
Open Space Plan 2008-2012

Section 7

Analysis of Needs

**Section 7.2.5 Community Open
Space & Recreation
DORCHESTER**

Section 7.2.5: Community Open Space & Recreation DORCHESTER

THE SETTING

Dorchester is the single largest neighborhood in Boston. Its northernmost boundary includes the relatively new and still expanding South Bay Shopping Center. From there the community extends south, its eastern edge along Dorchester Bay to the mouth of the Neponset River. Dorchester's southernmost extent is to the city limits along the Neponset River while to the west it borders Mattapan and Roxbury. Across this vast community are many residential neighborhoods and the commercial districts serving them. Some of the most significant include Uphams Corner, Fields Corner, Savin Hill, Jones Hill, Popes Hill, Bowdoin/Geneva, Harbor Point, Codman Square, Cedar Grove, Lower Mills, Adams Village, and Gallivan and Morrissey Boulevards. Dorchester is served by the MBTA's Red Line and many interconnected bus lines while the Southeast Expressway skirts along its eastern edge.

In the past, some planning processes have divided this community into North and South Dorchester, an artificial designation largely unrecognized and unused by residents. Therefore, it will not be used here.

History

The Town of Dorchester was settled and incorporated in 1630, encompassing present-day Dorchester, South Boston, Mattapan, and Hyde Park. In 1633, Puritans landed at Columbia Point, an area that was later defended from a fort atop Savin Hill. In that first year a burying ground was dedicated in Uphams Corner. Dorchester is also home to one of the city's oldest extant wood frame houses, the Blake House, constructed in 1648.

Although for nearly 200 years Dorchester developed primarily as a farming community, its harborfront and riverfront hosted commerce, particularly at Lower Mills and around Commercial Point. In the early 1800s, Dorchester estates and summer houses were built as second homes for wealthy Bostonians, especially on the area's numerous hilltops. South Boston was annexed to the city in 1804. In 1868, Hyde Park was incorporated as a separate town. In 1870, when Dorchester itself was annexed to Boston, it was still a rural community of 12,000 residents. But in that same year came

Needs Analysis

railroad access and ever-increasing residential and commercial development that began to transform what had been essentially an agricultural area. Upper-class Yankees and Irish built one- and two-family Victorian homes on Savin Hill and Jones Hill. At the junction of five streetcar lines, Uphams Corner became Dorchester's marketplace.

By 1920, with new streetcar and municipal water lines supporting growth, the population climbed to 150,000. Between 1950 and 1980, however, the neighborhood's population dropped by 23,000 people as many families joined the suburban exodus and the process of disinvestment in the community had begun. This movement was facilitated by the 1959 opening of the Southeast Expressway and the closing of the Old Colony Railroad commuter line.

Replacing those who left Dorchester were at first black families, then followed more recently by Cape Verdean, Latino, Vietnamese, and other immigrant families, as well as those who generally understood the high value yet low prices for many of Dorchester's older residences.

Demographics/Housing

During the triple-decker era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Dorchester attracted working-class families, mainly of Irish and other European descent. Predominantly Catholic, the area became delineated by parishes. Since the post-World War II suburban migration of the mid-twentieth century, the population has stabilized and begun to rise, from 82,912 in 1980 to 85,698 in 1990, a 3.4% increase. The population increase has accelerated further, with a 8.4% increase between 1990 and 2000 to a total of 92,862.

In 1990, 26% of Dorchester's residents were under the age of 18 versus 19% for the city. In 2000, 27% of Dorchester's residents were under the age of 18 versus 20% for the city. Thus, Dorchester will likely remain one of Boston's primary child-raising neighborhoods with the attendant needs for youth-oriented services and infrastructure that go with such an age group. Household median income and poverty figures are comparable between the city and Dorchester. The percentage of Dorchester's households that do not own a vehicle is 27%, while for the city it is 35%.

