being connected to the loop highway, but some people compared the two as alternatives. This chapter looks only at discussions about the loop highway, however, without mention of the comments on parking that were occasionally brought up in the same discussions. The debate over parking policy, including the argument that parking regulations might make the loop highway unnecessary, is covered in the next chapter.

#### ***8.4.1 The theory behind the loop***

The perceived rationale for building the loop highway was that Boston streets were congested because the downtown had insufficient street space for traffic moving north and south. The City Planning Board, which prepared the original plan for the loop highway, argued that the thoroughfare would address a number of different congestion problems—among other benefits, the loop highway would provide a good approach to the Charles River Dam from the business district, a better route for freight vehicles

traveling from the North to South railroad stations, and relief from congestion in the market and retail districts.<sup>63</sup>

The most often repeated explanation of why the loop highway would reduce traffic congestion was that it would divert regional through-traffic from the congested downtown streets. The system of regional arterial streets radiated out from downtown Boston like the spokes of a wheel (see Figure 4.2). As a result, people traveling from one part of the region to another were often forced to pass through the downtown. With the loop highway, regional traffic would no longer have to use the congested local streets to pass through the downtown. Not only would the loop speed up travel for these long distance travelers by providing them with a wide, new road, but by taking them off the congested downtown streets, it would also free up space on the existing streets for vehicles only traveling short distances. The Boston City Planning Board explained this idea in its original plan, saying that its analysis of traffic led it “to adopt the theory that through traffic should be led around, not through, the present most congested area.”<sup>64</sup> The board noted that Nelson P. Lewis, a transportation expert hired to comment on the plan, was “impressed” with this argument.<sup>65</sup>

The Boston Chamber of Commerce frequently repeated the argument that the loop highway would provide a new route for through traffic, thereby decreasing congestion on existing streets. Even before the chamber decided to back the loop plan wholeheartedly, it supported this theory of congestion relief. In March of 1924, when the chamber was arguing that the plan should receive further study before being approved, *Current Affairs*

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<sup>63</sup> *Boston City Record*, “New two-mile thoroughfare through downtown section proposed to aid traffic,” December 22, 1923, pp. 1741 & 1745.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Tenth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1924*, 1924, p. 67.

printed an editorial supporting the concept of the loop highway. The editors spoke of their “strong and unqualified support” for the loop highway in principle, though they believed in taking more time to “perfect” the details of the route and a financing scheme.

They said:

There was one outstanding feature of the legislative hearing held last week on the Intermediate Street and Related Widening proposed by the Boston City Planning Board. Not one dissenting voice was raised against the fundamental theory of the proposal. This theory is that traffic should be carried around the business district instead of through it and this diverting route should have satisfactory communication with the district. Team and truck owners, real estate interests, wholesalers and retailers admitted that they knew of no better way.<sup>66</sup>

In February of 1925, the legislative Special Commission appointed to study the plan released a report in which the commission took the opposite approach. The commission argued that the highway would chiefly be used by local traffic confined to the business district, rather than by long-distance traffic passing through the downtown. In other words, the Special Commission believed that the loop would primarily distribute traffic to different sections of the downtown rather than serve long-distance regional travel. Therefore, since most traffic would not be traveling the entire length of the loop highway, it would be practical to begin by building only the most useful segments of the highway, leaving other portions to be built later. The board suggested postponing a portion of the loop highway because they believed that there were other, more pressing street improvements to be made with the limited funds available, though it agreed that in the long run the entire highway should be constructed.<sup>67</sup> After vehement protest from the City Planning Board, Chamber of Commerce, and other interest groups, the Special Commission agreed to support building the entire loop at once, though its December

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<sup>66</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: The Intermediate Street - Now or next year?," March 17, 1924, p. 8-9. The chamber repeated this argument at various other times over the following year, such as in: *Current Affairs*, "Chamber again urges loop highway," October 19, 1925, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, "House Document No. 1160: Further report of the Special Commission," in *Massachusetts Legislative Documents*, Boston, 1925.



report reiterated the argument that the road would primarily be used for local rather than regional travel.<sup>68</sup>

#### **8.4.2 Loop highway supporters**

The most active support for the loop highway came from the Boston City Planning Board, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Special Commission. Nevertheless, the loop highway was also supported by a number of other individuals, businesses, and interest groups. The business and civic groups that formally endorsed the project at least once included the Affiliated Technical Societies of Boston, Boston Central Labor Union, Boston Fruit and Produce Exchange, Boston Motor Truck Club, Boston Real Estate Exchange,<sup>69</sup> Boston Society of Architects, Boston Society of Landscape Architects, Expressmen's League, Massachusetts Real Estate Exchange, Master Builders' Association, Metropolitan Garage Association, Retail Trade Board, Team Owners Association, United Improvement Association, and Women's Municipal League. Individual firms whose representatives spoke in favor included Batchelder and Snyder, the Boston and Maine Railroad, the Jordan Marsh department store, and the Merchants' National Bank. Individuals in support included businessman Howard Coonley, Boston Mayor Curley, engineering consultant General Goethals, planning consultant Nelson Lewis, and banking and financial interests representative Bentley W. Warren. Two public agencies that provided support were the Metropolitan District Commission's Division of Metropolitan Planning and Boston's Advisory Committee on Public

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<sup>68</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement.

<sup>69</sup> In the spring of 1926, the Boston Real Estate Exchange withdrew its support, apparently because opinions among its membership had become divided.

Improvements. Finally, the *Herald*, *Transcript*, and *Post* all published editorials favoring the loop highway.<sup>70</sup>

A frequent argument made in favor of the loop highway was that the project enjoyed near-unanimous support within the business community. In early December of 1923, before the City Planning Board officially released the plan, board member William Stanley Parker stated that “delegations representing approximately all business and other organizations of Boston had been consulted with reference to the location of the proposed new thoroughfare and that all were in accord with the necessity for the same.”<sup>71</sup> A week later, when the plan was presented to the public, the *Transcript* highlighted this point, reporting that the board said the highway had:

. . . been discussed with no less than twenty civic, business and professional groups in the city, and it is the consensus of opinion that it is a city-wide rather than a local improvement and that the entire business district will derive a “direct, substantial and accessible benefit there-from.”<sup>72</sup>

Over the next few years the *Transcript* continued to argue that the city’s interest groups unanimously supported the loop. For example, in March of 1925, after the legislative hearing to discuss the Special Commission’s proposal to build only sections of the loop highway, the *Transcript* printed an editorial commenting on the all-encompassing support:

Despite all the apparent confusion, despite all the important variations as to detail advanced by the numerous large interests represented at the hearing, one thing seemed certain, “There has been a landslide for the thoroughfare.” In other words, the plan to build a new wide street looping around the entire downtown district from the Charles River Dam to Haymarket Square . . . has gathered as widespread support as the Exchange Street plan has encountered widespread opposition. . . . [I]t was astounding to see how many representative citizens and interests of this conservative city were prepared to support the loop thoroughfare almost in its entirety.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The *Globe* published no editorials on the loop highway, either in support or opposition.

<sup>71</sup> *Boston City Record*, “Proposed new \$35,000,000 highway through city to relieve traffic,” December 8, 1923, p. 1685.

<sup>72</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board,” December 17, 1923, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Editorial: ‘A landslide for the loop,’” March 14, 1925, p. III-2.

The paper made similar statements in 1925 and 1926.<sup>74</sup>

The following March, *Current Affairs* published an editorial on the loop highway after a legislative hearing in which the Chamber of Commerce had advocated further study of the project. Despite this hesitation, the editorial emphasized that the plan was a good one that had widespread support from team and truck owners, real estate businesses, wholesalers, and retailers. The editors asked, "Is it too much to assume that for the first time there has been born an unanimity of opinion on the solution of the traffic problem of Boston?" They concluded that the only differences of opinion were over whether the bill was ready at once, or still needed to be perfected.<sup>75</sup> In 1925, after the "compromise plan" had been completed, the magazine noted that, "Rarely has such a united stand in favor of a large project of this nature been made before Legislative Committees."<sup>76</sup>

Despite these claims of great unity, in the spring of 1925 an article published in the *Transcript* suggested a somewhat different picture: agreement among private interest groups, but not among the members of the Special Commission. On April 8, after the Joint Legislative Committees on Municipal Finance and Metropolitan Affairs voted to study the loop highway plan for another year, the paper printed an article signed by one "Howie." He reported that the commission members had been unable to agree on a plan, and that although they had signed the recent report, they were in disagreement about many of its details. He said:

As the hearings progressed, the difficulties were ironed out, not so much because of the work of this commission but because of the efforts of the various groups interested. The members of the Legislature now say that if this commission could not agree after months of study, it is expecting too much to ask the Legislature to understand the situation and agree in a few short weeks, only

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<sup>74</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Start the thoroughfare at once," April 8, 1925, p. II-2, and "Editorial: The law for the loop," April 28, 1926, p. II-2.

<sup>75</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: The Intermediate Street - Now or next year," March 17, 1924, pp. 8-9.

<sup>76</sup> *Current Affairs*, "United aid for compromise plan," April 6, 1925, pp. 5+.

a small part of which would be given over to study of the problem because of the press of other legislation.<sup>77</sup>

### **8.4.3 Opposition to the loop**

“Howie’s” warning of trouble to come was apt. While the concept of the loop highway was directly opposed by only a handful of people, these were powerful opponents. The most instrumental were State Representative Henry Shattuck and Mayor Malcolm Nichols, with Special Commissioner Charles Carr being another vocal opponent. Other individuals who objected, though likely with less political impact, were Boston ward boss Martin Lomasney and several consulting engineers. In 1926, the Boston Real Estate Exchange also withdrew its support for the loop.

All of the loop highway opponents agreed that congestion was a problem that the city should try to address, but disagreed that the loop highway was the best approach. Most of their arguments had nothing to do with its congestion-relief potential. The biggest objection they raised was cost—they felt the city couldn’t (or shouldn’t) issue bonds to fund such an expensive project. They also raised objections to various proposed alternative finance mechanisms, such as betterment assessments.<sup>78</sup> Some of the proposed routes also upset the Boston Real Estate Exchange and financial community, which didn’t want any changes in the financial district that would have increased vehicle traffic

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<sup>77</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Vote to postpone loop thoroughfare for another year," April 8, 1925, p. 14.

<sup>78</sup> For various examples of opponents arguing that the loop highway was too expensive, see: *Boston Transcript*, "Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive," March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6, "Nichols is not ready to support 'loop' highway," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5, and "Reconsideration of loop highway refused, 64 to 110," April 30, 1926, pp. 1 & 7; *Boston Herald*, "\$25,000,000 street plan finds favor," February 14, 1925, pp. 1 & 2, "\$28,000,000 street loop plan strikes snag in Legislature," March 19, 1925, p. 2, and "Urge value of in-town 'loop' thoroughfare," April 1, 1925, pp. 1 & 3; *Boston Globe*, "'Loop' measure killed by House," April 30 (p.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 11, and "Merchants ask loop highway," October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

in the surrounding area.<sup>79</sup> Martin Lomasney argued that the loop highway route was undesirable because it would condemn land on which many and small businesses were located. He did not use this as an argument against building a highway at all, however, but proposed an alternative route.<sup>80</sup> Finally, Shattuck, Lomasney, and a few others contested the claim that the larger business community supported the loop.

Even if most opposition to the loop had nothing to do with congestion, there were occasional objections that dealt directly with issues of congestion. The most prominent of these was that the city should first try stricter parking regulations, to see if these could improve traffic congestion enough to make the (expensive) loop unnecessary. Shattuck<sup>81</sup> and Nichols<sup>82</sup> both stressed this point. The next chapter discusses in more detail their argument that the city should try changing its parking regulations before committing to the loop .

A handful of people also criticized the loop highway on the grounds that it would actually fail to relieve congestion, but these arguments never became part of the wider community debate. Also, in some cases speakers who made this claim did so once, but failed to press it over time. The fact that there was not sustained discussion of these perceptions (either in support or opposition) indicates that they were not widely shared and not central to the loop highway debates. For example Shattuck, in a letter to the

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<sup>79</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Battle opens over new city traffic artery," March 11, 1925, pp. 1 & 4. The exchange was joined in these objections by Bentley W. Warren, who presented a petition that he said was signed by 352 real estate owners in the financial district. The route for that area was changed, however, and the exchange supported the new plan. *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Start the thoroughfare at once," April 8, 1925, p. II-2; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor Curley commits city; Early start on great work is now planned," March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 12.

<sup>80</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Alternative 'loop' highway proposed," March 19, 1926, p. 4; *Boston Post*, "Lomasney raps loop highway," March 19, 1926, p. 17, and "Changes for loop highway," March 23, 1926, p. 9; *Boston Herald*, "Spare North End, Lomasney pleads on loop," March [23?], 1926

<sup>81</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Car-rider or automobilist?," March 18, 1925, p. II-2, and "Delay on Loop Highway sought by house leaders," April 29, 1926, p. 12; *Boston Globe*, "Merchants ask loop highway," October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Nichols is not ready to support 'loop' highway," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5.

*Transcript*, argued that the loop's own supporters said the highway would be only a partial solution to the downtown traffic congestion problem. Shattuck did not elaborate on the point, however, and never made it again in his later opposition to the plan, at least as reported in the press.<sup>83</sup> (He instead continued to press his objections to the financial issues.)

One early critic was consulting planner Thomas Adams. He had been asked by the City Planning Board to comment on its plans for the region. Adams did not oppose the loop highway by name, but he warned Bostonians that any attempts to deal with congestion were doomed to fail if the plans didn't take into account regional employment and housing patterns (which the loop highway study certainly did not do). Since his report was published around the time the loop highway was first proposed, his remarks must have been at least partially directed to that proposal.<sup>84</sup>

Several others went a step farther than arguing that the loop might fail to reduce congestion, warning that the project might actually increase traffic congestion over time. Charles L. Carr and Mayor Nichols based their arguments on the perception that any project that increased the concentration of activity downtown would worsen congestion. Carr, who joined the Special Commission after it had issued its February 1925 report, refused to sign the majority report issued in December 1925. He wrote a minority opinion, arguing that the loop highway would increase traffic congestion and therefore should not be built. The route would create a short-term improvement in traffic congestion, he said, but this would encourage a greater concentration of economic

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<sup>83</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Car-rider or automobilist," March 18, 1925, p. II-2.

<sup>84</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Tenth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1924*, 1924.

activity in the downtown, and thus in the long run the increased activity would generate even worse traffic congestion than had existed before the highway was built:

I regret that I feel obliged to dissent from the opinion of the majority of the Special Commission on the Intermediate Thoroughfare. It is not wise to make improvements that will help business to go on increasing in the narrow confines of the down-town district. Congestion will not be remedied by the Intermediate Thoroughfare. . . . The thoroughfare would bring in more people and more vehicles. It would encourage further accumulation of buildings within the district. Eventually it would increase the congestion and our present problem would recur in an intensified form.<sup>85</sup>

Carr repeated these arguments at a legislative committee hearing held in March of the following year.<sup>86</sup>

Malcolm Nichols took office as Mayor of Boston in January of 1926, and a few weeks later made public his opposition to the loop highway (during the campaign, he had hinted that he might not support it, but refused to take a definite position<sup>87</sup>). Nichols first announced his opposition at a luncheon organized by the Chamber of Commerce, where he had been invited to discuss "The Responsibilities of Business Men in City Affairs." In his speech, Nichols never directly said that he opposed the loop highway, but he expressed such grave doubts as to its efficacy that his opposition was obvious. He said that before authorizing such an expensive project, the city should "make sure that our improvements are going to improve." Echoing Carr, he warned that the loop highway might actually worsen congestion:

In spite of the very important and influential support, which the so-called loop has received, there exists, and, in my opinion, naturally and properly, in the minds of many people, serious doubt as to whether this improvement now presented will not in a few years' time produce more congestion rather than less.

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<sup>85</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement.

<sup>86</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Spare North End, Lomasney pleads on loop," March [23?], 1926

<sup>87</sup> *Boston Post*, "O'Neil hoping for landslide," November 2, 1925, pp. 1 & 11.

He said the city should deal with its parking problems before building expensive new roads.<sup>88</sup>

A second set of objections to the loop highway came from people who supported the concept of a major highway to relieve congestion, but believed that the loop as proposed would increase congestion where it intersected with other busy streets. One such warning came from L.H. Kunhardt, who was vice president and engineer for the Boston Manufacturers' Mutual Insurance Company. He argued that the loop highway crossed some heavily trafficked intersections and therefore would increase congestion, a problem he proposed to solve by running the road into a few underpasses.<sup>89</sup> Kunhardt's argument about the problem at intersections attracted attention from the General Court. After the compromise loop highway plan was crafted, the legislature requested that the Special Commission do further study, including an evaluation of the option of running the loop highway through subways at certain intersections. The commission hired Kunhardt to do the investigation. Ultimately the commission decided not to recommend the subways, but Kunhardt went ahead and, on his own, advocated the vehicular subways as part of a complex congestion relief plan that included a proposed railroad line running under the loop highway.<sup>90</sup>

Two other people also raised the idea that the loop highway would create traffic congestion where it intersected other streets. In March of 1926, in an opinion piece in the *Transcript*, real estate broker Richard M. Bradley argued that trying to cope with traffic

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<sup>88</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Nichols is not ready to support 'loop' highway," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>89</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "To build the basement with the street," April 6, 1925, p. 15; *Boston Globe*, "Loop hearing speakers are entirely in favor of project," March 31 (p.m.), 1925, p. 23.

<sup>90</sup> Anthony David Green, *Planning the Central Artery: Constraints on planners and the limits of planning in Boston, 1909-1979*, A.B. Honors thesis, Harvard University, 1979; L.H. Kunhardt, *The proposed intermediate or loop thoroughfare in Boston; How to make it, if built, of real use in the development of Boston and the metropolitan district*, Boston, 1925; *Boston Transcript*, "More confusion of ideas for 'loop' highway," March 22, 1926, pp. 1 & 6; *Boston Post*, "Changes for loop highway," March 23, 1926, p. 9.



congestion by widening streets was “old fashioned.” He said that modern traffic conditions required major streets unhampered by intersections, which necessitated putting such streets either under or above ground. He was clearly referring to the loop highway when he said, “it seems impossible to regard as a modern solution a surface artery, cutting the market district in two and necessarily blocking all cross traffic incidental to operating that district.”<sup>91</sup> The final critic of a loop highway with all at-grade street intersections was Henry Brinckerhoff, an engineer from the New York firm of Parsons, Klapp, Brinckerhoff and Douglas. He had been hired in 1926 by the Boston Real Estate Exchange to comment on the loop highway proposal, after some exchange members had begun to question the organization’s earlier support for the plan. Brinckerhoff presented his recommendations at a couple of legislative hearings that spring. He suggested that the loop highway be built, but that to avoid congestion at intersections it should have one overpass and one underpass.<sup>92</sup>

## 8.5 Conclusion: “Widening” streets

At first glance it might appear that the supply-side solutions Bostonians perceived as possible congestion remedies differed considerably between the 1890s and 1920s. After all, in the former the city decided to build a subway, while in the latter public debate centered on a highway proposal. However, there are significant similarities between the two periods. First, despite strikingly different transportation systems in the 1890s and

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<sup>91</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Boston buried the street car; Should it elevate the motor,” March 27, 1926, p. III-3. In another article, Bradley also argued about the link between congestion and concentration, arguing that some downtown functions could reasonably be moved out of the downtown. *Boston Transcript*, “Should Boston expand or concentrate?,” January 28, 1926, p. II-2.

<sup>92</sup> *Boston Post*, “Opposition to proposed loop,” March [18?], 1926; *Boston Transcript*, “More confusion of ideas for ‘loop’ highway,” March 22, 1926, pp. 1 & 6.

1920s, with very different kinds of vehicles in the streets, during both periods Bostonians focused on major construction projects as a way to ease the perceived traffic congestion problem—subways, elevated railroads, and street improvements. Though demand-side policies were proposed, as discussed in the next chapter, the most serious and extensive study and debate focused on major capital projects.

A second similarity between the two periods is that all of the construction projects were perceived of as “street expansions,” even the subways and elevated trains. Though the transit plans technically had nothing to do with street surfaces, many supporters described them as a way to “expand” the streets by removing one class of traffic, leaving more room for horse-drawn vehicles and pedestrians.

A third similarity is that all the capital plans that failed to win approval were rejected mostly on grounds that had nothing to do with perceptions about how effectively they might reduce congestion. The most common objection was cost, though in the 1890s many other plans attracted overwhelming opposition because they would have taken land from the Common. Objections to expense were largely responsible for defeating the loop highway, as well as the major street widening and elevated plans during the 1890s. (The combined subway and elevated bill that finally passed in 1894 was actually relatively affordable, because the city collected rental fees from the street railway company for the right to use the subway, while the private elevated railroad company paid much of the expense of creating that system.) The city of Boston would have been solely responsible for financing major street expansions, and many people saw the required tax burden as unreasonable. In reality Boston probably *could* have afforded at least one such major project—a few cities in both periods did undertake street improvement projects of similar

magnitudes—but doing so would have consumed a great portion of their discretionary funds for at least a decade or two. To put the expense in perspective, it is worth remembering that today very few major transit or street projects are entirely financed with city funds; usually these projects receive significant infusions of state and federal funding. Thus, while people may have perceived congestion as a problem, clearly many did not perceive it as enough of a problem to warrant massive public expenditures.

The flip side of the fact that the projects were usually opposed mostly on grounds that had nothing to do with congestion is, of course, that those which were rejected didn't attract a great deal of criticism as ineffective congestion relief. During the loop highway debates, Special Commissioner Carr and Mayor Nichols did predict that the loop would ultimately worsen congestion by increasing the concentration of downtown activity, and several other people warned that the loop highway would create congestion where it intersected busy streets, but these criticisms were never central to the debate. Evidence of this is the fact that loop supporters rarely bothered to rebut these arguments, though the General Court did ask the Special Commission to consider the issue of intersections.

In the 1890s there was slightly more opposition to different projects on the basis of effectiveness at relieving congestion, though it was still not at the heart of any of the debates. In the case of street improvements, arguments that better streets would not help congestion came up only occasionally, and only in two contexts. One was the concern that widenings would not help if streetcar tracks were laid on the improved streets; these speakers implied, however, that if streetcar tracks were kept off, then the new streets would indeed reduce congestion. A second hesitation about whether street widenings would reduce congestion, expressed by a few people, was that such projects would only

be successful if constructed as part of a comprehensive plan. The Rapid Transit Commission and Mayor Matthews pointed to past sporadic widenings that they perceived as having been ineffective because they were not part of a larger plan. Both the Rapid Transit Commission and Matthews drew up comprehensive plans, but in neither case did these receive more than passing attention. Neither, for example, ever moved past the stage of the initial proposal and immediate comment. The most likely reason is, again, the enormous expense. A second likely explanation is that the scale of the plan was, for that time in the United States, largely unprecedented. As such, it is not surprising that few people would have supported it.

