

Proposal to extend Sidewalks at Marginal Rd. and Shawmut Ave.

Connie Wong

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NORTH OF I-90

I spent the first 18 years of my life next to I-90 or “The Pike.” When I moved, I had trouble sleeping because I had never known quiet nor darkness. I had been conditioned to sleep through the noise of highway traffic, the sudden blares of train horns, the rattling of nighttime construction, and the unruly shouts of nightlife. The Pike was a constant assault on the senses in what should be the peace and quiet of one’s home.

The city itself has acknowledged I-90’s impacts on Chinatown¹ in its application for the *Reconnecting Communities* federal pilot grant, from displacement “The construction of the I-90 highway displaced hundreds of families through the demolition of homes and businesses...” to pollution “...Research conducted in Chinatown has shown there to be higher concentrations of particle pollution in Chinatown compared to other urban areas.”

Boston’s Chinatown continues to struggle outside of I-90’s immediate impacts. In the past two decades, many Chinese-owned businesses have shuttered. Most notably of these are five mid-sized grocers, all north of I-90 –Sun Sun on Oxford St., Chung Wah Hong on Beach St., See Sun on Harrison Ave., Cheng Kwong on Essex St., and C-Mart on Lincoln St. One mid-sized Chinese market remains north of I-90, and residents who want options are forced to venture to the outskirts of Chinatown, south of the Pike.

Though I have since moved, I am in Chinatown at least once a week to help my parents. We often cross the Pike at Shawmut Ave. and Marginal Rd. Many residents use the intersection to shop at the area’s remaining large Chinese grocers, C-Mart and New Ming on Washington St., as well as Whole Foods on Harrison Ave., and Siena Farms on Tremont St., all of which accept SNAP/EBT, and are south of the Pike.

¹ <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698676/city-of-boston-reconnecting-communities-grant-application-reconnecting-chinatown-2022.pdf>

There are many safety issues around Shawmut and Marginal. *Connect Downtown* implemented a separated bike lane on Tremont into Shawmut.² Many residents use the bike lane, from cyclists to mobility scooter users. However, the lane is also the preferred route for many able-bodied pedestrians and the elderly, as sidewalks in Chinatown are poorly maintained.

Tremont St.'s sidewalk from South Cove Plaza, an elderly home, past Eliot North Park, is a path of broken and missing bricks. Those with and without mobility issues frequently take the bike lane, often with shopping carts in tow, as they head to or from the grocers in the south.



Left: Facing north. Poorly maintained brick sidewalk along Eliot North park.

Right: Facing north. Community members often take the bike lane instead of the sidewalk.



Left: Facing north. A mobility scooter user goes south on Tremont St. past Eliot North Park.

Right: Facing south. A mobility scooter user continues south down Shawmut toward Marginal.

² <https://www.boston.gov/departments/transportation/connect-downtown#design-changes>

Mobility scooter users must stay in the bike lane going south down Shawmut to Marginal. Though there is a curb ramp heading south, there is no offramp. This ADA noncompliance has been well-documented in a 2018 class action lawsuit.³ Without access to the sidewalk, mobility scooter users approach Marginal by bike lane, which drivers often use to take a right onto Marginal Rd., repeatedly running over the flex posts until they are flattened.



Facing south. A mobility scooter user on Shawmut Ave. waits to cross Marginal Rd.



Facing south. Cars frequently drive into the bike lane to take a right onto Marginal Rd.

A DIVIDING LINE

While the bike lane on Tremont St./Shawmut Ave. has been useful for community members, the intersection at Marginal could be improved with extended sidewalks that would

³ <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/11/24/mobility-consent-decree-boston-sidewalk-accessibility>

better protect residents. A community opinion survey on extending sidewalks at Shawmut and Marginal was sent to the Boston Chinatown Residents Association and to parents at Josiah Quincy Elementary School. The initial survey noted the recent *Tremont Street Design Project* on the south side. The survey was quickly updated when a parent emailed to point out that a similar project on Harrison Ave. was slated to begin in 2025, also on the south side.



Safety enhancement work completed on Tremont St. A similar project on Harrison Ave. will begin in 2025.

