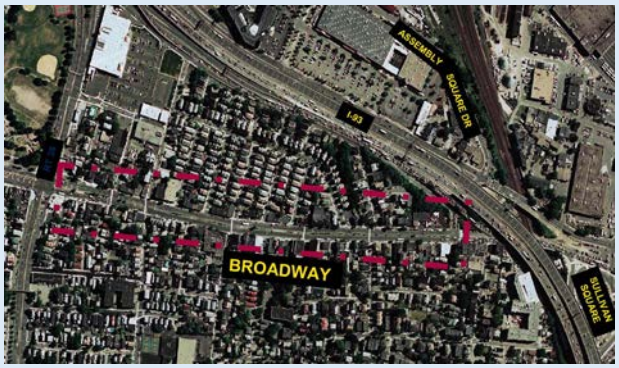
FHWA's Livable Communities Case Study Series

Broadway Reconstruction Project in Somerville, MA

Challenge—Adapting a Roadway to its Surrounding Context

At roughly 3.5 miles, Broadway is the only road running the entire length of Somerville, Massachusetts. In the East Somerville neighborhood, the four-lane collector road is out of scale with the predominantly residential one-half mile between Garfield Avenue and the Boston city line. Closely spaced duplexes and triple-deckers intermingle with single family homes, as well as public housing for seniors and people with disabilities, such as the 134-unit Bryant Manor complex, to provide a dense array of housing options in the corridor.



Aerial view of the Broadway reconstruction area in Somerville.

Most of the housing stock in East Somerville was built prior to 1940, before cars dominated the streetscape. Residents have long desired to restore an inviting pedestrian environment to access the neighborhood's schools, library, and community centers. Yet despite the relatively unwelcoming environment that Broadway created for street life, the area has always been home to many small businesses and restaurants. In recent years, the commercial district has become more of a regional destination. The city of Somerville recognized that a road designed as a highway collector was hindering economic development as well as the quality of life for the 10,000 residents that live within one-half mile of the Broadway corridor.

Solution—Implementing a "Road Diet" for Broadway

In 2007, residents met with city leaders to consider ways to reconstruct Broadway as an asset for all types of neighborhood users – families with strollers, students walking to the library, the elderly visiting with friends at the community center, and patrons visiting neighborhood businesses. The goal was to enhance existing residential character while also accommodating traffic and increased commercial activity in the neighborhood.

Excess capacity on Broadway offered the opportunity to turn more roadway space over to uses that would enhance the quality of life for residents. By putting Broadway on a "road diet," the road would become both a transportation corridor as well as a neighborhood amenity, with space for driving, walking and bicycling, as well as outdoor seating and street events. Increased pedestrian and bicycle access would attract users originating from the new housing expected at the Assembly Square transit station under construction and the existing Sullivan Square transit station. With the reconstruction of the East Somerville Community School (badly damaged by fire in 2007) and development of a new neighborhood park, Broadway's retrofit would help the city capitalize on these investments and further support the neighborhood.

Through its meetings with residents, city officials learned that the demand for very wide sidewalks was stronger than anticipated. As a result, designs call for 25-foot wide sidewalks in some areas, particularly surrounding the library. Elsewhere sidewalks vary between 16 and 18-feet wide, providing ample space for walking, congregating, and outdoor restaurant use in some locations. Five-foot bicycle lanes are also incorporated into the design, offering another safe travel option for residents and visitors.

Broadway's new design includes the reduction of a travel lane in each direction as well as the narrowing of space for buses and other traffic. In addition to the widened sidewalks and bicycle lanes, the new Broadway streetscape will include new trees, bicycle racks, new bus shelters, and benches. Safety will be enhanced through painted crosswalks and a wider landscaped median. The berms, trees, and bus stops will also serve to slow speeds, while better traffic signalization will promote smoother traffic flow. Century-old utilities will be replaced with energy-efficient LED street lighting.

A rendering of the completed Broadway reconstruction project. (Image source: City of Somerville)

Funding—A Variety of Uses, a Variety of Sources

Since the Broadway reconstruction project includes multiple elements, funding for the $7 million project came from a variety of sources. FHWA contributed $2.3 million through the SAFETEA-LU "High Priority Projects" program, and the State contributed $690,019 from MassDOT and $250,000 from the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority also provided $2.2 million for water and sewer improvements. Local funding comprises the bulk of the project costs, with the City of Somerville contributing $5.4 million. Portions of the City's contribution include $581,000 allocated to the City through HUD's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, $443,243 from the City of Somerville's Water and Sewer Enterprise, as well as other general funds.

Results—A Model for Future Redevelopment

Mindful of the disruption that multiple construction projects can cause for neighborhood residents, the city held off on beginning the Broadway project until the school re-construction was near completion in August 2012. The Broadway project should be completed in the summer of 2014.

Broadway is the first Federal-aid "road diet" project in the City of Somerville, and FHWA was instrumental in assisting the City in the design process to ensure that the enhanced amenities would accommodate efficient traffic flow. The East Somerville Main Street Association helped engage and provide outreach to local citizens, and the final design now being implemented reflects the sentiments of a diverse representation of the area's population. The strong community support for this project led the city aldermen to unanimously request that the "road diet" design be extended to the full length of Broadway, which will eventually increase the quality of life for even more residents living in the most densely populated city in New England.