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# A hope of renewal for Somerville

By Paul McMorrow

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STATE TRANSPORTATION officials can't shirk the Green Line extension to Somerville. There's a Big Dig court settlement that says so. Like it or not - and there were years when the folks who made these decisions were not liking it one bit - the extension is expected to open by 2014. The question now is whether the new route is an end unto itself that gets built merely out of obligation, like a Brussels sprout choked down after some gluttonous meal, or whether the \$1 billion project can serve as the catalyst for the rebirth of whole neighborhoods.

Somerville officials are doing their part to make the T project pay off. They're up-zoning the corridor along the Green Line's route. This new zoning will allow dense construction tied to the new railway link to Cambridge and Boston. Smart zoning can't do it all, though. One of the biggest redevelopment plays along the new Green Line route is being overshadowed, literally, by a rusting old roadway.

The McGrath-O'Brien Highway, which was built to speed commuters through East Somerville, does little more than give rush-hour drivers a view of the city's aging industrial edge. Its elevated portion, which runs between the new Green Line's planned branches, divides the city. The residential neighborhoods radiating from Union Square dead-end at a soaring concrete wall; on the other side, warehouses and railroad tracks fill a no-man's land between the elevated McGrath and its grown-up cousin, Interstate 93.

Somerville has a tortured relationship with transit. The city boomed as one of Boston's streetcar suburbs. Railroads on Somerville's eastern edge fed brick factories, meat-packing plants, and, later, rail-dependent heavy industry. Its fortunes swooned along with rail's decline. Residents have long chafed at the highways that cut through town. At a development conference in Boston last week, Somerville Mayor Joe Curtatone complained about shortsighted transportation planners who had "screwed us for half a century," and who had succeeded in "bringing suburbanites through the city, but not into it."

There's some heavy symbolism at play with the Green Line extension, but there's also real possibility. The line, which will restore rail service to a part of Somerville that lost rail to automobiles, is environmental mitigation for a multibillion-dollar highway project. It will trigger significant new construction in Union Square, and open up large chunks of underutilized acreage for development. The city's Brickbottom and Inner Belt neighborhoods were supposed to have been leveled to accommodate a cross-town highway that was never built; now, they're two of the biggest redevelopment opportunities along the Green Line route.

Brickbottom and the Inner Belt will straddle the route. Both neighborhoods are sandwiched between the McGrath and Interstate 93, and both are walled off behind the elevated McGrath. City planners believe that the arrival of the Green Line will transform the old industrial zones into new neighborhoods full of offices, residences and shops.

There's reason for optimism. The Red Line changed the face of Davis Square. However, unlike Davis, Brickbottom and the Inner Belt have a rickety piece of mid-century infrastructure rising between them and the rest of the city. At best, the old elevated McGrath highway will hem in any economic activity following the Green Line extension, creating a barrier that impedes new business from spreading to a section of town badly in need of it. At worst, by severing neighborhoods and stifling physical connections, the McGrath could severely dampen the potential of a classic transit-oriented development opportunity.

Earlier this week, state transportation officials kicked off a year-long study of the McGrath's future. The elevated stretch along Brickbottom is at the end of its useful life. Normally, the state DOT would shore up the elevated structure, replace its bridge deck, and move on. Instead, Somerville officials want the state to knock the whole thing down. They want to turn the elevated highway into an at-grade boulevard that would connect the new Green Line extension to the city around it. They talk of reimposing a human, pedestrian-oriented scale on an area now dominated by a state highway. And good urban design has economics behind it. Urban development and transit are

inextricably linked. So after dropping \$1 billion on the Green Line, the last thing the state should want to do is stifle the business, and taxes, that should follow.

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