
Open Space Plan 2008-2012

Section 2
Introduction

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Section 2.1:

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The identity of Boston is inextricably intertwined with its open space. From town commons and burying grounds of the early Colonial settlements, to the now institutionalized co-development of open space with transportation and other urban infrastructure, open space has become an essential part of Boston's urban fabric. It has been Boston's genius to generally balance human needs expressed through the marketplace with those expressed through other means. It is the purpose of this document to express Boston's needs for open space – in other words, the public consensus for livable urban development -- in part through adequate open space. This document also expresses a multitude of ways to meet those needs.

Past Open Space Planning

Planning for open space has been a boon for Boston, particularly in the recent past. The fortunes of the city park and recreation system had been in near collapse by the early 1980s. Deferred maintenance and limited capital reinvestment had resulted in negative impacts not only on the system itself, but also on the surrounding neighborhoods. Open space advocates and neighborhood activists, however, determined that the situation must turn around for the sake of the neighborhoods and the city, as well as the parks and recreation areas themselves. This was expressed in the 1987 Boston Foundation report, *The Greening of Boston: An Action Agenda*.

The City of Boston responded with a new Open Space Plan in 1987 that inventoried the deteriorated conditions of the municipal park system. It also set out guidelines as to how to proceed to repair the damage and equitably distribute the benefits of the system's revitalization. By 1997, nearly 100% of the system had been affected by a huge infusion of capital redevelopment that touched all neighborhoods.

In 1993, while this capital reinvestment effort was well underway, a new citywide Open Space Plan was issued. It went beyond the near-exclusive focus on capital reinvestment in the existing city park and recreation system. It saw that open space was a growing

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need in a dynamic city. Recreation needs change, as do potential and available opportunities to fulfill those needs. Who in the 1980s would have thought that soccer and skateboarding would become the popular recreational activities they are today? That plan foresaw the need for accommodating new activities in the city park system, as well as continuing the revival of the existing park system. It saw the growing importance of environmental protection in open space planning and management. It saw the changing demographic character of the city's population, with more immigrants and their needs, and other factors.

It saw that the two giant infrastructure projects – the Big Dig (CA/T Project) reconstruction of Interstate 93 and development of a new extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike to Logan Airport via a Third Harbor Tunnel (Ted Williams Tunnel); and the MWRA construction of the Deer Island secondary sewage treatment plant and nine-mile outfall tunnel – would provide significant opportunities and challenges for the city's open space system. The Big Dig has completed, or is now about to complete, the creation of open spaces in Central Boston, Charlestown, East Boston, South Boston, and the South End. Many of these will extend existing park systems like the Charles River Reservation and the East Boston Greenway, or help create new systems like the South Bay Harbor Trail and the downtown Boston Surface Artery corridor.

The new MWRA regional water pollution control plant has led to substantial improvements in the harbor's water quality, generating demand for access to the water for recreational use. The open space plan saw that interest in the harbor beaches would consequently increase from this water quality improvement, following the lead of the Back to the Beaches plan of 1993. Issued by the Joint Commission on the Future of the Boston Harbor Beaches, with project management performed by Boston Parks Department staff, it drew an attainable vision of regional water-based recreation close-to-home for thousands of Boston residents. The MDC (a predecessor agency to the DCR), stewards of the harbor beaches, soon began to reinvest in these valuable resources, reconstructing the South Boston beaches and Constitution Beach in East Boston.

A New Plan for Open Space

Much from the 1993, and a subsequent 2002, open space plan has been implemented. In the interim, new opportunities and challenges have developed and are continuing to develop. After years of losing population, Boston is now in a strong upswing in terms of population size. It is also a more diverse city, with

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immigrants from many more different lands than were previously represented. The non-white population is increasing its share of the total population of the city. Recreation programming for youth is more important, as the need for after-school care has increased with the number of parents and guardians working during the day. With the increased pressure for academic performance in schools, less time in the school day is devoted to physical activity for children, such as recess and gym. Therefore, after-school, evening, and weekend programs have increased their participation rates overall, putting pressure on park and recreation facilities throughout the system.

Environmental protection has become a major factor in open space decision-making. Three of Boston's newest parks in Boston are on capped landfills: Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor; Pope John Paul II Park on the Neponset River; and Millennium Park on the Charles River. Capped as part of a state imperative to reduce the water quality impacts from these old landfills, they illustrate the Chinese proverb that "crises present opportunities." All three are significant open spaces for the city while improving the water bodies they abut.

