

Curing Congestion: Competing Plans for a “Loop Highway” and Parking Regulations in Boston in the 1920s

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In the United States of the 1920s, traffic congestion was one of the top two or three issues concerning urban planners. At the time, traffic mitigation efforts boiled down to a fundamental conundrum: was the solution to traffic congestion more roads, or more rules? While most observers liked the idea of road expansion in principle, the enormous expense and disruption to the city fabric made major road building programs relatively rare. Traffic regulations were cheap to introduce, but required expensive enforcement efforts and were extremely unpopular with the driving public. Thus, cities found themselves torn between two problematic solutions, a situation often resulting in little or no effective action. No better demonstration of this “roads-versus-regulations” controversy can be found than 1920s Boston.

This paper looks at debates over traffic congestion relief in downtown Boston during the 1920s, analyzing the two competing proposals: roads, in the form of a major new surface thoroughfare called the Loop Highway, and regulations—more specifically, tightened parking restrictions. Roads were the heavy favorite in this debate, with the Boston City Planning Board and influential business backers aggressively promoting the Loop Highway. At the same time, a small but increasingly influential group of Bostonians called for new parking regulations in addition to—or instead of—the Loop Highway. After describing the Loop Highway planning efforts and the major parking proposals, the article concludes with a discussion of why the city ultimately adopted neither proposal, despite the endless complaints about congestion. The city and state leaders’ failure to adopt any strong congestion-relief policy resulted from various factors, but central among them was a fundamental planning analysis failure. In particular, no attempt was made to quantify and demonstrate project benefits, nor to establish the superiority of one project over another, thus allowing project critics to quash the proposals on the grounds of their disbenefits.

In the United States of the 1920s, traffic congestion was one of the top two or three issues concerning urban planners. At the time, traffic mitigation efforts boiled down to a fundamental conundrum: was the solution to traffic congestion more roads, or more rules? While most observers liked the idea of road expansion in principle, the enormous expense and disruption to the city fabric made major road building programs relatively rare. Traffic regulations were cheap to introduce, but required expensive enforcement efforts and were extremely unpopular with the driving public. Thus, cities found themselves torn between two problematic solutions, a situation often resulting in little or no effective action. No better demonstration of this “roads-versus-regulations” controversy can be found than 1920s Boston.

Like most U.S. cities at the time, Boston found itself overwhelmed by a flood of automobiles. Congestion was a topic of endless complaint, and speakers gloomily warned that it was “strangling” the city, or described it as “approximating the impossible.”¹ More specifically, congestion-relief advocates asserted that congestion harmed the economy, drove up living costs, and caused traffic accidents (Weinstein, 2002). This paper looks at the debate over traffic congestion relief in downtown Boston, analyzing the two competing proposals: roads, in the form of a major new surface thoroughfare called the Loop Highway, and regulations—more specifically, tightened parking restrictions. Roads were the heavy favorite in this debate, with the Boston City Planning Board and influential business backers aggressively promoting the Loop Highway. At the same time, a small but increasingly influential group of Bostonians called for new parking regulations in addition to—or instead of—the Loop Highway.

The remainder of the article briefly explains the research methodology and selection of the Loop Highway as a valuable case study for examining the roads-versus-regulation debate, describes traffic conditions in downtown Boston during the mid-twenties, provides brief accounts of the Loop Highway planning efforts and the major parking proposals, and concludes with a discussion of why the city ultimately adopted neither proposal, despite the endless complaints about congestion. The city and state leaders’ failure to adopt any strong congestion-relief policy resulted from various factors, but central among them was a fundamental planning analysis failure. In particular, no attempt was made to quantify and demonstrate project benefits, nor to establish the superiority of one project over another.

CASE STUDY SELECTION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Boston’s Loop Highway debates provide an illuminating case study of the roads-versus-regulations controversy during an era when traffic planning as a discipline was in flux. While the roads-versus-regulations debate of the 1920s has been discussed in other contexts by various transportation historians such as Paul Barrett (1983), Mark Foster (1981), and Robert Fogelson (2001), the Boston case provides an especially good opportunity for analyzing the problem because these were the only two types of proposals seriously considered for that city’s downtown. In most other cities (e.g., Chicago, as discussed by Barrett), there were also proposals to address congestion by reducing or removing streetcars from downtown streets, thus adding additional complexity to the planning and policy debates. However, in Boston most streetcars already traveled through the downtown via underground subways. The congestion debate was therefore limited solely to handling private vehicles via road expansion or new regulation.

