

Report of the Special Committee on the Boston Common



REPORT TO CITY COUNCIL PRESIDENT MAUREEN FEENEY AND
MEMBERS OF THE BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

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Presented for the Committee by Michael P. Ross, Chair

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REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE BOSTON COMMON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Boston Common was established in 1634 and is America's first and oldest public park. With 48 acres of land, there is a need for ongoing attention and care, which has at times been insufficient.

The Common is an important part of the history and tradition of the City of Boston. It houses Boston's Visitor's Center and is the start of the Freedom Trail, thus is memorable for many visitors. It is the front yard for our state government buildings, a block from the city's business district, and alongside a number of residential neighborhoods. The Common is of strategic importance, by encompassing two MBTA subway stations with accompanying plazas, and an underground parking garage.

The issues raised in this report recognize the critical role the Common plays in our city. This committee is looking for ways to make the Boston Common an even more central part of our city, maximizing its use by residents and visitors alike, creating a stronger visual icon within the Downtown.

The report of the Special Committee on the Boston Common examines data for the conditions of the Common, and investigates potential options for the park's future. Boston's Department of Parks and Recreation oversees the Boston Common, most recently under difficult financial circumstances. There is much to be done, however, and the City of Boston should seek to improve the maintenance of this world-class park, even under these tough economic times. This Committee has sought to learn from the experiences and best practices of other cities facing similar problems. We make recommendations based in part on our research and observation of several New York parks.

Physical Appearance of the Boston Common

A walk through the Common reveals the wear and tear on its turf, statues, and aesthetic features. Difficult budget decisions have forced reductions in the levels of maintenance, and it shows. To make the Common a destination for those who live and work nearby, and those who visit the city, this Committee is seeking to answer the question of how to make the Common a more welcoming park that is vibrant, clean, and safe.

Developing Positive Activity

Crime on the Common

From 2006 to the summer of 2007, we witnessed a difficult period for the issue of safety on the Common. In 2007, the Boston Police Department began to enforce the overnight curfew in an effort to stem the small crime wave in the area. Crime statistics show some recent successes in crime reduction in the Common, through the use of Safe Street Teams. This heavier presence may only be a temporary fix, and may merely be displacing crime to other parts of the neighborhood. We cannot expect strained police resources to be the only



Figure 1. Cracked Sidewalk and cigarette butts by Park Street Station

deterrent to crime. This report makes recommendations to increase positive activity on the Common, and how that will create a better and safer environment on the Common.

Homelessness on the Common

Homelessness is a chronic problem in major U.S. cities. In Boston, our mission is to end homelessness. The Emergency Shelter Commission (ESC) estimates that as many as 100 homeless people utilize the Common as a living space during the summer months. "Neighborhood team" street outreach programs are needed during the day, and the ESC engages area ministries in a longer-term strategy to find housing for the homeless. A number of service agencies worked with the ESC to find housing for 40 percent of those found homeless in the park in 2007 and continues that work today. We recognize the important work of the Housing First program. Providing shelter for the homeless should remain the first priority. We also need to ensure that day-to-day social services and outreach continues, and that there remain resources available for the homeless.

New York City

Our committee had an opportunity to visit New York City this past June. Our fact-finding mission was designed to see what was being done at three parks in Manhattan, in order to find ideas that could be brought to bear on the Common. In New York, we saw some interesting models. There are great ideas that have been generated for urban green space in New York City, and great opportunities for us, and the Common and the Department of Parks and Recreation would benefit from learning some of the best practices used in New York.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this report are a foundation for a renewed strategic plan that is badly

needed on the Boston Common. These recommendations are merely the beginning of the conversation. It should be the jumping-off point for more extensive, more public, more detailed planning processes for the Common, as we look to revise the Master Management Plan.

Four main issues drive the discussion to improve the Common.

1. **Maintenance and improvements of the physical structures of the park.** We need to do more to improve the infrastructure of the park, and that we have a better understanding of what structures are used by visitors, residents, and those who work nearby. There are places where aesthetic improvements can be made, and places where significant changes are recommended.
2. **Reduce criminal activity on the Common.** We have found that bringing positive activity eliminates criminal activity that affects safety and usage in the Common. By finding new ways to expand hours of use, giving people a larger commitment to the Common, and finding new ways of bringing people to the Common, we can attract people there to eat and drink, to play or relax, to bring their families, to protest or rally, and to experience cultural and social events.
3. **Improving our ability to fund the improvements and activities for the Boston Common.** The Parks Department operates under budget constraints felt by all aspects of government and are forced to find alternative forms of funding to survive. The Friends of the Public Garden has done an excellent job raising funds for the Boston Common. We think more can be done to reach out to abutters, businesses, and nearby institutions, and we recommend a few options.

ABOUT THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE BOSTON COMMON

The committee convened for the purpose of addressing the future of the Boston Common in the following areas: maintenance and physical infrastructure, public safety, homelessness, and financial opportunities and challenges.

To date the committee has held two public hearings, several working sessions, and made a site visit to New York City to review several of their parks.

On March 19, 2008 the committee held its first public hearing at Suffolk University Law School, convening to hear testimony from the public and from administration officials.

