

# APPENDIX C: CAMBRIDGE BICYCLE CONVERSATIONS SUMMARY

## 1. Background

Between October, 2019 and March, 2020, 75 people who lived or worked in Cambridge were interviewed about biking and transportation in the city. Deliberate efforts were made to hear from people of color, seniors, people with disabilities and people participating in the city's affordable housing programs. Efforts were also made to hear from people who cycle for a variety of reasons, including for recreation, to cycle to work, to save money and to spend time with their children. Interviews were informal and took place where people were already at (such as on the street) or at locations of their choosing.

## 2. Summary

Many people mentioned the affordability, convenience, ease and pleasure of biking. Most people who bike frequently cited dangerous and inconsiderate drivers as the biggest source of stress. Barriers to bike include fear of dangerous driving, self-perceptions of their lack of physical ability or a sense that biking is not something commonly done in their community.

These conversations with people about their transportation and mobility experiences help inform directions and next steps that will help support people in the community and work towards more equitable engagement and access.

## 3. Project overview

### Interviews:

Interviews were conducted in person as open-ended or semi-structured conversations. Interviews included intercept surveys on the street or in public places such as in front of a library, in senior centers, at events such as the bicycle installation nights and at pre-arranged locations suggested by the interviewee. All participants were told that the information collected will help the Cambridge Bike Plan 2020. Interviews ranged from 5-45 minutes, depending on people's ability and willingness to talk.

Interviews were conducted by Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, a professor of Anthropology at Brandeis University, Cambridge resident and member of the Cambridge Bicycle Committee. Two additional members of the Cambridge Bicycle Committee— Dien Ho and Gloria Huangpu—conducted interviews at the November Central Square bike lights give away event and Dien Ho assisted with conversations at the November Fletcher Maynard Academy listening sessions.

At the bare minimum, we asked people why they cycled, what aspect of cycling caused stress and what streets they avoided. Longer conversations included topics such as stories and anecdotes about their experiences cycling, their thoughts on cycling infrastructure in the city and how the city can improve community engagement related to transportation projects. For infrequent cyclists, we emphasized perceptions of cycling as a transportation option.

Interview locations: North Cambridge Senior Center, Cambridge Public Library - Central Square branch, Cambridge Public Library - main branch, Carl Barron Plaza, Porter Square, Inman Square, the intersection of Windsor St. and Broadway, JFK apartments, Central Square Senior

Center, Massachusetts Ave and Western Ave., the Fletcher Maynard Academy, Massachusetts Ave and Albany Street, The War Memorial Recreation Center.

Listening sessions: On November 21, 2019 we held a series of focus group/listening sessions about transportation in Cambridge at the Fletcher Maynard Academy. These sessions coincided with the school’s “Dinner of Thanks” event which attracts students and families from around the city, especially the Port neighborhood. Topics ranged from housing to streets, public safety, gentrification and barriers to bicycling.

Demographics:

We heard from 75 people (37% Black, 39% white, 12% Latinx, 10% Asian, 2% multi-racial; 60% female, 39% male, 1% non-binary; age — 19% 24 and under, 16% 25-34, 22% 35-44, 12% 55-64, 31% 65 and over). Because not everyone filled out the voluntary demographic survey these numbers provide a \*rough approximation\* of the interviewees and should not be taken as a precise reflection of the demographics of everyone who participated.

#### **4. Why people bike in Cambridge**

People bike in Cambridge for many different reasons. A large majority of people we spoke with said they bike because it is convenient and fun, although other reasons include affordability, ease of parking, speed, disability, work arrangements, or to spend time with their children. Here is a sampling of peoples’ responses (some quotes were lightly edited for clarity):

“I never have to worry about traffic or where to park. It takes the same time every trip and is faster than driving. Also, even though I don’t drink coffee, I come in raring to go. That is the greatest feeling in the world, especially as a school teacher.” — Math teacher at a Cambridge public school.

“I am a nurse and I visit seven homes a day, sometimes riding twenty five miles. I ride because there is no parking, I don't get reimbursed for parking tickets and I don't have a parking permit.” — Nurse and home healthcare supervisor.

“I’m 86 years old. And if it wasn’t for the bike I wouldn’t get out much. I have sciatica in my legs. It’s a nerve thing. I can’t stand up too long. But with a bike I can be out all day long. I love bikes. If they took this bike I’d be heart-broken, crying every day. I take it home, keep it inside, right next to me, right next to my bed so I can get up and jump on it!—Street interview at Carl Barron Plaza.

