



To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Brooke McKenna, Commissioner

Date: March 26, 2026

Subject: Awaiting Reports 2026-12 Street Closures in the Harvard Square Area

In response to Awaiting Report No. 26-12, requesting that the City Manager work with relevant City departments to prioritize pilot projects in 2026 without the use of a consultant for an extensive pedestrianization study, and, in the medium-term, consider how additional pedestrianization of a section of Brattle Street could enhance the Square by restoring two-way traffic to JFK Street, we report the following:

The City will not pursue the two-phased pedestrianization study previously authorized in the FY26 budget. This study was planned to look comprehensively at the impacts of large scale pedestrianization with the Square, including significant public outreach as well as traffic analysis, modeling, and recommendations. In lieu of this work, we will continue to explore opportunities for pedestrianization that are less impactful to the overall transportation network in Harvard Square, MBTA service, deliveries, and other vehicular access. The pedestrianization of lower Bow Street, between Dewolfe Street and Plympton Street, is one such effort that is currently under way.

Lower Bow Street has been closed for construction for several years, without having significant impacts on the safety or functionality of the surrounding traffic patterns. This has demonstrated that from a traffic perspective, this location is an excellent opportunity for pedestrianization. In addition, during COVID, the adjacent restaurants, with front doors on Mt. Auburn Street, had robust outdoor dining on Bow Street with great success. We are excited about this opportunity to activate this space into a place for increased social interaction and gathering.

Later this spring, this section of roadway will be closed to vehicular traffic and activated for pedestrian use. This is a collaborative effort including a wide-ranging group of stakeholders coordinating all aspects of the closure. A group of neighborhood stakeholders, including the Harvard Square Business Association, Harvard University, and adjacent businesses, are working together with City staff to ensure the success of this project. The pedestrianized area will be anchored by active outdoor dining, with additional space designed to support informal public use throughout the day. The Community



Development Department's Public Space Lab is exploring opportunities for simple, flexible interventions – such as public seating, light-touch play elements, and small-scale design treatments – to help define the space as a shared public environment and support everyday use. The space will also be available for events, such as student celebrations or HSBA events. Other City departments, including the Department of Transportation, Department of Public Works, Fire Department, and Police Department are coordinating to ensure the area functions from an operational perspective, including maintenance and public safety considerations.

As mentioned above, we are confident that this segment of Bow Street can be closed without negative impacts to mobility in Harvard Square. Given the enthusiastic engagement from the adjacent businesses and institutions, we anticipate the closure will be well received in the neighborhood. As the project proceeds, we will continue to monitor any emerging issues, such as noise complaints. In the fall, at the close of the outdoor dining season, we will evaluate whether to keep the pedestrianization through the winter months or re-open the street and resume in the pedestrianization in the spring. City staff and partners will observe how the space is used, gathering feedback from the public, and identifying opportunities for improvement over time.

Beyond Bow Street, we continue to work with stakeholders, including the Harvard Square Business Association, Harvard University, and other interested parties, to identify and execute additional opportunities for pedestrianization in addition to continuing to support larger scale special events in the Square.

We will also begin internal high-level analysis of JFK Street and Brattle Street and the possible changes to how they operate in Harvard Square. This is a complex street pair in the heart of the Square that serves many roles—both in the transportation network and in support of commerce, street life, entertainment, and other functions of the Square. It is important we thoroughly understand the challenges that changes to these streets could pose—such as limitations on truck turning movements—before we move forward with any changes. We would not propose significant changes to these streets without comprehensive analysis, planning, and consultation with stakeholders and community members.