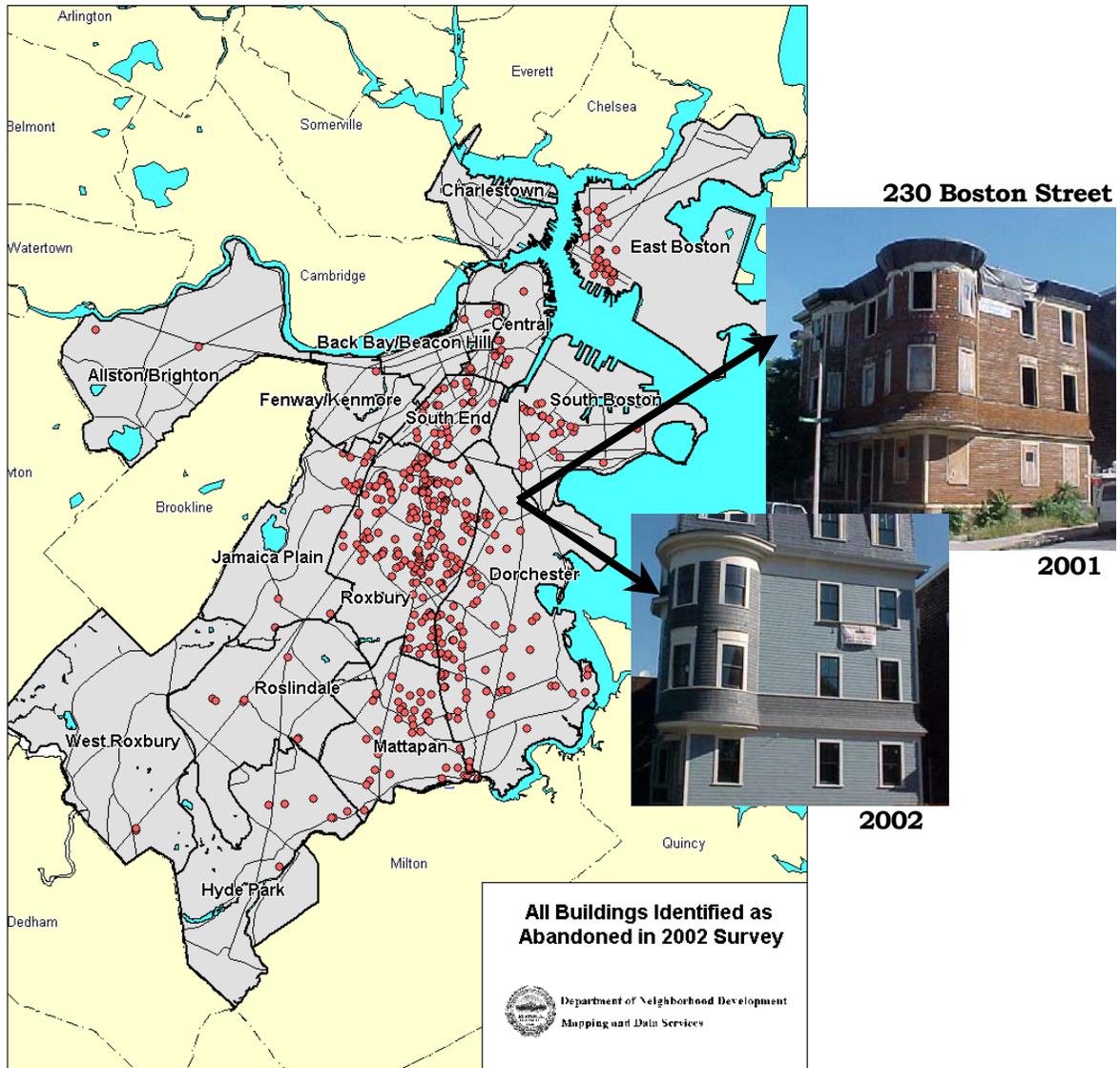




City of Boston Department of Neighborhood Development

2002 Abandoned Building Survey



2002 Abandoned Building Survey Results

Introduction

An abandoned building represents the loss of a commercial or residential resource. Buildings that once served a community's need for housing or jobs have lost their immediate usefulness. In addition, abandoned buildings represent blight on a neighborhood, a threat to health and safety, and a loss of potential property tax revenue. If the needs of abandoned buildings are not addressed immediately, time takes a further toll on the structures, making returning the property to use an increasingly expensive and difficult venture.

With this in mind, the Department of Neighborhood Development has conducted annual surveys of abandoned buildings since 1997 to assess the extent of this problem and to work with neighborhoods on the reclamation of abandoned buildings. With each survey, lessons are learned about both the survey and its results. The 2002 report discusses these lessons and examines some of the causes of abandonment.

Scope and Methodology

The 2002 Abandoned Building Survey is the most comprehensive survey to date. Based on the experiences and information gathered in previous years, the survey methodology has evolved over time.

