

Report of the Special Committee on the Boston Common



REPORT TO CITY COUNCIL PRESIDENT MAUREEN FEENEY AND
MEMBERS OF THE BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

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Presented for the Committee by Michael P. Ross, Chair

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REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE BOSTON COMMON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Boston Common was established in 1634 and is America's first and oldest public park. With 48 acres of land, there is a need for ongoing attention and care, which has at times been insufficient.

The Common is an important part of the history and tradition of the City of Boston. It houses Boston's Visitors Center and is the start of the Freedom Trail, thus is memorable for many visitors. It is the front yard for our state government buildings, a block from the business district, and alongside residential neighborhoods. The Common is of strategic importance, encompassing two MBTA stations with accompanying plazas, and an underground garage.

The issues raised in this report recognize the critical role the Common plays in our city. This committee is looking for ways to make the Boston Common an even more central part of our city, maximizing its use by residents and visitors alike, creating a stronger visual icon within the downtown.

The report of the Special Committee on the Boston Common examines data for the conditions of the Common, and investigates potential options for the park's future. Boston's Department of Parks and Recreation oversees the Boston Common, most recently under difficult financial circumstances. There is much to be done, however, and the City of Boston must improve the maintenance of this world-class park, even under these tough economic times. This Committee has sought to learn from the experiences and best practices of other cities facing similar problems. We make recommendations based

in part on our research and observation of several New York City parks.

Physical Appearance of the Boston Common

A walk through of the Common reveals the wear and tear on its turf, statues, and aesthetic features. Difficult budget decisions have forced reductions in the levels of maintenance and it shows. To make the Common a destination for those who live and work nearby and those who visit the city, this committee is seeking to answer the question of how to make the Common a more welcoming park that is vibrant, clean and safe.

Developing Positive Activity

Crime on the Common

From 2006 to the summer of 2007 we witnessed a difficult period for the issue of safety on the Common. In 2007, the Boston Police Department began to enforce the overnight curfew in an effort to stem the small crime wave in the area. Crime statistics show some recent successes in crime reduction in the Common through the use of Safe Street Teams. This heavier presence may only be a temporary fix and may merely be displacing crime to



Figure 1. Cracked Sidewalk and cigarette butts by Park Street Station

other parts of the neighborhood. We cannot expect strained police resources to be the only deterrent to crime. This report makes recommendations to increase positive activity on the Common, creating a better and safer environment.

Homelessness on the Common

Homelessness is a chronic problem in major U.S. cities. In Boston, our mission is to end homelessness. The Emergency Shelter Commission (ESC) estimates that as many as 100 homeless people utilize the Common as a living space during the summer months. “Neighborhood team” street outreach programs are needed during the day, and the ESC engages area ministries in a longer-term strategy to find housing for the homeless and do the work needed to allow them to stay in those homes. A number of service agencies worked with the ESC to find housing for 40 percent of those found homeless in the park in 2007 and continues that work today. We recognize the important work of the Housing First program. Providing shelter for the homeless should remain the first priority. We also need to ensure that day-to-day social services and outreach continues, and that there remain resources available for the homeless.

New York City

Our committee had an opportunity to visit New York City this past June. Our fact-finding mission was designed to see what was being done at three parks in Manhattan, in order to find ideas that could be brought to bear on the Common. In New York, we saw some interesting models. There are great ideas that have been generated for urban green space in New York City and great opportunities for our city. The Common and the Department of Parks and Recreation can learn from New York City’s best practices.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are a foundation for a renewed strategic plan for the Boston Common. They are merely the beginning of the conversation – the jumping-off point for more extensive, more detailed planning for the Common, as we look to revise the Master Management Plan.

Three main issues drive this discussion.

1. **Maintenance and improvements of the physical structures of the park.** We need to improve park infrastructure, gaining a better understanding of what structures are used by visitors and residents. There are places where aesthetic improvements can be made and places where significant changes are recommended.
2. **Encourage more positive activity on the Common.** Bringing positive activity for more hours of the day and more months of the year improves public safety on and public commitment to the Common. By finding new ways to expand hours of use, giving people a larger commitment to the Common, and finding new ways of bringing people to the Common, we can attract people there to eat and drink, to play or relax, to bring their families, to protest or rally, and to experience cultural and social events.
3. **Improving our ability to fund the improvements and activities for the Boston Common.** The Parks Department operates under budget constraints felt by all aspects of government and are forced to find alternative forms of funding to survive. The Friends of the Public Garden has done an excellent job raising funds for the Boston Common, and we recognize their contribution. We think more can be done to reach out to abutters, businesses, and nearby institutions.

ABOUT THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE BOSTON COMMON

The committee convened for the purpose of addressing the future of the Boston Common in the following areas: maintenance and physical infrastructure, public safety, and financial opportunities and challenges.

To date the committee has held two public hearings, several working sessions and made a site visit to several New York City parks.

On March 19, 2008 the committee held its first public hearing at Suffolk University Law School, convening to hear testimony from the public and from administration officials.

On May 6, 2008 the committee held a working session to discuss the status and future of the Boston Common Garage with James Rooney, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Convention Authority.



Figure 2. The Special Committee on the Boston Common



Figure 3. Broken brick barrier and trash found on the path between Frog Pond and baseball fields.

On May 14, 2008, the committee held a working session with the MBTA team working on improvements to Park Street Station, Boylston Street Station, and to discuss the future impact of Silver Line plans, mitigation and impact.

On June 13, 2008, the members of the Special Committee, along with Commissioner Pollak, community, industry and business leaders and members of the Friends of the Public Garden travelled to three city parks in New York City to evaluate their general operation, degree of use and appearance.

On June 16, 2008 the committee held a public hearing to address the specific and principal issue of public safety, where various crime statistics for the Boston Common area were presented by Boston Police Captain Bernard O'Rourke.

On November 14, 2008, the committee met to discuss an overview of what was learned over the course of the year and to think about next steps.

