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**Open Space Plan 2008-2012**

**Section 7**  
**Analysis of Needs**

**Section 7.2.3 Community Open  
Space & Recreation  
CENTRAL BOSTON**

## **Section 7.2.3: Community Open Space & Recreation CENTRAL BOSTON**

### **THE SETTING**

Included within the BRA-designated Central Boston planning district discussed here are “Downtown:” the Financial District, Downtown Crossing, the Waterfront, Government Center, and the Bullfinch Triangle; and the discrete residential areas of the North End, West End, and Chinatown.

#### *History*

##### Downtown

Originally known as the Shawmut Peninsula, the city’s civic, commercial and financial core has been located at the site of modern-day downtown Boston since the city’s founding. The Old State House, at the junction of State and Washington Streets, had served as the center of public life since the 17th century. The original Faneuil Hall was built in 1742; today with the renovation of Quincy Market as a pedestrian-oriented public space with restaurants and retail shops, the area is a major tourist draw. Christopher Columbus Park, located between the market and the waterfront, provides passive and active recreation for tourists and North End residents alike.

##### *Financial District and Downtown Crossing*

Throughout the 18th century, increasing development resulted in dense street patterns encircling Fort Hill and eventually reaching the Boston Common. Fort Hill was leveled in 1872, the same year a fire destroyed much of downtown Boston. Now most of the financial district’s office towers are located in the area. Post Office Square Park provides critical open space, a green oasis in the built-up and paved-over downtown area. The park itself is the product of a public/private partnership and exemplifies the advantages of corporate abutters participating in the management of public spaces in the downtown core.

Central Boston’s retail district is centered on Downtown Crossing. A portion of Washington Street here is closed off to traffic flow, allowing pedestrians to have more space for movement, especially

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during rush hours and lunchtime. This has created a lively street scene that has strengthened this retail district.

### *The Waterfront*

A major influence in the growth of downtown Boston has been the development of its harbor. At the beginning of the 18th century, Boston's position as a prominent maritime community was secured with the addition of Long Wharf and the building of nearly 40 wharves, more than a dozen shipyards, and six ropewalks. With the decline of the shipping industry in the early 1900s, Boston's wharves began to be abandoned. Some buildings remained vacant or underutilized until the current Central Artery was constructed in the 1950s. Today, wharf renovation and urban renewal have created one of Boston's newest mixed use districts. Harborwalk, a continuous pedestrian path being created along the water's edge from the South Station area to the North End, will link all the publicly accessible open spaces along the waterfront, including those at Rowes Wharf.

### *Government Center*

During the urban renewal era of the 1950s and 1960s, the dilapidated Scollay Square area was leveled to make space for Government Center, a new building complex to accommodate expanding city, state, and federal offices. An 11-acre brick-paved plaza in front of the new City Hall was built as the center of this complex. The plaza is regularly used for concerts, political rallies, civic celebrations, and a farmer's market.

### *Bulfinch Triangle*

The Bulfinch Triangle is the area between Government Center and the North Station complex. So-called because of Charles Bulfinch's street plan for a triangular area created by the 19th century filling-in of the marshy North Cove, it consists of warehouse structures now converted for mostly office uses.

### *The Coming Transformation*

The coming two decades will again transform the character of downtown Boston. Major factors in this transformation will include the completion of wharf restoration, the ongoing linkage of the Harborwalk system, and the depression of the Central Artery. The Central Artery depression has created at the surface both a linear park (almost 12 acres worth) and a boulevard-style thoroughfare.

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### The Residential Neighborhoods

#### *North End*

The North End, one of Boston's oldest neighborhoods, was "wharfed-out" early and inhabited by wealthy merchants and humble seamen. In the early 1800s came the Irish who built houses abutting the narrow streets and alleys that to this day distinguish the North End. Since the 1890s the area has had a large Italian population. In the 1950s, with the building of the Central Artery, the North End became isolated from the downtown area; that isolation is now disappearing as the surface restoration of the Central Artery project is nearing completion. The neighborhood contains several sites which are on the Freedom Trail and local residents have accepted the resulting influx of tourists. In fact, the number of restaurants and retail shops have gradually increased over the years.

#### *West End*

The West End was once a neighborhood of residential structures, shops, and commercial enterprises, an "urban village" much like the North Slope of Beacon Hill appears today. The urban renewal movement of the 1950s and 1960s razed the West End. In its place is the Charles River Park luxury housing complex, a self-contained mega-development that exemplifies Le Corbusier's "tower-in-the-park" urban design philosophy. Traces of bitterness remain from the vast displacement of residents and businesses that took place in the name of "slum clearance." One legacy of this phenomenon is the vigilance and opposition displayed by residents in other parts of the city when proposals call for the wholesale demolition of older structures that have given neighborhoods their character and livable appearance. Another legacy is the awareness among city planners that preservation and adaptive re-use of existing structures – and landscapes – should be a key strategy, and a first resort, in neighborhood revitalization.