1. **Creating a master list:** By accessing information from a variety of City agencies, a list of potentially abandoned buildings was created for the first building survey. The following City of Boston agencies assisted this effort by providing lists of possibly abandoned buildings:
 - Assessing and Tax Title
 - Fire Department
 - Inspectional Services
 - Water and Sewer Commission
 - DND program staff reports of abandoned buildings.

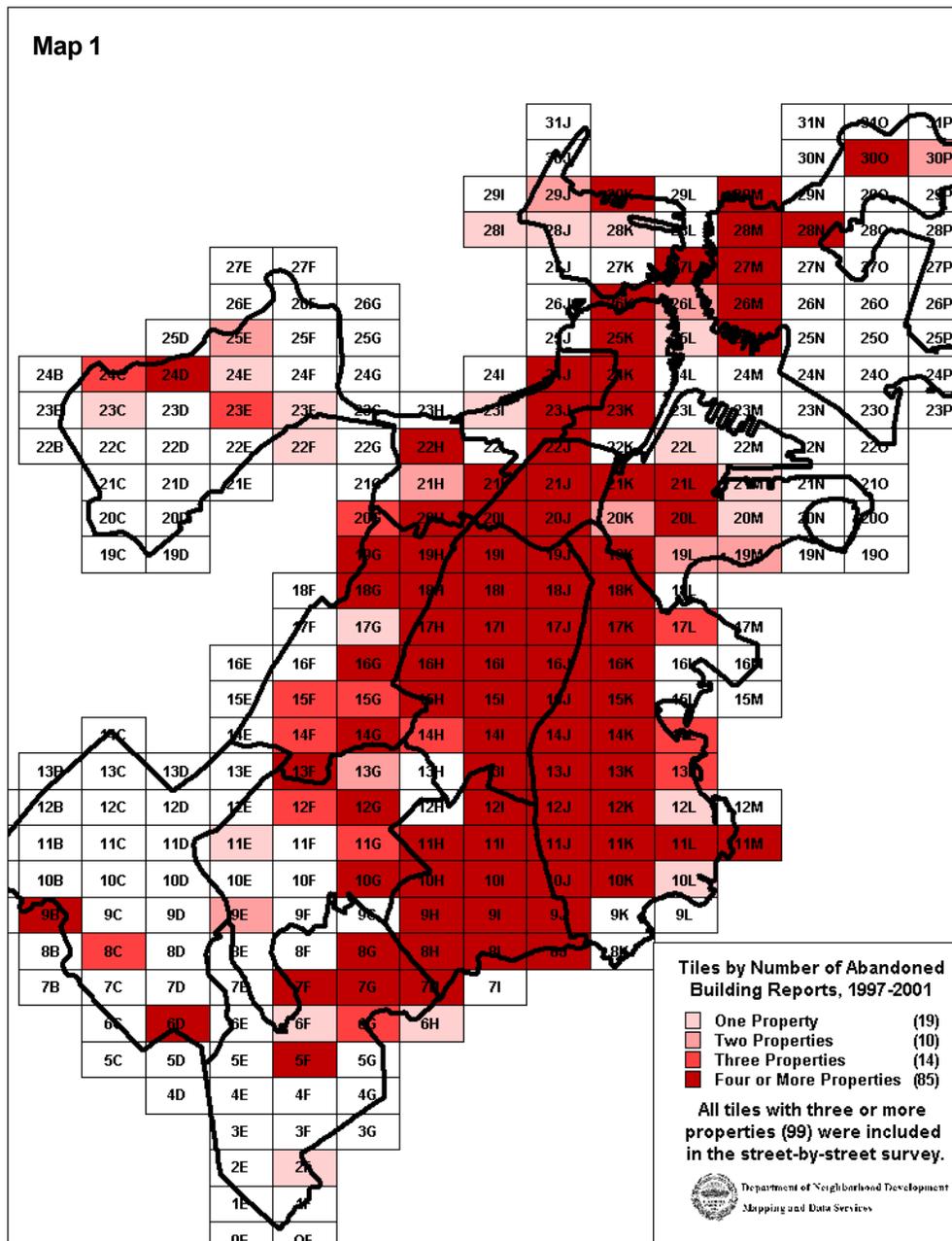
The 2002 survey combined lists of previously identified abandoned buildings with buildings that had been boarded through the Project Pride program¹.

2. **Establishing target areas:** In the first year of the survey (1997), all streets were surveyed in wards that contained more than 75 potentially abandoned buildings. In following years, the survey area was adjusted to focus on previously known concentrations of abandoned housing, coupled with areas that have concentrations of potentially abandoned buildings. While this method succeeded in identifying newly abandoned buildings in areas with a high concentration of existing abandoned buildings, there were many other areas where a street-by-street survey was not completed. In all surveys the city was divided into a grid and map "tiles" were created which were used as an aid in determining priority study areas and for coordinating survey teams

In 2002, data from previous years' tiles was compared with current tile data. All tiles that had at least three instances of an abandoned property during the 1997 to 2001 period became part of the 2002 street-by-street survey. 99% of buildings identified as abandoned during the 1997 to 2001 period were found within this survey area. In some cases, there were no currently identified abandoned

¹Project Pride combats illegal activity on City-owned and privately owned abandoned properties by boarding and securing drug-related buildings. Project Pride also cleans and fences vacant lots in areas including designated drug control areas.

buildings in a tile (though there were such buildings in previous reports). This substantially increased the area covered by the street-by-street survey, while excluding areas where there was little chance of finding an abandoned building.