Dorchester has a higher share of owner-occupied units (36%) compared to the city as a whole (32%). Unlike other Boston neighborhoods, such as Allston-Brighton and the Fenway where high college student populations lower the number of family

Needs Analysis

households, families form 80% of Dorchester's households. This compares with 65% across the city.

In 1990, the racially diverse population of Dorchester included 49% whites, 32% blacks, 11% Hispanics, 4% Asians and Pacific Islanders, and 3% other. In 2000, the racial make-up has changed further: 34% are white, 37% are black, 11% Hispanic, 11% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 17% in other racial/ethnic categories.

In Dorchester, 1 - 4 unit frame housing predominates: 86% of Dorchester housing units are in the 1 - 9 unit range versus 68% for the city. Besides the triple-decker form, there are embellished Victorians, large apartment buildings, and ranch houses. Density increased by 462 persons per square mile in Dorchester for the ten-year period between 1980 and 1990 versus an increase of 1188 persons per square mile in the 1990-2000 period.

THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY

Equity and Investment

The 351 acres of protected open space in Dorchester, largely under the jurisdiction of the City of Boston and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DCR), give the area's residents a ratio of 3.78 acres of protected open space per 1,000 persons compared to a citywide ratio of 7.47 protected acres per 1,000 persons. This lack of quantity is, however, somewhat balanced by the wide range of open space types, including passive and historic landscaped parks, harbor promenades, playgrounds, beaches, community gardens, and, increasingly, the Neponset River area.

The open space system is coming closer to realizing its full potential in some important areas. They include areas along the Neponset River, the harbor shoreline, and the Old Colony railroad right-of-way adjacent to them, where important restoration and expansion of open space is underway largely through the DCR. When the city, state, and community fully implement the long-range comprehensive plans for these key resources, the amount of open space in Dorchester will substantially increase. Significant increases in Dorchester's usable open space acreage has occurred (see below, "On the Shores of the Neponset") with the opening of Pope John Paul II Park (2001) and the Neponset River Rail Trail/Greenway (2002).

Under the City of Boston capital improvement program, eleven neighborhood parks and playgrounds, and one historic cemetery,

Needs Analysis

received improvements totaling over \$4 million (see table). These included renovations at Doherty-Gibson Playground (aka Townfield), Dorchester Park, Ryan Play Area, and Roberts Playground. The reconstruction at Mothers' Rest at Four Corners, formerly known as Corbett Park, included the additional of several vacant lots, enabling the expansion of the park to accommodate new features.

Dorchester Capital Projects 2001-2006	
Mothers' Rest at Four Corners	\$610,854
Doherty-Gibson Playground	\$187,478
Dorchester North Burying Ground	\$295,189
Dorchester Park	\$384,395
Downer Avenue Playground	\$187,478
Garvey Playground	\$276,435
Hemenway Playground	\$807,552
Martin / Hilltop Playground	\$44,434
Miranda Memorial Park	\$188,848
Roberts Playground	\$216,011
Ryan Play Area	\$677,633
Walsh Playground	\$216,011
Total	\$4,092,316

Assessment"On the Waterfront"

The Southeast Expressway cuts through the eastern edge of Dorchester, creating a physical barrier between most of its residential areas to the west and the waterfront to its east, with the exception of the Savin Hill, Columbia Point, and Port Norfolk neighborhoods. Columbia Point, Port Norfolk, and Savin Hill, while blessed with a diverse open space inventory, are comparatively inaccessible from the rest of Dorchester due to the Expressway, much like the North End is physically isolated from downtown Boston due to the elevated Central Artery. Columbia Point, separating the South Boston shoreline from Dorchester and originally a "calf pasture" used for grazing, has now developed institutional uses such as the University of Massachusetts Boston campus and the John F. Kennedy Library. While splendid facilities in themselves, Columbia Point's many institutions have poorly integrated open space systems that need better linkages. Additional tree planting on existing avenues and roads would help improve the scenic qualities of this area.

