

## **Section 7.2**

# Analysis of Needs: Community Open Space & Recreation

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## Section 7.2

**COMMUNITY OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION****Introduction**

The Community Open Space and 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 and 9 are again city-wide rather than neighborhood specific.

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

1. Context
2. Demographics
3. Population Density and Need Score
4. Facilities Distribution
5. Park Access and Equity
6. Community Planning and Development

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

1. **Context:** What is the development history of this community and how does it inform what we see today?
2. **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, and the most recent census data (2010) shows growth at nearly 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 7.59 acres of protected open space per 1,000 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. This analysis also considers the age ranges in each neighborhood as this information is closely correlated with the types of park facilities that are most used and desired.

3. **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.

4. **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. This information helps open space managers and stewards understand if a neighborhood has reasonable access to an appropriate range of active recreation opportunities.

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.

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, indoor and outdoor recreation activities. They often host community events and become a gathering place for civic activities and ideas.

5. **Park Access and Equity:** Can people easily walk to a public park? Are parks serving those residents in greatest need of open space access?

For the purposes of this plan, 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](http://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 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. Actual walking distances are less important than a comprehensive understanding of park distribution and access.

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 a park’s entrance but do not define the entire population served by that park.

To understand the Park Service Area Maps, it helps to see that that information is layered.

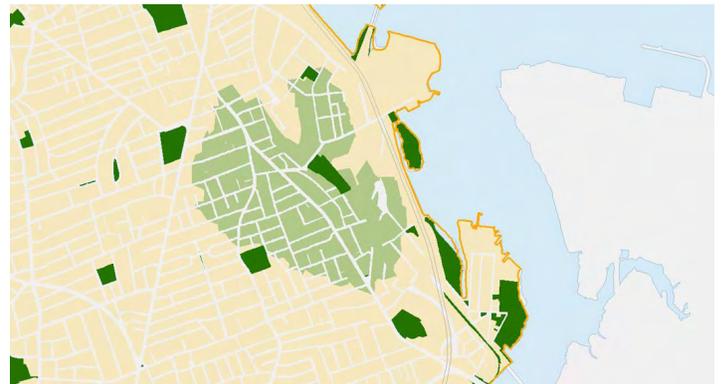
This map shows an example of the service areas from Pocket Parks (0.1 mile distance):



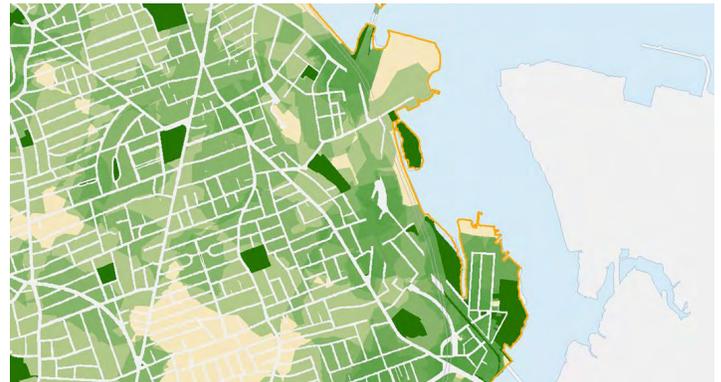
This map shows the Service Area from a Neighborhood Park (0.25 mile distance):



This map shows the Service Areas from a Community Park (0.5 mile distance):



When these Service Areas are layered together, we can see which parts of the neighborhood have walkable access to one park, several parks, or no parks at all:



For the purposes of this analysis, urban wilds are included as park lands (called “Publicly Accessible Open Space” on the Map 10 legend), but community gardens and cemeteries are not. This decision was made because urban wilds only differ from other 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 elected 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 Equity**

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.

6. **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?

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 improvement 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. The discussion of community planning and development within these neighborhood chapters highlights key projects with potential for open space impacts. A comprehensive list of active planning and development projects can be found on the website of the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Further information on map data and metadata for each of the neighborhood maps can be found in Appendix E.