#### *Chinatown*

Chinatown/South Cove is located on landfill built on tidal flats to provide additional housing in the early 1800s for Boston's expanding middle-class population. In the 1840s, this area's original residents began to move out of the city. Newcomers were mainly Chinese, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Syrian immigrants who converted the homes to multi-unit tenements.

Non-residential uses developed on the edges of Chinatown. South Station, the railroad lines serving it, and the elevated line along Washington Street, were constructed in 1899. Many tenements were razed for expansion of the garment industry. After World War

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II, Chinese restaurants and specialty shops began to occupy ground floors of residential buildings and a tourist industry began to evolve.

Subsequently, many more housing units were lost due to urban renewal programs. Creation of the Southeast Expressway and the Massachusetts Turnpike, and an increase in traffic along Essex Street, isolated the Chinese residents in the South End from those in South Cove. Old rowhouses were replaced with institutional-scale buildings and high-rise housing towers. Community isolation increased further following the 1974 creation of the “Combat Zone” adult entertainment district. This had perceptually cut off Chinatown from the Central Business District as well as from Boston Common and the Public Garden.

Today, Chinatown exists on approximately one-half the land mass it once had, with a population that had tripled between 1950 and 1987. The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been critical years for the neighborhood in terms of pressures from without and within. The Combat Zone is now a fading memory. Gains and losses to open land on the east and south of Chinatown are possible with the development of air rights over the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Meanwhile, the community struggles to provide housing for new immigrants, growing families, elder residents, and non-Asians attracted by the proximity to downtown Boston.

### *Demographics/Housing*

Like much of the rest of the city, Central Boston experienced a rapid decline in its residential population after the Second World War. It finally stabilized in the 1980s due to an influx of young professionals looking for “walk-to-work” residential accommodation. For example, by the 1920s, with the last tenements completed, 35,000 people lived in the North End alone. The 1980 census showed a population total of about 9,000. The 1990 population total in the North End sub-neighborhood showed an increase to 10,935.

There was a slight drop in Central Boston’s population from 1980 to 1990 of -0.88%, but in the 1990s, the population increase was dramatic: from 21,669 in 1990 to 25,602 in 2000, an 18% increase. Of course, the daytime population of the neighborhood swells, as close to 200,000 persons come to work at downtown offices. In

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addition, thousands of tourists and business visitors swarm the downtown area.

The largest minority group in Central Boston is Asian at 21% in 2000 (versus 8% in Boston). Whites remain predominant at 72% of the total neighborhood population in 2000.

In 2000, 7% of Central Boston persons were youth 17 years of age and younger while for Boston, they were 20%. This neighborhood has a large elderly population (17% for Central Boston versus 10% for the city as a whole), including many of Italian ancestry.

Multi-family housing dominates the residential sections of Central Boston. High-rise residential towers now make up the former West End, as well as the Harbor Towers and Rowes Wharf complexes on the waterfront. The North End and the Waterfront districts now have many newly converted condominiums; and buildings typically have mixed uses with shops on the ground floor.

In terms of economic status, higher incomes are more likely seen, but poverty and unemployment are present as well. The median household income for Central Boston is \$46,841 versus 39,629 for Boston; unemployment is 8.9% versus 7.2% for the city; and the poverty rate is 16.9% versus 19.5% for the city. Car availability for households is difficult: 55% of households lack a vehicle, versus 35 % for the households in the city.

The many 3- to 5-story brick, 19th century residential buildings are characterized by shops and restaurants on the ground floor (30% of the district's housing units are in the 3-9 unit structure category). Later and larger loft buildings frame the district on Beach Street, Hudson Street, Kneeland Street, and Harrison Avenue (57% of housing units are in the 20 or more unit structure category).

## THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY

### *Equity and Investment*

In comparison with the rest of the city, the Central Boston area is underserved in terms of open space available to local residents. With a total of 56 acres of parks, playgrounds, squares, and malls (only 47 acres are protected), this open space must cater to the outdoor needs of the local population (25,602 in Central Boston per the 2000 Census) as well as those of office workers, shoppers, and tourists. For Central Boston, there are 1.83 acres of protected open space per thousand residents, substantially below both the ratio for most other neighborhoods in Boston and the overall city ratio of 7.47 acres per thousand residents. While somewhat below the ratio of 2.5 acres per thousand population set out by the South End Open Space Study prepared by the Boston Urban Gardeners (1988), a more appropriate guideline for inner core urban neighborhoods like Central Boston, the addition of a projected 12 acres of parkland from the Central Artery Project will increase the ratio to 2.29 acres per thousand persons.