On May 6, 2008 the committee held a working session to discuss the status and future of the Boston Common Garage with James Rooney, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Convention Authority. On May 14, 2008, the committee held a working session with the MBTA team working on



Figure 2. The Special Committee on the Boston Common

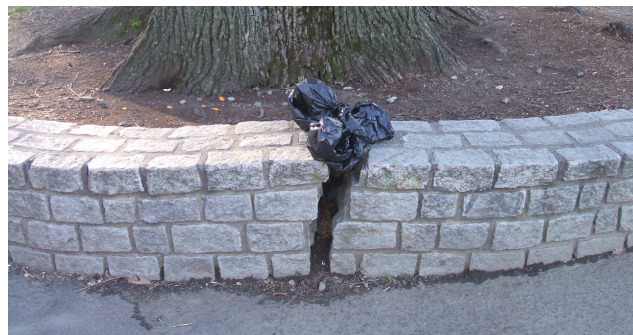


Figure 3. Broken brick barrier and trash found on the path between Frog Pond and baseball fields.

improvements to the Park Street Station, Boylston Street Station, as well as to discuss the future impact of Silver Line plans, mitigation, and impact.

On June 13, 2008, the members of the Special Committee on the Boston Common, along with Commissioner Pollak, community, industry and business leaders, and members of the Friends of the Public Garden, travelled to three city parks in New York City to evaluate their general operation, degree of use, and appearance.

On June 16, 2008 the committee held a public hearing to address the specific and principal issue of public safety, where various crime statistics for the Boston Common area were presented by Boston Police Captain Bernard O'Rourke. On November 14, 2008, the committee met to discuss an overview of what was learned over the course of the year, and to think about next steps.

On December 8, the committee held public working sessions to discuss its end-of-year report on the Boston Common. This report is designed to give some background of the issues at hand, and put forward recommendations for future action.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE BOSTON COMMON

The Boston Common has a number of significant problems. There is considerable work to be done to make the Common look like the world-class destination it should be. As a literary, historic, and political landmark, the areas of the Common that are falling into disrepair are should not be acceptable to this city, and this committee's top priority is working on ways to ensure improvements are made.

Near the top of our list is the corner of Park and Tremont Streets. There is no delineation between the Boston Common and Downtown Crossing. Crossing into the park at a pedestrian crossing at that corner or along most of the Tremont Street Corridor, there is nothing that makes you feel like you've left a business district and entered an historic destination. There are ill-conceived and poorly maintained planters scattered around, and access points are blocked by groupings of news racks. There are no grassy areas at these entrance areas, and nothing here brings a visitor *into* the park, as you'd find at other access points around the Common. We strive to make entry into the Boston Common a unique parkland experience at all access points.

A short distance from the Park Street Plaza, the Brewer's Fountain is found in a state of disrepair. We are fortunate to have funds earmarked to renovate the fountain with capital dollars, a Save America's Treasures grant, and support from the Friends of the Public Garden and the Solomon Foundation. The MBTA has a series of much-needed renovations of their nearby structures planned as well.

Further down Tremont Street is the disappointing Visitor's Center. Three million people walk the Freedom Trail every year, starting in the Boston Common. Reports show that close to 1 million

people use the Visitors Center every year – many simply because of the public restroom facility on the grounds. This site needs to be enhanced to be given the prominence that its role should suggest. As it stands now, there are no fences along Tremont providing an entry way leading people to anticipate such a building. No signage exists to direct visitors to the Center.

Beyond the access points and fencing issue around the Visitor's Center and along the Tremont Street Corridor, we find continued disrepair. The Committee has noted sidewalks that are cracked and disheveled, statues that are misshapen and out of scale, and patches of grass that have been worn down – especially along edges of unprotected pedestrian walkways.

The more use of the lawns, curbs, and sidewalks, the greater attention is needed. The Common remains a good-weather draw as a weekday lunch spot and for activity on weekends, but it does not get nearly the use or attention that it deserves.



Figure 4. Along Charles St.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Crime on Boston Common had been on the rise until the Boston Police Department reprioritized crime prevention on the Common, starting in the fall of 2006. High profile criminal activity on the Common brought greater attention to the area, including heightened drug activity and highly-publicized gunfire on the Common.¹ Increasingly, the Common was seen as an unsafe nighttime location.² In November, 2006 the BPD arrested seven people on drug charges,³ and another seven in February, 2007.⁴ An upgraded “Safe Streets” initiative brought more officers to the Common, supporting increased efforts to enforce the overnight curfew on the Common.⁵ Boston Police Captain Bernard O’Rourke acknowledged at a hearing on March 19, 2008 that these measures served to drive crime to Downtown Crossing and other areas nearby. Longer-term strategies are needed, as are measures that will reduce crime throughout downtown and across the City.

Below we can see the dramatic rise in drug arrests on the Common in 2006 and 2007, with the benefits being felt strongly in the first nine months of 2008. This is one of the most rapidly increasing criminal concerns on the Common. We recognize that this doesn’t solve the problem. We must recognize that the Common is a critical area for tourism and media attention, and as our city’s most treasured green space, public impressions of the park play a critical role in the thinking of this committee.

Boston Police Department									
Reported Part I Crime And Drug Arrests on the Boston Common									
Crime Category	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Jan-Sept 2008
Violent Crime*	36	24	30	30	22	19	28	25	18
Property Crime**	150	173	186	154	177	122	166	136	93
Drugs	84	70	93	67	46	21	133	86	40
Total	270	267	309	251	245	162	327	247	151
* Violent Crime totals include homicide, rape and attempted, robbery and attempted, and aggravated assault.									
** Property Crime totals include burglary and attempted, larceny and attempted, and vehicle theft and attempted.									

¹ <http://www.bostonherald.com/news/regional/view.bg?articleid=1019899&srvc=art>

² <http://www.virtualtourist.com> has a series of posts from individuals warning visitors to avoid the Common after dark, with a number of anecdotes from people who felt their safety was in danger.