“I’m in the union, I do construction. The wear and tear on my hip just wore it down. I got real severe arthritis. It's so bad that they have to give me a total hip replacement. I'm stuck in the house all day. I'm out of work now. The only exercise I can get is riding my bike. Riding a bike — you're not putting any weight on the hip, you're just doing a pedal motion. It's the only exercise I can get all day. If I don't go for a bike ride all day, I'm going crazy.” —Roofer who rides daily with his son.

“These are my two kids. The one in front, I can just be right next to him. The one in the back, we can talk about what we see and point out different features of the city. It is great we get to go outside together and see the city. I've lived here for eight years and things have improved a lot. I've seen changes to streets that were a bit hairy before. I am excited that there is even more changes that are going to happen.”— Bicycle commuter during the week and leisure rider with children during weekends.

“The T runs on their schedule. When you are ready to go somewhere, you shouldn't have to wait a half hour. On a nice day like this, Sunday, don't wait for the bus, just get on your bike and ride. On a bike you can go anywhere, any route.” — Bicycle commuter at a Bike Fix-it event.

“I live in Cambridge and bike to save money. It is less expensive transportation. In the past twenty years maybe I've used public transportation maybe twenty times. That's more money in my pocket!” — cook at Harvard Square restaurant.

“I came out to Cambridge in 1972 with old Schwinn tied to the roof and when I got here I sold the car and just used the bicycle. Back then, on Massachusetts avenue everything with wheels was out there— rollerbladers, buses, cement mixers and bikes. So I guess I was a cyclist in the city before it was a hip thing.”— Senior who bikes daily to local stores.

“I use the bike for commuting, going to work, taking the kid to the doctor, taking the kid to the day care and going grocery shopping. Before we used to take Uber to Market Basket. I would say that in the past seven months, we have saved easily about \$500.” — Cargo biker who rides daily with his daughter.

“I love the exercise. I love that it's free. I love that there's no traffic. I try to encourage people to do this all the time. I'm on Instagram all the time. I'm on Facebook all the time. I'm always putting up the pictures, 'Look at me, not in traffic.'” — Bicycle commuter between Harvard and Arlington.

“I feel the air. I feel the temperature. I feel more connection with how nature is. I see more actually, I see the sky more. I'm exposed more to things that you wouldn't in a car.” — Senior biker.

“It is lovely biking around here. I find it fun in the morning commuting to work. It is like 30 minutes [driving] with traffic, 29 minutes on the T and 18 minute bike ride! Biking wins again!” — Bike commuter

“I had a kid three years ago. That changed my cycling. It took a year to convince my Husband I ride differently with her. I ride at a quarter of the pace. Now she's like, 'I want to go on the bike' instead of the stroller. People always wave to her on the street.” — Family biker who rides daily with her daughter.

“One of the great things that Cambridge is doing, they're starting to install these bike lanes, which make a complete difference. First of all, I'm shielded by people who are

parked so that a motorist who might be under the influence or just reckless or not thinking cannot reach me.” — Senior biker.

## 5. Stresses

Dangerous driving was by far the most common source of stress while cycling (mentioned in over 20 interviews). Other stresses included bicycle theft and storage issues, blocked bicycle lanes, weather, and the need to ride on sidewalks. Here is a sample of responses:

“People who drive cars think they own the road and they don't.”

“I am regularly pushed into traffic because there is a car parked in the bike lane.”

“Basically we have to be ultra-defensive, which I guess is good anyways, but it causes us to stop and start again. I don't think drivers know how much energy that takes.”

“I know the laws that you have access to the full road, but genuinely, I try to stay off on the side. Sometimes, especially on left turns, I have to be on the main road to be able to make that turn.

### Clothing:

One person noted that the clothes he wears affects how drivers treat them on the road. A crossing guard who bikes to work said: “when I don't wear a uniform, it's bad out there. When I wear a uniform, it is better. I get more respect from drivers when I wear my uniform.”

### Sidewalk riding:

Sidewalk riding came up in eleven interviews. Many participants said they felt compelled to ride on the sidewalk in spots where riding on the road felt too dangerous. Riding on the sidewalk, even legally, puts people at risk of harassment or worse from the police. Furthermore, most people (cyclists and non-cyclists) were unaware that it is legal to bike on sidewalks outside of business districts.

“I feel there is no need for a law that bikes can't be on the sidewalk. I don't want to get a ticket! Right here on Mass Ave, they stop people all the time. I don't really see the point. We aren't a vehicle, or motorcycle or moped.”

