
Open Space Plan 2015-2021

Section 7

Analysis of Needs

Section 7.2 **Community Open Space &
Recreation**
INTRODUCTION

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Section 7.2: Community Open Space & Recreation INTRODUCTION

The Community Open Space & Recreation Needs Analysis breaks down the open space analysis by neighborhood, in contrast to the city-wide assessment which was explored in Sections 3, 4 and 5. At the neighborhood scale we are better able to inventory and analyze the specific fabric and make-up of a community, and explore how the open space resources in that community respond to its needs. Functionally, neighborhood boundaries have no meaning in the use and operation of the city's open space system but these established perimeters help organize the discussion for the purposes of the Open Space Plan. Framework Goals, Objectives and Action Plan items, which are discussed in Sections 8 & 9 are again city-wide rather than neighborhood specific.

The six basic components of the Open Space Plan community needs assessment are:

1. What is the community setting and history?
2. Who is the parks and open space system serving in each community?
3. Where in the community are the populations with the greatest need for access to open space and how well served are these areas?
4. Where are the parks and open spaces in the community and what kinds of facilities are located in these places?
5. Can residents easily walk to a public park?
6. What planning and development is happening in the community what are the potential open space impacts and opportunities associated with those projects?

Each of these is explained in further detail in this introduction, and then explored within each neighborhood in the following sections.

Context:

- What is the development history of this community and how does it inform what we see today?

Demographics:

- Who is the parks and open space system serving in each neighborhood?

Demographic analysis provides an overview of the population of each neighborhood. The City of Boston has been in a period of population growth for the last several decades, but the most recent census data (2010) shows growth at nearly

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5% between 2000 – 2010. City populations are projected to continue to increase through 2020 and these trends are important to understand when evaluating the parks and open space system.

Using the 2010 census figures, the city provides 7.64 acres of protected open space per 1000 residents citywide. Some neighborhoods are rich with open space resources and others are more constrained; we'll compare how each neighborhood stacks up against the city averages. We'll also look at the age ranges in each neighborhood as this information is closely correlated with the types of park facilities that are most used and desired.

Population Density and Need Score:

- Where are the populations in greatest need for open space in the neighborhood?

Park “need” is an important but somewhat subjective analysis. For the purposes of this plan, “need” scores are developed using several contributing criteria weighted in the following order:

- Population Density
- Percent of population under the age of 18
- Block groups designated as Low Income using the MA State Environmental Justice criteria
- Block groups designated as Minority using the MA State Environmental Justice criteria
- Block groups designated English Language Isolated using the MA State Environmental Justice criteria
- Percent of the population over the age of 69

These variables result in a total score for each census block group; those areas with the highest scores are identified as being in greatest “need”. This analysis provides greater depth to the population density maps and offers a spatial understanding of the general demographics of a neighborhood.

Facilities Distribution:

- Where are the parks and open spaces in the neighborhood and what kinds of facilities are located in these open spaces?

The Facilities Distribution maps shows how active park uses are distributed throughout the neighborhood. Playlots and water spray play areas are indicated on Map 7 for each neighborhood, and athletic fields and three types of courts are indicated on Map 8. As open space managers and stewards, this information helps

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us understand if a neighborhood has reasonable access to an appropriate range of active recreation opportunities.

Facilities distribution is also interpreted to include community facilities – schools, libraries, and community centers. These community spaces are represented on the Neighborhood Fabric and Activity map (Map 9 for each neighborhood), which helps illustrate how park facilities relate to activity generators in the neighborhood. These facilities are a year-round draw for youth and families and offer opportunities for coordinated park programming and outdoor recreation activities. They often host community events and become a gathering place for civic activities and ideas.

Facilities distribution maps do not provide any information or analysis related to park quality or use. These important measures are examined through park inspections, audits, maintenance and qualitative assessments.

Park Access and Equity:

- Can people easily walk to a public park?

The City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department utilized a version of the NRPA typology for categorizing existing parks and open space areas to better understand park availability. These categories were based on guidelines established by the National Recreation and Park Association (www.nrpa.org).

