

Tackling transportation in the suburbs

Public-private partnerships key in Newton and Needham



by CHUCK TANOWITZ
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IF GREATER BOSTON HAS AN ACHILLES HEEL, it's transportation. This was the number one issue when we launched the N² Innovation District in Newton and Needham and it remains a major hurdle today. It's also cited as a key impediment to growth in a recent [MassEcon report](#) about why companies locate to or within the state.

The MassEcon report notes that companies come to Massachusetts primarily for the workforce. But locating within the Commonwealth means taking into account where the workforce lives and how to get them from their home to the office. This is why so many startups locate themselves on the Red Line, as it provides easy access to young, economical coding talent.

It's also why companies looking for more experienced engineering, sales, marketing and executive talent locate themselves along I-95 and the MassPike, often choosing the N² Innovation District.

While Newton and Needham offer a strong, educated, and innovative employment base, moving people into and around the district is essential if we are competitive. Addressing transit is extraordinarily complex and there is no one solution.

Many people, for example, when asked how they would fix traffic, suggest widening roads and extending MBTA lines. But wider streets and trolley lines are just two items the transportation toolbox. They are also often the two most expensive and least viable options. Plus, the solution to our transit needs can't be just limited to one or two options anyway.

Recently, both Newton Mayor Setti Warren and Boston Mayor Marty Walsh released ambitious transportation plans that aim to address our region's transportation needs. Walsh's plan builds around the concept of access, safety, and reliability. Warren's plan builds more broadly around concepts of a safe, smart, accessible, livable, and sustainable system.

In order for our region to continue to be successful, we're going to need to adopt initiatives and principals found in both plans.

Both look to increase public transit. Even though Newton hosts both the Green Line and the commuter rail, residents here don't use it as much as others in the metro Boston area. The Massachusetts Area Planning Council pegs public transit usage in the 101 cities and towns that make up the Boston metro area at nearly 40 percent, with that number expected to increase by a third by 2030. About 13 percent of Newton commuters use public transit today, while only 9 percent of those who don't live in the city but come here to work use public transit. (And among those who live outside but work here, a whopping 81 percent drive). So Warren's goal of having 23 percent transit ridership by 2040 may be a sharp increase but remains modest for the region.

Understandably, both mayors' plans call for substantial increases in walking and biking as well as decreases in driving. But while Newton wants to see a 20 percent drop in single-car rides, Boston wants to see the 40.6 percent share of single-car rides drop by half.

Boston

Mode for Commute	Today	2030 Goal
Public Transit	33%	Up by a third
Walk	1.45%	Up by almost half
Bike	1.9%	Increase 4x
Drive alone	40.6%	Down by half

Newton

Mode for Commute	Today	2040 Goal
Public Transit	13%	23%
Walk	4%	9%
Biking	1%	6%
Driving	73%	53%

MAPC Region of 101 Cities and Towns

Mode for Commute	Today	2030 Goal
Public Transit	39.6%	Up by a third
Walk	1.5%	Double
Bike	1.1%	Increase by 4x
Drive alone	49.5%	Down by half

The N² Innovation District is already enjoying some traffic relief thanks to the partial opening of the Kendrick Street ramps to I-95. Part two of that project is scheduled to come online in 2018.

The state is also redesigning Needham Street and Highland Avenue in ways that will incorporate bike lane and pedestrians, but also improve street crossings so that car traffic moves more smoothly. The Upper Falls Greenway, which runs parallel to Needham Street, is emerging as a well-used bike and pedestrian corridor connecting the residents of Newton Upper Falls with the businesses on Needham Street, both those that are here today and those that will open this summer when a new mixed-use project called Newton Nexus is completed.

When TripAdvisor expanded into its new headquarters in 2014, it looked inward to solve this problem, providing multiple methods to get to work. Employees have access to a 1,000-car garage but also the option of taking free branded shuttle buses from around the Boston metro area, including at the Newton Highlands T stop. Bike commuters have access to protected bike parking. Shared bikes are available for employees to do errands or for a workday ride around Cutler Pond. It's a great model but smaller companies don't have the resources or workforce size to invest in their own transportation ecosystem.

That's why the Newton-Needham Regional Chamber and our municipal partners are beginning to work with property owners and businesses on ways to connect workers at Wells Avenue, Needham Crossing, Gould Street, and other areas to the broader mass transit that's already in place.

In order for the N² Innovation District to prosper, we'll need a public-private partnership to invest in added street improvements, bike lanes, bike-sharing programs, and shuttle buses. Mayor Warren and Mayor Walsh have taken important first steps to define the challenges and the vision. It's up to the rest of us to make it happen.

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