“I ride on the sidewalk because it is safe and don't feel comfortable biking on roads without paths. I only feel safe on Western Ave.”

“It can be a bit hairy and the only way across is to sort of take the pedestrian path”

“Sometimes I do not ride in the street [Mass Ave.]. Like, I will take my chance riding on the sidewalk.”

### Snow clearance:

A few noted drivers become aggressive in the winter: “the first to go are the bike lanes because the snow is pushed to the side. And bike lanes are the least sort of priority in terms of getting plowed.”

### Bike lanes:

“I am regularly pushed into traffic because there is car parked in the bike lane.”

## **6. Problem spots**

While it is not the only problem street, the consensus is that Massachusetts Avenue is the worst place to bike on in Cambridge. Despite this, many people report cycling on Massachusetts Avenue because it is such an important artery.

### Massachusetts Avenue:

“Central is good if you go in one direction but it is a problem when you need to turn.”

“Mass Ave. I tried to avoid it. There are a lot of buses, a lot of cars. So I use Broadway instead.”

“It is a bit hairy and I think most people don't bike all the way up Mass Ave.”

“But I will not, it's a last resort and only if necessary, bike through Harvard Square.”

“The corner of Mass Avenue and Vassar is a difficult intersection to make a left turn on.”

“Mass Ave could really use some work. — The entire thing. It's so bad. Especially like, yeah, the part from like Harvard to Central, there's like nothing, and people are always angry. So, that's always a frustrating section.”

### Quincy St./Broadway intersection:

“you have also cars going straight, as well as to the right. From where you're coming from, it's only left. I think the cars coming straight don't always know that.”

### Broadway:

“It's much more nerve wracking because you are so close to cars. The car door opens and sometimes you have to go right into the car lane.”

### Prospect St. (especially near Central):

“I'm very careful to avoid Prospect Street and Mass Avenue and Central Square, where there've been a number of accidents”

### Bishop Allen Drive:

“I take Bishop Allen to go to work. Lots of [potholes]. There are a lot, especially around construction areas. It is unsettling.”

### All intersections with Memorial Drive (such as Western and River St):

“I live by Memorial Drive. That to me is the most negative area. Crossing is impossible. The sidewalks are narrow and bumpy. It is the least pleasant place [to bike], even though the area is so beautiful.”

## **7. Barriers**

While dangerous driving was mentioned by many people as a reason they do not bike, people also mentioned other barriers such the lack of secure bicycle parking, access to age-appropriate bikes and concern over how it would be perceived.

“I used to cycle in Jamaica but not after coming to Cambridge. We saw bicycles like it was a primitive thing.” — Cambridge Senior Center interview.

“I find walking more convenient than biking because you have to worry about stuff. A lot of kids bike to my school and those are always full. So, that's like extra time to wake up in the morning, to ride to school, and try to find a spot that's convenient to park your bike.” —FMA listening session, CRLS student.

“Where I live there are a lot of bikes getting stolen. I refuse to leave it outside. Where I live I always bring it inside. But the building is conservative about it. Saying don't bring it inside.”— Central Square interview

“At my house, there's no storage. Well there's storage for bikes, but it's outside. So, the Blue Bikes is super convenient for us in the summer.” — FMA listening session

“I can't imagine it's pleasant riding a bike in Cambridge. I mean, I think there are advantages for your health, for the environment, but I would think it'd be kind of nerve wracking.” — Cambridge Senior Center

“I just wouldn't bike I wouldn't feel safe, but my son used to bike, but I was always scared for him when he was biking. So anything can happen.”— FMA listening session

## **9. Equity**

Conversations revealed that few people see biking separately from other issues in the city. Effective community engagement begins from the premise that biking does not exist in isolation from other city issues, whether that is affordable housing, racial inequality, gentrification and policing. Intentional efforts need to be made to invite local organizations with deep roots with communities of color in the planning and organizing of fun bike rides. Moreover, opportunities for people to get children's bikes or affordable used bikes will make biking more accessible to low-income households in Cambridge:

### Community meetings:

“The city does those hearings but I always feel they already have narrowed it down into a certain option. They will organize public hearings on bike lanes but there has to be a broader conversation. Because the thing is that the issue of transportation does not exist in isolation.” — Family biker

“[Community meetings] it's a waste of my time. And then I have to find childcare for my kids. But if they have a big open events that parents can attend, that kids can attend...like maybe some sort of an event that like, you know, has play time and stuff for kids some parents don't have babysitters can participate.”— FMA listening session

#### Community-organized fun rides:

“I like that they shut down a section of Memorial Drive. If we can do that somewhere closer to, like, Kendall. Something towards this end [the Port] or even by the mall.”— FMA listening session.

