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**Open Space Plan 2008-2012**

# **Section 7**

## **Analysis of Needs**

**Section 7.2.2 Community Open  
Space & Recreation  
BACK BAY/BEACON  
HILL**

## **Section 7.2.2: Community Open Space & Recreation BACK BAY/BEACON HILL**

### **THE SETTING**

#### *History*

Beacon Hill takes its name from the sentry light erected on its peak to warn settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in case of a threat from Indians or foreign invaders. The south slope as it exists today began to emerge in the 1790s with the building of the present State House. Starting at this time, the hill was reshaped and the old beacon taken down.

Cutting and filling allowed the development of Louisburg Square and Mt. Vernon Street for substantial house lots. The north slope had three sections by the latter 1700s: stately houses around Bowdoin Square; an African-American community centered between Joy and Phillips Streets; and a “redlight” district near the Charles River. The north slope changed due largely to construction of both the Massachusetts General Hospital complex and tenement and apartment buildings in the 1800s.

The Back Bay originally referred to a tidal body of water on the western edge of the Shawmut Peninsula that stretched from Brookline to Boston Common. A dam, finished in 1821 to harness industrial water power, ran along what is now Beacon Street from Charles Street to present-day Kenmore Square. Stagnant water and the accumulation of sewage soon led to demands to fill the area. Landfill began at the Public Garden and extended west. From the 1850s to the 1890s, the entire area was filled beyond Kenmore Square and north to the present location of Storrow Drive. Parisian boulevards were the inspiration for the linear plan of the Back Bay with its stately tree-lined spine of Commonwealth Avenue. By contrast, an English model with squares influenced the layout of Beacon Hill and the South End. The Back Bay developed quickly with fashionable townhouses reflecting the affluence of its residents. Deed restrictions created consistency for building heights, setbacks, and masonry construction.

In the realm of more recent history, development of the Massachusetts Turnpike, the Prudential Center, and Copley Place have created a relatively new major residential, commercial, and

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hotel complex on the southern reaches of this neighborhood. In addition, retail activity on Newbury Street has been substantially upgraded in the past two decades. Large swaths of both Beacon Hill and Back Bay are now designated historic districts that provide continuing design controls. Boston Common, the Public Garden, and Commonwealth Avenue Mall are themselves designated City of Boston Landmarks. In addition, Boston Common and the Public Garden are National Historic Landmarks (the highest tier of listing in the National Register of Historic Places).

### *Demographics/Housing*

The 1990 census enumerated 27,808 residents of Back Bay/Beacon Hill, down 8% from the 30,212 residents in the 1980 census. The 2000 census indicated another population loss of 5% to 26,721.

The average household size is relatively small – 1.5 persons – compared with the citywide figure of 2.3. One-person households dominate Back Bay/Beacon Hill by the significantly high figure of 62% of all households compared to 37% citywide. Group quarters accommodate 8% of the population, likely due to the number of college students and some lodging house tenants.

The relative affluence of the Back Bay and Beacon Hill neighborhoods is reflected in a median annual household income of \$66,427, compared to \$39,629 for the city at large. Only 10% of households are below the poverty line, versus 20% citywide. However, perhaps due to choice of lifestyle, proximity to mass transit, or the difficulties of parking a car in this neighborhood, 43% of households do not have a vehicle versus 35% citywide.

The presence of children in this neighborhood is limited. While 19% of the city is in the 17 and under age group (1990), only 5% are in this group in Back Bay/Beacon Hill; the 2000 figures are 20% for the city and 5% for Back Bay/Beacon Hill. Only 36% of the neighborhood's population live in family households versus 65% citywide.

The presence of college students and young professionals in this neighborhood likely accounts for the differential in the population percentage for the 18-44 age group: 67% in the Back Bay/Beacon Hill neighborhood versus 52% citywide.

Masonry townhouses of 4-6 stories are the predominant type of housing in the area, dating mainly from the 19th century. Many buildings are now divided into 5 or more units. There are some

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larger apartment buildings. Back Bay/Beacon Hill has a higher percentage of 3-9 unit residential structures (45% versus 38% citywide), and a sharply higher percentage of housing units in the mid-range to larger structures (49% in structures 10 units or greater versus 30% citywide).

## THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY

### *Equity and Investment*

The area's residents have a ratio of 4.86 acres of protected open space per 1,000 persons, compared to the citywide ratio of 7.47 acres of protected open space per 1,000 persons. The 4.86 acres per thousand ratio for this neighborhood compares quite favorably with the 2.5 acres per thousand persons guideline set out in the South End Open Space Study prepared by the Boston Urban Gardeners (1988). This is a more appropriate guideline for comparison for urban core neighborhoods like Back Bay and Beacon Hill.

The total amount of open space in the area is approximately 137 acres compared to a total of 128 acres of protected open space. Due to high real estate values and highly limited availability of vacant land, the overall amount of open space is unlikely to increase unless private landowners or public development agencies can provide open space in their development plans.

