



A Call to Action to Make Roszie the Most Walkable Neighborhood in Boston

November 8, 2021

BY ELECTRONIC MAIL ONLY

Mayor-Elect Michelle Wu

One City Hall Square

Boston, Massachusetts 02201

Dear Mayor-Elect Wu:

WalkUP Roslindale congratulates you on your decisive victory last week. You have been a champion for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders since you first took office as a City Councillor seven years ago. Indeed, we are convinced that your proven history of transportation advocacy played a big part in your landslide win, which represents a strong mandate for action. Boston is ready for real change to make our transportation system work, and is also long overdue for systemic solutions to our housing crisis.

We understand you have a lot on your plate starting a new job in just over a week, but there is no time like the present to get the ball rolling toward a sustainable city. In that spirit, we offer our suggestions for immediate action items for your incoming administration, organized as city-wide priorities and illustrated with Roslindale-specific improvements. Many of these changes could be initiated in your first 100 days in office, and we hope to see progress toward all of them in the first year.

We discuss each of the following priorities below:

- (1) Bus/Bike Lane Expansion and Enforcement
- (2) Improved Pedestrian Signalization
- (3) Safer Streets
- (4) Equitable MBTA Fares
- (5) Sensible Parking Reform
- (6) Affordable Housing
- (7) Bicycle Infrastructure
- (8) Appointments and Personnel

(1) Bus/Bike Lane Expansion and Enforcement. Dedicated bus/bike lanes have proven invaluable for encouraging mass transit and bicycle use. These street redesigns are among the cheapest and most effective tools we have to accomplish change quickly. Despite the high return on investment, expansion has been very slow and enforcement often non-existent. Your administration should immediately examine opportunities to add dedicated bus/bike lanes citywide along with transit priority signals, and prioritize carefully stepped-up Boston Transportation Department enforcement (both immediately in person and ultimately through automated enforcement) so that the full potential of these lanes can be realized.

- **In Roslindale specifically,** the Washington Street lane needs a realistic and implementable enforcement plan -- with significant, sustained outreach to first-time offenders and ticketing as well as towing for those who repeatedly park illegally -- particularly for the afternoon outbound lane. The dedicated lanes should also be extended past Roslindale Square toward Dedham. The stretch of Washington Street from West Roxbury Parkway to Roslindale Square is often jammed up at peak times; bus riders and cyclists should not be stuck in traffic caused by individual car drivers. In addition, a [queue jump](#) should be implemented using [transit priority signals](#) where [Washington Street intersects with Firth Road and South Street](#) to allow buses to more easily merge back into the southbound travel lane.

(2) Improved Pedestrian Signalization. Stop lights throughout the City are stuck in a 1960s mindset favoring cars over people. These need to be modernized in two ways: (1) shorter cycles with pedestrian leading intervals and (2) elimination of "beg buttons" as a trigger for a pedestrian cycle. A key reason pedestrians often cross against the light everywhere in Boston is that the wait time for the pedestrian cycle is unreasonably long. This is another change that can be made quickly at little to no cost that will yield major dividends in encouraging walking and transit use and also improve pedestrian safety. We ask that city planning and departments under your administration prioritize pedestrians and cyclists over vehicular traffic.

- **In Roslindale specifically:**

(1) the City should adjust the timing of **the two Washington Street crossings adjacent to Adams Park** to provide longer pedestrian cycles and eliminate the need for the beg buttons.

(2) **Closer to Forest Hills,** the City and Department of Conservation & Recreation must fix the crosswalk signal at the intersection of Washington Street and the Arborway so that pedestrians are not caught in the traffic island by turning vehicles that have a green turn signal. The turning traffic should be restricted to the end of the cycle so that pedestrians can safely cross the Arborway without interruption.

(3) **All traffic lights in Eastern Roslindale** need to be changed to provide for a leading pedestrian interval, including the light on Cummins Highway in front of the entrance to the Stop & Shop shopping mall.

(3) Safer Streets. The inverse relationship between vehicular speed and pedestrian safety has long been proven beyond any doubt -- in short, [speed kills](#). The move to a 25 mph city-wide speed limit in 2017 was a welcome start but wholly inadequate in the absence of commensurate changes to street design. Despite the urgent need to slow down car drivers in our neighborhood streets, the current pace of reviewing, approving, and implementing the City's Neighborhood Slow Streets program is far too slow and the process for neighborhoods afflicted by dangerous traffic is too complex. While we would be happy to see a much larger budget for this program and faster approvals and implementation, we also suggest the supplementing or converting the program into one based on data, driven by focusing on the documented highest-crash areas and working down the list, urgently and without delay, with a goal to accomplish a complete deployment citywide before 2030. A data-driven approach coupled with faster implementation will save lives.