For the purposes of this report, abandoned property is defined as:

Any residential, commercial, industrial or mixed-use building - excluding sheds and garages on residential properties - which is not occupied and which shows visible signs of physical distress (i.e. boarded up, burned, open to the elements, or otherwise deteriorated).

The rationale for this specific definition of abandonment is that it best reflects the most problematic form of abandonment in Boston, i.e., that which has the most detrimental impact on the quality of life in Boston's neighborhoods.

Data Gathered

Staff and volunteers fanned out across Boston with maps, survey forms and digital cameras to complete the survey during August, September and October of 2002. Fieldwork provided the following information about buildings:

- **Abandonment type** (abandoned, boarded, burned, or no longer abandoned);
- **Specific signs of physical distress** (roof, walls, windows, porches, etc.);
- **Photos.**

The 2002 survey also gathered information about the following:

- **Vacant lots that need to be cleaned** (regardless of ownership);
- **Partially abandoned buildings.** These buildings are partially boarded, but some portion of the building is still in use. The survey identified 48 buildings that met this criterion, with only 15 being residential. Just as with fully abandoned buildings, these properties are an eyesore and are at risk for abandonment.

Causes of Abandonment

Buildings are abandoned for a number of reasons, some of which are specific to a family or business problem or crisis. Some are linked to wider changes, either within a community or an economic sector. In bringing a property back to use, the reason for the initial abandonment plays an important role in which strategy should be used to renovate the property. While this is an obvious issue with abandonment resulting from fires, the strategies are less straightforward in dealing with abandonment caused by general economic changes.



Cause: Fire

7 Lamson Court, East Boston

32 Buildings (7.5% of the total) were identified as “burned”. In a number of cases, fires lead to the abandonment of not just one, but two or three buildings.

Cause: Foreclosure

62 Clifford Street, Roxbury

19 buildings in the survey had mortgage foreclosures associated with them, but only 11 (2.6% of the total) could be clearly connected to the time of the abandonment. For this reason, it does not appear that foreclosures are a significant factor in abandonment at this time.



Cause: Changes In A Particular Economic Sector

“Shocks” to a particular economic sector, such as new storage tank requirements for gas stations or changes in funding programs for nursing homes has lead to abandonment. While both of these cases did not lead to a surge in abandoned properties, they do represent situations that require unique responses.



1607 Dorchester Avenue, Dorchester



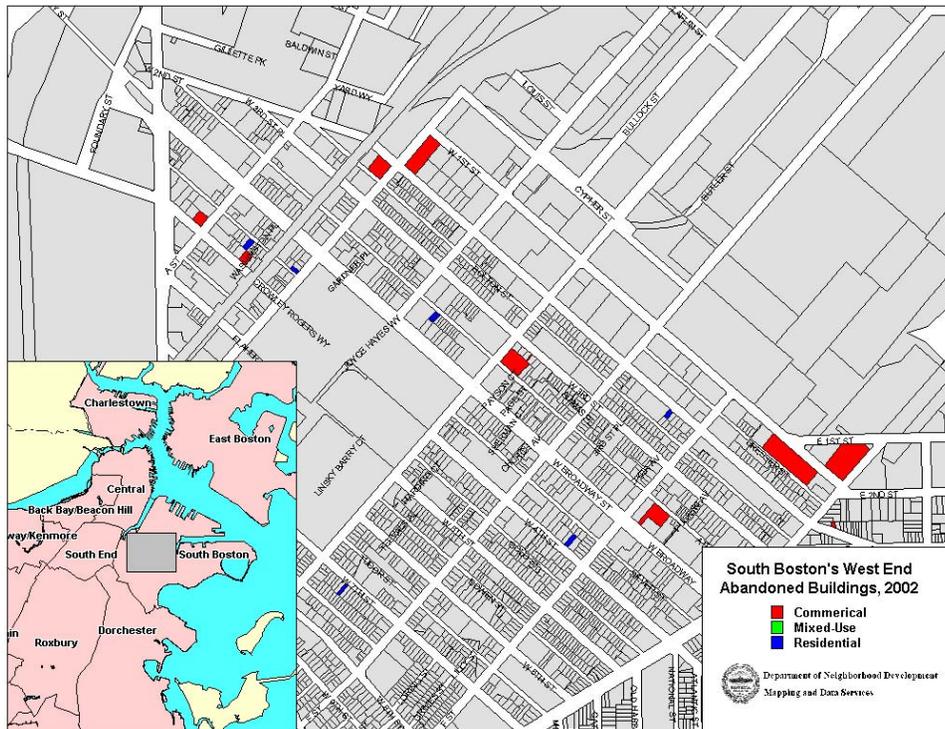
533 Cambridge Street, Allston

Cause: Neighborhoods in Transition

South Boston's West End

The existence of marginal property types (such as warehouses) combined with real or anticipated changes in a neighborhood can lead to “transitional abandonment”. With both this case and with abandonment created by obsolete building uses, rapid identification of these buildings and plans for re-use of the properties can limit the effect of the abandonment on the surrounding neighborhood.