The Loop Highway debates are also interesting because they took place at a time when the “Progressive” movement was having a significant impact on urban planning. Progressive urban reformers strove to bring a business-like approach to municipal affairs, which they perceived as having become chaotic and irrational under the corrupt “machine” governments that had

developed during the nineteenth century. Progressives wanted cities to be run like corporations, on principles of efficiency and with a staff of trained professionals applying specialized, “scientific” methods to solve problems. Urban traffic planning was one of the first areas to make use of the new approaches: traffic congestion was symbolic of the chaos the Progressives wanted to tame. In addition, traffic congestion had economic costs, creating frustration for business owners and the public. Using surveying and planning methods developed by railroad and rapid transit engineers, traffic planners took elaborate surveys of vehicles, passengers, and existing road infrastructure, and then analyzed the data to predict economic costs and benefits associated with different policy scenarios, such as proposed new roads or transit lines. In addition to new roads, the progressive emphasis on orderliness and regulation stimulated cities’ interest in experimenting with novel traffic control concepts, including stricter parking regulations.²

Most existing research on the roads-versus-regulations debate of the 1920s takes a broad-brush, comparative approach, looking at policy discussions across many cities, and often over decades. In contrast, I chose a highly detailed case study approach, in order to analyze in depth the particular policy stances and language used by individual actors, as well as the surrounding political and planning environment that may have influenced them. The sources I used to construct an understanding of the events recounted in this historical analysis included newspapers; government reports; transcripts of meetings held by the city council, legislature, and legislative committees; magazines; and personal letters and memoirs. Newspapers proved to be the single most important source, for in addition to printing articles, editorials, and letters to the editor, they often provided the only records of certain government hearings and legislative debates which included testimony from dozens of different individuals and organizations. I relied primarily on four newspapers—the *Boston Transcript*, *Boston Herald*, *Boston Globe*, and *Boston Post*—all of which provided extensive coverage of local issues from a variety of political and class perspectives. Finally, an invaluable source of information was *Current Affairs*, a weekly publication of the Boston Chamber of Commerce. All told, I uncovered more than 600 documents relevant to the case study analysis.

BOSTON IN THE 1920s

Boston in the mid-1920s was a large city with just under 800,000 people. The downtown, however, served as the functional heart of a metropolitan region with about 1.8 million residents (Massachusetts Metropolitan District Commission 1927, pp. 3 & 12). Though confined to a small peninsula of land, the city’s central business district included the port, railroad stations, warehouses, professional offices, hotels, cultural facilities, premier retail establishments, and city and state administrative buildings. These activities created a great deal of traffic, not only from local movement within the district, but also from people traveling into downtown from throughout the region. The throngs of vehicles, combined with the downtown’s small size and narrow, crooked streets, generated serious traffic congestion.

Although relatively little documentation exists of traffic conditions at the time, a 1926 traffic survey estimated that just over one million people came into the downtown daily. While about two-thirds of people took public transit to the downtown, 20% of people came by automobile. These automobiles created congestion far out of proportion to their importance as a transportation mode.³ A one-day traffic survey from 1924, for example, found that 61% of the 140,000 private vehicles entering and leaving downtown were passenger cars. The remainder consisted of motorized trucks (29%) and horse-drawn vehicles (10%). As for the total number of vehicle trips downtown that day, the surveyors estimated the number at

200,000 to 250,000.⁴ As mentioned above, one distinctive feature of Boston's downtown was that there were few surface streetcars adding to the congestion, since most of the trolley vehicles had been moved underground into subway tunnels.

This burden of vehicles greatly strained Boston's street network. The streets were narrow, and many were crooked or discontinuous. Worse yet, the combination of regional geography and the street pattern combined to send an enormous amount of traffic onto the only two streets running north and south through the heart of the downtown, Washington and Tremont, neither of which was particularly wide. Although the city periodically made small adjustments to downtown streets, widening or straightening them, these were modest, ad hoc efforts that had no major impact on traffic capacity.

