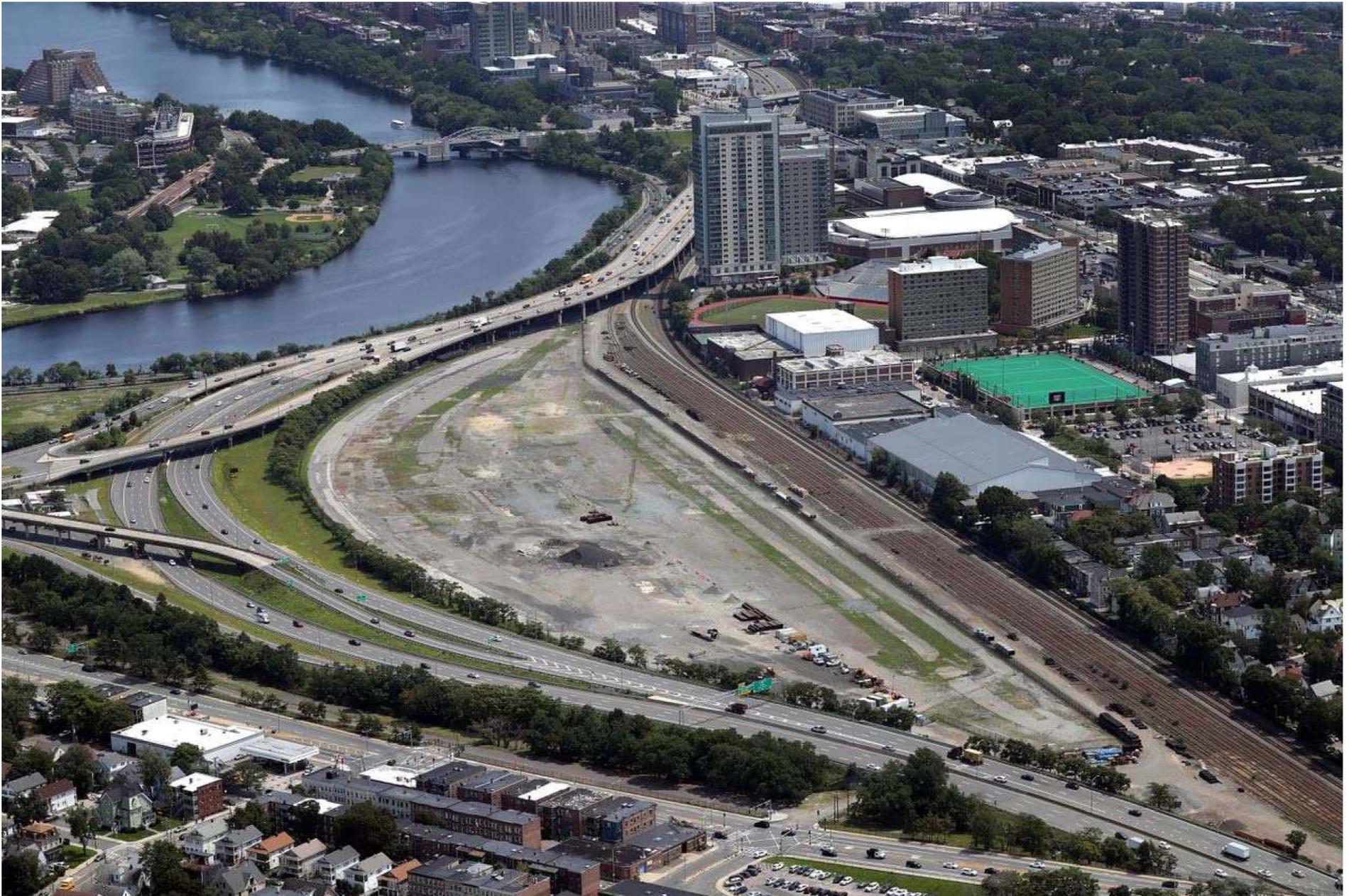


CHESTO MEANS BUSINESS

Feds reject \$1.2 billion request for Pike realignment

The state and city are still looking for ways to pay for the huge re-do of the Mass. Pike in Allston.

By [Jon Chesto](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 23, 2023, 5:33 a.m.



The Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston, where the state and city tried - and for now failed - to win \$1.2 billion in federal transportation grants to help fund a major overhaul that would straighten the highway, make room for a new mass transit hub and unlock a large swatch of land for redevelopment. DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The Mass. Pike realignment in Allston sure sounded like an infrastructure dream last May when the Baker and Wu administrations sought federal help to pay for most of it.

Significantly reducing vehicle crashes by straightening out a crumbling stretch of highway and its tangle of ramps? Check. A massive new train station in an area starved for public transit? Yes, it's in there. More green space, including a long-awaited link to the Charles River. Sounds awesome. And don't forget the millions of square feet of new buildings that could go up - or the reuniting of a neighborhood that the turnpike severed in half six decades ago.

