

March 12, 2009

Senator Steven A. Baddour
Representative Joseph F. Wagner
Co-Chairs, Joint Committee on Transportation
State House
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Senator Baddour and Representative Wagner,

While we support much of the current effort to reform the Commonwealth's transportation system, the Charles River Conservancy strongly opposes the transfer of any part of the oversight of the historic park bridges and parkways now overseen by Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to Mass Highway Department (MHD) and EOT, as contained in House Bill #107, Section 68 and Senate Bill #10, Section 55.

The transfer of oversight of DCR's parkways and bridges to MHD would have devastating consequences for the Charles River Parklands—which are treasured not only by abutters but, in fact, by citizens across Massachusetts. These structural features are an integral part of the adjacent parks where thousands of people from the nearby neighborhoods as well as from the entire metropolitan area come to bike, roller blade, or simply to enjoy the views of the Charles River. If these parkways are transformed into regular express highways, the recreational experiences of the paths and parks would be reduced, if not lost entirely. The trees, low speed, and absence of trucks are essential to maintain the recreational character of the Basin parklands. Who, after all, wants to jog next to a freeway?

The parkways and bridges also provide essential transportation links—for vehicles, but also for bicyclists and pedestrians who use them for both recreation and commuting. The connectivity of the Charles River Basin depends on the pathways, parkways, and bridges being considered as an integrated system. Park pathways do not simply stop at a bridge, but need to continue over it. Involving another agency, in addition to DCR and the municipalities whose roadways intersect with the parkways, further fragments the parklands and this connectivity, as well as the organizational efficiency with which the whole system can be managed and improved.

In recent months, DCR has committed to a thorough public process to ensure that the rehabilitation of its bridges under Governor Patrick's Accelerated Bridge Program addresses the concerns of all constituents, including those invested in alternative forms of transportation—whether because of environmental and health concerns or because of economic necessity. As the Commonwealth's steward of these park bridges and the “democratic common ground” offered by public parkland, the DCR has a long history of safeguarding the character of our park system for all its users, while ensuring efficient transportation through this open space.

But a transfer of the historic bridges and parkways to MHD and EOT will certainly mark a change in how these structures and the abutting parkland are treated. The implementation of the MDC's 2002 Charles River Basin Master Plan will also be in jeopardy if this bill were to pass. This includes the occasional closing of parkways to vehicular traffic for festivals, fundraising walks, or to encourage people to explore their city by foot or bike—as is done on DCR's Memorial and Storrow Drives. (And let us remember that Storrow Drive was originally private land given to the Commonwealth by James Storrow as an addition to the metropolitan park system.) DCR, like the Conservancy, supports and promotes the use of the parklands and parkways for healthy, active recreation. In a time when rising obesity rates and a lack of accessible open space are critical issues facing our children, a reduction of our historic park system is the wrong message to send.

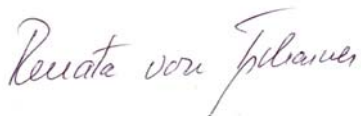
Finally, we believe it is vital to the *environmental* health of the parkland, rivers, trees, and other natural habitats that DCR maintain the care and control of these park bridges and parkways. DCR places an emphasis on the natural landscape, environmental permitting procedures, and the treatment of stormwater from its parkways and bridges—an emphasis which would be lost under MHD, whose principal concern is simply to move vehicles as effectively as possible from point A to point B.

Our parks with their majestic tree-lined parkways, designed by world-renown visionaries like Frederick Law Olmstead and Charles Eliot, have long been the envy of American and European cities alike. To ensure that they receive the care and attention they deserve, we urge you to keep the authority for these bridges and parkways with DCR. The solution to the preservation of these park features lies not in a needless reorganization of agency responsibilities, but in the dedicated staff and expertise already present within DCR, and in a more consistent allocation of the Commonwealth's resources toward them.

In a time when we all are increasingly aware of the need for more effective, affordable, and greener transportation solutions, we ask that you remove this proposal—which is an erosion of our park system with little or no financial savings to the Commonwealth—so that we and other park advocates can fully support this transportation reform bill.

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide our input on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Renata von Tscherner". The ink is a reddish-brown color and the signature is written in a fluid, connected style.

Renata von Tscherner
President
Charles River Conservancy