³ http://www.bpdnews.com/2006/11/drug_arrests_in_boston_common.html

⁴ http://www.bpdnews.com/2007/02/operation_deep_freeze_ices_dru.html

⁵ http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/08/30/curfew_targets_crime_on_common/

PARK RANGERS

“The Boston Park Rangers have three primary areas of responsibility; public assistance, public safety and park protection, and interpretive programming.... To protect the park resources and the people who patronize the parks, the Rangers work closely with fire, police, conservation and animal control service agencies in Boston, using the tools of verbal persuasion and education, Rangers enforce all City of Boston park rules and Bike Patrol regulations, local, state and federal laws and ordinances.”⁶

In 1982 the City Council and Mayor legislated that Boston Park Rangers – who had previously worked as contract employees – would be permanent city employees.

Ten years ago, the Parks Department had 22 full time Park Rangers for the whole Boston Parks system. Today that number is down to 12, with another 6 seasonal employees. That means that while ten years ago there would regularly be between 10 and 12 Rangers on the Common most of the day, today that number is down to two Rangers during the off season, and up to four or five during peak season, including seasonal Rangers and a supervisor.

The impact of this reduction in Rangers staffing has been felt in two primary areas: public safety and public education. The City of Boston has had to rely more on the Boston Police Department to enforce the law, bringing a tougher-minded crime-prevention strategy to the Common. This may be a short-term positive, but the longer-term impact of

having Rangers on the Common creates a better environment for crime prevention overall.

As it currently stands, because the large grant of money that the City gets from the Visitor’s Center, the Rangers on the Common generally situate themselves at or near the Center. This does not give them the opportunity to keep patrol on all 48 acres as regularly as would be needed to keep the park safe and accessible.

Education and programming have deteriorated with the staffing reduction in Rangers. Ten years ago, Rangers would each be responsible for several programs a month designed to educate visitors, with special emphasis on teaching school kids about the history and importance of the Boston Common. This elimination of educational programming will have a long-term negative impact on our ability to connect the Common and the issues in this report to the public as a whole.

Park Rangers play a number of important roles with respect to the quality of life on the Common. They are a presence when someone needs help, whether it be a tourist who is lost, or a resident who wants to report a problem. They can also be a great source of information about the Common and about the area. Because they have a daily presence on and commitment to the Common, they would be most able to recognize suspicious activity quickly and act promptly and appropriately.

⁶ <http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/parkrangers/default.asp>
<http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/parkrangers/patrolandsafety.asp>

HOMELESSNESS

Recently, the City of Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission, working with the Parks Department, the Boston Housing Authority and several homeless outreach and housing providers, have succeeded in helping the homeless who use and live on the Common. In response to recent efforts to enforce the overnight curfew after some high profile criminal activity in 2007,⁷ the ESC, BHA, and providers organized a targeted housing intervention that employed a multi-pronged approach designed to reduce homelessness, house those in need, and to continue providing outreach and support services to those they have not yet been able to house.

Homelessness is a priority issue for this committee. Government is responsible for helping those who are most in need of help. The programs put forward by the ESC are critical to the Common because homeless people, like other city residents and visitors, find the Common, with its shade trees, lawns and other amenities, a pleasant place to rest—a haven from otherwise hard lives, and it is our job to offer them aid if they want it.

The City of Boston takes care to differentiate the housing, treatment and health care issues of homelessness from issues connected to public safety. Few homeless individuals who frequent the Common are found to be perpetrators of violence, but due to vulnerability tied to the lack of housing, they often become its victims. Because of the prevalence of substance abuse issues among the homeless, clusters of unsheltered homeless persons can become a magnet for substance abuse activity. For this reason, outreach services with expertise in substance abuse treatment and referral are a critical

part of the service continuum. This adds to the urgency with which this issue must be addressed.

There are many services available for the homeless around the Common. In September, 2007, Mayor Menino announced the Boston Common Ground Housing Initiative. This initiative provided “a multi-agency housing plan designed to reach unsheltered, long-term homeless individuals in the vicinity of the Boston Common. The goal of the new outreach program is to increase housing opportunities for the most vulnerable individuals experiencing long-term or repeated episodes of homelessness.”⁸ This on-going initiative has been an important step for providing housing to those on the Common, previewing the city's recent Housing First program.⁹

There are a number of ways to help the homeless near the Common. Thanks to longstanding commitments by the historic congregations that ring the Common, there are ample opportunities for a hot meal and temporary shelter. These services remain critical for the homeless population, and more resources are needed. However there is really only one solution to homelessness – a home.

Housing issues on the Common impact nearby neighborhoods as well. Just as we see a connection between the lack of positive activity on the Common at night and the less vibrant nature of Downtown Crossing once the work day ends, so we see a link between homelessness on the Common to Downtown Crossing. The Downtown Crossing Partnership can thus play an important role in a comprehensive response to homelessness on the Common and environs.

⁷ “Shots on Common strike teens, State House”, *Boston Globe*, August 28, 2007

⁸ <http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/default.aspx?id=3610>

⁹ <http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/default.aspx?id=4013>

NEW YORK CITY

On June 13, 2008, The Boston City Council's Special Committee on the Boston Common went on a fact-finding mission to three New York City parks, accompanied by the Boston Parks Commissioner, and a number of civic and business leaders. The trip was organized with help from the Friends of the Public Garden, and with cooperation from the New York City Parks Department. Most notable about the visited parks was the usage they got during the day, and the maintenance they received, compared to the Boston Common.

Madison Square Park

Madison Square Park was the smallest of the three parks we visited, at 6.2 acres, about 1/8th the size of the Common. It was only in 2001 that a restoration project brought the park out of its poor condition, with additional improvements made in 2002.