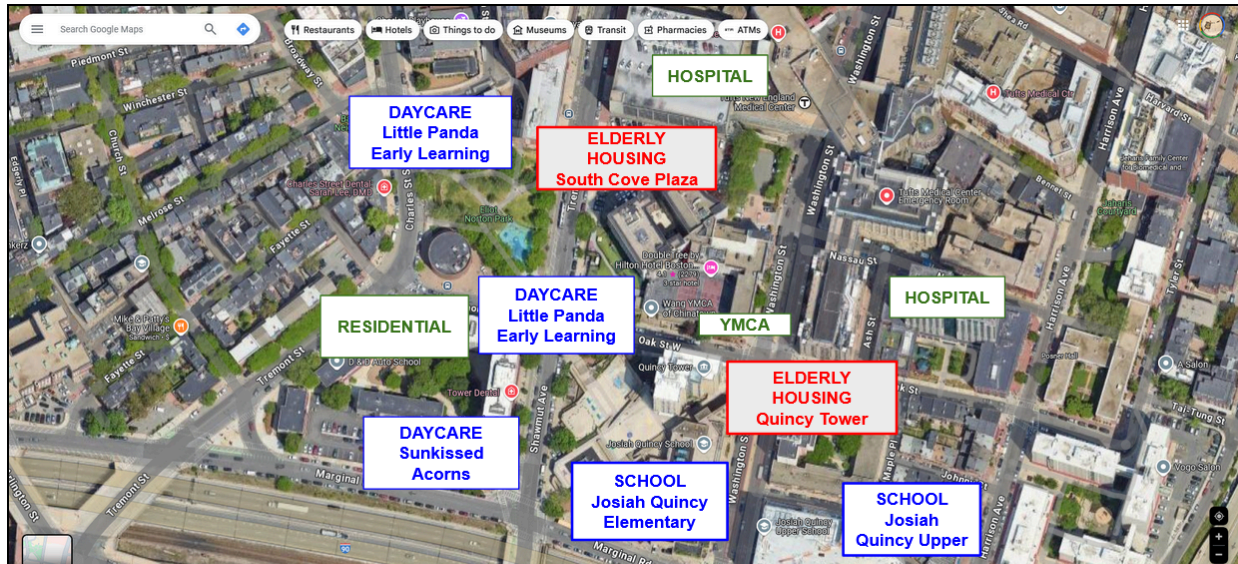
There is an economic difference between the two sides of I-90. To the north, Chinatown's median income is \$51,687.⁴ On one corner of Shawmut and Marginal stands the 200-unit New Mass Pike Towers, 190 of which are affordable units.⁵ Also north are community establishments—a hospital, daycares, schools, elderly housing, and the Chinatown YMCA. On the other side, the South End's median income is \$106,764,⁶ a studio on Harrison Ave. starts around \$2,700 a month. It is also where two large Chinese grocers, C-Mart and New Ming, are located, along with Whole Foods and Siena Farms, all of which accept SNAP/EBT. "...While historically Chinatown, I-90 has been artificially marking this area as part of the border with the South End, despite the prevalence of Asian-centered facilities to the south."⁷

⁴ <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/528be767-2cb3-4685-9a66-206cede8773b>

⁵ <https://trinitymanagementllc.net/property/mass-pike-towers/>

⁶ <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/528be767-2cb3-4685-9a66-206cede8773b>

⁷ <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698676/city-of-boston-reconnecting-communities-grant-application-reconnecting-chinatown-2022.pdf>



North of I-90 is densely populated with community members who cross Shawmut and Marginal.



South of I-90 are businesses that residents north of I-90 frequent, all of which accept SNAP/EBT.

Though \$1.8 million dollars from the *Reconnecting Communities* grant have been designated to the *Reconnecting Chinatown* project to address the many issues of I-90,⁸ the timeline to completion will be long. A similar Pike-capping project in Back Bay took 11 years to complete⁹. Chinatown residents deserve more immediate solutions.

⁸ <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/02/28/boston-highway-divided-chinatown-gets-federal-grant>

⁹ https://www.pci.org/PCI/PCI/Project_Resources/Project_Profile/Project_Profile_Details.aspx?ID=246327

UNSAFE STREETS, THE UNITING FACTOR

Marginal Rd. is a frontage road that leads to an I-90 on-ramp. The National Association of City Transportation Officials notes “The frontage road, especially in a residential context, benefits from traffic calming at intersections and midblock... These enhancements preserve safe speeds for bicyclists and pedestrians..”¹⁰ These measures are lacking in Chinatown. On the south side, parallel to Marginal Rd., runs Herald St., which leads to an I-93 on-ramp.

