

# In Mattapan, bike lanes divide the community: 'They're just trying to push us out'

By [Tiana Woodard](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 1, 2022, 11:29 a.m.



A tiny section of Babston Street in Mattapan featured a bike lane protected by three plastic bollards. The bike lane is replaced with sharrows as the street leaves Mattapan Square. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Mayor Michelle Wu's administration is putting together an ambitious plan to replace Mattapan's faded and unprotected bike lanes with new biking infrastructure, with the hope of taming traffic congestion and making a green transit option safer citywide.

Cycling advocates say state-of-the-art bike lanes are long overdue in Mattapan, whose large Black and Latino communities have often felt overlooked by City Hall.

“We deserve good things, we deserve nice things,” said Shavel’le Olivier, executive director of the Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition.

But an undercurrent of opposition is running through community meetings, neighborhood association gatherings, and social media; some residents see bike lanes as a subtle, yet powerful, agent of gentrification that will only aggravate traffic congestion for residents.

“The lanes are for the people who are moving into our neighborhood,” said Donna Woodley, a former Mattapan Square business owner who’s lived in the area for 30 years.

When a neighborhood group [posted](#) about the plan to redesign Blue Hill Avenue last fall — “Let’s get out of our cars and clean our air!” — an avalanche of criticism followed.

“No one is riding bikes in Mattapan that they need a whole lane for bikes,” one person wrote. “It’s obvious they’re just trying to push us out the city.”

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The bike lane debate is heating up just as the city's affordable housing shortage is threatening Mattapan's status as one of the city's last affordable enclaves, and many Black and Latino homebuyers have been [priced out](#).

Plans for new bike lanes began in 2018, under Mayor Martin J. Walsh, when the city started discussing a major redesign of Blue Hill Avenue and Mattapan Square to improve the flow of traffic. They have taken on new importance for the Wu administration, which has focused on reducing emissions and improving both transit and economic resilience in "environmental justice" neighborhoods like Mattapan.

The city hasn't developed a final plan yet — staffers hope to complete the community feedback process by next year — but planners are considering "quick-build" and "full-build" bike lanes, which shield cyclists with obstructions like flex posts or parked cars, along Blue Hill Avenue and Cummins Highway.

Boston has already taken a half-step forward: from summer 2020 to fall 2021, the city introduced a temporary, protected bike lane pilot on Cummins Highway between Wood Avenue and River Street. [Some](#) praised the plan, but other residents reported feeling squeezed by the pilot's temporary bike lanes and rarely saw anyone using them.

Ayana Cole of Mattapan, 40, said she parked in one of the temporary parking spots between the bikes and lane of traffic on Cummins Highway during the trial and found that when she opened the door to get her twin, then-infant daughters out of their car seats, she felt way too close to traffic speeding by.

"If I'm taking [my kids] out closer to the road versus the sidewalk, there's a greater chance of them getting hit by a car," she said.

Cole doesn't ride her bike much and wouldn't consider letting her daughters, now 2, use bike lanes until they're teenagers. The new bike lanes seem to her to be for the wealthier

newcomers who can afford Mattapan's rising housing costs. People with more income have more leisure time between jobs, Cole said.

"If you're working two jobs, you don't have time to ride a bike from one job to the next," she said.

A [Facebook user](#) in the public group "Growing up in Mattapan, Ma" put it more bluntly, writing in a post last fall that City Hall's goal with the plan is "Gentrification. To attract young white professionals to buy in the area."

The Wu administration said it's highly attuned to such concerns and is trying to address them in a thorough community engagement process, but the bike lanes are meant for all.

"The City is also working across departments to prevent displacement while making needed investments in our streets to benefit the daily lives of existing residents," a city spokesperson said.

Research shows that across the country, bike lanes tend to be more of a product of gentrification than a cause of it, said John G. Stehlin, author of "Cyclescapes of the Unequal City: Bicycle Infrastructure and Uneven Development." High earners who work in downtown districts move to working-class neighborhoods like Mattapan and push elected officials to improve the substandard biking infrastructure so they can cycle to work.

"It's not really about the bike," Stehlin said. "It's about these much bigger issues and processes."

Yet a sense that biking is a white, luxury pastime persists, said Adonia Lugo, inaugural equity research manager of the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies — even though all kinds of people have historically, and still do, ride bikes.

Lugo said the biking movement has been centered around affluent, mostly white activists lobbying for bike-friendly, environmentally conscious infrastructure. Their advocacy, she

said, often ignores factors that make biking inaccessible to some communities, like the threat of increased surveillance.

“For people in these underresourced communities ... they’ll [look at this investment and think,] ‘This is not for me,’” Lugo said.

In Mattapan, though, some proponents of the bike lanes are Black cyclists who say they’d put them to good use — like Olivier, the food and fitness coalition executive director.

In 2011, Olivier, now 30, created the Mattapan on Wheels Annual Bike-a-thon, which aims to expose locals to cycling’s advantages with biking trips through parts of Boston, Quincy, and Milton.

“We need to bring awareness,” Olivier said, because adding bike lanes “could be a benefit” to all in Mattapan.

Before Olivier could drive, biking was her main way of visiting Boston’s different neighborhoods and “opening up [her] worldview.” It’s kept her active. And it sparked her interest in transportation equity.

“My interest in biking evolved into interest in transportation in general,” Olivier said.

And some would-be cyclists of color say the dearth of safe bike lanes is one reason why fewer Black and Latino people ride bikes. A 25-year-old Mattapan resident, who asked to remain anonymous for privacy concerns, said she’d bike in her neighborhood more if lanes were more visible and protected. Right now, she “tries to stay off the street” because “she doesn’t want to get hit.”

State Representative Russell Holmes of Mattapan doubted bike lanes’ benefits when first approached about the development. But dangerous speeding and fatal traffic accidents have shown that bike lanes are important and overdue, he said. EMS responded to one bike-related fatality and scores of biking crashes along Blue Hill Avenue, American Legion Highway, and Cummins Highway between 2015 and 2021, [according to city](#)

[data.](#)

“I don’t want to see anymore memorials on the side of my road,” he said. “That’s unacceptable.”

But Holmes, Olivier, and others supportive of neighborhood bike lane improvements understand why people in Mattapan are worried. The city government’s lack of transparency, investment, and care over the years has eroded their trust.

That’s why proponents like Olivier say they’re responding by talking with people about their concerns and the benefits safe bike lanes can bring, such as improved access to physical activity, stress relief, and giving youth safer ways to explore Boston.

“If they decide, ‘I still don’t want a bike lane,’ fine,” she said. “But at least they thought for a second time.”

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