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**Open Space Plan 2008-2012**

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

**Section 7.2.4 Community Open  
Space & Recreation  
CHARLESTOWN**

## **Section 7.2.4: Community Open Space & Recreation CHARLESTOWN**

### **THE SETTING**

#### *History*

Originally settled in 1629, Charlestown did not become a part of Boston until 1874. It was already a thriving harborside community by the time of the American Revolution. A naval shipyard was established there in 1800, generating a mixture of industry and port-related activities as well as large sections of tenement housing for workers. As waves of working class Europeans arrived to work in the shipyard, many of the wealthy old Charlestown families began to move out.

With World War II placing a heavy demand on the shipyard, many of the neighborhood's homes were converted into rooming houses to accommodate both workers and ship crews. The resulting concentration of immigrants, sailors, and laborers gave Charlestown a reputation that did not encourage investments in building single-family homes, businesses, or support services.

During the immediate post-war period, the area began a decline that did not begin to reverse until the urban renewal efforts of the 1970s. This urban renewal process, now completed, was part of a larger revival and rebuilding initiative that has helped restore the community, perpetuating further growth and improvement. A key part of this new growth has been the redevelopment of the Charlestown Navy Yard for office, research, and residential uses. Another promising development has been the depression of the Central Artery in the City Square-Charlestown Navy Yard Area, a project known by its acronym CANA - Central Artery North Area. With adjacent urban renewal parcels poised for mixed-use development, the opening of the new Paul Revere Park (DCR), and the reconstruction of City Square by the state, this gateway to the neighborhood has been transformed.

Other transformations from the Central Artery Project include the New Charles River Basin parks, and most spectacularly the Leonard Zakim-Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge. With significant developments in the neighborhood's demographics, Charlestown is a community that continues to grow stronger economically,

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## Needs Analysis

physically, and socially while relying on its long-established traditions and values for stability.

### *Demographics/Housing*

Once home to a predominantly blue-collar, Irish-American population, Charlestown has grown more economically and socially diverse. Housing and infrastructure improvements have attracted young professionals into the area and the conversion of the Navy Yard has accelerated this process. In fact, between 1980 and 1990, the population of Charlestown increased 10% from 13,364 to 14,718 persons, and then again by 2000 grew by 3% to 15,195 persons (versus 2.6% for Boston).

In terms of the age profiles for 2000, Charlestown is generally comparable to the city as a whole. For example, in 2000, 18% of the neighborhood population is under 18 years of age, compared to 20% for the city as a whole.

Racial and ethnic diversity has affected this community as well as the rest of the city. The Hispanic percentage increased from 2% in 1990 to 11% in 2000. Asian/Pacific Islanders went from 2% in 1990 to 5% in 2000; blacks went from 1% in 1990 to 6% in 2000. The percentage of white persons dropped from 95% in 1990 to 82% in 2000.

Public housing developments constitute a large portion of the total number of dwelling units in the neighborhood. Together, the Charles, Newtowne, Mishawum Parks, and Bunker Hill developments have a total of more than 1,500 units, nearly 20% of the community's total.

It is not clear yet whether Charlestown will continue to retain a stable population of long-term residents. An increasing number of units are being converted into rentals to be occupied by couples without children. According to the 2000 census, the median income for Charlestown was \$56,110, considerably higher than the city median figure of \$39,629. Also reflective of changes in Charlestown, the percent of Charlestown households with no vehicles available, 27%, is considerably lower than for the city as a whole, 35%.

## Needs Analysis

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

Charlestown has a total of 112 acres in its open space inventory of parks, playgrounds, squares, and malls. Protected open space, such as under Parks Department and other public jurisdictions, stands at 71 acres. That translates into a ratio of 4.67 acres of protected open space per 1000 persons, below the city's ratio of 7.47 acres. However, it compares favorably with the ratio of 2.5 acres per thousand population suggested by the Boston Urban Gardeners in the South End Open Space Study (1988) as a more appropriate guideline for inner core urban neighborhoods like Charlestown.