As a high school sophomore in 2005, I received a phone call from a friend one morning in April. He informed me that Stephanie Lam, one of our classmates, had been struck by a vehicle on Herald St. the day before and did not survive. I was and am very familiar with Herald St. I cross it regularly with my parents to go to C-Mart, New Ming, and Whole Foods. It did not and does not surprise me that a car traveling on Herald St. would have the velocity to end a life.

Chinatown in general has a speeding problem. In September, two intersections north of Shawmut and Marginal, two vehicles collided at Tremont and Stuart, with one vehicle striking three pedestrians standing on the corner of the sidewalk and damaging the building behind them.



Left: 2005 Boston Herald article on Stephanie Lam's death after being struck by a vehicle on Herald St.¹¹

Right: 2024 Boston Globe article on an accident at Tremont and Stuart that injured three pedestrians.¹²

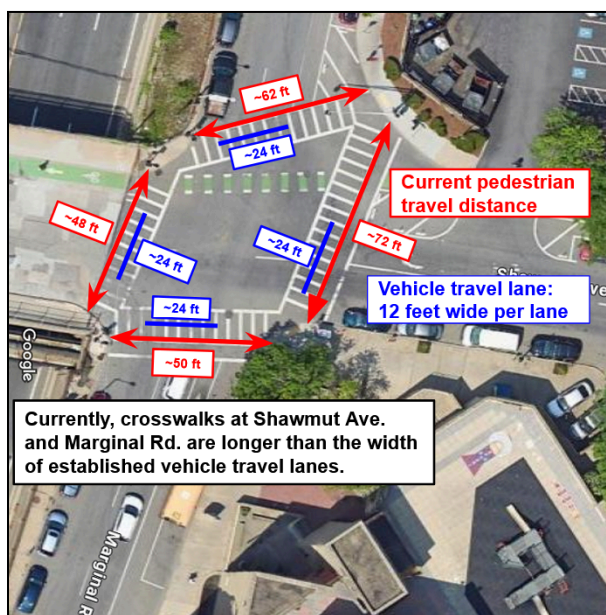
¹⁰ <https://nacto.org/publication/urban-street-design-guide/streets/boulevard/>

¹¹ Gelzinis, P. (2005, April 15). Teen death hits home for friends. *The Boston Globe*.

¹² <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/09/27/metro/three-pedestrians-struck-downtown-boston/>

SAFER STREETS FOR THE NORTH

It is clear that Chinatown needs to improve pedestrian safety. *Reconnecting Chinatown* will take many years to complete. Safety enhancements could be implemented in the meantime. Dr. Peter Furth, a Civil and Environmental Engineering professor, noted that the crosswalks are long due to their angles and narrow sidewalks. According to the *Boston Transportation Department's Minimum Widths for Roadway Lanes*,¹³ the minimum width for a shared bus/bicycle lane is 12 feet. Using this metric for the two travel lanes on Shawmut Ave. and Marginal Rd., though the bike lane is separated, pedestrians would cross 24 feet of travel lanes. Dr. Furth pointed out that because the sidewalks were so narrow, pedestrians are forced to share more space with vehicles than is necessary or safe.

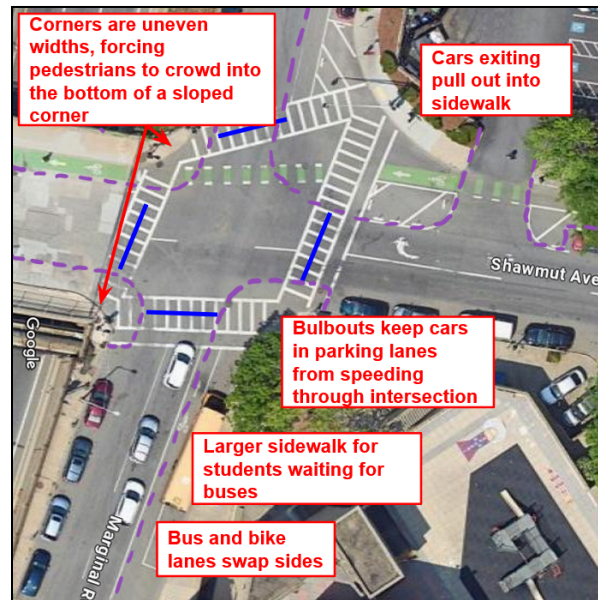


Crossings are 48 to 72 feet. If travel lanes are 12 feet wide, crossings should be 24 feet.