One of the most popular attractions at Madison Square Park was the Shake Shack (Figure 5), a year-round take-out eatery with outdoor seating in front of the building. On most days, the line to order extends around the park's perimeter. One visitor noted how "quality commercial ventures proved to stabilize and enrich the parks in New York with



Figure 6. Seating at Shake Shack, Madison Square Park

revenue going to its care." The outdoor seating area around the Shake Shack uses small gravel as a ground covering, which is easier to maintain than mulch or grass (Figure 6), and still visually pleasant.

Another useful feature of Madison Square Park is the fenced off dog run (Figure 7). It is a small separate dog-friendly space, inviting to owners, and has a quality-of-life benefit to those who live in the neighborhood. The park is well maintained and clean. The dog park was creatively buffered by sturdy plantings and fauna which served as an excellent transition from park to dog park.

Also at Madison Square Park, a low black semi-temporary rubberized fence deters visitors from



Figure 5. Shake Shack, Madison Square Park



Figure 7. Dog run, Madison Square Park

destroying the grass (Figure 8). This helps prevent the public from using the grass as a pass-through – something we’ve seen that has resulted in the trampling of grass on the Common. It does not restrict use of the lawn for sun bathers and those who want to enjoy the open space, though they do prohibit casual athletic activity, like ball- or frisbee throwing. The fence appears to be a good low-cost alternative to the chain-linked fence used on the common, which is expensive, must be installed by contractors rather than park employees.



Figure 8. Moveable fence, *Madison Square Park*

Bryant Park

Bryant Park was an entirely different experience than the other parks we visited. There was much to love about this park, but Bryant Park is not a model for the Boston Common.

On the positive side, there was incredible vibrancy, diversity, and openness to the park. A late lunch crowd packed in, with a restaurants and café/bar drawing diners from area businesses. Kiosks attracted crowds to outdoor seating areas and an expansive lawn. The park was flanked by several monuments and memorials, and featured a carousel,

outdoor library, active fountains, with sidewalks, curbs, lawns maintained daily, and fauna that is varied, healthy, and inviting (Figure 9). There was a movie screen and stage on the far end of the lawn. Bryant Park promotes creative programming, including: books, chess, piano, art, concerts, readings, martial arts lessons, and yoga.



Figure 9. Foliage, *Bryant Park*

In sum, the park was pristine and well kept. It is clear what access to funding can mean to the overall aesthetic beauty of a park. Even the bathroom was spotless, with fresh flowers in a vase as you enter.

On the other hand, the park was completely over-commercialized, and the privatization of the park gave it a feeling of more of an amusement park’s park than a place to relax and enjoy open space. This Committee would strongly oppose efforts to emulate Bryant Park, though we would like to see the Common bring in those ideas that worked.

Though Bryant Park has its downside, the neighborhood around the park had been blighted for years, and the rejuvenation of the park made an impact to the whole neighborhood. In 15 years, it went from one of the more dangerous neighborhoods with frequent homicides within the park, to one of the most sought-after locations in New York City.

Central Park/Boathouse

It is difficult to compare an 800 acre park to one of 48 acres. We were most interested in visiting the Boathouse, which provides several options for those who want to be there, including: a year-round moderately priced restaurant, a bar, a low-price cafeteria, a high-end function room, and an outdoor café/bar. The Boathouse looks out over a beautiful pond, and is a draw to a very divergent population, in large part because it is a destination spot for many seeking to enjoy the park. While bigger than what the Common could accommodate, it's diversity of options and its low-cost fare is appealing.

Moreover, to spend time in the Boathouse café, one need not spend a single dollar. Throughout the restaurant there is seating for people who wish to "brown-bag" their lunch, or just sit and enjoy the view. A restaurant on the Common should offer no less.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 10



Figure 13

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE BOSTON COMMON

As the City Councilors whose districts abut and include the Boston Common, we have worked together to come up with a series of recommendations that we believe will be worthy of consideration by the Boston Parks Department. We have framed this portion of the report in four categories: Physical Issues, Positive Activity, the Restaurant, and Funding.

Physical Appearance

Visitor's Center

The Visitor's Center is where every tourist visiting the Common and indeed, Boston, is directed to go. It is also the starting point for those walking the Freedom Trail. For such a critical fulcrum of tourist activity, the Center is underwhelming and inadequate. It sits unnoticed within the Common. There is nothing that directs visitors there, or even suggests to someone walking past that it is a location of any note or importance whatsoever. The only sign of any significance is the presence of a mounted Ranger.



Figure 14. Sidewalk near the start of the Freedom Trail by the statues

Our Recommendation

The Grand Entrance to the Boston Common should be at the Visitor Information Center, a plaza that needs to be renovated and redesigned. We suggest installing a parade of international flags which leads visitors to the Center. Furthermore, we urge decorative fencing to force pedestrian traffic flow that brings visitors to the Center.

Tremont Street

There is no fencing along Tremont Street from Park Street to Avery Street, as we'd find at every other edge of the park, and as we see surrounding the Public Gardens. This creates a sense that the park is part of the street, incorporated within the residential and commercial buildings along Tremont Street. A visitor does not sense entering our city's most important and historic parkland.

The millions of users of the Park Street MBTA subway station pass by a corner of the Boston Common, without ever knowing if they are actually in a park. There is no separation from the T station



Figure 15. Along Tremont Street

to the park, and there is no entryway that changes the feel from subway station to park. The result is that at that corner the Boston Common is treated like and looks like a subway station rather than a park.

