

PART 2

Introduction

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The identity of Boston is inextricably intertwined with its open space. From town commons and burying grounds of the early Colonial settlements, to the now institutionalized co-development of open space with transportation and other urban infrastructure, open space has become an essential part of Boston's urban fabric. It has been Boston's genius to generally balance human needs expressed through the marketplace with those expressed through other means. It is the purpose of this document to express Boston's needs for open space – in other words, the public consensus for livable urban development in part through adequate open space. This document also expresses a multitude of ways to meet those needs.

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Past Open Space Planning

Planning for open space has been a boon for Boston, particularly in the recent past. The fortunes of the city park and recreation system had been in near collapse by the early 1980s. Deferred maintenance and limited capital reinvestment had resulted in negative impacts not only on the system itself, but also on the surrounding neighborhoods. Open space advocates and neighborhood activists, however, determined that the situation must turn around for the sake of the neighborhoods and the city, as well as the parks and recreation areas themselves. This was expressed in the 1987 Boston Foundation report, *The Greening of Boston: An Action Agenda*.

The City of Boston responded with a new Open Space Plan in 1987 that inventoried the deteriorated conditions of the municipal park system. It also set out guidelines as to how to proceed to repair the damage and equitably distribute the benefits of the system's revitalization. By 1997, nearly 100% of the system had been affected by a huge infusion of capital redevelopment that touched all neighborhoods.

In 1993, while this capital reinvestment effort was well underway, a new citywide Open Space Plan was issued. It went beyond the near-exclusive focus on capital reinvestment in the existing city park and recreation system. It saw that open space was a growing need in a dynamic city. Recreation needs change, as do potential and available opportunities to fulfill those needs. Who in the 1980s would have thought that soccer and skateboarding would become the popular recreational activities they are today? That plan foresaw the need for accommodating new activities in the city park system, as well as continuing the revival of the existing park system. It saw the growing importance of environmental protection in open space planning and management. It saw the changing demographic character of the city's population, with more immigrants and their needs, and other factors.

It saw that the two giant infrastructure projects – the Big Dig (CA/T Project) reconstruction of Interstate 93 and development of a new extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike to Logan Airport via a Third Harbor Tunnel (Ted Williams Tunnel); and the MWRA construction of the Deer Island secondary sewage treatment plant and nine-mile outfall tunnel – would provide significant opportunities and challenges for the city's open space system. The Big Dig has created or will create open spaces in Central Boston, Charlestown, East Boston, South Boston, and the South End. Many of these will extend existing park systems like the Charles River Reservation, or help create new systems like the East Boston Greenway, the South Bay Harbor Trail, and the downtown



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Boston Surface Artery corridor. The new regional water pollution control plant has already led to substantial improvements in the harbor's water quality, generating demand for access to the water for recreational use. The plan saw that interest in the harbor beaches would consequently increase from this water quality improvement, following the lead of the *Back to the Beaches* plan of 1993. Issued by the Joint Commission on the Future of the Boston Harbor Beaches, with project management performed by Boston Parks Department staff, it drew an attainable vision of regional water-based recreation close-to-home for thousands of Boston residents. The MDC, stewards of the harbor beaches, soon began to reinvest in these valuable resources, reconstructing the South Boston beaches and Constitution Beach in East Boston.

A New Plan for Open Space

Much from the 1993 open space plan has been implemented. In the interim, new opportunities and challenges have developed and are continuing to develop. After years of losing population, Boston is now in a strong upswing in terms of population size. It is also a more diverse city, with immigrants from many more

different lands than were previously represented. Caucasians are now a minority, as shown by the 2000 census. Recreation programming for youth is more important, as the need for after-school care has increased with the number of parents and guardians working during the day. With the increased pressure for academic performance in schools, less time in the school day is devoted to physical activity for children, such as recess and gym. Therefore, after-school, evening, and weekend programs have increased their participation rates overall, putting pressure on park and recreation facilities throughout the system.

Environmental protection has become a major factor in open space decision-making. Three new parks in Boston are on capped landfills: Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor; Pope John Paul II Park on the Neponset River; and Millennium Park on the Charles River. Capped as part of a state imperative to reduce the water quality impacts of these old landfills, they illustrate the Chinese proverb that “crises present opportunities.” All three are significant open spaces for the city while improving the water bodies they abut.

