Appendix 7 – *Jamaica Plain Gazette,* 8/15/03: Local cyclists' test shows tracks, bikes work well together

Trolleys pass bike test

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Trolleys passed a recent bipartisan bicycle-safety test—though there's disagreement on how high their grade should be.

The planned restoration of the Arborway trolley line down Centre and South streets has worried bicyclists on both sides of the trolley debate. The proposed station, or "trolley plaza," design calls for a concrete platform to extend into the street to within 26 inches of the rails. In this narrow corridor, bicyclists could wreck by either hitting a pedal on the 8-inch curb or by dropping a tire into the rail.

Bike activists Mira Brown of Bikes Not Bombs and Jeffrey Ferris of Ferris Wheels bike shop conducted an experiment two months ago to see if the design was safe for bicyclists. They were joined by Ferris Wheels employee Joel Singler and by Paul Normandia, who is the Gazette's art director.

The experiment was held in the MBTA parking lot on the Arborway Yard, at the corner of Washington Street and the Arborway, where old trolley rails still lie in the pavement. The trolley plaza was simulated with cardboard cartons. The experimenters tried riding between the "plaza" and the rails in the parking lot.

Despite being on opposite sides of the trolley debate—Brown supports trolleys, Ferris opposes them—both believed initially that the plaza design might be dangerous for bikers, especially inexperienced ones. The test changed their minds—to varying degrees.

"I was very pleasantly surprised, actually," Brown said. "It was a piece of cake."

She said a test involving a run of the full length of a trolley plaza—about 140 feet—was more difficult than an early 65-foot test, but still "doable." Tossing stones and other realistic "debris" into the riding zone also added to the difficulty.

"It was much easier than I expected it to be," said Ferris. "It was bikeable."

But, he warned, "You have to focus on what you're doing. There's not much room for error." He also thought it would be harder in real life as opposed to the "closed environment" of the parking lot.

The two also disagreed on whether riding past the trolley plaza was any worse than riding past parked cars.

"It felt a lot safer to me than it is right now with parked cars," Brown said, noting that a trolley plaza won't suddenly fling a metal door open in front of a bike.

Asked if the plaza was any worse than parked cars, Ferris said, "It is and it isn't. It's different."

One thing both sides could probably agree on was Brown's comment: "I think the MBTA should have done the test, not us."

The recent state ruling on mitigating the impacts of trolley restoration requires a thorough study of bike safety. Both Brown and Ferris are on the Arborway Rail Restoration Project Advisory Committee (ARRPAC), the group planning the restoration.

The plazas aren't the only bike safety issue related to the trolleys. Flyers issued in April by the anti-trolley group Better Transit Without Trolleys claimed that trolleys would pass within 6 inches of bikes riding by.

Ferris dismissed that concern, saying that the rails themselves are a bigger danger than any vehicle riding them, or any car or truck. He said that opinion is based on "the damage to bikes and damage to people that come in [to his store]."

One of the minor details in the trolley debate has been talk of "flange fillers"—devices that fill in or seal off the gap in the rail when no trolley is on it. The flange filler would be too strong for a bike wheel to push down, but trolley wheels could push it down easily.

Ferris said he looked into flange fillers about 10 years ago, and was told that most models are used in factories and would disintegrate quickly in Boston weather.

Barbara Boylan, the MBTA's project manager on trolley restoration, said at a recent ARRPAC meeting that MBTA consultant Bill Lieberman is investigating various types of flange fillers as he jets around the country working on various light rail projects.

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