Our Recommendation

Continuation of black iron ornamental fencing needs to be extended along the length of Tremont Street to the Park Street Station. A boundary is needed around the Park Street Station as well, delineating the station area from the rest of the park. Seeing as this entire stretch of land is above an MBTA tunnel, the MBTA would be the ideal owner of this responsibility. The entire plan would logically be put together in conjunction with the work on the Brewer's Fountain and Visitor's Center, with a long-term visual plan.

Newspaper Racks

At a number of locations along Tremont Street, there are areas filled with newspaper racks, blocking access to the park, and slowing down pedestrian traffic.

Our Recommendation

Pursuant to 2008 Docket 0646, amending CBC Chapter 16-38 regulating the placement and maintenance on newspaper racks passed by the City Council and signed by the Mayor this year, the Department of Public Works should get the racks on the Boston Common in compliance immediately. Racks should be moved to locations along the street that won't interfere with normal pedestrian traffic. No more than five racks should be placed in a row, with a five-foot gap between groupings, and a minimum of four feet of clear space for pedestrian passage is needed, as specified in the ordinance.

Deer Park

The existing Deer Park Maintenance facility is a wasted opportunity right now. The Boston Common

is small, and the current use takes up valuable space that can be put to public use.

Our Recommendation

As we learned from our New York visit, maintenance facilities belong underground. The Parks Department should work with the Massachusetts Convention Authority to find space for and access to underground facilities. Deer Park is an ideal location for a public-use facility. This is a potential site for a commercial restaurant.

Men's Comfort Station

The men's comfort station, or "Pink Palace," is out of use, is no longer maintained, and is well on the way to becoming a blight. The Parks Department appears unable to keep it in good condition, yet does not appear to have the funds to take it down.

Our Recommendation

The comfort station requires rehabilitation; we suggest turning it into an outdoor kiosk for warm-weather months.

Little League and Softball Fields

The fence between the Little League and the softball fields prevents the fields from ever being used for other athletic activities, such as soccer, ultimate Frisbee, or other permitted or non-permitted uses. As a result, significant resources are required to keep nonathletic areas of the park maintained.

Our Recommendation

Remove the fence between the fields, and develop a partnership with a local college to maximize care and utility for these fields. We strongly object to any partnership along the lines of Roche Field in the South End. We encourage the Parks Department to work with a local college on creating a partnership that allows for better care and maintenance of the athletic fields, without giving away public rights to play sports on those fields.

We also recommend looking into installing an appropriate turf and rubber field, such as the kind found at English High, and the one being installed in Clemente Field in the Fenway (also an historic park). It will provide greater access, greater use, and require limited maintenance.

Brewers Fountain

Brewers Fountain is an eyesore. This should instead be a source of pride to our parks systems. It is hard to fathom how Brewers Fountain has fallen into such disrepair. The Friends of the Public Garden have worked with the Parks Department and abutters to get funds committed to restoring the fountain, along with a Save America’s Treasure’s grant, and support from the Solomon Foundation.

Our Recommendation

If the Department has the funds in-hand for this project, then we look forward to seeing the ground breaking imminently. If they still require more funds, there are businesses and institutions that are ready to be asked to help. This restoration project needs to be a top priority for the city, and the City Council has passed an order to expend the funds required to accomplish this work.

Soldiers and Sailors Monument

The Soldiers and Sailors Monument is in poor condition, and is in need of help. Estimates are that restoration will require \$300,000.

Our Recommendation

Funds are needed for this restoration.

Lack of Signage

Paths are lacking in consistency of design, fail to delineate where they go, and don’t provide proper circulation of visitors and foot traffic within the park. They lead you away from places that people should be led to. There are no directions to historic sites, taking away one of the most important aspects of being in an historic park.

Our Recommendation

Make the paths more consistent, with better direction. Small and appropriate signs are needed around the park both to help with direction and as markers to memorialize sites around the park.

Frog Pond

The Frog Pond provides a mountain of opportunities that are not being fully realized. We congratulate the Frog Pond Trust on making the skating and wading pond a success, though it’s not evident that it has been a money-maker for the owner. There was a temporary carousel which served as a good example of intelligent alternative uses that bring people to the Common. Limited food services are available.

Our Recommendation

The restaurant facility should be improved and expanded at the Frog Pond. The carousel should be made permanent, and run year-round.

Dog Run

The Boston Common has been scattered with dogs and dog owners, walking and playing at a number of locations. Dogs are often let off leash, often times running away from their owners, becoming a danger to themselves and to others around them – in particular to cyclists and runners swerving to avoid



them. Owners allow their dogs to play on grassy

areas that are also used as passive activity space which can be a health risk.

Our Recommendation

A defined dog park, such as the one shown in Madison Square Park (Figure 16), should be built on the Common. Owners already take their dogs out at the corner of Beacon and Charles Streets, and the area by that corner is a suggested location for a dog park. Though we were initially skeptical, the dog park used at Madison Park is a logical model for the Common, using gravel or rock as a ground cover, rather than grass. The area would need a well-defined and attractive boundary.

The group BostonDog has issued a report that suggests a rotating dog park around the Common, designed to minimize long-term impact on the sections used. This is a solution worthy of more study. It also recommends a permanent dog park near the tennis courts.

Silverline

The Silverline project will rip up the entire stretch of the Common along Charles Street for up to 10 years, for the staging area for heavy equipment. It will snarl traffic as they close a lane for the construction of a new tunnel, and it will make an entire stretch of the Common nearly unusable during that time. All of this will be done for the purpose of putting in bus transit that is unnecessary, when tunnels already exist for light rail, and when it is nearly universally agreed that the bus system as set up does not work, and is not nearly as effective or efficient as light rail.

