



March 1, 2023

Jeff Gonneville
Interim General Manager
MBTA
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116

Dear Mr. Gonneville,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) is writing to comment on the [Davis Square Station Accessibility Improvements](#) project, part of the MBTA's system-wide [Elevator Accessibility Upgrades](#) project. We had the pleasure of hosting the Davis Station project team at our January meeting, and are enthusiastic about the MBTA's efforts to make existing stations more accessible. Our committee is supportive of infrastructure that will make public transit more usable for people with disabilities, in line with the MBTA's other efforts towards regional transit equity and with longstanding federal law. However, we are concerned that the [75% design](#)'s handling of the Holland Street headhouse will have a net negative effect on accessibility, safety, and user experience in and around the station.

Because our biggest concerns involve design elements that have few or no alternatives within the project's current scope, **we urge the MBTA to devote more resources and time to a comprehensive redesign of the Holland Street headhouse** that will align Davis Station with the modern gold standards we have seen at Copley Square in 2011, the GLX stations last year, or [Kendall/MIT earlier this month](#). We do not think this course change should delay the two elevator replacements planned for the College Avenue headhouse and the mezzanine, nor the new elevator planned for the mezzanine. We also encourage the City of Somerville and the MBTA to pursue **additional accessibility improvements** around the College Avenue headhouse and Davis Square as a whole, including replacing uneven cobblestones, adding more accessible ramps, and creating temporary wayfinding that directs those seeking an elevator from the Holland Street headhouse to the College Avenue headhouse.

We would like to note that [Somerville's ADA Title II Transition Plan](#) created in the mid-2010s identifies Davis Square as "the most inaccessible in the city, followed by Union Square and the Winter Hill area" (p. 123). Respondents to the Transition Plan's survey identified better snow clearing and overall streetscape improvements, especially sidewalk improvements, as key themes in improving the accessibility of these areas. We agree with these respondents, and believe that such targeted remediations would contribute significantly to Davis Square's accessibility in the near-term, even as the Holland Street headhouse undergoes redesign. We are hugely supportive of the [seven accessible ramps the City installed in Fall 2022 and two more to come in Spring 2023](#), and encourage an earnest expansion of these efforts.

The Holland Street headhouse is a critical node of connectivity for rapid transit users, bus and Tufts shuttle riders, pedestrians, cyclists, and local businesses in Somerville. It connects rapid transit users from Braintree to Dorchester to Cambridge and everywhere in between on the [busiest route pre-pandemic](#). It links numerous bus riders spanning West to East Somerville, enabling access to countless jobs and opportunities across the city. It provides a direct connection with the Tufts campus, making Davis Square a key destination for students and staff. It is a gateway for pedestrians and cyclists traveling along the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway and Somerville Community Path, spanning Concord to the northwest to Cambridge Crossing (and beyond) to the southeast. This gateway is [among the top 10 most popular pedestrian locations in Somerville](#) at an average of almost 750 crossings per day since 2010. Unsurprisingly so, since the Holland Street headhouse is within a 10- to 15-minute walk of countless restaurants, grocery stores, and other shopping locations, as well as the Somerville Theatre, the West Branch of the Somerville Public Library, Teele Square, and several parks. Seven Hills Park is

particularly relevant here since it abuts the Holland Street headhouse courtyard and hosts several annual, well-attended cultural events including Honk, ArtBeat, and Porchfest.

The Red Line has for the past 40 years served as a cornerstone of the beloved community institution that is Davis Square. During this time, the increasing importance of the Holland Street headhouse has also entailed increasing complexity. The area supports the variety and volume of travel described above in a limited amount of space with relatively low visibility, leading to congestion and intermodal conflicts. We believe the 75% design will exacerbate these dynamics, and urge the MBTA to reinvest in Davis Square by holistically reimagining the Holland Street headhouse to reflect current uses and future needs. We think this reimagining must include accessibility upgrades including and beyond a new elevator.

We have several concerns that seem unlikely to be addressed within the project's current scope.

- **Elevator positioning:** The proposed elevator position would reduce the amount of space in the heavily trafficked outdoor courtyard area and would remove a sheltered bus waiting area. This significantly constrained pass-through space would exacerbate the pedestrian/cyclist conflicts already present. The positioning would also create a sharp corner in the courtyard, impeding sightlines from Holland Street to the Community Path and from inside the station to the bus stop.
- **Pedestrian/cyclist routing and electrical substation:** The 75% design depends on the assumption that cyclists will change long-standing travel behavior by taking a longer, more circuitous route behind the headhouse rather than passing through the courtyard. We are not convinced community members will adopt this new route, especially given the electrical substation proposed between the headhouse and Meacham Road (which also removes existing bike parking). This placement will create an unattractive, narrow route unsupportive of bidirectional travel, complicated further by the periodic parking of maintenance vehicles next to the substation. Somerville community members are already unhappy with the narrow width at many points along the long-awaited Community Path Extension, and will likely react similarly to the narrow route proposed here. At the very least, our committee would like to see robust mirroring and lighting installed on the path, a contingency plan for mitigating cyclist/pedestrian conflicts in the courtyard, and the reorientation of the electrical substation toward Meacham Road so vehicles can access it without using the bike route.
- **Narrow mezzanine walkway:** The suspended walkway proposed to link the elevator to the rest of the mezzanine looks too narrow to comfortably accommodate bidirectional use, especially if riders are using wheelchairs/mobility devices or pushing strollers as the elevator intends. We are also concerned that this area of the station will be almost entirely out of sight from most pedestrian traffic, which could present safety issues independent of project efforts to make elevator cabs visible.

We are excited to see accessibility improvements at Somerville's existing T stations, and commend the MBTA on pursuing this important line of work. In order to meet these goals in an holistic way while improving overall user experience and accessibility, we encourage MBTA leadership to pursue a comprehensive redesign of the Holland Street headhouse while moving forward on elevator replacements and installation at the College Avenue headhouse and Davis Station mezzanine. We encourage the City of Somerville to simultaneously pursue targeted measures to better support the overall accessibility of Davis Square. We are convinced this course change will have a tremendous impact on the Somerville community and MBTA ridership for decades to come.

Sincerely,
The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

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