On December 8, the committee held public working sessions to discuss its end-of-year report on the Boston Common. This report is designed to give some background of the issues at hand and put forward recommendations for future action.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE BOSTON COMMON

The Boston Common has a number of significant physical problems. There is considerable work to be done to make the Common look like the world-class destination that it is. As a literary, historic and political landmark, the areas of the Common that are falling into disrepair should not be acceptable to this city, and this committee's top priority is working on ways to ensure improvements are made.

Near the top of our list is the corner of Park and Tremont Streets. We find no delineation between the Boston Common and Downtown Crossing. Entering the park at a pedestrian crossing at that corner or along most of the Tremont Street corridor, we find nothing that gives the park visitor a feeling of leaving a business district and entered an historic destination. There are ill-conceived and poorly maintained planters scattered around, and access points are blocked by groupings of news racks. There are no grassy areas at these entrance areas, and nothing here brings a visitor *into* the park as you would find at other access points around the Common. We strive to make entry into the Boston Common a unique parkland experience at all access points.

A short distance from the Park Street Plaza, the Brewer Fountain is found in a state of disrepair. We are fortunate to have funds earmarked to renovate the fountain with capital dollars, a Save America's Treasures grant, and support from the Friends of the Public Garden and the Solomon Foundation. The MBTA has a series of much-needed renovations of their nearby structures planned as well.

Further down Tremont Street is the disappointing Visitors Center. Three million people walk the Freedom Trail every year, starting in the Boston Common. Nearly one million people use the Visitors

Center every year – many simply because of the public restroom facility on the grounds. This site requires enhancement to give it the prominence that its role should suggest. As it stands now, there are no gateway fences along Tremont Street providing an entry way leading people to anticipate such a building. No signage exists to direct visitors to the center.

Beyond the access points and fencing issues around the Visitors Center and along the Tremont Street corridor, we find continued disrepair. The Committee has noted sidewalks that are cracked and disheveled, misshapen and out of scale statues and worn down patches of grass – especially along edges of unprotected pedestrian walkways.

With heavier use of the lawns, curbs, and sidewalks, comes a need for greater attention and care. The Common remains a good-weather draw as a weekday lunch spot and for weekend activity, but it does not get nearly the use or attention that it deserves.



Figure 4. Along Charles St.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Crime on Boston Common had been on the rise until the Boston Police Department reprioritized crime prevention on the Common, starting in the fall of 2006. High profile criminal activity on the Common brought greater attention to the area, including heightened drug activity and highly-publicized gunfire on the Common.¹ Increasingly, the Common was seen as an unsafe nighttime location.² In November, 2006, the BPD arrested seven people on drug charges,³ and another seven in February, 2007.⁴ An upgraded “Safe Streets” initiative brought more officers to the Common, supporting increased efforts to enforce the overnight curfew on the Common.⁵

Boston Police Captain Bernard O’Rourke

acknowledged at a hearing on March 19, 2008 that these measures served to drive crime to Downtown Crossing and other areas nearby.

Longer-term strategies are needed, as are measures that will reduce crime throughout downtown and across the city.

In the table below we can see the dramatic rise in drug arrests on the Common in 2006 and 2007, with the benefits being felt strongly in the first nine months of 2008. This is one of the most rapidly increasing criminal concerns on the Common. We recognize that this doesn’t solve the problem. The Common is a critical area for tourism and the public’s attention and as our city’s most treasured green space, public impressions of the park play a central role in the thinking of this committee.

Boston Police Department									
Reported Part I Crime And Drug Arrests on the Boston Common									
Crime Category	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Jan-Sept 2008
Violent Crime*	36	24	30	30	22	19	28	25	18
Property Crime**	150	173	186	154	177	122	166	136	93
Drugs	84	70	93	67	46	21	133	86	40
Total	270	267	309	251	245	162	327	247	151
* Violent Crime totals include homicide, rape and attempted, robbery and attempted, and aggravated assault.									
** Property Crime totals include burglary and attempted, larceny and attempted, and vehicle theft and attempted.									

¹ <http://www.bostonherald.com/news/regional/view.bg?articleid=1019899&srvc=art>

² <http://www.virtualtourist.com> has a series of posts from individuals warning visitors to avoid the Common after dark, with a number of anecdotes from people who felt their safety was in danger.

³ http://www.bpdnews.com/2006/11/drug_arrests_in_boston_common.html

⁴ http://www.bpdnews.com/2007/02/operation_deep_freeze_ices_dru.html

⁵ http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/08/30/curfew_targets_crime_on_common/

PARK RANGERS

“The Boston Park Rangers have three primary areas of responsibility: public assistance, public safety and park protection, and interpretive programming.... To protect the park resources and the people who patronize the parks, the Rangers work closely with fire, police, conservation and animal control service agencies in Boston, using the tools of verbal persuasion and education, Rangers enforce all City of Boston park rules and Bike Patrol regulations, local, state and federal laws and ordinances.”⁶

The city initiated a seasonal Park Rangers program in 1982, they became year-round employees in 1987, and in April, 2008, Rangers were made permanent full-time city employees.

Ten years ago, the Parks Department had 22 full time Park Rangers for the whole Boston Parks system. Today that number is down to twelve, with another six seasonal employees. That means that while ten years ago there would regularly be between ten and twelve Rangers on the Common most of the day, today that number is down to two Rangers during the off season, and up to four or five during peak season, including seasonal Rangers and a supervisor.

The impact of this reduction in Ranger staffing has been felt in two primary areas: public safety and public education. The City of Boston has had to rely more on the Boston Police Department to enforce the law, bringing a tougher-minded crime-prevention strategy to the Common. This may be a short-term positive, but the longer-term impact of having Rangers on the Common creates a better

environment for crime prevention overall. Rangers are well equipped to deal with some of the quality-of-life issues that occur on the park.

The Park Rangers service station is located adjacent to the Visitor Center, providing the center additional Ranger presence during the year. This is good for the center, but makes it more difficult for the Rangers to be in other parts of the park. The Ranger station closes at 6 p.m., releasing the Rangers from duty at that time except during special events. This limits the Rangers’ ability to be an evening and night presence.