The renovated Harbor Point housing development has attracted a stable residential population despite the area's relative isolation. With certain recreation facilities on-site, a new DCR waterfront park along its eastern edge, and a new pedestrian/bicycle connection to

Needs Analysis

the South Boston beaches, the Harbor Point housing development now feels less isolated.

Sandwiched between the ramps of Morrissey Boulevard and the Southeast Expressway, Savin Hill is a small but stable residential community with grand Victorians and triple-deckers that have spectacular views of the Harbor and access to Savin Hill Bay. However, Savin Hill is physically disconnected from the rest of the city but for a single road bridging the Southeast Expressway.

The Savin Hill area, while blessed with a diversity of open spaces, could benefit from further enhancement of local facilities. Two such enhancement strategies would be development of the existing beaches in the area and the introduction of a stabilization program for other natural resource areas in the neighborhood, such as, the urban wild at Patten's Cove. In response, the DCR has undertaken a project to restore Savin Hill Beach while protecting coastal wetland resources (the project is almost completed). In accordance with its recently completed master plan, the Parks Department has undertaken a phased capital improvement program for Savin Hill Park, an historic landscaped park in the heart of the neighborhood.

Port Norfolk will continue to undergo transformations as its former industries are converted to housing and commercial development. This area can anticipate future development of DCR parkland as the Lower Neponset River Master Plan is implemented.

Open space opportunities exist on the Dorchester waterfront. The proximity of McConnell Playground and Malibu Beach to Dorchester Bay provides elements for developing the Bay as a regional aquatic recreation center. Recent park developments on Dorchester Bay at Tenean Beach by the DCR and at Rainbow Park have created two much-needed facilities popular for strolling, sitting, picnics, children's play, swimming, and fishing. The DCR efforts now underway will allow continuous waterfront access to Tenean Beach, potentially increasing the points of entry to the water's edge from the neighborhood.

The Inland Neighborhoods

To the west of the Expressway is the residential area around Uphams Corner (where Dudley Street and Columbia Road meet) and Everett Square (where Massachusetts Avenue and Columbia Road meet), which consists of triple-decker, two-family, and large Victorian-era homes. Many of these homes show signs of recent rehabilitation efforts. Recreational and cultural opportunities are becoming available with improvements to existing open space

Needs Analysis

facilities and many concerts and other performances presented at the historic Strand Theatre. The houses along Dorchester Avenue, a major local thoroughfare, are interspersed with light industrial and commercial uses. The Midlands rail corridor defines the western edge of this neighborhood.

The Uphams Corner residential area is currently underserved in terms of open space facilities. The increasing population, especially that of children, will put even more pressure on existing parks and playgrounds in the coming decade. Part of the problem is a lack of direct access to the shoreline facilities at Columbia Point and at Savin Hill. Columbia Road, a major arterial in this sub-neighborhood, provides access to the DCR's recently rehabilitated South Boston harbor beaches. However, MBTA bus service to these beaches from inland residential areas is still needed to expand access to these highly valued recreational resources.

Lower Mills has experienced a general housing revitalization effort for some years now, in part spurred by the conversion to apartments and condominiums of the Baker Chocolate Mill complex. Condominium conversion has also taken place around Ashmont, as well as renewed commercial activity. Changes in the Neponset area will focus on the DCR's opening of the Neponset River Trail, a pedestrian and bicycle facility, as well as the new Pope John Paul II Park at the former Neponset Drive-In and Hallet Street Landfill sites.

In areas to the west, community revitalization efforts are ongoing. Fields Corner has already experienced substantial revitalization projects, stimulated by city investment. Fields Corner is also a new Main Streets District. In Codman Square, the Codman Square Community Development Corporation and the city continue to support development and investment at this important commercial node. Today Dorchester's commercial nodes have undergone changes attributable to the disappearance of the streetcar lines, shifts in population, and the advent of Main Streets Districts in several of Dorchester's retail areas. Generally, the sections of the community nearer the waterfront have experienced more revitalization activity than the western portions of the neighborhood. Dorchester Avenue, which is a primary commercial artery of the neighborhood, is in need of extensive tree planting and general "greening" measures. Overall, many streets in Dorchester are distinguished by their mature shade trees, but there are gaps in the presence or health of street trees. This makes the street trees' overall positive impact on Dorchester's streetscapes "patchy" in its effect.