In the past six years, the City of Boston has invested \$1.67 million for capital improvements in the area's parks (see table below). Boston Common received some treatment, as did the Public Garden, and the Commonwealth Avenue Mall.

#### Back Bay/Beacon Hill Capital Projects 2001-2006

Boston Common	\$830,348
Commonwealth Avenue Mall	\$235,743
Copley Square	\$21,000
Granary Burying Ground	\$173,292
Public Garden	\$414,272
Total	\$1,674,654

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### *Assessment*

#### *A Neighborhood of Regional Parks*

Because they are large, historic in character, highly visible, and centrally located in or near dense residential and business districts, the parks in this area are among the most heavily used in the greater metropolitan area: Boston Common, the Public Garden, Commonwealth Avenue Mall, and Copley Square Park (all under Parks Department jurisdiction), the DCR's Charles River Esplanade, and State House Park.

While these parks are regional and tourist destinations, they also serve the neighborhood. Both Boston Common and the Charles River Esplanade contain active sports facilities and a children's play area. In addition to these major parks, there is one children's playground each within the Beacon Hill and the Back Bay residential neighborhoods.

There was more open space created in the Back Bay, thanks to the construction of an approximately half-acre Dartmouth Street Plaza. This extended the Dartmouth Street entrance of the Boston Public Library eastward toward Copley Square Park. The city will close the southbound side of Dartmouth Street to enable the construction of this new plaza. This will help make Copley Square an even more desirable destination for special events of citywide appeal. The city completed construction on the \$1.2 million ISTEAF-funded project during 2002.

Despite heavy use, the parks in this area are generally in very good condition. The master plans and management plans that have been formulated in the past fifteen years, the most recent being the Copley Square Park Management Plan (1996), have guided capital investment, programming, and use of these parks. It is also due in large part to increased maintenance funding (especially from the Parkman Fund) and improved maintenance by the Parks Department. Funding provided by private, neighborhood-based groups has complemented the Department's maintenance efforts. These groups, primarily the Friends of the Public Garden and the Friends of Copley Square Park, reflect the substantial affluence of many of the neighborhood's residents and their elevated sense of civic responsibility. Their fundraising for additional maintenance, repair, and other associated services helps address the high standard of park development in these urbanized, heavily used parks.

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A pressing concern is the availability of extraordinary resources to restore and maintain the Charles River Reservation here in its most heavily used segment. The continued pressure on the DCR's capital and maintenance budgets has affected the condition of this premier regional park. The DCR's own Charles River Reservation Master Plan identifies the deterioration that affects the park's facilities. The new master plan then maps out an implementation schedule for restoring major portions of the park and redesigning others to meet new needs. Naturally for an historic park, a major recommendation of the plan is to "[p]reserve the essential character-defining features of the historic landscape while adapting the Basin to contemporary uses." (from the poster Charles River Basin: The Second Century, DCR, 2000) It further recommends for the Esplanade the restoration of ornamental tree and shrub plantings.

One key recommendation of the new master plan is that a pedestrian and bicycle connection should be established between the Back Bay Fens, Commonwealth Avenue Mall, Charlesgate, and the Charles River Reservation. Another recommendation is to complement the proposed pedestrian-only zone on the Esplanade islands with a wider pathway on the Storrow Lagoon's inside edge suitable for bicyclists and skaters. This is in accord with the accepted open space planning principle to reserve the space closest to a water body for pedestrians, and the next closest for users of faster modes of recreational transport (e.g., skaters and bicyclists). Also important is the recommendation to more carefully manage special events on the Esplanade to help preserve this historic landscape, but also to better distribute events to other alternative locations within the Reservation.

In response to the developments around the Charles River Reservation, two groups formed. The Charles River Conservancy (CRC) advocates for more adequate budgets for this regional park, for its protection, and for master plan implementation. The Esplanade Association (TEA) is specifically focused on this neighborhood's particular segment of the Charles River Reservation. It has conducted fundraising for specific items such as bench repair, statue restoration, and playground reconstruction.

*Tree Care: A Neighborhood Asset*

The Parks Department has planted many street and park trees during the past six years, thereby reinforcing the scenic urban character of this neighborhood. Several new park trees have been planted through a Department program where persons or other entities can donate funds for a tree with a plaque placed in the soil.

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The minimum donation also includes two years of follow-up care. Friends groups have also contributed to tree planting and care. The Department has eliminated the backlog of dead, dying, and diseased street trees needing removal. Many of the tree pits have been replanted with a mix of species to prevent large-scale losses from disease. The goal for tree care in this neighborhood in the future will be assuring adequate funding for park and street tree maintenance as many of the newer trees recently planted get older, and as already aging and stressed trees call for more frequent care.

