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**Open Space Plan 2008-2012**

**Section 7**  
**Analysis of Needs**

**Section 7.2.12 Community Open  
Space & Recreation  
ROXBURY**

## **Section 7.2.12**

### **Community Open Space & Recreation**

#### **ROXBURY**

#### **THE SETTING**

##### History

Members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony established a village in Roxbury in 1630. By the 18th century, rural homes and country estates of Boston's wealthy families occupied this area. Roxbury farms provided fresh produce to Boston, which had become a dense settlement specializing in maritime commerce.

By the 19th century, Roxbury's rural character began to change. When the Boston and Providence Railroad built a commuter line down the Stony Brook Valley in 1834, housing began to be built for people commuting to Boston. By the mid-19th century, Roxbury's northern section, Lower Roxbury, was a full-fledged industrial mill town providing jobs for the new Irish and German immigrants. In exchange for new gas, water, and sewer lines, Roxbury was annexed to Boston in 1868. By the late 1800s, with electric streetcar service now penetrating Roxbury, residential development was rapid and extensive.

The Boston parks movement began to influence Roxbury. Roxbury alderman Hugh O'Brien urged that Boston's "country" park, comparable to Central Park in New York, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and Mount Royal Park in Montreal, be built in newly annexed Roxbury. The city broke ground on the construction of this country park in 1885, during Hugh O'Brien's tenure as mayor. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Franklin Park was one of the destinations of choice on a Sunday afternoon for Boston residents in the late 19th century. Franklin Park became the location of Boston's first sports field called the Playstead, and the nation's first municipal golf course.

The 20th century erosion of Boston's industrial base affected Roxbury adversely, as did the flight of middle class residents to the less dense suburbs surrounding Boston. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the racial composition of Roxbury changed from 80% white to 80% non-white. Housing deterioration in many sections accompanied this change as the newer residents were often poorer migrants from the South. Yet black middle class

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## Needs Analysis

professionals had begun to move in as well, attracted by the historic housing stock, much of it still in good condition.

The 1960s saw a major urban renewal effort in the residential Washington Park area of Roxbury. The Washington Park urban renewal program, begun in 1963, doubled the size of the historic Washington Park (now Malcolm X Park), and added an indoor recreation center, pool, and ice rink.

With the abandonment by the late 1960s of much housing and businesses, vacant land became abundant. This in part led to a strong grassroots community gardening movement that began in 1960 through Augusta Baily who formed the Roxbury Beautification Project. This movement is still an important feature of community revitalization efforts. Another community preservation effort was the campaign to stop the extension of I-95 through Roxbury into downtown Boston. Ultimately, this campaign generated the Southwest Corridor Park in 1987, Boston's first major new open space in almost a century (since Carson Beach in South Boston, 1924). Other lands acquired for the highway right-of-way are now beginning to be developed. It is hoped that this will contribute to an economic revival in Roxbury, as will the completion of the Big Dig and the proposed Urban Ring mass transit system.

### *Demographics/Housing*

The major population trend in Roxbury from 1950 to 1980 was population loss. Population then increased 2% from 1980 (57,751) to 1990 (58,893). However, the drop to 55,663 persons in 2000 shows a slowed rate of population loss of -5.48%.

The year 2000 Census shows 33% of Roxbury's population is in the 17-and-under group versus 20% for Boston as a whole.

In 2000, 65% were black and 7% self-identified multi-racial, while the Hispanic population proportion went up to 25%. The percent of white persons increased (6% in 1990, and 10% in 2000).

A larger proportion of Roxbury's population are in households are families than in Boston (84% versus 65%, respectively). Roxbury households had a lower median income than the Boston figure (\$27,133 versus \$29,629, respectively) and a higher percentage in poverty status (27% versus 20%, respectively). The percent of Roxbury's residents in the labor force who are unemployed is significantly higher than for Boston (12% versus 7%, respectively). Roxbury has a higher percentage of households with no vehicles than does Boston (42% versus 35%, respectively).

Needs Analysis

Housing is a critical concern in Roxbury, which has a high percentage of publicly-owned or -assisted units. Roxbury has a lower percentage of owner-occupied units than does Boston (23% versus 32%, respectively).

## Needs Analysis

**THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY***Equity and Investment*

Roxbury has a total of 597 acres in its protected open space inventory of parks, playgrounds, squares, and malls under the Parks Department and other providers. Roxbury has a ratio of 10.72 acres of protected open space per thousand persons, above the city average of 7.47 acres.

The Parks Department has invested \$8.9 million in capital construction and re-construction in the parks and playgrounds of Roxbury during the 2001-2006 period. Madison Park High School received the lion's share, with over \$3 million. This has led to improvements in its ball fields and courts that benefit not only Madison Park High School and the O'Bryant School, but also the community at large in the surrounding area.

