8 URBAN DESIGN VISIONS

One of today's challenges for state and community officials, developers, and urban, transportation, and environmental planners is how to transform older roadway corridors with mixed land use, usually industrial, commercial, and residential, into attractive places to live, work, and play. Residents wish for a welcoming, aesthetically pleasing place that feels like a neighborhood they "belong to." Business owners wish to ensure economic stability and growth within a walkable, accessible, and also aesthetically pleasing environment—a "destination" for neighbors, other community residents, and those passing through. Planners and government officials wish to promote healthy economic development for the corridor, while preserving and if necessary restoring sensitive environmental areas for recreational or commercial purposes. Often these wishes or goals are in conflict, and the urban design challenge/opportunity is to rehabilitate a corridor so as to create an attractive area in which to live and work without jeopardizing economic development.

Certainly the study corridor is an area that would benefit from enhanced urban design and that presents many of the challenges that can pertain to achieving that objective.

As part of this study, an urban design workshop for the corridor was held (on February 2, 2004) to explore issues, challenges, and possibilities. The participants included members of the Advisory Committee, MPO staff, and invited urban design professionals familiar with Somerville, Cambridge, and Route 28, who offered their services pro bono. The invited professionals were:

Steven A. Heiken, AIA
Vice President of ICON Architecture, Inc.

Gretchen J. Von Grossmann, RA AICP
Principal of Von Grossman & Company

Bhupesh D. Patel
Design Tank
Route 28 Study Advisory Committee

Anne Tate
Former Special Assistant for Sustainable Development, former Office for Commonwealth Development

The workshop, in large part a brainstorming session, was successful in that it summarized the urban design concerns and existing "ingredients" in the corridor and identified a number of long-range concepts for the corridor—visions for Somerville's and Cambridge's consideration. These

summaries and concepts are presented below, beginning with an overview of the corridor's characteristics.[1]

8.1 CORRIDOR OVERVIEW: THREE DISTINCT SEGMENTS

The corridor is a high-volume arterial that is used by local traffic and as a collector/distributor facility for regional traffic. For many commuters and other users, Route 28 is used as the primary (line-haul) route. Others use it as an arterial collector to/from I-93. East Cambridge and points southwest were noted as significant destinations. East Cambridge is an example of a major destination that cannot be served well directly via I-93; Route 28 serves as a collector arterial for traffic to access/egress East Cambridge.

The roadway divides the city of Somerville and parts of East Cambridge. It was noted that the operational characteristics of the roadway, the land use, and development potential of the corridor vary along its length. This presents opportunities for a variety of improvement treatments that include urban design features, parcel access/egress, and transportation infrastructure.

The northern third of the roadway (from the Mystic River Bridge to Mystic Avenue) is an undivided facility (it has no median) and proceeds at-grade through an environmentally sensitive area, between the Ten Hills neighborhood and Assembly Square, and under I-93.

The middle third (from Mystic Avenue to Medford Street) is a divided principal arterial that includes three major intersections and the bridge over the MBTA's Lowell commuter rail line. Land use is mixed, but mostly residential.

After the Medford Street intersection, the roadway is elevated southbound to the Twin City Plaza traffic light. The northbound direction is grade-separated over the MBTA's Fitchburg commuter rail line and over Washington Street. The roadway is at-grade in both directions beginning at the Twin City Plaza traffic light to the end of the corridor at Museum Way. Land is primarily zoned as business, but it also includes a residential neighborhood in the northern part of the last segment in the vicinity of Washington Street. The area in Somerville on the east side of Route 28 from just south of Washington Street and up to Twin City Plaza, a total of over 135 acres, is zoned business and industrial and consists of old industrial complexes. The businesses in this area, the Inner Belt District, other than those abutting Route 28, have access from Washington Street only. North Point, a large mixed-use development site located in the southern part of the southern third of the study corridor, on the eastern side of the roadway, in Cambridge (about 40 acres), Somerville (about 5 acres), and Boston (about 1 acre), will be developed over several phases.

Figure 8.1 shows the corridor divided in the three segments. It also lists key characteristics and issues for each segment. These issues and others are included in the discussions in one or more of the following sections of this chapter.

