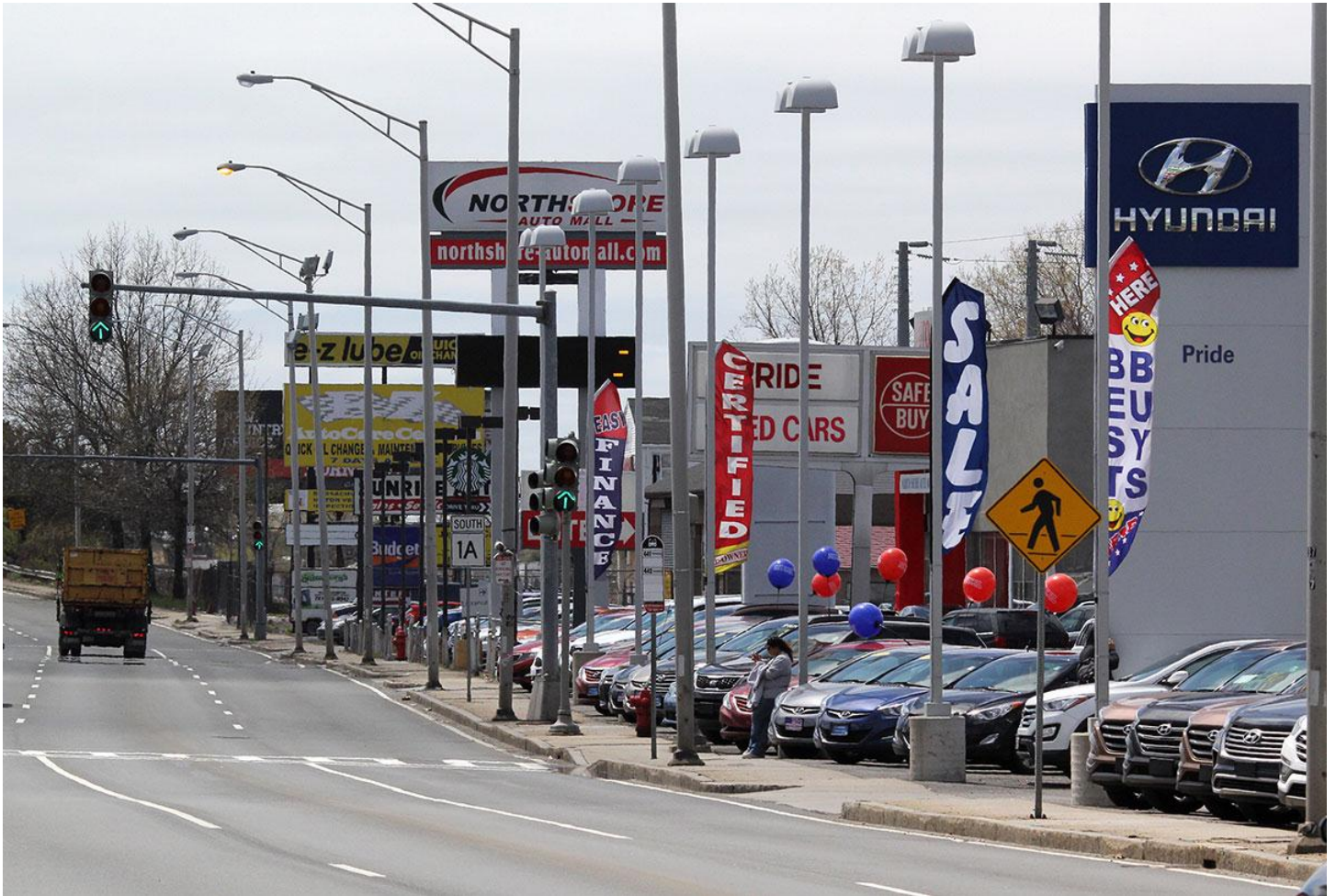


Is the Lynnway the ugliest street in America?



ITEM PHOTO BY OWEN O'ROURKE

One sign that may impact the perception of the Lynnway is the Starbucks sign. Good luck finding it in the photo above.

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BY THOMAS GRILLO/The Daily Item

For as long as anyone can remember, the Lynnway has been packed with car dealerships, fast-food restaurants, discount shops, billboards and hundreds of garish signs.

"When you drive up the Lynnway, you see every mistake that has been made over the last 75 years," said James M. Cowdell, executive director of the Development & Industrial Corp. (EDIC/Lynn).

"Why is it ugly? It happened. A place opened and an ugly sign went up. Another place opened, another ugly sign went up. Now it's a splattering of ugly signs that blend ... and the one sign that should stand out, Starbucks, gets blended in with the ugliness. What message does that send as we are trying to change our image?"

As developers propose to transform portions of the Lynnway into a neighborhood for waterfront apartments and amenities that rival Boston's Seaport District, some say it's the right time for Lynn.

“It will change, someone will go first,” said Charles Morneau, who along with Joseph O’Donnell, founder of Boston Culinary Group and Belmont Capital in Cambridge, could be among the first when they break ground on a 17-acre site on the water side of the Lynnway adjacent to the General Edwards Bridge. They expect to start construction next spring on a \$69 million luxury-apartment project that would include 250 units in a wood-frame, three-story building.

“The timing is right because the key political people have lined up behind it and are pushing to get things done,” Morneau said. He is referring to the Lynn Economic Advancement and Development (LEAD) Team, a panel that includes U.S. Rep. Seth Moulton, Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Jay Ash, Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack, Environmental Secretary Matthew Beaton, Cowdell and others who can cut through the bureaucracy and make things happen.