Education and programming have deteriorated with the staffing reduction in Rangers. Ten years ago, each Ranger would be responsible for several programs a month designed to educate visitors, with special emphasis on teaching school kids about the history and importance of the Boston Common. This elimination of educational programming will have a long-term negative impact on our ability to connect the Common and the issues in this report to the public as a whole.

Park Rangers play a number of important roles on the Common. They are a presence when someone needs help, whether it be a tourist who is lost, or a resident who wants to report a problem. They can also be a great source of information about the Common and about the area. Because they have a daily presence on and commitment to the Common, they would be most able to recognize suspicious activity quickly and act promptly and appropriately.

⁶ <http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/parkrangers/default.asp>,
<http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/parkrangers/patrolandsafety.asp>

HOMELESSNESS

Recently, the City of Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission, working with the Parks Department, the Boston Housing Authority and several homeless outreach and housing providers, succeeded in helping a number of homeless individuals who use and live on the Common. In response to recent efforts to enforce the overnight curfew, the ESC, BHA, and providers organized a targeted housing intervention that employed a multi-pronged approach designed to reduce homelessness, house those in need, and continue providing outreach and support services to those they have not yet been able to house. Some organizations have had excellent success at finding and maintaining housing for the homeless, with one group reporting a 91% retention rate after two years.⁷

Homelessness is a priority issue for this committee. Government is responsible for helping those who are most in need of help. The programs put forward by the ESC are critical to the Common because homeless people, like other city residents and visitors, find the Common a pleasant place to rest, and it is our job to offer them aid.

The City of Boston differentiates the housing, treatment and health care issues of homelessness from issues connected to public safety. Few homeless individuals who frequent the Common are perpetrators of violence, but due to vulnerability tied to the lack of housing, they often become its victims. Because of the prevalence of substance abuse among the homeless, clusters of unsheltered homeless persons can become a magnet for substance abuse activity. For this reason, outreach services with expertise in substance abuse treatment

and referral are a critical part of the longer-term strategy of helping the homeless. This adds to the urgency with which this issue must be addressed on the Common.

There are many services available for the homeless around the Common. In September, 2007, Mayor Menino announced the Boston Common Ground Housing Initiative. This initiative provided "a multi-agency housing plan designed to reach unsheltered, long-term homeless individuals in the vicinity of the Boston Common. The goal of the new outreach program is to increase housing opportunities for the most vulnerable individuals experiencing long-term or repeated episodes of homelessness."⁸ This on-going initiative has been an important step for providing housing to those on the Common, previewing the city's recent Housing First program.⁹

There are a number of ways to help the homeless near the Common. Thanks to longstanding commitments by the historic congregations that ring the Common, there are ample opportunities for a hot meal and temporary shelter. These services remain critical for the homeless population, and more resources are needed. However there is really only one solution to homelessness: a home.

Housing issues on the Common impact nearby neighborhoods as well. Just as we see a connection between the lack of positive activity on the Common at night and the less vibrant nature of Downtown Crossing once the work day ends, so we see a link between homelessness on the Common to Downtown Crossing.

⁷ 90 percent number provided by the Pine Street Inn

⁸ <http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/default.aspx?id=3610>

⁹ <http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/default.aspx?id=4013>

NEW YORK CITY

On June 13, 2008, The Boston City Council's Special Committee on the Boston Common went on a fact-finding mission to three New York City parks, accompanied by the Boston Parks Commissioner and a number of civic and business leaders. The trip was organized with help from the Friends of the Public Garden, with cooperation from the New York City Parks Department. Most notable about the visited parks was the usage they got during the day and the maintenance they received compared to the Boston Common.

Madison Square Park

Madison Square Park is the smallest of the three parks we visited, at 6.2 acres, about 1/8th the size of the Common. It was only in 2001 that a restoration project brought the park out of its poor condition, with additional improvements made in 2002.

One of the most popular attractions at Madison Square Park is the Shake Shack (Figure 5), a year-round take-out eatery with outdoor seating in front of the building. On most days, the line to order extends around the park's perimeter. One visitor noted how "quality commercial ventures proved to stabilize and enrich the parks in New York with



Figure 6. Seating at Shake Shack, Madison Square Park

revenue going to its care." The outdoor seating area around the Shake Shack uses small gravel as a ground covering, which is easier to maintain than mulch or grass (Figure 6), and still visually pleasant.

Another useful feature of Madison Square Park is the fenced off dog run (Figure 7). It is a small, separate dog-friendly space, inviting to owners, with a quality-of-life benefit to those who own dogs and those who don't. The park is well-maintained and clean. The dog park was creatively buffered by sturdy plantings which served as an excellent transition from park to dog park.

Also at Madison Square Park, a low black semi-temporary rubberized fence deters visitors from



Figure 5. Shake Shack, Madison Square Park



Figure 7. Dog run, Madison Square Park

destroying the grass (Figure 8). This helps prevent the public from using the grass as a pass-through – something we’ve seen that has resulted in the trampling of grass on the Common. It does not restrict use of the lawn for sun bathers and those who want to enjoy the open space, though they do prohibit casual athletic activity, like ball- or frisbee throwing. The fence appears to be a good low-cost alternative to the chain-linked fence used on the Common, which is expensive and must be installed by contractors rather than park employees.



Figure 8. Moveable fence, Madison Square Park

Bryant Park

Bryant Park is an entirely different experience than the other parks we visited. There is much to love about this park, but Bryant Park is not a model for the Boston Common.

On the positive side, there is incredible vibrancy, diversity, and openness to the park. A late lunch crowd packed in, with a restaurant and café/bar drawing diners from area businesses. Kiosks attracted crowds to outdoor seating areas and an expansive lawn. The park is flanked by several monuments and memorials, and featured a carousel,

outdoor library and active fountains. Sidewalks, curbs and lawns are maintained daily, and flora that is varied, healthy, and inviting (Figure 9). There is a movie screen and stage on the far end of the lawn. Bryant Park promotes creative programming, including: books, chess, piano, art, concerts, readings, martial arts lessons, and yoga.