## Needs Analysis and Persons with Disabilities

The demographic tables for each neighborhood include data on the percentage of the overall neighborhood population with some type of disability. This information is important within the Open Space Plan because the City of Boston strives to create a built environment that is responsive to the needs of all its citizens, including those with disabilities. All park renovation and improvement projects comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and many projects go beyond those minimum standards to create inclusive environments for play and passive recreation. The City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department has performed an Accessibility Self-Assessment of BPRD-owned park properties and uses this tool to identify where accessibility improvements are needed as part of park renovation projects.

## Boston’s Open Space and Recreation Plan and the SCORP

This introduction to the Community Open Space and Recreation Needs subsection would not be complete without a discussion of the relationship of the current (2012) Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) to said needs. Massachusetts, despite being one of the most densely populated states in the nation, is also one of the most heavily forested on a per acre basis. While the statewide plan addresses the needs of rural and suburban areas, the SCORP goals relate well to the needs we have found in the communities of Boston:

### **SCORP Goal #1: Increase the availability of all types of trails for recreation.**

The Boston OSRP survey respondents overwhelmingly pursue activities compatible with this goal: over 80% enjoy walking (the most popular activity) and over 70% “enjoy nature” (the second most popular activity). For park features used, again trail-oriented features are among the most popular: 70% of respondents chose natural areas, including trails, which was the most popular choice. Respondents were also asked how important park features were to them. “Natural Areas/Trails” was the most frequently chosen response for “most important feature” and “second most important feature.” A large number of respondents (48%) stated that the presence of a natural area (associated with trails) would lead to more frequent visitation of a Boston park.

This section of the plan discusses these trail-related needs, and the means of addressing them, from building or redeveloping park paths and trails, the city's planning for a bike network system to encourage use of bicycles to access parks, and the city's effort to improve pedestrian access to parks via the Public Works Department's Safe Routes to Parks program.

**SCORP Goal #2: Increase the availability of water-based recreation.**

The Boston OSRP survey respondents overwhelmingly chose natural areas including "wetlands" and "waterbodies" as the most popular park features used (70%). Respondents were also asked how important park features were to them. "Natural Areas/Trails" was the most frequently chosen response for "most important feature" and "second most important feature." Since "natural areas" in an earlier question included water features like wetlands and waterbodies, it is a fair interpretation to say that water features are considered by Boston residents as highly important features of the parks where they exist. A large number of respondents (48%) stated that the presence of a natural area (associated with water features) would lead to more frequent visitation of a Boston park.

This section of the plan discusses these water-based recreation needs, such as for water spray play features in play lots, improved canoe and kayak access, improving pedestrian and bicycle access to parks with water features such as the Charles River Reservation and the Emerald Necklace, and increased waterfront access through Harborwalk/Chapter 91 regulations.

**SCORP Goal #3: Invest in recreation and conservation areas that are close to home for short visits.**

The majority (56%) of Boston OSRP survey respondents say the park they most frequently visited in the past twelve months was the park closest to home, which shows the value of proximity to parks and open space for usage. A very high percentage of respondents (40%) say that having parks closer to home and that are easier to walk to and from would encourage them to visit Boston parks more often.

This section of the plan discusses the need for close-to-home parks for everyday needs. The Park Service Area Analysis documents park proximity and highlights where in the city we need to add open space in order to ensure that every Boston resident has a park within a 5-10 minute walk of their home.

**SCORP Goal #4: Invest in racially, economically, and age diverse neighborhoods given their projected increase in participation in outdoor recreation.**

As EOEEA well knows, the vast majority of census block groups in the City of Boston are environmental justice areas. The majority of Boston OSRP survey respondents, 59%, were from neighborhoods that are racially, economically, and age diverse: Jamaica Plain, Dorchester, Roslindale, the South End, Mission Hill, Roxbury, Hyde Park, East Boston, and Mattapan.

This section of the plan discusses the diversity of the communities throughout Boston, and the effort to meet the needs for close-to-home recreation for such communities. We also discuss the community-based design process for park construction and renovations, where several public meetings and online surveys are used to solicit input into the development of the park design.