Map 2



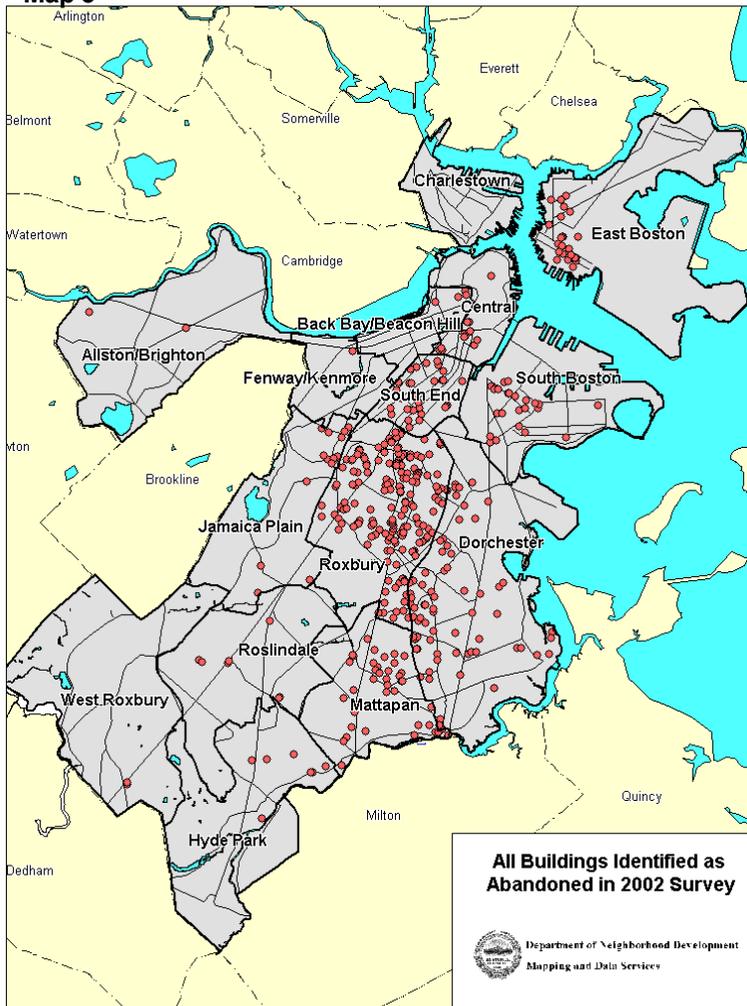


Cause:
General Changes in the Economy
154 Terrace Street, Mission Hill

A movement away from smaller, older or less efficient storage facilities has led to the abandonment of a number of buildings.

Survey Results: Overall

Map 3



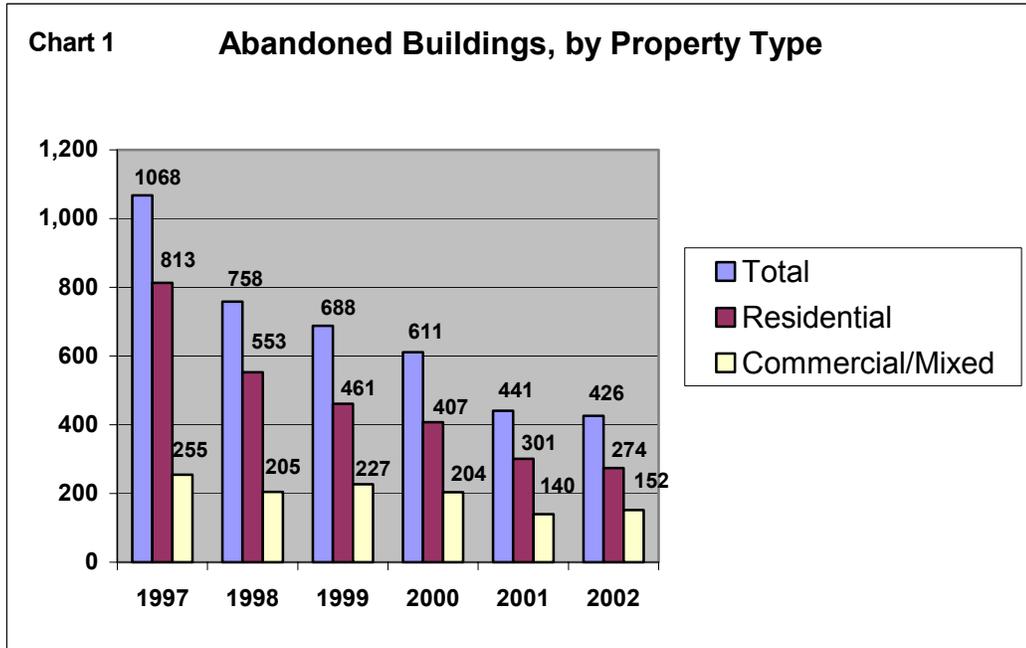
All Identified Abandoned Buildings, 2002

Residential:	274
Mixed-Use:	27
Commercial:	125
Total:	426

The geographical spread of these properties is similar to past years, with the largest portion of abandoned buildings located along the Blue Hill and Warren Avenue corridors in Mattapan, Dorchester and Roxbury.