Figure 9. Foliage, Bryant Park

In sum, the park is pristine and well kept. It is clear what access to funding can mean to the overall aesthetic beauty of a park. Even the bathroom is spotless, with fresh flowers in a vase as you enter.

On the other hand, the park is over-commercialized, and the privatization of the park gives it a feeling of more of an amusement park’s park than a place to relax and enjoy open space. This Committee would strongly oppose efforts to emulate Bryant Park, though we would like to see the Common bring in those ideas that worked.

Though Bryant Park has its downside, the neighborhood around the park had been blighted for years, and the rejuvenation of the park made an impact to the whole neighborhood. In 15 years, it went from one of the more dangerous neighborhoods with frequent homicides within the park, to one of the most sought-after locations in New York City.

Central Park/Boathouse

It is difficult to compare an 800 acre park to one of 48 acres. We were most interested in visiting the Boathouse, which provides several options for those who want to find an opportunity to dine at an area park, including: a year-round moderately priced restaurant, a bar, a low-priced cafeteria, a function room, and an outdoor café/bar. The Boathouse looks out over a beautiful pond, and is a draw to a very divergent population. It is a year-round destination spot for many seeking to enjoy the park. While larger than what the Common could reasonably accommodate, it's diversity of options and its reasonably-priced fare is appealing.

Moreover, to spend time in the Boathouse café one need not spend a single dollar. Throughout the restaurant there is seating for people who wish to "brown-bag" their lunch or just sit and enjoy the view.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 10



Figure 13

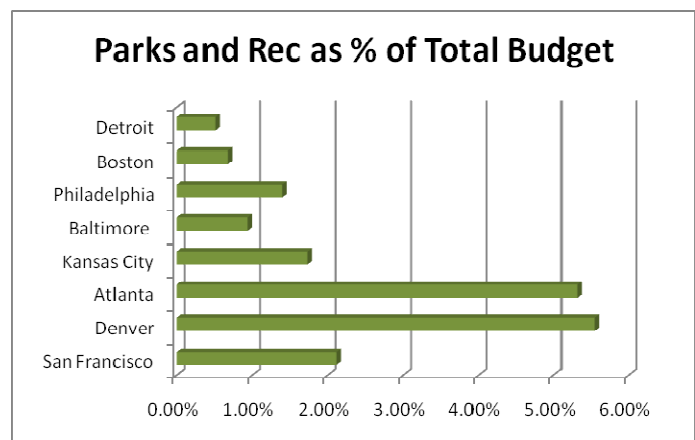
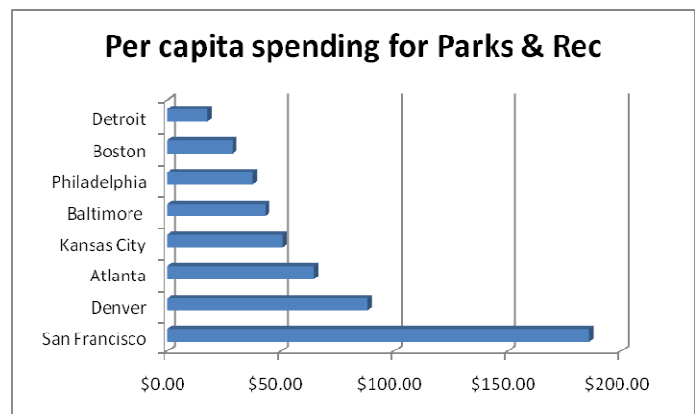
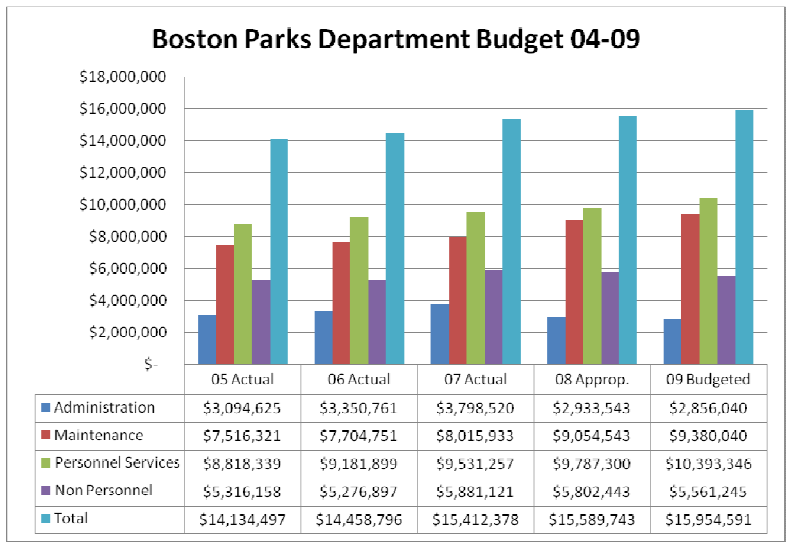
FUNDING

The Parks Department has done amazing work with the resources available. Personnel costs continue to rise near the cost of living, at 3.8 percent over the last four years. Non-personnel costs have declined 5.8 percent over two years – despite rising gas and oil costs. Parks Department spending has risen 2.9 percent in four years.¹⁰ The Department earned \$5.5 million in 2008, \$1.75 million from donations, \$600,000 from cemetery fees, and \$2.5 million from golf course income. These earnings are up from \$3.8 million in 2004, and \$4.8 million in 2006. The Fund for Parks and Recreation currently has an account balance of \$4.5 million, and the city annually raises and spends close to \$5 million from that fund each year (\$5.1 million in 2006, \$4.9 million in 2007, \$5.3 million in 2008). The Parkman Trust has \$17 million on-hand and spends \$1.2 million annually.

These budget figures are for the entire parks system for the City of Boston, recognizing that the Common is but a slice of that – albeit an important slice.

What is particularly disturbing is that Boston as a whole underfunds their parks system as compared to major American cities. As shown in the charts to the right, Boston ranks just ahead of Detroit among major American cities in both per-capita spending on Parks and Recreation operation, as well as in percentage of total operating budget.