Elevated plans, and at times the subway, were criticized as likely to increase congestion on the grounds that they would bring more pedestrians and business activity into overly crowded sections of the downtown. The alley plan for an elevated railroad was somewhat unique among other proposals discussed in this chapter in that many people criticized it on the grounds that it would increase congestion. Although this was only one of several arguments made against it, the objection was made by many people and given some prominence. As for the subway, there was discussion of whether or not putting streetcars underground would relieve congestion (most but not all of the speakers thought it would), but the public hearings focused primarily on issues such as whether or not Bostonians would be willing to travel underground, the engineering feasibility of construction a subway, expense, and protection of the Common.

## TAMING VEHICLES TO RELIEVE CONGESTION

### 9.1 Introduction

At the same time that Bostonians were debating major construction projects designed to expand street space and so reduce congestion, some citizens perceived that policies targeted on reducing the numbers of vehicles in the streets might be successful. During the 1890s, the two primary such suggestions were to regulate the behavior of team drivers and to restrict the number of streetcars downtown. By the 1920s streetcars were gone from the surface streets downtown, and freight vehicles were no longer perceived as a primary cause of congestion, but the passenger automobile came in for scrutiny. The most active debate centered on parking regulations, although there was also some interest in new forms of traffic regulation like traffic signals, stop signs, and one-way streets. Finally, in both periods a few people called for “deconcentrating” the downtown as a way to reduce congestion. This chapter describes these “demand-side” policies and people’s perceptions about whether or not they could relieve congestion. The most consistent theme across both the subway and loop highway case studies is that while participants in both talked a great deal about regulatory solutions to congestion, they were extremely slow to make any significant changes to the city’s existing regulations.

## 9.2 Restricting streetcars downtown (1890s)

In the 1880s, concern about streetcars causing congestion downtown generated calls to relieve the situation by limiting the numbers of streetcars allowed downtown, as well as more efficiently coordinating their routes and schedules. The city never found the political strength to do so, but the private sector temporarily took such action on its own, when Whitney and his new West End Street Railway Company bought out the competing companies and created a single system. In the 1890s this pattern partially repeated itself, although the ultimate outcome was different (a publicly-built subway). The many streetcars were once again considered a primary cause of congestion, and some people reacted by calling for reducing the number of tracks and cars the West End ran through the downtown. Throughout the 1890s there were many proposals to do this, with the suggestions ranging from a complete ban on all cars downtown, to limiting the tracks on Washington and Tremont to one track in each direction, to specific rearrangements of the downtown streetcar routes. A few people proposed limiting streetcars downtown as a complete and independent solution to the congestion problem, while others wanted to combine some limitation of streetcars with supply-side projects such as street widenings, subways, or elevated trains. Paralleling the 1880s, however, the city never took such regulatory steps. Public attention ultimately focused more on construction solutions such as a subway or elevated train, and calls to limit downtown streetcars cars died off in the face of these other plans.

Most proponents of limitations on the numbers of cars (as opposed to an outright ban) argued that their plans would reduce congestion without seriously degrading the quality of transit service. They pointed out that most streetcars were virtually empty by

the time they reached the center of downtown. Therefore, if suburban riders transferred at the edge of downtown onto a smaller number of cars passing through the central city, the West End could still bring passengers all the way to downtown destinations, yet burden the congested streets with fewer streetcars.

The idea of limiting streetcars cropped up regularly throughout the 1890s. A number of individuals argued over the years that limiting or removing streetcars from the downtown would adequately deal with the congestion problem. None of the proposals were ever adopted, but the fact that people kept proposing them indicates that they were perceived as potential remedies for congestion. For example, after the Rapid Transit Commission's plan came out, the writer of an anonymous letter to the *Transcript* objected to the commission's plan on the grounds that it spent money on capital improvements that would damage the Common and yet not remove the dangerous streetcars. "How easily all this could be avoided," he argued, "by simply forbidding all streetcars from the congested area. Such a plan would save the city millions, and give the citizens safe streets."<sup>1</sup> Henry Bigelow Williams (who supported a subway) also proposed reducing the number of cars downtown by rearranging the downtown streetcar lines so that suburban travelers would transfer to new lines once they reached the edge of downtown. He said, "I believe if nothing else were done, except the adoption of the street car routes above proposed, the relief afforded to our streets would be enormous, long blockades of cars a thing of the past."<sup>2</sup> Colonel Thomas L. Livermore, an on-going participant in the city's transportation debates, appeared at a hearing to protest putting surface streetcar tracks across the Common. He pointed to the many almost-empty cars

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<sup>1</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Letter to the editor: Simplicity and economy vs. intricacy and extravagance," April 9, 1892, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Bigelow Williams, *Change of present car routes in addition to subways, a help to rapid transit*, 1893.

passing through the downtown and claimed that congestion could be eliminated in a week by stopping cars at the edge of downtown.<sup>3</sup> Another call for an end to streetcars downtown came shortly after from the New England Woman's Club. At a meeting of 200 club members, it was proposed that all the women of the region should ask the West End to stop its streetcars at the edge of the downtown, and the women would agree to walk the remaining distance to their destinations. The club agreed that the West End should be asked to try the plan as an experiment in the first week of April.<sup>4</sup>

While the plans just mentioned were never part of any sustained debate and never attracted government attention, one group of citizens who petitioned for streetcar reductions in 1893 did achieve widespread notice and attracted commentary that revealed people's perceptions about the usefulness of the strategy. The group of residents argued that many of the cars were only partially full by the time they reached the city center, and therefore some of them could easily be eliminated if passengers coming from the outskirts stopped at the edge of downtown and transferred to a circuit line running through Washington and Tremont.<sup>5</sup> Throughout 1893, the citizens petitioned the Boston Board of Aldermen to limit the West End's downtown tracks in this way.<sup>6</sup> (These efforts went on in parallel with, but separately from, the debate over building new underground or elevated transit facilities.) The citizens first requested an aldermanic hearing in May,

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<sup>3</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Save the common," February 10, 1893, p. [1?]. Two other speakers at the hearing made similar arguments.

<sup>4</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Stop the cars: Women propose to walk to the stores," March 3, 1892, p. 4. Nothing ever appeared to come of this meeting.

<sup>5</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Unsafe streets; Contention made before the Aldermen," October 26 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> While the state granted the corporate franchises that permitted a transit company to form, the city was in charge of deciding what streets the corporation could use.



at the very end of the legislative committee's spring hearings on subways and elevated trains, and three hearings were eventually held between late October and mid-December.<sup>7</sup>

The petitioners were a large, prestigious, and politically inclusive group of citizens, so the perceptions that a limit on downtown streetcars would reduce congestion at least somewhat must have been widely shared. The petitioners claimed to have signatures from over 8,000 people, including the representatives of property and businesses worth \$150 to \$200 million dollars, residents from outlying districts who relied on the streetcars to travel downtown, and six or seven hundred teamsters and cab drivers, people for whom the traffic congestion was a direct economic concern. Among the people who spoke in favor of the plan were individuals from diverse backgrounds, such as a prominent advocate of tenement reform, Alice N. Lincoln, and Herbert L. Harding, president of the Republican, business-oriented Citizens' Association.<sup>8</sup> One of the lawyers representing the petitioners, Thomas Gargan, was a prominent Irish-American politician well respected by conservatives as well as the Yankee Democrats.<sup>9</sup>

The arguments the petitioners made about why the tracks should be limited focused above all on safety concerns. It was unclear if they considered that the safety problems arose from the congestion of cars, but this may well have been the case, given that it was a perception many people held in the 1890s. In addition to the safety issue, the petitioners described congestion-induced delay to streetcar passengers as a significant problem that their plan would address.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Danger in streets; Too many car tracks in our roadways," May 23, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Unsafe streets; Contention made before the Aldermen," October 26 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., Letter to Mr. Gargan (December 20, 1893), in Nathan Matthews, Jr., Political Papers, Littauer Library, Littauer Center, Harvard University; *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: One of the commissioners," January 5, 1894, p. 4; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Swain, Gargan and Dalton are the subway commissioners," January 2, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Unsafe streets; Contention made before the Aldermen," October 26 (a.m.), 1893, p. 9.

Though the petitioners themselves stressed their safety concerns more than delay, the newspapers editorials on the subject focused on the slowness of the streetcars, rather than safety issues. Editors at both the *Globe* and *Herald* argued that they plan would help to reduce congestion. The *Globe*'s editors wrote only a cryptic one-line opinion (part of a series of "editorial points" they printed daily), saying, "It would unquestionably be better to have fewer cars on Washington and Tremont Sts. than to have so many cars that don't move."<sup>11</sup> The *Herald*'s editors commented at greater length on the plan's congestion-reducing potential. They said that many people, including center-city business men, favored limiting streetcar downtown, and the editors agreed that such a plan might be useful.<sup>12</sup>

As opposed to the perception that a reduction in the number of streetcars would on its own be enough to reduce congestion, some people argued that the streetcar reductions were a necessary addition to street-widening or subway plans. They feared that without such a limit, any new street space would be quickly taken up by additional tracks, and there would be no overall reduction in congestion. For example, when Henry Curtis Spalding presenting his multi-faceted plan for transportation improvements including tunnels in the downtown, street widenings, and new vehicle regulations, he warned that:

Any plan which does not involve the removal of the tramways from the surface in the business section of the city, can do but little, if anything, towards the remedying of these difficulties unless an enormous sum be expended in street widenings.<sup>13</sup>

In February 1893, the Street Commission produced a plan of proposed street widenings at the request of Mayor Matthews. Both the commissioners and Matthews emphasized that

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<sup>11</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Editorial points," October 28 (a.m.), 1893, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Cars on transportation and Washington streets," October 27, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Curtis Spalding, *Local transportation at Boston: Comprising swift transit by tunnel railways connecting together the tracks of all the steam railroads and rapid transit by the aid of subways*, Boston, Press of Brown Brothers, 1891, p. 12.

they supported widenings only on the condition that the streetcar lines downtown be rearranged. The commission's report warned:

[M]oney expended in extensive street widenings in the heart of the city would be practically thrown away unless such improvements are accomplished by a complete readjustment of the track surface of the street railway company.

Matthews himself stated that "an absolute and unqualified" condition of his support was that streetcar tracks not be put on the new streets unless most of the existing downtown tracks were removed.<sup>14</sup> Finally, in 1894 ex-Mayor Hart argued that Boston should widen streets (instead of building a subway), with the first step of any widening plan being the limitation of streetcars downtown.<sup>15</sup>

When the subway was discussed in 1894, many of the most influential supporters argued that the plan would only relieve congestion if streetcars were also removed from the streets above it. For example, in March 1894 the Citizens' Association passed a resolution supporting the subway only on the condition that the authorizing legislation specified that streetcar tracks be removed from Tremont.<sup>16</sup> The concept of removing streetcar tracks was also a central part of Matthews' campaign for the subway, starting in November 1893 with his letter of acceptance of the Democratic nomination for mayor.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 1894 debates over the subway, Matthews again and again emphasized that the subway would enable the city to entirely remove surface streetcars from Washington and Tremont. In a January 1894 speech to the Beacon Society, in which he

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<sup>14</sup> *Boston Herald*, "For wider streets; Mayor Matthews' plan for rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 1. Matthews also stated that he thought the "real" solution to downtown congestion would be to remove all streetcar tracks downtown, but he agreed with the Rapid Transit Commission that the public would not permit this.

<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 15 vols., [Boston, the General Court], 1894, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Taxpayers talk: Subway is demanded by Boston citizens," March 9 (a.m.), 1894, p. 10. In earlier annual reports, the association had twice called on the city to limit the number of cars allowed downtown, among other proposals to ease congestion. Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fourth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1892, p. 68, and *Fifth annual report of the Executive Committee*, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., Letter to Hon. James Donovan, (November 29, 1893), in Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Political Papers*, Littauer Library, Littauer Center, Harvard University, Vol. 5, pp. 15-18.

only half-heartedly supported the subway, for example, Matthews said that the project would be worthwhile only if the surface cars were also removed from those streets. (The *Advertiser* titled its article on the speech “Subway useless if the surface cars come back again.”<sup>18</sup>)

The Boston Subway Commissioners took the same position. In the report and amended bill they issued in February 1894, they explained that one failure of the existing act was that it didn’t give them the power to require the West End to use the tunnel:

As the primary reason for building a subway is to remove all cars from the surface of streets so treated, and restore the streets to ordinary city traffic, it is apparent that a subway, as authorized by this act, would be a failure and the money expended upon it largely wasted.<sup>19</sup>

To remedy this problem, the commissioners proposed an amendment to the bill that would give them the power to compel any street railway company with lines within 1000 feet of the subway entrances to remove all surface tracks and to use the subway instead.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the wide range of people who perceived that limiting streetcars downtown would be either a partial or complete remedy for congestion, the idea never gained substantial political support. For example, the issue never made it so far as to be voted on by the Board of Aldermen. It was also almost never treated as a potential alternative to such expensive capital projects as the subway or an elevated train. During the months when the petitioners’ one-track plan was being debated, the city was also debating the alley plan and then the subway, but the two discussions remained almost entirely separate. In the end the one-track petitioners switched their support to the subway plan,

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<sup>18</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Subway useless if the surface cars come back again,” January 29, 1894, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Boston Board of Subway Commissioners, *Statement of the Subway Commission; Subway Act of 1893 inadequate*, 1894, pp. 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Subway bill at last,” February 12, 1894, p. 1.

once that began to appear politically viable.<sup>21</sup> Once the subway bill passed the General Court and city council, the petition for limiting West End surface tracks lost all momentum. Although the track reduction proposal lingered on in the aldermen's business the following year,<sup>22</sup> it never again attracted much attention.

While almost nobody in 1894 compared the idea of limiting streetcars downtown to the subway proposal, there was one exception. In February 1894 the *Post* ran a single editorial suggesting that rerouting some cars off Tremont and Washington would bring "great advantages" in terms of congestion relief and be much cheaper than building a subway. The editors lamented that, "Enterprises involving the expenditure of millions are discussed at length, while resources close at hand, and comparatively costless, are not availed of."<sup>23</sup> The editors did not repeat their argument again, however, suggesting that their comment wasn't one they considered important enough to advocate strongly.

Along with an eventual lack of support, the plans to limit streetcars also suffered from persistent opposition. Objections to limiting streetcars downtown, which mostly arose in the context of protest of the petitioners' plan for single tracks on Washington and Tremont, had nothing to do with the congestion relief potential. The West End strenuously opposed any reduction in tracks, claiming that this would force it to drastically reduce service, thus inconveniencing riders.<sup>24</sup> Some suburban riders also complained that the one-track system would force them to walk tiresome distances. More opposition came from a few downtown merchants who argued that the tracks improved

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<sup>21</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Tremont Street subway," December 18, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "City government: Meeting of the Boston Board of Aldermen," January 1, 1894, p. 8, and "Meeting of the Boston Board of Aldermen," March 13, 1894, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: Real rapid transit," February 1, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "May 27, 1893, 4. Tracks on Harrison ave," May 27, 1893, p. 4; *Boston Transcript*, "Removal of street car tracks," December 8, 1893, p. 3; *Boston Globe*, "About single tracks," December 23 (a.m.), 1893, p. 6.

downtown business by centralizing the region. Department store owner R.H. Stearns, for example, testified that removing the tracks would injure his business, breaking up the beneficial centralization that existed.<sup>25</sup> He led a petition to the Board of Aldermen protesting any removal of tracks.<sup>26</sup> The same day that this petition was entered, the *Transcript* ran an editorial on the single-track plan that mentioned the retailers' petition, among other objections.<sup>27</sup>

The most common objection to limiting cars downtown was that the streetcar riding public would refuse any plan that forced them to transfer between lines or walk farther to their destinations, and therefore the city shouldn't even try to implement such limits. The Rapid Transit Commissioners, for example, said that a complete ban on streetcars downtown would be the most effective way to combat congestion, but that the public wouldn't accept it (though they did think the public would accept a system that required transferring at the edge of downtown):

The Commission[ers] . . . were yet of the opinion that the public had been so long demoralized by direct horse-car connections with the retail shops and theatres as to render [a ban on cars downtown as] too radical for adoption.<sup>28</sup>

Matthews also made the same argument in two speeches to the 1894 legislative committee. He said that he rejected the idea of removing all tracks from the downtown unless some substitute form of transportation were provided that would carry patrons directly downtown (the subway, which he supported, would provide such service.) He reasoned that the citizens of the region simply would not agree to any transportation system that no longer carried them directly to downtown destinations, even though he

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<sup>25</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Removal of street car tracks," December 8, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Boston City Council, "Petitions Referred: to the Committee on Streets and Sewers," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1893, p. 746.

<sup>27</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: How the streets do their work," December 16, 1893, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission to the Massachusetts Legislature*, [Boston, the Commission], 1892, pp. 64-65.

himself thought that it would be better to stop the tracks at the edge of the downtown.<sup>29</sup>

The *Post's* editors claimed that the only reason the Aldermen didn't limit tracks downtown was that the public didn't demand it, because people were unwilling to walk or transfer.<sup>30</sup>

Although very few people actively opposed the idea of removing the streetcars on the grounds that it would fail to reduce congestion, that argument did appear twice. Edward Atkinson, in a letter to the *Herald*, said the streets would simply fill up with horse-drawn vehicles if the streetcars were removed.<sup>31</sup> The *Transcript's* editors made the same point in their reaction to the 1893 petition to reduce tracks, warning that:

. . . the parts of Tremont and Washington Streets sought to be relieved would be encumbered by almost countless numbers of vehicles for carrying passengers and teams for the conveyance of freight from the northern to the southern depots, and vice versa.<sup>32</sup>

The editors were not very consistent in their argumentation on this point, however. They did not apply the argument about horse-drawn vehicles replacing streetcars to the subway plan. Also, the following year they ran one editorial suggesting that before building the subway, it might be worth experimenting for a few months to see if stopping the streetcars outside the congested district helped reduce congestion.<sup>33</sup> This suggestion implied the perception that streetcars were an important source of congestion.

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<sup>29</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Transit by subway," February 28, 1894, pp. 1 & 7; Nathan Matthews, Jr., *Argument of Mayor Matthews before the committee on transit of the Massachusetts legislature, April 4, 1894*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1894, pp. 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: The street car nuisance," October 29, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Letter to the editor: Big tubes in the ground," March 13, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: How the streets do their work," December 16, 1893, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Some people are canvassing the suggestion . . .," January 30, 1894, p. 4.

### 9.3 Regulating teams (1890s)

As explained in Chapter 7, streetcars were only one type of vehicle perceived to cause congestion. Throughout the subway debates, speaker after speaker suggested that inconsiderate behavior by team drivers caused congestion. People believed that congestion was caused by a whole host of behaviors, from driving heavily laden teams on the streetcar tracks (and thus blocking streetcars), to leaving wagons at the curb for long periods, to unloading heavy goods into the streets and sidewalks. While nobody suggesting restricting the number of vehicles, the idea of regulating driver behavior was a popular proposal. People suggested that congestion could be relieved with tighter regulations on drivers, or with better enforcement of existing regulations. In a few cases proponents argued that teaming regulations could substitute for capital projects to reduce congestion, though more often the two were perceived as complementary policies.

Support for regulations came from almost every direction: public agencies and commissions (the Rapid Transit Commission, Boston Board of Police,<sup>34</sup> and Boston Surveying Department<sup>35</sup>), government officials such as Mayor Matthews and various aldermen, and the conservative Citizens' Association.<sup>36</sup> The *Transcript* several times

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<sup>34</sup> Boston Board of Police, "Document 144: Mayor's message transmitting suggestions of Board of Police and Rapid Transit Commission of 1891 in regard to regulation of street traffic," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1894.

<sup>35</sup> Boston Surveying Department, "Document 36: Annual report for the year 1893," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1894, pp. 12-13.

<sup>36</sup> In a letter to the Rapid Transit Commission in February of 1892, the Citizens' Association spoke of "the importance of obtaining a measure of immediate relief by the enactment and strict enforcement of sensible and reasonable street traffic regulations, in order that moving vehicles may obtain the best accommodations possible in our crowded streets." If such regulations were combined with rules reducing the number of cars allowed downtown, plus a few street widenings, the association felt it was "not impossible that . . . the problem of rapid transit may be materially modified." (Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fourth annual report*, 1892, p. 68.) The association went on to press again for new traffic regulations, this time at considerable length, in its 1893 annual report. Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report*, 1893, pp. 20-22.



proposed new traffic regulations or better enforcement, sometimes hesitantly<sup>37</sup> and at other times vigorously.<sup>38</sup> The *Herald* in 1893 and 1894 published a whole series of editorials supporting tougher street regulations, usually doing so in the context of arguing that capital plan such as street widenings or the subway would not bring congestion relief unless teams were also regulated.<sup>39</sup> Numerous individuals also testified to the legislative committees in support of regulations, or wrote letters to the newspapers. These included former Boston Mayor Frederick O. Prince, who in 1893 favored a tunnel under the Common combined with regulation of teams,<sup>40</sup> several of the petitioners asking the Board of Aldermen to restrict streetcars downtown,<sup>41</sup> and merchants protesting the Tremont subway who feared the construction process would drive away all their customers.<sup>42</sup>

All the interest in better regulation of team drivers was never translated into concrete policy changes. (In fact, during the years of the case study, the aldermen even passed orders that gave teams additional permits to stand for long periods in the streets. For example, one aldermanic attempt to better enforce regulations against standing on certain streets actually resulted in official permission for teams to stand there for longer time periods.<sup>43</sup>) A pattern reoccurred again and again, whereby proposed new regulations would be studied, but then gradually abandoned. Almost the only people to argue that

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<sup>37</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Something about monopolies," December 20, 1890, p. 4, and "Editorial: The rapid transit report," April 5, 1892, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: How would it work to have special police . . .," April 9, 1892, p. 12, and "Editorial: A bill to exclude vehicles . . .," February 12, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Street improvements," February 10, 1893, p. 6, "Editorial: The rapid transit bill," May 5, 1893, p. 6, "Editorial: The elevated railroad," October 17, 1893, p. 4, "Editorial: The sidewalk congestion," February 12, 1894, p. 4, and "Editorial: The subway," March 1, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Views on street widening: Several Ex-Mayors of Boston give their opinions on the subject," January 26, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "A single track sufficient," October 26, 1893, p. 3; *Boston Herald*, "Present system a disgrace; City government blamed for congested streets," October 28, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Against subway; Merchants' league is solidly arrayed," April 30 (a.m.), 1894, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Boston City Council, "Teams in the streets," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1891, pp. 1288-1289.

tighter regulation would not help were the teamsters. It appears that the failure to adopt tougher regulations resulted from political inability to overcome lobbying by the teamsters, rather than a perception that they wouldn't help relieve congestion.