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Brownfields, vacant lands contaminated by pollutants, usually from their previous use(s), are also “crises presenting opportunities.” One case in point is a former industrial site on Reservation Road in Hyde Park that was recently cleaned by the city and redeveloped as a park along Mother Brook. Reservation Road Park contains a soccer/football field, a skateboard park, and a restored riverbank with a nature trail. Others in the making are the Condor Street Marsh and the Belle Isle Fish Company sites in East Boston. The city is investing in redesign and engineering to convert these two brownfields into attractive coastal access and wetland restoration sites.

Many urban water bodies are “brownfields under water.” The prime example for the city is the Muddy River, the water body running through several of the Emerald Necklace parks. A major planning and engineering study has already begun to identify the full extent of the problem and possible solutions. This study will support the allocation of substantial federal/state/municipal funding for restoration of this water body. It also addresses restoration and revegetation of the riverbanks, helping to complete a major component of the Emerald Necklace master plan.

While always a planning imperative, linkage has become a near-ubiquitous mantra in open space planning for good reason. With the emphasis on aerobic activity for health, there is a popular need for opportunities to safely and attractively travel long distances by walking, hiking, running, in-line skating, bicycling, and the like.

Linked or linear open space systems have a long history in Boston, beginning with Olmsted and the Emerald Necklace system and Eliot’s regional system for the metropolitan Boston area. In the years ahead, this new plan foresees even more



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activity to realize both old proposals and new ideas for linkages and linear systems. Efforts will continue to restore the “old” Charles River Reservation based on guidance from a recently completed MDC master plan, to complete, via the CA/T Project, the “new” Charles River Reservation, and to integrate the two.

Harborwalk will steadily advance as development occurs along the harborfront from Charlestown to Dorchester. It will use anchors such as restored MDC harbor beaches, revitalized city waterfront parks like Christopher Columbus Park, and privately-managed but

publicly accessible jewels such as the Fan Pier project to provide points of reference – and destination – for the more commonplace, but vital, projects in between.

Other linear systems that will be the focus of planning and capital investment include the Emerald Necklace Greenway (i.e., the effort to restore an adequate measure of continuity for non-motorized travel through this park system); fully implementing the master plan for the Mattapan Square-to-Dorchester Bay stretch of the Neponset River Reservation and extending master planning to the Mattapan Square-to-Paul’s Bridge stretch; the East Boston Greenway from East Boston Memorial Park to Belle Isle Marsh; the Mother Brook Greenway from Hyde Park to Dedham linking the Neponset River to the Charles River; the East Coast Greenway, linking Boston to an interstate greenway extending both north and south of the city; and several others detailed in the *Greenways, Trails, and Bikeways* chapter.

Partnership will continue to be a strong watchword in the years ahead. The Muddy River restoration project would not have advanced as far as it has without the help of the neighboring institutions, agencies at the city, state, and federal level, and private entities such as the Emerald Necklace Conservancy working together. The recent success of the Frog Pond skating rink in Boston Common results in large part from private sector support for its operation and maintenance. Donations and grants continue to sustain the burying grounds restoration effort. Community gardens receive help from the city through the Parks Department and the Department of Neighborhood Development, and from the Boston Natural Areas Network. The gardeners themselves do much to care and maintain their garden parcels. Community stewards will become a more prominent feature of urban wilds and natural area management, and will be sought for growing systems such as greenways and Harborwalk.

Stewardship/partnership is an important factor in a relatively new phenomenon for the city park system: acquisition. The city has, through Mayor Menino’s Open Space Acquisition Fund, actively acquired several new parcels. To provide community

support that is key to an open space's success, and to reduce impacts on the city's operating budget, community participation is needed, whether through for-profits, non-profits, or community volunteers. As this program has proceeded, various models for stewardship/partnership have been developed that can help inspire other neighborhood open space advocates as they prepare their acquisition proposals.

Visioning the Future of Open Space

The vision or endpoint for our efforts to plan for open space in Boston can be as vast as the dreams of the over half a million residents of Boston. But we can certainly outline a set of commonly held images that can inspire, and have been inspired by, the imaginations of residents and professionals alike throughout the discussions that have lead up to this plan.