[1] Many of the Route 28 urban design vision elements discussed during the brainstorming session are already included in transportation plans and other studies by the City of Cambridge, the City of Somerville, and their consultants, and in various development proposals.

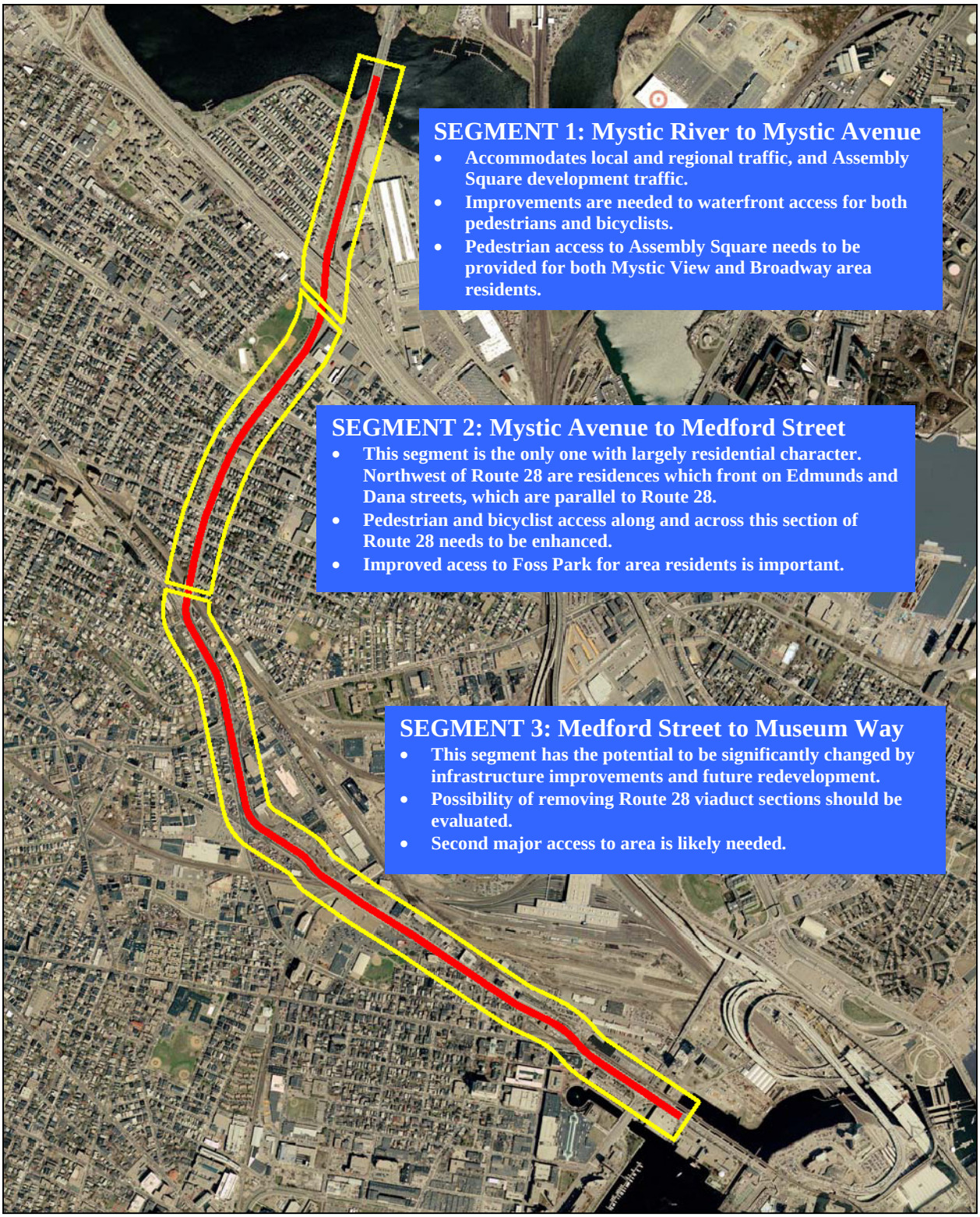

FIGURE 8.1
Corridor Segments and Key Characteristics and Issues

C T P S

Toward a Route 28 Corridor Transportation Plan: An Emerging Vision

8.2 MAJOR AND MINOR TRAFFIC NODES

In the view of workshop participants, there are five major existing "traffic exchange" points along the corridor: the I-93 interchange at Assembly Square, Washington Street, Somerville Avenue, Third Street, and First Street. These are locations where major streams of traffic cross and/or change direction to/from major origins/destinations. Minor intersections include Broadway, Pearl Street, and Medford Street. Figure 8.2 shows the major and minor nodes and potential access/egress opportunities.