A break down by neighborhood is outlined in the residential and commercial sections of this report.

The number of abandoned buildings has decreased 60% since 1997 and 30% since 2000. With a 66% drop in abandonment, residential buildings have outperformed the commercial/mixed-use sector, which experienced a 40% drop in abandoned buildings since 2000.



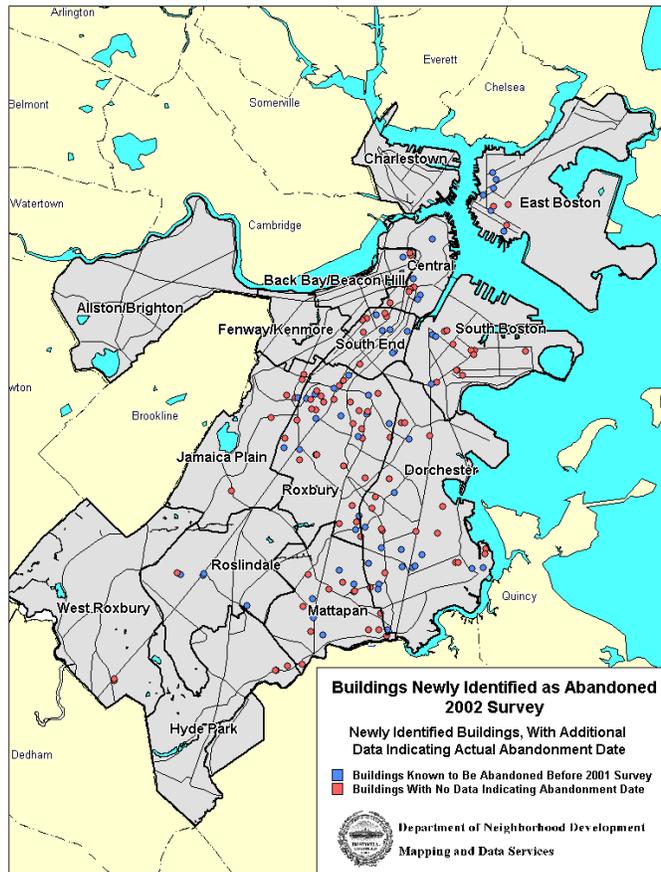
Newly Identified Abandoned Buildings, 2002

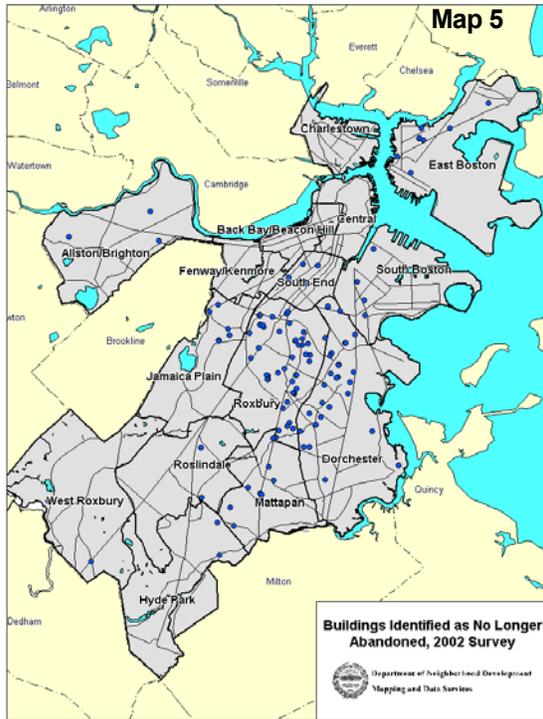
Residential:	87
Mixed-Use:	16
Commercial:	57
Total:	160

Using Project Pride and Inspectional Services' boarding information, Water and Sewer's shut-off data, in conjunction with previous survey data, 63 of the 160 buildings that were newly identified were determined to have been abandoned *before* the last survey.

A number of abandoned buildings were discovered because of the larger street-by-street survey area, but there were a number of newly abandoned buildings, especially in the commercial/warehouse sector that have been abandoned in the last year.

Map 4





No Longer Abandoned Buildings, 2002	
Residential:	77
Mixed-Use:	7
Commercial:	29
Total:	114

41% of buildings found to be no longer abandoned are located in Roxbury.