The City of Boston's Parks and Recreation Department invested over \$1 million in improving targeted facilities through the capital plan (see table). These include work at Ryan and Edwards Playgrounds, as well as improvements to Winthrop Square.

Charlestown Capital Projects 2001-2006	
Courageous Sailing Center	\$470,230
Edwards Playground	\$138,758
Ryan Playground	\$566,565
Winthrop Square	\$14,330
Total	\$1,189,883

*Assessment*

Charlestown can be divided into four distinct geographic areas:

Town Hill/Breed's Hill

This southern section of Charlestown is primarily residential with some institutional buildings and churches. Many of its rowhouses have been converted into condominiums and two-family houses in recent years to accommodate an influx of new residents. Historical open spaces such as the John Harvard Mall and City Square Park are in the Town Hill area. The John Harvard Mall, a set of terraces covering nearly an acre, has passive areas, historical features, and a playlot. Serving as a gateway for the entire neighborhood, City Square has been restored and re-designed, with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation as the steward of this signature open space. The Central Artery North Area (CANa) project has replaced previously existing highway ramps with development parcels.

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## Needs Analysis

The Monument Square National Register District surrounds the Bunker Hill Monument. The Training Field (aka Winthrop Square) serves as the centerpiece of a cohesive residential community known as Breed's Hill. Its large shade trees and low fence enable good visibility and five gateway entrances provide easy physical access.

Rich in passive open space, the Town Hill/Breed's Hill area has easy access to active recreation space to accommodate the expanding population: at Bunker Hill Community College (tennis courts and playing fields), the Navy Yard (tennis courts), Paul Revere Park (play lot and playing field), Rutherford Union (play lot and tennis court), and Harvard Mall (playlot). There have been improvements to, and promise to be more, connections to the riverfront from the Town Hill/Breed's Hill area, thanks to the recent opening of Paul Revere Park and the development of CA/T mitigation parks in the New Charles River Reservation. Connections to the harborfront will also improve thanks to Chapter 91/Harborwalk requirements for developments at Tudor Wharf.

### Bunker Hill/Little Mystic

This area contains most of Charlestown's one- and two-family houses occupied by the town's older families. It features a variety of playgrounds and waterfront access areas, including Ryan, Doherty, and Barry Playgrounds. Ryan provides access to the Mystic River, while Barry provides access along the Little Mystic River. The latter water body also has public housing developments and abandoned sites at its edges, including a public access boat ramp. In addition, the Charlestown High School nearby has a full complex of ball fields and tennis and basketball courts, now maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department.

The potential of the Mystic River shoreline remains unrealized except at Ryan Playground where a boardwalk has been completed, connecting to a boardwalk at the renovated Schrafft building. There is a pressing need for a thorough environmental protection strategy for the Mystic River, one that will enhance the ecosystems in the marsh, grass mud flats, and shallow waters of the river channel. With the City about to engage in a regional improvement effort for the Mystic River with five other municipalities and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, it is anticipated that such an environmental protection strategy will be a key product of this effort.

A demand exists for passive areas to serve the large number of elder residents in the area. The small Olmsted-designed space at

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## Needs Analysis

the north edge of Doherty has been improved, but the new formal passive area on the Bunker Hill Street side of Doherty needs improvement.

### Charlestown Navy Yard

This area has in the last decade and a half developed as a distinct neighborhood with new affordable, elderly, and market-rate housing. Many of the historic buildings have been rehabbed as office space and as research facilities to provide employment and a substantial daytime population. While Shipyard Park has expanded into a family-oriented facility, the wharves now have increased public access. The Parks and Recreation Department has infused capital dollars into the Courageous Sailing Center to rehabilitate the pier and other physical features, as well as lead a fund-raising campaign to help pay for the program's operating costs. A signature recreation feature for Charlestown, this program helps adults, youths, and children access the watersheet of Boston Harbor.

The primary need here is to further improve access to the existing and proposed facilities at the Yard for other Charlestown residents. Opportunities exist to increase access into the Navy Yard from the surrounding community by paved pathways and signage on the north side of Chelsea Street linking the neighborhood to the existing gate 4, 5, and 6 crossing locations.