8.3 MAJOR DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Along the corridor, there are several large land parcels with great development or redevelopment potential. These include Assembly Square, the McGrath Corridor, the Inner Belt District, and North Point (see Figure 8.3).

Assembly Square has been studied for a variety of development schemes, including associated roadway and transit improvements. Zoning, development, and transportation improvement recommendations have been documented in numerous studies over the years. Most recently, Federal Realty Investment Trust proposed a planned unit development (PUD) for Assembly Square that includes the redevelopment of approximately 66.5 acres of land into a transit-oriented, mixed-use development. The plan includes the relocation of the permitted IKEA store adjacent to Home Depot along I-93.

The ***McGrath Highway Corridor*** includes the land on either side of Route 28 in the vicinity of Somerville Avenue and Washington Street. These parcels, many of which are underutilized, are "locked" on either side of the elevated structure and have limited visibility and access to Route 28 under the current configuration. The feasibility of demolishing the Route 28 viaduct at this location is key to the redevelopment of this segment of Route 28, including the improvement of the roadway's aesthetics.

Adjacent to this area is the ***Inner Belt District***, located within the space enclosed by the MBTA's Fitchburg commuter rail line, Washington Street, and the MBTA maintenance facility. The Lowell/New Hampshire Line embankment bisects the district, with only a "temporary" culvert bridge for the Inner Belt Road to link the northern and southern areas. This district currently has no direct access to Route 28; however, the City of Somerville has conducted a study on access to the site.

Within the McGrath Highway Corridor and Inner Belt District areas is a smaller ***Development Triangle*** that has potential to be redeveloped separately from the other, larger areas. It is bounded by Somerville Avenue, Washington Street, and Route 28 and includes Union Square.

The ***North Point*** development is largely located behind several small business parcels lining the eastern side of Route 28, but it also has some frontage along the roadway. The North Point development plans provide for direct access to Route 28.

The total development potential of the parcels is enormous, and, therefore, comprehensive, proactive planning is underway.

8.4 ACCESS AND VISIBILITY FROM WASHINGTON STREET, ROUTE 28, AND I-93

To unlock the development potential of the above districts, accessibility and visibility are key. Existing access points to Lower Brickbottom and Inner Belt are by roadway only and limited to connections with Washington Street. Roadways at which there is potential for adding or improving connections to or across Route 28 include Somerville Avenue, Medford Street, the Twin City Plaza entrance, Third Street, and First Street.

Three alternative access points for major development districts were discussed at the workshop:

- A direct connection with I-93; for example, from southbound I-93 via an off-ramp from the Leverett Connector that would terminate at a point inside the internal circulation roadway system in the Inner Belt District. In addition to providing a direct I-93 connection to employees and customers associated with North Point, Inner Belt, and McGrath Corridor businesses, the ramp would reduce traffic, noise, and pollution for residents and small businesses along the midsegment of Route 28.

- A bypass road that would run from Sullivan Square through the Inner Belt District to Route 28 in East Cambridge. The bypass road would provide an alternative route for people traveling between I-93 and East Cambridge.

- A possible third connection comes from the Rutherford Avenue Corridor Transportation Study[2] "Bypass Alternative": a roadway that connects to Sullivan Square and runs parallel to Rutherford Avenue just east of I-93.

8.5 THREE-POINT DEVELOPMENT TRIANGLE: UNION SQUARE, SOMERVILLE AVENUE, AND WASHINGTON STREET

Along the third (lower) segment of Route 28, in addition to access and visibility for the three major development districts, there may be additional accessibility opportunities related to Union Square, Washington Street, and Somerville Avenue. Presently, for someone traveling along Route 28, it is not immediately clear how to access Union Square and what the destination opportunities are along Somerville Avenue. As a result, today Union Square is less of a destination than a cut-through location for destinations in mid-Cambridge.