Needs Analysis

Dorchester's neighborhood parks are multi-purpose facilities, and tend to be well distributed throughout the community, providing ball fields, ball courts, and playground areas. There are also some notable areas for passive recreation in the neighborhood parks such as the wooded portion of Dorchester Park with its Olmsted design.

Dorchester's neighborhood parks are generally in good condition, and in some cases residents are apprehensive that park popularity will attract overuse. Still, certain sub-neighborhoods such as those around Codman Square, Meetinghouse Hill, and the Bowdoin Street area lack sufficient neighborhood park space. Coordination with schools and improvements to schoolyards as noted in Community Priorities below can help mitigate this situation throughout Dorchester. Improvements to parks on a regular cycle of capital rehabilitation continues to be needed; examples include Byrne, McConnell, Quincy-Stanley, Ripley, and Roberts.

Cedar Grove Cemetery and South Dorchester Burying Ground are important for contributing green vistas to their surrounds. Cedar Grove also helps buffer the Neponset River and ecologically sensitive areas along its banks from human development.

An initiative is being discussed that would promote linkages to Dorchester'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 Dorchester. 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. It could provide a series of destinations for tourists to visit, which could further the neighborhood's economic development agenda. The Dorchester Historical Society has expressed interest in this concept, as have several neighborhood activists. In the meantime, the Browne Fund has made a \$15,000 design grant to the Dorchester Historical Society for Allen Park, the original Dorchester Town Commons. This would certainly be a destination along such a trail.

Growing Community Spirit

The community gardens in Dorchester, as in other neighborhoods, have largely been built and nurtured on former vacant lots. Entities such as the Boston Natural Areas Network have built and supported the 23 diverse community gardens throughout

Needs Analysis

Dorchester. These gardens serve a role in ameliorating the dense cityscape that resulted from the rapid development of Dorchester in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many are on former house lots and serve as the only openings in the dense urban fabric in certain sections of this neighborhood. Community gardens have also been bright spots bringing neighbors together and representing their future hopes for community revitalization.

On the Shores of the Neponset

The ecosystem of the Neponset River shoreline has notable and vulnerable natural resource qualities. Sustained efforts of the DCR and the community - especially the Neponset River Greenway Coordinating Council - have been important in keeping out damaging uses. Future efforts must balance protection with public access and recreational opportunities, which will in turn reinforce the constituency for resource protection.

In the mid-1990s, the state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs helped this cause by designating the Neponset River Estuary as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). This official designation gives this area a higher level of state environmental review for development within its boundaries. It also recognizes the high quality of the natural resources in the Neponset River Estuary, despite its proximity to a major metropolitan center. With the opening of Pope John Paul II Park, the DCR has taken a great leap forward toward realization of the Lower Neponset River Reservation Master Plan. Another milestone in the implementation of the Master Plan is the opening of the Neponset River Greenway on an abandoned rail corridor. This pedestrian/bicycle path helps link the regional Pope John Paul II Park to other Dorchester communities beyond the immediate Neponset sub-neighborhood.

The DCR should continue to implement the Master Plan that it completed in the mid-1990s for the Lower Neponset River Reservation, and connect this Reservation to the Dorchester Shores Reservation. To increase the benefits of this linear recreation system, further planning efforts are needed to extend it beyond Dorchester. The Neponset River open space system should continue westward to Mattapan, Milton, Hyde Park, and beyond. To be able to go from Lower Mills or Port Norfolk to the Fowl Meadow, Stony Brook, Mother Brook, Charles River, and Blue Hills Reservations should be the energizing vision for implementing the Master Plan for the Lower Neponset River Reservation and for planning its eastward extension.

