



Innovative designs for future waterfront parks can help establish a “green” infrastructure that serves as a buffer against flooding. (Conceptual rendering.)

# Waves of Change

*Creating a new coastal future  
for the State and its capital*

BY JEFF HARDER

*From Charlestown and East Boston to the Seaport, Fort Point and beyond, these are heady days around Boston Harbor. Once the heart of the New England maritime industry, the historic port is now the humming center of the city’s 21st-century economic boom—a tableau of packed restaurants, bustling retail spaces, modernist apartment buildings, the headquarters for businesses like Vertex Pharmaceuticals and soon General Electric, and construction scaffolding surrounding millions of square feet under rapid development.*

But Boston's developing waterfront demands havens of green amidst the grey: the kind of open space that attracts residents and visitors alike with diverse, neighborhood-building amenities. Intrinsic elements of what makes Massachusetts special, parks provide places for restoration and recreation, help an especially vulnerable coastal city meet the challenges posed by climate change, and enhance quality of life in this bustling section of the Commonwealth's capital city.

## GETTING STARTED

"The overarching question is: how can we shape a really brilliant future for this world-class waterfront?" says Jocelyn Forbush, Chief of Operations and Programs for The Trustees.

Such is the goal of the Boston Waterfront Initiative, a collaboration involving Trustees, the administration of Mayor Marty Walsh, and nonprofit partners including Boston Harbor Now and the Barr Foundation. "We are pleased to be supporting The Trustees, who bring an important set of competencies to this work, which to be successful will require the broad engagement of public, private, and nonprofit partners," says Jim Canales, President and Trustee of the Barr Foundation.

An outgrowth of its 2018 Strategic Plan, the Trustees initiative centers on protecting and restoring precious lands on the harbor's highly developed waterfront for their conservation, environmental, and cultural value, ultimately forging a shared, coherent vision of the waterfront. And by forging new partnerships and sparking a wave of creative thinking within The Trustees itself, the Initiative looks to find novel ways for establishing open space in the Commonwealth's cities for decades to come. "When we talk about wanting to create iconic open space along the water, we're not talking your average city park," says Barbara Erickson, Trustees President and CEO. "We're talking about a new era of space design and a new era of parks funding that follows a different model than Boston has ever seen before."

The Boston Waterfront Initiative represents a return to The Trustees' first geography of concern: circa 1891, Charles Eliot saw the Commonwealth's capital losing its connection to restorative landscapes and built the organization that would pioneer the protection of open space for the public's



**The Boston Harbor in ca. 1906, showing the Central Wharf (foreground) and Long Wharf. East Boston is visible in the distance.**



**Recent view of Christopher Columbus Park from Custom House Tower, shows how some of the same Boston wharves and East Boston waterfront from the above early 20th-century photo look today.**

use and enjoyment. More recently, after The Trustees merged with the Boston Natural Areas Network—an advocate for open space, community gardens, and greenways in the City—and helped with the management of the city's community gardens and urban wilds, Forbush says, "we began to look more broadly and ask 'how do we carry on our

collective legacy and find or create other open spaces in Boston, and play a role in the public realm where we can connect people to green places?"

## MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

At the same time, the City of Boston launched Imagine Boston 2030, an effort





**New York City's Brooklyn Bridge Park is a remarkable example of former industrial waterfront that has been transformed into open green space. The 85-acre park extends for more than a mile south from its northernmost point just above the Manhattan Bridge.**

whose stated aims include investments in open space as well as reducing the waterfront's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change—an acute concern considering the potential impacts of coastal flooding on the city's 665,000-plus residents. “In the last few years, there's been a groundswell of looking at the waterfront and saying, ‘this is an amazing resource and asset for the city, it's being developed piecemeal and haphazardly, and if we're not careful we're going to lose this moment,’” Forbush says. “A number of entities, including The Trustees, are looking at the waterfront and saying, ‘Let's do something.’”