Our Recommendation

The Silverline Project is a mistake. The plans in place will disturb sacred grounds, such as the historic graveyard. Unused light rail tunnels already exist below ground, and the MBTA, with its multimillion dollar deficit, should be looking at ways it can build a system around what is there, and ensuring that we

have opportunities to become a greener, more efficient city while *not* tearing up our precious parks system during the construction.

Infrastructure for Events

The Common is already a focal point for many cultural, social, and political events, from Shakespeare on the Park to rallies, protests and concerts. Each event brings considerable needs in terms of audio and visual equipment, electrical requirements, and heavy supplies. Most of these events bring trucks onto the Common, creating poor conditions for the grass and sidewalks. After some of the more damaging events, entire sections of the Common have been closed off for months as grass is allowed to regrow. We want the events with less damage and negative impact to the Common.

Our Recommendation

Permanent facilities for electrical and audio equipment, most likely at the Parkman Bandstand, would alleviate the need for heavy trucks wiring for every event. We also suggest future investigation into bringing trucks and heavy equipment onto the Common through an underground access point.

Seating and other Infrastructure

Benches in some parts of the park are falling apart and are nearly unusable. Portable chairs can be added to create more flexible seating opportunities. Small folding chairs are used in both Madison Square Park and Bryant Park and are not taken off-site.

Our Recommendation

Fix the benches and bring in portable chairs.

Developing Positive Activity

Security and the Park Rangers

The reduction of Rangers, from 22 full-time Rangers for the entire Parks Department a decade ago to just 12 now, negatively impacting the security of the Boston Common, putting more pressure on the

police, and decreases the educational programming available at the park.

Our Recommendation

Funds must be found to bring more Rangers back to the Boston Common. We know the presence of Boston Police is likely to have the biggest short-term impact on security. But longer-term, Rangers are able to provide other services. Rangers are needed for improved programming. They are a friendly presence to tourists and residents alike, creating an overall positive atmosphere on the Common. While a police presence serves to prevent crime, Rangers help improve the overall image of the park, and allow the police to work on the wider area.

Programming

There are a number of ways to attract positive life-enhancing activity on the Boston Common. It is incumbent on the Parks Department to be creative in attracting a diverse and changing crowd to the Common. We are concerned that the only people who use the Common are those who live or work next to it and those who come from out of town for an extended visit. The Common has the potential to be a destination spot for those who live all around Boston, who live in suburbs, and those from around the state who can bring their children into Boston



Figure 17. Art installation at Madison Square Park

for the day. These visitors are not only likely to visit the Common and other parks, but they are also likely to spend money in Boston in other ways, having a positive overall impact on the city's economy.

Our Recommendation

The Boston Common needs more programming: more concerts, more theater like Shakespeare in the Park, more art installations as you'd find in Forest Hills Cemetery, and more family-oriented programming is needed as well. In particular, the Common should look to find youth-oriented programming aimed at young people from all over the city. These programs will take youths off the streets, providing them community-oriented activities that are engaging, and increase their personal and emotional investment in the Common.

Homeless Population

Fundamentally, the problem is homelessness in and of itself. As a city and as a state, there is no shortage of roles that can be played on the part of government in housing the homeless. On the Common in particular, the problem is that homelessness with no structured housing, public health and public safety intervention, can also be a magnet for crime. People with addiction illnesses attract drugs and drug abuse, which can attract low-level drug dealing and other crime, especially when there are mixed populations who sometimes use the homeless for cover.

While moving the homeless out of the park may make the park more pleasant for some, to do so would violate the Parks Department policy that the Common is a park for all. Furthermore, displacing people does not solve the problem of homelessness, nor does it resolve any safety concerns for the longer-term, it merely moves those problems elsewhere, often just temporarily. Placing people in housing is the true solution.

Our Recommendation

We support the Emergency Shelter Commission's efforts to engage outreach ministries in a "solutions strategy" around the homeless. We support the city's work with the homeless and linking them with service providers for housing and social services. We support the relocation of programs that feed and minister to the homeless to community meals programs, as a better and safer way to get them the meals and services they need.

More specifically, we urge the city to identify homeless resources around the Common to build upon the success of Housing First programs while maintaining outreach services for those not yet housed who still need shelter and treatment services. Finding ways to help people move from the street to homes and stabilizing formerly homeless people in their new neighborhoods is a positive program with long-lasting effects. For example, after a significant number of unsheltered older and elderly adults was identified in the December 2004 homeless census, Mayor Menino and the Emergency Shelter Commission launched a three year Elder Street Homeless Initiative with private funding from the Citizen's Bank Foundation that has reduced the street senior population by 80%, with some 60% of the 140 older homeless adults placed in permanent housing or long-term residential programs.

We also recognize that the funding to maintain current services is uncertain. The U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development currently provides \$300,000/year to the Pine Street Inn for daytime outreach services. HUD would prefer that their funds be used for housing over services. If such reallocation is deemed necessary, it will be important to find new resources to ensure the continuity of outreach and other social services programs that help connect homeless clients to treatment and housing on a day-by-day basis.

Pursuant to our interest in creating or enhancing the fundraising arm for the Boston Common, there should be increased efforts to raise money for additional outreach workers to provide the homeless with services. Multi-discipline outreach services linked to housing such as those currently provided by Pine Street Inn being at the top of that list.