The Friends of the Public Garden are doing a phenomenal job. They raise money and awareness for the area parks, and should be commended for their work. We are encouraged by their model and believe that it is one that can be built upon.



¹⁰ FY2009. We expect additional 2010 Fiscal Year cuts.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE BOSTON COMMON

As the City Councilors whose districts abut and include the Boston Common, we have worked together to come up with recommendations that we believe are worthy of consideration by the Boston Parks Department and the wider community. We have framed this portion of the report in four categories: Physical Issues, Positive Activity, the Restaurant, and Funding.

Physical Appearance

Visitors Center

Every tourist visiting the Common – and nearly all who visit Boston – are directed to the Boston Common Visitors Center. It is the starting point for the Freedom Trail, attracting nearly a million visitors annually. For such a critical fulcrum of tourist activity, the center is underwhelming and inadequate. It sits unnoticed on the edge of the Common at a nondescript location. There is nothing that directs visitors there, or even suggests to someone walking past that it is a location of any importance whatsoever.



Figure 14. Sidewalk near the start of the Freedom Trail by the statues

Our Recommendation

A more prominent entrance to the Boston Common is needed at the Visitors Center, and the plaza needs to be renovated and redesigned. We suggest installing a parade of international flags which leads visitors to the center. Furthermore, we urge installation of decorative fencing to guide pedestrian traffic flow that brings visitors to the center, as well as a small welcome sign.

Tremont Street

There is no fencing along Tremont Street from Park Street to Avery Street, as we would find at every other edge of the park, and as we see surrounding the Public Garden. This creates a sense that the park is part of the street, incorporated within the residential and commercial buildings along Tremont Street. A visitor does not sense entering our city's most important and historic parkland.

The millions of users of the Park Street MBTA subway station pass by a corner of the Boston



Figure 15. Along Tremont Street

Common without ever knowing they have actually entered a park. There is no separation from the MBTA station to the park, and there is no entryway that changes the feel from subway station to park. The result is that at that corner the Boston Common is treated like and looks like a subway station rather than a park.

Our Recommendation

Continuation of black iron ornamental fencing needs to be extended along the length of Tremont Street to the Park Street Station. A boundary other than fencing is needed around the Park Street Station as well, delineating the station area from the rest of the park. As this stretch of land along Tremont Street is above an MBTA tunnel, the MBTA should take on the responsibility of installing and maintaining this fence. This work should be done in conjunction with the work on the Brewer Fountain and Visitors Center, with a long-term visual plan in mind.

Newspaper Racks

At a number of locations along Tremont Street there are areas filled with newspaper racks, blocking access to the park and slowing down pedestrian traffic.

Our Recommendation

Pursuant to 2008 Docket 0646, amending CBC Chapter 16-38 regulating the placement and maintenance on newspaper racks passed by the City Council and signed by the Mayor this year, the Department of Public Works is asked by this committee to put those racks currently on the Boston Common into immediate compliance. Racks should be moved to locations along the street that won't interfere with normal pedestrian traffic. No more than five racks should be placed in a row with a five-foot gap between groupings and a

minimum of four feet of clear space for pedestrian passage is needed, as specified in the ordinance.

The city should also look to the Landmark Commission to gain greater controls on the placement of newspaper racks

Deer Park

The existing Deer Park Maintenance facility is a wasted opportunity right now. The Boston Common is small, and the current use takes up valuable space that can be put to public use.

Our Recommendation

As we learned from our New York visit, maintenance facilities belong underground. The Parks Department should work with the Massachusetts Convention Authority to find space for and access to underground facilities. Deer Park is an ideal location for a public-use facility. This is a potential site for a commercial restaurant with a kitchen also placed underground, working in conjunction with the Boston Convention Center parking garage.

Men's Comfort Station

The men's comfort station, or "Pink Palace," is out of use, is no longer maintained, and is well on the way to becoming a blight. The Parks Department appears unable to keep it in good condition yet does not appear to have the funds to take it down.

Our Recommendation

The comfort station requires rehabilitation and is an ideal location for outside investment. We suggest turning it into an outdoor kiosk for warm-weather months.

Little League and Softball Fields

The fence between the Little League and softball fields prevents the fields from ever being used for other athletic activities, such as soccer, ultimate

Frisbee, or other permitted or non-permitted uses. As a result, significant resources are required to keep nonathletic areas of the park maintained. In addition, the fields are worn down much too easily after a spring rain, often requiring re-turfing. As it stands now, the breakdown of these fields requires a labor-intensive and funding-intensive process to keep the fields in good enough shape to be used during the spring, summer and fall.

Our Recommendation

The permanent fence between the two fields should be replaced with a temporary rubber fence that can be put up during softball and little league baseball games, and taken down to allow for other sports to be played on these fields.

To allow for easier maintenance and higher usage, we recommend installing a synthetic turf field, along the lines of those found at English High and being installed at Clemente Field in the Fenway (also an historic park). This will allow for more permitted activities in that part of the Common.

We recommend developing a relationship with a local college to maximize care and utility for these fields. We would not support a partnership that gives up significant rights to the field, along the lines of the deal on Roche Field in the South End. The City of Boston should maintain control over permitting. There is the ability to work with a college on appropriate hours that will still provide good access to the field for the general public. As an alternative, we also recommend seeking out grant money to fund the installation of the turf.

Any plans around these fields should be developed with the assistance of the Hill

House and area Little League, to ensure that we are not displacing the current groups that use the field most often. No alterations of these fields should limit or reduce access for the organizations that use them currently.

Brewer Fountain

Brewer Fountain is an eyesore. This should instead be a source of pride to our parks systems. The Friends of the Public Garden have worked with the Parks Department and abutters to get funds committed to restoring the fountain, along with a Save America's Treasure's grant, and support from the Solomon Foundation.

Our Recommendation

If the Department has the funds in-hand for this project, then we look forward to seeing the ground-breaking imminently. If they still require more funds, there are businesses and institutions that are ready to be asked to help. This restoration project needs to be a top priority for the city and the City Council has passed an order to expend the funds required to accomplish much of this work.

