
Open Space Plan 2008-2012

Section 7
Analysis of Needs

**Section 7.2.13 Community Open
Space & Recreation
SOUTH BOSTON**

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SOUTH BOSTON

THE SETTING

History

First connected by bridge to Boston Proper in 1805, the South Boston peninsula soon began the gradual process of reaching its current shape through landfills. At that time the street grid was laid out and wealthy Yankee investors began to build wooden houses near Telegraph Hill. With the opening of the Old Colony railroad, the northern marshes began to be filled in to accommodate a thriving timber and foundry industry. Further landfills created space for larger railroad yards, linking the rail system to the waterfront as the South Boston port developed into one of the busiest in the country. Simultaneously, South Boston became the home of mainly Irish immigrants who came to work for industry.

By the end of the 19th century South Boston's residential development included many simple row houses and detached three-family dwellings. The early part of the 20th century saw the completion of Frederick Law Olmsted's vision to create a grand open space system along the water's edge to be enjoyed by residents.

The industrial waterfront's decline began after World War II as Boston's maritime industry was adversely affected by changing freight transportation technologies. Many of the piers were abandoned or turned into parking lots. However, in the last two decades there has been an increase in maritime commercial uses with trucking and containerized shipping feeding off the piers. Investments by public agencies like EDIC and Massport has revitalized the port area. In addition, recent projects in the Fort Point district indicate a move toward the cultural, institutional, and commercial redevelopment of former railroad and industrial land.

A significant land use trend has been one factor leading to an overall re-assessment of the South Boston industrial waterfront area. This trend is the scarcity of developable land in the downtown and Back Bay business districts, which has led to high rents and land costs. The abundance of underutilized land in the South Boston industrial waterfront area provides an attractive

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alternative for future dense commercial and residential development.

Three major decisions in the past decade have provided catalysts for development in this area, remaking it as a new urban frontier. One was the decision by the federal government to construct a new federal courthouse on the Fan Pier. This provided a destination and an attraction – including a spacious new open space on the waterfront – that gave people a reason to come across Fort Point Channel.

Another major decision was the one by the MBTA to construct a Transitway – a dedicated line for use by a dual mode bus (electric in the tunnel under Fort Point Channel, a clean diesel above-ground) – that would connect the South Boston piers area with South Station. This transitway has created a mass transit line from mass transit hubs in downtown Boston, making this area more accessible and the surrounding land more attractive for development.

The third major decision was to develop a joint city-state project – the new Boston Convention & Exhibition Center and a companion hotel in the industrial area south of the waterfront. The Center, the largest convention venue in the northeastern U.S. with a building footprint of 1.6 million square feet, was completed in 2004.

Given such factors, the City through the BRA developed a plan for the South Boston Waterfront District, understanding that a major part of the growth of the city lay in this area. In 1999, the BRA released The Seaport Public Realm Plan to outline the potential assets in the public realm of this newly emerging neighborhood that should be reserved or developed in the proposed build-out. Since then several passive-oriented parks have been constructed as part of this area's on-going build-out.

Another major milestone in the development of the South Boston Waterfront District has been the state approval of the Municipal Harbor Plan for this district in 2000. A part of this review included the proposed Fan Pier multi-use development complex. With hundreds of thousands of square feet of office, retail, residential, and institutional/ cultural development accompanying a substantial assemblage of waterfront open space and Harborwalk, this project, once fully built-out, will provide the critical mass to draw great numbers of people to a new realm of scenic open space on the South Boston waterfront.

Needs Analysis*Demographics/Housing*

South Boston lost almost one third of its population between 1950 and 1970 but has stabilized at around 30,000 persons since those years. A slight decline of 2.99% in population occurred from 1980 to 1990, but an increase of 1.5% to 29,938 occurred by 2000.

In terms of the age distribution, the most dramatic difference between South Boston and Boston is in the 18 to 24 age range, where there is a 7 percent difference in population share (9% versus 16% respectively). This may have to do with the distance from major higher educational institutions and the poor transit access from this neighborhood to such institutions.

As far as race/ethnic composition is concerned, whites remain predominant (98% in 1980, 95% in 1990, 87% in 2000), but diversification is beginning to occur, primarily due to an influx of Hispanic (8% in 2000), Asian/Pacific Islander persons and multi-racial persons (both at 4% in 2000).

Renters have dominated the housing stock. In 1985 only a quarter of South Boston's housing units were owner-occupied. In 1990 31% of occupied units were owner-occupied. As the past decade has seen increasing condominium conversions in this neighborhood, the percentage of owner-occupancy has increased to 34%. The migration of young professionals into the area has been a factor in higher rents and real estate prices throughout the neighborhood.

