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Mr. Chris Osgood

Chief of Streets, City of Boston

Via email: chris.osgood@boston.gov

Re: Northern Avenue Bridge

December 3, 2018

Dear Chief Osgood:

Thank you for speaking with me after the public meeting on the Northern Avenue Bridge last week. As we discussed, I'm sending you a letter expressing some of my concerns and frustrations and to clarify the Alliance's position and our request for additional information.

As you know, the Boston Preservation Alliance has been involved in efforts to preserve this integral piece of Boston's history and the character of Fort Point for about four decades, most recently highly active since the bridge was closed to pedestrian traffic in 2014. I participated in the last stakeholder group gathered at the direction of the Mayor in 2015 which began with many disparate opinions but after long discussions concluded that a restored, historic bridge was the preferred solution. I was also on the jury of the joint BSA/City "Ideas Competition" in which the vast majority of entries embraced the historic bridge in some form. It's clear the city loves this historic structure, and that's also been apparent among my fellow Task Force members and from comments by the general public and other advocacy organizations.

The Alliance is known for being an organization that is realistic and rational. We recognize that situations change, that engineering and economic realities need to be part of the process. With that in mind we've been firm yet open-minded throughout this current Task Force process. For example, given the evidence of sea water already rising to meet the bridge early this year we backed off on our insistence that the bridge remain at its current elevation and moveable, despite those being character-defining features.

The Alliance Board appreciated the presentation by the City/AECOM team on July 31 and has had robust discussion about the challenges and opportunities the bridge presents. Our Board has concluded, as I've stated in subsequent Task Force Meetings, that our desire is for the restoration, repair, or reconstruction of the existing bridge. However recognizing the challenge of the bridge's condition, if a method that preserves a significant amount of its character cannot be found – after honest, transparent, serious, and creative examination of alternatives to do so have been exhausted – then we would support a new, people-friendly, creative, place-making crossing here. (What I've summarized as "Go old or go bold" in some public settings and discussions.) However, we have yet to receive hard evidence -- written evidence beyond the limited verbal information and diagrams shared with the task force and repeated at other public presentations such as the BSA Historic Resources Committee,

that alternatives for preservation and repair have been truly explored. No written analysis of alternatives, no cost estimates to various approaches, no case studies of why truss rehabilitations successful elsewhere cannot be applied here. In other words no concrete evidence, despite requesting such for months. We cannot support, and will urge the Task Force and the community not to support, moving forward with a new structure without this information.

And it's not just the Preservation Alliance that wants this data. Other Task Force members want it and regulators who must approve and permit the city's plan through Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act will require it. Eyes with approval power will be scrutinizing what is proposed. The Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Army Corps of Engineers who also have experts watching them regarding this bridge including the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation will not be satisfied with what has been presented to the Task force or to me. We've stated this a number of times and offered ourselves as the test case to review the justifications made for the future of the bridge to save the city months of delay if it were to submit a proposal for permitting with insufficient data backing it up. And, perhaps a more rigorous reporting requirement will reveal a better solution. That is the point after all, to truly examine alternatives before the loss of the historic resources is allowed to move forward.

I've been asking for this information for months. I've been promised it's coming, yet, it never comes. Instead we've been getting pabulum. Watered down, overly-simplistic presentations with no real evidence that creative solutions have been attempted. You heard that from some public comment at the meeting last week. Instead we get the same simplistic answers, the same lip service of "we've tried." The same 85+% requiring replacement, the same "the steel is old," "the joints are complicated," etc.

Where is the data? Where is the evidence? Where are the explanations that answer the obvious questions that will be asked by regulators and others such as:

- Bridges with 100 + year old steel are rehabilitated all the time around the country with successful results. Why can't this work here? (See for example [Bach Steel's](#) information on bridge restorations or the various [case studies](#) of bridge rehabilitations ... just to cite a few.) To simply say "the steel is old" is insufficient. Old steel unto itself isn't the problem. Corroded steel is another story, but we all know the entire bridge isn't corroded.
- Splicing to old steel has been used in many occasions using a variety of techniques, including full penetration welding, splice joints, etc. Sometimes to great success even when initial conclusions were "it is impossible." We've been told splicing has been explored but have seen no details of why it doesn't work. Where is the evidence that this has truly been examined?
- Simply saying the existing joints are complicated and showing an exploded diagram isn't really an answer as to why they can't be rehabilitated. In fact, it's a rather poor

explanation. Where are the cost estimates? Why have others succeeded in this endeavor and we cannot?

- What attempts were made to develop a method to reuse the vast majority of old truss members where only the bottom is damaged? We've been told options were examined but have never been provided with information about what specifically was explored or why it wouldn't work. (And let's not conflate deck system with truss, the former clearly not viable for reuse and not historic anyway.) I've yet to see evidence that the engineers have truly "worked the problem" in any creative ways, yet solving this one item would drastically lower the 85+% replacement claims.
- Then there is the approach to reduce the load demands on the truss itself – the hybrid approach concept that has been used in a variety of other historic bridge situations. What approaches have been examined there and where are the numbers? The Calculations? The data? Where are the schematic diagrams, etc. that demonstrate that ruling it out was more than a thought experiment?

Even when we met with a smaller group of the City's team weeks ago we received not a lot more, were promised a document to follow, and yet still nothing. But the team is now speaking publicly with words, diagrams, and numbers that imply that the bridge cannot be saved and acting on that conclusion yet we've yet to receive hard evidence. I do appreciate that at the public meeting it was noted that the Task Force has yet to agree with that conclusion.

We entered this Task Force process to be helpful. We reduced our aggressive tone and vocal public outreach of years past to embrace this process. We've tried to be a team player, be collaborative, and give this process a chance, but requests for data from me and others go largely unanswered and the same information with little modification largely re-presented. It's as if the more times it is said it becomes fact, not because significant additional data is provided. If over these months more data has been gathered then let's see it in more than a few simple slides.

The Alliance Board has opened the door and said we could be reluctantly willing to accept evidence that suggests we need to move beyond saving the bridge, but you need to demonstrate options have truly been examined. The team has failed to take hold of our outstretched hand.

On a broader note, I've come to the conclusion that the City's perspective on this project may be all wrong. Both in past meetings and the AECOM team at the recent public meeting have noted that this is really just "a section of roadway over the water." That is certainly one way to look at this, through an engineering and infrastructure lens. Doing so places human comfort, placemaking, community engagement, and the unique character of the bridge and its context as secondary. It looks at this challenge as primarily a road project. Yet we've heard over and over again from the general public that they don't see it that way. They feel that the beauty and desirability of the historic Northern Avenue Bridge as a place

for people (and what people want from a new bridge) instead gives primacy to characteristics that a “road over the water” perspective does not. These different ways of thinking will lead to two different results. I’ve been asked why the Parks Department or people involved with tourism or even the Greenway aren’t part of the discussion. Their input would be valuable if we are truly talking about placemaking as an important goal.

I look forward to receiving the additional data so we can more fully evaluate the City’s claims that are moving toward a new bridge solution.

Sincerely,



Greg Galer

Executive Director

Cc: Para Jayasinghe, City of Boston
Ben Sun, City of Boston
Joe Allwarden, AECOM
Ben Rosenberg, Silman