Brownfields, vacant lands contaminated by pollutants, usually from their previous use(s), are also "crises presenting opportunities." One case in point is a former industrial site on Reservation Road in Hyde Park that was recently cleaned by the city and redeveloped as a park along Mother Brook. Reservation Road Park contains a soccer/football field, a skateboard park, and a restored riverbank with a nature trail. Others recently cleaned and converted to open space use are the Condor Street Beach and the Belle Isle Coastal Preserve sites in East Boston. The city invested in redesign and engineering to convert these two brownfields into attractive coastal access and wetland restoration sites.

Many urban water bodies are "brownfields under water." The prime example for the city is the Muddy River, the water body running through several of the Emerald Necklace parks. A major planning and engineering study has been completed to identify the full extent of the problem and identified the solution. This study will be implemented in the coming years through the allocation of substantial federal/state/municipal funding for restoration of this water body, and the commencement of construction by the Army Corps of Engineers. The restoration program will also address restoration and revegetation of the riverbanks, helping to complete a major component of the Emerald Necklace master plan.

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While always a planning imperative, linkage has become a near-ubiquitous mantra in open space planning for good reason. With the emphasis on aerobic activity for health, there is a popular need for opportunities to safely and attractively travel long distances by walking, hiking, running, in-line skating, bicycling, and the like. Linked or linear open space systems have a long history in Boston, beginning with Olmsted and the Emerald Necklace system and Eliot's regional system for the metropolitan Boston area. In the years ahead, this new plan foresees even more activity to realize both old proposals and new ideas for linkages and linear systems. Efforts will continue to restore the "old" Charles River Reservation based on guidance from the DCR master plan, and integrate it with the "new" Charles River Reservation, the latter completed via the CA/T Project.

Harborwalk will steadily advance as development occurs along the harborfront from Charlestown to Dorchester. It will use anchors such as restored MDC harbor beaches, revitalized city waterfront parks like Christopher Columbus Park, and privately-managed but publicly accessible jewels such as the Fan Pier project to provide points of reference – and destination – for the more commonplace, but vital, projects in between.

Other linear systems that will be the focus of planning and capital investment include the Emerald Necklace Greenway (i.e., the effort to restore an adequate measure of continuity for non-motorized travel through this park system); fully implementing the master plan for the Mattapan Square-to-Dorchester Bay stretch of the Neponset River Reservation and extending master planning to the Mattapan Square-to-Paul's Bridge stretch; the East Boston Greenway from the Bremen Street Park to the Belle Isle Marsh Reservation; the Mother Brook Greenway from Hyde Park to Dedham linking the Neponset River to the Charles River; the East Coast Greenway, linking Boston to an interstate greenway extending both north and south of the city; and several others detailed in the Greenways, Trails, and Bikeways chapter.

Partnership will continue to be a strong watchword in the years ahead. The Muddy River restoration project would not have advanced as far as it has without the help of the neighboring institutions, agencies at the city, state, and federal level, and private entities such as the Emerald Necklace Conservancy working together. The success of the Frog Pond skating rink in Boston Common results in large part from private sector support for its operation and maintenance. Donations and grants continue to sustain the burying grounds restoration effort. Community gardens

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receive help from the city through the Parks Department and the Department of Neighborhood Development, and from the Boston Natural Areas Network. The gardeners themselves do much to care and maintain their garden parcels. Community stewards will become a more prominent feature of urban wilds and natural area management, and will be sought for growing systems such as greenways and Harborwalk.

Partnerships with institutions will become vitally important in the coming years, as institutional growth nationwide has increased exponentially. Of course, with the large presence of institutions in Boston, their impact is keenly felt. Two institutional expansions with major open space impacts will be those of Harvard University in Allston, and Boston College in Brighton. Such expansion planning must include open space components open to the wider public beyond the college community. These components must also integrate, in an urban design sense, the college community with the surrounding community as a way to harmonize town-gown relations and benefit the city as a whole. Through such planning, open space needs in the surrounding communities can be addressed.

Stewardship/partnership is an important factor in a relatively new phenomenon for the city park system: acquisition. The city has, through Mayor Menino's Open Space Acquisition Fund, actively acquired several new parcels. To provide community support that is key to an open space's success, and to reduce impacts on the city's operating budget, community participation is needed, whether through for-profits, non-profits, or community volunteers. As this program has proceeded, various models for stewardship and partnership have been developed that can help inspire other neighborhood open space advocates as they prepare their acquisition proposals.