Soldiers and Sailors Monument

The Soldiers and Sailors Monument is in poor condition and is in need of help. Estimates are that restoration will require an estimated \$300,000.

Our Recommendation

Funds are needed for this restoration.

Lack of Signage

Paths are lacking in design consistency, fail to delineate where they lead and do not provide proper circulation of visitors and foot traffic within the park. They lead you away from places that people should be led to. There are no directions to historic sites, taking away one of the most important aspects of being in an historic park.

Our Recommendation

Small and appropriate signs are needed around the park both to help with direction and as markers to memorialize sites around the park.

Frog Pond

The Frog Pond provides a mountain of opportunities that are not being fully realized. We congratulate the Frog Pond on making the skating and wading pond a success, though it's not evident that it has been a money-maker for the owner. There was a temporary carousel which served as a good example of intelligent alternative uses that bring people to the Common. Limited food services are available.

Our Recommendation

The restaurant facility needs improvement and expansion at the Frog Pond. The carousel should be permanent, and run year-round.

Dog Run

The Boston Common has been scattered with dogs and dog owners walking and playing at a number of locations. Dogs are let off leash, often running away from their owners, becoming a danger to themselves and to others around them – in particular to cyclists and runners swerving to avoid them. Dogs have been known to run into traffic at the corner Beacon and Charles Streets. Owners allow their dogs to play on grassy areas that are also used as passive activity space which can be a health risk.

Our Recommendation

A defined dog park, such as the one shown in Madison Square Park (Figure 16), should be built on the Common. Owners already take their dogs out at the corner of Beacon and Charles Streets, and the area by that corner is a suggested location for a dog park. Though we were initially skeptical, the dog park used at Madison Park is a logical model for the



Figure 16. Dog Park at Madison Square Park

Common, using gravel or rock as a ground cover rather than grass. The area would need a well-defined and attractive boundary.

The group BostonDog has issued a report that suggests a rotating dog park around the Common, designed to minimize long-term impact on the sections used. This is a solution worthy of more study. They also recommend a permanent dog park near the tennis courts.

Silverline

The staging area for the heavy equipment needed for the Silverline project will rip up the entire stretch of the Common along Charles Street for up to ten years. It will snarl traffic as they close at least one lane for the construction of a new tunnel, and it will make one whole side of the Common nearly unusable during that time. All of this will be done for the purpose of putting in bus transit that is unnecessary when tunnels already exist for light rail, and when it is nearly universally agreed that the bus system as set up does not work and is not nearly as effective or efficient as light rail.

Our Recommendation

The Silverline Project is a mistake. The plans in place will disturb sacred grounds, such as the

historic graveyard and athletic fields. Unused light rail tunnels already exist below ground, and the MBTA, with its multimillion dollar deficit, should be looking at ways it can build a system around what is there, and ensuring that we have opportunities to become a greener, more efficient city while *not* tearing up our precious parks system during the construction.

Infrastructure for Events

The Common is already a focal point for many cultural, social and political events, from Commonwealth Shakespeare Company's Shakespeare on the Common, to rallies, protests and concerts. Each event brings considerable needs in terms of audio and visual equipment, electrical requirements and heavy supplies. Some events bring loud and polluting generators, creating problems with neighbors, and creating a poor environment for the participants as well. Events often bring trucks onto the Common, creating poor conditions for the grass and sidewalks. After some of the more damaging events, entire sections of the Common have been closed off for months as grass is allowed to regrow. We want the events with less damage and negative impact to the Common.

Our Recommendation

Permanent and upgraded capacities for electrical and audio equipment under the control of the Parks Department are needed at the Parkman Bandstand. This would alleviate the need for heavy trucks wiring for every event. We also suggest future investigation into bringing trucks and heavy equipment onto the Common through an underground access point.

Seating and other Infrastructure

Benches in parts of the park are falling apart and are nearly unusable. Portable chairs can be added to

create more flexible seating opportunities. Small folding chairs are used in both Madison Square Park and Bryant Park and are not prone to disappear.

Our Recommendation

Fix the benches and bring in portable chairs.

Developing Positive Activity

Security and the Park Rangers

The reduction of Rangers – from 22 full-time Rangers for the entire Parks Department a decade ago to just 12 now – negatively impacts the security of the Boston Common, puts more pressure on the police, and decreases the educational programming available at the park.

Our Recommendation

Funds must be found to bring more Rangers back to the Boston Common. The presence of Boston Police has the biggest short-term impact on security but longer-term, Rangers are able to provide many of those services. They are a friendly presence to tourists and residents alike, creating an overall positive atmosphere on the Common. While a police presence serves to prevent crime, Rangers help improve the overall image of the park and allow the police to work on the wider area. Fundraising efforts for the Rangers should be put in place, with consideration given to the time-sensitive nature of recruitment, hiring and training.

Programming

There are a number of ways to attract positive life-enhancing activity on the Boston Common. It is incumbent on the Parks Department to be creative in attracting a diverse and changing crowd to the Common. The Common has the potential to be a destination spot for many more people than go there now. It can be a site for Boston residents, those who live in suburbs, and those from around



Figure 17. Art installation at Madison Square Park

the state who want to bring their children into Boston for the day. Many of these visitors are not only likely to visit the Common and other parks, but would likely spend money in Boston, having a positive overall impact on the city's economy.

Our Recommendation

The Boston Common needs more programming: more concerts, more theater like Shakespeare on the Common, more art installations as you would find in Forest Hills Cemetery and more family-oriented programming. In particular, the Common should look to find youth-oriented programming. These programs will give our city's youth substantive and educational options, providing them community-oriented activities that are engaging, increasing their personal and emotional investment in the Common.

Homeless Population

Fundamentally, the problem is homelessness in and of itself. As a city and as a state, there is no shortage of roles that can be played on the part of government in housing the homeless. On the Common in particular, the issue of homelessness with no structured housing, public health and public

safety intervention, can also be a magnet for public safety concerns. People with addiction illnesses attract drugs and drug abuse, which can bring low-level drug dealing and other crime, especially when there are mixed populations who sometimes use the homeless for cover.