One early call for regulations came in January 1890, when Alderman Smith proposed that the board set up a committee of three aldermen to consider various restrictions on teams in the downtown. The regulations proposed included tighter restrictions on teams stopping on Washington Street, as well as a complete weekday ban on teams on Washington from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. The proposal was intended to remove the teams perceived to be causing "blockades."<sup>44</sup> Objections came from Alderman McLaughlin, who argued that the city should never prevent public travel in any street and that the existing ordinances covered the other concerns that Smith had raised. McLaughlin further argued that any such regulations would only benefit the West End, whose streetcars were the real cause of the congestion on Washington Street. (He was one of a few people to argue that new regulations would be ineffective at reducing congestion.) Smith defended his proposed regulations by saying the city could not afford to widen the streets downtown, but regulations were something the city council had the power to enact. He predicted that the public would be very interested, and claimed that he had spoken to "quite a number" of large real estate owners on Washington, all of whom had favored the idea. The Board of Aldermen ultimately voted to set up a committee to review the proposal, but it never resurfaced before the full board.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Boston City Council, "Removal of causes of blockades," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1890, p. 84.

<sup>45</sup> Boston City Council, "Blockades in streets," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1890, pp. 105-106]

The Rapid Transit Commission and its members were some of the stronger advocates for regulations. Not only did the 1892 report propose stricter regulations, but the two commissioners who visited Europe came back praising the traffic regulations in force in London and Paris. Osborne Howes, Jr. described how in Paris, “if it were not for the admirable regulations established and enforced by the police authorities, a complete arrest of travel could hardly be prevented.”<sup>46</sup> John Fitzgerald focused on London, where he praised the way the city kept its heavy traffic flowing, with only infrequent blockades. He attributed this success to both the lack of streetcars (London had omnibuses instead) and police enforcement of stringent traffic regulations. He noted that drivers “observe the laws of the road, and the uplifting of a policeman’s hand is obeyed as instantaneously as the command of an officer in a well-drilled military company.” He described London’s prohibition on loading and unloading heavy freight teams during business hours and, in the conclusion to the report, suggested that:

If a like ordinance were in operation here, and applied to Washington and Tremont Streets, much of the congestion which now prevails would be lessened. Who has not experienced the frequent delays that occur on the streets mentioned, by the unloading of safes, coal, and flagstones, and the keen delight which often beams on the faces of the drivers of these heavy teams, feeling that they can retaliate on the horse-car conductor and driver for being so often obliged to leave the track?<sup>47</sup>

One interesting element of this quotation is Filene’s suggestion that team drivers deliberately blocked traffic.

When the Rapid Transit Commission came out with its report, it mentioned regulation of teams several times as one component of its overall plan. The

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<sup>46</sup> Osborne Howes, Jr., *Report on the transportation of passengers in and around the cities of Europe, made by Osborne Howes, Jr., to the Rapid Transit Commission of the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston, November 10, 1891*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1891, pp. 28-29.

<sup>47</sup> John Edward Fitzgerald, *Report of John E. Fitzgerald, Rapid Transit Commissioner, on the transportation of passengers in and around the cities of Europe, made to the Rapid Transit Commission of the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston, Oct. 16, 1891*, in Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 161-2.

commissioners said that the city would receive “great benefit” if it adopted four regulations used in Europe: limiting the waiting time for vehicles in Washington and Tremont; prohibiting teams on these streets from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (except for light wagons drawn by one horse); compelling drivers on certain streets to keep on the right; and obliging drivers of slow vehicles to keep to the right so faster vehicles could pass easily.<sup>48</sup>

At least some of Boston’s aldermen perceived these suggestions as good ones. A month after the report came out, the Board of Aldermen directed its Committee on Rules and Order to study the suggested new regulations. Alderman Lewis, who proposed the order, said he could think of no more important business before the city council for that year and that, “There is no question but what our streets are capable of a much larger use . . . provided we have regulations concerning their use by vehicles.”<sup>49</sup> The committee ultimately never proposed major changes to the regulations, but shortly thereafter the Common Council proposed an ordinance stating that coal unloaded in the downtown from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. be moved in sacks or baskets.<sup>50</sup> This regulation appeared to be primarily intended to deal with congestion, though some aldermen also mentioned that the rule would keep the sidewalks free of coal dust and eliminate piles of coal on the sidewalks that inconvenienced pedestrians. When the rule came before the Board of Aldermen for confirmation in October, a group of seventeen coal firms sent the city a letter protesting that the new law would cripple their business and increase coal costs for

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<sup>48</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, pp. 12-13.

<sup>49</sup> Boston City Council, “Standing regulations of the board,” *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1892, p. 631.

<sup>50</sup> Boston City Council, “Unloading of coal,” p. 661, and “Ordinances,” p. 878 & 885, *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1892.

all residents. The aldermen voted ten to one to send the matter back to the committee, where it apparently died.<sup>51</sup>

Members of the 1893 legislative committee on rapid transit also made a stab at tightening regulations. The committee's original bill, which it proposed in May, called for a series of measures beyond the construction of an elevated railroad, one of which was that a new metropolitan transportation commission be given authority to make rules and regulations regarding the use of the streets.<sup>52</sup> When the *Transcript's* editors commented on the bill, they praised the idea of giving the new commission power over street regulations as "worthy of high encomium."<sup>53</sup> The *Herald's* editors lauded the proposed regulatory power even more heavily:

More than this, the regulation that it is suggested the commission should exercise over the streets of Boston merits, to our thinking, unqualified approval. It is by vesting authority of this kind in responsible hands that a reform in our present highly defective methods is alone possible. This is the way in which the rights of all users of the streets have been secured, and the mutual convenience of all users of streets has been obtained in the great capitals of the world, where, by insisting upon rigid rules, the transit of every one is made more comfortable, easy and rapid. We think the committee is to be highly commended on this proposition.<sup>54</sup>

Despite these enthusiastic reactions, however, the provision on regulations was one of the many items that failed to reappear in the next version of the bill.

The Board of Police also perceived the matter of regulations promising enough to take up the issue in 1894. At the end of April, the *Globe* reported that new Police Commissioner A.P. Martin believed that congestion could be reduced by regulating both

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<sup>51</sup> Boston City Council, "Ordinances," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, 1892, p. 885. Discussion of the rule didn't reappear in the council proceedings. However, a December *New York Times* article claimed that, "The coal dealers of Boston have co-operated with the Common Council to leave certain streets unobstructed by merchandise between the hours of 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. No vehicle will be allowed to obstruct the highway during the hours specified for more than five minutes at a time." The *Times* may have been mistaken, or some council members may have privately discussed a voluntary rule with the teaming industry. *New York Times*, "What Boston talks about: The great problem of rapid transit receiving attention," December 11, 1892, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> *Boston Globe*, "L' bill: Rapid transit at last in sight," May 2 (a.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: The rapid transit bill," May 2, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The rapid transit bill," May 5, 1893, p. 6.

streetcars and other vehicles.<sup>55</sup> On June 23, just when the General Court was debating the bill for the Meigs elevated railroad, the Board of Police held a public hearing to find out if the public perceived inadequate police enforcement of the traffic regulations to be responsible for the existence of some of the city's traffic congestion. The police had sent letters to various individuals, many of whom appeared to speak. A representative of the Expressmen's League (which represented delivery companies) testified that he thought the lack of police officers was the primary cause of congestion in the market district; he therefore supported an increase in officers. The Stablekeepers' Association sent a representative who also advocated for more police in the downtown. The West End's attorney and Amos Towle of the Master Teamsters' Association disagreed, saying the police did all they could. The former did, highway, feel that the city could reduce congestion by limiting the number of licenses permitting vehicles to stand at the curb in congested areas. Amos Towle of the Master Teamsters' Association testified that the police enforcement was good and that the only way to relieve congestion would be to improve the streets themselves.<sup>56</sup>

The Board of Police apparently decided that enforcement was adequate, but that new regulations could improve congestion. It sent Matthews a plan that they thought would "facilitate" travel through the congested district, and asked him to submit it to the Board of Aldermen. The plan set out an elaborate system of one-way streets, the object of which was "to facilitate the passage of teams from one point to another by keeping them on the move in the same direction, as far as possible, on each of these thoroughfares, so

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<sup>55</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Against subway; Merchants' league is solidly arrayed," April 30 (a.m.), 1894, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Boston Globe*, "To raise blockades: Police commissioners give a hearing on the matter and hear some practical suggestions," June 23, 1894, p. 9.

that teams will not come in contact with each other passing in opposite directions on the same streets.” In addition, the plan designated separate routes for “heavy” teams transporting merchandise and for the speedier “light” teams and passenger vehicles. Finally, the plan called for a ban on the delivery of heavy items during business hours on certain streets; the elimination of licensed carriage and wagon stands on certain streets; shorter permitted time for vehicles stopped temporarily at the curb; and tighter restrictions on street exhibitions of horses for sale.<sup>57</sup>

Towle of the Master Teamsters’ Association immediately protested the plan as “impossible.”<sup>58</sup> However, a few weeks later the Police Board Chairman Martin presented the plan to some of the aldermen, who favored the plan. At this meeting Martin argued that pedestrians would benefit from the plan as much as teams. He noted that his plan of separating light and heavy teams had already been tried successfully on one of the city’s bridges.<sup>59</sup> Matthews must have perceived the plan as having merit, for he sent it to the aldermen with a brief letter “commending” the suggestions.<sup>60</sup>

However, he ultimately backed away from this position. In January 1895 he ended his mayoralty with a lengthy “valedictory address” to the city council in which he argued that the teaming industry was correct to argue that it should not be further regulated as long as streetcars, the “chief” cause of congestion, were still allowed on the streets:

Much remains that could be done to facilitate travel by regulating the use of the street by teams. The interests concerned have, however, taken the not wholly unreasonable positions that they should not be made the special object of regulation as long as the chief cause of congestion—the street-railway companies—are allowed locations everywhere; and this argument, together with others of less force, has hitherto sufficed to deter the Board of Aldermen from taking action. It

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<sup>57</sup> Boston Board of Police, "Document 144: Mayor's message," 1894.

<sup>58</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "Relief for streets," July 9, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "No more blockades if Gen. Martin's plan proves a success," August 1, 1894, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Boston Board of Police, "Document 144: Mayor's message," 1894.

seems now to be the opinion that the question of traffic regulations should be postponed until the street-car service has been permanently readjusted by the Transit Commission.<sup>61</sup>

Matthews' ultimate rejection of the idea of tighter regulations on teams culminated a pattern of gradually lessening support on his part. For example, in 1891 and 1892 he served on the Rapid Transit Commission, which strongly recommended better regulations. He also mentioned the need for regulations in 1892 in the context of a proposed widening of a downtown street,<sup>62</sup> and in his inaugural address to the city council in 1893 he made passing mention of regulations in a list of transportation improvements the city needed.<sup>63</sup> However, in February 1893 his tone changed. At a legislative hearing where he proposed a street-widening plan, he was asked what power the city had to prevent vehicles from standing in the street. Matthews dismissed the issue, saying that this was a matter under police control, and although he had received many letters of complaint, all that he could do was forward them to the board of police commissioners.<sup>64</sup> The following month, when he was promoting a plan for a subway plus an elevated system, he was again asked about regulations. This time he said that regulations could not be enforced until new streets were built, because the narrowness and crookedness of the streets made enforcing the regulations impossible. On these grounds he felt the board of police should not be blamed for the lack of enforcement.<sup>65</sup>

As far as can be gleaned from the newspaper reports, the teaming industry seems to have been the main political force opposing tighter regulations. Relatively few other

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<sup>61</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., *The city government of Boston; Valedictory address of Hon. Nathan Matthews, Jr., Mayor of Boston, to the members of the City Council, January 5, 1895*, Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1895, p. 96.

<sup>62</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 166: Message of the Mayor in relation to widening of Water Street," in *Documents of the City of Boston for 1892, 1892*.

<sup>63</sup> Nathan Matthews, Jr., "Document 1: Inaugural address to the City Council, January 2, 1893," in *Documents of the City of Boston, 1893*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>64</sup> *Boston Herald*, "For wider streets; Mayor Matthews' plan for rapid transit," February 9, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Hub's spine: Matthews would raise Boston's back bone," March 16 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 2.



people spoke out directly against the idea of regulations, while the people who did do so all mentioned the protests of the teaming industry, indicating its influence. One such objection came from a state representative, John Quinn, who in 1893 protested the idea of giving a new metropolitan commission the power to regulate street traffic. Quinn argued that:

The teamsters of Boston and all other transportation interests will protest to the very last against any interference with their rights to any and all streets through which they now have rights to pass, and for which they as well as all others pay taxes for creation, support and maintenance.<sup>66</sup>

The teamsters also most likely influenced the Board of Trade, the only business association to object to tighter regulations. It is likely not coincidental that the Board of Trade made its objection at a meeting at which it also voted to accept the Master Teamsters' Association as a member organization. At that meeting members heard a report from its transportation committee objecting to one member's suggestion to impose tighter regulations on teams. The committee argued that the proposed regulations would be burdensome to business, and were already covered by existing ordinances.<sup>67</sup> It appears that protests by the teaming industry in late 1894 also succeeded in stopping further calls for new regulations from members of the city government, most notably Matthews.

## 9.4 Regulating automobile parking (1920s)

In the 1920s passenger automobiles, rather than streetcars or freight vehicles, were perceived as the vehicles causing congestion, and so public attention focused on policies to regulate private cars. There was almost no discussion of banning vehicles, but, as with the debate on teaming regulations in the 1890s, community members proposed ways to

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<sup>66</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Over or under: Elevated road and subway bills reported," May 3 (p.m.), 1893, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Boston Herald*, "New plan of rapid transit; It is discussed and approved by the Board of Trade," February 21, 1893, p. 8.

modify drivers' behavior so as to lessen congestion. While there was a certain amount of interest in managing *moving* vehicles using new traffic control technologies like traffic lights (discussed in Section 9.5), the major focus of interest was on using parking policies to reduce congestion.

Boston's interest in parking was anything but unique. City planners and government officials around the country were trying out strategies to reduce the number of passenger cars parked on city streets. Most large cities limited the time motorists were permitted to park downtown during business hours. Miller McClintock, in *Street Traffic Control*, said that cities typically limited themselves to prohibitions on parking in a few areas, along with time limits on more streets.<sup>68</sup> Table 9.1 shows the use of time limits and no-parking zones in effect in twelve of the nation's larger cities around 1925.

**Table 9.1: Parking restrictions in typical cities.**

City	Parking prohibited in certain areas	15-minute zones	30-minute zones	40-minute zones	1-hour zones
Boston			X		X
Buffalo	X				X
Chicago	X		X		
Cleveland	X				X
Kansas City	X				X
New Orleans	X	X			X
Philadelphia	X				X
Portland (OR)	X	X	X		
St. Louis		X			
San Francisco				X	
Seattle	X				X
Washington, D.C.	X				X

Source: Miller McClintock, *Street Traffic Control*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1925, p. 149.

The extreme concern over congestion and parking led some cities to try more stringent measures. In 1920, the city of Los Angeles imposed a limited ban on parking in

<sup>68</sup> Miller McClintock, *Street Traffic Control*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1925, p. 149-150.

the downtown during part of the business day. The rules remained in effect just nineteen days. The city council backed down in the face of protests from the business community and newspapers, dramatically scaling back the restrictions.<sup>69</sup> In Chicago, some of the larger businesses began advocating a downtown parking ban in the same year, but small businessmen successfully opposed them. Finally, in 1927, the city council passed a downtown parking ban.<sup>70</sup> The disagreements over parking bans in Los Angeles and Chicago were not unusual. McClintock claimed that arguments over what to do with parked vehicles were “the aspect of the traffic problem which has gained the greatest attention of the public, and that about which the greatest controversies have been waged.”<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the years of this case study, parking was regularly discussed in Boston. These discussions arose in many contexts, among them debates over the loop highway and also meetings of the Board of Street Commissioners, who were in charge of establishing and modifying traffic regulations for the city of Boston. While most people seemed to perceive that parking policies could reduce traffic congestion at least somewhat, there was great disagreement about the extent to which this would help. Also, people had very different perceptions about what specific parking policies would be practical and effective, with the proposals running a wide gamut of possibilities. The mildest proposal, which came from the Chamber of Commerce and Mayor Nichols, was a formal request to drivers that they obey existing regulations. At the other end of the spectrum was a proposal to ban all parking in the downtown. Other suggestions included

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<sup>69</sup> Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the automobile: The making of the modern city*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, pp. 52-91.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit: The formation of public policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983, pp. 158-159.

<sup>71</sup> Miller McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1st ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1925, p. 138.

minor modifications to existing regulations, building new parking garages, increasing police enforcement of parking regulations, and charging an annual fee for the right to park on city streets.

Most of the participants in the parking debates had very definite opinions about what would or would not reduce traffic congestion. The Chamber of Commerce, for example, opposed major changes but gave lukewarm support to modest ones and encouraged better enforcement. The Special Commission took a similar position, though it was slightly more supportive of modest changes to the existing regulations. The Boston City Planning Board was surprisingly quiet on the subject, preferring instead to advise more study of the subject.<sup>72</sup> Mayor Nichols started with the radical proposal of an annual parking fee, but backed down in the face of overwhelming opposition and later supported the mildest of all possible measures—a polite request that drivers obey the parking regulations voluntarily. The Board of Street Commissioners, which actually controlled traffic regulations, at one point suggested a complete parking ban downtown.

#### **9.4.1 Modifying regulations**

The Board of Street Commissioners regularly made small changes to the parking policies in its *Street Transportation Regulations*, adjusting the parking time limits on a particular street (e.g., from twenty minutes to an hour) or imposing no-parking rules during business hours on a few new blocks. There were continuing calls to make more such adjustments, usually to ban parking on specific streets or shortening permitting parking times. Such modest adjustments were generally acceptable to the community. I

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<sup>72</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eleventh annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1925*, 1925, pp. 9-10.

found no strong opposition to the general idea of tinkering with the parking rules, though few people seemed to perceive that this would achieve much congestion relief.

The Special Commission advocated modest changes to the parking regulations in both of its 1925 reports. In the February 1925 report, the commission explained that it had made a “close” study of parking in downtown Boston and concluded that additional parking prohibitions on a few routes in the downtown would complement the loop highway in reducing congestion. The commissioners pointed to past experience with parking limits on Washington and Tremont to demonstrate that additional limitations would be effective. (They also recommended other modest measures such as new parking garages and better police enforcement of parking rules, and opposed the idea of a complete parking ban.) The commission concluded its discussion of parking with the statements that it wished to study the issue further, and that the Chairman of the Boston Street Commission (a member of the Special Commission) was in “hearty” agreement that more restrictive parking regulations would be beneficial.<sup>73</sup> The commissioners’ position on parking regulations did not change substantially in the December 1925 report. Once again they recommended limitations on a few more through streets from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. These restrictions, the commissioners argued, “would only slightly reduce the parking area and would much help the traffic situation in the downtown section.”<sup>74</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce gave lukewarm support to the idea that some changes in regulations would be useful, usually proposing modest changes as an alternative to some tougher proposal like a total ban on parking, or in rebuttal to the claim that tighter

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<sup>73</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, “House Document No. 1160: Further report of the Special Commission,” in *Massachusetts Legislative Documents*, Boston, 1925, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement - p. 8.

parking regulations might make the loop highway unnecessary. The fact that the chamber only promoted modifying parking at times when it was opposing something else suggests it didn't perceive them as important in and of themselves. The chamber also never actually suggested specific changes in parking regulations, but instead contented itself with supporting the general concept.<sup>75</sup> This lack of specificity also suggests that the chamber did not really perceive modifications to the existing parking policy as a desirable or effective way to reduce congestion.

In the spring 1925, the chamber's Gifford LeClear published an article outlining many approaches to relieving the traffic congestion problem. While he did mention altered traffic regulations as one solution, his endorsement was anything but ringing. He began by saying that there were three classes of solutions. The first was a gradual (and voluntary) expansion of the business district; the second, road improvements; and the third, "rules and regulations." His discussion of regulations began with a warning that many people were making snap judgments about which regulations might be useful, and he used as an example the call for a total ban on parking downtown as a way to eliminate the all-day parker. He also objected to the idea that enforcing short parking time limits would reduce traffic congestion, saying that the spaces would still always be occupied, regardless of the time limit permitted. In addition, he pointed out, if the city shortened allotted parking times, this would lead to cars pulling in and out of spaces more frequently, a process that blocked traffic. He ended by saying that he didn't oppose all parking restrictions, but didn't say which ones he supported.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: On parking regulations," June 8, 1925, p. 10, and "Boston's parking problems," June 15, 1925, pp. 5-6, 16.

<sup>76</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Boston's traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution," May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.

As for the perceptions of the business community at large, the chamber claimed to have captured them in a survey. In November 1926 the chamber released the results of a poll in which it had asked various businessmen what parking policies they favored. Of the over 500 respondents, 57% percent said they felt present regulations were “adequate.” While a small majority thus, apparently, opposed modifying the existing regulations at all, that still left almost half the respondents favoring some sort of change. Interestingly, however, when asked whether the existing regulations should be “modified,” somewhat fewer people responded, but among those who did, 63% said yes.<sup>77</sup> Although the chamber itself didn’t interpret these results as revealing support for new parking regulations, the fact that almost half the respondents favored modifications suggests there was significant interest in the community in trying new policies.

#### **9.4.2 A complete ban**

One policy that the Chamber of Commerce did not support at all was a complete ban on parking, though the idea was proposed by some members of the Boston Street Commission, Mayor Nichols, and a few private citizens. Unlike Los Angeles and Chicago where a parking ban was seriously considered and implemented (albeit for a short time in the case of Los Angeles), the idea never took hold in Boston.

The people who proposed bans on all downtown street parking during business hours seem to have been not only trying to free up lane space in the streets, but also to counter the specific problem of vehicles left parked on the streets for a full day. A full ban was probably considered necessary to eliminate the “all-day parker” because the police didn’t

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<sup>77</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Boston merchants in favor of parking,” November [15?], 1926; *Boston Post*, “Oppose ban on parking downtown,” November [12?], 1926; *Current Affairs*, “Business men and our parking rules: Some conclusions which may be drawn from Chamber’s questionnaire,” November 15, 1926, pp. 4 & 12.

regularly enforce parking time limits, so people who wanted to park all day usually did so with impunity, even in zones with time limits. There was little unanimity as to how many of these “all-day parkers” really existed (the police claimed there were thousands,<sup>78</sup> while the Chamber of Commerce claimed it conducted found few all-day parkers during a count of parked cars<sup>79</sup>) and how much they actually contributed to traffic congestion, although there seemed to be general agreement that the all-day parker was a selfish individual.