Survey Results: Residential

Looking more closely at residential abandoned buildings draws a more detailed picture of not only how many residential buildings are abandoned, but also how many housing units are abandoned. Additionally, these results allow us to reasonably extrapolate which types of housing are more likely to be abandoned, and where we might find further concentrations of abandoned buildings.

Summary Statistics

The number of residential abandoned buildings fell 9% from 2001, from 301 to 274 buildings.

While not a significant decrease, this shows steady progress in moving toward the goal set by Mayor Thomas Menino in his 2000 housing preservation and production strategy, *Leading the Way*. The goal of this strategy is to reduce the number of abandoned residential buildings by 50%; 2001 numbers show a total reduction of 33% thus far. Although to meet the goal, an additional 133 buildings will need to be returned to use, currently 65 buildings are already undergoing rehab and 22 Boston Housing Authority properties are scheduled to begin work, putting Mayor Menino's goal soon within reach.

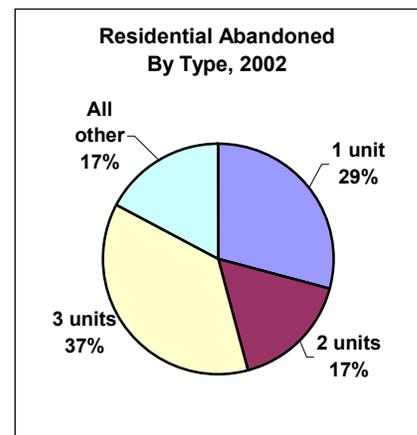
Residential Abandonment by Property Type and Number of Housing Units

Chart 2

Three-family homes make up the largest share of abandoned residential buildings. This suggests that three-family homes are a residential type where city efforts should be concentrated, especially since they can provide more units of housing, compared to single- or two-family homes.

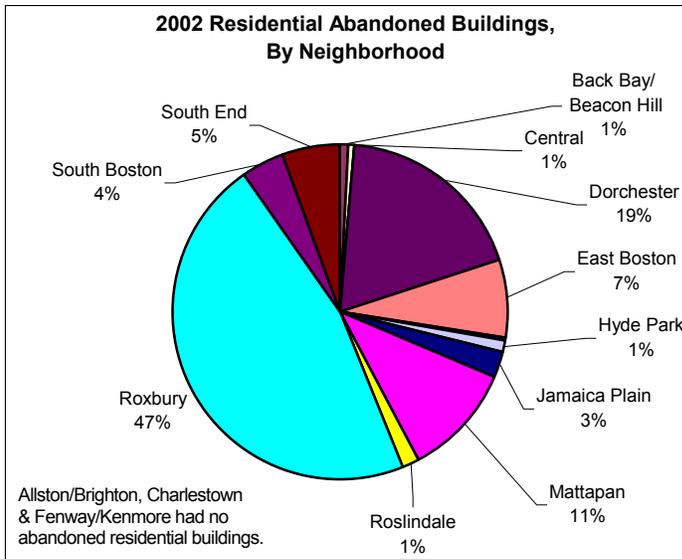
In total, the 301 currently abandoned residential and mixed-use buildings contain 884 units of housing. Of these, 65 buildings (containing 195 housing units) were identified in the field as currently undergoing some level of renovation or repair.

75 residential and mixed-use buildings, which were identified in 2002 as "no longer abandoned", contain approximately 203 units of housing.



Residential Abandonment by Neighborhood

Chart 3



As seen in the chart 3, Roxbury has by far the largest number of abandoned buildings. The table below outlines detailed information about each of Boston's neighborhoods. The following results are significant:

- Most central Boston neighborhoods have experienced little or no abandonment.
- In neighborhoods that had a moderate rate of abandonment in 1997 (including Hyde Park, Mattapan, the South End, Jamaica Plain and East Boston), there has been a significant decrease in abandonment.

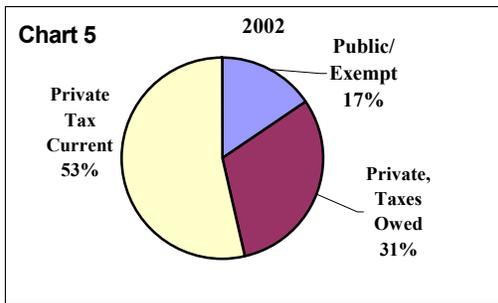
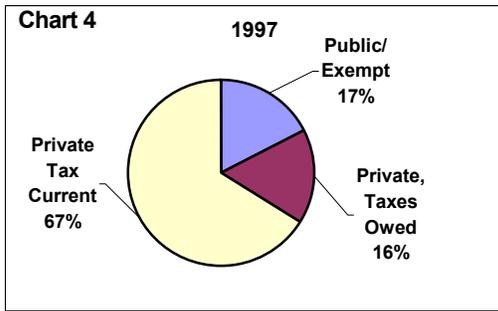
Abandonment in Roxbury has been reduced significantly in terms of the number of residential buildings (from 288 to 127), but this is a smaller decrease (56%), than the city-wide decrease of 66%.