In the early and mid-1920s, the only available parking lots were just outside the downtown, so most drivers parked on the street. The city attempted to use its traffic regulations to limit parking and thus relieve congestion. Traffic regulations were determined by the city's Board of Street Commissioners, which regularly made minor adjustments to the rules. The regulations covered a wide variety of topics, ranging from instructions on driving and parking, to a prohibition on mistreating horses, to the maximum permitted length and width of vehicles. Along with general traffic rules that applied to the whole city, there were also special ones for designated downtown streets, where the rules were specifically designed to reduce traffic congestion. The special, downtown rules included designating some streets as one-way between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., as well as a host of rules aimed at preventing vehicles from standing in the street in congested places. Indeed, almost half the regulations consisted of three articles that limited vehicles from parking or stopping in ways that might obstruct traffic.

THE LOOP HIGHWAY PLANS

The initial plan for the Loop Highway came from the Boston City Planning Board, a commission of unpaid, appointed representatives that had been created in 1914. In 1923, the Boston City Council supplemented the board's annual appropriation of \$7,500 with a one-time supplement of \$25,000 to be used for "Special Investigations." The board used this additional money for various tasks including hiring well-known planner Nelson Lewis as a consultant for the board and beginning work on a comprehensive plan for the city. In addition to the longer-term general plan work, board member William Stanley Parker suggested that the Loop Highway be developed at once as an independent project.

Early in December of 1923, the Board officially submitted to the mayor and public its plan for the Loop Highway, which was officially called the "Intermediate Thoroughfare" because it lay between two other major north-south routes.⁵ At that time, vehicles traveling from the northern suburbs of Cambridge and Somerville into downtown passed over the Charles River Dam bridge, and then had no direct, major thoroughfare to take them directly to (or even near) the downtown retail or market districts. The Loop Highway, traveling south from the bridge, passing just to the east of the retail district, and then turning west and connecting to South Station, was intended to fill this need (see Figure 1). In addition, for traffic not stopping downtown, the Loop would be much faster than existing routes.

The street was to be 100 feet wide, and in each direction to have three lanes of moving traffic, a lane for parking or standing vehicles, and a sidewalk. Along its two-mile route, the Loop would intersect with twenty streets feeding into different districts of the downtown. To create the road, some existing streets were to be widened, and in other places entirely new road segments would be built. The total cost of building the road, including land acquisition and construction costs, was estimated at \$32,850,000—a staggering price for a single road



Figure 1: Map of the proposed Loop Highway. Source: Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare, 1925.

project at the time. The Board suggested raising a significant fraction of the cost through special levies assessed against property owners along the route.⁶ While the proposed route, width, and financial plan for the Loop changed slightly over the next three years, the basic concept never varied substantially from the initial layout.

The plan and accompanying documents that the Board submitted in 1923 were impressively thorough in their discussion of the exact route chosen, but vague on exactly how much traffic relief the road would provide. The plan discussed how specific segments of the Loop would alleviate existing bottlenecks at particular locations (Boston City Planning Board, 1924, pp.56-59). Attached to the plan was a "Brief of Argument" (pp. 60-66), which, despite intriguingly analytical-sounding section headings like "Theory that Should Underlie the Solution" and "Results Accomplished," added little meaningful new content to the plan. The Board also included an evaluation of the plan from one of the best known planners of the time, Nelson P. Lewis. Lewis's laudatory letter was similar to the Board's own writings, in that he focused mostly on a detailed discussion of the specific choice of route and financing plans. Lewis concluded that he "firmly believed" that the road would "be worth to Boston far more than it would cost" (p. 70), but he provided no particular evidence to back up that claim. None of these documents compared the Loop's congestion-relief potential to any of the other policies under discussion in Boston, including the Board's own research into parking regulations.

Aside from its initial 1923 plan, the Board prepared one other public document on the Loop: the "Progress Report on Proposed Intermediate Thoroughfare" (Boston City Planning Board, 1925). Published by the Board in collaboration with a long list of interest groups supporting the Loop, the report covered much of the same ground as the Board's initial plan, but added two major new components: a detailed discussion of the Loop planning's history, and then a 19-page "Summary of Reasons for Adoption of the Intermediate Thoroughfare Plan." This summary did not add a great deal of new analytical information, though it did try to make an economic case for the Loop by reporting on quantitative estimates of the economic costs of congestion in other cities, and arguing that Boston businesses probably faced similar costs. The Board also asserted that the Loop would add 25% to downtown lane capacity. Despite these new additions, the "Progress Report," like the original plan, lacked much evidence or analysis that would have convinced doubters that the Loop would be worth its enormous cost.