One prominent source of support for a ban was the Board of Street Commissioners. They must have perceived the idea of a ban as having merit, because in June 1925 they held a hearing to gather public input on the idea of prohibiting the parking of “pleasure vehicles”<sup>80</sup> in the downtown before 10 a.m. and from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.<sup>81</sup> Although the proposal generated many irate opponents and few supporters (except from representatives of the Team Owners’ Association and the Expressmen’s League), the Street Commission continued to support the idea as at least worthy of more reflection. A year later, in April 1926, the *Transcript* ran an article on the growing pressure in Boston to deal with the parking problem. The article commented that while some persons hoped that the situation would improve with the addition of new traffic enforcement police officers, “there is still the feeling among other persons who have studied the problem that the plan of prohibiting parking in the downtown area before ten o’clock in the morning and

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<sup>78</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Merchants ask relief as auto parking grows,” April 24, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>79</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Boston’s traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution,” May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.

<sup>80</sup> The article does not explain exactly what “pleasure vehicles” are, but in those days the term usually referred to all personal automobiles, as distinguished from vehicles transferring freight.

<sup>81</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested,” June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7.



between four and six-o'clock in the afternoon should be revived." Street Commissioner Harding was said to favor a ban and believe that businessmen would support it.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the chamber's own steady opposition to a parking ban, *Current Affairs* did print opinions and letters from supporters of a ban. Enough of these appeared to suggest that there was a constituency in the community who perceived that a ban would help relieve traffic congestion. In July 1925, in a paragraph in the weekly column "City Planning Notes," the chamber noted that officials in Chicago and Philadelphia favored banning parking in their congested downtowns.<sup>83</sup> The following week, in the same column, the chamber reprinted a letter it had received from one Ellerton Jones in response to its request for opinions on the traffic problem. Jones explained that he thought a ban would be cheap and effective enough to remove the need to build the loop highway:

The first thing to do is to stop the parking of all pleasure vehicles in the congested area . . . . This may seem a pretty drastic step to take but it is one that could be taken without any large expenditure of money and if it is taken and the ruling enforced it will, I am almost certain, result in freeing our streets to such an extent that it will not be necessary to spend millions of dollars in building a loop thoroughfare or something of that sort.<sup>84</sup>

Jones also argued that the existing opposition to a ban would pass. He reminded readers that when the idea of removing streetcars from Tremont and Washington Streets first came up, there had been great protests from retailers, but their opposition had passed. A few weeks later the "City Planning Notes" column also reported that the editor of a weekly insurance paper in Boston had written in favor of banning passenger cars from

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<sup>82</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Merchants ask relief as auto parking grows," April 24, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>83</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," July 6, 1925, p. 14.

<sup>84</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," July 13, 1925, pp. 9+.

parking and even driving downtown on the grounds that streetcars and trucks were more appropriate users of the narrow streets than parked passenger cars.<sup>85</sup>

Mayor Nichols never gave outright support to the idea of a parking ban, but he did intimate that if the parking situation couldn't be improved, then such a ban might be necessary. In June 1926, after he had already sent a letter asking that employers request their employees not to park all day on the streets, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that Nichols warned the city it might need to ban parking in the future:

“It has been suggested by the street department,” said Mayor Nichols, “that an arbitrary line be drawn across the city, perhaps through Berkeley and Dover Streets, beyond which no parking would be allowed. We may be forced to some such drastic action as this, but I am still hopeful that we can accomplish the same result by more agreeable means. I suggested a parking tax or license, too. But we will not undertake any stringent measures until we have exhausted the possibilities of the co-operation and liberality of the motorists themselves.”<sup>86</sup>

Overall, the idea of a parking ban attracted more opposition than support. When the street commissioners held their hearing on the subject, most attendees protested fiercely. A police department representative said such a ban could not be enforced, given the department's current resources. The chamber's representative read from a report describing a ban as unlikely to reduce congestion, because even when parking was banned, cars still pulled over to unload or pick up passengers, thus effectively blocking a lane of traffic. The *Transcript* also appeared to oppose the plan, as it entitled the article “Chamber Opposes Drastic Parking Rule,” the use of the word “drastic” hardly implying support.<sup>87</sup>

How many businessmen favored the ban is hard to tell, but the chamber was unwavering in its opposition, as shown by the articles published in *Current Affairs* and by

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<sup>85</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” July 27, 1925, p. 9. For one example, see also: *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” August 10, 1925, p. 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, “Mayor seeks motorists' aid,” June [24?], 1926.

<sup>87</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested,” June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7.

statements from its representatives at public hearings.<sup>88</sup> The most positive statement the chamber made was to say that although a ban would be inappropriate at the time, it might be necessary in the future:

Looking at it from a broader viewpoint, we are in sympathy with the assertion that the passenger car as a means of transportation in the busy down-town streets is inefficient and wasteful of street spaces, and it is entirely possible that within a few years it must be replaced by taxicabs, busses and other types of transportation. Eventually it may be necessary to prohibit passenger cars from parking in, or even from entering, the down-town district, but we do not believe that the time has yet come to adopt any "blanket" regulations.<sup>89</sup>

In one case the chamber actually argued that a complete ban on parking would not help and might even worsen congestion. In May 1925 Gifford Le Clear argued in *Current Affairs* that a ban to deter the all-day parker was a foolish idea because the all-day parker was not the problem. LeClear pointed to a chamber survey of parked vehicles that found that most cars parked for less than twenty minutes. Eliminating the all-day parker would have thus little effect, he said. In fact, it might even have a negative effect by increasing turnover in parking spots, since cars pulling in and out of spaces created additional congestion:

The benefits to be expected from the elimination of parking are less than might be anticipated. In the first place, the elimination of parking is not really an elimination; trucks, machines for delivering and receiving goods, still can stop and the eliminating of this privilege is one that wants to be thought over before acceptance. With one, two, or three cars stopping in a block the avenue of travel that begins against the curb is as effectively blocked as if the cars extended the whole length of the block. The value of a properly enforced restricted time of parking will produce even less results.

It must be remembered that the only advantage in forcing a twenty minute or a ten minute or half hour limit is that more people could be accommodated. The spaces would still be occupied; and bear in mind also that the time required for parking and unparking, if I may coin the term, causes a greater blocking of traffic than would cars located quietly all day at the curb.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> In addition to examples described below, see, for example: *Boston Transcript*, "Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested," June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7; *Current Affairs*, "Boston's parking problems," June 15, 1925, pp. 5-6, 16.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* For more articles opposing a parking ban, see also *Current Affairs*, "We can't dodge traffic problems; So the Chamber puts in much time and effort trying to solve them," October 26, 1925, pp. 52+, "Magnetizing Boston," December 28, 1925, pp. 4 & 16, and "City planning and street traffic notes," November 1, 1926, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Boston's traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution," May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.

Along with issuing statements against a ban, the chamber also reported on other associations that opposed parking bans. For example, *Current Affairs* reprinted part of a report by the national Automobile Chamber of Commerce that claimed:

Prohibition of parking will not go down the throat of the American public. A place to stop for a reasonable length of time is just as much an essential part of motor travel as the road bed itself, and the public will demand that right.

The effort of various agencies to drive the automobiles off the street will not find enthusiasm with the American citizen who knows that the automobile is his best guarantee of freedom from the restrictions of monopolized transportation.<sup>91</sup>

This statement was typical of much opposition to a ban in that it focused on the ban as unacceptable to the public or business community, rather than criticizing it as ineffective congestion relief. To give another example, in October 1925 the chamber's affiliated Retail Trade Board spoke out against the idea of a parking ban at one of the hearings on the loop highway. The board's opposition to the ban seemed to come more from a fear of losing potential customers than from a conviction that the ban wouldn't improve traffic congestion. At the same hearing, a spokesman for the Jordan Marsh department store said that the company supported the loop highway, but warned against a parking ban. He said that if the women who shopped downtown couldn't park easily, they would take their patronage to other cities that provided better parking.<sup>92</sup>

The chamber's 1926 survey of businessmen's opinions on parking included a question about their support for a complete ban. A *Herald* article, "Boston merchants in favor of parking," announced that, "Boston business men do not want the automobile banned from any part of the business section of the city, nor do they advocate a general prohibition of parking, according to their vote on a questionnaire submitted to them by

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<sup>91</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," November 1, 1926, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Chamber spokesman urges action on loop highway plan," October 15, 1925, p. 6. For more coverage of the hearing, see also: *Boston Globe*, "Merchants ask loop highway," October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

the Chamber of Commerce.” The article noted that the response to the question of whether or not parking should be banned in the downtown was 399 (70%) opposed, with only 167 (30%) in favor.<sup>93</sup> (Of course, though the paper did not mention this, even 30% in favor was still a sizable number of people.) The *Post* article on the survey took a similar position. It entitled its article “Oppose Ban on Parking Downtown.” The article explained that:

Boston business men will not give much support to any traffic regulation which would ban traffic from any special section downtown, according to replies they have made to a “feeler” questionnaire sent out by the committee on municipal and metropolitan affairs. . . . The questionnaire also brings out the fact that a majority of the business men in the financial, office and wholesale district will not take kindly to a general prohibition of parking in their sections. Their needs for automobiles for the use of salesmen and other contingencies seem to lead those answering the queries on their stand to express a desire for more or less liberal parking rules.<sup>94</sup>

Like the Chamber of Commerce, the Special Commission opposed any widespread ban on parking. When the Special Commission released its first report in February 1925, it merely brushed off the idea of a parking ban, dismissing the idea in the passing comment that “[o]bviously parking cannot be entirely prohibited.”<sup>95</sup> In the December report, however, which was published after the Street Commissioner’s well-publicized suggestion of a ban, the commission paid more attention to rebutting the idea of a parking ban. The commissioners remarked that, “It is an interesting exhibit of the efforts of the Street Commissioners to restrict the parking evil.” Nevertheless, they continued, they strongly opposed the proposed ban. Although they agreed that some changes in parking policy would be beneficial, they reminded the community that parking was already

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<sup>93</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Boston merchants in favor of parking,” November [15?], 1926.

<sup>94</sup> *Boston Post*, “Oppose ban on parking downtown,” November [12?], 1926. For the chamber’s position on its survey results, see: *Current Affairs*, “Business men and our parking rules: Some conclusions which may be drawn from Chamber’s questionnaire,” November 15, 1926, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, “House Document No. 1160,” 1925, p. 3.

prohibited on most major through streets, so a complete ban would mostly effect minor streets, where they said traffic congestion wasn't much of a problem anyway.<sup>96</sup>

### **9.4.3 A fee**

In 1926 a new and very unpopular proposal for dealing with parking was proposed by Mayor Nichols and the "sub-committee on revenue" of the City's Ways and Means Committee. The sub-committee proposed charging drivers an annual fee for the right to park on city streets. The fee was to be \$5 to \$10 a year, and the existing parking regulations would have still applied. The proposal was made public in January 1926, just before Mayor Nichols announced his opposition to building the loop highway until the city had first tried to cope with its parking problem. The Board of Street Commissioners held a hearing the day after the plan was released. Various groups protested at the hearing, the newspapers ran scathing articles, and the City Council voted a resolution expressing its disapproval of the idea.<sup>97</sup> The commissioners initially decided to postpone a decision until another hearing could be held in a month or so, but the second hearing never materialized, and the fee proposal disappeared for good.<sup>98</sup>

At the time the city was strapped for revenue, and it is unclear whether Nichols and his sub-committee on revenue perceived the proposal more as a strategy to raise revenue or to reduce congestion. The sub-committee officially stated was that the proposal was

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<sup>96</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, p. supplement - p. 8.

<sup>97</sup> *Boston Globe*, "City council avoids parking tax action," January 23 (a.m.), 1926, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Boston parking tax plan meets strong protest," January 22, 1926, pp. 1 & 5; *Boston Transcript*, "Parking tax plan roundly denounced by autoist bodies," January 22, 1926, p. 1; *Boston Globe*, "Street parking fee called un-American," January 22 (p.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 12.

intended to do both. The *Globe* reprinted part of the report issued by the sub-committee that offered both motives:

It is clear, therefore, . . . that Boston streets are largely and regularly used as parking places, for long and short periods, by thousands of non-residents who contribute nothing to the revenue of the city. This use of the streets accentuates congestion, increases the difficulty of handling traffic, and necessitates the maintenance of an enlarged force of traffic officers, thus imposing an additional burden on Boston taxpayers. It would seem only fair that a portion of this additional burden, if not the whole of it, should be borne by those who enjoy the advantages.

After consultation with the Street Commission, your subcommittee is convinced that the imposition of a small yearly license fee for the parking privilege would not only help to relieve in some measure the existing traffic congestion, but would also bring the city sufficient revenue to cover the cost of traffic control, including the expense involved by the impending increase of the police department.<sup>99</sup>

Though both motives were mentioned, the sub-committee's primary task was to advise on city finances, not transportation policy, so revenue concerns seem likely to have dominated. Nevertheless, the committee may well have been trying to reduce congestion, because the head of the sub-committee, Harvard Professor William Bennett Munro, had a professional interest in traffic matters. He studied municipal government and had advised Miller McClintock on his 1924 Ph.D. thesis entitled *The Street Traffic Problem*. Also, the statement quoted above mentioned traffic congestion relief first, and revenue second.

The *Globe* article announcing the fee proposal mentioned that the Mayor "did not doubt there'll be 'an awful howl' raised in this public hearing, by automobile parkers" but the paper also wrote that the "the majority of the citizenship [was] expected to line up with the Mayor on the proposition." The "awful howl" did indeed occur, but without any obvious line-up of support. (The closest thing to support that the proposal received was a letter from the Chamber of Commerce saying it believed the proposal worthy of study and needed more time to consider it.) Most opponents perceived the plan as an

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<sup>99</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Plan to make autos pay for parking in Boston streets," January 21 (a.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 4.

unreasonable imposition on motorists or a scheme that would drive away business, and they didn't even bother to comment on its congestion-relief potential.

The opposition from business and automobile advocacy groups was swift and adversarial. The Boston Motor Club called an "emergency" meeting of its Board of Governors as soon as the plan was announced and issued a statement that the proposal was "an imposition on the rights of the citizens of this community." The club objected on the grounds that motorists were already overburdened with too many fees and taxes.<sup>100</sup> At the hearing of the Street Commissioners, the club's representative received considerable publicity for his contention that the proposal was "un-American." (He also insisted that it would not lessen congestion.) The Retail Trade Board's representative made a similar statement.

None of the newspapers had anything positive to say. The *Transcript* immediately published an editorial warning that the proposed fee would be counterproductive as a revenue-generator because it would likely drive business away from the city and thus reduce overall revenues to the city.<sup>101</sup> (Presumably this situation would have reduced congestion as well, but the editors didn't make that argument.) The *Herald* ridiculed the fee with a cartoon in which a driver discovers that all the cities in the region have introduced parking fees, and so he ends up giving up his car and returning to the railroad for transportation (see Figure 9.1). The *American* ran a cartoon on a similar theme, while the *Post* ran one lampooning the "freedom" of the city (see Figure 9.2).

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<sup>100</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Boston Motor Club aroused over plan for parking fees," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5; *Boston Globe*, "Plan to make autos pay for parking in Boston streets," January 21 (a.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>101</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: A license tax for parking," January 21, 1926, p. II-2.

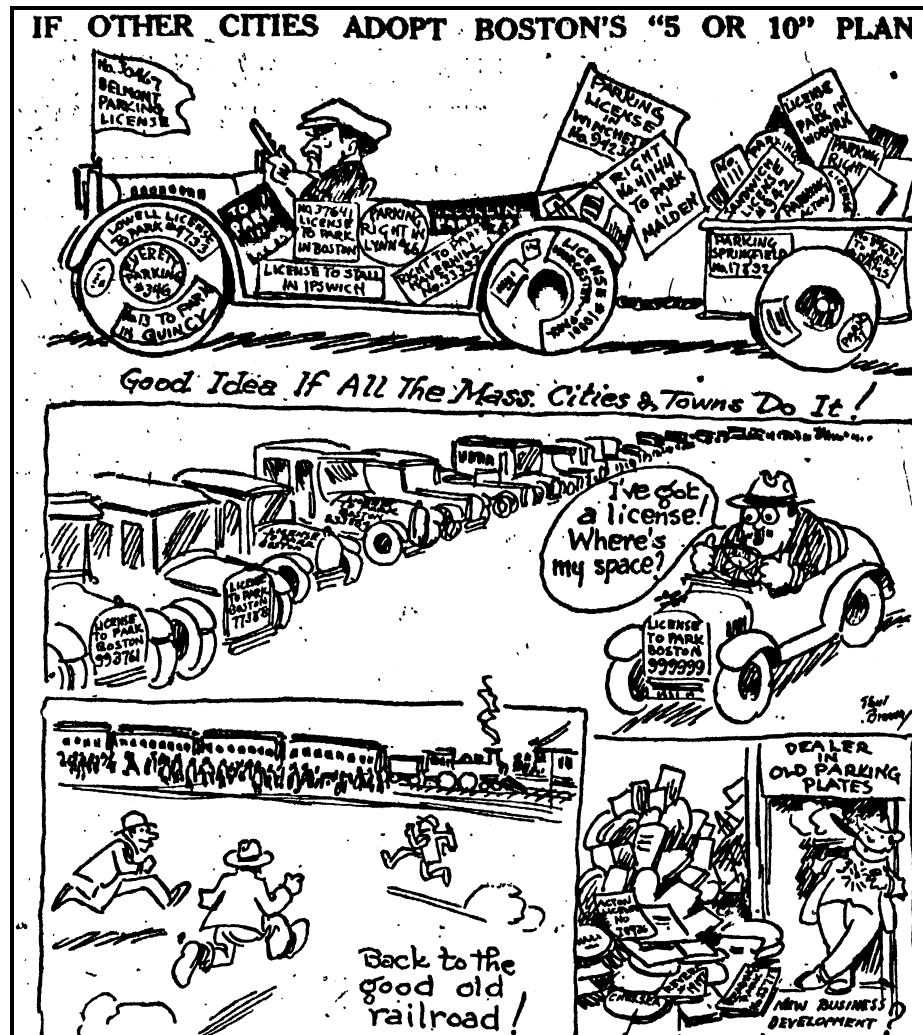


The *Post* was one of the only sources to comment directly on why the fee would not reduce congestion. The paper said that the proposed fee:

... is of at least doubtful legality, is not practical, will not do much to solve the traffic problem, is certain to incur the ill will of the whole State outside of Boston and is likely seriously to injure our business interests.

On the issue of effectiveness, they went on to say that the fee wasn't high enough to keep motorists from parking downtown and therefore wouldn't effect congestion.<sup>102</sup>

Figure 9.1: A *Herald* cartoon in response to the proposed annual parking fee.



Source: *Herald*, "If other cities adopt Boston's '5 or 10' plan," January 22, 1926, p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: The auto parking tax," January [22?], 1926.

Figure 9.2: A *Post* cartoon in response to the proposed parking fee.



Source: *Boston Post*, "The freedom of the city," January 22, 1926, p. 1.

#### 9.4.4 Better enforcement

Discussions about parking regulations frequently included calls for improved enforcement. As discussed in Chapter 3, enforcement of traffic regulations was spotty at best, and parking rules were some of the hardest to enforce. Motorists simply ignored

most of the rules, many leaving their cars parked in the street all day. Boston shared this enforcement problem with cities around the country. In Philadelphia, one 1923 commenter warned that the city found it couldn't enforce parking limits of any time unless one or two officers were placed on each block to time each car. Miller McClintock warned that, "[I]f an attempt were made strictly to enforce the parking regulations, it is doubtful if the entire police force of the average city would be adequate for the purpose."<sup>103</sup>

The enforcement changes proposed in Boston fell into two strands—demands for additional police officers devoted to parking control, and the suggestion that parking infractions be removed from the municipal court system and made fines payable directly to the police department. (The latter suggestion was supposed to save motorists time, but also to make it easier for the police to enforce the regulations.) Nobody publicly opposed these policies, while many people praised them. Ultimately more police officers were added, though the changes to ticketing procedure did not occur during the period of study.

One short burst of support for better enforcement came from the Boston Motor Club after Mayor Nichols announced the plan to charge an annual fee for the right to park on Boston's city streets. James F. Cavanagh, Chairman of the Legislative Committee of the Boston Motor Club, was outraged at the idea. He noted that his organization had submitted to the General Court a bill calling for a new traffic violations court to make enforcement easier, which he felt was a better way to deal with the parking issue than a

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<sup>103</sup> McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1925, p. 150.

new tax. Cavanagh argued that motorists already were overtaxed, but apparently felt that enforcement of the existing laws was desirable.<sup>104</sup>

The Special Commission's two 1925 reports both advocated better enforcement of parking regulations. They both included text for a proposed state law giving the owners of ticketed vehicles the option of paying the fine at a police station instead of having to appear in court.<sup>105</sup> When the Special Commission's first report came out in February 1925, its parking proposals garnered support from Representative Shattuck in a letter he wrote to the *Transcript*, although he criticized the plan for the loop highway itself. Shattuck's letter in turn generated a response from the paper's editorial board. The paper printed an editorial entitled "Parking and Ticketing," which called for consideration of the Special Commission's proposed legislation. The editorial said that the parking enforcement issue hadn't yet received much public attention, but that it should. The editors then quoted the section of the commission's report that discussed the proposal, and added their own endorsement of the idea.<sup>106</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce also pushed for better enforcement, doing so with more enthusiasm than it generated for the idea of tightening the regulations. At a hearing in February 1925, its representatives praised the Special Commission's proposed change in the ticketing system<sup>107</sup> and a *Current Affairs* article described the plan for its readers, though did not go so far as to endorse the idea. In April, however, the chamber went a

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<sup>104</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Boston Motor Club aroused over plan for parking fees," January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5; *American*, "Motorists protest parking tax plan," January [21?], 1926.

<sup>105</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, "House Document #1160," 1925, pp. 4 & 11; *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, p. supplement - pp. 8 & 17.

<sup>106</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Parking and ticketing," March 18, 1925, p. II-2.

<sup>107</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Changing the map of Boston; New and widened streets proposed," February 23, 1925, p. 7.

step farther in a brief article about the loop highway plan that appeared on the cover of *Current Affairs*. Author Fitzhenry Smith, Jr. called the bill, “A step toward relief by more effective regulation of the use of existing streets.”<sup>108</sup> Several more articles later in the year repeated this endorsement.<sup>109</sup>

The chamber began in the summer 1926 to advocate for additional police officers to be assigned to parking enforcement duty. This effort appears to have been stimulated by the fact that, after a couple of years of advocacy, the city council had finally authorized the police department to hire an additional three hundred officers. Fitzhenry Smith, Jr. sent a letter to the police commissioner in July suggesting that the department use this as an opportunity to create a squad dedicated to parking enforcement. Police Commissioner Wilson’s response, also reprinted in *Current Affairs*, was that the new officers were needed for other duties, and that the creation of a parking squad would require the addition of yet more policemen.<sup>110</sup> The next month another article by Smith called for adding more police resources to the parking problem, though he also added that the police could never fully enforce parking regulations without public cooperation.<sup>111</sup>

In August 1926 the chamber’s affiliated Retail Trade Board also called for better enforcement. It released a report calling for new efforts to deal with traffic congestion, arguing that the foremost need was new streets, but that “The other method of securing

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<sup>108</sup> *Current Affairs*, “The Loop Highway and Dock Square Improvements,” April 6, 1925, cover.

