

## Section 2

# Introduction

*“The future of Boston lies in its parks and open spaces. Our parks bring people together, diffuse social pressures, educate and strengthen our children, cool our planet, keep us healthy, and add economic value to our endeavors. They can become a powerful organizing force for advancing our city’s image.”*

Mayor Martin J. Walsh, Transition Team Report on Energy, Environment and Open Spaces, April 2014

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Section 2.1:

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

### What is Open Space?

Open space is commonly defined as lands that are not developed for building purposes. The term is synonymous with “green space” and can include parks, natural areas, athletic fields or courts, plazas, waterfront areas, community gardens, and cemeteries. The City of Boston Open Space Plan uses a broad definition of open space to incorporate all publicly owned or accessible parks and green spaces. Ownership of these open space properties varies from the City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department, to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), to myriad other land holders like the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), the MBTA, and the State Department of Transportation (MassDOT). Some privately-owned open spaces are publicly accessible (Q Park in South Boston for example) and those too are acknowledged in this plan. Institutional landholdings encompass a large portion of the privately owned undeveloped lands in the city, though public access to these places varies. These campus green spaces are also included in the Open Space Plan due to their environmental and conservation value, potential recreation value, and visual qualities that contribute to the landscape character of the city. Open space ownership and protection status is presented in Section 5: Open Space Inventory.

### Value of Parks

Public parks and open space contribute to our sense of place in the city. Parks express our history and culture, cultivate community by drawing people to a shared space, and connect us with the natural world. Green spaces offer opportunities for citizens to directly engage in shaping public space through stewardship, participation in park activities and events, and community design.

### Park Benefits

The value of open space extends across multiple arenas, providing health, economic, environmental and social benefits.

**Health benefits** of open space include access to opportunities for physical activity for children and adults, as well as access to the mental health benefits associated with the restorative aspects of green space. Urban trees offer health benefits by improving air quality and creating cooler environments which make our city more livable year-round. (Source: Quantifying the Contribution of Public Parks to Physical Activity and Health by the National Recreation and Park Association)

**Economic benefits** of parks are multi-faceted as well. Parks increase property values of nearby homes, which in turn benefits both the city and those residents. Many of Boston’s parks are cultural destinations, contributing to the economic engine of tourism. Parks are venues for programmed activities that provide economic benefits to the city, and

help sustain a quality of life in the city that’s highly valued. (Source: The Economic Value of City Park Systems by the Trust for Public Land)

**Environmental benefits** of open space extend from buffering increasingly extreme storm events, absorbing stormwater run-off and reducing strain on traditional infrastructure systems, to providing shade and cooling as well as carbon sequestration from tree canopies. Urban parks and open space systems also support wildlife habitat and provide opportunities for city dwellers to engage with the natural world.

**Social benefits** of parks are largely supported by public access and ownership of these spaces. Public spaces provide a platform for civic life including protests, rallies, events, and gatherings. Public parks are shared spaces where neighbors come together to create communities, and where the diversity of urban life is celebrated. Parks provide venues for arts and performance of all scales. These spaces also hold cultural meaning for their role in the history of our city and our nation as well as their role as a stage for contemporary events. Privately owned parks and open space can offer health, economic and environmental benefits, but the full spectrum of social benefits of parks are only found in the public foundation of these places.

The Open Space Plan takes a full accounting of all green spaces in the city which enables us to understand the system we have in place and envision the open space we need in our city’s future. Boston is amidst a time of population and development growth, and we are benefitting from the open space vision our predecessors provided for this city over a hundred years ago. As we look to Boston’s future, we must embrace the value that these spaces bring to our lives and ensure that they are sustained.

### Open Space and the Public Right of Way

Lands which are primarily used for transportation are not typically classified as open space (i.e. roads and right-of-ways), but these spaces can offer public value for active and passive uses in addition to their transportation services. Reconceiving of city streets as “Complete Streets” allows us to transform this traditional infrastructure into green infrastructure offering multiple benefits for city residents including plantings, gathering areas, bikeways, and walkways in addition to traditional transportation and utility needs. The roadway system has the potential to provide green connections to and between parks which enhances the value of all open spaces. In some ways, these links between green space and roadway space increase the value of each as shade, pedestrian access and animated activity nodes are spread throughout the city. In other ways, it is important to regard the city’s parks and open space system as unique and discrete from these other networks. The social, health, economic and environmental benefits of park lands cannot be replicated, even in exceptionally designed streets. These public spaces can work together and complement each other, but expansion and

improvement of the city's street network should not be considered interchangeable with expansion and improvement of the city's park system.