¹³

[https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2020/09/Minimum%20Widths%20for%20Roadway%20Lane Widths.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2020/09/Minimum%20Widths%20for%20Roadway%20Lane%20Widths.pdf)

Sidewalk extensions and bulbouts would shorten crossings, increasing safety and preventing cars from pulling into the bike lane or other “dead space” not currently designated for pedestrians or vehicles. This design does not remove travel lanes or parking spaces. It converts space that is supposed to be inaccessible to vehicles into dedicated pedestrian areas. It would also provide a raised buffer between bike and vehicle travel lanes.



Sidewalk extensions would better protect pedestrians and bike lane users. At present, there are large areas of dead space that vehicles should not use, which pedestrians cannot safely use.

COMMUNITY OPINION

The community survey had 18 respondents. 15 reported encountering safety issues from vehicles while crossing, and 3 did not.

When asked if extended sidewalks would improve their experience, 15 respondents said yes, 1 respondent said potentially, and 2 said no. Supporters cited the following safety concerns:

- Cars running red light (66.7%)
- Cars speeding (61.1%)
- Cars in or using the bike lane (47.4%)

- Cars taking rights on red lights from Shawmut onto Marginal (47.4%)
- Cars entering/exiting the Mass Pike Towers parking lot (21.1%)
- Walk signal too short to cross Shawmut (47.4%)
- Walk signal too short to cross Marginal (31.6%)

When asked about further concerns, one respondent wrote “Cars stop in the meddle [sic] of the walk side, do not allow us to cross the street safety [sic]”

Pick-up and drop-offs were of particular concern. One respondent wrote “I think this proposal would have an extremely negative impact on drop off and pick up. The Tremont street change was one of the worst hassles that I've ever experienced as a driver, doing this to the streets near JQUES would lead to terrible consequences for families trying to pick up their children.”

However, there were more respondents with safety concerns. When asked if they had other thoughts to share, respondents wrote

- “...The sidewalks also need to be wider to accommodate more people, people with strollers, walkers, wheelchairs, etc. The ramps off of the bridge are really steep and unsafe. This intersection should be bringing neighborhoods together - instead its [sic] an eyesore that's dangerous”
- “Little children have to cross very long intersection crosswalks....”
- “...I wish parents did not drive to school. They are actually making the area less safe for everyone. That said, YES to extended sidewalks--a big yes!”

According to the *Boston in Context: Neighborhoods 2018-2022 American Community Survey*,¹⁴ 74.1% of Chinatown residents have no access to a vehicle. This is echoed in survey findings, where most respondents were more concerned about pedestrian safety than traffic.

¹⁴ <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/528be767-2cb3-4685-9a66-206cede8773b>

It is important to consider all opinions surrounding public projects. Bill Bonnice, a co-chair of the Dorchester North Neighborhood Association, is working with the city on pedestrian safety at Pleasant St. Bill noted a resident's concern and the result when the city trialed the design "If you do that, the traffic is going to back up," but after a bunch of complaints and safety issues, another part of BTD reached in and snagged their consultant's design for that intersection and temporarily implemented it and there's been no backup. And the person who complained that there would be backup has since conceded that they were wrong."

The flex posts at Shawmut and Marginal already guide traffic. Extending the sidewalks would increase pedestrian safety without changing the existing intended traffic patterns.

COST AND MATERIALS

Similar projects were given a budget of roughly \$250,000¹⁵. This would be about 14% of the \$1.8 million RCN grant. Materials would include concrete, asphalt, pipework, electrical supplies, potentially new trees, and all associated labor, construction vehicles, and tools.

CONCLUSION

The Pike has been and will always be a defining feature of my life. In the past, it shaped my understanding of what had to be –we had to live with pollution in every form. At present, I am learning that we can shape our understanding of historical urban planning decisions by acknowledging mistakes and actively working to remedy them. Many improvements can and will be made through *Reconnecting Chinatown*, but after decades of living with the impacts of I-90 and navigating Chinatown's ongoing economic struggle, residents north of the Pike deserve more immediate solutions than a ten-plus year timeline would bring.

¹⁵ <https://www.mass.gov/news/massdot-announces-65-million-shared-streets-spaces-program-awards>

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