“It would be good to have an easier location for access to cheap bikes. Seems like there isn't a lot of places to buy used bikes.” — Central Square street intercept survey

#### Senior outreach:

On one hand, there is a sizable population of seniors in Cambridge who bike. Many of whom do so because they find biking to be easier than walking. On the other hand, many seniors have a self-perception that they cannot bike. Offering classes for seniors should help. An 80 year old man who cycle frequently cautioned that these classes need to be marketed carefully. He said that these classes should sound like a fun social activity and not as an obligation and not patronizing. Having tricycles and an elderly instructor present will also help:

“Any statement or invitation should have elements of, ‘Come have fun together with a group of other people who want to explore bicycling.’ Say this isn't about whizzing around Cambridge. This is about exploring healthy, fun, relaxed exercise. Seniors and other people in this society are so overloaded with things that are good for them, which when they try, they can't do. So they say to hell with doing things that are good for you.”

### **10. Residents' bike-specific suggestions**

- Covered bicycle parking so it is easier to park bicycles during snowy weather: “The city can really do is try to have as many covered bike parking. There are spots to park but they're not covered.”
- Bicycle-specific lights at T-junctions, especially along Mass Ave.: “It'd be really nice to have that in a few spots that are completely dead end, and we all have to stop, but there's no way that a car can run in front of you. It'd be nice if we had our own lights.”
- More closed streets: “Like how they do Memorial Drive, like do that more often, with more roads.”
- More attention to details like intersections and the location of bicycle parking: “We are adding bike lanes. But a lot of times, small things can go a long way.”

- “The city is forgetting the small things – like bike racks. There should be thoughtful approach to pick up and drop off zones, such as in front of War Memorial or in front of Cambridge library.”
- More opportunities to buy, sell and trade bicycles and gear: “Don’t make winter biking a rich person’s thing. Find creative ways to make winter biking possible. The city could coordinate community swaps or used bicycle gear events.”
- City bicycle workshops and events should be clubbed with other events: “Like Center for Families Annual literacy day.”
- More bike lanes: “Make sure every single street has a bike lane. That way I feel protected. If a car is not respecting that space, I can call them out. If there is no lane, I don’t feel empowered to call them out.”
- Better enforcement of bike lane blockage: “I thing that could immediately improve is for bike lane blocking to be enforced. Now it is a joke. It is a convenient place for an Uber to park, or anyone else. If you go on a bike from Harvard square to Boston, I could take 100 pictures of cars blocking the lane in 24 hours.”
- Opportunities for unhoused people to do bicycle maintenance: “I’m always having problems with maintenance. I need a warm space to do bike repairs. I tried repairing my bike on the MBTA platform at Harvard but they wouldn’t let me do it there. You can’t do mechanical work when hands are cold. Try using tools to screw things, nuts and things, small parts, you can’t work them”

## 11. Residents’ street and transportation comments

Three non-biking transportation themes that came up frequently were inadequate street lighting, uneven brick sidewalks and the difficulty seniors have on buses.

### Lighting:

“I’m terrified to even walk home tonight because there’s no lighting.”

“I feel like it’s getting darker at the streets of Cambridge. I don’t feel like they’re lit up well.”

“On Cherry street, between Cherry street and Washington street they need to have better light in there to, because there’s a park there and it’s so dark.”

“If you go down this way, Windsor Street is dark. One part it’s light, one part is dark, lighting it’s bad.”

### Sidewalk conditions:

“We have a lot of sidewalks that still need to be tended to. I’ve fallen a couple of times because of weirdness on the sidewalks. I also think that at night we don’t have really good



lights when you're walking down certain side streets or neighborhood streets, which can be creepy.”

“There's bricks here and there that are actually raised and some are missing. So it's not easy if you're walking down the street late at night, it's not really lit. You can easily fall and hurt yourself.”

"I broke my ankle and it's just the sidewalks, you got trees growing out.”

Buses:

“There's a lot of seniors on the bus, but they will not wait a few minutes [for us to sit down]”

“The problem I have when I take the bus is they don't give you enough time to sit down. And I think it's terrible that they take off before you're able to sit down.”