<sup>109</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Editorial: On parking regulations,” June 8, 1925, p. 10, “Boston’s parking problems,” June 15, 1925, pp. 5-6, 16, and “Magnetizing Boston,” December 28, 1925, pp. 4 & 16.

<sup>110</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Can’t enforce parking edict,” July [5?], 1926; *Current Affairs*, “New police officers in training” July 12, 1926, pp. 4 & 16.

<sup>111</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Our parking problem,” August 2, 1926, [p. 2].

relief will come through the more systematic enforcement of reasonable traffic regulations” (by which it meant parking regulations).<sup>112</sup>

When the police department finally began a new effort to crack down on parking violators in the fall 1926, a *Current Affairs* editorial immediately proclaimed the effort a success.<sup>113</sup> A few weeks later, *Current Affairs* published an article entitled “Truckmen comment on parking” that repeated statements about the new crackdown made by four members of the freight transport industry, all of whom spoke positively about the effort.<sup>114</sup> In November the magazine published yet another article on parking that included praise of the new enforcement, though this time it cautioned that the ever-increasing number of vehicles meant that the parking problem was “not yet solved.”<sup>115</sup>

#### **9.4.5 Requests for cooperation**

Parallel to calls for more effective police enforcement of parking rules came formal requests to Boston motorists that they stop disobeying the regulations. This approach fit with the national tendency of the times to view traffic regulations as a subject on which motorists needed to be educated.<sup>116</sup> A member of the state’s Department of Public Safety argued that government had failed to create a “will” to obey traffic laws among its citizens and needed to educate the driver that “only by a strict and faithful observance of

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<sup>112</sup> *Boston Herald*, “Cite necessity of new streets,” August [15?], 1926; *Current Affairs*, “Merchants and the parking problem,” August 16, 1926, p. 5.

<sup>113</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Editorial: More parking space for shoppers,” September 13, 1926, p. 6.

<sup>114</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Truckmen comment on parking” October 4, 1926, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Business men and our parking rules: Some conclusions which may be drawn from Chamber's questionnaire,” November 15, 1926, pp. 4 & 12.

<sup>116</sup> Mark S. Foster, *From streetcar to superhighway: American city planners and urban transportation, 1900-1940*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1981, p. 96.

all our laws can he achieve that liberty and freedom which we all so much desire.”<sup>117</sup>

Although the requests made to Boston motorists were not phrased as “education,” this is clearly what they aimed to do.

Mayor Nichols and the Chamber of Commerce both put out such appeals to the community. In June 1926, Mayor Nichols initiated such an effort. He announced that “The most practicable and effective way to solve the traffic difficulties of Boston’s business district is by co-operation,” and sent out a letter to downtown businesses asking that they request their employees to obey parking rules, especially those prohibiting all day parking.<sup>118</sup> The text of his letter singled out the all-day parker as the cause of traffic congestion, and then said:

These all-day parkers in many cases are executives and employees of business houses. It is my belief that they will be willing to assist in the solution of the traffic problem if the matter is placed squarely before them. Therefore, I am sending this general letter to the heads of business firms, directing such firms to assist by posting notices to executives and employees, urging them not to leave their cars on the streets beyond the time permitted by law. If we can secure their immediate cooperation I believe in a very short time the city will experience a marked improvement in traffic conditions and that much intolerable delay, inconvenience and loss will be avoided.

I feel sure that you will agree with me that the practice of extended parking ought to be abolished. May I, therefore, count upon your assistance in helping to meet the present serious situation. A word from you would also be greatly appreciated.<sup>119</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce actively followed up on Nichols’ effort with pleas of its own, suggesting that its leaders perceived the idea as having some merit. At the beginning of August, *Current Affairs* published an article on “Our Parking Problem” that explained that the police department could not manage to catch all violators, and that drivers needed to cooperate by respecting the laws. The article continued with a request

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<sup>117</sup> Alfred F. Foote, “Police methods,” in *Proceedings of a conference on motor vehicle traffic, held under the joint auspices of Yale university and the state of Connecticut in New Haven, Apr. 9, 10, and 11, 1924*, edited by R. S. Kirby, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1924, p. 102.

<sup>118</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, “Mayor seeks motorists’ aid,” June [24?], 1926.

<sup>119</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Mayor seeks help to reduce parking,” June [22?], 1926.

for members to let the chamber know their views of parking policy. The specific questions asked were:

1. Do you believe in parking regulations in theory only?
2. Are you willing to help put them in practice?
3. Will members who own automobiles cooperate with the Chamber by observing strictly the existing regulations and inducing others in their employ to do likewise?
4. Is it a practicable suggestion to ask business men and others to cooperate by calling attention to the persistent violators of the parking regulations that come to their knowledge?<sup>120</sup>

Two weeks later, a *Current Affairs* article mentioned that the Retail Trade Board had asked its members to respect the city's parking regulations.<sup>121</sup> Around the same time, the Chamber of Commerce submitted to Mayor Nichols a plan to follow up on his letter to business owners requesting that employees respect the parking regulations. The chamber suggested that business owners be sent a form letter with a pledge for their employees to sign, saying that they would avoid commuting to work by automobile if possible, and if they had to bring their cars that they would not park them on the streets.<sup>122</sup> Then in September 1926 (at the time when the police department had stepped up its enforcement efforts), *Current Affairs* published an article entitled "Obey the Parking Rules" that exhorted readers to follow the laws:

Remember that the street traffic regulations have been designed primarily to assist in the transaction of business in the city. Modern business depends largely upon the easy movement of vehicular traffic. The elimination of the parking evil is a highly important step towards the improvement of traffic conditions in Boston. If you obey the laws, you will be helping yourself and your associates. Do not force the police to bring it to your attention. Make note of these rules and obey them.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Our parking problem," August 2, 1926, p. [2?].

<sup>121</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Merchants and the parking problem," August 16, 1926, p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Chamber suggests no parking pledge," August [18?], 1926.

<sup>123</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Obey the parking rules," September 6, 1926, pp. 4 & 5.



#### 9.4.6 Garages

If people were going to voluntarily stop parking on downtown streets, then they needed alternatives. One such alternative would have been to stop driving, of course, but the community didn't pursue that line of action. Instead, some people argued that the way to reduce on-street parking was to increase the supply of off-street parking spaces. The argument went that if off-street parking were provided, then people would voluntarily use it, leaving fewer cars parked on the streets. Since there was little free land in the downtown itself, people suggested providing parking facilities either underneath downtown buildings, or just outside the congested district. Unlike some of the parking strategies suggested, this one was actually implemented quite quickly, although it is unclear that it reduced congestion.

Garages were a new concept in the mid-1920s. Boston was on the cutting edge of the trend, being one of the first cities to build any. In 1925 McClintock praised garages as useful and predicted that more would be built in the future. However, he also noted that it could be difficult to get financial backing for them, as they were considered a "rather speculative venture."<sup>124</sup> In addition, garages required special zoning permission, which city councils were not always eager to give because some residents opposed garages as eyesores or fire hazards.

During the loop highway debates, the garage idea came up during the very first legislative hearing, held in March 1924. Mayor Curley explained that he had discussed with the three largest department stores the possibility of building a garage in the heart of

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<sup>124</sup> McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1925, p. 148.

the downtown to serve their customers.<sup>125</sup> In July of the following year, *Current Affairs* printed an item entitled “Customers’ Garage to Relieve Parking Congestion.” The piece explained that the Jordan Marsh department store had begun construction of a 600-space garage on Beach Street to accommodate its customers’ vehicles and noted that, “It is expected to take a large number of parked cars off the city streets.”<sup>126</sup>

Unlike most of the other proposed parking reduction policies, this one generated active results—from the private sector. The members of the Retail Trade Board began offering validated parking to customers who parked in a garage near the North Station, and the local transit company ran a bus between the station and the downtown. *Current Affairs* explained that:

The directors of the Retail Trade Board feel that these garage arrangements will make it more convenient for shoppers to transact their business in Boston; especially during the morning hours. It will also help in some measure to relieve traffic congestion.<sup>127</sup>

*Current Affairs* followed up on this notice the next week with praise for the plan, noting that the *Transcript* had taken the garage plan as evidence of the business community’s willingness to do its part in solving the congestion problem:

A significant statement was made by the *Transcript* in commenting upon this plan:—  
“When the merchants of Boston give such tangible proof of their willingness to cooperate for the betterment of traffic conditions, they establish a strong claim to cooperative action by the community at large in achieving the still greater improvements which are now on the calendar, awaiting legislative attention.”<sup>128</sup>

By the following year the Retail Trade Board had expanded the parking validation program to cover three garages, accommodating 2000 cars.<sup>129</sup> The chamber itself repeatedly advocated the idea of building garages at the edge of the downtown, too.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Real estate fears big traffic street is too expensive,” March 10, 1924, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>126</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” July 6, 1925, p. 14.

<sup>127</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Free parking for store patrons,” November 23, 1925, p. 6.

<sup>128</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” November 30, 1925, pp. 7 & 16.

<sup>129</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Loop highway conflict has quiet start,” March 18, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

Support for garages near downtown also came from the *Boston Post*. In an editorial it published in reaction to Nichols' January 1926 proposal for an annual parking fee, the *Post* said that:

We don't want to keep people out of Boston; we want them to come here; crowds are the life of business. How long would the big stores on Washington Street pay enormous taxes if the crowds were kept away? But we do want their cars stowed away somewhere besides on our congested streets. And the means of doing that consist of great and tall garages all around the immediate fringe of the business district, places in which moderate charges could be made for day occupancy.<sup>131</sup>

Underground garages in the city center were another variant on the idea of creating off-street parking. In July 1925 *Current Affairs* included in its "City Planning Notes" column an item entitled "Believes New Garage Law Would Help Parking Problem." The magazine reported that Charles A. Newhall, a real estate broker located on Tremont Street, had written to the chamber's Committee on Municipal and Metropolitan Affairs to suggest that the city and state change their laws to allow construction of garage space under buildings.<sup>132</sup> The idea of underground garages also came up in suggestions to put one under the Boston Common. The next month *Current Affairs* noted that the city of Boston had often heard suggestions for underground parking lots, including the first suggestion for an "auto cave" under the Boston Common two years ago.<sup>133</sup> The following week the paper noted that a chamber member had written to commend the idea of a parking garage under the Common.<sup>134</sup> The idea reappeared in April of the following year, when the idea of a garage under Boston Common was discussed in the City Council. The

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<sup>130</sup> See, for example: *Current Affairs*, "Magnetizing Boston," December 28, 1925, pp. 4 & 16.

<sup>131</sup> *Boston Post*, "Editorial: The auto parking tax," January [22?], 1926.

<sup>132</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," July 13, 1925, pp. 9+.

<sup>133</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," August 3, 1925, p. 6.

<sup>134</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," August 10, 1925, p. 8.

council voted unanimously to ask Mayor Nichols to request the Street Commission to study the proposal.<sup>135</sup>

Another variation on the idea of providing garage space was to create parking places at outlying transit stations. *Current Affairs* printed yet more discussion of off-site parking July 1925, reporting on an article from the *Christian Science Monitor* that suggested that traffic congestion would be relieved by building parking lots at the ends of major street railway and rapid transit lines. The authors asked for feedback on the plan from readers.<sup>136</sup> The item evidently caught readers' interest, for the very next week *Current Affairs* reported that the proposal had "been received with commendation, criticism and doubts." The main objection, according to the article, was doubt that car owners would voluntarily leave their cars in such parking lots. (The authors also pointed out that the chamber estimated there already were 3,500 "vacant spaces" in existing garages just north of the downtown, suggesting that a lack of spaces was not the reason drivers didn't park outside the downtown.)<sup>137</sup>

The idea of parking at transit stations reappeared in November 1925, when *Current Affairs* reported that the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company was offering parking at its stations. The magazine noted that a similar plan was suggested in the *Transcript*:

The Boston *Transcript* points to this novel plan and suggests that the company is making a strong bid to "buy off the automobile." Competition in recent years has much reduced street car riding. The idea holds promise of expediting automobile traffic in the congested parts of the city.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Boston Post*, "For autos under the Common," April [13?], 1926; *Boston Globe*, "Great garage under Common is proposed," April [14?], 1926.

<sup>136</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," July 27, 1925, p. 9.

<sup>137</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning notes," August 3, 1925, p. 6.

<sup>138</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," November 2, 1925, p. 16.

Related to the idea of providing garage space was the concept of providing transit between garages and the downtown. In January 1926, the *Transcript* reported that the Boston Elevated Railway was experimenting with the idea of running buses from garages on Massachusetts Avenue into the downtown. The hope was that people would make use of the service, thereby not driving into and parking in the downtown. According to a city official, the Street Commissioners felt that “it would be well to try the experiment to see if congestion of automobiles would be relieved.” Another person, however, expressed concern that the plan wouldn’t ultimately reduce on-street parking because people wouldn’t be willing to transfer between their cars and a bus.<sup>139</sup>

Though support for creating off-street parking options came most frequently from the retail community, support did come from other sources. In October 1925, Governor Fuller mentioned the provision of off-street parking spaces as one of several “important steps toward the solution of the [parking] problem.”<sup>140</sup> The Special Commission’s December 1925 report recommended garages on both the outskirts of downtown and at transit stations.<sup>141</sup> In January 1926, Mayor Nichols mentioned new garages near downtown as a “natural” solution to the parking problem, one that was happening on its own.<sup>142</sup> Finally, at the end of 1926 the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that Harvard University’s new Albert Russel Erskine Bureau for Street Traffic Research<sup>143</sup> had just published a bulletin on the question of off-street parking. The paper announced,

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<sup>139</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Mayor not opposed to downtown bus line,” January 28, 1926, p. 10.

<sup>140</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, “Low-cost street ‘widening’ with parking ban suggested,” October 5, 1925, p. 2.

<sup>141</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, p. supplement.

<sup>142</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Nichols is not ready to support ‘loop’ highway,” January 21, 1926, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>143</sup> The bureau was headed by Miller McClintock.

“Shortage of Parking Space in Business Districts Is Big Factor in Congestion, and Curbs Can Accommodate but 15 Per Cent Says Harvard Bureau.” The article said:

Development of additional off-street storage facilities for automobiles to overcome the acute shortage of parking space in the business districts of American cities is pointed out as a factor of major importance in the relief of traffic congestion in a bulletin made public by the Albert Russel Erskine Bureau for Street Traffic Research, recently endowed at Harvard University for technical study of the traffic problem.<sup>144</sup>

#### **9.4.7 New parking regulations versus the loop highway**

The previous discussion of parking policies as a way to reduce traffic congestion focused on outlining what the different proposals were and who made or supported them. It did not dwell on how effective the proponents felt parking policies would be compared to other alternatives. This next section looks at one particular aspect of that question of efficacy: how Bostonians perceived the relative merits of the loop highway and parking regulations as policies to combat traffic congestion. The only type of policy that a number of people argued would reduce congestion enough to make the loop highway unnecessary was parking policy. Indeed, this was the only objection to building the loop highway, other than cost, that was raised regularly. Many of the parking policies discussed above came out in articles that also took a stance for or against the loop highway, and in many cases the authors made very clear which approach they preferred. Loop highway supporters tended to argue that while some additional parking regulations would bring about minor congestion reduction, they would not bring nearly as much relief as the loop highway. Opponents of the highway, such as Nichols and Shattuck, argued just the opposite: improved parking policies should be tried first because they might reduce congestion enough to make the expensive loop highway necessary.

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<sup>144</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Off-street motor storage declared city traffic need," December [11?], 1926.

Discussion of parking policies and the loop highway as competing alternatives arose periodically throughout the entire period of this case study. As mentioned earlier, when the City Planning Board first presented the loop highway plan publicly in 1923, the newspapers mentioned that the board would also study parking policies as a congestion relief idea.<sup>145</sup>

Right from the beginning, the Boston City Planning Board argued that parking policies were inferior to the loop highway as an antidote to traffic congestion. In 1922, the year before the loop highway plan was released, the board wrote in its annual report:

That something drastic needs to be done to give relief to traffic in the downtown district is recognized by both the City Planning Board and the Board of Street Commissioners, and it is recognized also what that something is. Traffic rules and regulations cannot do much more than they are doing now unless they be made to keep all but commercial vehicles out of the downtown streets during the crowded hours of the day.

What the downtown business territory needs above all else is a broad highway paralleling Washington Street, connecting the north side of the city with the wholesale territory which lies east of Washington Street and which extends to Kneeland Street.<sup>146</sup>

Later in the report the board reprinted a report on street traffic from consultant Nelson P. Lewis, who argued that, “even if some of the traffic could be taken from the streets they would still be of inadequate capacity, while there is a conspicuous lack of direct routes between different parts of the city.” While Lewis did not mention parking specifically, parking policies would likely have been one of the methods he was thinking of when he mentioned removing some traffic from the streets. Later, as he argued further for the need of new and expanded roads, he said: “Something might be accomplished by further

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<sup>145</sup> *Boston City Record*, “Proposed new \$35,000,000 highway through city to relieve traffic,” December 8, 1923, p. 1685.

<sup>146</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Eighth annual report of the City Planning Board for the year ending January 31, 1922*, 1922.

regulation, as suggested in the report on street traffic made by the Chamber of Commerce in 1914, but regulation appears to have gone about as far as it can.”<sup>147</sup>

As for the Special Commission, its first report mentioned that modified parking policies would be helpful in conjunction with the loop highway, but didn’t make any direct statement about their effectiveness relative to the loop highway. By June 1925, when Harriman spoke for the Special Commission at a legislative hearing, this position had changed. Harriman stated that:

The parking problem is only a part of the general problem of traffic congestion in Boston. We reiterate our belief that while some improvement can be effected by a better enforcement of existing parking regulations and the judicious imposition of new regulations, the fundamental solution lies in the provision of more street space, the diversion of traffic away from present centers of congestion, and the spreading out of business districts. This the proposed Loop Highway holds the greatest promise of doing.<sup>148</sup>

The Special Commission’s December report repeated the claim that parking policies could not substitute for the loop highway as a way to reduce traffic congestion.<sup>149</sup>

Harriman repeated this position yet again in March 1926, at one of the final legislative hearings on the loop highway.<sup>150</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce also insisted that parking plans couldn’t substitute for the loop highway. In April 1925, *Current Affairs* printed an article on the loop highway that stated that both new streets and regulations would ease congestion, “but the latter alone will not solve the present problems.”<sup>151</sup> In October, *Current Affairs* published an editorial by Fitzhenry Smith, Jr., with the title “Parking prohibitions not a substitute for Loop Highway.” Smith explained himself at some length:

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>148</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Boston’s parking problems,” June 15, 1925, pp. 5-6, 16.

<sup>149</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement.

<sup>150</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Loop highway conflict has quiet start,” March 18, 1926, pp. 1 & 11.

<sup>151</sup> *Current Affairs*, “The Loop Highway and Dock Square Improvements,” April 6, 1925, cover.



It is sometimes argued that if parking were prohibited in the down town districts, or at least if more attention were paid to parking, our traffic problem would be solved and that the improvement of existing streets and the construction of new thoroughfares would not be required. . . . But it is a mistake to believe, and we will deceive ourselves if we hold to the belief, that parking alone is the cause of the present congestion of traffic in down town Boston and that its elimination will accomplish the results which all well wishers of the city desire. . . . The truth is that the streets in the congested districts are not now adequate for the traffic which has no course other than to go through them. And that is why the Chamber and many other business organizations are urging the construction of the so-called Loop Highway, which aims to divert traffic around these overworked districts. *No prohibition of traffic can serve the purpose or accomplish the relief which such a thoroughfare will furnish, for it strikes at the root of the problem.*<sup>152</sup> (Italics added.)

When *Current Affairs* later reported on the Retail Trade Board's plan to provide free garage space to shoppers, the article warned that this plan would "help in some measure to relieve traffic congestion" but was "only one step" towards that relief. The article continued on to say that, "With the number of automobiles increasing at a tremendous rate, it is the belief of Boston merchants and other important business and civic interests that the proposed 'Loop Highway' for Boston transcends in importance any other effort to reduce congestion in the city."<sup>153</sup>

Yet more opposition from the business community came from S. St. John Morgan, president of the Retail Trade Board. In October 1925, at a loop highway hearing, he complained that too much attention had been given to the idea of parking regulations. He argued that the auto brought the retailers much business, and that if parking were banned, then there would be no need for improved highways because shoppers would stay away.<sup>154</sup> This fear that difficult parking might drive shoppers to other parts of the region was likely one of the main reasons the business community did not support efforts to control congestion through parking regulations.

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<sup>152</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: Parking prohibitions not a substitute for Loop Highway," October 19, 1925, p. 10. For another restatement of the chamber's position, see: *Current Affairs*, "Free parking for store patrons," November 23, 1925, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Boston Post*, "Urge loop highway as hub's need," October 15, 1925, pp. 1 & 14.

Although the Chamber of Commerce, City Planning Board, and Special Commission all argued that parking policies could not bring the same relief as the loop highway, they were opposed by several people, including, the politically influential Nichols and Shattuck. In March 1925, after the “compromise plan” for the loop highway had been worked out, Shattuck wrote a letter to the editor of the *Transcript* in which he cast doubt on the effectiveness of the loop highway, but supported the idea of parking restrictions.<sup>155</sup> Then, at a legislative hearing in October of the same year, Shattuck stated:

... it would be well if the question of parking regulations be disposed of before anything definite be done in relation to a thoroughfare. The presence of large numbers of automobiles on the streets, he thought, adds to the congregation, and if these could be eliminated the problem would not be so complex.<sup>156</sup>

In January 1926, at his speech formally opposing the loop highway, new mayor Malcolm Nichols said the city should hold off on building the loop until the city had first thought through its parking policy. In the following statement quoted in the *Transcript*, he implied that the city might make a bad mistake if it built the loop highway before trying to deal with parking issues. (In the following quote, his phrase about traffic under “better control” is a reference to controlling parking.)

With traffic under better control, the city may wisely proceed with no serious delay with the improvement of the main arteries of the business district, the mayor remarked. “But, unless we solve the traffic problem first, we shall run the risk of making mistakes which no city ought to make and the city of Boston certainly cannot afford. Everyone desires the improvement of the city of Boston; but before we make commitments amounting to tens of millions, let us make sure that our improvements are going to improve.

Furthermore, he said that if the community could first come to agreement on traffic regulations, then it might be easier to agree on the details of a major street improvement.

