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# Snowplows, #WinterBiking and Government:

From Grassroots Campaign to Policy Change

Becca Wolfson, Boston Cyclists Union

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# 2014 was a Cold, Snowy Winter

Ice had piled up on a particular pathway used by Boston commuters to bike into the city, the Southwest Corridor.

**Concerned citizens repeatedly asked the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to clear the pathway, but resources were limited and snowpack remained.**

*The condition of the Southwest Corridor Bike Path today is absolutely unacceptable. From Boylston St. near the Stony Brook T-Station to New Washington Street, at the end of the Corridor near the Forest Hills T-Station, the path was nearly completely covered in ice. This path is the only safe route to take, and for it to be covered in ice two days after minimal snowfall is detrimental to Boston's cyclists who rely on safe travel to get to and from work every day. The path should either be plowed to the pavement or de-icing techniques should be employed.*

A DCR staffer responded:

*Thanks for your email. The Southwest Corridor Park bike path location was originally plowed down to the pavement, but there has been some melting and refreezing and current temperatures are not conducive to more melting, even if treated. While we do treat some high-priority crosswalks (such as at schools and T stations) with salt, we do not treat all the pathways and sidewalks throughout DCR (including on the Southwest Corridor) as this can have a detrimental effect on landscaping.*

*Unless you have appropriate winter bike tires that can handle normal winter weather conditions on these paths, we recommend you use alternate forms of transportations at this time of year for your own safety.*

# Citizen Complaint led to Heightened Emotional Responses

The bicyclist replied:

*Thank you for your response.*

*I find much of your response difficult to believe. I checked the bike path every day since the storms and did not see it plowed to the pavement once. There was always a layer of snow ontop of the pavement. If this were indeed a result of melting and freezing, then why is this only effecting this bike path, and not area sidewalks as well?*

*Also, you mention that salt is not used because of effects on landscaping, but there are many other deicing materials which can be used in its place. To ignore these options shows to me that bike paths are a low priority, even though the Corridor is a "level 1 priority."*

*Please have plow operators pay more attention to how much snow they are plowing. I understand that patches of ice in certain vulnerable areas are inevitable and part of "normal winter weather conditions." For an entire section of the path to have no visible pavement, however, indicates a lack of care on the part of DCR to properly prepare the path for the winter as the State and local governments do for all other modes of transportation.*

*Respectfully,*

- Distrust of public officials
- Feelings of marginalization
- Insinuating lack of knowledge and care by DCR
- “Level 1 Priority” pathway



## Energy and Environmental Affairs

dcr  
Massachusetts



### Snow Removal Priorities

All snow removal locations are prioritized according to the following categories:

- **Level 1 (during storm event):**

Primary roadways and parkways\*

State Police barracks

Traffic bridges

Potential flood zones

Designated sidewalks, pathways\*\*, and crosswalks which provide safe passage in the immediate proximity to schools while in-session.

- **Level 2 (dedication of snow removal resources within first 12 hours after storm event):**

Secondary roadways and parkways

State House passage and street parking

Sidewalks, pathways\*\* and crosswalks providing safe passages to schools, foot bridges, bus shelters, bus stops, T-stations, including median strips and handicap ramps

- **Level 3 (snow removal response may occur beyond first 12 hours after storm event):**

DCR-managed ice skating rinks parking lots (12), if open

Interior park roads and tertiary parkways

DCR facilities and building parking lots

Less traveled sidewalks, pathways, crosswalks and multi-use paths\*\*:

These less traveled sidewalks, cross walks and multi-use paths may be cleared as specific public safety needs warrant.

As resources allow, DCR will attempt to address Level 3 priorities by focusing on sidewalks without immediate abutters.

DCR anticipates the continued cooperation from abutters in clearing the remainder of Level 3 priority sidewalks consistent with municipal ordinances within the metropolitan Boston area.



## DCR Facilities

- Priority 1
- Priority 2
- Priority 3

## DCR Pedestrian Bridges and Ramps

- Priority 1
- Priority 2
- Priority 3

## DCR Crosswalks

- Priority 1
- Priority 2
- Priority 3
- Not cleared

## DCR Sidewalks

- - - Priority 1
- - - Priority 2
- - -



# DCR Response was Reactionary and Defensive

At that point, the staffer forwarded the exchange to higher ups and asked how to respond. One replied:

- Limitations of resources and nature of melt
- The frame of reference chosen is pedestrians - Bicycling is not prioritized