The Boston Parks and Recreation Department has made capital improvements to several facilities in Central Boston, including a significant re-design of Christopher Columbus Park in the North End-Waterfront interface. Given the potential to link the Quincy Marketplace area to the waterfront thanks to the Central Artery depression and the creation of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway parks, the Department determined a need to significantly refresh the design of this signature waterfront park, which had not seen such re-design since its construction in the 1970s.

Central Boston Capital Projects 2001-2006	
Christopher Columbus Park	\$4,445,100
Copp's Hill Burying Ground	\$562,940
DeFilippo Playground	\$53,587
Puopolo Playground	\$436,104
Total	\$5,497,731

### *Assessment*

The pedestrian environment in Central Boston benefits from its context – the area is at once the civic, historic, and economic core of the city. Accordingly, its open spaces provide a rich diversity of experiences. While existing squares, pedestrian malls, passive seating areas, and plazas are well distributed, they could be better linked in a coherent, intelligible manner – for example, the waterfront should be easily accessible from Post Office Square and

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City Hall Plaza. Comprehensive programs to ensure the perpetual maintenance of all existing and proposed public spaces have not yet been instituted. There continues to be a lack of indoor public gardens for year-round use and for the use of day care centers.

On the other hand, the residential population located along the waterfront and in the North End urgently requires new playgrounds to accommodate current demands. Also limited are the neighborhood's indoor recreation areas, critical spaces in these dense areas, especially during the winter months.

The depression of the Central Artery has increased access to the waterfront, both from the financial district and Government Center, eliminating the problem of isolation and greatly improving the open space network here. On the restored surface above the depressed artery, the resulting open space will contribute 30 acres of parks, plazas, and public pedestrian ways to Central Boston. Almost 12 acres of the 30 will be parkland. Together the entire 30 acres will be known as the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy (RFK) Greenway in tribute to the matriarch of the Kennedy family who grew up in the North End. A conservancy has been set up to manage and maintain this new open space system.

Squeezed within the downtown area, Chinatown is a community with extremely challenging land use demands, very little green space, and few public recreational facilities. There are compelling needs for additional passive and active recreational areas for extended family groups including young children, adolescents, and the elderly.

In addition to Gateway Park, Chinatown possesses several other open spaces. Oak Street has a small community garden. On Tai Tung Street, a small passive area was transferred from the BRA to the Parks Department. Oxford Street has a pocket park. Both Tai Tung Village and Mass Pike Towers have courtyards. Acorn Day Care Center has a tot lot. Statler Park, Lincoln Square, and Elliot Norton Park account for an additional 1.3 acres, but they are shared with the greater downtown community. There are the 75 acres of Boston Common and the Public Garden; however, they serve virtually all of Boston's residents and many of its visitors.

In Chinatown itself, the only public park that contains a children's play area is Gateway Park. Similarly, the elderly have virtually no public place to congregate that is safe, secure, and easily accessible until the RFK Greenway parks are completed in the area. For security reasons, management authorities must control the use of facilities in the housing complexes.



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Pagoda Park, just south of Kneeland Street, adds another 1.47 acres with three courts and a modest amount of green space. Due to Pagoda Park's location next to a highway ramp and across a major thoroughfare from Chinatown proper, teens are the primary user group. Owned by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, the park's accessibility may be further limited by pending transportation projects. Yet the potential exists for new recreation and open space facilities and better connections arising from these same transportation projects. The Turnpike Authority's interest in building on the air rights over the highway interchange just south of Chinatown will result in new open spaces if the planning recommendations of the BRA South Bay Planning Study are followed.

One hopeful development on the horizon is the construction of the Central Artery Project's parks. The open space of Chinatown will expand with multi-purpose plazas, woonerfs (pedestrianized streets), and expanded sidewalks between Essex and Kneeland Streets.

Another hopeful sign is the BRA's A Civic Vision for Turnpike Air Rights in Boston. Released in 2000, this plan calls for a multi-purpose neighborhood park in the Chinatown area. Such a park would be developed in one section of the decking over the Turnpike Extension in this area.