At least one member of the city council supported Nichols’ position. When in April 1926 the council voted to have the Board of Street Commissioners study the feasibility of

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<sup>155</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Letter to the editor: Car-rider or automobilist,” March 18, 1925, p. II-2.

<sup>156</sup> *Boston Globe*, “Merchants ask loop highway,” October 15 (a.m.), 1925, p. 7.

building a garage under the Common, the council member who introduced the order mentioned the garage as an alternative to the loop highway:

In explaining his action, the councilor pointed out that the street widening programs on which the city has spent millions and the present theoretic loop highways and bridge programs have all been drawn up with the idea of relieving congestion and speeding up traffic.

[Councilor]Heffernan pointed out that the parking problem has become more and more acute each year and that unless some remedy is found within a short period of time, widenings and traffic regulations will only serve to make the handling of automobiles in the city worse.<sup>157</sup>

The *Globe* quoted him as making the point even more directly: “Such a vast garage would go far toward making unnecessary the \$35,000,000 loop highway talked of.”<sup>158</sup>

Governor Fuller, in an October 1925 address to the twelfth annual conference of Massachusetts Planning Boards, described a parking ban as a way to “widen” the streets. The governor “pointed out that the removal of standing cars from Boston streets would ‘widen’ the streets at least 18 feet, without expense.” He did not mention parking as an alternative to the loop highway in particular, but given that others were making the argument at the time, it seems likely he had the loop in mind.<sup>159</sup>

## 9.5 Changing other traffic regulations (1920s)

Several types of traffic regulations that focused on moving vehicles (as opposed to parked ones) were also discussed in the mid-1920s. There were a few discussions about adding more one-way streets and trying out stop signs, but the idea that received the most attention was traffic lights. All of these technologies received mostly favorable press, except for a specific proposal to make Tremont Street one-way. However, even proponents of these traffic control technologies did not seem to perceive them as

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<sup>157</sup> *Boston Post*, "For autos under the Common," April [13?], 1926.

<sup>158</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Great garage under Common is proposed," April [14?], 1926.

<sup>159</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, "Low-cost street 'widening' with parking ban suggested," October 5, 1925, p. 2.

significant solutions to the downtown traffic congestion problem. They were rarely discussed as strategies that could be applied system-wide, instead being perceived as devices that would improve traffic flow at the specific intersections where they were implemented. Reflecting this view of the devices as localized improvements, nobody ever discussed them as the only traffic congestion relief policies the city might need, for example, or as alternatives that might make the loop highway unnecessary.

Boston was a rather late adopter of traffic signals. In 1914 Cleveland installed the first one, and by the early 1920s most major cities had at least a few signals,<sup>160</sup> but not until late 1924 did Boston install its first one. By December 1926, Boston still had traffic signals installed at only four intersections. Businessmen had donated two of the lights, and the police department paid for the other two. At the time, another businessman was planning to give a fifth signal, with the requirement that it be capable of functioning as part of a coordinated system along Tremont Street, a project then under development.<sup>161</sup>

Everybody had good things to say about the traffic lights, but the coverage was often quite short and did not reveal much about the writers' perceptions. For example, the newspapers published short announcements each time a new signal was installed, but usually gave little commentary beyond a description of how well the light had functioned on its opening day and who showed up for the opening ceremony. The editors did not perceive the signals as important enough news to warrant commentary.

There were, however, some more substantive comments made about the lights, though these did not always center on congestion. One common theme that ran through

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<sup>160</sup> Historian Clay McShane estimated that there were at most 500 traffic lights in use in the United States in 1923. Clay McShane, "The origins and globalization of traffic control signals," *Journal of Urban History*, March 1999, 382-383 & 396.

<sup>161</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Modern traffic signal systems," December 20, 1926, pp. 6 & 32.

the press coverage of traffic signals was a perception that they would reduce accidents. Many articles emphasized this safety aspect more than any congestion benefits.<sup>162</sup> Also, a number of articles emphasized that the towers would reduce the number of policemen needed to direct traffic at an intersection, which was perceived as a major advantage.<sup>163</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce was more voluble in its praise, unsurprising given that Gifford LeClear, one of its members, helped to design Boston's first signals. *Current Affairs* reported often and favorably on traffic signals.<sup>164</sup> Also, the chamber did explicitly link the lights with congestion relief. In February 1924, the chamber sent Mayor Curley a letter urging the city to install traffic signals, predicting that they would "materially aid in the efficient handling of traffic" and that "street traffic on important thoroughfares can be more efficiently handled by the use of signal lights . . . at the more congested street intersections on these thoroughfares."<sup>165</sup>

Though the press coverage of traffic lights was admiring, almost nobody described the lights as a large-scale remedy for traffic congestion. Instead, they focused on the benefits achieved in the area immediately adjacent to a particular light. I found only one article advocating a widespread system of traffic signals in Boston as a way to deal more comprehensively with traffic congestion. At the very end 1926, the *American* published an article about an upcoming test of a "system" of traffic lights to be tried in the growing

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<sup>162</sup> For a statement that the safety benefits are more important than the congestion ones see: *Current Affairs*, "Modern traffic signal systems," December 20, 1926, pp. 6 & 32. Safety benefits are also mentioned in: *Current Affairs*, "Chamber aids police department; Assists department in traffic signal light installation," December 15, 1924, pp. 5-6, "Editorial: Their worth is proven," January 5, 1925, p. 8, and "City planning and street traffic notes," November 8, 1926, p. 5; *Boston Globe*, "New traffic signals speed up traffic at busy corner," December 8, 1924, pp. 1 & 9.

<sup>163</sup> See, for example: *Christian Science Monitor*, "New traffic tower declared success," March [?], 1926; *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," November 8, 1926, p. 5, "Chamber aids police department; Assists department in traffic signal light installation.," December 15, 1924, pp. 5-6, "Traffic signal made permanent," June 29, 1925, pp. 1+, and "We can't dodge traffic problems; So the Chamber puts in much time and effort trying to solve them," October 26, 1925, pp. 52+.

<sup>164</sup> For my period of study, I found 24 articles in *Current Affairs* that mentioned traffic signals at least in passing.

<sup>165</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Recommends use of signal lights," February 4, 1924, p. 28.

Back Bay neighborhood, which lay just outside the downtown. The paper said that the system had been, “Hailed by many as one solution to Boston’s ever growing traffic problems.”<sup>166</sup> Even here, although the writer suggested that lights might have a general impact on congestion, lights were still mentioned as only “one” solution. The only other articles expressing a perception that signals could have comprehensive effects on traffic were two brief notes in *Current Affairs* describing area-wide traffic improvements that had come from the introduction of signals in the downtowns of Chicago and Jackson, Michigan.<sup>167</sup>

Another traffic control mechanism that attracted modest attention as a way to counter congestion was the one-way street. One-way streets have an ancient history, reputedly being used in the ancient Roman city of Pompeii, but fell out of favor until the early twentieth century.<sup>168</sup> While Boston may have been slow to adopt traffic signals, it was an early adopter of one-way streets, first introducing them in 1909.<sup>169</sup> In the 1920s, however, reactions were mixed. While various people perceived that one-way streets were, in principle, a useful way to reduce congestion, proposals from the Special Commission and City Planning Board to make Tremont Street one-way generated nothing but opposition.

During the loop highway debates, the Chamber of Commerce and Governor Fuller both in passing mentioned one-way streets as helpful for reducing congestion. In 1924, a *Current Affairs* article on “Municipal Progress in Boston in Fifteen Years” mentioned

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<sup>166</sup> *American*, “New Back Bay traffic plan works well,” December [3?], 1926.

<sup>167</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” November 8, 1926, p. 5, and “City planning and street traffic notes,” July 19, 1926, p. 11.

<sup>168</sup> McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1925, p. 101.

<sup>169</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its rise and fall, 1880-1950*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 257.

that street traffic had “benefited” from the establishment of one-way streets.<sup>170</sup> Also, a speech by Governor Fuller that addressed traffic issues mentioned one-way streets as “among the important steps” towards relieving traffic congestion.<sup>171</sup>

The Special Commission’s February 1925 report proposed new one-way streets. Buried among other recommendations, the commissioners noted that it had “taken into consideration the probable re-routing of traffic” and that it seemed to them “inevitable” that Tremont and Washington would be made a pair of one-way streets, with other pairs to be established as well.<sup>172</sup> The plan to make Tremont Street one-way in particular generated public outcry, and the commission’s December report dropped the suggestion. Still, the commission must have continued to perceive the idea as having merit, for the December report mentioned in passing that various methods of handling traffic, including one-way streets, were “all means which have been used for the betterment of the traffic situation and we are glad to record that Boston has kept pace with the rest of the country in the handling of its traffic.”<sup>173</sup>

The idea of restricting Tremont to one-way traffic had one more source of support. In October 1926, planning board member Parker released a new proposal to reverse the direction of Washington Street (it was already one-way at the time) and add Tremont as a parallel one-way street running in the opposite direction. The plan also advocated additional pairs of one-way streets elsewhere in the downtown. According to the *Post*, “Mr. Parker believes that several badly-congested traffic spots of the city will find much remedy in his plans.” Parker explained his reasoning as follows:

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<sup>170</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Municipal progress of Boston in fifteen years.,” February 11, 1924, pp. 10+.

<sup>171</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, “Low-cost street ‘widening’ with parking ban suggested,” October 5, 1925, p. 2.

<sup>172</sup> Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, “House Document No. 1160,” 1925, p. 6.

<sup>173</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement - p. 8.

The principal fault in the present use of our streets is the weaving of parallel traffic lanes. It will always be necessary to arrange for traffic flowing in a given direction to cross the various lanes of traffic having a general direction at right angles to it. It is not necessary or desirable for lanes of traffic having general parallel trends, moving to and from the same general terminal districts, to cross each other in the process.<sup>174</sup>

The rest of the community was much less enthusiastic than the Special Commission and Parker. A *Transcript* article that came out after the original proposal to make Tremont one-way, authored by Edwin F. Melvin, foreshadowed the opposition that was to doom this plan. Melvin first discussed Harriman's enthusiasm for the proposal as a form of congestion relief:

Mr. Harriman is confident that by the treatment which he proposes traffic through the most congested district of the city would be straightened out and allowed to move rapidly without the hindrance occasioned by the presence of opposing streams of traffic.

However, Melvin went on to note that opposition from merchants "has always been a stumbling block" to making Tremont Street one-way. He explained that Harriman believed that this objection would be irrelevant under his proposal for Tremont, since vehicles would be able to stop on the side of the street where most of the shops were located (Tremont had shops on only one side for the blocks it bordered the Common).<sup>175</sup> The newspapers' coverage was not encouraging. Though it didn't criticize the plan on congestion-relief grounds, a *Post* article described the plan as "startling" and a "drastic recommendation," language suggesting that the reporter was unenthusiastic.<sup>176</sup> A *Herald* article from the same period also used the word "drastic" to describe the plan.<sup>177</sup>

When the Street Commissioners held a hearing on Parker's proposal, yet more people raised objections. The *Herald* article on the hearing was subtitled "Merchants Oppose Reversal of Routes." The reporter noted that, "Such a wide divergence of

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<sup>174</sup> *Boston Post*, "Wants traffic to go south on Washington Street," October [24?], 1926.

<sup>175</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Harriman's plan to unsnarl the tangle of Boston's downtown traffic," March 7, 1925, p. III-7.

<sup>176</sup> *Boston Post*, "Wants traffic to go south on Washington Street," October [24?], 1926.

<sup>177</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Would reverse traffic flow," October [24?], 1926.



opinion appeared at the hearing before the street commissioners yesterday that city officials were only confirmed in their determination to proceed slowly before taking any action.” A representative of the Jordan Marsh department store said that there was no need for a change in the city’s traffic regulations, as congestion was not a special problem. The manager of the Retail Trade Board attacked the plan in detail, saying that it would bring many trucks onto Washington Street, thus creating a hazard for pedestrians. Among other objections, he claimed the plan would force drivers to travel many blocks out of their way. A lawyer for the Automobile Legal Association called on the Board of Street Commissioners to resign, though he seemed to object more to the constant state of flux of the city’s traffic regulations than to the one-way plan in particular. In the end, the commissioners decided to postpone any decision about the one-way plan until it had been studied by a traffic advisory committee that Mayor Nichols planned to create.<sup>178</sup>

Another traffic regulation discussed in the mid-1920s was the “boulevard stop system.” The concept was to give vehicles on major streets priority by requiring that vehicles entering from a side street stop before proceeding. The first known use of octagonal signs to indicate that drivers must stop was in Detroit, in 1914, though the principle had been tried earlier on parkways in Chicago. By the early 1920s, most major cities were using these signs, at least on a few streets.<sup>179</sup> Boston however, had not yet followed suit. During the latter part of the loop highway debates the community began investigating their use.

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<sup>178</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Parker plan to undergo study," November [18?], 1926.

<sup>179</sup> McShane, "The origins and globalization of traffic control signals," 1999, pp. 379-404; Miller McClintock, *Street traffic control*, 1925, p. 126.

In December 1925, the *Transcript* announced that the Chamber of Commerce had recommended to the Street Commissioners that Boston try this “western” idea, and that there had been “unanimous” opinion to try it on Shawmut Avenue. Chamber representative LeClear was quoted as saying that, “The fundamental idea of the plan . . . is that of safety and freedom of traffic.”<sup>180</sup> *Current Affairs* reported on the same meeting a few days later. It quoted LeClear as saying that there would be fewer accidents, and “Quicker progress and less congestion upon through traffic ways would also result.”<sup>181</sup> Another *Current Affairs* article from the end of month implied that stop signs might have area-wide congestion relief benefits, reporting that Chicago had estimated it could reduce its \$120 million annual loss to congestion by using boulevard stops to create “through streets.”<sup>182</sup> At the beginning of 1926, the *Transcript* announced that the Boston Police Commissioner had requested a ruling from the Attorney General as to whether or not the city could use boulevard stops, which it desired to test on Shawmut. This article mentioned the plan as a way to reduce accidents, but didn’t mention speeding traffic flow.<sup>183</sup>

## 9.6 “Deconcentrating” the downtown

The preceding discussions have focused on efforts to reduce congestion by limiting vehicles in the downtown (the proposed restriction on streetcars in the 1890s) or modifying drivers’ behaviors (teaming regulations in the 1890s, and parking regulations and new traffic control devices in the 1920s). A very different approach, and one much

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<sup>180</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "'Boulevard stop' plan to be tried in Boston," December 16, 1925, p. 1.

<sup>181</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Urges boulevard stop system," December 28, 1925, p. [1?].

<sup>182</sup> *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," December 28, 1925, p. 7.

<sup>183</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Will try boulevard-stop plan if law permits," January 14, 1926, p. 1.

less often discussed, was to change the factor that was attracting those vehicles into the downtown in the first place: the density of activity downtown. For the small number of individuals and organizations who perceived that overly dense development caused traffic congestion, a reasonable solution to the problem was expanding the boundaries of the business district to “deconcentrate” the area. The proposals to do this mostly called for shifting the retail district (or at least new additions to the retail community) to a new location.

In the 1890s the perception that such expansion would reduce congestion was voiced in conjunction with support for an elevated railroad circling the downtown, and with opposition to the alley plan. In the 1920s, aside from a few general statements that the principle of deconcentration was valid, the major participants in the loop highway debates issued statements protesting the argument that the city should not build the loop highway in order to let existing congestion induce businesses to deconcentrate. In neither case study was there ever a major push to implement deconcentration policies, however.

### **9.6.1 1890s**

The perception that the city could relieve congestion by reducing downtown density was expressed much less often than any other proposed congestion relief policy except for stop signs and one-way streets. Deconcentration was mentioned (positively or negatively) by only six different sources, and came up in only limited circumstances. The proposals for expansion usually focused just on expanding the retail district around Tremont and Washington Streets; retail activity had already begun a slow expansion west, into the newly developed Back Bay area, and proponents argued in favor of

choosing new transit projects that would support that trend. The explicit calls for deconcentration to reduce congestion in the retail district mostly came up in just two contexts. First, the Rapid Transit Commission's report called for running an elevated train around the edge of the downtown, a policy choice explicitly chosen to reduce downtown concentration. Secondly, the *Herald's* editors and Citizens' Association mentioned the benefits of promoting deconcentration in the course of opposing the 1893 alley plan. One unique factor about perceived congestion in the retail district was that proponents were particularly concerned about congestion of pedestrians, rather than just vehicles.

The Boston Surveying Department was the single Boston city agency or official to advocate in writing the idea of deconcentration. In its annual report for 1893, the department spoke at some length about how the city had accommodated growth through expansion in the past, but that this was no longer occurring downtown for lack of available new land. The department suggested that the city should consciously expand its business area through landfill and the lowering of downtown's hills.<sup>184</sup> Its interest in deconcentration as an approach to the congestion problem, unique among other city agencies, reflected the fact that it was used to thinking in terms of developing new territory (its main concern was laying out streets in the city's undeveloped lands).

The Rapid Transit Commissioners were the only other source of official public support for a policy of deconcentration. They perceived that an important role for any major new transit improvement downtown was to reduce congestion by facilitating expansion of the retail district. Their plan therefore included an elevated railroad circling

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<sup>184</sup> Boston Surveying Department, "Document 36: Annual report for the year 1893," in *Documents of the City of Boston*, 1894, pp. 6 & 12-13.

downtown Boston. The commissioners explained that they had compared plans for a circuit elevated road with a proposal for a central elevated line running north-south through the center. They concluded that the former was preferable because it would reduce activity around the retail district and thus reduce congestion. Much of the retail trade was already poised to move out to the Back Bay area, argued the commissioners, but a single line running along or near Tremont would prevent this natural expansion from continuing. A circuit, on the other hand, would facilitate the expansion and thus relieve congestion:

[T]he sooner the movement [towards the Back Bay] occurs the sooner the heaped up tide of humanity which now chokes Tremont and Washington Streets will spread out and flow freely; the crowd will thin, and the pressure will be equalized and relieved by expansion.<sup>185</sup>

The editors of the *Herald* not only seconded this opinion, but also went on in later years to make similar arguments about deconcentration as a way to reduce congestion. They praised the Rapid Transit Commission's idea of building a circuit road when the commissioners first suggested it in August 1891. The plan had the "merit of tending to dissipate the existing congestion of travel," they said, "besides providing for the growth of business and travel in the future."<sup>186</sup> In the spring of 1893, when the alley plan for an elevated railroad between Washington and Tremont Streets was proposed, the *Herald's* editors argued that the alley plan would increase congestion by concentrating yet more pedestrians in already overcrowded streets. As an alternative, the paper's editors proposed a unique deconcentration solution I found nowhere else: that the city should consider paying businesses to move out of the congested area. The editors said:

It would be better, indeed, to spend half of the \$15,000,000 or \$20,000,000 [which the new street between Tremont and Washington would cost] in granting bonuses to a number of leading

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<sup>185</sup> Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892, p. 68.

<sup>186</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: A ring road," August 14, 1891, p. 4.

dealers to induce them to change their stores, and locate them, say, on the Back Bay, where both the streets and sidewalks are wide and where means of rapid transit could be supplied at a relatively small outlay in damages to property.

It is questionable whether the city can afford to consider that the present retail center is to continue to be the retail center in the future, especially as it is so poorly adapted to the requirements of modern business. When one takes into account the distance between the Third Avenue and Sixth Avenue elevated railroads in New York, it will be seen that the policy of transportation pursued there has not been to bring all of the business into a narrow quarter, but to dissipate congestion by widening the area. This was the merit of the plan of the rapid transit commission, which has not in this respect been equaled by any of the suggestions that have since been made.<sup>187</sup>

The suggestion of giving businesses a financial incentive to deconcentrate would have been breathtakingly radical for the time—not only was concentration commonly considered an urban advantage, but municipal governments of the 1890s did not tend to actively involve themselves with individual business location decisions the way they do today. It is unclear if the editors genuinely perceived their suggestion as good policy or simply wanted to use controversy to call attention to their opposition to further concentration. When the alley plan came to a referendum in the fall, the *Herald* again objected on the grounds that it would increase congestion by further concentrating the business area, but the editors did not repeat their suggestion of paying retailers to move or specifically call for any other plan designed to deconcentrate the downtown.<sup>188</sup>

The Citizens' Association, like the *Herald*, raised the issue of deconcentration in reaction to the Rapid Transit Commission's report and the alley plan. The association commented on the former in its annual report, saying that it found the work overall disappointing, but pointing to "several very important and fundamental considerations" raised by the commission's suggestions. One of these was that:

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<sup>187</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: Congesting congestion," March 10, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>188</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The elevated railroad," October 17, 1893, p. 4.

. . . the congestion must be remedied, not alone by furnishing better facilities for bringing people into and carrying them away from the congested district, but by enlarging the area of the retail shopping district, so that people can be scattered over a wider area.<sup>189</sup>

When the alley plan came up for referendum in the fall of 1893, the Citizens' Association sent a formal statement to the *Globe* and *Transcript*, urging voters to reject the plan for many reasons, one being that the bill would increase congestion:

The truth is that the area of our retail shopping district is too limited for the million or more of people who shop in our city. It should be, therefore, the endeavor, in locating new lines of transit for the future, to draw people away from this overcrowded center.<sup>190</sup>

Finally, Herbert Harding, speaking on behalf of the Citizens' Association in March 1894, brought up a different argument when he testified in favor of the subway before the legislature's transit committee. When questioned about whether he thought business should be forced to move to new locations, Harding said he didn't believe in compelling them to do so, but that this would happen naturally on its own as people sought to avoid ever-worsening congestion:

I think that the time is coming when the parts of the community are going to recognize, and the people in the community are going to recognize that the sidewalk accommodations in the old part of the city are too narrow, too inadequate to accommodate a very much larger travel than they now bear. I think, therefore, that the evil is going to correct itself by degrees. People will not crowd themselves into a section of the city which is already over-crowded, and I believe it is wise, in considering any large matter of this sort which is not designed alone for today, but for the future, it is wise to look ahead of us. This section of the city already is too limited for the demands placed upon it. It must grow in certain directions, in some direction; now, then, give it a chance to grow in a direction that will be found for the interests of the city and the interests of that section.<sup>191</sup>

Harding's argument was unusual in that he suggested that congestion was a self-correcting problem (or at least wouldn't get a lot worse) because existing downtown congestion and its attendant irritations would deter additional activity from locating there.

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<sup>189</sup> Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report*, 1893, pp. 6-7.

<sup>190</sup> *Boston Globe*, "Blind alley is what Boston is liable to run into if it adopts the alley L plan," October 27 (p.m.), 1893, pp. 1 & 2; *Boston Transcript*, "Objections to the bill; Rapid-transit scheme should be rejected," October 28, 1893, p. 5. The Citizens' Association repeated these objections in its annual report for 1893. Citizens' Association of Boston, *Fifth annual report*, 1893, pp. 16-17.