Another quarter of its housing stock (1985) was in public housing, giving South Boston the highest density of public housing of any neighborhood. An artists' community is well established in some of Fort Point's former industrial lofts, across from downtown Boston, but questions about its future linger. It is anticipated that in the coming years, future housing developments in the South Boston Waterfront District will include affordable housing units. This should help ease the burden on those residents being pushed out of market rate housing by higher rents or condominium conversions.

According to the 2000 Census, South Boston's median household income was \$40,311, higher than the citywide figure of \$39,629. In 2000, 32% of the neighborhood's households did not own cars, a slightly smaller share than the 35% share for Boston as a whole.

THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY

Equity and Investment

With South Boston's extensive beachfront factored in, the neighborhood has a total of 211 acres of protected parks, playgrounds, beaches, squares, and malls. South Boston has 7.03 acres of protected open space per thousand persons. While slightly less than the city's overall ratio of 7.47, the 7.03 ratio is quite substantial for a highly dense mixed-use urban neighborhood. It compares favorably with the ratio of 2.5 acres per thousand population posited by the Boston Urban Gardeners in the South End Open Space Study (1988) as a more appropriate guideline for inner core urban neighborhoods like South Boston. However, most of the neighborhood's space is distributed in large regional parks at the water's edge. Therefore, while the dense urban fabric of the neighborhood is currently largely unrelieved by regularly distributed open spaces, the open spaces that are available are of a generally high quality with desirable natural and built features.

The City of Boston's Parks Department has invested over \$2.6 million of improvements in the neighborhood's open space facilities over the past six years (see table below). This has included a renewed playlot in Sweeney, and a renewed ball diamond and a renewed soccer field in Joe Moakley Park.

South Boston Capital Projects 2001-2006	
Flaherty Playground	\$92,295
Joe Moakley Park	\$2,292,260
Sweeney Playground	\$368,086
Total	\$2,660,347

Assessment

South Boston consists of two distinct sub-neighborhoods, the predominantly residential area south of First Street and a once wholly industrial area to the north located on flat landfill terrain between Fort Point Channel and the Reserved Channel.

The Residential South Boston Neighborhood

Characterized by a grid-patterned residential street network on an undulating terrain, this area of South Boston is now completely developed with little vacant land available for new projects. While the street grid itself is interspersed with churches, schools, pocket parks, and playgrounds, some sited to offer panoramic views of the harbor, its southern shoreline is framed by a continuous open space system of parks, beaches, and promenades conceived by

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Frederick Law Olmsted. The Strandway connects the playgrounds of Joe Moakley Park to the L Street Beach, Pleasure Bay, and Castle Island.

The Mary Ellen McCormack, Old Colony, and West Broadway public housing developments dominate the Dorchester Avenue side of the neighborhood. Dorchester Avenue itself is expanding with commercial uses, especially at Andrew Square, where the MBTA station has been rehabilitated.

The residents of this area of South Boston are generally well served by diverse and easily accessible open space facilities. While Joe Moakley Park and Christopher Lee Playground provide a full range of active recreation facilities, the Strandway and Castle Island area take care of passive, water-based, and linear recreation needs. Some of the best views of Boston Harbor are from locations along the South Boston shoreline. The DCR has recently rehabilitated beach facilities such as bathhouses and sidewalks. However, the beaches still tend to be underutilized mainly due to a continuing perception among residents that local waters are contaminated. A flag system has been instituted to notify users of the water quality conditions, which will continue to improve as the MWRA and BWSC work to significantly reduce CSO discharges. The activation of secondary treatment at Deer Island and the discharge of treated effluents nine miles out to Massachusetts Bay is leading to further cleansing of local waters as the sediments from past discharges are in part diluted and inactivated over time.

On a smaller scale, the residential St. Vincent neighborhood and Andrew Square remain relatively underserved with only a few pocket parks in the vicinity. The West Broadway housing development does not have easily accessible active recreation facilities.

In the mid-1990s, state legislation mandated the transfer to the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) of 14.34 acres of MBTA land between the Reserved Channel and East First Street, located opposite Christopher Lee Playground (aka M Street Playground). Formerly part of the MBTA power station complex, it had been selected as a site for an MWRA CSO facility. Due to community opposition to the siting of this facility at this location, state legislators from South Boston have been unwilling to support legislation to enable a non-park use on this state park parcel per Article 97 requirements. Therefore, the MWRA's CSO program for the South Boston area has dropped this site from its planning. Some in the community do desire waterfront access in this area.

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Yet this parcel is in a Designated Port Area, a Chapter 91 designation for land restricted to maritime commercial and industrial uses. It will likely take time to resolve and accommodate the various needs and interests in this area.