Park Type	Park size (acres)	Typical Uses	Service Area
Pocket Parks	Less than 0.25 acres	Plazas and squares	0.1 mile
Neighborhood Parks	0.25 acres to 5 acres	Multi-use	.25 miles – 5 min walk
Community Parks	Over 5 acres	Multi-use, large facilities	0.5 miles – 10 min. walk

The categories provide us with a structure through which to evaluate the distribution of open space across the city. No single park type is considered more valuable than another; rather, the ways these spaces relate to one another and form a network across the city help illustrate where city residents have ample access to open space and where that access is limited.

Service Areas and Access:

The Open Space Plan's park access and service area analysis is similar to the access analysis published in the Trust for Public Land (TPL) ParkScore Index city rankings (<http://parkscore.tpl.org/>). According to the TPL, 97% of City of Boston residents are within a 10 minute walk of a publicly accessible park. The city's Open Space

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Plan takes a more fine-grained approach to this analysis by reducing the service areas at parks that are 5 acres or less to a maximum 5 minute walk. This sets the bar higher and provides us with a more nuanced understanding of access to the city's open space system.

It is important to understand where the gaps in park service areas are so that we can take steps to improve park access in those communities in the future. It is also important to understand that this is a walking distance analysis. Many city parks serve people who live beyond a 5 or 10 minute walking distance, particularly parks with athletic facilities or unique features. The Service Area maps illustrate the reasonable walking distance to and from the entrance to a park but do not define the entire population who is served by that park.

For the purposes of this analysis, urban wilds are included as park lands, but community gardens and cemeteries were not. This decision was made because urban wilds differ only from standard parks in their landscape features and level of development. Community gardens also provide an open space resource to their communities, but the facilities are dedicated to a particular use and oftentimes users are limited to only those who are assigned plots. Community gardens are discussed in further detail under Section 7.3.2. Cemeteries and historic burying grounds are also not included in this park access analysis. While many cemeteries provide passive open space to their surrounding community, their primary function is to provide or preserve burials. Because there is much variability in each cemetery's public access, passive recreation opportunities, and scenic value, we have chosen not to include the entire class of properties in this analysis. Cemeteries and historic burying grounds are discussed in further detail under Section 7.3.1.

Park Access and Equity Continued:

- Are the parks serving those residents in greatest need of open space access?

Park Equity advances the Park Service Areas analysis to understand how gaps in park access relate to areas with populations in high need of open space access. Overlaying the Park Need Score analysis with the Park Service Areas analysis creates a Park Equity Map for each neighborhood. Strategies for addressing gaps in park service, particularly in high need areas, are discussed in Section 8 Goals and Objectives.

Community Planning and Development:

- What planning and development projects are happening in the community what are the potential open space impacts and opportunities associated with those projects?

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Throughout the city there are planning and development initiatives underway by city departments and private developers. Much of this work will impact city open space in some way, and many of these planning and development projects offer opportunities to improve and enhance open space as a result of the project. Open space impacts from new projects are evaluated in multiple ways including proposed project density and use(s), provision of on-site open space, zoning compliance, and project design and massing. Critical to this analysis is an understanding of the existing neighborhood open space including park access, distribution of facilities, need scores, and other demographic criteria presented in this chapter. This understanding of the existing fabric of neighborhood open space informs the analysis of the potential impacts a project might have on a neighborhood. Adding new residents, workplaces, and commercial areas is often desirable and appropriate, but providing for the open space needs of those new dwellers or workers is fundamental. The Boston Parks and Recreation Department's Open Space Impact Assessment tool builds on the analysis presented here, and applies this understanding to proposed projects.

Planning efforts precipitate many development projects throughout the city. The Boston Redevelopment Authority and Boston Transportation Department generate most planning studies, but some are the products of institutions undergoing their own Institutional Master Planning processes. Planning projects present unique opportunities for open space consideration. Redevelopment of underutilized lands, transportation enhancements, and city (or campus) connectivity projects all consider open space and offer opportunities for open space improvements. Again, the analysis of existing park access, equity, facilities distribution and demographics informs the process of identifying areas where planning projects can help advance open space goals and objectives citywide.

Direct investment in park development projects is ongoing and is one of the primary missions of the public agencies that manage and maintain open space in Boston. Capital expenditures target projects throughout the city and aim to reinvest in park land in a cyclical manner than is responsive to the lifecycle of park facilities and the changing needs of a neighborhood. Designation of new park land, whether publicly or privately owned, is usually the product of a planning project.