<sup>191</sup> Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Transit, *Hearings on subways in Boston*, 1894, Vol. 5, pp. 14-15.

The *Transcript's* editors were vague about their views on deconcentration, but it seems they had at least lukewarm support for the idea that it would reduce congestion. Just before the alley plan vote, their editorials never directly referred to or supported the argument that the plan would increase concentration and thus congestion. However, they ran an editorial arguing that the city should only make major street improvements if these were part of a comprehensive plan designed so that, “‘the heart of the city’ may . . . be distributed around the newer portions of the city.”<sup>192</sup> This statement of support for the concept of deconcentration, if not for a specific plan to achieve it, matched the tone of an earlier 1890 editorial criticizing the city’s street system. In this piece the editors said that Boston was “‘confronted by conditions imposing almost absolute necessity for affording some new area for the prosecution of business in the existing center of the city.”<sup>193</sup>

There was only one source of definitive opposition to the idea of deconcentration in the 1890s. This came from Rapid Transit Commissioner Richardson, who so disagreed with the rest of the commission that he issued a minority report. He said that the city should not try to spread or move the retail district, because doing so would be extremely slow. Further, even if businesses did establish themselves in new locations, the center would always remain extremely congested.<sup>194</sup> The fact that nobody else publicly opposed the idea of deconcentration as a congestion relief strategy cannot have meant that the community agreed with it—it would have threatened too many entrenched business interests—but more likely reflected the fact that the proposal was considered too far-fetched to be worth contesting.

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<sup>192</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Mr. Robert Treat Paine's proposed . . .," November 4, 1893, p. 12.

<sup>193</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: Always re-making Boston," December 18, 1890, p. 4.

<sup>194</sup> James B. Richardson, "Dissenting report of commissioner Richardson on elevated railroad routes," in Massachusetts Rapid Transit Commission, *Report of the Rapid Transit Commission*, 1892.



### 9.6.2 1920s

During the years between the two case studies, the idea of deconcentrating the downtown to relieve congestion continued to attract some interest. For example, the 1914 report on traffic congestion put out by the Chamber of Commerce's "Under Forty" division emphasized deconcentration as an important element of any plan to reduce traffic congestion. The report described the way geography had served to limit the expansion of the downtown and explained that, "To remedy the difficulty, we must either reduce the number of vehicles and foot passengers, *or widen the boundaries of the district*" (italics added). Then, in one of the last sections of the report, entitled "Conclusion—Extension of the Business District," the authors explained that it was beyond the scope of their report to provide a plan for extending the downtown, but said they felt sure that it could be achieved and urged the chamber to help devise such a plan.<sup>195</sup>

By the 1920s, the perception that deconcentration might relieve congestion was receiving a modest amount of attention. It was discussed much more prominently during the loop highway debates than it had been in the 1890s, for example. However, unlike in the 1890s, when the idea of deconcentration was proposed several times but opposed only rarely, in the 1920s the idea generated fewer direct statements of support than statements of opposition.

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<sup>195</sup> Boston Chamber of Commerce, *Street traffic in the city of Boston; A study made under the direction of the Governing board of the Under Forty Division, Boston Chamber of Commerce*, Boston, E.L. Grimes, 1914, pp. 4 & 45-46.

The most definitive statement in favor of a policy of deconcentration for Boston came from Charles Carr, who joined the Special Commission in the summer of 1925, before it issued its second report. When the Special Commission published its second report in December 1925, Carr refused to sign and instead issued a minority opinion that treated the issue of decentralization in some detail. Carr argued that the majority report was wrong both to promote the loop highway and to argue decisively against decentralization. Decentralization was necessary, said Carr, if the city were to reduce traffic congestion. He contended that with careful planning, the city would be able to keep a thriving downtown at the same time as expanding business into new areas. In order to support his claims, he pointed to New York City and London as examples of cities where business activity had expanded into new locations. Even in Boston, he pointed out, business was already starting to move into the Park Square and Copley Square districts. Furthermore, some Boston stores were opening branches in the suburbs. He opposed the loop highway on the grounds that it would prevent the downtown from deconcentrating and would in fact worsen congestion by increasing centralization.<sup>196</sup>

Although the Chamber of Commerce spoke out against the idea of decentralization at the end of 1925, *Current Affairs* did publish several items about other people who support the policy. In September 1925, the magazine reported that a member of London's traffic advisory committee had urged Boston and other cities to spread out the business district as the "only solution of the congestion problem." The author of the *Current Affairs* article appeared to give at least modest support to the idea, because he

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<sup>196</sup> Dissenting Report of Charles L. Carr, in: *Current Affairs*, "Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith," December 21, 1925, supplement.

said the London man had “expressed an opinion which will be heartily endorsed by many city planners.”<sup>197</sup> The following year, the magazine reported on a speech by the “self-styled” transportation engineer J. Rowland Bibbins, who argued that the “only” escape from congestion was to decentralize by limiting the construction of new tall buildings.

Bibbins was quoted as saying:

*There is only one escape from this traffic concentration, with its appalling problems of capital expenditures for transportation, traffic facilities and thoroughfares; that is decentralization, both for the city and the nation. Until downtown business men stop building skyward, city budgets will grow with appalling speed. In spite of billions invested in rapid transit, street and sidewalk capacity has become the acute problem, which finds no solution where half a city’s working population is dumped into the mile circle each day.*<sup>198</sup> (Italics added.)

Bibbins was the single person I found who suggested that deconcentration could be achieved by limiting building heights.

The person who took the most thoughtful, middle-of-the-road position on (de)concentration was real estate broker Richard M. Bradley, who wrote an opinion piece for the *Transcript* entitled “Should Boston Expand or Concentrate?” Bradley’s position was considerably more reflective than that of his contemporaries. He began by asking “What are we trying to do with Boston and why?” The article then continued on to argue that cities existed in order to bring together people so that they could engage more efficiently in economic activity. He noted, however, that not *all* businesses benefited from being near each other, and proposed that downtown Boston needed concentrations only of certain specialized sectors, such as retail or lumber. He concluded:

It is the intention of this sketch merely to touch on a few main features in order to show that neither those who just now are calling for indiscriminate concentration, nor those who are calling for greater diffusion of business locations in our city, are necessarily right. The test is how can we best promote the efficiency of the center for accomplishing the purposes for which it exists, and this can be determined only by studying each function with its individual characteristics, and giving it its proper place in the city plan. In this our transportation plan

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<sup>197</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning notes,” September 28, 1925, pp. 7 & 59.

<sup>198</sup> *Current Affairs*, “City planning and street traffic notes,” November 15, 1926, p. 3.

should be so framed that it will neither call for general sacrifice to perpetuate the concentration of those things whose concentration does not make for general efficiency, nor attempt to favor or force the diffusion of those functions that in an efficient metropolitan center are the better for reasonable concentration.<sup>199</sup>

The idea of using policy to encourage decentralization as a method to relieve traffic congestion was actively opposed by the Chamber of Commerce and retail businessmen, as well as the Special Commission. While only some statements of opposition denied that the idea was theoretically sound, they almost all argued that such policy was undesirable because it would be too expensive to make the changes in the transportation system necessary to support retail in new locations. Also, some people argued that such a policy was objectionable because it would decrease the value of downtown property.

The perception that decentralization would be a bad policy to reduce congestion was expressed several times in the spring of 1925, following the release of the Special Commission's February 1925 report. For example, at one of the March hearings General Goethals, who had been hired by the Retail Trade Board to study the loop highway plan, raised the issue. He said that the Retail Trade Board had specifically directed him to consider the idea of deconcentration:

I was brought into this matter because of a belief that seemed to be prevalent when the \$32,000,000 project for the intermediate thoroughfare was proposed that the solution should be the removal of the retail and business district from the present location in Boston to land to the south of Boston, and the question put up to me was whether this was economically practicable or impracticable and, if impracticable, what relief in my opinion could be given to the congestion that now exists in the business section of Boston.

His statement that the perception that deconcentration might help congestion was "prevalent" suggests the idea was widely discussed, despite the fact that I found few such statements in the written records from the time. As for Goethals' own position, later in his speech he said that he had reached the conclusion that deconcentration would be

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<sup>199</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Should Boston expand or concentrate," January 28, 1926, p. II-2.

impossible to implement, though he never said the theory was incorrect. He said it would be “economically impracticable to relieve the situation by moving the business section of Boston from its present location to the southern limits of the city.” Such a shift, he reasoned, would have required changes to the rapid transit passenger system that would have cost more than building the loop highway.<sup>200</sup>

George Mitton of the Jordan Marsh department store, which was a member of the Retail Trade Board, repeated Goethals’ argument that deconcentration was impractical policy. After pointing out that his store had invested many millions in its downtown property, Mitton said that Jordan Marsh had considered moving to the Back Bay, but “concluded that this would eventually lead to changes in the city’s transportation system many times more costly than the loop.”<sup>201</sup>

On the same day as the *Herald* reported on Mitton’s testimony, it published an editorial referring to the decentralization issue. The editors came out flatly against the idea, like Goethals and Mitton arguing that such relocation would require infeasible changes to the city’s transportation infrastructure:

The plea that the retail trade should remove to another part of the city runs against the obstacle that our entire transportation system, including the tunnel, the subway, and the steam railroad stations, would have to be rebuilt if this were attempted. The ultimate cost to the community of such a shifting of fundamentals would exceed many times that of the traffic route now proposed.<sup>202</sup>

The Special Commission strongly opposed the idea of deconcentration in its December 1925 report. The majority report did not mention Carr by name, but took pains to rebut his minority report: “There are those who argue that congestion be permitted to become so serious that business will be forced out of the downtown section

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<sup>200</sup> *Boston Transcript*, "Build intermediate belt highway, says Goethals in report," March 11, 1925, p. II-3.

<sup>201</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Urge value of in-town 'loop' thoroughfare," April 1, 1925, pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>202</sup> *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The loop plan hearing," April 1, 1925, p. 22.

into the outlying sections,” began the discussion. The authors went on to explain reasons “too important that they cannot be gainsaid” why decentralization was a bad idea. The commission argued that the taxable valuation of the downtown represented half the valuation of the entire city, and that “In our opinion this value must be conserved and not destroyed.” Second, they argued that experience showed that decentralization simply wouldn’t happen (except for New York, large cities had not moved their business districts). Cities kept their business districts fixed not only as a way to preserve property values, but also because it was prohibitively expensive to move the major transportation lines that served the business districts. Finally, the commission did directly address the theory of deconcentration as congestion relief. It claimed that despite pockets of extreme density within Boston’s downtown, in total the area was not overly dense (the average height of buildings was much lower than in cities like New York and Chicago), and therefore deconcentration would be ineffective in downtown Boston at reducing congestion.<sup>203</sup>

Around the same time, the Boston City Planning Board came out unequivocally against any policy of deconcentrating the retail district. The December 1925 *Progress Report* on the loop highway specifically argued against “moving” the retail district. The board claimed that such policy would be ineffective at relieving congestion for two reasons. First:

Any attempt to move the retail district means to modify all the transportation facilities in the city to the detriment of downtown real estate and would result merely in transferring congestion to another point.

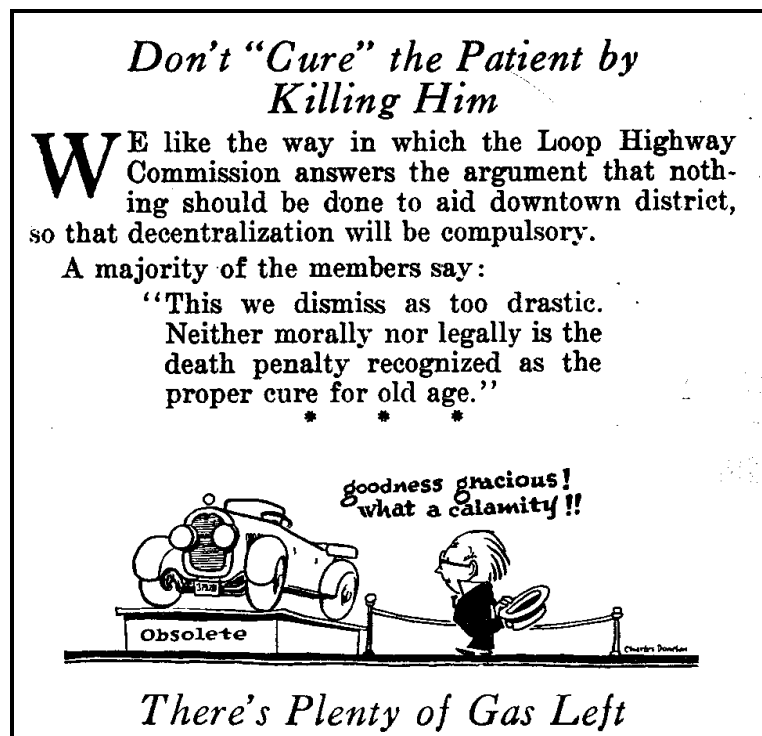
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<sup>203</sup> *Current Affairs*, “Final Report of Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare and the Extension and Widening of Certain Streets in Connection Therewith,” December 21, 1925, supplement - pp. 4-5.

In addition, argued the board, 90% of the traffic on Tremont and Washington was through traffic rather than local, so reducing activity in the district would not appreciably reduce congestion.<sup>204</sup>

As for the Chamber of Commerce, although it had published short articles reporting on other people who spoke in favor of deconcentration, when the Special Commission's December 1925 report came out, *Current Affairs* published a short cartoon that praised the commission's stand against decentralizing the downtown. The cartoon implied that such a policy would "kill" the downtown economy (see Figure 9.3).<sup>205</sup>

**Figure 9.3: A *Current Affairs* cartoon opposing proposals to deconcentrate the downtown.**



Source: *Current Affairs*, "City planning and street traffic notes," December 28, 1925, p. 7.

<sup>204</sup> Boston City Planning Board, *Progress report on proposed intermediate thoroughfare*, Boston, the Board, 1925.

<sup>205</sup> Just a week earlier the chamber published an editorial praising the loop highway plan for, among other things, helping to "spread out" the business district. This is actually a reference to the commission's stated intent to spread out business into low-density areas *within* the downtown, rather than to expand outside the existing downtown. *Current Affairs*, "Editorial: Merits careful study," December 21, 1925, p. 8.

This stand by the chamber had been foreshadowed in May 1925, when the magazine published an article by chamber member Gifford LeClear, who said that gradual deconcentration of the downtown would occur naturally in the long run, but that the city should not use public policy to force this to happen.<sup>206</sup>

## 9.7 Conclusions

The majority of debate about reducing congestion through demand-side policies focused directly on vehicles. However, a few people took a step back and argued that the city also needed to reduce the density of activity downtown that created congestion in the first place. Thus, in both time case studies there were a small number of people calling for transportation policies that would draw retail activity out of the Tremont and Washington area. The argument came from influential people, including those with experience in transportation issues. However, these perceptions were not widely shared, and remained only a marginal part of the debate on congestion. They were ignored in most discussions about congestion relief policy, and even their supporters did not emphasize them. Far more attention went to policies that directly impacted vehicles and drivers.

In the 1890s Bostonians considered two ways to reduce congestion by regulating vehicles: limiting streetcars and tightening regulation of horse-drawn vehicle drivers' behavior. The numbers of streetcars were seen by many as a cause of congestion, and while most attention focused on removing the cars by placing them into subways or on

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<sup>206</sup> *Current Affairs*, "Boston's traffic problems; What the Chamber is doing to aid in finding solution," May 25, 1925, pp. 5+.



elevated tracks, a substantial number of people argued instead that the city could simply require the West End to reduce the number of tracks and/or vehicles in the downtown.

These proposals to limit the number of cars downtown never achieved concrete results, though it would have seemed like a promising strategy to try for many reasons. The public cost would have been low. In addition, residents were highly critical of the West End in general and therefore likely to support efforts perceived as forcing it to become a better corporate citizen. The members of the group petitioning the aldermen to limit tracks on Washington and Tremont included highly influential members of the local political and business communities, who could have provided additional political power to counterbalance the West End's.

In the end, although the West End no doubt brought its considerable political power to bear in opposing any new limitations on its streetcars, the real barrier to implementing such plans seemed to be politicians' fear that the riding public, rather than the West End, would object. The perception was that riders would find any plan to limit streetcars downtown inconvenient, forcing them either to walk farther or to make a transfer. Matthews and the Rapid Transit Commission, among others, explained that they could not support major limitations on streetcars for this reason. (Curiously, nobody ever suggested that if streetcars were limited, the benefit to riders of reduced congestion and therefore faster service downtown might outweigh the hassle of transferring or extra walking.)

Regulating the behavior of horse-drawn vehicle drivers to was another popular idea for reducing congestion, a logical extension of the 1890s perception that driver behaviors such as stopping at the curb for long periods caused traffic congestion. Suggestions for

tighter regulations came from an even wider variety of influential sources than did the proposals to limit streetcars—the Rapid Transit Commission, Mayor Matthews, the city's Board of Police, some aldermen, and one of the legislative committees, as well as private individuals and civic associations. Not only did many speakers argue in favor of new regulations and better enforcement, but such recommendations also made it into official reports like the Rapid Transit Commission's and were formally considered by the Boston Board of Aldermen, who controlled regulations.

Despite all the attention these proposals received, and the fact that almost nobody appeared to perceive that they would be ineffective, the aldermen made almost no changes over the several years covered in this case study. Political considerations again provide an explanation. The teamsters vigorously opposed any new regulations and appeared to be successful at pressing their case. An additional factor was probably the fact that, in the late nineteenth century, Americans had no experience with vigorous police enforcement of traffic regulations. Boston was not alone in finding that its police were not effective enforcers of even the regulations that existed. Thus, even though the city had the legal power to make regulations, many people probably believed that enforcement of new regulations would have been impossible. Their perception that enforcement was impossible would have been less a criticism of the police than a feeling that the public would never accept new regulations. That sentiment was soon to change, however.

By the 1920s, the situation had transformed itself. Not only had private automobiles replaced the streetcar and team as the vehicle causing concern, but new interest in traffic regulations had swept the country. Starting just a few years after the subway was

approved, American cities began to consider many new kinds of traffic regulations. Over the next decades they experimented with regulations for both moving and parked vehicles.

When the loop highway debates were underway in Boston, residents had mixed feelings about regulating automobiles. On the one hand, the city had successfully begun to implement some new regulations for moving vehicles, such as one-way streets and a few traffic signals. These were well accepted by the public (enforcement was not a major concern), and most people perceived them as at least modestly effective at reducing congestion. However, nothing in the records from the loop highway years suggests that the community considered them likely to provide an overall remedy for traffic congestion. Instead, the new traffic control devices were implemented very gradually and in only a few places, and perceived as useful tools for relieving localized congestion. The fact that not a single person ever compared them to the effectiveness of the loop highway is a telling indication that Bostonians didn't see this kind of regulation as having potential to provide major congestion relief.

The community was much more divided in its perceptions of parking regulations. Enough people considered them to be the key to the congestion problem that parking regulations made it into the loop highway debate as a potential alternative. Nichols and Shattuck both argued that parking regulations might be a cheap alternative to the very expensive loop highway. The Chamber of Commerce, Special Commission, and City Planning Board, the loop's strongest defenders, responded by arguing that different parking regulations would improve congestion modestly, but could never substitute for

the substantial relief that the loop highway would bring. Further complicating the debate, many different types of solutions to the parking problem were being debated.

The two most stringent—and controversial—ideas were a complete ban on downtown street parking during business hours and an annual fee for the right to park on downtown streets. Though the Street Commissioners, Nichols, and a few other individuals perceived that these ideas had merit, the plans received far more opposition than support. Most criticisms focused on issues other than congestion, though a few people argued that the plans wouldn't help with traffic. Not only did loop supporters oppose these proposals as competition for the loop plan, but they seemed genuinely concerned that the plans would harm the city's businesses. Some feared, for example, that a ban or fee might keep customers from shopping downtown and would inconvenience businessmen who themselves used cars at work. Several people also argued that these plans were wrong on principle, because people had a right to park for free.

The Chamber of Commerce spoke out strongly against a parking fee or complete ban and had only lukewarm support for another approach to the parking problem, which was to make modest adjustments to the existing time limits and blocks off-limits to all parking. Most of the community seemed to perceive that these minor changes might help traffic a little, but that they would not have a major impact, and certainly not enough to make the loop highway unnecessary.

Finally, there were proposals to try to change motorists' behavior, either by forcing or encouraging them to respect the parking rules. It was widely agreed that so many people disobeyed the existing regulations (especially the time limits in effect on many

blocks) that the police were unable even to begin to keep up with the enforcement problem. Nichols and the Chamber of Commerce both sent out public requests that people start obeying the rules. Though both parties suggested that this strategy might have a big impact, nobody else seemed interested enough even to comment. Another idea was to provide more off-street parking in garages so that people would have less reason to park on the street. The retail community must have perceived this as a good idea (it also would have provided an added convenience to shoppers), since retailers began validating parking fees for shoppers who chose to use garages.

These carrot approaches were combined with a stick, too. Some people argued that the police could control the situation if they had more officers and a less cumbersome ticketing system. The Chamber of Commerce was the biggest proponent of better enforcement, lobbying the city and police department to add enough officers to create a dedicated parking enforcement unit. The chamber most likely made enforcement a particular priority because it perceived this as a way to stave off calls for stricter regulations. Nobody ever spoke out against the idea of stricter enforcement, though the General Court's slowness to pass a law simplifying the ticketing system may have indicated a lack of enthusiasm. The city also was slow to pay for adding additional parking control officers, but this probably had as much to do with general budget pressures as a perception that parking enforcement would not help control congestion.

## CONCLUSION

### 10.1 Introduction

Though this research presents a great deal of detail about how congestion was perceived over the course of two eras of public policy debates, the most important conclusions to be drawn from the mass of details are exceptionally simple. Three themes stand out. First, the factors people said they perceived as causing congestion were closely linked to the policy solutions they favored. Second, most people didn't, in actual fact, talk very much about how they perceived congestion, even though they were very concerned about it and spent endless time debating congestion relief policies. This relative silence indicates that there was not much controversy about the idea of congestion within the community. Third, the perceptions that Bostonians held about congestion were not only mostly accepted as conventional wisdom within each time period, but they changed very little across the two time periods—people understood congestion in the 1890s in many of the same ways that they did in the 1920s, even though cities had undergone radical changes. This continuity of perceptions is not, however, linked just to Boston in the 1890s and 1920s. Many of these perceptions are still held today. I conclude with several reflections on how the findings about perceptions of congestion from past eras can inform current policy debates.