Table 1

Abandoned Residential Buildings, by Neighborhood					
Neighborhood	1997	2001	2002	% Change 2001 – 2002	% Change 1997 - 2002
Allston/Brighton	3	2	0	-100%	-100%
Back Bay/Beacon Hill	3	2	2	0%	-33%
Central	12	2	2	0%	-83%
Charlestown	1	0	0	0%	-100%
Dorchester	176	66	51	-23%	-71%
East Boston	50	20	20	0%	-60%
Fenway/Kenmore	0	1	1	0%	N/A
Hyde Park	45	4	3	-25%	-93%
Jamaica Plain	37	10	7	-30%	-81%
Mattapan	101	24	30	25%	-70%
Roslindale	11	5	4	-20%	-64%
Roxbury	288	140	127	-9%	-56%
South Boston	7	10	12	20%	71%
South End	45	14	15	7%	-67%
West Roxbury	3	1	0	-100%	-100%
Unknown ²	31	0	0	N/A	N/A
Total	813	301	274	-9%	-66%

² The unknown category includes properties that were unable to be "geocoded" within a neighborhood boundary. For 2001 and 2002, all properties were successfully geocoded.

Residential Abandonment by Ownership Type and Tax Status



An examination of abandoned residential buildings based on their ownership type (public or private) and their tax status gives us further information that can shape DND programs.

While privately held tax-current property has comprised the largest category of residential abandonment since 1997, the adjacent charts show that this has decreased as a percentage of total abandonment from 1997 to 2002, from 67% to 53%. Tax delinquent property, however, has nearly doubled as a percentage of total abandonment, from 16% in 1997 to 31% in 2002. This does not mean that there are *more* tax delinquent properties, as the total number of abandoned buildings has fallen from 813 to 274 (a 66% decrease). This proportion has increased because the number of tax delinquent buildings has only fallen 35%, from 130 to 85.

Addressing Abandoned Residential Buildings

Private Renovation of Abandoned Buildings:

Many properties that are no longer abandoned have been returned to use by the private market. While some buildings can be re-occupied with sweat equity and a minimum amount of rehab, other properties need a high level of renovation. **12-14 Creighton Street** in Jamaica Plain is a good example of the time it can take to renovate a property. Identified in the initial abandoned building survey of 1997 private work began on the building in 2000. The renovations continued until early 2002, when the building was finally re-occupied.

12-14 Creighton Street, Jamaica Plain



Buildings Renovated through Public/Private Cooperation:

Other properties are renovated through the efforts of non-profits, lenders, and government agencies. For example, 136 Pleasant Street in Dorchester is a six-unit building that was damaged by fire in 1998. The Pine Street Inn purchased the property in 1999. With funding from the City of Boston's Department of Neighborhood Development, the Putnam Senior Executives Foundation, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston and Wainwright Bank and

Trust Company, construction began in July 2001 and was completed in early 2002. The property will remain permanently affordable as housing for formerly homeless families.

136 Pleasant Street, Dorchester

2000



2002



Department of Neighborhood Development Programs

Efforts to eliminate abandoned housing have been successful, but as this report shows, there are areas in which the City of Boston can focus its efforts:

- 1) Three-family homes present an excellent opportunity to increase the number of available housing units. There is currently a need for a purchase/rehab program that could address this property type.
- 2) Privately owned, tax-delinquent buildings have failed to respond to the private market or City efforts. Further analysis should be done with tax title data to determine if more aggressive tax foreclosures and/or receiverships may help to reduce the stock of such buildings.
- 3) Roxbury continues to have the highest concentration of abandoned buildings. DND has been working diligently with the citizens of Roxbury to plan the future of the neighborhood, not just in terms of abandoned housing, but also as it regards vacant lots, neighborhood business districts, schools, and other facilities.

A range of existing City of Boston programs assist in bringing abandoned buildings back to use.

- The **1-4 Family Program**, administered by LISC and the Boston Community Loan Fund, provides funding to a network of community development corporations (CDCs) to acquire and rehabilitate privately owned abandoned buildings. The CDCs rehabilitate the building and sell the finished house to a first-time homebuyer at an affordable price.
- Homeowners who wish to re-occupy an abandoned home can access DND programs including **Boston HomeWorks**, **Boston's Historic HomeWorks**, and **Senior Home Rehabilitation** to assist with funding the repairs that can make the house livable again.
- The **Hidden Assets Program** provides grants for the renovation of smaller apartment buildings (five or more units) for long-term affordable housing.
- DND staff reaches out to abandoned building owners to determine what assistance, if any, the Department can offer. If outreach is unsuccessful, action can be taken through the **Receivership Program**. Boston's Inspectional Services Department can force otherwise reluctant owners to renovate their buildings.