The Barr Foundation was one such organization advocating for a long-term vision for the waterfront. “Boston's waterfront is a treasure to be stewarded for the enjoyment of future generations,” adds Canales. “The Barr Foundation is investing in partners who share an aspiration for a larger vision that encompasses the entire waterfront, from

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Charlestown to Dorchester. Given what we now know about the threats of sea level rise, and the potential for a great public realm worthy of a world-class city, Boston can be a leader.”

At the moment, Forbush says The Trustees are going “parcel by parcel” to find areas on the waterfront that could be transformed into open green space. Fortunately, there's no shortage of inspiration. New York City's Brooklyn Bridge Park, for example, is an 85-acre park fashioned on a postindustrial

waterfront not unlike Boston Harbor, and a surcharge on the development around the park means that its funding doesn't depend on city coffers. Crissy Field in San Francisco, Millennium Park in Chicago, and other iconic urban green spaces provide muses, and while the particulars might change along Boston Harbor, the endgame is the same. “We're hoping to not only generate funds that could make a world-class [park] design, but also create a new income stream with development partners that would sustain the park in the long run, ultimately lifting up the surrounding neighborhoods,” Erickson says.

Thoughtfully designed open spaces on the waterfront are also vital to shielding the city's built environment from climate-change-related impacts and ensuring the city's resiliency in the decades to come, a core aim of the city's Climate Ready Boston initiative. Instead of seawalls, for example, salt marshes and natural green borders



**Moakley Courthouse and Boston Harborwalk on the South Boston waterfront; one of the more recent open space additions to the Boston Harbor shoreline.**

could absorb the brunt of flooding, while green infrastructure that steers flooding to unoccupied segments of the coast could save crowded neighborhoods. “The idea that you can use green infrastructure to buffer against storm inundation, flooding, and damage is incredibly important,” Erickson says. “I hope we can leverage our conservation legacy to set a few examples that show how green infrastructure can have a powerful role in making a more resilient city.”

And with The Trustees at the helm, promising days await the Boston Waterfront Initiative. “As the former Executive Vice President at The Trustees, I know firsthand its ability to develop and maintain outstanding destination parks,” says Kathy Abbott, President and CEO of Boston Harbor Now, a nonprofit steward for the harbor, islands, and waterfront, and a partner on the Initiative. “We look forward to supporting their work to build a significant new model that contributes to our efforts to make Boston’s waterfront, harbor, and islands welcoming, vibrant, accessible and climate-resilient.”

### **A STRATEGY FOR OUR COAST**

The effort in the capital dovetails with The Trustees’ broader coastal strategy across its existing properties on the Massachusetts shoreline. Today, The Trustees owns and protects 115 waterfront miles across 28 properties, from Crane Beach in Ipswich to Wasque Point on Martha’s Vineyard—dynamic, changeable landscapes susceptible to climate change, erosion, coastal flooding, and the perils of aging infrastructure. “As property stewards, we’re having to replace boardwalks more and do lots of small and midsize repairs that add up, and we realized this has to be addressed more cohesively,” Forbush says. Right now, the organization is undertaking a coastal vulnerability assessment to identify the areas under greatest threat and formulate long-range solutions to preserve access to the coastline; measures could range from simply adding moveable stairs and boardwalks to true marvels of engineering.

“We are the largest private owner of protected coastline in Massachusetts, even more than the State,” Erickson says. “It’s a

responsibility of ours to accept a leadership position in thinking about the coast and lighting the way for others.”

In an era of remigration from the suburbs back to cities and a cultural and economic rebirth in Boston, finding ways to add open space along the waterfront transcends The Trustees’ strategic plan: it speaks to the identity that will define the city and its residents for decades to come. “Boston has this amazing maritime history,” Erickson says, “but as that subsides or diminishes, how are we going to use these lands and give them a new life that’s publicly accessible?” The answer and the future are one and the same.

*Jeff Harder is a freelance writer and editor who lives in New England.*

*Editorial Note: Look for more information on The Trustees’ broader coastal plans, as well as further details and progress updates on the Boston Waterfront Initiative, in upcoming issues of Special Places.*