### *The Turnpike Air Rights Connection*

Although there is a need for more ball fields, play areas, and tennis courts, such needs are highly land-intensive. Therefore, they are unlikely to be met in the near term given the intense land use pressures and high property values in this neighborhood. As mentioned before, one approach will be the provision of open space amenities as part of public and private development projects. The Parks Department will continue to work with the BRA through Article 80 and other review processes, as well as through the Parks and Recreation Commission's 100-foot rule review process, to determine the need for open space amenities as part of development projects.

This approach may yield some results as the development process proceeds for the air rights parcels over the Massachusetts Turnpike Extension. The BRA-commissioned study resulting from the work of the Strategic Development Study Committee (SDSC), *A Civic Vision for Turnpike Air Rights in Boston*, called for a new connection from the Fens to the Charles River through Parcel 10 (to be underwritten by development on Parcel 9 in the Kenmore Square neighborhood). This would also link the Commonwealth Avenue Mall to these two parks. The other Back Bay-relevant open space proposals in this study are the recommendations to leave Parcel 11 undeveloped and to limit heights or arrange massing on Parcel 12. These development restrictions are based on the goal of protecting the Fenway Studios artist housing cooperative's access to sunlight and natural northern exposure. The National Park Service has designated this building a National Historic Landmark. It will also provide some sense of openness and visual access to the sky and to a larger perspective on the skyline. That is the one virtue of the Turnpike boat sections (below-grade yet open to the sky) as they cut through the built-up neighborhoods of Boston.

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While direct open space impacts from the Turnpike air rights may be limited in the Back Bay neighborhood, one aspect of the overall scheme that should be considered is developing a connector between the Turnpike air rights east and west of the Back Bay. The connector – a bike lane – would substitute for a more direct linear feature, given the current configuration of the Prudential Center complex and the Copley Place complex. An on-street bike lane on Boylston Street and appropriate cross streets can serve a linkage function. If a bike route is more feasible as the connector, signage will be needed, as it will also be for pedestrians using this or a similar route.

See also the chapters on the Emerald Necklace and Historic Burying Grounds for further in-depth discussion of issues and recommendations important to parks in the Back Bay/Beacon Hill neighborhood.

## THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

This neighborhood's already popular parks will continue to see increasing use in the next few years, especially with the city's ongoing focus on tourism and the renewed interest in downtown residency and visitation. For many parks in the area, the need is for extraordinary maintenance and management efforts to safeguard already completed or currently pending capital improvements.

### *Opportunities*

#### A Neighborhood of Regional Parks

- Continue to enhance the Boston Parks Department's maintenance resources, especially for turf management, routine maintenance of park elements, and graffiti removal.
- Manage for the reduction of competing uses and overuse by continuing to follow the master plans and other established Parks Department policies regarding use of specific areas and facilities. Explore cooperative efforts with public, non-profit, and for-profit entities to create additional active play and sports facilities, recognizing that the expansion of ball fields, children's play areas, and courts is generally not feasible in existing parks.
- Support continued partnerships with the neighborhood's committed park friends groups to undertake extraordinary maintenance and other expenses for these heavily used regional parks.
- Focus city capital and fundraising monies on the monuments and memorials in Boston Common, the Public Garden, and the Commonwealth Avenue Mall. Encourage ongoing efforts by the city's Adopt-a-Statue Program.
- Support DCR efforts to maintain and improve the Charles River Esplanade. Support the implementation of the new master plan for the Charles River Reservation, including landscape and structure restoration, pedestrians-only Esplanade islands, a wider inboard pathway for cyclists and skaters, and improved special events management to help reduce over-use of the Esplanade. Improve access by pedestrians and bicycles to the Reservation from the neighborhood, particularly at Charlesgate, connecting the Charles River Reservation to the Commonwealth Avenue Mall and the Back Bay Fens.
- 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.

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### Tree Care: A Neighborhood Asset

- Seek out a multitude of outside sources – friends groups, neighborhood and block associations, property owners and the like – for supplemental support of the Department’s street and park tree maintenance.

### The Turnpike Air Rights Connection

- Work with the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and the BRA to ensure that open space amenities are included as part of the future Turnpike air rights developments.
- Urge the DCR to begin the planning process for re-designing Charlesgate to accommodate pedestrian and bicycle connections from the Back Bay Fens and Commonwealth Avenue Mall to the Charles River Reservation. Urge the DCR to seek opportunities from the nearby Turnpike air rights developments or TEA-21 Transportation Enhancements program for assistance in funding this large-scale enhanced multi-modal transportation project.
- Work with BTM to plan a bike lane or bike route connector to help link the Turnpike air rights parcels east and west of the Prudential Center and Copley Place complexes. Use signage to assist pedestrians on the connector route.

### *Community Priorities*

- Explore design options for maximum use of existing active recreation facilities without disturbing the peace or historic integrity of the parks or their surrounds.
- Continue to maintain the horticultural health of Copley Square and safeguard the capital investments there by public/private efforts.
- Encourage the DCR to care for Charlesgate.
- Consider enhancements for the Dartmouth Street Mall, particularly in light of the new Dartmouth Street Plaza.