While moving the homeless out of the park may make the park more pleasant for some, to do so would violate the Parks Department policy that the Common is a park for all. Furthermore, displacing people does not solve the problem of homelessness, nor does it resolve any safety concerns for the longer-term, it merely moves those problems elsewhere, often just temporarily. Placing people in housing is the true solution.

Our Recommendation

We support the Emergency Shelter Commission's efforts to engage outreach ministries in a "solutions strategy" around the homeless. We support the city's work with the homeless and linking them with service providers for housing and social services. We support the relocation of programs that feed and minister to the homeless to community meals programs, as a better and safer way to get them the meals and services they need.

More specifically, the City, State and Federal Government must work together to identify resources to build upon the success of the Housing First program while maintaining outreach services for those not yet housed who still need shelter and treatment services. Finding ways to help people move from the street to homes and stabilizing formerly homeless people in their new neighborhoods is a positive program with long-lasting effects. For example, after a significant number of unsheltered older and elderly adults were identified in the December 2004 homeless

census, Mayor Menino and the Emergency Shelter Commission launched a three year Elder Street Homeless Initiative with private funding from the Citizen's Bank Foundation. This program has reduced the street senior population by 80%, with some 60% of the 140 older homeless adults placed in permanent housing or long-term residential programs.

We also recognize that the funding to maintain current services is uncertain. The U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development provides \$300,000/year to the Pine Street Inn for daytime outreach services. These funds should be used for housing over services. If such reallocation is deemed necessary, it will be important to find new resources to ensure the continuity of outreach and other social services programs that help connect homeless clients to treatment and housing on a day-by-day basis.

Pursuant to our interest in creating or enhancing the fundraising arm for the Boston Common, there should be increased efforts to raise money for additional outreach workers to provide the homeless with services. Multi-discipline outreach services linked to housing such as those currently provided by Pine Street Inn being at the top of that list.

The Restaurant

Attempts at creating a sit-down eating environment on the Common have been unsuccessful. Emerson College's café loses \$35,000 per year. The Frog Pond has food service near the skating rink. Neither facility attracts the kind of diverse crowd that is willing to sit for extensive periods of time and spend money on the Common. A significant part of the problem is the short-term contract provided to the vendor and the lack of beer and wine. Many people will be willing to

enjoy a sit-down meal, returning time and again, with the ability to enjoy a drink with their meal. We can do better.

Our Recommendation

Testimony from the police at our hearing in March made it very clear that when there is a greater presence of people and events on the Common, there is a correlating drop in crime. Positive activity on the Common will deter crime naturally.

The addition of a commercial restaurant at any of a number of locations around the Boston Common is a key piece of this committee's proposal for improving the Boston Common. A restaurant provides a newfound opportunity around parks financing, structural improvements, enhanced foot traffic, decreased crime and development of a destination spot for residents, tourists, and businessmen and –women alike.

The City of Boston should look to businesses to bid for an extended period of time for the opportunity to create and run such a restaurant. Three years is not enough time to allow a business enough return on their investment to make such an enterprise worthwhile. The Deer Park or men's comfort station are two locations that would make for ideal locations, and the restaurant at the Frog Pond should also be considered for limited expansion.

Whatever restaurant is built on the Common should not be a high-end expensive establishment, limiting to most residents. Just to be entirely clear, the Tavern on the Green is not our model. A smaller version of the Boathouse, or perhaps more appropriately a version of the Shake Shack with both indoor

and outdoor seating options would be the model we are looking for. We want to create a diverse and open environment for all comers.

A restaurant should:

- be constructed within the historic look and architecture of the park;
- be done appropriately, largely within the footprint of structures that currently exist;
- be designed to bring in year-round clientele;
- provide an indoor area to sit and eat;
- provide and maintain outdoor tables;
- be accessible in look, feel, and price – inviting to residents and visitors alike;
- provide a place for people who just want a place to sit with their own lunch;
- provide revenues for park upkeep and maintenance that more than justifies its presence to Boston taxpayers;
- provide good employment opportunities to Boston's residents;
- be responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the area of park nearby;
- be marketed to broaden the appeal of the area, drawing more traffic not only to the Common, but connecting its marketing strategy with an overall plan for Downtown Crossing renewal.

Funding

Capital Budget Needs

The Department of Parks and Recreation has a difficult job. They care for 2,200 acres of parkland. Though the Boston Common accounts for just two percent of that, it is without question the most important park in the city and one of the most important in the world.

This committee has not yet gone through its recommendations line-item by item to determine how much money it will require. That work is critical and is the major part of the next phase. For now, however, we recognize that this is an ambitious agenda to fix all that has gone wrong with the Boston Common, and we are not going to simply put out ways to spend money on the Boston Common without bringing in ideas for how to fund them.

Our Recommendation

The City of Boston can float bonds for items on our list that qualify for capital improvements, and that is sound fiscal policy. That said, during difficult economic times, and recognizing how hard our Budget Office has worked to maintain its A-grade Bond Rating, this committee is not interested in placing significantly greater burden on the shoulders of taxpayers. With the future in a cloud we need to emphasize fundraising opportunities that are being missed.

We need greater investment and buy-in from abutters around the edges of the Boston Common who have not been fully tapped. There needs to be someone who reaches out to businesses, residents, stakeholders and institutions along Park, Tremont and Boylston Streets, as well as those in Downtown Crossing, Chinatown and the Theater Districts. Businesses and institutions make millions of dollars on their proximity to the park, and their investments are enhanced when the Common is better maintained and more beautiful. We need to be asking for them to step up with more interest and financial commitment to the Boston Common.

The City Council, the Parks Department, the Mayor, and all elected officials from the area must work to support efforts to significantly

expand abutter interest, to allow better care, maintenance and improvements all around the Common. We will to work with The Friends of the Public Garden to accomplish this task. The job ahead is daunting and needs to be started immediately.