### Rutherford Avenue and the Neck

This area is on the western side of Charlestown bordering Somerville and is dominated by transportation arteries. While there is a small residential enclave north of Cambridge Street, most land uses are commercial or industrial. The Bunker Hill Community College is located in this area across from the Phipps Street Burying Ground.

This section of Charlestown has few open spaces, primarily the playlots at Rutherford/Union and Caldwell Street.

The Millers River has been polluted by encroaching industrial uses and has lost its vitality as a natural resource. As part of the New Charles River Reservation Project (a CA/T mitigation measure), the Millers River, and the Charles, has been made more attractive, benefiting this part of Charlestown. To make pedestrian and bicycle connections from the North End, across wide, busy New Rutherford Avenue, to the New Charles River Reservation/Charles River Dam and the new Paul Revere Park (DCR), additional planning is required.

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Needs Analysis

The Boston Transportation Department completed a study of the Rutherford Avenue Corridor, a major artery in this area. The study calls for ways of increasing capacity and making it multi-modal (pedestrians, bicycles, transit, as well as cars) while buffering the neighborhood via increased open space. The implementation of this plan may yield a new face for this part of Charlestown, enhancing this regional transportation facility while it generates open space assets for this neighborhood.

## THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Broad themes for open space planning in Charlestown include the consolidation and improvement of access to the existing system through opportunities set up by transportation and development projects, and the rehabilitation of existing open spaces to respond to changing community needs.

### *Opportunities*

#### Neighborhood-wide

- Continue to fund capital rehabilitation of city park facilities as needed in the capital renewal cycle, at such parks as Barry, John Harvard Mall, Rutherford/Union, Winthrop Square, Cook Street, and Ryan.
- Develop public/private partnerships with area businesses for park improvement projects.
- Encourage the development of the East Coast Greenway connection to Boston through Charlestown.
- Support the regional Mystic River Corridor Strategy effort as a way to create more open space and recreational opportunities along the Mystic shoreline, and to protect and restore the river's environmental assets.

#### Bunker Hill/Little Mystic

- Realize the Little Mystic's potential as an accessible resource for recreation, relaxation, and education through the revitalization of underutilized sites such as the abandoned public access boat ramp.
- Utilize the model of the boardwalk at Ryan and other sites to improve public access to the water.
- Preserve existing views of Charlestown's waterfront from within the neighborhood. Make project proponents aware of the need to maintain public visual access to the waterfront through the development review process.
- Support the zoning and design guidelines incorporated in the City of Boston's Municipal Harbor Plan, especially the requirement for 50% open space designation for all projects along the waterfront.

#### Charlestown Navy Yard

- Improve local residential access into the Charlestown Navy Yard by planning for designated paths from the Chelsea Street edge of the Yard at gates 4, 5, and 6.

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Needs Analysis

Rutherford Avenue and the Neck

- Work with the Boston Transportation Department (BTD) and with MHD during the implementation of the Rutherford Avenue Corridor study to assure viable open spaces are developed along with the transportation benefits of this proposed multi-modal facility.
- Urge a coordinated effort by BTD, DCR, and MHD to create pedestrian and bicycle connections between the New Charles River Reservation, Paul Revere Park, and the DCR parklands of the North End and the Back Bay/Beacon Hill neighborhoods.

*Community Priorities*

- Further expand the Courageous Sailing Center at Pier 4 with more programs for Boston youth, new memberships, and expanded facilities.
- Install security lighting with an historic look at Phipps Street and Bunker Hill cemeteries.
- Provide further support for the Park Partners program.
- Plant additional trees and shrubs in parks throughout the neighborhood.
- Explore means of providing neighborhood bikeways that connect to regional bikeways in adjacent municipalities, either through Harborwalk or on-street bike lanes.
- Support the Friends of City Square Park in the effort to sustain the Galvin Green trees saved from the CANA parcels.
- Use city capital improvement funds to rehabilitate John Harvard Mall.
- Investigate the need for handball during the public participation process for any future renovation of Ryan Playground.