The Restaurant

Various attempts at creating a sit-down eating environment on the Common have been unsuccessful. Emerson College's café loses \$35,000 per year. The Frog Pond has a low-end eatery near the skating rink. Neither facility attracts the kind of diverse crowd that is willing to sit for extensive periods of time and spend money on the Common. A significant part of the problem is the lack of beer and wine. Many people will be willing to enjoy a sit-down meal, returning time and again, with the ability to enjoy a drink with their meal. We can do better.

Our Recommendation

Testimony from the police at our hearing in March made it very clear that when there is more of a presence of people and events on the Common, there is a correlating drop in crime. Positive activity on the Common will deter crime naturally, and that a stronger presence of both police and/or park rangers will provide both a sense of safety as well as deterring actual crime.

The addition of a commercial restaurant at any of a number of locations around the Boston Common is a key piece of this Committee's proposal for improving the Boston Common. A restaurant provides a newfound opportunities around parks financing, structural improvements, enhanced foot traffic, decreased crime, and becoming a destination spot for residents, tourists, and businessmen and - women.

The City of Boston should look to businesses to bid for an extended period of time for the opportunity to create and run such a restaurant. Three years is not enough time to allow a business enough return on their investment to make such an enterprise worthwhile. The Deer Park or Men’s Comfort Station are two locations that should be considered, and the restaurant at the Frog Pond should also be in the mix for limited expansion.

The restaurant should:

- be constructed within the historic look and architecture of the park;
- be done appropriately, largely within the footprint of those structures that currently exist
- be designed to bring in year-round traffic.
- provide an indoor area to order food, providing some interior seating;
- provide and maintain a number of outdoor tables;
- be accessible in look, feel, and price; inviting to residents and visitors alike, with good food;
- be available for use by those who have brought their own lunch;
- provide revenues for park upkeep and maintenance that more than justifies it’s presence to Boston taxpayers;
- provide good employment opportunities to Boston’s residents;
- be responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the area of park nearby;
- be marketed to broaden the appeal of the area, drawing more traffic not only to the Common, but connecting it’s marketing strategy with an overall plan

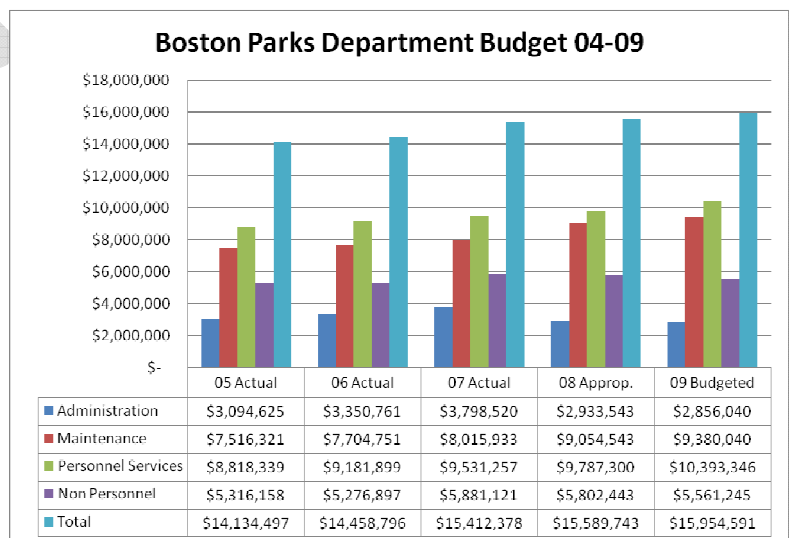
for Downtown Crossing renewal.

Funding

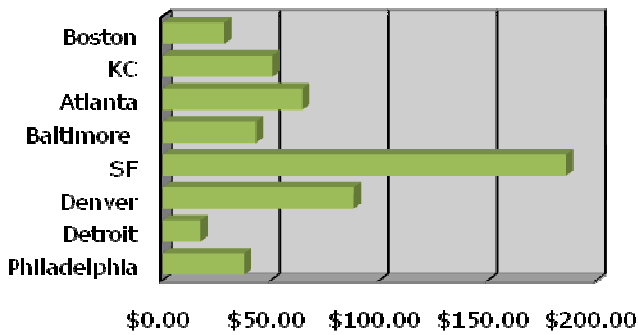
The Parks Department has worked hard to accomplish what they can with the resources they have. Personnel costs continue to rise near the cost of living, at 3.8 percent over the last four years. Nonpersonnel costs have declined 5.8 percent over the last two years – despite gas for vehicles and oil for heating buildings increasing substantially. Parks Department spending has risen 2.9 percent in four years.¹⁰ It is notable that the Parks Department raised \$5.6 million in 2007, up from \$3.8 million in 2004, and \$4.8 million in 2006. The Department expects to have raised \$5.5 million for each of 2008 and 2009, with an additional \$2.65 million in in-kind contributions. City allocations to the Parks Department are down.

These budget figures are for the entire parks system for the City of Boston, recognizing that the Common is but a slice of that – albeit an important slice.

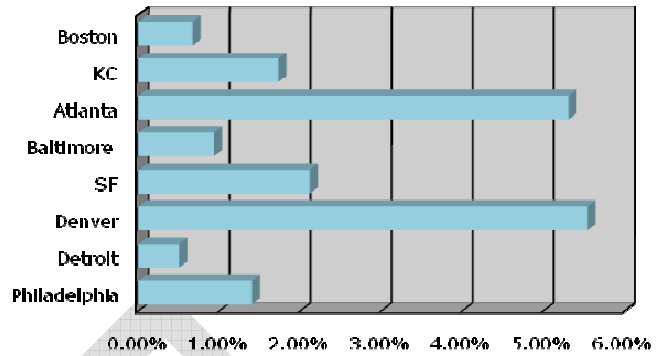
What is particularly disturbing is that Boston as a whole underfunds their parks system, as compared to major American cities.