Between the Channels: The South Boston Waterfront District – Fort Point, The South Boston Piers, and Commonwealth Flats

In stark contrast to the rest of the neighborhood, the area north of First Street has been predominantly industrial and commercial. Much of the land is currently underutilized or vacant. Less than one percent of the land has been developed for public open space. The EDIC's Marine Industrial Park provides some respite with new tree plantings and a passive recreation park. The piers in the north have been adapted for new uses such as office and residential towers, exhibition spaces, and restaurants or are slated for institutional buildings, such as the new Institute for Contemporary Art. The old warehouses along the Fort Point Channel have been converted into offices and cultural facilities like the Children's Museum. They have also become home to a unique community of furniture makers, high quality printers, and artists. However, this community has become threatened by market forces as the Fort Point neighborhood becomes desirable for office and other uses yielding higher revenues to property owners.

This section of the neighborhood has almost no open spaces that can be used by the public, but does have large tracts of vacant land. The gradual increase in the population of residents between 25 and 34, including some couples with small families, is putting increasing pressure on existing open space facilities throughout South Boston. Fort Point Channel, abandoned and contaminated for the most part, has not been developed for public uses, with the exception of Museum Wharf. EDIC's Marine Industrial Park has a well maintained and accessible pedestrian environment.

Change, however, has occurred and further change is imminent. The federal government, based on joint city/state/federal planning led by the Parks Department, constructed a new courthouse named after the deceased Congressman Joseph Moakley at Fan Pier with an extensive 2+ acre plaza/park with a harborwalk, enabling public access with views of Boston's scenic urban waterfront. This is a critical piece in this area's emerging open space system, as it serves as a "hinge," a double gateway from downtown Boston to a future system of harborwalks and open spaces along Fort Point Channel, and to another future system of harborwalks and open spaces along the South Boston Piers.

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Children's Wharf, the harborside area between New Northern Avenue and Congress Street anchored by The Children's Museum Boston, is an emerging node in the Fort Point Channel open space system. The Parks Department owns the harborwalk there (which has been reconstructed with TEA-21 funding) and will own a new park being constructed along the New Northern Avenue edge (the result of Chapter 91 mitigation for the construction of the Transitway tunnel). Combined with an interactive outdoor exhibit in the area in front of the Children's Museum, Children's Wharf will create an attraction that will draw people to Fort Point Channel. This will help energize a constituency for the full build-out of a continuous open space system along both sides of the channel. Such a system would serve a regional audience thanks to both the Children's Museum's regional market and to the harbor water taxi system, including a proposed landing at Children's Wharf. A more comprehensive approach to developing the potential of the Fort Point Channel is now underway. The BRA has worked with local interests to draft a Fort Point Channel Watersheet Activation Plan that calls for the Channel to become a water park (including the continuous open space system referred to above). This would enable direct public interaction with the water, thereby making water-based recreation a centerpiece of urban living. The plan was released in 2002.

Other projects are generating considerable new open spaces in this area. The Central Artery Project has created open spaces along Fort Point Channel – such as Vent Building Park, Mt. Washington Avenue Park, the Cabot Cove Harborwalk, the Fort Point Channel Harborwalk, and the Dorchester Avenue Park and Harborwalk – which may link up with the South Cove Harbor Trail and the Melnea Cass Boulevard bike path, both in the South End. As it moves ahead over the course of several years of mixed-use development, the Fan Pier project will provide an assortment of open spaces that will significantly improve public access to the water in this area. Massport is providing a series of open spaces in its Commonwealth Flats Development Area (CFDA), located to the east of the Fan Pier area, south of the World Trade Center and the Boston Fish Pier, and north of the proposed Boston Convention and Exhibition Center. Four significant open spaces will ultimately be located in the CFDA area closest to the waterfront, providing a more attractive siting and better waterfront access for the more densely developed CFDA area closer to the I-90 connection to the Ted Williams (Third Harbor) Tunnel.

In the 1999 publication *The Seaport Public Realm Plan* (the "Seaport" generally refers to this "between the channels" area, aka

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the “South Boston Waterfront”), the BRA has provided the most significant planning guidance yet regarding open space for this new sub-neighborhood. This plan provides a proposed street and block layout plan, pedestrian circulation plan, transit and transportation plan, land use/civic uses plan, water uses plan, open space plan, and urban design plan. It seeks to replicate, refine, and improve on the model of small livable neighborhoods elsewhere in the city. Rather than the mega-blocks currently found in this old industrial area, the proposed layout of streets and open spaces seeks to re-create the small, irregular blocks of “Boston Proper.”