Relatedly, departmental impediments to building raised crosswalks, speed humps, speed tables and chicanes must be eliminated. While we accept that emergencies require rapid response, we should also recognize that poorly-designed streets kill people as well. Just as we have codes and enforcement that have greatly reduced building fires and subsequent injuries and deaths, we have streets that are designed for far higher speeds than should ever be allowed in a dense urban environment and we get predictable results of excessively fast motor vehicle traffic, serious injuries, and motor vehicle driver, occupant, and pedestrian deaths. We suggest meeting with Boston Fire Department and EMS services to map a clearly defined system of quick response arterials so that traffic calming can be implemented on other streets with higher volumes as well as every side street.

- **In Roslindale specifically**, many neighborhood groups have been crying out over recent years for design improvements to slow down vehicular traffic. The various Slow Streets applications that were not selected in past rounds provide a wealth of information about residents' urgent needs.

(4) Equitable MBTA Fares. WalkUP Roslindale strongly supports your aspirations for free MBTA service but recognizes this will be a long-term project. In the meantime, the free bus route trial programs have shown tremendous promise and should be expanded. Not only do free buses accomplish the obvious goal of encouraging bus use, they also expedite boarding and shorten route times. Coupled with the dedicated bus lanes, this reform will allow the MBTA to get substantially more use out of its existing fleet.

- **In Roslindale specifically:**

(1) **The many bus routes that run up Washington Street and Hyde Park Avenue, terminating at Forest Hills, are ideal candidates for expanded fare-free service.** As the overwhelming majority of riders traveling to Forest Hills switch to the Orange Line (or Commuter Rail) where they either pay subway fare or are covered by a transit pass, we expect the financial impact of eliminating fares for the bus leg of this multimodal trip will be quite modest. The City should work with the MBTA to at least initiate a trial period to gather data for longer term changes.

(2) The Roslindale Commuter Rail stops should be part of Zone 1A for fare purposes.

The fare disparity between taking the bus to the Orange Line to get downtown (\$2.40 each way) and the Commuter Rail for the same trip (\$6.50 each way) is unacceptable. Those who cannot afford the nearly triple commuter rail fare are forced to spend much longer in transit. Meanwhile, the commuter rail is currently running well below capacity. At a minimum, the City should work with the MBTA to do a trial to measure how much commuter rail ridership increases with equitable fares. Longer term, we believe **all Boston commuter rail stops should be included in Zone 1A.**

(5) Sensible Parking Reform. Boston is decades overdue for a top-to-bottom rethinking of parking policy. We dedicate an enormous amount of our most valuable urban space to passive car storage and subsidizing car ownership. Much of this space would be better used for dedicated bus/bike lanes, wider sidewalks, and affordable housing. While major reform will require a lot of careful thought and process, there are several measures that should be of obvious benefit.

(a) Residential Permit Fees. At the top of this list should be ending the City's policy of providing unlimited residential parking permits to any household for free. This policy unnecessarily subsidizes and incentivizes car ownership. It also results in fierce battles over scarce on-street parking spots in many neighborhoods, pitting neighbor against neighbor. At the absolute minimum, the City should charge a permit fee that covers the cost of running this program. But we believe a higher fee would be appropriate to generate funds that could be used for sustainable transportation and other neighborhood improvements, and in particular much higher fees should be charged for second, third, fourth, etc, vehicles (with potentially a limit on permits per household) so that car owners help cover some of the impact of their vehicles on city infrastructure.

(b) Smart metering in neighborhood business districts. Another immediate action should be active management of prime spots in front of restaurants and shops with smart parking meters. Much of the conflict around these scarce spaces that are so important to local businesses would be resolved with smart, dynamic pricing to make certain that people who prefer or need to park a short distance from their business destination can do so.

- **In Roslindale specifically,** the central business district is an ideal spot to test out a meterless phone-based paid smart parking system that would not require a substantial capital investment to launch: we could start getting data on spot availability and impact on businesses immediately, and the Taft Hill municipal lot would remain available for those who prefer not to use a phone-based payment system. We would also love to see the City explore the idea of making Roslindale Square Boston's first [Parking Benefits District](#), as provided under the Municipal Modernization Act, with a portion of collected revenue dedicated to maintaining and improving infrastructure in the business district.