The following resources can provide further information and research findings on the benefits of urban parks:

National Parks and Recreation Association – <http://www.nrpa.org/research-papers>

Trust for Public Land – <https://www.tpl.org/research-library>

Landscape Architecture Foundation, Landscape Performance Series – <https://lafoundation.org/research/landscape-performance-series>

Centers for Disease Control Parks, Trails and Health Resources – [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthtopics/parks\\_resources.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthtopics/parks_resources.htm)

University of Washington Green Cities: Good Health – <http://depts.washington.edu/hhwb>

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign: Landscape and Urban Health Laboratory – <http://lhlh.illinois.edu>

Section 2.2:

## **PLANNING PROCESS & PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

As the owner and caretaker of the largest and most complex municipal park 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.

We developed three methods of engaging community input for this new 2015-2021 Open Space Plan. One method used a survey questionnaire to elicit information about use of the city's open spaces and the preferences and changes desired by respondents, which included residents and non-residents who stated they used parks in Boston. The survey was available both online and as a hard copy for those without internet access. Approximately 3000 survey responses were received and incorporated into the Analysis presented in Section 6, Community Vision.

A second method was the provision of an email address ([openspaceplan2015@cityofboston.gov](mailto:openspaceplan2015@cityofboston.gov)) specifically designed to accept comments throughout the planning process. These emails were reviewed and comments incorporated as appropriate into the plan.

The third method was sponsoring public meetings in all the neighborhoods, as well as a citywide public forum held at the main branch of the Boston Public Library at Copley Square, which has excellent transportation access. The first series of community meetings was held in June and July 2013. The citywide public forum was held on the evening of November 13, 2014. The second series of community meetings was held in July through September 2014. Comments received at these events were recorded and later evaluated for incorporation as appropriate into the plan.

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

We used various means of notification to alert interested parties to these public participation processes. For the survey, we used multiple email blasts to notify the public to its availability. Target audiences for the email blasts included:

- 150+ Park Partner Organizations
- Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services
- ONS Early Notification System (the city's own city-wide email blast system)
- City Clerk's Office
- BPS System Wide Employee News Blast
- BPS System Wide Community News Blast
- All City Councilors and State Representatives for Boston Districts
- City of Boston Main Streets Organizations
- Various Community Groups
- Churches throughout City of Boston (via fax, email, and post-card mailing)
- City of Boston Parks Department Facebook and Twitter Accounts
- All Special Events and Athletic Permit Holders

- Boston Redevelopment Authority
- Department of Neighborhood Development
- Boston Transportation Department
- Boston Public Works Department
- Banner on the City of Boston Webpage

Posters and handbills were distributed to all branches of the Boston Public Libraries and all Boston Centers for Youth and Families (aka Boston Community Centers), as well as many non-profit agencies and churches.

A City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department press release about the survey was issued. A notice among the rotating banner items was provided on the City's website home page. A special webpage on the Parks Department website (<http://www.cityofboston.gov/Parks/openspace>) served as a portal to the online survey and promoted locations for the availability of the hard copy surveys. A notice on the Parks Department home page also alerted viewers to the survey. All community design review meetings for park projects during the survey period gave notice to attendees of the survey's availability. We promoted the survey at events such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's Multicultural Festival and the Boston Elderly Commission's Walk. Parks staff appeared on air for announcements about the survey on radio stations MIX 106.3 ("Today's R&B and Classic Soul") and BigCity 101.3 (urban/hip-hop music), and on Chronicle, the nightly newsmagazine of Boston television station WCVB, TV-5.

The first series of community meetings that gave background information on the Open Space Plan also alerted attendees to the survey availability; meeting notification via notices to local newspapers and email blasts also mentioned the availability of the survey.

The survey availability period was extended one month to October 31, 2013 to broaden participation further. Notification of this extension was sent via email blasts and a press release.

The survey was also mentioned in the pre-event promotion of the panel discussion about the Open Space Plan that was held at the Boston Public Library at Copley Square in November. The panel discussion also featured an open-ended discussion with members of the public in attendance.

After the survey period was closed, Parks staff analyzed the data and prepared Section 6, Community Vision. The total responses analyzed were 2,998, which compares favorably with the 1,105 responses for the survey prepared for the 2008–2014 Open Space Plan.

A second round of community meetings was held in neighborhoods throughout the city from mid-July to early September 2014. Besides giving background on the Plan and an update on its status, a prominent feature of the meeting presentation was highlighted results of the survey. The presentation, including the survey results, stimulated lively discussion between the meeting attendees and the Parks Department staff presenters. The Department presenters recorded the responses, as well as providing paper input forms for those who wished to provide written input instead. Also presented was the Open Space Plan's email address for sending us written comments. The Open Space

Plan webpage mentioned above also served as the portal to the pdfs of the neighborhood presentations so that those who could not attend their neighborhood meeting could see the presentation and provide their input by other means.