Proposed boulevards and squares, some reminiscent of Post Office Square Park and Franklin and Blackstone Squares, help connect the interior of the new neighborhood with the key open space system here – the Harborwalk. The southern end of the Reserved Channel is the potential location of a larger park, which may include active uses such as ball fields and children’s play equipment. Future planning exercises will need to take place to flesh out the design programs of these proposed parks, squares, and boulevards. These facilities will need to accommodate the desires of the future users who will reside in housing to be built here. These planning exercises may also determine whether or not additional open spaces for active and passive recreation should be created to meet the demands of this new sub-neighborhood; such spaces may also prevent impacts on the active and passive recreation spaces of other nearby neighborhoods, such as Central Boston, Charlestown, the (currently) residential South Boston, the South End, Roxbury, and the northern sections of Dorchester.

The BRA contemplates implementation of the proposed improvements in The Seaport Public Realm Plan through funding by state and local public agencies, private developers, and subsidies from state and federal sources, such as grants. It proposes a Seaport Public Realm Enhancement Fund to accept “contributions from private development in the Seaport, based on the fact that private land values have been greatly enhanced by billions of dollars of public infrastructure improvements.” As waterfront sites will be required by state law to develop publicly-accessible amenities, including open spaces, “[i]nland parcels would benefit from these waterfront improvements in terms of increased land and building value. To balance this inequity, inland property owners will be expected to pay a proportionately higher amount into the Enhancement Fund, to offset the lower cost of their public realm improvements.” (The Seaport Public Realm Plan, page 113.)

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Other tools for implementation of the plan include the development of urban design guidelines, amendments to the zoning code for this area, amendments to the Municipal Harbor Plan (the City's customized Chapter 91 regulations which were recently approved by the state), an area transportation study, and completion of master planning for the Boston Marine Industrial Park. These tools will help to shape the future open spaces in this new sub-neighborhood.

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

The industrial Fort Point Channel/Reserved Channel district and the residential areas of South Boston are discrete sub-neighborhoods. The emergence of the “Between the Channels” district as a mixed-use sub-neighborhood provides an opportunity to establish a dynamic relationship in land uses: the new public realm amenities associated with proposed projects in the new area can be used by the growing population in the current residential area. The public sector targeted the South Boston Waterfront District for a profusion of transportation and economic development projects now completed. These public sector projects, and the private sector projects that follow in their wake, are likely to provide open space opportunities that promise to alter the status quo dramatically. The currently inaccessible waterfront along the South Boston piers and channels will become available to residents and visitors alike in the years and decades ahead through developer compliance with the Harborwalk provisions.

Healthy open space plays a role in promoting the perception of neighborhood livability. This can be supported by the upswing in attraction to the residential South Boston, coinciding with the revitalization of both the regional beaches along Dorchester Bay and the parks and squares in the interior of the neighborhood. The City’s planners likewise hope that the new open spaces devised for the area “Between the Channels” will help establish the new South Boston Waterfront District as livable and desirable. The challenge will be to create a balanced open space system to meet the various needs of visitors and residents alike.

Opportunities

The Residential South Boston Neighborhood

- Urge the DCR to continue to staff, program, clean, and revitalize South Boston’s extensive beachfront and support facilities.
- Accommodate soccer fields in South Boston through programming of existing parks. Seek new space for a soccer facility, perhaps in the South Boston Waterfront District, for the long term.
- Explore, through a tax title and vacant land recovery program, the possibility of new parkland in the St. Vincent neighborhood.
- Promote small boat docking for use by neighborhood residents at Castle Island to supplement existing yacht clubs.

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- Support a public review process for the DCR Reserved Channel parcel to resolve the multiple interests of preservation of maritime commerce and industry, environmental remediation, community preservation, and access to waterfront open space.

Between the Channels: The South Boston Waterfront District

- Support the implementation and refinement of the recommendations contained in the BRA's Seaport Public Realm Plan. Work through the implementation process (urban design guidelines, zoning amendments, etc.) to assure varied open space and recreation needs are met for present and future users. Use part of the Seaport Public Realm Enhancement Fund to purchase land for active and passive recreation areas in the inland portions of the South Boston Waterfront District.
- Create a clean and accessible Fort Point Channel for public use based on the recommendations of the BRA's Fort Point Channel Watersheet Activation Plan.
- Strengthen the public environment at Children's Wharf by seeking enhanced pedestrian connections with the surrounding warehouse residential area.

Community Priorities

The Residential South Boston Neighborhood

- Implement a tree planting program for Joe Moakley Park.
- Continue to facilitate the creation of new and usable open space for the Old Colony, McCormack, and West Broadway housing developments.
- Install signs for the designation of pedestrian and bike paths along the Strandway.