*I thought your response was a appropriate. I have a couple points to add.*

*A narrow linear path bordered by turf and vegetation (which is covered by snow) doesn't thaw as quickly as a sidewalk abutting a roadway. Even if we did repeatedly apply salt or chemically treat pedestrian routes, thaw and refreezing would continue to be a problem during periods of extended sub freezing weather conditions. This is why our current standard does not call for pedestrian routes to be completely free of snow pack and ice. We do not have the resources to meet that standard.*

*This past Saturday I walked section 3 of the Corridor from Forest Hills to the Stony Brook MBTA station and while some of the paths were covered in snow pack they were all safely passable for pedestrians - even pedestrians pushing child strollers. A tremendous effort goes into clearing the SWC pathways and our staff should be complimented for their efforts.*

Then another even higher higher up forwarded this to staffers:

Hi All,

We should all be stating as a policy that DCR has no responsibility or intent of providing "safe" winter biking opportunities on any of our linear paths or sidewalks. This is impossible! Any path or walk where we do snow removal is strictly to provide reasonable continued passage for pedestrians. If anyone wants to bike our paths in winter they should assume variable and dangerous conditions, and know they are doing it at there own risk.

Frankly, I am tired of our dedicated team wasting valuable time addressing the less than .05% of all cyclists who choose to bike after a snow/ice event. Sometimes during winter in Boston you can safely bike, and I do it when it is dry and safe. This is not one of those winters! We should not spend time debating cyclists with poor judgement and unrealistic expectations, and stick with [the staffer]'s recommendation that they find other transportation. If someone is completely depending on a bike for year-round transportation, they are living in the wrong city.

Feel free to forward this to those complaining.

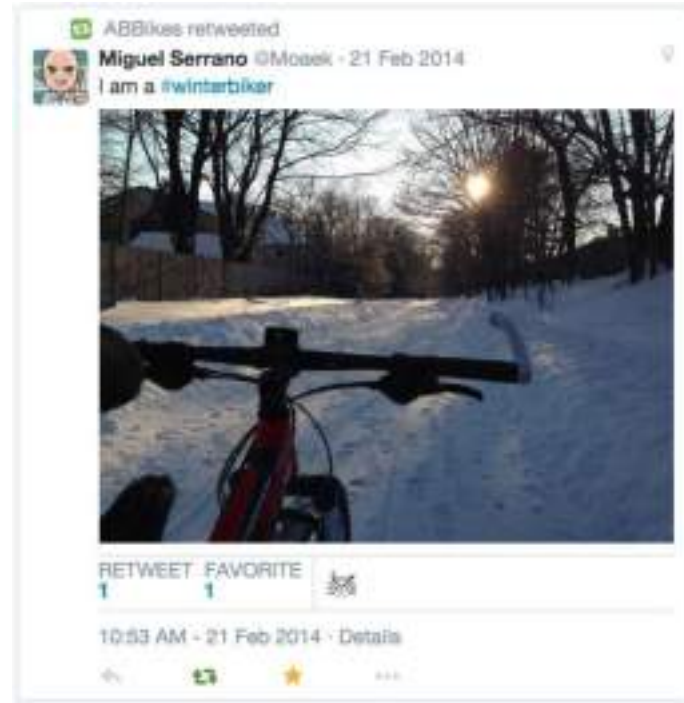
# Leaked Email Derides and Insults Cyclists

- Denial of responsibility due to lack of resources
- Bicycling is an optional mode of transportation
- Cyclists are the .05%

Universal  
hub

# Reaction from Advocacy Groups was Swift and Unrelenting: #WinterBiker

Coordinated a multi-week campaign involving Twitter





 **ABikes** @ABikes · 17 Feb 2014

"I'm Aletta heading to class. Biking year round is normal where I'm from"  
@MassDCR @DevalPatrick  
#pointtofivepercent



RETWEETS 11 FAVORITES 3

10:25 AM - 17 Feb 2014 - Details

 **ABikes** @ABikes · 17 Feb 2014

\*Name's James, I bike to work.  
@GenzymeCorp since I only live 2 miles away.\*  
@MassDCR @DevalPatrick  
#pointtofivepercent



RETWEETS 1 FAVORITES 1

11:38 AM - 17 Feb 2014 - Details

 **ABikes** @ABikes · 17 Feb 2014

"Me llamo Micky, uso mi bici para ir a almuerzo."  
@MassDCR @DevalPatrick  
#pointtofivepercent #fixDCR

[View translation](#)



RETWEETS 6 FAVORITES 5

1:29 PM - 17 Feb 2014 - Details

Photo campaign to take focus away from marginalization, normalize bicycling in the winter



