

Hoping 'Sound of Silence' more than song

By Ray Hainer/ Correspondent

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For years, residents have lobbied for a sound barrier to be installed along the nearly mile-long section of Lincoln Street that runs parallel to the Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston. They may finally get their wish in 2005, but the state agency that runs the highway has other things to worry about these days, and isn't making any promises.

The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority plans to repave the section of the highway between the Newton and Allston-Brighton tolls this year, and Allston legislators have proposed that the Lincoln Street sound barrier be constructed as part of that project.

At a meeting in early November, the legislative delegation from Allston met with MTA Chairman Matthew J. Amorello to discuss the sound barrier. Amorello was receptive but stopped short of making any guarantees, according to state Rep. Kevin G. Honan, D-Brighton.

In a recent interview, MTA spokesman Doug Hanchett confirmed that the agency is considering building the sound barrier.

He added, however, that unlike the paving, which he called "etched in stone," plans for the barrier are "not definitive by any means." The chief operating officer at the MTA is assembling a capital funding plan for 2005, Hanchett said, and no final choices have been made.

Other worries

Unfortunately for Lincoln Street residents, the sound barrier proposal has been eclipsed by other concerns at the MTA. Just days after the legislators' November meeting with Amorello, engineers discovered that the Central Artery tunnel, which had sprung a large leak in September, has hundreds of leaks in its walls.

The Boston Globe later reported that a senior engineer at the MTA, which oversees the Big Dig, knew of the leaks as early as 2001, a revelation that prompted Gov. Mitt Romney to call for Amorello's resignation.

Hanchett, who has worked at the MTA only under Amorello, said that he is not in a position to comment on how a change of chairman would influence projects, but he indicated that Amorello looks more favorably on sound barriers than his predecessors.

"The sound barrier program was dormant until Chairman Amorello came in. He jump-started it," Hanchett said. "When funds allowed, we've tried to do one or two of these each year."

Here before

Plans for the barrier have been scrapped once before, when former MTA Chairman James Kerasiotis left the agency in spring 2000, according to Honan. "We had commitments from Kerasiotis, but he moved on," he said.

Lincoln Street resident Harry Mattison has been an active supporter of a sound barrier, and recently described the importance of the barrier to the neighborhood.

"For several hundred people, Lincoln Street is either in their front yard or backyard. You can't leave your house without seeing the Mass. Pike," Mattison said. "Whatever they decide to do is going to have a huge impact on our day-to-day lives."

Allston's legislators are well aware of the impact and have guaranteed that, if a barrier is built, residents will be involved at each step of the process.

"[The paving] is an extraordinary opportunity to address that sound issue, but we have to do it in a way that's amenable to the neighborhood," Honan said. "Once the funds are in place, I will advocate, along with my colleagues, that there be a public meeting for the residents of Lincoln Street, Violin Street and the neighboring community."

More input

A spokesman for state Sen. Jarrett T. Barrios, Colin Durrant, said that the Cambridge Democrat's main concern was that the public and community leaders have "an opportunity to provide input into the design and construction."

Hanchett agreed with the legislators on the importance of hearings, and said that residents are always consulted about the type of barrier to be used.

"When we build these things, we talk to the local people," he said. "We don't try to ram anything down anybody's throat. We try to be good neighbors to all the communities we pass through," he said.

If plans for the barrier do go forward, Hanchett said that the construction would take place all in one season, likely in two months or less. "These are not the most complicated engineering feats," he said. "Unlike the Big Dig."

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