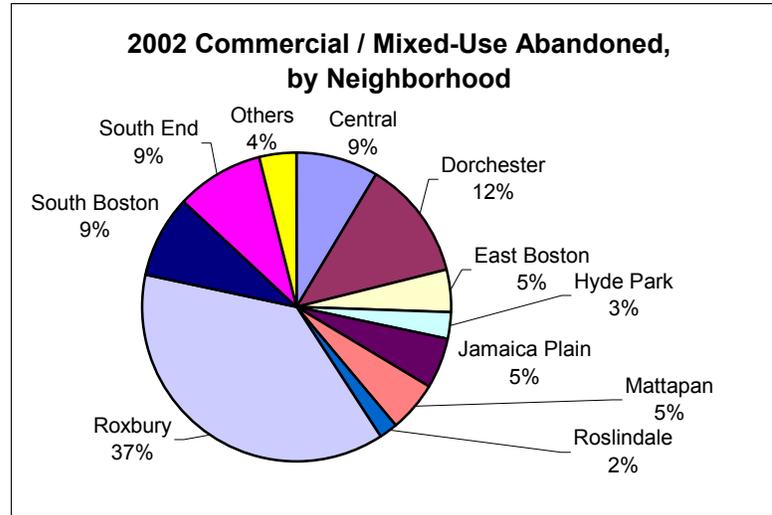
Survey Results: Commercial

From 2001 to 2002, there was a 7% increase in the number of commercial and mixed-use abandoned buildings in the survey. Even with this increase, the number of abandoned commercial and mixed-use

buildings has fallen 40% since 1997. There are many difficulties in properly identifying and assessing the abandonment status of such properties, since a large number of buildings used for storage may *appear* to be abandoned (due to little day-to-day activity around the buildings or disrepair), when in fact they are not. Even though staff makes a great effort to be consistent, the number of abandoned commercial buildings can change from year to year.

Commercial and Mixed Use Abandonment by Neighborhood

Chart 6



As seen in the chart above, Roxbury has by far the largest number of abandoned commercial and mixed-use buildings. Table 2 outlines detailed information about each of Boston’s neighborhoods

Neighborhood	2000	2001	2002	% Change 2000 – 2001	% Change 2001 - 2002
Allston/Brighton	1	3	2	200%	-33%
Back Bay/Beacon Hill	0	0	2	0%	N/A
Central	13	8	13	-38%	63%
Charlestown	3	0	0	-100%	0%
Dorchester	19	14	19	-26%	36%
East Boston	16	11	7	-31%	-36%
Fenway/Kenmore	1	0	0	-100%	0%
Hyde Park	3	3	4	0%	33%
Jamaica Plain	10	6	8	-40%	33%
Mattapan	18	11	8	-39%	-27%
Roslindale	4	3	3	-25%	0%
Roxbury	89	61	57	-31%	-7%
South Boston	12	9	13	-25%	44%
South End	18	12	14	-33%	17%
West Roxbury	1	1	2	0%	100%
Unknown ³	1	0	0	N/A	N/A
Total	209	142	152⁴	-32%	7%

³ The unknown category includes properties that were unable to be “geocoded” within a neighborhood boundary.

In many neighborhoods the number of abandoned commercial or mixed-use buildings is so few that the addition or subtraction of a building from the results appears to be a dramatic upturn or downturn in abandonment. In neighborhoods such as Allston/Brighton, Back Bay/Beacon Hill, Charlestown, Fenway/Kenmore, Hyde Park and West Roxbury this is the case. More meaningful results include:

- While the number of abandoned commercial/mixed-use buildings has increased in Central Boston from 2001 to 2002, this is largely due to a more thorough survey in the Chinatown/Downtown Crossing area of the city, not due to a sudden increase in abandonment.
- In South Boston, there has been an increase in abandoned commercial/mixed-use buildings over the last year, as marginal properties (mostly warehouses) have been vacated.

City of Boston Efforts to Reduce the Number of Commercial and Mixed-Use Abandoned Buildings

Through its programs intended to strengthen neighborhoods and local business districts, the Department of Neighborhood Development's Office of Business Development has addressed abandoned commercial buildings in several ways:

- Through the **Commercial Real Estate and Business Finance** program, larger properties are restored to usefulness. This program is instrumental in the ongoing efforts to restore the currently abandoned Ferdinand's Furniture Store in Dudley Square.
- Some buildings are no longer useable and are demolished in preparation for new construction.
- The **Boston Main Streets** program helps to revitalize local business districts. As a result, formerly abandoned buildings have found new life.
- In some cases, private investment brings an old commercial space back to use, and DND's **ReStore Boston** assists by providing additional funding to upgrade the storefront.
- In the case of mixed-use properties, both the **Office of Business Development** and DND's **Neighborhood Housing Development Division** work together to provide funding and technical assistance.

Next Steps

Less than 1% of all buildings in Boston are abandoned, but a single abandoned building can lead to a decline in investment in a street or neighborhood. For this reason, the Department of Neighborhood Development will continue its efforts to reduce the number of abandoned buildings through a combination of existing programs, stepped-up tax foreclosure and receivership efforts, as well as research into new programs that can address more stubborn issues, such as the number of abandoned three-family homes.

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⁴ In 2002, 9 commercial/mixed-use abandoned buildings had for sale or for rent signs. There were five such buildings in 2001.