## 10.2 Three themes

### 10.2.1 *Perceived causes were linked to preferred solutions*

Any analysis of a person or community's perceptions faces the challenge of distinguishing people's statements of their genuine beliefs from statements made strategically as a way to achieve a desired end. This problem is, of course, always present with a study of public policy questions, since the participants often have major personal interests at stake. However, even though people may sometimes slant their arguments to gain a desired end, it is reasonable to assume that most people are not outright lying, at least most of the time. Thus, for example, I have assumed that people did not generally express opinions they did not hold at all—they may have played down or overemphasized an argument, but during the course of the debates the perceptions expressed would have been more or less true. Especially when an opinion was expressed many times and by many different people—as a good number of the ideas discussed in this research were—it is safe to assume that it represented a strand of thought current in the community. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to ignore the fact that people would have probably emphasized the ideas they *wanted* to be true and downplayed those that matched less well with their personal goals and interests. This approach to thinking about the material is especially useful when looking at the relationship between people's perceptions of what caused congestion and what solutions the city should adopt.

It is likely that Bostonians placed relatively little emphasis on the high concentration of activity downtown as a cause of congestion because they didn't particularly want to lose that density of activity. Many people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

century had reasons for liking concentration. As Robert Fogelson explained in a book on the history of the American downtown, most people perceived concentration as a self-evident benefit that improved the city's economy. Concentration allowed easy communication among businesses working together, as well as providing shoppers with a single location where they could meet many of their needs.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, any time Bostonians argued that concentration caused congestion, they would have been criticizing a phenomenon most people had no desire to change. The fact that concentration was only occasionally mentioned as a cause of congestion probably does not mean that few people considered the possibility. Instead, Bostonians who believed that centralization was inherently good for business would have been less likely to single it out as a cause of congestion, since doing so would have implied that they should have adopted policies to reverse the centralization process, something they didn't want to do for other reasons.

This argument would have held especially true for the 1920s, when a greater number of people expressed opposition to the idea that concentration caused congestion than claimed to perceive a link. By the 1920s, some businesses were beginning to relocate from the downtown to neighborhoods with more convenient automobile access, a process that highly alarmed many downtown businessmen and city leaders. People who saw decentralization happening, feared it, and wanted to stop it, would have been especially unlikely to draw attention to any of its benefits, included possible reductions in traffic congestion.

A second area where looking at the link between perceptions of causes and desired solutions is useful is the debate over automobile parking in the 1920s. The large number

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its rise and fall, 1880-1950*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 22-23, 270-1.



of statements connecting parking and congestion suggested that it was an idea of great interest. The Chamber of Commerce strongly objected to limitations on parking, both because these could have threatened support for the loop highway, and also because businessmen feared parking limitations might lead shoppers and even businesses to move to other areas with easier parking. Thus, as part of its effort to discourage any major changes to parking policy, the chamber also downplayed the idea that parking caused congestion, claiming to perceive only a weak link.

### **10.2.2 *People didn't talk much about congestion (they talked policy)***

Despite all the concern about congestion, despite the many commissions that studied it, despite the countless hours of public hearings about how to relieve it, and despite the great number of citizens and public officials who made their views known over the years, I discovered that Bostonians actually said relatively little about congestion. They did say enough about their perceptions to enable me to develop with confidence an analysis of the different perceptions held in each time period, but that material was gleaned only after reading hundreds and hundreds of items. Discussions nominally about traffic congestion usually didn't reveal much about what people thought about congestion.

Instead, people mostly discussed policies. Although those policies were presented as strategies to reduce congestion, the policy debates had relatively little to do with matters of congestion. Proponents touted their projects without much explanation of how, or why, or how well they thought the plans would address the congestion problem. As for the opposition to particular plans, most of it focused on issues other than congestion, cost being the most prominent objection, but also disruption to community and economic life,

or proposal-specific matters like the convenience of walking up stairs to catch an elevated train compared to walking down stairs to catch a subway.

This relative silence about a condition people disliked and talked about so much suggests that it was a settled issue for people. Congestion was non-controversial. It was conventional wisdom. People more or less agreed about what they thought congestion was, what caused it, and why it mattered. They also believed that most of their perceptions were universally shared, so there was no reason to bring them up. As a result, they didn't usually bother to discuss issues like why congestion actually mattered, and when they did do so, there was little active controversy. For example, some people stressed safety as a more serious consequence of congestion than economic harm (or vice versa), but on most issues neither camp felt the issue was controversial enough to warrant active efforts to persuade the rest of the community to adopt its position. Also, while people may have disagreed about the relative importance of the different perceived impacts of congestion, they tended to agree they were all problems.

The lack of attention was particularly true of the debate about why congestion mattered, but it was also the case with regard to the factors people thought caused congestion and what solutions they thought would relieve it. There was some back and forth over the questions of cause and remedy, and people sometimes used these perceptions about congestion to justify their preference for one policy over another. However, many of the debates over the policies in question carried on with virtually no reference to matters of congestion itself.

### **10.2.3 Continuity of perceptions across the two cases**

During the decades between the 1890s and the 1920s, Boston, like all major cities in the United States, underwent enormous changes. These included radical shifts in patterns of business and industrial activity, land-use patterns, and transportation technology—not to mention other areas such as population growth, changing ethnic composition, and new models of municipal government. Changes in all these areas were closely intertwined, with changes in one factor occurring in reaction to, as well as causing, changes in the others. For example, with the mass introduction of motorized vehicles (and the paved roads that made them useful), transportation underwent one of its most dramatic and sudden shifts in human history—the social impacts can be compared to those following the introduction of the wheel and the railroad. The rise of automobiles not only provided a new transportation technology, but ultimately allowed people to adopt new commuting patterns, such as from suburb to suburb, and facilitated suburban development into new parts of the region, far from transit, and at lower densities of housing.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these and other essential shifts in the way many people lived and conducted their daily affairs, many of Bostonians' fundamental perceptions about traffic congestion remained unchanged. While there were certainly some shifts in the particular concerns and proposed policies regarding congestion, the single most striking pattern that arises from this research is just how many perceptions about congestion remained stable, even in the face of dramatic social change. The population doubled, transit moved off the

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass frontier: The suburbanization of the United States*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 181-186.

streets, personal transportation became available to a substantial portion of the population with the introduction of automobiles that swamped the streets—and yet people’s perceptions of congestion didn’t seem to change all that much.

One area in which Bostonians’ perceptions of congestion remained unchanged between 1890 and 1920 was the idea that congestion was a serious problem the community needed to address. Speaker after speaker, and writer after writer, described the city’s congestion in vigorous language, use of the term “evil” being but one example. The specific perceptions expressed about why congestion mattered were also fairly consistent across both time periods, although it is true that there were some differences. For example, only in the 1890s did some people express the perception that congestion was slowing the development of new suburban communities (by slowing down transit between the suburbs and downtown). Also, the concern that congestion “cost” the community some dollar figure in lost time and opportunity was mostly confined to the 1920s. However, the fundamental concerns about why congestion mattered remained the same. In both periods, pedestrian safety was a serious concern, while worry about fire danger was limited to a small group of people. Anxiety about the impact congestion had on the economy was also central to both periods. Even the specific concerns about the economy didn’t change all that much. One notable difference was that in the 1920s people argued that when congestion increased businesses’ costs, this would be reflected in higher consumer prices, but other perceived issues were similar. For example, worries about congestion hurting the city’s competitiveness and potential for growth cropped up in both eras. Also, in both time periods people perceived the retail and freight delivery industries as particularly effected by congestion.

A second pattern repeated across the two cases was that regulations were proposed as a means of combating congestion, but not seriously acted upon. During the two periods under study, only the most minor traffic rules were changed. Construction projects designed to increase roadway capacity received much more attention and support than policies to regulate vehicles or reduce their numbers downtown. In the subway case, reputable figures such as the Rapid Transit Commissioners and Mayor Matthews at times proposed changing the rules regulating the behavior of teams in order to reduce traffic congestion. While proposed changes to the traffic rules came up regularly, the idea never received the level of attention given to the various proposals for major construction projects—street widenings, elevated railroads, and the subway. Also, rarely were regulations suggested as alternatives to these capital solutions; instead they were usually proposed as adjuncts to a capital policy. During the 1920s, the subject of parking regulations came up from time to time. Again, reputable figures such as Mayor Nichols and the Special Commissioners proposed them. Unlike in the subway debates, some parking regulation proponents did propose these as alternatives to the loop highway (although most loop highway discussions took place without any mention of regulations). In the end, highway, even after the several-year-long debate over the loop highway, the city's street commissioners made only the most minor changes to the regulations. Also, while new traffic control technologies like traffic signals were being slowly introduced in the 1920s, these were perceived to be of only minor significance. No one ever proposed them as an alternative to the loop highway, or suggested that they might bring area-wide congestion relief.

Proposed regulations to reduce congestion failed to achieve support more because of political opposition than because of any lack of needed expertise or even a lack of funding to implement them. In both eras, either the larger public or a powerful minority apparently felt that regulatory remedies simply were not worth the cost inconvenience. In the case of regulations on the teamsters during the 1890s, the teaming industry clearly opposed them, and the teamsters, as an interest group, apparently had the necessary political clout to prevent their implementation. In the 1920s, a large portion of the public traveled in automobiles and thus would have been effected by more restrictive parking regulations, and politicians probably feared a general voter backlash. The Chamber of Commerce also took a strong position against new parking regulations. Apparently, the teamsters and the Chamber of Commerce felt that any congestion relief obtained through regulations would not be beneficial enough to outweigh the inconvenience of the regulations.

A third theme that carried across the 1890s and 1920s was the lack of attention paid to how effective particular plans might be in reducing congestion. When I began developing questions to guide my analysis of Bostonians' perceptions about congestion, the list included an additional question: *How effectively did people think that their proposed plans would reduce congestion?* More specifically, did people expect their proposals to eliminate congestion, or just reduce it? Did they expect the results to last for a short period of time, many years, or permanently? I ultimately had to abandon this forth research question for a very simple reason: in neither time period did the participants discuss the effectiveness of their solutions. There was a little bit of debate as to whether or not a particular proposal would or would not work at all (which was

presented in earlier chapters), but virtually no effort to explain *how* effective any particular plan would be.

A handful of people made specific claims that a plan would “eliminate” congestion, that travelers would save a certain amount of time after a plan was introduced, or that traffic would be reduced by a certain percentage, but these claims were so few and far between that it was impossible to draw meaningful conclusions from them. In addition, the few times quantified claims were made, such as a statement by the Subway Commissioners that the subway would reduce travel times through the downtown by fifty percent, no evidence was given to back up the claim.<sup>3</sup> Even when particular numbers were used, they almost always appeared to be presented more rhetorically than as a careful prediction of outcomes.

Even the rhetorical devices used to defend particular plans did not appear with enough consistency to reveal larger patterns. There was some variation in language—sometimes speakers said that a plan would “relieve” congestion, while other plans were promised to “reduce” congestion, and less frequently speakers spoke of “solving” the congestion problem, but there was no obvious pattern in the use of the words. They appeared to be used casually, often even interchangeably.

### **10.3 Policy implications for today**

The analysis of Boston’s congestion in the 1890s and 1920s reveals striking similarities that not only existed between the two cases, but several of which also continue to the present. The extent to which many perceptions about congestion remain

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<sup>3</sup> *Boston Transcript*, “Subway bill at last,” February 12, 1894, p. 1.

unchanged, despite the passage of more than a hundred years, is sobering. Thinking about these similarities can help us to better understand contemporary approaches to transportation policy, reminding policy makers and residents alike to stop and reflect carefully on just what congestion is, what it means to them, and what likely can and cannot be done about it. To conclude I point out three perceptions of congestion that characterized both eras in Boston and which, I argue, are still largely true.

### **10.3.1 *Why congestion matters***

Today, as in Boston in the 1890s and 1920s, public debates about congestion rarely include much discussion of why congestion is a problem worthy of major public expenditure (as opposed to being just an irritant to daily life that must be accepted). Some academics do address the issue thoughtfully, but even in academia the typical explanation for why congestion matters has become routine. In both the public and academic debates, the most commonly used techniques for explaining why congestion matters are to calculate a “level of service” on a congested road or highway, or to calculate the total “cost” of congestion. The level of service concept is used to describe or define the level of congestion on a roadway, and often to justify the need for improvements. Calculating the total cost of congestion to a community is intended to demonstrate why congestion matters, and people often compare this number to the estimated cost of a project to justify building it. While these two tools may seem like a significant advance made during the last century, the way they are applied often leaves them almost as uninformative as the simple statements by Bostonians in the 1890s who



said congestion was “terrible.” The LOS and cost-of-congestion concepts deserve more public discussion over how they should be used in policymaking.

A widely used version of the “level of service” concept is laid out in the *Highway Capacity Manual* (HCM) published by the Transportation Research Board. It is a manual dedicated to the management of congestion, though it does not call itself such. The HCM states that the two concepts of capacity and level of service (LOS) are its focus. The HCM defines capacity as, “the maximum hourly rate at which persons or vehicles can be expected to traverse a point or a uniform section of a lane or roadway during a given time period under prevailing roadway, traffic, and control conditions.” Level of service is then defined as a measure of the quality of service or “flow” on a facility, one of the main components of which is the presence or lack of congestion. The manual defines six levels of LOS, ranging from LOS A, which represents completely free-flow condition, to LOS F, where congestion not only slows traffic but reduces roadway capacity as well. These standards are based on empirical observation, professional judgment, and modeling, and combine observations of such factors as average travel speed, density, and flow rate to arrive at an overall “rating” for a particular roadway segment or intersection.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of calculating an LOS for an intersection or freeway segment is not inherently problematic. What is worrying is that it is often applied without consideration as to whether it is applicable to the situation at hand. While the LOS concept does not in and of itself indicate when a facility needs of expansion or other improvement, it can be misinterpreted as doing so. There is a tendency to assume that a facility receiving a low rank needs fixing. (The American custom in schools of using “F” to indicate a failing

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<sup>4</sup> Transportation Research Board, *Highway capacity manual*, Washington, D.C., the Board, 2000, Chapter 2.

grade probably furthers the common perception that a facility with an LOS F rating is unacceptable.) However, all a rating of LOS F really says is that the road is carrying fewer vehicles per day than it could; this does not necessarily mean that it would be cost effective or otherwise desirable to improve the facility. A further limitation of the LOS concept is that it does not necessarily take into account local conditions (though local planners may, of course, do so). For example, five minutes of delay in downtown Chicago and five minutes of delay in a small town probably should not be considered equally serious, though they might both receive the same LOS rating.

A second common explanation used today of why congestion matters is that it “costs” society a certain dollar figure, a concept that has been gradually refined over the last hundred years. Recently, researchers at the Texas Transportation Institute have produced the best-publicized measurement of congestion. In 1980 they developed a methodology to measure the impact of congestion that applies a formula called the “Regional Congestion Index” (RCI), with which they measure congestion in thirty-nine urban areas.<sup>5</sup> Their findings are commonly used as definitive evidence of congestion; the RCI findings are even reported in the popular press every year when a new set of rankings is released.

The RCI formula is based on hourly traffic counts on a subset of the region’s road segments. Because most of the data used comes from the Federal Highway Administration’s Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS), the formula uses 24-hour count data from the HPMS count locations, which are mainly on freeways, with a few on arterials and state highways. The 24-hour volume for each location is compared

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<sup>5</sup> James W. Hanks, Jr. and Timothy J. Lomax, *Roadway congestion in major urbanized areas 1982-1988*, College Station, Texas Transportation Institute, 1990.

to its defined capacity to determine an aggregate level of congestion. The authors use a set value of 13,000 daily vehicle miles as the capacity volume of freeway lanes and 5,000 vehicle miles daily for arterials (see Figure 10.1.). The authors then use this RCI to estimate a total cost of congestion for each metropolitan region, based on travel delay, increased fuel consumption, and increased auto insurance premiums. For example, to measure the cost of delay they multiply the estimated hours of delay by an estimated hourly value of time.

**Figure 10.1: The Regional Congestion Index**

$$RCI = \frac{(\text{Freeway VMT/Lane-Miles} \times \text{Freeway VMT})}{(13,000 \times \text{Freeway VMT})} + \frac{(\text{Arterial VMT/Lane-Miles} \times \text{Arterial VMT})}{(5,000 \times \text{Arterial VMT})}$$

RCI=1 means no congestion

RCI > 1 means congestion

VMT = Vehicle Miles Traveled

Source: James W. Hanks, Jr. and Timothy Lomax, *Roadway congestion in major urbanized areas 1982-1988*, College Station, Texas Transportation Institute, 1990.

While there is academic debate about the details of the methodology employed in the RCI and other models used to estimate the cost of congestion, fundamental questions about whether or not it makes sense to assign a dollar value to congestion in this way are infrequently raised. For example, while there is a healthy academic debate about the proper dollar amount to charge for an hour of “lost” time, far fewer people question whether or not it makes sense to represent that intangible hour in terms of money. (Is a hypothetical \$100 assigned to a few hours of delay really the same thing as \$100 of city money spent installing a traffic light? Would most people really place equal weight on

those two different \$100s?) In the public policy community, this issue is almost never raised when people justify projects using estimates of hypothetical cost. Another question rarely addressed in public debates over congestion is whether free-flowing roads are truly socially desirable, as many of the LOS and cost-of-congestion models assume.<sup>6</sup> Many economists, for example, would argue that building roads big enough to accommodate peak hour traffic without delay is wasteful, because much of the capacity will be unused for the rest of the day.

Another characteristic of the way people discussed congestion in the two case studies that persists today is a lack of public exploration of the idea that maybe congestion is not such a problem, or at least not a problem that government needs to address. Then, as now, almost nobody in the public debate suggests even considering the possibility that conditions will improve naturally, on their own—or at least will never get so bad on a large scale as to reach a virtual standstill. Today, as in 1890, people predict that without government intervention, congestion will worsen to the point that traffic becomes virtually immobile. Yet, almost nobody argues that traffic congestion probably will never get “unbearable” because people will stop driving a particular route once congestion reaches a level unacceptable to them. Another view of congestion as inherently good which people rarely suggested in my cases, and still don’t discuss today, is that congestion is a sign of a vibrant, healthy economy, and that healthy economies don’t usually need major public intervention.

Behind the LOS and cost-of-congestion numbers often used to portray just how bad a city’s congestion problem maybe lies the larger question of *why* congestion matters. The

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<sup>6</sup> A rare example of a popular article that raises this question is: Mark Levinson, "All jammed up," *Economist*, September 5, 1998, pp. 3-18.

implicit assumption behind most of these models is that lost time is the key problem. Other issues mentioned in current debates about congestion include higher freight costs, lower economic competitiveness, increased consumption of gasoline, additional air pollution, and mental and physical health impacts on drivers who find driving in congestion stressful. While these subjects are discussed somewhat in the abstract, there is much less discussion of which of these impacts of congestion matters in connection with particular congestion relief plans.

Paying more attention to just why and how much congestion matters in a particular place would bring two major benefits. First, given the expense and disruption associated with major construction projects, the more carefully we justify them the better. Justifying projects is also important given that most governments have scarce transportation resources—only the most helpful projects should be built. Also, having a better sense of how problematic we perceive congestion to be can help governments allocate resources across all budget sectors—should we maybe shift money from other programs into transportation, or vice versa?

Second, the more carefully a community defines *why* congestion is a problem, the more likely it is to select policies that address the real concerns. If the perceived problem is that workers cannot quickly commute to downtown jobs, then mass transit investments might be very appropriate. If, on the other hand, the perceived problem is slow freight delivery, then better transit is unlikely to help, and other policies such as special truck lanes on freeways might be more effective.

### **10.3.2 Construction versus regulatory policies**

Today, traffic regulations are more stringent than they were in the 1920s, but most communities still do not usually opt to use all the existing options of tough regulations and enforcement to curb driver behaviors that create congestion. This is especially true for downtown traffic. For example, double parking is a frequent occurrence, often effectively reducing the capacity of a street by one, two, or even three lanes. Yet, communities often fail to give police the direction and resources to crack down effectively on double parking, even where city ordinances prohibit it. A specific example of a community's reluctance to impose tough regulations occurred a year ago in San Francisco, when Mayor Willy Brown proposed banning downtown deliveries by large trucks during business hours. The newspaper reported on the immediate outcry from delivery companies and downtown merchants, and the proposal disappeared from public view.

The fact that many people today reject using stricter driver regulations to reduce congestion (as in earlier Boston) suggests two implications. First, it points to the perennial political challenge of implementing policies that require large numbers of people to change habitual behaviors. Nevertheless, changing driver behavior is not impossible. In the period between about 1900 and 1925, American drivers adopted a whole host of new behaviors, such as stopping at traffic signals and stop signs. However, it may be that people are most willing to accept behavioral restrictions in eras when there are other, radical changes in their daily lives. Imposing new regulations in the first decades of the twentieth century was probably more acceptable than it is today because people then were adapting to the radical changes in transportation occasioned by the mass

introduction of personal vehicles into city streets. Today, it may be difficult to introduce any significant changes to driver behavior until other aspects of the urban transportation system also undergo fundamental changes.

The fact that we choose not to adopt regulatory reforms that might reduce substantially at least certain kinds of congestion raises a second important possibility for planners and policy makers: perhaps it reveals a lack of serious concern with congestion. If actions speak louder than words, then it would appear that they perceive the impacts of congestion as less worrisome than would be the inconvenience of strict prohibitions on congestion-inducing driver behaviors. People who complain about congestion but also decline to advocate tough regulatory policies may not actually find congestion to be of as much concern as they claim. Planners and city officials may want to incorporate this apparent contradiction between action and words into the public discussion, as a way to better clarify the public priorities surrounding traffic issues.

### **10.3.3 (Not) focusing on policy effectiveness**

Today, there is a fair amount of academic discussion about how effective particular congestion relief policies will be, but often these debates do not make it into the popular press and political debates. The failure to squarely address how just how much and for how long policies can be expected to reduce congestion seriously undermines policy debates about which of competing policies are the most desirable, and which are worth pursuing at all. For example, the public might decide not to support some projects that would be costly or disruptive to the community if they were aware that the benefits could be expected to last only five or ten years at most.

One particular area where this is beginning to change is the concept of “induced” traffic. In the last ten years, a growing number of environmental advocates and others have begun to argue that in fast-growing regions, new road capacity quickly fills up and becomes congested. They argue, therefore, that new capacity is not effective congestion relief policy.<sup>7</sup> This argument is slowly coming into more prominence, though it is still very much a minority view in many parts of the country. Whether or not it is true that induced growth eliminates any congestion-relief benefits from new road capacity built in growing regions, the fact that there is some debate about the question in the public arena is healthy. It is just what should happen more often. While predicting how much a particular policy will reduce congestion is an imprecise science, that very uncertainty makes it all the more important that policy makers consider what is and isn’t known about a project’s effectiveness in order to make the best decisions about spending scarce tax dollars. Bringing to the public’s attention the strengths and limitations of any policy’s effectiveness will help to shape more accurate community perceptions about what can and cannot be done about congestion.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example: California Surface Transportation Policy Project, *Traffic congestion: Build it and they will come* [web page], [cited August 1, 2002], available at <http://www.transact.org/Ca/congestion2.htm>.