The other major planning documents for the Loop came from a Special Commission established by the state legislature to study the plan. The legislature became involved because Boston could not afford to build the road without issuing bonds that would take the city far beyond its legislatively imposed debt limit, a situation requiring special authorization from the Massachusetts state legislature. In the spring of 1924, the state legislature established a "Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare."⁷ The Special Commission was composed of representatives from five public bodies: the state-appointed Metropolitan District Commission's Division of Metropolitan Planning, as well as the city of Boston's City Planning Board, Finance Commission, Transit Commission, and Board of Street Commissioners (Massachusetts General Court, 1924).

The commission held hearings, discussed the matter with the community, and organized surveys of both traffic and parked cars. In February 1925, the commissioners released their preliminary findings, and requested another year to work (Special Commission to Investigate the Boston Intermediate Thoroughfare, 1925). In terms of planning analysis, the Commission summarized the results of the traffic and parking surveys, and acknowledged that some changes to parking regulations might be needed in the future, though it declined responsibility for deciding what those changes should be. In terms of its recommendations, the Special Commission deviated from the plan prepared by the City Planning Board in suggesting a slightly narrower street (85 feet instead of 100 feet) as a way to save money, and in laying out an alternate route for the southern portion of the road. In addition, the commission proposed alternative financing arrangements. The most noteworthy element of the report, however, was that the commissioners recommended modifying the original Loop plan by building only the northern and southern portions of the Loop Highway, postponing construction of the central section. This partial project would be viable, the commissioners asserted, because they believed the route would be mostly used to distribute downtown traffic, and not as a through-route for traffic bypassing the downtown, as the City Planning Board had claimed. The Special Commission gave no evidence or even much of an explanation on why it disagreed with the Board on this point.

The report generated a storm of protest from Loop supporters, who wanted to see the whole Loop built at once. After holding hearings, the legislative committee in charge of the matter asked the interested parties to develop a compromise plan. The Chamber of Commerce led several meetings attended by members of the Special Commission and twenty or so participants representing the city civic and business groups that were interested in the issue. On March 18, the mayor approved a new, compromise plan that called for immediate construction of the complete Intermediate Thoroughfare as called for in the initial plan, although some details of routing and financing were modified.⁸

In December the Special Commission released its *Final Report* on the Loop (Special Commission on Laying Out and Constructing New Thoroughfare, 1925), by far the most thorough planning document produced during the Loop's lifetime. This report recommended building the full Loop, though the report argued (without research evidence) that most vehicles were likely to be local rather than through-traffic. The plan also acknowledged a hitherto unmentioned aspect of planning analysis: that the Loop should be compared to other alternatives. The actual discussion of these potential alternatives, however, was limited. The only two alternatives proposed were to do nothing and wait until congestion worsened to such an extent that businesses moved away, which the commissioners rejected out of hand, or to drastically restrict parking, which they also rejected as "entirely inadequate." In explaining their position on parking regulations, the Commissioners wrote:

The statement is frequently made that if parking were prohibited in the downtown district there would be no need of radical street improvements. Our answer to this statement is that parking is already prohibited on one or both sides of very many streets in the downtown section and particularly on the streets paralleling the proposed Intermediate Thoroughfare and for the relief of which the thoroughfare is to be constructed. . . . It is thus evident that. . . the entire prohibition [on parking] in the downtown district would do little to relieve north and south bound traffic. (p. 8)

The report instead recommended some milder changes to parking policy, including banning parking during business hours on the few north-south streets where it was still permitted, encouraging the construction of garages outside downtown, and making parking tickets quicker for the police to process through the courts.

During the two years leading up to the publication of the Special Commission's final report, the Loop Highway plan appeared well on its way to success. Boston politicians, government officials, and businessmen all agreed there was a pressing need to reduce traffic congestion. The plan also addressed a particular need that had been recognized for over thirty years—the lack of a good north-south traffic artery. Steadfast supporters of the Loop Highway included the Boston City Planning Board and, after some brief initial reluctance, the politically powerful Chamber of Commerce. At various times the project was formally endorsed by a wide range of interests, including the Boston Real Estate Exchange, the Boston Fruit and Produce Exchange, the Team Owners' Association, the Boston Motor Truck Club, the Boston Society of Landscape Architects, and major financial and banking interests. At one point or another, all of the city's principal newspapers praised the project, from the conservative Republican, business-oriented *Herald* and high-society *Transcript*, to the more populist Democratic *Globe* and *Post*. Nelson P. Lewis and General George W. Goethals, the two outside consultants hired to comment on the project, were wholeheartedly enthusiastic. As for opposition to the project, it was scattered and sporadic. Competing congestion relief ideas, including calls to reduce on-street parking, were put forward as concepts but never as concrete proposals, and they attracted little support.