“That whole corridor in Lynn can really turn around and be an attraction,” Morneau said. “It’s in the right location, just miles from Boston and there’s ocean, nothing better.”

Change is coming to the Lynnway. A pair of residential developments will bookend the Lynnway. Earlier this month, Louis Minicucci Jr. and Arthur Pappathanasi closed a \$2.5 million purchase of the former Beacon Chevrolet site. When completed, the \$80 million waterfront residential project will include 355 apartments on the 14-acre site on the northern end of the stretch with rents expected to be in the \$2,000 range. At the other end of the stretch is O’Donnell’s \$69 million project on a 17-acre waterfront site that would include 250 units in a wood frame, three-story building.

City Council President and state Rep. Daniel F. Cahill said the Lynnway is slowly changing and the transformation will take time. A decade ago, \$6 million was spent to move the power lines off the ocean side as the first major step to spur development.

“We are still in the infrastructure phase,” he said. “The only reason we are talking about massive residential projects is because the path has been cleared for large scale development on the waterfront side. You won’t see much change to the Lynnway’s facade until a few developments break ground in the next few years. “On signs, Cahill said it’s an issue that ignites controversy. Some say signs should be whatever businesses want. Others insist that the only way to clean up the city’s gateway is for a strict ordinance to control the size, height, color and lettering of signs. While the City Council amended sign rules in 1993 to limit their size and height and ban flashing ones, any business can seek permission to override the regulation and nearly all have been successful in doing so. The rest have been grandfathered.

One marquee that may impact the perception of the city is Starbucks. Ironically, it’s easily missed because, while it’s so small compared to others, it’s larger than sign rules allow.

But there’s more than meets the eye when it comes to a Starbucks sign.

The arrival of a Starbucks has benefits beyond easy access to an espresso macchiato, decaf cappuccino or cafe latte. Between 1997 and 2014, homes within a quarter mile of a Starbucks [increased in value by 96 percent](#), on average, compared with 65 percent for all U.S. homes, based on a comparison by [Zillow](#), the Seattle-based online real estate company.

When Starbucks arrived in Chelsea when Ash was city manager, he called it the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. “Starbucks came to us for a special permit to erect the sign because there are restrictions in that section of the Lynnway,” Cahill said. “It was a symbolic event because for years Starbucks said they were not interested in locating in Lynn and they finally came so we approved it.” Peter Capano, the Ward 6 city councilor whose district includes the Lynnway, said everyone agrees the highway’s aesthetics need to be improved.

“We are looking at a proposal for changes on the Lynnway,” he said.

A study is being done by the state’s Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the Department of Transportation that will offer ideas to improve it, he said. Public hearings will be held and a report is expected to be issued later this year.

Patrick McGrath, who owns the Lynnway Mart Indoor Mall & Flea Market that attracts thousands of buyers and sellers, has been seeking a developer to build on his 8.5-acre prime waterfront parcel.

“I don’t know what to say, the Lynnway is what it is,” he said. “I hope to have my site developed and it starts there. Hopefully, Joe O’Donnell’s site next door gets developed. Unfortunately, we’ll always have the Creamery, the car wash and car lots. They’re not going anywhere, at least in my lifetime. I would like to see it all developed.”

One reason why the Lynnway looks the way it does is that officials have been reluctant to implement firm regulations because it is a major source of real estate taxes for the city. Peter Caron, the city’s assessing director, reports that 183 Lynnway businesses that employ hundreds of Lynn residents contribute \$6,017,000 to the city’s coffers annually.

Not every Lynnway business is a blight. Consider the handsome Solomon Metals Corp. property. Once the home of Harrison Dispatch, a former trucking terminal for General Electric Co., Steven Solomon has maintained the grass, shrubs, trees and added chains from the U.S.S. Wasp and later purchased a pair of bells to add to the front display.

“Even though we are in the scrap metal business, we take seriously the idea that we should put a positive face out front and be good neighbors,” said Solomon, whose family has owned the building since 1974.

The other good looking commercial site is the Clock Tower Business Center. The 305,000-square-foot office building is surrounded by a wrought iron fence, and its grounds are covered with green and trees.

One community, Framingham, has tackled the issue of landscaping and signs with success.

Susan Bernstein, a former Framingham Planning Board member, was part of the effort in the 1990s to remake Route 9. Her goal, along with fellow members, was to turn the road filled with unattractive signs and too little green space into a tree-lined boulevard. Twenty years later there’s been enormous improvements made, say planners.

The panel started with landscaping and implemented strict regulations on the number of trees and shrubs that must be planted on commercial lots. "There was a great sensitivity towards changing the ambiance of Route 9," she said. "When businesses came before us, we required lots of trees, and over time, as you can see, they mature and you start to get an improvement. "Framingham required one tree for every three parking spaces, or one every 27 feet. The rules called for trees with a two- to three-inch trunk. "We were specific about the type of trees, and it's tedious work," she said. "But developers prefer to spend as little as possible. "As a result, hundreds of trees have been planted in the last two decades along the road, in parking lots and in front of buildings. Later, the panel devised a bylaw to reduce the size of signs. At one time, there were few limits and signs rose to 35 feet. Today, the limit in most parts of the road is 20 feet. "If you look at communities that have good signs, that says more about them than almost anything as you enter," she said. "When you drive through communities with 40-foot signs you see that it demonstrates an image of a schlocky town." Bernstein, a real estate agent, said a community's image greatly influences property values. But how to get it done is another matter, she said. "There has to be the political will on the various boards to do it," she said. "It's not easy." Thomas Grillo can be reached at tgrillo@itemlive.com.