The seminar will examine two historical cases of the reasons that people perceive traffic congestion to be a problem. It will compare perceptions of congestion in downtown Boston during debates over plans to build a subway in the 1890s and a "loop highway" or boulevard in the 1920s. The presentation will outline the research methodology and describe each case study setting. Then, it will turn to public perceptions in each case. People's perceptions of the congestion problem ranged widely, but most people's explanations fell into a few major categories. Two of the perceptions that appeared most frequently in both case studies were that congestion caused traffic accidents and harmed the city's economy. In the 1890s, when streetcars still ran on the surface streets in the downtown, people perceived congestion as a problem because it slowed passenger travel and slowed development of the suburbs. Two new arguments made in the 1920s were that congestion raised the cost of living for all residents and imposed a quantifiable monetary cost on the city. The seminar will conclude with an analysis of both changes and continuities across the two time periods and reflections about how studying past perceptions of congestion can inform contemporary transportation planning.

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