In addition to raising money for projects, improvements, and beautification plans, we need to raise funds for outreach workers for area outreach ministries and organizations that help the homeless. We need to provide additional funding to hire more Park Rangers, as well as helping fund other security measures for the park. We need to fund programming for the Common to bring in a steady flow of diverse and interested people from around the Boston area to ensure that interest and commitment in the Boston Common remains high among Boston and area residents.

Standing still on this issue of funding is not an option. There is immense untapped potential.

Commitment to the Common

In addition to budgetary commitments to the Boston Common the park requires more civic engagement. We cannot allow apathy and disinterest to permeate the public's psyche around the Boston Common. The less interest we show, the more likely the conditions on our greatest park will remain the same.

Over the course of 2008, this committee held two hearings, five working sessions, and issued two draft reports prior to this final version. We have had front page media coverage on a couple of occasions, we've submitted blog posts and opinions on the subject of the Boston Common, and we have been on television and radio on the subject. While the stakeholders around the Common have remained engaged with us all throughout this conversation, we

would have expected that all three Boston City Council offices would have been flooded with emails and phone calls from people who were just as passionate about the Boston Common as we are. Prior to December 13, 2008, our offices had each received only a couple dozen calls and emails related to the Boston Common, which is far below what we'd expect for a subject of this importance. Following the editorial in the Boston Globe on December 13, 2008, we did get a sudden increase in awareness and activity. In order for this effort to succeed, we will need the continued participation of the public.

Our Recommendation

In conjunction with the Friends of the Public Garden, we should hold regular public meetings on the Boston Common that include residents, stakeholders, the Parks Department, area businesses both big and small, and the institutions. Regular topics of discussion should include areas of need, updated information about activities on the Common, preparation for how to get out details on major events, public safety updates related to the Boston Common and budgetary or maintenance updates from the Parks Department.

Those who live, work and play on and around the Boston Common have an opportunity to direct its future. They can learn what's happening, provide direction, volunteer assistance and provide a foundation of new ideas. This provides an opportunity for the Parks Department and the Friends of the Public Garden to always stay one step ahead of what is needed on the Boston Common, rather than allowing the Common to fall into disrepair again.

Bidding Process

The current City of Boston bidding process for most commercial entities on public space involves a three-year contract only. This does not allow for enough return on investment for most major commercial entities. For instance, to build a restaurant you'd most likely need to build the kitchen underground to minimize imprint and maximize efficiency. That alone could require an investment that is way too large to be recovered in just three years.

Our Recommendation

This report recommends that processes for bringing in new private commercial opportunities on or around the Common should be bid out through an open process, with a contract set for at least eight years rather than the standard three. For the City of Boston a longer contract also creates greater budget certainty, provides more consistency in the product, and is likely to result in significantly larger sum for the city.

Partnerships

We would like to imagine that our city's budget has the capacity to grow and that we can do more and more good at the Boston Common with public funds. Even in good economic times, government is always under pressure to keep taxes as low as possible. It's a never-ending struggle for every department of government to keep budget increases to no more than cost-of-living adjustments to employees. The reality is that every year, under additional economic pressures, whatever cuts have to be made to the Parks Department budget in order to keep within the appropriated funds is most felt by those who use and enjoy our parks regularly. They see the daily need.

Our Recommendation

There are a number of abutters that have significant investment in the beauty and

appeal of the Boston Common. The Massachusetts Convention Center, Emerson and Suffolk Universities, neighboring businesses and residents all have the value of their services and their properties tied to the look of the Common. For example, the new carousel – installed and run by the operator of the Frog Pond – is the kind of innovative new idea for the Common, and more opportunities like this should be sought particularly in the spring and fall. Partnerships do not and must not equate to giveaways to institutions and businesses. The Common will always be the responsibility of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

Common Kiosk Sales

We take nothing away from the important work that the Boys and Girls Club does in the community. However a park badly in need of funds does not receive enough from the sale of food and other items that are sold by kiosks around the Common.

Our Recommendation

A plan needs to be put in place to gradually increase the percentage of Boston Common kiosk profits that remain in the Common. A comprehensive plan is needed to generate revenue and accomplish the goals set out in this committee.

The Problem: Lack of Information

Currently the city does not have verifiable statistical information about Boston Common usage, and the perspectives of those who use the Common most.

Our Recommendation

The Parks Department should solicit an extensive survey of usage, ideas and attitudes towards the Common. Long-term planning can only occur with more information.

CONCLUSIONS

The Boston Common is a central part of Boston and of the neighborhoods around it. These green spaces are the most valuable and most appreciated spaces in our city, and they should be the centerpiece of our city. The opportunities here are not just for an improved park but of a rejuvenated Downtown Crossing.

The Boston Common provides the City of Boston with great opportunities which have recently gone unmet. The City has not maximized the possibilities, and the members of the Special Committee on the Boston Common have written this report as a guide for the city to consider.

We urge the Parks Commissioner, the Mayor and all those with connections to the park – community stakeholders, abutters, universities, businesses and community organizations – to work together on making the Park what it can be.

The recommendations of this report are a foundation for a strategic plan that should be put together for the Common, to build upon the Master Maintenance Plan that currently exists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Special Committee on the Boston Common wishes to thank all those who have participating in our hearings and working sessions throughout the year. Special thanks to those who took a day out of their summer to join the committee on their research trip to New York.

Thanks also go to the Friends of the Public Garden, Parks and Recreation Commissioner Antonia Pollak, and committee central staffer Juan Lopez. Thank you to Pamela Andrade, a Northeastern University architecture student, who offered the renderings at the end of this report. Thanks to Reuben Kantor of Councilor Ross's office for his contributions to this report.

Above all, we thank the public for their continued passion and interest in the work of this committee, and their commitment to the future of the Boston Common. As mentioned, this report is just the start of this process, and we hope there will be continued commitment to the issues surrounding the Boston Common.



DOG PARK

CAROUSEL AT THE FROG POND

VISITORS CENTER ENTRANCE

DEER PARK RESTAURANT CONCEPT

SIGNAGE

Proposed Staging Area for MBTA Silverline Phase III Project