Directed at “@MassDCR”, “@DevalPatrick”, personal networks of the riders themselves

 **ABBIkes** @ABBIkes · 23 Feb 2014  
Amy just moved here from Atlanta and still's a #winterbiker "Cause it's dependable!"  
@MassDCR @DevalPatrick #bikebos



RETWEETS 3 FAVORITES 1

10:45 AM · 23 Feb 2014 · Details

 **ABBIkes** @ABBIkes · 19 Feb 2014  
Michaela's a #winterbiker on her way to SMFA, which could have safe paths directly there!  
@MassDCR @DevalPatrick



RETWEETS 2 FAVORITES 0

11:20 AM · 19 Feb 2014 · Details

 **ABBIkes** @ABBIkes · 26 Feb 2014  
in 20 degrees, PhD candidate Caitlin finds being #winterbiker still practical @MassDCR  
@bostonbikeunion @bikeboston



RETWEETS 1 FAVORITES 2

1:41 PM · 26 Feb 2014 · Details



ABBikes @ABBikes · 20 Feb 2014

Chase is a #winterbiker on his way to Beth Israel, near many @MassDCR pathways @DevalPatrick #bosbike @bikeboston



1



ABBikes retweeted



North Shore TMA @NorthShoreTMA · 19 Feb 2014

Agreed @noteon! Definition: #winterbiker: Only person in the entire office who had serious fun during their commute.

1



ABBikes @ABBikes · 24 Feb 2014

#winterbiker Shruthi still shuttles her daughter to daycare @PorterSq @MassDCR @bikeboston #bikebos @bostonbikeunion



FAVORITE

1



5:10 PM - 24 Feb 2014 · Details

1

Campaign transformed over time in a coordinated effort, involving advocacy groups from around the region

ASBikes retweeted



**GO Bike Buffalo** @GOBuffalo · 21 Feb 2014

A #winterbiker in Buffalo.



RETWEETS

2

FAVORITES

6



2:47 PM - 21 Feb 2014 - Details



**ASBikes** @ASBikes · 19 Feb 2014

Crappiest weather ever and you still might not get a bike parking spot in Allston! #winterbiker #biketoe #bikeboson



FAVORITE

1

7:20 PM - 19 Feb 2014 - Details

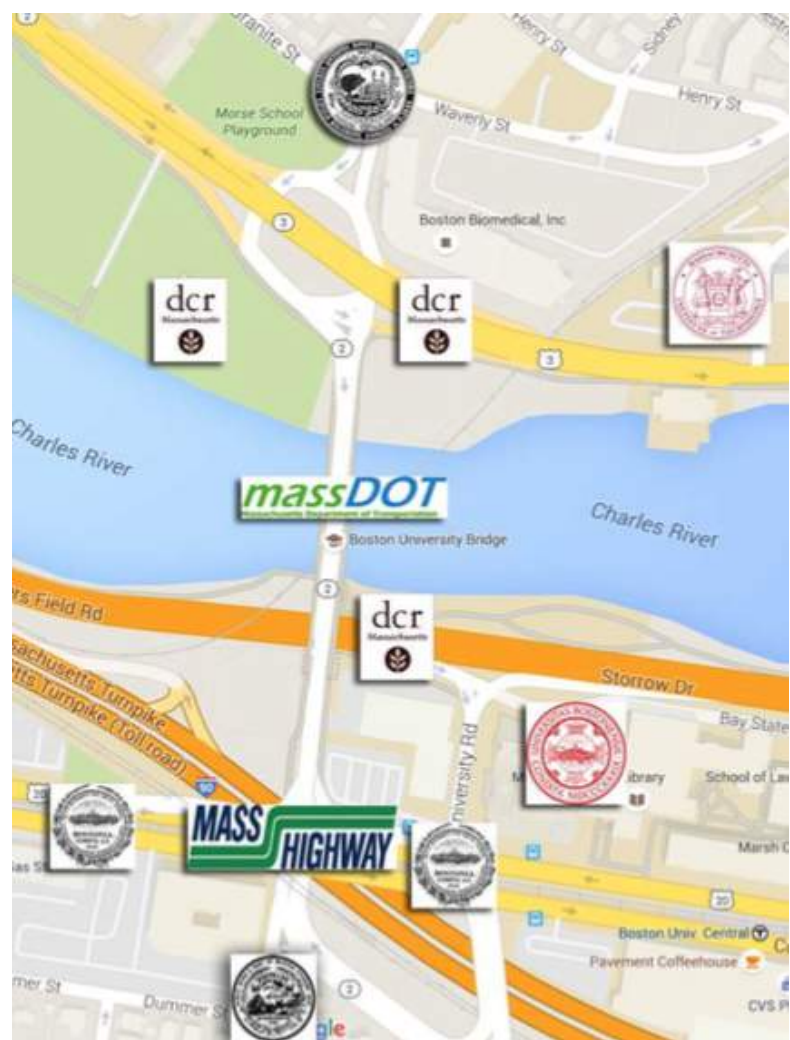
# Victory!

