
Open Space Plan 2008-2012

Section 7
Analysis of Needs

**Section 7.2.15 Community Open
Space & Recreation
WEST ROXBURY**

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THE SETTING

History

Originally part of the town of Roxbury, West Roxbury broke off to form its own town government in 1851. In the same year rail service was extended to rural West Roxbury, allowing people to live in the new town but work in Boston. With the annexation to Boston in 1874, a second wave of housing construction began in the late 19th century. Yet its development has largely been of more recent times: over 3/4 of West Roxbury's current housing units were built after 1920.

The original West Roxbury village formed along Centre Street near Spring Street. The Roxbury Latin School, the oldest private school in America (1645), was built near the location of the old village and still operates there. A 19th century utopian experimental community that attracted many noted American intellectuals, Brook Farm was located in the western reaches of West Roxbury near Saw Mill Brook and the Charles River.

Demographics/Housing

West Roxbury has continued the trend of population loss begun during the seventies. Population decreased 5.2% from 31,333 in 1980 to 29,706 in 1990, and again decreased, but by only 3.5% to 28,663 from 1990 to 2000. The percentage of West Roxbury residents 65 years and older was 21%, a far higher proportion than the 10% figure for Boston. Families as a share of West Roxbury's population was higher than for Boston (78% versus 65%, respectively). This was further reflected in the percentage of youth 0-17 at 19%, almost the same percentage as for Boston (20%).

The median income of West Roxbury residents was higher than for all Boston residents: \$53,607 versus \$39,629, respectively. Only 6% of all residents were in poverty status, versus 20% for Boston as a whole. Unemployment was lower too: 3% versus 7% for Boston. Only 14% of West Roxbury households had no vehicles available to it, versus 35% for Boston households.

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While West Roxbury remains predominantly white (97% in 1980, 94% in 1990, and 86% in 2000), there has been a trend in the 1990s toward racial/ethnic diversification. The black population rose from 2% in 1990 to 6% in 2000; the Hispanic population rose from 2% in 1990 to 5% in 2000; and the Asian/Pacific Islander population rose from 2% in 1990 to 3% in 2000. Self-identified multi-racial persons accounted for 2% of West Roxbury's 2000 population.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of the West Roxbury occupied housing stock was owner-occupied. Fifty-five percent (55%) of year-round units are single-family, whereas multi-family structures with 3 or more units constitute 25% of the occupied housing stock.

THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY

Equity and Investment

West Roxbury has a total of 645 acres of protected open space, and a total of 1185 acres of total open space, both protected and unprotected. With a 2000 population of 28,663, West Roxbury has 22.50 acres of protected open space per thousand persons, more than the citywide ratio of 7.47 acres per thousand persons. However, as in East Boston, much of these protected acres are in relatively undeveloped holdings at the perimeter of the neighborhood far from the denser population centers.

In the 2001 to 2006 period, the City of Boston has invested \$0.74 million in improving Billings Field, the most centrally located of West Roxbury's four major recreational parks.

West Roxbury Capital Projects 2001-2006

Billings Field	\$744,040
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Not too long ago, the City made an even more significant investment in West Roxbury's newest and largest city-owned park, the 105-acre Millennium Park. This \$14 million investment has capped this former city landfill site, thereby reducing pollution to the Charles River. Its re-use as a park has made it the biggest "recycling project" in the state. The city completed the landfill closure and park construction in November 2000. The park portion of the project cost \$3.5 million, partly paid for by a state Strategic Urban Recreation Facilities (SURF) grant.

Assessment

West Roxbury is the most suburban of Boston's neighborhoods. Density decreases here, with an abundance of single-family homes and backyards.

The neighborhood itself is largely defined by the open spaces surrounding it. To the east are the DCR's Stony Brook Reservation, Bellevue Hill, and West Roxbury Parkway. To the west are Millennium Park, a municipally owned urban wild at the West Roxbury High School/Community Center, the DCR's Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Parkway, Brook Farm, Havey Beach, and large private cemeteries. To the south are two more cemeteries and the Roxbury Latin School and West Roxbury Quarry urban wilds. To the north is the Allandale Woods urban wild.

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“A Park with a View”

Now completed, Millennium Park has made a significant addition to the West Roxbury open space system. It has 21 acres of playing fields that feature a variety of activities including soccer, football, and lacrosse. The addition of this acreage at Millennium Park has doubled the amount of parkland devoted to playing fields in West Roxbury. Youth leagues are actively using these fields. This large new park also includes a nature study area, a play lot for children, a handicapped-accessible canoe launch on the Charles River, and a 360°-scenic overlook. At times quite windy, it is a favorite for flyers of kites.