These comments were reviewed and considered as we finalized preparation of the Draft Open Space Plan 2015–2021 for public release. The draft plan was released on October 23, 2014 with the comment period ending on November 26, 2014. Again a Department press release was issued to notify the public of the draft availability and comment period, as well as an extensive email blast protocol that replicated the target audiences as noted above for the survey, plus all those who attended the community meetings and gave us their email address were also sent a notification email. A notice appeared on the Parks Department home page about the draft release and comment period, which linked to the Open Space Plan home page that served as a portal to the draft plan.

Using the same email address for comments during and after the survey period, the Department accepted email comments on the draft. Once the comment period ended, Parks staff reviewed and considered the comments as we prepared the final revisions to the Plan.

We also used other means to incorporate community input:

- 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 persons active in the community garden movement.
- The Parks Department's ongoing capital improvement program typically schedules two to three advertised community meetings for each capital project. Through that process, community residents will often bring up additional 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 on 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 Design and Construction 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 incorporating traditional outreach methods with the newer internet-based communication methods, we have combined the best of various methods to achieve a plan that is reflective of public input and responsive to public need.

Section 2.3:

## **ENHANCED OUTREACH AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES**

Boston is an immigrant city and a majority-minority city. This contributes to the following statement made in Section 3, Community Setting: “Boston meets the criteria for being defined as an environmental justice community. The total population of Boston that fell within an Environmental Justice Block Group was 456,403 or 74% of the population.”

In light of this phenomenon, our public participation process has assumed that every community, no matter its demographic composition, should be treated like an environmental justice community, and that all our outreach throughout the city is enhanced outreach for environmental justice communities.

So while our entire public participation program for the public was enhanced to reach out to environmental justice populations, and that program was described in the previous Section 2.2, Planning Process and Public Participation, we will highlight here the more assertive measures we undertook to reach out the environmental populations.

In Section 2.2, we mentioned that there were three major methods of engaging community input for the 2015–2021 Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). The first method mentioned, the survey questionnaire, was translated into six other languages, in addition to English. These six languages were recommended by the Mayor’s Office of New Bostonians, an agency which focuses on the needs of newer immigrants living in the city: Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Vietnamese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Cape Verdean Creole. The survey in all seven languages was made available online and as a hard copy paper version, and notification to appropriate news outlets in all communities, including environmental justice communities, was also made. Paper (hard copy) versions were distributed to all neighborhood Boston Public Library branches and to Boston Community Centers located in most neighborhoods. The collection period of May 4 to October 31, 2013 was a period for the public when they are most aware of the parks and open spaces in their neighborhoods.

Notices about the survey and the opportunity for public input and comment were provided via press releases to citywide and local newspapers, some radio appearances by Parks Department community outreach staff, and via the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services Electronic Notification System; news outlets, radio stations, and neighborhood groups in environmental justice neighborhoods were included. To further reach out to environmental justice communities, Parks staff appeared on air for announcements about the survey on radio stations MIX 106.3 (“Today’s R&B and Classic Soul”) and BigCity 101.3 (urban/hip-hop music), and on Chronicle, the nightly newsmagazine of Boston television station WCVB, TV-5.

The Parks Department held a series of public meetings in each neighborhood (most of which are environmental justice communities) during the survey collection period to outline the process

of developing the Open Space Plan and to encourage participation in the survey. In addition to hosting this series of meetings, Parks Department staff attended various events and forums such as Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative’s Multicultural Festival, the Mayor’s Annual Health and Fitness Walk for Seniors, and the ONEin3 Council (for persons in the 20 to 34 age range), where publicizing the survey yielded more public input from these underrepresented age groups. In all methods of notification and at the end of the questionnaire itself, the public was made aware of the opportunity to also convey their opinion and input in writing, beyond the limitations of the survey questionnaire, to an email address specific to this planning process.

Another method was sponsoring public meetings in all the neighborhoods including environmental justice communities, as well as a citywide public forum held at the main branch of the Boston Public Library at Copley Square, which has excellent transportation access. The first series of community meetings was held in June and July 2013. The citywide public forum was held on the evening of November 13, 2014. The second series of community meetings was held in July through September 2014. Comments received at these events were recorded and later evaluated for incorporation as appropriate into the plan. As with the survey collection phase, notices about the meetings and the opportunity for public input and comment were provided via press releases to citywide and local newspapers, some radio appearances by Parks Department community outreach staff, and via the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services Electronic Notification System. All notification went out to environmental justice communities, as they form the majority of communities in the city.