Another important improvement was to Orchard Park. The adjacent public housing development received a complete makeover. This included the reconfiguration of the footprint of the park, as a result making it a bigger park. With the new housing, the city saw that the rundown facilities at Orchard Park needed reconstruction. To help with the park's renewal, the city sought and was awarded state Urban Self-Help funds, enabling it to make the reconstruction a more complete project to match the complete overhaul of the adjacent public housing community.

Roxbury Capital Projects 2001-2006	
Beauford Play Area	\$253,993
Blue Hill Avenue	\$14,422
Children's Park	\$202,517
Clifford Playground	\$533,360
Columbia Road	\$14,422
Crawford Street Playground	\$171,433
Eliot Burying Ground	\$195,409
Flaherty Playground	\$285,128
Franklin Park	\$220,000
Franklin Park Golf Course	\$1,573,734
Highland Park	\$92,295
Lambert Avenue Playground	\$253,993
Little Scobie Playground	\$282,710
Madison Park High School	\$3,324,008
Orchard Park	\$730,308
Trotter School Playground	\$809,387
Warren Avenue	\$14,422
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$8,971,540</b>

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## Needs Analysis

### *Assessment*

With many acres of protected open space, Roxbury possesses great variety in its open spaces. A pastoral landscape park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Franklin Park is Roxbury's link to the Emerald Necklace park system, as well as Boston's largest park. It includes natural features such as steep drumlins, forested areas, and a 7-acre pond, all connected by paths, and regional attractions such as a public golf course, a zoological park, a sports stadium for city youth, and a cross-country track facility of world championship caliber. It also includes more conventional active recreation features, like ball fields, tennis courts, picnic areas, and play lots.

Spread throughout the community are smaller parks with landscape and active recreation features. A park with historic and unique features like Highland Park represents one end of the spectrum. Clifford Playground, with its ballfields, basketball court, and play lot represents the more functional end of the spectrum.

### Preserving Existing Assets

Given the richness and multitude of Roxbury's existing open spaces, one of the assessment approaches is maintenance of effort. The city's capital improvement program has led to a large investment in Roxbury's city-owned open space facilities. Its impact has been substantial, with play fields, courts, and tot lots back in working order and in full use again. Continuing the capital program will achieve rehabilitation of other parks that require capital infusions due to cyclical wear and tear such as at lighting at Madison Park High School field, Mt. Pleasant Street Park, Winthrop Playground, and the Franklin Park Golf Course.

Improved mechanization, fiscal management techniques, and productivity measures have led to improved maintenance. Continuing to maintain these standards will help protect these facilities that are widely distributed throughout Roxbury.

### Enhancing Existing Assets

A second assessment approach is the development of new initiatives to improve existing facilities. Two items to focus on are thoroughfares and schoolyards. These are existing facilities that are only beginning to meet their fullest open space potential. The upgrading of thoroughfares is an on-going initiative of the city. A need for thoroughfare improvements has been identified in the draft BRA Roxbury Master Plan: "Provide safe and commodious streetscape designs that balance the street right-of-way between pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular movements."

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Needs Analysis

Several important thoroughfares traverse Roxbury – Melnea Cass Boulevard, Blue Hill Avenue, Warren Avenue, Humboldt Avenue, and Columbia Road are just a few that could use improved landscape treatments. Thoroughfare initiatives that have been completed in Roxbury include the Parks Department (BPRD) Columbia Road median landscaping and tree planting, the BPRD landscaping of Blue Hill Avenue medians in the vicinity of Grove Hall and Franklin Park, the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND) “Blue-on-Green” vacant lot green-up initiative on Blue Hill Avenue from Dudley Street to Grove Hall, the DND Neighborhood Enterprise streetscape initiative on Blue Hill Avenue at Grove Hall, and the BPRD Boston Youth Fund trimming and litter pick-up along Melnea Cass Boulevard. Additional thoroughfare improvements in Roxbury will further improve its public image, benefiting residents and encouraging new investments, both private and public. They will also serve to connect open spaces together and link open spaces to the neighborhoods they serve. Using the Growing Boston Greener tree planting initiative for thoroughfare would help popularize interest in side street planting.

Schoolyards can provide benefits to schoolchildren and resident children alike, such as the learning of social skills and self-confidence, and the development of physical fitness. Such facilities are well distributed in Roxbury and can provide a complement to city parks. Yet many of these spaces are paved, barren, and poorly maintained. With tall fences surrounding them, they often give the image of a holding pen rather than a nurturing space for physical and social growth. The city has developed the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, a consistent strategy for schoolyard improvement and institutional mechanisms to carry out the strategy (see Appendix 2, Open Space Inventory, for further details). It has yielded successes in Roxbury, such as at the Mason, Ellis, Dearborn, and Emerson Schools.

