

A Waterfront for All of Boston

from Lydia Edwards

Boston's waterfront is a precious resource, one that belongs to all residents. For Charlestown, the North End and East Boston, our city's waters and waterfront are invaluable assets for recreation, tourism, transportation, shipping, education and sporting events, and they provide an irreplaceable benefit to our residents. Boston's neighborhoods must have access to the waterfront in perpetuity, and exercise control over development that could restrict public use and ownership of the waterfront.

In Boston, the public's right to access the waterfront is in jeopardy—but working with residents, public agencies and private developers, we can aim higher.¹ Despite legal rights to public access that date back to the 1800s, the recent trend of waterfront development and public space raises concern for Boston's future.² From unwise building decisions to flagrant violations of Massachusetts law, development along the waterfront has serious ramifications for Boston's future.

To put it plainly, both private developers and public agencies can do better. Advocates³ and residents' groups⁴ have long engaged in waterfront preservation, at times sparring with City Hall on individual parcels or projects⁵ as well as large-scale harbor planning.⁶ Our city should aim to work in harmony with civic groups and area residents, partnering to preserve neighborhoods, protect public spaces and right-of-ways, promote economic development including marine industries and tourism, and finally, create a waterfront that works for all.

Open Space Requirements and Harbor Planning

Chapter 91⁷ of Massachusetts law sets stringent open space requirements for waterfront development. While implementation of the law can be adjusted for local municipalities, fundamental to the law is the public's unassailable right to public spaces. Fulfillment of the law requirements sufficient access to sufficient public space. In recent years, neighborhood advocates have noted that Boston waterfront development proposals contain less than 100 feet between private development and the waterfront, whereas typical development in other comparable cities may dedicate twice as much space.⁸

¹<https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2016/05/10/barr-foundation-worries-that-boston-waterfront-jeopardy/nXe1RISa6XWBPRfP92wEUM/story.html>

² <http://www.clf.org/blog/boston-public-spaces-arent-really-public/>

³<http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2017/02/21/environmental-group-files-suit-stop-seaport-condo-tower-development/3c20oUOGBTwh9XCBrfjqzl/story.html>

⁴ <http://www.mass.gov/anf/docs/anf/reg-review/eea/charlestown-waterfront-coalition.pdf>

⁵ <http://northendwaterfront.com/2017/04/city-continues-fight-liquor-picnic-tables-long-wharf/>

⁶ <http://northendwaterfront.com/2017/01/newra-joins-opposition-bpda-municipal-harbor-plan/>

⁷<http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/massdep/water/watersheds/chapter-91-the-massachusetts-public-waterfront-act.html>

⁸ <http://preservebostonwaterfront.org/regulatory/>

Recommendations:

- Hold new development to high standards on open space requirements;
- For existing development, ensure enforcement of Chapter 91 open space and access requirements in partnership with Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, and bring an end to any violations of public access rights; and
- Maintain existing public spaces: at the city level, ensuring appropriate funding and coordination of Boston Parks Department, Boston Public Works and Boston Transportation Department, while partnering with state and federal government to preserve park and public properties; and
- Form a citizen advisory council to review strengths and weaknesses of existing and proposed Municipal Harbor Plans.

Climate resiliency

Boston is extremely vulnerable⁹ to the impacts of climate change, including sea-level rise, flooding, heat waves, storms, disruptions to the power grid and other consequences. Waterfront districts are particularly at risk, but residents of communities like East Boston¹⁰ and Charlestown¹¹ are already engaged in solutions.¹²

Working with natural design—adding rain gardens, permeable pavement and planting trees to mitigate stormwater runoff—as well as innovative 21st-century engineering, we can ensure our communities are resilient in the face of strong winds or high waters, keep power online during harsh conditions and ensure critical services like food shipment and medical treatment facilities keep operating during even the most difficult scenarios.

Recommendations:

- Continued city-level support for Climate Ready Boston;
- Launch a public green infrastructure challenge to solicit environmentally-friendly interventions to manage sea-level rise and flooding;
- Ensure new construction has elevated utilities and partner with public and private entities to build clean energy “microgrids” for backup power;
- Work with the University of Massachusetts Boston, other academic partners, and the City of Boston to analyze the merits of large engineering solutions to sea-level rise, as applied in European nations such as Italy and the Netherlands;
- Revisit planned development in high-risk areas and ensure city planning and development policies and building approvals align with Climate Ready Boston findings and contemporary understanding of climate science; and

⁹http://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/04_climate_ready_boston_digital_climatevulnerabilityassessment.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.eastietimes.com/2017/07/19/noah-holds-second-climate-ready-workshop/>

¹¹ <http://charlestownbridge.com/2017/07/28/climate-ready-boston-brings-show-project-to-charlestown/>

¹² <http://www.wbur.org/news/2017/08/02/east-boston-climate-defense>

- Recognizing and considering the trade-off for potential short-term economic benefits, acknowledge that some areas may not be suitable for construction or human habitation in a coastal city.

Transportation

Ferry service provides residents of Boston with unique, yet underutilized, mode of transit. Increasing ferry service can reduce vehicle traffic congestion, connect neighborhoods and save time for commuters. The Imagine Boston 2030 process, which consulted thousands of residents, identified expanded water transportation as a top priority¹³. Experts note that Boston companies currently fund thousands of private shuttles each day, creating significant expense and adding to downtown traffic.¹⁴ New York City's recent expansion of ferry service¹⁵ is a positive sign and Boston should swiftly follow suit.

Recommendations:

- Leverage civic groups and findings of Imagine Boston Waterfront and pending Boston Harbor Ferry study to push for sensible next steps on affordable ferry service;¹⁶
- Explore workforce opportunities created by expanded waterfront transportation and connect District One and other waterfront residents directly to employment;
- Conduct an environmental and economic analysis of reductions in vehicle congestion, reduced air pollution and time saved by expanded waterfront transportation; and
- Working with city and state partners, continue pilot efforts (reduce fare, increased service or altered schedule) to enhance ridership.

Conclusion: Development and Opportunity

Boston's waterfront is an incredible resource for the city. Well-planned development can work for existing residents and businesses as well as visitors and new industries, preserving historic neighborhoods while welcoming innovation and new arrivals to our city. Yet development works best when residents of Boston drive planning of their own communities. Open space and public access to the waterfront are presently threatened and Boston should shift gears from the recent history of waterfront development to unlock open space and a waterfront that works for all Bostonians. The city's laudable climate resiliency planning is a critical step in engaging residents in sustaining the long-term viability of their communities, and should be met by reforms in planning and development that bring new construction in line with modern science.

¹³https://imagine.boston.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Imagine-Boston-Waterfront-For-Web-posting_FINAL.pdf

¹⁴<https://northendwaterfront.com/2017/07/waterfront-panel-cites-impending-need-water-transportation-public-access-responsible-development/>

¹⁵<http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/139-17/now-hiring-mayor-de-blasio-new-ferry-service-adding-jobs-brooklyn-navy-yard-with#/0>

¹⁶ <http://www.northendregionalreview.com/2017/07/14/boston-harbor-ferry-study-now-underway/>