- Brokered meetings and discussions with connections in the State House and DCR
- Identified issues: Funds, technology, scope of work
- Led to formation of the Urban Parks & Pathways Committee
- Secured funding for a bobcat!



# Problem:

This was only one municipality in a multi-jurisdictional region

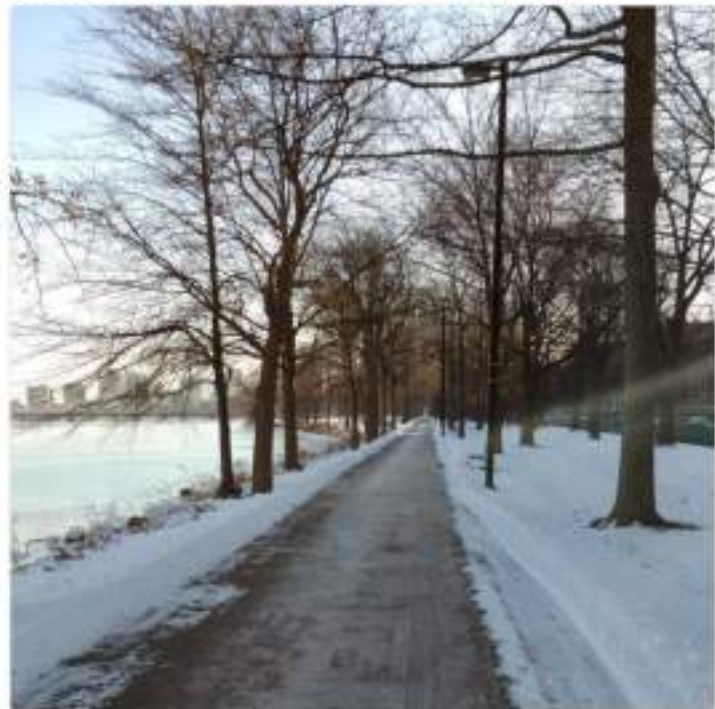


Erica Mattison and 8 others liked



**ABBikes** @ABBikes · Jan 10

Esplanade east of BU Bridge is clear and dry! Thanks @MassDCR @newbalance cc @StreetsBoston @bostonbikeunion @MassBike @WalkBoston



27 3 11

Jurvis and 3 others liked



**Charlie Denison** @cdon4 · Jan 9

@rightlegpegged @BostonBTD @BostonPWD @bostonbikeunion @StreetsBoston @BOS311 @bikeboston Somerville cleared theirs right away!



23 1 3





**Boston Public Works**

@BostonPWD

Following

PWD is testing a brine solution on the dedicated cycle track on Staniford St before tonight's snow  
#visionzerobos #bostonstreets



RETWEETS 13  
LIKES 44



7:08 PM - 11 Dec 2016

Retweet icon, Retweet count: 13, Like icon, Like count: 44



Reply to @BostonPWD



**BostonCyclistsUnion**

@bostonbikeunion

Following

Thank you @BostonPWD! <3



**Boston Public Works** @BostonPWD

PWD is testing a brine solution on the dedicated cycle track on Staniford St before tonight's snow #visionzerobos #bostonstreets

RETWEET

1

LIKES

5



10:44 AM - 12 Dec 2016

Retweet icon, Retweet count: 1, Like icon, Like count: 5



Reply to @bostonbikeunion @BostonPWD

# Takeaways

**Advocates:** Know your snow removal policies and know your ASK

**Municipalities:** HAVE snow removal policies and follow them

**All:** Recognize the power of coordinated social media campaigns



# Thanks!



beekaw

35 likes

52w

beekaw Just wearing a little snow and slush for style. #winterbiker  
@mcbikechallenge @bostoncyclistsunion



Add a comment...

...

[bwolfson@bostoncyclistsunion.org](mailto:bwolfson@bostoncyclistsunion.org)  
[@bostonbikeunion](https://twitter.com/bostonbikeunion) [@beekaw](https://twitter.com/beekaw)