With all these trends, pressures, and opportunities, the need is great to think ahead to act for the greater good as we address our city's open space needs. Thus, we prepared a new plan you see here. In the section of this document called the Action Plan, you will see a map which will graphically represent some of the physical changes proposed in this plan, and therefore, depicts a slice of this vision we have outlined. The remainder of this plan sets out the background and recommendations to point the way to achieve this vision.

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Section 2.2:

PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

As the owner and caretaker of the largest and most complex municipal parks system in the Commonwealth, the Boston Parks and Recreation Department has, over the years, taken a suitably multi-layered approach to public participation in developing the current Open Space Plan.

As this is a plan update, given our perception that conditions and trends are substantially similar to those we determined in 2002 for our last plan, we made a more strategic approach to public participation.

For the 1993 and 2002 plans, we have conducted public forums and crafted and distributed comprehensive parks use and needs surveys at those forums. We have partnered with other public agencies in completing open space research and public outreach. We have been good listeners as our constituents—the many hundreds of thousands of people who use our parks in a myriad of ways every year—have told us what they like and what they want to see changed.

Thus, these public process reached out to green space advocates, the average citizen in the neighborhoods, other city agencies and non-city organizations, all with the goal of gaining maximum input, as we looked to the future of open space in Boston.

Given limited staff resources, and with the opportunities for public outreach at low cost afforded by the internet, we felt we should blend older outreach elements with the new to achieve a synthesis of citizen, advocate, and professional input into the new open space plan.

The older outreach element was our traditional means of outreach: the press release to the newspapers, whether general circulation dailies or more narrow circulation weeklies in the neighborhoods. The newer element was the internet, via e-mail and the World Wide Web.

Input would be solicited via a new Web page devoted to the open space plan (http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/openspace_update.asp). This page would alert people to the opportunity to take an online survey that would ask about their open space use and needs, but also alert them to the opportunity to submit comments on the new open space plan to an e-mail address of the plan's project

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manager. The survey itself would have an open-ended section at the end to allow for unrestricted discussion of the respondent's ideas and concerns.

Notice about the web page, commenting on the plan, and the survey was posted on the city's main home web page, the Park and Recreation Department's main home web page, and on a city e-newsletter called Cityline.

Notice via two rounds of press releases were sent to all the general circulation dailies or the more narrow circulation weeklies in the neighborhoods.

Notices were also sent via the e-mail blast list of the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services, which sends e-mails every week about community meetings, comment periods, and the like to all neighborhood associations, neighborhood and community activists, non-profit groups, elected officials, and anyone else who desires to be on the list.

In addition, the plan's project manager also e-mailed to known open space advocacy groups, friends groups, and the like, as well as permit holders from lists of holders of athletic facility and special events permits, notifying them of the survey and the chance to comment on the plan.

For the 2003 plan, despite scores of community meetings, we solicited only 298 responses to our survey; this time, we obtained 1105 respondents for our survey. In this way, we are able to more accurately gauge public input into the city's open space needs at a much lower cost.

In addition to the online survey, all notices including the press releases indicated that surveys on paper were also available for pick-up at public library and Boston community center branches throughout the city. In this way, it allowed those without computer or internet access to be involved.

The survey period lasted from January 1, 2007 to March 15, 2007, a 75-day period during a period of time when many people are home and have time to go to their computer or go to the local library or community center branch to participate in the survey or provide input on the city's open space needs.

The surveys were then analyzed, and the comments reviewed and incorporated into the draft open space plan.

We also used other means to incorporate community input:

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- As various chapters of the Open Space Plan were completed in draft form, these drafts were circulated among community persons with experience and special knowledge of that specific chapter. For example, the chapter on community gardening was vetted by several persons who are active with gardens.
- The Parks Department's on-going capital improvement program provides typically two to three advertised community meetings for each capital project. Community residents will often bring up other open space-related concerns that are incorporated into the plan.
- On a daily basis, public input is literally only a telephone call away as various units at the Parks Department – from planning to maintenance – field numerous messages from our users as to how we are doing and what can be improved.
- Within the Parks Department, preparation of the Open Space Plan has been led by the Design and Construction Unit, but with participation from other units and divisions within the Department. To ensure expert comment and input, the Policy and Resource Development Unit also distributed various draft chapters of the plan among city officials.

Thus, by using the existing plan as a platform to be updated, and therefore incorporating the extensive meeting-type outreach we used then with the newer internet-based outreach methods we recently engaged in, we have combined the best of both methods to achieve a plan that is reflective of public input and responsive to public need.