- Parks which are cleaner than ever with well-maintained play equipment, courts, and fields;
- Parks with programming by Park Rangers, arts groups, and sports, fitness, and recreation providers;
- Play lots that are safe, widely available, stimulate child development, and provide meeting places for parents and other caregivers;
- Recreational facilities that respond to changing demographics and provide youth and adults alike with opportunities for healthy activity, team building, and bolstering self-esteem;
- Youth programming that encourages leadership, accomplishment, and productive activity;
- Greenways, trails, and bikeways between parks and along the seashore and riverbanks linking neighborhoods as well as open spaces;
- Burying grounds maintained as attractive, historical assets for their neighborhoods;
- Community gardens protected and designed with community enhancement in mind;
- Urban wilds and natural areas protected, maintained, and interpreted through community/agency partnerships;
- Improved access to open space through public transit and non-motorized travel, as well as improved vehicular routes;
- Acquisition of key open space parcels to protect viewsheds, watersheds, and habitats, buffer existing open spaces, and provide needed recreational facilities;
- Continual improvement and innovation in park and open space design, maintenance, and programming;
- Corporate and business involvement in open space creation, funding, and enhancement;

- Community empowerment through involvement in decision-making about the design and care of parks and open spaces; and
- Stable and enhanced funding for the citywide system of open spaces.

The map associated with the *Action Plan* will graphically represent some of the physical changes proposed in this plan, and therefore, depicts a slice of this vision we have outlined. The remainder of this plan sets out the background and recommendations to point the way to achieve this vision.

PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

As the owner and caretaker of the largest and most complex municipal parks system in the Commonwealth, the Boston Parks and Recreation Department has taken a suitably multi-layered approach to public participation in developing the current Open Space Plan.

We have conducted public forums and crafted and distributed comprehensive parks use and needs surveys. We have partnered with other public agencies in completing open space research and public outreach. We have been good listeners as our constituents—the many hundreds of thousands of people who use our parks in a myriad of ways every year—have told us what they like and what they want to see changed.

More specifically, the highlights of our outreach and community input include the following:

- The 100th anniversary conference of the National Recreation and Parks Association was held in Boston where an open space forum open to the general public was used not only for discussions of open space visions but also as a distribution vehicle for a survey targeted to local advocates.
- Parks Department personnel participated in a “*Greening of Dorchester*” forum in which residents, green space advocates and public officials from the city’s largest neighborhood offered suggestions and visions for open space there.
- An Open Space Map of Boston was created by the Department that locates and identifies all open space—regardless of owner—across the city. To date, 280 of these maps have been distributed. Comments from map recipients have been incorporated into the plan.
- *Boston 400*, a long-range citywide comprehensive planning effort by the Boston Redevelopment Authority in conjunction with the City’s 400th anniversary in the year 2030, included meetings in 22 different neighborhood areas that gathered information and ideas as well as initiating discussions about parks and open space. Parks Department personnel attended these meetings and gathered invaluable information in the

process for input into the Open Space Plan. Parks Department personnel also distributed survey questionnaires to citizens participating at these meetings.

- The Parks Department sponsored an Open Space Forum in April 2000 at the Boston Public Library (at Copley Square) in which past accomplishments were highlighted and future goals elucidated with significant public input throughout the event. Drafts of various sections of the Plan that were then available for public review and comment were provided to the public at the Forum. Notices were provided to all the community newspapers of the availability of these draft sections for public review and comment. Several persons have sent in written comments.
- 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 several persons who are active with gardens.
- The Parks Department's on-going capital improvement program provides typically two to three advertised community meetings for each capital project. Community residents will often bring up other 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 as to how we are doing and what can be improved.
- Within the Parks Department, preparation of the Open Space Plan has been led by the Policy and Resource Development Unit, but with participation from other units and divisions within the Department. To ensure expert comment and input, the Policy and Resource Development Unit also distributed various draft chapters of the plan among city and MDC officials, such as the Office of the Chief of Environmental Services, the Environment Department, the Landmarks Commission, the Conservation Commission, the BRA Planning Division, the BRA Office of the Chief Planner, the DND open space development unit, the BWSC planning office, the Trust Office of the city Treasury Department, and the MDC Planning Office.

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