*Location , Location, Location!*

One benefit of living in Central Boston is the proximity to the ferries that access the Harbor Islands, a regional open space resource for swimming, nature study, historical interpretation, fishing, boating, and kayaking. As the National Park Service and the various partners proceed with their plans, further use and development will likely generate a public regard for these spaces as deep as is held for the Emerald Necklace and the Charles River Reservation. For Central Boston, the Harbor Islands will likely become a richly rewarding "backyard." (Please see the Harbor Open Space chapter in the part titled Resource Protection Mission for further discussion of the Harbor Islands.)

## THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

While characterized by mature and well-distributed public spaces, Boston's historic inner core has only 56 acres of open space, a quarter of which are hard-scaped plazas, malls, and squares. Future generations of North End, Bay Village, and Chinatown residents, tourists, and downtown office workers stand to benefit from a radically transformed public realm once both the new Central Artery surface restoration and the Massachusetts Turnpike Air Rights are realized. A diversity of open space types should be created in these corridors with discrete connections to the neighborhoods and the waterfront (in the spirit of the "walk-to-the-sea" concept) and in tandem with supportive land uses.

### *Opportunities*

#### Chinatown

- Support the open space objectives of the BRA's 1990 Chinatown Community Plan.
- Create additional open space along Hudson Street and near the I-90/I-93 interchange through the Central Artery completion process.
- Use air rights over the Massachusetts Turnpike to create a large, green park serving the Josiah Quincy School and several nearby housing complexes.
- Create active and passive community open space along streets, on rooftops, and in plazas and courtyards in partnership with institutional, housing, and commercial developers in and near Chinatown.
- Promote the planting and care of outdoor urban plant materials, including those of Asian origin. Introduce programs to Adopt-a-Tree and Adopt-a-Window Box. Compile a guidebook and conduct workshops as part of implementation.
- Work with the BHA and the housing complexes to raise the standard of routine maintenance around properties.
- Re-design Elliot Norton Park to better meet community needs for green space and active recreation.
- Support the reconstruction of the Liberty Tree Park under the city capital improvement program.
- Encourage all planning initiatives and development projects in and around Chinatown, such as the Midtown Cultural District, to provide additional open space for the community.

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### North End

- Support the completion of the Central Artery surface restoration parks.
- Seek from all proposed developments on Sargent's and Lewis Wharves a commitment to protect the water in the vicinity of their projects from pollution, and to provide public access as determined by abutters and the local community.
- Complete Harborwalk along the North End piers and examine the possibility of docking small craft for community use along Puopolo or Langone Parks. Support the development of the Historic Piers Network, a system of physical and programmatic historic interpretation to attract year-round use along Harborwalk and to protect public access.
- Continue to fund capital rehabilitation of city park facilities as needed in the capital renewal cycle, such as Cutillo and DeFillippo.

### Downtown

- Support the completion of the Central Artery surface restoration parks.
- Develop underutilized pockets of land in Dewey Square for passive open spaces in the financial district similar to the School Street Park and Angell Memorial/Post Office Square Parks.
- Preserve currently unrealized open land in the Midtown District for the creation of public spaces that complement cultural activities and ensure lively use day and night.
- Develop open space maintenance mechanisms based on the Post Office Square Park model, where appropriate, for the perpetual stewardship of downtown parks. Continue to encourage corporate support for downtown open spaces.

### *Community Priorities*

#### Chinatown

- In conjunction with local businesses explore the possibility of closing off streets for recreational use more often, as is done for the August Moon Festival.
- Maintain existing active sports facilities. Maintain the accessibility and usability of Pagoda Park, which contain the very popular – and only – multi-use ball courts in Chinatown. Increase community access and playing space through capital improvements such as redesign, reorganization, expansion, and in the case of Pagoda Park, possibly even relocation.

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- Form partnerships to assist with design, management, and maintenance of open space in and for Chinatown. Candidates include Beach Street, Gateway Park, and Oak Street Plaza.
- Implement a Beach Street Beautification Project and apply for grants from sources such as the Browne Fund and the Henderson Foundation for capital improvements such as planters and plantings.
- Address immediate security and safety problems at Gateway Park, such as garbage and conflicts with vagrants. Redesign Gateway Park to better meet community needs.
- Redesign the open space across from Tai Tung Village (Tai Tung Street Seating Area on the corner of Tyler Street) to make it more usable. Consider playground facilities for pre-school and school children and seating for adults and elders. Repair paving.

North End

- Use targeted capital improvement funds for DeFilippo Playground with the new design to be determined through a community process.
- Improve security for North End parks through lighting, programmed year-long uses, and signage.
- Support the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority plans to improve parcels at Richmond and North Streets adjacent to the harbor tunnel portals.

Downtown

- Adopt sliver open spaces, such as medians, through maintenance and management agreements with tenants in adjacent buildings.
- Implement a tree planting program in downtown area with corporate funding and support.