Hard to say no, right?

But that's exactly what the US Department of Transportation just did, by rejecting [the city-state request](#) for a "Mega" grant of \$1.2 billion, which would have covered 60 percent of the project's \$2 billion price tag.

The [grumbling](#) has already begun about [the state's failure to secure](#) federal infrastructure funds for the Cape Cod Canal replacement bridges, aside from a \$1.6 million planning grant: Who's to blame, and why?

Maybe it's time to talk about what's happening with Allston, too.

With the Seaport mostly built out, the remaking of Suffolk Downs underway, and Widett Circle [headed to the MBTA](#), the old Beacon Park rail yard in the heart of Allston represents perhaps Boston's last great remaining redevelopment opportunity: 70-plus acres of flat, empty land, all owned by Harvard University, just a few miles from downtown. To tap into Beacon Park's potential, with air rights and decking that could stitch Allston back together, Harvard needs the turnpike to be lowered and the long-awaited West Station finally built.

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So what went wrong? A spokesperson for US DOT said the federal agency is not yet able to comment on the Mega selection process, because of language that Congress included in its 2021 [infrastructure law](#). It certainly didn't help Allston's chances that [the new \\$5 billion program](#), funded by a section of that law, ended up being uber-competitive - with more than 100 applications jockeying for just over \$1 billion in the first of five annual rounds.

But the Allston application probably wasn't ready for prime time anyway, with a construction start date still years away. US DOT gave it a "not recommended" grade, according to an agency spreadsheet listing evaluations of the various Mega applications.

Because of a protracted debate about how to thread the Pike's eight lanes, the four-lane Soldiers Field Road, and commuter train tracks through a narrow area known as "the Throat," state transportation officials only recently settled on a final version of the project: [an "at grade" option](#) that puts everything on the ground, next to each other. (The

1/24/23, 12:35 PM

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Charles River Watershed Association remains opposed, and is continuing to push for a six-lane Pike because of flooding and other environmental concerns.)

Another possible shortcoming: It's not yet fully clear how the state and the city would pay for the remaining \$800 million. Presumably the city would pick up the tab for local streets, possibly from taxes on the private development that Harvard would eventually usher into Beacon Park. Harvard, for its part, has [agreed to chip in \\$58 million](#) for West Station, though the transit hub is expected to cost much more than that.

Meanwhile, the turnpike viaduct continues to crumble, and the tab to maintain it keeps going up. MassDOT is embarking on a \$72 million patch-up this summer, with J.F. White Contracting, based in Framingham, selected to manage the job.

State officials frame the Mega loss as an opportunity to improve for the next go-around. MassDOT spokeswoman Kristen Pennucci said "it is not a surprise that we were not awarded in the first round" given the early stages of project design and the program's highly competitive nature. Feedback, she said, will help MassDOT sharpen its application for additional federal funding opportunities, including future Mega rounds. And a spokeswoman for Mayor Michelle Wu said her administration remains committed to refining the project's design and financing.

Likewise, Rick Dimino, chief executive of business group A Better City, put a positive spin on things, pointing to what he described as the good news: The application, he said, sent a signal to US DOT that city and state officials take the Allston project seriously. Dimino, a major player in this saga, said he hopes everyone involved can get feedback from the feds and improve the next application.

From state Representative Mike Moran's perspective, not committing to the at-grade option at an earlier date probably hurt. But the Brighton lawmaker remains hopeful about the long-term prospects, especially considering all the economic benefits that the realignment would unlock.

A Harvard spokeswoman simply pointed to a letter that university officials submitted last May in support of the Mega request, outlining Harvard's past and future infrastructure investments in and around Beacon Park. With four centuries of history, Harvard fits the definition of "patient money." The university can wait.

But it's hard to blame frustrated Allston residents if they are feeling impatient.

Tony D'Isidoro, the Allston Civic Association's president, said the Mega rejection is just one more twist on a long roller-coaster ride. The setback adds a little bit more uncertainty to the grand vision of pulling the highway down and building over it. The Allston association and several other community and advocacy groups had already started drafting a letter to send to newly elected governor Maura Healey's future transportation secretary, Gina Fiandaca, to emphasize the project's importance.

The neighborhood has scored some recent victories. [Harvard committed](#) to setting aside at least 20 percent of any housing in Beacon Park or on the university's "Enterprise Research Campus" land to the north, across from the business school, for badly needed affordable units (and even more in the ERC's first phase). The university agreed to subsidize long-term planning for the railyard. And the MBTA reached a deal to buy Widett Circle, an industrial area near South Station, which should reduce the need to devote space at West Station for layover tracks.

D'Isidoro said he remains optimistic that the Pike project will amount to a "well-funded, generational change" - eventually. In the meantime, he said, it sure looks like a long road ahead.

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1/24/23, 12:35 PM

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