Municipal Parks & Recreation Budgets Per Capita



Parks & Recreation Spending as percent of total budget



The Friends of the Public Garden are not in any way the problem. They play a huge role in raising money and awareness around the Boston Common, and should be commended for the work that they do. The results are clear: the Public Garden is one of the brightest spots in the city, showing the tremendous results of years of dedication and work on the part of the Friends. Similarly, the Common is the beneficiary of their attention primarily along the Beacon Street side of the park, around the Frog Pond in particular. The other parts of the Common have not been quite as fortunate, lacking such regular care from committed abutters and residents.

Our Recommendation

It comes down to fundraising. We cannot expect to place more on the shoulders of taxpayers. With tough economic times facing our City, we need to emphasize fundraising opportunities that are being missed. We need greater investment and buy-in from abutters around the edges of the Boston Common who have not been fully tapped. There needs to be someone who reaches out to businesses, residents, and institutions along Park, Tremont and Boylston Streets, as well as those in Downtown Crossing, Chinatown, and the Theater Districts.

The City Council, the Parks Department, the Mayor, and all elected officials from the area must work to support efforts to significantly expand abutter interest, to allow better care, maintenance, and improvements all around the Common. We intend to work with The Friends of the Public Garden to accomplish this task, but the job ahead is huge and needs to be started immediately.

We should consider creation of a Boston Common Improvement Fund. We need all abutters to work in conjunction with the Parks Department to raise funds, and develop long-term strategic planning for the Common. In addition to raising money for projects, improvements, and beautification plans, this nonprofit organization should also be tasked with raising funds for outreach workers to help the homeless, and should be involved with increasing funding for the Park Rangers, along with other security measure to help keep the park safe.

The City can never afford to cede any responsibility whatsoever for governing the Common.

Beyond fundraising, the Improvement Fund should hold public planning meetings to ensure long-term success in turning the Common around.

Standing still on this issue of funding is not an option. The Common is slowly deteriorating, and there is immense untapped potential.

Bidding Process

The current City of Boston bidding process for most commercial entities on public space involves a three-year contract only. This does not allow for enough return on investment for most major commercial entities. For instance, to build a restaurant, you'd most likely need to build the kitchen underground, to minimize imprint and maximize efficiency. That alone could require a significant investment that would be difficult to recover in just three years.

Our Recommendation

This report recommends that processes for bringing in new private commercial opportunities on or around the Common should be bid out through an open process, with a contract set for at least eight years, rather than the standard three. For the City of Boston, a longer contract also creates greater budget certainty, provides more consistency in the product, and is likely to result in significantly larger sum for the city.

Partnerships

We would like to imagine that our city's budget has the capacity to grow and that we can do more and more good at the Boston Common with public funds. Even in good economic times, government is always under pressure to keep pressures on taxpayers to a minimum, and it's a never-ending struggle for every department of government to keep budgetary increases to no more than cost-of-living adjustments to employees. The reality is that every year, under additional economic pressures, whatever cuts have to be made to the Parks Department budget in order to keep within the appropriated funds is most felt by those who use and enjoy our parks regularly. They see the daily need.

Our Recommendation

There are a number of abutters that have significant investment in the beauty and appeal of the Boston Common. The Massachusetts Convention Center, Emerson and Suffolk Universities, neighboring businesses and residents all have the value of their services and their properties tied to the look of the Common. For example, the new carousel – installed and run by the operator of the Frog Pond – is the kind of innovative new idea for the Common, and more opportunities like this should be sought, particularly in the spring and fall.

Common Kiosk Sales

We can take nothing away from the important work that the Boys and Girls Club does in the community. But a park badly in need of funds does not receive enough from the sale of food and other items that are sold by kiosks around the Common.

Our Recommendation

A plan needs to be put in place to gradually increase the percentage of Boston Common kiosk profits that remain in the Common. A comprehensive plan is needed to generate revenue and accomplish the goals set out in this committee.

The Problem: Lack of Information

Currently the City of Boston does not have verifiable statistical information about Boston Common usage, and the perspectives of those who use the Common most.

Our Recommendation

The Parks Department should solicit an extensive survey of usage, ideas, and attitudes towards the Common. Long-term planning can only occur with more information.

CONCLUSIONS

Parks make a city. Open space for the sake of open space is nothing special. The Boston Common is a central part of Boston and of the neighborhoods around it. The most important and visited park in an historic city should be the centerpiece of that city. The opportunities here are not just for an improved park, but of a rejuvenated Downtown Crossing.

The Boston Common provides the City of Boston with great opportunities which have recently gone unmet. The City has not maximized the possibilities, and the members of the Special Committee on the Boston Common have written this report as a guide for the city to consider.

We urge the Parks Commissioner, the Mayor, and all those with connections to the park –community stakeholders, abutters, universities, businesses, and community organizations – to work together on making the Park what it can be.

The recommendations of this report are a foundation for a strategic plan that should be put together for the Common, to build upon the Master Maintenance Plan that currently exists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Special Committee on the Boston Common wishes to thank all those who have participating in our hearings and working sessions throughout the year. Special thanks to those who took a day out of their summer to join the committee on their research trip to New York.

Thanks also go to the Friends of the Public Garden, Parks and Recreation Commissioner Antonia Pollak, committee central staffer Juan Lopez.

Above all, we thank the public for their continued passion and interest in the work of this committee, and their commitment to the future of the Boston Common. As mentioned, this report is just the start of this process, and we hope there will be continued commitment to the issues surrounding the Boston Common.