THE PARKING REGULATION PROPOSALS

As city leaders debated the Loop Highway, there was a quiet but persistent series of calls to use parking regulations to improve congestion. Many people believed that parked cars caused congestion, either by tying up valuable street space when stopped or double parked, or else by delaying traffic as drivers pulled in and out of parking spaces. Even the Chamber of Commerce, a supporter of only the most modest changes to parking policy, published an

article decrying the ubiquitous rows of “standing machines that block and hamper the movement of traffic.”⁹

Despite this general consensus, however, there was no shared view on what might constitute effective downtown parking policies. On the one hand, most people supported modest policy changes such as modifying existing regulations, improving motorist compliance with those regulations, or building more off-street parking, but even the strongest advocates of such policies never claimed they would significantly impact congestion. At the other end of the spectrum, a few people called for the drastic options of banning all street parking during business hours, or charging a fee to park on the streets. These proposals were touted as highly effective congestion relief, but they garnered little serious support and generated storms of opposition, and were never treated as serious proposals by the larger community.

One of the most frequent suggestions was to modify existing parking regulations slightly. The primary rule about parking in the central business district was that no vehicle should be parked for more than twenty minutes, though police officers could, at their discretion, permit vehicles to stand for longer periods of time when this wouldn't interfere with vehicle or pedestrian traffic. This basic rule was augmented with long lists of blocks where different rules applied—shorter or longer time limits, or no parking at all during business hours. Although people regularly called for modifying these rules and small changes were made periodically, nobody seriously argued that more such changes would resolve the congestion problem.

The specific regulations themselves were only part of the problem, however. More seriously, motorist compliance was spotty at best. In theory, the Boston police enforced the traffic regulations, and drivers caught breaking them were fined up to \$20 for each offense. Actual experience was otherwise. Many drivers left their cars parked all day long in zones designed for short-term parking, an enforcement problem that Boston shared with other cities. Traffic expert Miller McClintock, in a book on traffic regulation in the U.S., warned that, “[I]f an attempt were made strictly to enforce the parking regulations, it is doubtful if the entire police force of the average city would be adequate for the purpose.” (McClintock, 1925, p. 150)

Bostonians favored two approaches to improving compliance with the parking regulations and, thus, reducing congestion. The first, a series of formal requests to Boston motorists that they obey the regulations, fit with the national tendency of the times to view compliance with regulations as a matter of proper motorist education (Foster 1981, p. 96). Mayor Nichols and the Chamber of Commerce both put out such appeals to the community. While everybody seemed to support the idea of motorist education, some people also called for giving the police stronger powers to force compliance with the existing regulations. Despite widespread support for this idea, however, the state did not authorize changes to the ticketing procedures until several years later.

Others argued that increasing the supply of off-street parking spaces would lead drivers to voluntarily stop parking on downtown streets. Since there was little free land in the downtown itself, people suggested providing underground parking lots, surface lots just outside the congested district, or lots at outlying streetcar stations. Private-sector initiative led to relatively quick action along these lines. The downtown department stores constructed new garages and offered their customers validation for an existing garage outside the downtown that was connected to the downtown by bus service.

While the three policy ideas of modifying parking regulations, enforcing them more effectively, and adding off-street parking options had modest support, two policy proposals which raised vehement opposition were a downtown parking ban and a downtown street-parking fee. Those who proposed bans on all downtown street parking during business hours seem to have been not only trying to free up lane space in the streets, but also to deal with the specific problem of vehicles left parked on the streets for a full day. (Many people decried the

“all-day parker” as a particular source of traffic congestion, though the logic of why all-day parkers caused more congestion than a space filled with several cars over a day was never clearly explained.) Given the problems the police had enforcing time limits, a flat-out ban appeared to be more enforceable. Unlike Los Angeles and Chicago where parking bans were tried (albeit for only a few days in the case of Los Angeles), the idea never took hold in Boston. Indeed, although it was mentioned sporadically, the idea generated heated opposition and no detailed proposal was ever crafted or seriously considered by the city government.