#### Meeting New Needs, Finding New Opportunities

A third assessment approach is investigating new needs and opportunities. Community input has identified needs for soccer fields, tot lots and spray pools (especially to service day care centers and family day care providers), and, in general, close-to-home recreation. With much vacant land still available in Roxbury, opportunities to develop family housing should include the development of children’s play areas. The Department of Neighborhood Development has often worked to develop such play opportunities along with housing. This is the approach also being taken by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

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Needs Analysis

The availability of vacant land may generate opportunities for play lots, soccer fields, and other active recreation facilities. However, given Roxbury's topography and geology, the slopes and the proximity of bedrock to surface may make construction of such facilities difficult. Vacant land may hold more promise in the abstract than in reality, particularly when buildable sites could also hold much-needed housing. A balanced planning approach is needed, one that weighs future residents' open space and housing needs, translates that into appropriate land use allocations, and engages a design process incorporating community input with maintainable facilities. This coordinated approach should be developed among agencies such as the Department of Neighborhood Development, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and the Parks and Recreation Department.

Once but a part of an estate in 18th and early 19th century Roxbury, the Shirley-Eustis House is now a restored house museum in a mixed residential/industrial area on Roxbury's eastern edge. It is the last remaining seat of a Royal Governor in the United States, built in 1744 by Governor William Shirley. Much city-owned vacant land surrounds the House. The present-day owner of the house museum, the Shirley-Eustis House Association, has acquired vacant land in the vicinity to recreate the 18th to 19th century landscape, providing the residential neighborhood with an appropriate buffer to the nearby industrial uses and open green spaces accessible to local residents and schoolchildren. A cooperative arrangement with the city has yielded an exciting public/private/community partnership to acquire, protect, and maintain greenspace that is lacking in this neighborhood.

Another initiative would promote linkages to Roxbury's abundance of public and cultural assets. A neighborhood-wide trail, as suggested in the BRA's Boston 400 draft report, or a series of sub-neighborhood trails could link the wealth of open space, historical, cultural, and environmental features, while benefiting residential and commercial areas in Roxbury. This type of initiative would be ripe for a public/private partnership approach to development and management, perhaps on a similar basis to the Freedom Trail.

A Roxbury "heritage" trail (or greenway) would connect a series of destinations for tourists to visit, such as Roxbury Heritage State Park, the Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists, Fort Hill/Highland Park, Schoolmaster Hill/Franklin Park, and the Shirley-Eustis House, to name a few. This could thus further the neighborhood's economic and community development agenda.

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The Parks Department would be willing to provide assistance as appropriate to the development of such a trail, especially since several potential sites such as Franklin and Highland Parks are Department properties. The Department, thanks to a federal grant in the mid-1990s, has created a series of Park Ranger-led neighborhood historical/environmental tours: a Roxbury tour is already available. This could provide the basis for planning the trail and interpreting the destinations.

## THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

With a large inventory of city parks, the last six years has seen a significant re-investment in Roxbury's open space through the city's capital improvement program. Maintenance was an important theme emerging from the community participation process. As underserved areas with vacant lots are redeveloped, planning to achieve adequate open space should take place. Franklin Park's dual role as a regional park and a neighborhood open space resource should be strengthened. As a neighborhood of historic and cultural diversity rich in open space resources, linkage concepts like gateways, greenways, and urban trails should be addressed.

### *Opportunities*

#### Preserving Existing Assets

- Continue the rehabilitation of existing capital facilities, including play lots, ball fields (soccer, baseball, football, etc.), ball courts, paths, and benches, such as at Dennis Street Park, Madison Park High School field, Mt. Pleasant Street Park, Winthrop Playground, and the Franklin Park Golf Course.
- Protect and preserve urban wilds through the Parks Department Urban Wilds Initiative.
- Assist community gardens with Parks Department maintenance services as needed, as organized through the Department's community garden coordinator.
- Install blue safety call boxes in parks where, in the judgment of park and police officials, the combination of park areas located far from the street or other public activity areas, *and* public safety history, warrants such infrastructure.
- Support a coordinated effort by DCR and MBTA legal and real estate management staffs to transfer ownership of the Southwest Corridor Park lands from the MBTA to the DCR.

#### Enhancing Existing Assets

- Support the Parks Department transportation study for Franklin Park. Seek to improve access to Franklin Park with entrance and edge treatments (especially at Peabody Circle), and traffic calming and management (including increased MBTA bus service to the park during holidays and weekends between May and October). Support the on-going rehabilitation and improvement of the Franklin Park Zoo by Zoo New England.

