

## Voters OK \$9.1M Streetscape

By Joe Walsh | April 5, 2019

Lexington Center will get a new streetscape in less than four years, with renovated sidewalks, added safety features, and new tree plantings.

Lexington voters narrowly approved about \$9.1 million in construction funding for the long-awaited streetscape project at the April 3 annual Town Meeting session. The project's 121-41-4 vote, slightly above the two-third majority needed to approve new debt, reflected concerns from some residents that the project is too costly and not accessible enough for people with disabilities.

With the project's construction costs now approved, the town will aim to start construction in spring 2021, according to Center Committee member Pamela Shadley. A second season of construction will end in fall 2022, ensuring that the Center will have a new streetscape in time for the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington.

The project's three goals, Shadley says, are safety for all users of Massachusetts Avenue, accessibility, and renewal of the area's landscape. The town will reconstruct the sidewalk on both sides of the street using both brick and concrete, the sidewalk area will be slightly wider at crosswalks, and the town will install new benches and trees. Meanwhile, the street will be reconfigured somewhat to make it safer for bikers and pedestrians. The project team will ensure that the streetscape is well-built, she added.

"The estimate includes robust oversight by resident engineers, town staff, and the consultant team," Shadley said.

Project supporters emphasized that the sidewalk is currently in disarray, mired with damaged brick surfaces and dying trees. Lexington Chamber of Commerce Chair Jim Shaw argued that the renovation project is long overdue, and that a newly revitalized Lexington Center will stimulate business and make the space more vibrant.



"The time has come for the town to move this initiative forward," Shaw said. "It's been decades since any major improvements have been made in our center business district."

Some residents, however, warned that the new streetscape design does not improve the center's accessibility. In particular, Victoria Buckley, the chair of the Commission on Disability, says brick sidewalks are rougher than concrete, making them challenging for many residents with disabilities.

While wire-cut bricks comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Buckley argued that they are still not easy to traverse, frequently presenting tripping hazards if they are not installed or maintained well. She would like to see mostly-concrete sidewalks, rather than the current plan to preserve brick where brick currently exists and concrete where concrete currently exists.

Amid these and other concerns, Buckley proposed an amendment requiring the Board of Selectmen to seek advice from the Commission on Disability during the construction process, and the amendment passed by a wide margin. She says the town needs to listen to the disability community's perspective.

"The Commission is charged to watch out for people with disabilities in our town,"

Buckley said. "They are taxpayers too. You are asking them to pay for something that they can't walk on."

Several residents agreed with Buckley's concerns, noting that brick is more expensive than concrete and potentially slippery for disabled and non-disabled residents alike. Town meeting member Frank Sandy believes the design prioritizes aesthetics over function and cost.

"There is no advantage to brick," Sandy said. "I don't think we should be spending millions of dollars for something just because it is cute, when it is dangerous."

Supporters say wire-cut brick can be just as smooth and safe as concrete if it is installed correctly, citing studies and regulations that determine that brick is safe.

Further, some residents and officials noted that the current design is a drastic improvement over the current state of Lexington Center, which has Boston pavers dating back to the 1960s in some cases. Center Committee Chair Jerry Michelson said the design is a compromise that included input from many stakeholders, including members of the disability community.

"We should not wait another year and watch the trees die and the roads crumble," Michelson said.