(6) Affordable Housing. This election made clear that housing affordability is the most pressing issue for many of our fellow Bostonians and Roslindale residents. In your first 100 days, we believe your administration should prioritize approval and permitting for new housing, particularly those that are to be built near ample transit facilities and exceed the City's current minimum affordability thresholds. We ask you to extend that to any such projects in Roslindale and citywide.

Beyond the first 100 days, your administration should undertake a substantial citywide re-zoning effort to codify the needs of our changing city. Namely, to remove zoning restrictions that limit denser housing across our neighborhoods, including in Roslindale, and to especially remove parking minimums for new housing that are outdated and harmful to the cost of new housing and your administration's ambitious climate change goals. The removal of parking minimums can be paired with an increase in the percentage of inclusionary development units in new housing developments to make more income-restricted housing available without increasing the overall cost of building. Savings from reduced parking minimums could also be put toward higher "green building" standards, a critical step to mitigate climate change.

We would also like to see your administration encourage innovation in tying together new housing with transportation options. For far too long, transportation and land use decisions have been made in a vacuum and without coordination. New developments should have ample secure bicycle storage; unbundled parking, so residents are not required to pay for spots they don't need (whether in the form of higher rent or purchase price); as well as free or subsidized car-sharing and MBTA passes bundled with housing.

(7) Bicycle infrastructure. We recommend that the City require bicycle lanes to be installed on any new street construction, resurfacing, or restriping. The best case for any particular instance should be analyzed and determined by the Boston Transportation Department (including protected lanes and contra-flow, bi-directional lanes) and passed to the Department of Public Works for execution. A network is only as good as its weakest link: Boston has some excellent protected bike lanes, but without very significantly expanding the network and connecting the disparate sections of protected infrastructure across the City, they lose their transport utility. The dreaded, and dangerous 'Sharrows' should be eliminated from all locations in the City to be replaced by proper bicycle lanes.

The City must begin to transition to permanent, real protection for protected bicycle lanes. Plastic flex posts are all too often run over by motor vehicles and destroyed within days of installation. The replacement costs for flex posts are considerable and maintenance is never-ending. Concrete dividers with drainage openings, perhaps with flex posts on top, if designed to resist pressures from plowed snow, would offer real protection for people on bikes, significantly reduce maintenance costs, and demonstrate that the City of Boston intends to make biking a normalized part of travel.

- **In Roslindale specifically,** better, more comprehensive enforcement of the Washington Street bus/bicycle lane would help provide a more reliable safe space for cyclists. Belgrade

Avenue would be a great candidate for better bicycle infrastructure, including a protected bicycle lane.

(8) Appointments and Personnel. We recognize that our priorities list relies in large part on the many dedicated civil servants and public employees who now work under your administration. To that end, we strongly urge you to appoint senior officials and department heads that prioritize safe streets and pedestrian and cyclist safety as a default who will not need convincing of their importance.

Similarly, we urge you to make new appointments to the Zoning Board of Appeal as expeditiously as possible, while also initiating what will undoubtedly be a longer process of deep reform. A number of the Board members, including the chairperson, are holdover appointments from the two prior administrations. You have the ability to quickly appoint new members to the board who will focus on our city's need for new housing and diminish concerns like parking or aesthetics that have too often dominated ZBA discussions in the past and derailed otherwise good developments from approval. Longer term, we believe your administration should engage all stakeholders in a conversation about broad and fundamental reform to both the Zoning Code as well as the constitution of the ZBA. Included in this discussion should be consideration of changing project approval requirements to a mere majority of members present rather than the current supermajority required, greater input from those with technical expertise in building and zoning codes as well as environmental land-use policies, coordination of transit and active transportation upgrades with higher density development, and improvements in transparency and the public process more generally.

In conclusion, we congratulate you once again, and look forward to working with you on building a sustainable Boston!

Sincerely yours,

Adam Kessel

Resident @ 36 Taft Hill Terrace, Roslindale, Vice-President of the [Board of Directors](#) of Walkable Urban Place Roslindale, Inc. (d/b/a WalkUP Roslindale)

About WalkUP Roslindale

WalkUP Roslindale, which takes its name from the international movement to foster “Walkable Urban Places,” is a collaborative group of residents dedicated to making Roslindale the most walkable neighborhood in Boston. We advocate for a dynamic, livable streetscape and we support positive changes to our public and private built environment that strengthen walkability and other forms of active mobility as means toward better personal and public health, safety, social capital, economic development, and environmental sustainability. We are led by a board of directors comprised of twenty-three residents and business owners and have nearly 1,000 additional supporters. More information about WalkUP Roslindale and our initiatives can be found at walkuproslindale.org.

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