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Needs Analysis

- Promote the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND) efforts to improve the Blue Hill Avenue Corridor and the Grove Hall neighborhood enterprise zone as a means to improve the thoroughfare itself and as an important access route to Franklin Park.
- Promote the Growing Boston Greener Initiative for thoroughfare and side street tree plantings to bring greening principles to practice in Roxbury.

## Meeting New Needs, Finding New Opportunities

- Implement the planning recommendations for greenways, thoroughfares, and open spaces that arose from the BRA Roxbury Master Plan process.
- Enhance major Egleston Square thoroughfares like Columbus Avenue, Washington Street, and Seaver Street so that they will be more green and bicycle-friendly. This will improve the area's image as well as access its nearby open spaces.
- Advocate for the land banking of vacant land for future open space development. Trigger land banking when residential and commercial development occurs on other vacant parcels in Sav-Mor (southern portion), Quincy-Geneva, and Washington Park South (eastern portion), sub-areas with fewer open space resources.
- Work with the BRA, the Parks Commission, and other regulatory bodies to protect the open space districts designated by the Roxbury zoning.
- Investigate designating an urban trail for bicyclists and pedestrians linking places of recreational, historic/cultural, and open space significance in Roxbury. Include interpretive signage on the broad scope of Roxbury and African-American history in Boston. Coordinate with the efforts of the Roxbury Heritage State Park, Grove Hall Board of Trade, and the Dudley Square Main Streets Program. Target focus areas such as Walnut Avenue, connecting Malcom X Park, Horatio Harris Park, the Museum of Afro-American Artists, and Franklin Park; the Highland Park neighborhood; and the Dudley Square-Dudley Triangle-Shirley-Eustis House area.
- Support and assist the open space development efforts of the Shirley-Eustis House Association.
- Establish a pedestrian walk to connect open space in the Highland Park neighborhood. Work with the community to plan and manage this walk.

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## Needs Analysis

- Support proposed regional open space linkages, such as the Connecting the Corridors project coming from the nearby Fenway neighborhood and the extension of the Melnea Cass Boulevard Bikeway to the South Bay Harbor Trail. Ensure pedestrian and bicycle accommodation when Ruggles Street is upgraded.
- Work with the MBTA to improve the interface between the Midlands Line and adjacent residential properties. Create a buffer between the rail line and the residential uses along the right-of-way. Explore possibilities of a planted buffer, linear park, or bicycle path.

### *Community Priorities*

#### Preserving Existing Assets

- Continue to rehabilitate Parks Department facilities in Roxbury, such as at Mt. Pleasant and Franklin Park.
- Advocate for regular, consistent maintenance of Melnea Cass Boulevard by the Massachusetts Highway Department to insure its gateway role for the Roxbury neighborhood, institutional neighbors such as Northeastern University, and such future development projects.
- Keep maintenance a high priority for the parks in this neighborhood. Increase maintenance levels to address the intensive use of these parks.
- Support all community participation in helping clean up parks, major thoroughfares, and open space. Continue city efforts to counteract illegal dumping, a major problem in this area. Work with organizations that have ongoing clean up efforts.
- Support community efforts to supplement the park security provided by the Boston Police Department and the Park Rangers.
- Improve street tree maintenance. Organize neighborhood-based tree care groups.

#### Enhancing Existing Assets

- Continue the Boston Schoolyard Initiative to incorporate grass, trees, and playground equipment into public schoolyards.
- Provide opportunities for children to cool off in the summer through more off-street spray pools and street closing permits for safe hydrant use.
- Plant more trees along key streets and such major thoroughfares as Dudley Street and Warren Street, and in active recreation parks, as in Hannon and Clifford.

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Needs Analysis

- Provide a visitor center at Franklin Park, which will help welcome people into the park and increase their familiarity with its resources.
- Develop Franklin Park marketing and outreach programs targeted at community groups in the surrounding neighborhood to increase awareness of the varied events and programs that now exist beyond the zoo and golf course and of the vast improvements in the park's security situation. Develop a Franklin Park brochure and other literature in Spanish, Cape Verdean, and English to help in marketing and image-building.
- Continue to provide reduced-price admission to the Franklin Park Children's Zoo at selected times.
- Continue to target youth with facilities and programming through a coordinated recreation program that links outdoor and indoor activities.
- Focus on the needs of young girls, such as basketball, soccer, and tennis. Provide such facilities close to home.

Meeting New Needs, Finding New Opportunities

- Continue to support the open space goals of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative plan. Develop the Dennis Street Park at the earliest opportunity.
- Develop open spaces out of vacant lots. Tap into the DND inventory of vacant lots.