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Since the City of Boston has rehabilitated most parks in the recent past, many neighborhood park issues relate to management and maintenance. Continuing the capital rehabilitation cycle on a consistent basis will be important for fulfilling the open space needs of this community. Playground equipment safety and turf care are ongoing concerns, along with general park care and security. There is interest in extending Park Partners programs, especially to provide more family activities.

Beyond the care of existing facilities, there is great interest in expanding public open space resources and addressing environmental concerns. Besides the focus on the waterfront, there are opportunities to strengthen the green space system in the southern area of Dorchester with improved connections. Street tree planting and care is important. Quality open space is needed in housing complexes. Demonstrated desire for additional community gardens will warrant attention. Given the vacant land opportunities and the several areas underserved by open space in Dorchester, balanced long-term community redevelopment will need new open spaces to accompany new housing and commercial developments.

The quality of life in Dorchester can be further improved by opening further access to the shoreline. Designating paths and transportation routes to facilities like Joe Moakley Park, Carson Beach, Savin Hill Bay, and Pope John Paul II Park will provide additional recreational opportunities for a greater number of neighborhood residents. Linkage between the Neponset River Reservation and the DCR's other reservations should be the energizing vision for the neighborhood as well as a legacy for Charles Eliot, who planned much of this system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Opportunities

"On the Waterfront"

- Continue to address water quality improvements along the waterfront. Support the BWSC sewer separation projects, the MWRA CSO Control Project, and the DEP Chapter 91 and Boston Conservation Commission reviews of waterfront projects.
- Increase and improve community access to Dorchester Bay. Support the DCR's construction of a boardwalk along the Southeast Expressway embankment linking Tenean Beach

Needs Analysis

- to Savin Hill via Victory Road Park. Encourage the DCR to provide continuous waterfront access and expanded parkland in their negotiations with Boston Gas. Develop commercial activities such as restaurants, boat rental, and shops to complement recreational activities at Tenean Beach. Support plans for a new MBTA station providing access to the waterfront in conjunction with the Old Colony project.
- Prepare a plan for recreation, open space, greening, and other environmental improvements in Port Norfolk that recognizes the historic character of the area. Support the timely implementation of the capital developments proposed for the Port Norfolk area in the DCR master plan for the Lower Neponset River Reservation. Explore with the DCR the development of recreational piers, such as at Shaffer Paper.
 - Plan for new aquatic recreation opportunities at Savin Hill Bay by programming the improved Malibu and Savin Hill Beaches. Screen the traffic impacts of Morrissey Boulevard with landscaping.
 - Continue the Harborwalk between the Kennedy Library and Carson Beach through Calf Pasture.
 - Develop a linkage plan for the open spaces in the Columbia Point sub-neighborhood. Increase community use of institutional ball fields and open spaces at slack times. Increase scenic quality through a plan-driven tree and landscape planting program for this sub-neighborhood's roadways.
 - Support the DCR work to increase continuous access to Tenean Beach as a means to increase neighborhood access to this waterfront recreation area. Support the work of the Boston Water and Sewer Commission to decrease stormwater-driven pollution of Pine Neck Creek.
 - Explore revenue production for open space from concessions such as boat rentals at suitable locations near shoreline recreational areas.

The Inland Neighborhoods

- Continue to support extending the greening of Columbia Road. Examine the possibility of designated bicycle lanes and a designated bike route with signs to improve access to Joe Moakley Park and the harbor beaches from Dorchester's residential areas and from Franklin Park.
- Expand access to Carson Beach through direct MBTA bus service to the McCormack Bathhouse from the inland residential communities.