An issue that has been addressed is improving pedestrian and bicycle access to this new park, as it is located at the western edge of the neighborhood, and separated from the residential areas by the major thoroughfare of VFW Parkway. This parkway has attractively landscaped sidewalks for use by walkers, runners, in-line skaters, and bicyclists to approach the park. However, the sidewalks themselves were often significantly deteriorated with unsafe surface conditions that are in need of repair or replacement. In recent years, the DCR rehabilitated many of the sidewalks, and others will be restored by the MWRA through its sewer project in this area.

Beyond Playing Fields

There are other assets for active field sports that are not considered protected open space yet help function to meet the neighborhood's needs. The Parkway Little League holds title to Praught Field, which contains two diamonds that supplement ball fields at Draper and Billings. Some high school students from West Roxbury who attend West Roxbury High School, Catholic Memorial High School, or Roxbury Latin School use the fields associated with these campuses in West Roxbury. Non-high school student use is also made of the West Roxbury High School fields.

With Millennium Park doubling the playing field acreage in West Roxbury, there is less pressure to address this need in the open space continuum. Instead, the issue for West Roxbury is now not so much overall open space (22.50 acres of protected open space per thousand population, a very substantial open space to population ratio), but the distribution, quality, protection of, and access to, what open space exists.

Children's play lots exist at Beethoven, Billings, Draper, and Hynes. The play lot at Millennium Park adds a fifth play lot under the Parks Department jurisdiction. The Ohrenberger School, thanks to the

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Schoolyard Initiative, has a children's play lot that is available to the public during non-school hours.

However, this is a type of facility where because of young children's limited mobility, distance is a strong factor in terms of need: the typical primary service radius for play lots is a quarter-mile, while a typical secondary service radius is a half-mile. There are large swaths of West Roxbury that are not within the primary or secondary service areas of the five existing play lots. It will essentially remain so with the addition of the Millennium Park play lot, as it is over a half-mile from West Roxbury's residential areas. However, the low percentage of households with no vehicle available helps to mitigate this problem to a certain degree.

A need has in the past been expressed by the West Roxbury Neighborhood Council for more play lots, but there are three factors to consider: most West Roxbury homes have yard space usable for children's play; there are very limited vacant lands available, if any, that are suitable for the type of construction needed for play lot development; and there is considerable competition for such lands by residential and commercial development. With an active real estate market and increasing population growth in the city, such competition is fierce, driving up prices and reducing opportunities for acquisition.

Still, though obstacles exist, a thorough review of available opportunities is needed, with some large land holdings possibly offering a chance to better distribute play lots throughout West Roxbury. The VA Hospital, MBTA holdings, and some DCR holdings may offer possibilities. Some options that appear more feasible are play lot development through the Schoolyard Initiative at the Lyndon Pilot School.

Townscape/Scenic Enhancements

The residential areas of West Roxbury are, for the most part, much admired for their attractively landscaped features. West Roxbury Parkway and VFW Parkway, both DCR facilities, provide exemplary thoroughfares that scenically enhance the overall neighborhood landscape character.

Washington Street should be targeted for improved landscape treatments that also will enhance the neighborhood's image and recreational value. Some efforts have already taken place through the Parks Department horticulture unit and its office of public/private partnerships, such as median planting beds.

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Access to Nature

West Roxbury has considerable resources available for walking/hiking, nature appreciation activities, and scenic enhancement. Substantial acreage is in a natural state: 680.05 protected and unprotected acres in West Roxbury. (Included in this acreage is the 8.9 acres of the Millennium Park riverside natural area, formerly the Municipal Shoreline urban wild, and the approximately 60 acres of the Millennium Park Meadow natural area along the slopes of this park.) Most of this acreage is protected. The largest unprotected parcels are the Roxbury Latin School natural area and the West Roxbury Quarry. Both have some acreage under the jurisdiction of the Wetlands Protection Act. The Conservation Protection subdistrict in the West Roxbury zoning code further protects certain natural resources within them should development go forward.

The major issues for natural area planning and management are the quality of and the access to existing areas in West Roxbury. Quality issues include litter and illegal dumping, control of invasive species and erosion, and native habitat restoration. Access issues include a near total lack of internal access (e.g., trails) within some sites, poor signage and markings, and the development of trail maps and brochures. The improvement of quality and access is contingent upon the documentation of existing resources and the identification of environmentally sensitive areas. This would enable the Department to more effectively restore native habitats and plan for ecologically sound access.

The Need for Connectivity

An access-related planning concept that will be explored in the future is enhancement of system connectivity. With West Roxbury's rich inventory of natural spaces, it seems a given that they should be connected into a system that would increase the utility of these seemingly isolated areas.

One foundation on which to build this system connectivity is the venerable proposal of the Charles-to-Charles Corridor. This 1975 proposal calls for the linkage of the existing Emerald Necklace corridor to natural open spaces in southern Brookline through to those in West Roxbury and Newton. With the opening of the Millennium Park, this western terminus of the Charles-to-Charles Corridor should stimulate further efforts toward planning and implementation.