One option would be for Somerville Avenue to split off from Route 28 in an obvious and aesthetically pleasing manner that would include a "gateway" treatment and indicate to the driver that Union Square and Somerville Avenue destinations are additional options in Somerville for

[2] Rutherford Avenue Corridor Transportation Study, Boston Transportation Department, March 1999.

shopping and dining. This treatment would create a Somerville Avenue–Union Square–Washington Street triangle with associated furniture, facilities, and interconnections of roadway, pedestrian, and other modes of transportation.

8.6 INTERNAL CIRCULATION

As with the Assembly Square District, where an internal circulation system was also studied, an internal roadway system will have to be planned for the McGrath Corridor District, the Inner Belt District, and possibly the North Point development, including interconnections among them. For example, a "Brickbottom Boulevard" could be created in the largely abandoned MBTA right-of-way that formerly was used by the Lowell/New Hampshire Line. This could form part of a connector road system parallel to Route 28 that would connect Charleston Avenue (Gilmore Bridge) to Washington Street behind North Point and between the McGrath Corridor and the Inner Belt District.

8.7 GREEN LINE EXTENSION TO MEDFORD HILLSIDE AND UNION SQUARE

In the North Point development in Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville, the MBTA and North Point developers are currently in discussions to relocate the MBTA's Lechmere Station to the eastern side of Route 28, onto property currently owned by the North Point developers. Access to the new station is currently being studied. In addition, the MBTA has begun the environmental review process for extending the Green Line from the relocated Lechmere Station to Medford Hillside and Union Square. An Expanded Environmental Notification Form was filed with the MEPA Office on October 16, 2006. The decision of the Secretary of Environmental Affairs on the filing requires that draft and final environment impact reports be completed. This project is in the State Implementation Plan (SIP) and is a transit mitigation project in the Administrative Consent Order (ACO) from the Central Artery project. Figure 8.4 shows transit opportunities that are planned or possible, including the relocated Lechmere Station and Green Line extension. The relocation and extension provide the potential for transit access to the Lower Brickbottom and Inner Belt areas.

8.8 ROUTE 28 REDESIGNED AS A BOULEVARD

One possibility is to redesign Route 28 as a boulevard type of roadway similar to the segment of Massachusetts Avenue between Harvard Square and Porter Square. The design would include a median with green landscaping and wider sidewalks with street furniture for pedestrians. Preliminary analysis for such a plan would need to examine the question of whether a more traffic-oriented design is required.

8.9 ROUTE 28 AT WASHINGTON STREET

Potential options for redesign of this location that could be evaluated include:

- In conjunction with the boulevard concept, an at-grade intersection design.
- If the grade separation needs to be maintained, a design with Washington Street at grade and Route 28 passing under it. However, one of the constraints would be the existing rail line that Route 28 crosses.

8.10 CONNECT MEDFORD STREET WITH ROUTE 38 (MYSTIC AVENUE) IN SOMERVILLE

A boulevard connection (via Fellsway West and Walnut Street) could be created between Mystic Avenue and Medford Street. The new boulevard would be landscaped and include pedestrian and bicycle accommodations.

8.11 NORTH–SOUTH BICYCLE CONNECTIONS WITHIN SOMERVILLE

A direct north–south bicycle connection does not exist today. As data in this report suggest, such connections could include various branches and alignments of the Somerville Community Path through Somerville that would connect the Alewife Linear Park to the Charles Dudley White Bike Path and the Seven Draw Park on Mystic River (at Assembly Square). If making Route 28 an at-grade urban boulevard were to be found feasible and to become the desired option, then that roadway would become the north–south bicycle connection in Somerville, thus avoiding the hills and narrow streets that plague all of the current attempts to define a north–south route.

8.12 PEDESTRIAN CONNECTIONS ACROSS MYSTIC RIVER

It would be desirable to create safe and comfortable pedestrian crossings of the Mystic River. Possible crossing locations in Somerville that could be enhanced are at:

- Wellington Fellsway Bridge (Route 28)
- Amelia Earhart Dam
- Alford Street (Route 99)