Needs Analysis

- Increase the inventory of public green space in the Meetinghouse Hill/Mt. Bowdoin area. Investigate the vacant parcels surrounded by Richfield, Bellevue, and Hamilton Streets for their potential development as open space.
- Develop pedestrian-scale open spaces to complement the neighborhood-level commercialization of Uphams Corner and Everett Square. Support the efforts of the Department of Neighborhood Development Main Streets program in Uphams Corner.
- Examine the Midlands rail tracks right-of-way for open space opportunities.
- Explore establishing additional play lots and other active recreation areas for youth in certain underserved sub-neighborhoods such as Uphams Corner, Jones Hill, Everett Square/Columbia Road, Fields Corner, Ashmont, Neponset, and Codman Square. Coordinate with the School Department and the Department of Neighborhood Development in targeting schoolyards in such areas for Schoolyard Initiative improvements.
- Continue to fund capital rehabilitation of city park facilities as needed in the capital renewal cycle, such as at Byrne, McConnell, Quincy-Stanley, Ripley, and Roberts.
- Support the BRA Dorchester Avenue Plan to improve the streetscape along Dorchester Avenue with a public/private partnership for tree planting and maintenance.
- Develop a street tree planting plan for Dorchester's residential areas using a strategic approach that builds on other capital improvement or economic development efforts as well as existing well "treed" streets. Support the Growing Boston Greener effort especially in this neighborhood.
- Continue and expand the Park Partners and ParkARTS programs to help stabilize maintenance and security as well as to enhance park programming for special events and sports, youth, and community activities.
- 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.

On the Shores of the Neponset

- Increase public access and open space facilities all along the Neponset River while protecting and stabilizing the ecosystem. Support the DCR's completion of a recreational trail system with boardwalks, observation areas, and docks along the Neponset and on the abandoned rail corridor.

Needs Analysis

- Encourage planning for a path system to link Dorchester Park and Cedar Grove Cemetery to the river. Encourage the MHD to restore a zone of suitable plant materials between the Southeast Expressway and the shoreline. Work with the DCR to enable Dorchester residents to fully utilize the new Pope John Paul II Park to help meet the open space needs of the community.
- Focus on public access and the development of passive and water-oriented recreational facilities in the Lower Mills area. Support efforts of the state Department of Environmental Management to develop the Lower Mills Heritage State Park.
 - Coordinate with the DCR, MEPA, BRA, Park Commission, Conservation Commission, and other agencies to review development projects in the Neponset River Estuary ACEC and near the Neponset River Reservation properties and associated resources.
 - Link Pope John Paul II Park to future and existing DCR parklands in Port Norfolk and the Dorchester Shores Reservation. Plan for the extension of the Neponset River Reservation westward to Mattapan, Milton, Hyde Park, and southward to the Fowl Meadow and other DCR reservations.

Growing Community Spirit

- Continue to provide ancillary support to the large number of community gardens through the City small grant program to support small-scale improvement projects at each site.

Community Priorities*“On the Waterfront”*

- Coordinate city/DCR jurisdiction on shoreline issues, such as Yacht Club expansion and potential beach pollution.

The Inland Neighborhoods

- Explore the feasibility of establishing new parkland in the neighborhood through the Parks Department’s Open Space Acquisition Program.
- Develop Columbia Road as a tree-lined thoroughfare to link the inland neighborhood areas to Joe Moakley Park.
- Initiate an open space/streetscape planning process for the Newmarket Square area through discussions between concerned business groups and the city. Build upon the work that has been done by the Parks Department to rehabilitate Clifford Playground.
- Provide more community policing at parks to discourage illegitimate activities like public drinking and drug use. Coordinate the Boston Youth Fund program with existing

Needs Analysis

Park Partner groups to optimize maintenance of open space resources in the neighborhood.

- Support development of quality open space in publicly-assisted housing sites.
- Provide more street hockey courts in parks.
- Continue and expand Park Partner opportunities at parks for which community members need support.

On the Shores of the Neponset

- Support the DCR's planning efforts for recreational access all along the Neponset from the Fowl Meadow Reservation to the mouth of the river.