Another opportunity to explore is the abandoned railroad right-of-way between Spring Street and the Boston/Dedham line that

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includes the New Haven Street Urban Wild. This potential rail trail/linear park can help improve access from the Grove Street/Spring Valley sub-neighborhood to Millennium Park. It may also support a children's play lot to better serve the surrounding area, which is currently outside any play lot's secondary service area.

Unfortunately, in response to pressure from some abutters, the MBTA has completed sale of segments of this corridor that now limit its continuity. While open space uses on the remaining portions is being sought by some in the community, the loss of continuity will limit the potential types of open space uses to be developed.

Ultimately, a neighborhood-centered trail system that links the major thoroughfares and residential areas to the multitude of natural areas in West Roxbury would have enhanced the serene, leafy character of this community, and encouraged walking, running, and bicycling, aerobic activities that help reduce obesity and mortality rates. Such a system in West Roxbury would have advanced the concept of such trails in each neighborhood that the draft Boston 400 citywide comprehensive plan has envisioned.

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

West Roxbury enjoys many natural areas and such scenic DCR facilities as Veterans of Foreign Wars Parkway, West Roxbury Parkway, and Brook Farm. More such facilities will be addressed in the coming years. Improving access to urban wilds and the Charles River shorefront and greening up major city thoroughfares are two important targets for planning. Millennium Park adds substantial space and a diversity of activities to the mix of existing open space, while improving access to nature and the Charles River. Improving access to Millennium Park and other open spaces in this neighborhood will connect the built core of West Roxbury to the more open edges of the neighborhood.

Opportunities

Capital Renewal

- Continue the rehabilitation of capital facilities such as the playing field at Hynes.

Greenways, Trails, and Townscape/Scenic Enhancements

- Green-up and make bicycle-friendly such major thoroughfares as Washington Street, Centre Street, and Spring Street.
- Work with Brookline on the planning and implementation of the Charles-to-Charles Corridor plan.
- Investigate the potential for recreational use of the remaining portions of the abandoned railroad right-of-way (former Dedham Secondary Branch) in the southern part of West Roxbury.
- Explore the feasibility of a neighborhood trail system linking recreational and natural spaces in West Roxbury.
- Develop a natural resource inventory to support the development of an ecologically sound trail system at Allandale Woods, the city's largest urban wild.

Access to Nature

- Work with the Appalachian Mountain Club, Massachusetts Audubon Society, Boston Conservation Commission, and Boston Natural Areas Network to protect and make more accessible the urban wilds and natural areas in this neighborhood. Make efforts to create, improve, and restore trails (e.g., the boardwalks at Leatherbee Woods), to develop trail maps and brochures, and provide more programming (such as guided walks). Support the Browne Fund project to create an interpretive nature trail at Millennium Park. Develop a natural resource inventory for

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Allandale Woods urban wild to support future native habitat restoration projects and ecologically sound trail improvements.

- Prepare a West Roxbury component to the citywide urban wilds/natural areas master plan.
- Increase formalized waterfront access at such protected sites as Havey Beach (DCR) and link them to Millennium Park. Support the DCR's effort to extend the Charles River Reservation along the Charles shoreline in the West Roxbury/Dedham area.
- Work with BTD and DCR to improve safety for pedestrians using and crossing VFW Parkway to access Millennium Park.
- Support the efforts of the DCR at Brook Farm as this site was noteworthy for this neighborhood's early history, and as a landmark in the nation's cultural history. Maintain a connection between this site and Millennium Park.
- Work with youth groups and neighborhood associations on natural area clean-ups and other natural area restoration projects.
- Explore, as with Forest Hills Cemetery, the use for passive recreation of the private cemeteries northwest of the VFW Parkway, such as for Ranger tours and brochure-guided bicycle tours.

Community Priorities

Access to Nature

- Work with the DCR to improve the treatment of the Rivermoor urban wild along its Charles River Park Road edge so as to improve pedestrian access to Millennium Park.

Greenways, Trails, & Townscape/Scenic Enhancements

- Work with the community and the DCR on the clean-up, repair, and marking of Stony Brook bicycle paths and the Turtle Pond fishing piers.

Recreational Needs

- Support BPS parents' efforts to develop play lots at the Lyndon Pilot School.
- Determine if vacant or underutilized lands are available for the development of children's play lots. Investigate land at the VA Hospital or the MBTA ROW for this purpose.
- Investigate the feasibility of future parkland in the Grove Street area, especially at the natural areas owned by the West Roxbury Quarry and Roxbury Latin School. Work with

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the community, the BCC, and the BRA on developing a long-range plan for the future use of the West Roxbury Quarry.