Even less popular than a parking ban was the idea of a parking fee. In January 1926, this new approach to parking was proposed by a sub-committee of Boston’s Ways and Means Committee and Mayor Nichols. The proposal called for keeping the existing parking regulations, but charging drivers an annual fee of \$5 to \$10 for the right to park on city streets.¹⁰ The opposition from business and automobile advocacy groups was decisive and adversarial. All the city’s newspapers ran scathing articles. For example, the high-society *Transcript* immediately published an editorial warning that the proposed fee would be counterproductive as a revenue-generator because it would likely drive business away from the city and thus reduce overall revenues to the city.¹¹ Even the populist *Post* ran a cartoon lampooning the “freedom” of the city. The fee proposal soon after disappeared for good.

CONCLUSIONS: WHY NOTHING HAPPENED

In the end, the city did very little to address its congestion problem. As mentioned above, the only changes made to parking policy were modest ones that had no discernable impact on congestion. As for the Loop Highway, despite all the signs pointing in its favor, it died swiftly and decisively in April 1926 when the state legislature voted to deny Boston permission to issue bonds to fund the road. This final vote was unexpected, as on April 22, sixteen of the twenty members of the Joint Legislative Committees on Municipal Finance and Metropolitan Affairs voted to recommend a bill allowing Boston to build the Loop. The bill went to the Senate, where it passed easily on April 27. In the House, however, the measure died after three days of deliberation that the *Transcript* called “one of the longest debates of the year.” On April 29, the House voted 87 to 55 against the bill, and the next day, voted 110 to 64 against a motion to reconsider it. No further attempt was made to resuscitate the plan in anything like its original form, although the same route showed up four years later in a 1930 Thoroughfare Plan for the City of Boston as an elevated road to be called “The Central Artery”¹² (Boston City Planning Board, 1930).

Given the endless, desperate calls for congestion relief, the failures of both the Loop and tough parking policies beg explanation. In the end, the Loop and parking proposals both foundered due to a combination of political machinations and poor planning. The exact reasons why the House rejected the Loop Highway are murky, despite the long three days’ of debate. In the spring of 1926, several organizations and individuals had started raising some objections to the plan, but no single objection appeared to be widespread, and for the most part opponents were scattered. The *Herald* described the final debate in the House as “an afternoon largely spent in oratory,”¹³ and newspaper transcripts of the afternoon corroborate that opinion—the various legislators appeared to be posturing more than raising serious objections. In the case of the Loop, the primary objections centered on the project’s high cost and the argument that parking regulations could achieve the same congestion relief benefits at a fraction of the cost. The Loop’s supporters also neglected to positively demonstrate the project’s potential effectiveness at relieving congestion.

Ultimately, though, it appeared that the project’s great expense was the key objection. The Loop represent an unprecedented expenditure for an urban road project, and the financing

would have required adopting special taxes. Thus, it is not surprising that many people opposed the project on these grounds. The two most politically prominent Loop detractors, Malcolm Nichols (Boston mayor as of 1926) and a well-respected member of the state legislature, Representative Henry Shattuck, consistently objected to the project's cost, as did many of the other individuals who began to criticize the Loop in 1926. Cost concerns were also raised many times in the last three days of legislative debate in the House. However, beyond the normal wariness that might surround such a major financial undertaking, the Loop also fell victim to long-standing party politics in the state. For decades, the Republican-dominated state legislature had opposed large-scale public works projects in the historically Democratic city of Boston on the grounds that they were merely make-work projects that perpetuated the city's patronage machine. The Loop must have appeared to state Republicans as yet another wasteful, expensive Democratic ploy for new patronage opportunities.

The Loop's absolute price, however, was not the only objection. Both Mayor Nichols and Representative Shattuck argued that a lower-cost alternative to expensive road expansion existed in the form of parking regulations. Nichols and Shattuck stressed that they opposed the Loop because they felt it was too expensive a project to undertake until the city first determined whether new parking regulations could solve the congestion problem. The argument that Boston should first try parking regulations as a cheaper alternative to the Loop Highway undoubtedly convinced some legislators. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, it provided convenient political cover to those who opposed the project for less politically palatable reasons.

Most fundamentally, however, the Loop Highway's collapse can be seen as a profound failure of planning analysis. In the original Loop plan, the Boston City Planning Board failed to explicitly consider any alternatives to road construction as strategies to achieve congestion relief. As a result, from the beginning the plan was vulnerable to criticism that more economical solutions—such as parking regulations—could just as effectively reduce congestion. This was not a problem as long as political support for the project was strong, but once Shattuck and others began suggesting that parking policies might be a cheaper alternative, the analytical failures became critical. Had Loop supporters brought forward comparative logic and evidence to support their plan's superiority, they might have been able to rebut this criticism. However, despite the fact that by the 1920s more analytic planning procedures were being developed under the influence of the Progressive movement, the Board never provided compelling counterarguments.

As for the failure of parking proposals that might have effectively reduced congestion—the downtown parking ban or parking fee—they also suffered from a lack of sound planning analysis. Proponents never provided any evidence or persuasive analysis to demonstrate that such policies would significantly reduce congestion. Given how unpopular parking restrictions were at the time, it is unsurprising that politicians and the public would not flock to these proposals if there were no compelling reason to believe that they would be effective.

In sum, the attempts to relieve congestion through the Loop and parking regulations both failed for similar reasons. In both cases, policymakers concluded that the cure was worse than the disease—in the case of the Loop, the expense, and in the case of parking regulations, the reduced convenience for motorists visiting downtown. Such conclusions were easy to reach, given planners' failure to provide strong justifications for their claims of congestion relief. Despite the fact that the transportation planning movement was adopting more evidence-based planning methods, the Boston community was not yet incorporating them into its planning analyses. Such traffic planning methods would not appear in Boston until four years later, when the City Planning Board released its 1930 *Report on a Thoroughfare Plan for Boston* that included a cost-benefit analysis for each proposed project.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Boston Herald*, "Editorial: The street problem," February 14, 1925, p. 10.
- 2 For an early statement of progressive views about cities, see: *The New England Magazine (New Series)*, "What a great city might be—A lesson from the White City," March 1896, pp. 3-13. A good description of how planning fit into the larger progressive movement can be found in Fairfield (1994). For discussions of transportation planning in particular, see Foster (1981) and Barrett and Rose (1999). For a discussion of the development of traffic regulations, see McShane (1999).
- 3 *Boston Post*, "Railroads carry less than autos," August [4?], 1926.
- 4 *Boston Transcript*, "Chamber opposes drastic parking rule suggested," June 4, 1925, pp. 1 & 7; *Current Affairs*, December 21, 1925, supplement - pp. 1-2.
- 5 *Boston Transcript*, "Map of new \$35,000,000 street proposed by the city planning board, " December 17, 1923, p. 7.
- 6 *Boston City Record*, "New two-mile thoroughfare through downtown section proposed to aid traffic," December 22, 1923, pp. 1741 & 1745; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor favors \$32,000,000 plan for proposed thoroughfare, " March 10 (p.m.), 1924, p. 15.
- 7 The commission's name changed slightly over the next years.
- 8 *Boston Globe*, "To renew parley on Exchange st; Conference yesterday was 'satisfactory,'" March 13 (a.m.), 1925, p. 36; *Boston Herald*, "Hope to settle traffic issue," March 13, 1925, p. 11; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor Curley commits city; Early start on great work is now planned," March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 12; *Boston Globe*, "Mayor Curley commits city; Early start on great work is now planned, " March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 12; *Boston Herald*, "\$28,000,000 street loop plan strikes snag in Legislature, " March 19, 1925, p. 2; *Boston Transcript*, "Give unanimous support to loop thoroughfare," March 18, 1925, pp. 1 & 7; *Christian Science Monitor*, "Wider streets plan indorsed, " March 19, 1925, p. 4.
- 9 *Current Affairs in New England*, "The traffic survey," December 11, 1922, p. 10.
- 10 *Boston Globe*, "Plan to make autos pay for parking in Boston streets," January 21 (a.m.), 1926, pp. 1 & 4.
- 11 *Boston Transcript*, "Editorial: A license tax for parking," January 21, 1926, p. II-2.
- 12 The Central Artery, ultimately built in the 1950s, was recently torn down and is being relocated underground in the "Big Dig," project, infamous as perhaps the most expensive segment of highway ever built in the U.S.
- 13 *Boston Herald*, "Loop road bill loses in House," April 30, 1926, pp. 1 & 14.