

SECTION 2

INTRODUCTION

SECTION 2.1:

INTRODUCTION**A NATIONAL CHALLENGE**

On January 27, 2021, President Joe Biden signed *Executive Order 14008: Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*. He issued a challenge to conserve at least 30% of U.S. land and freshwater and 30% of U.S. ocean areas by 2030. The 30x30 challenge seeks to protect natural areas and increase access to nature for communities that lack it, in an effort to reverse the impacts of climate change and biodiversity decline (The White House 2021). The 30x30 challenge is the first-ever national goal for the stewardship of nature in America.

The U.S. Department of the Interior then released the *Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful* report which recommended a ten-year, community-led, nationally-scaled campaign to conserve and restore the country's lands and waters (DOI 2021). It included the following principles:

- Pursue a collaborative and inclusive approach to conservation
- Conserve America's lands and waters for the benefit of all people
- Support locally led and locally designed conservation efforts

The report noted:

“While the coronavirus pandemic inflicted tragedy, grief, and pain, the natural world offered peace, escape, and hope for many. Now, as the nation recovers and rebuilds, it is time to do right by the lands and waters that sustain every community in every part of the country: returning American wildlife to abundance; safeguarding the health and productivity of the nation's working lands and waters; giving every child the chance to play and explore in a safe, close-to-home park; honoring and supporting the natural and cultural resource priorities of Tribal Nations; and far more.”

The report included the following recommendations:

- Create more parks and safe outdoor opportunities in nature-deprived communities
- Expand conservation of fish and wildlife habitats and corridors
- Increase access for outdoor recreation

The 30x30 initiative calls for a more inclusive model of conservation that is science-based, locally driven, and engages all stakeholders. The report also highlighted the need to bring diverse voices together—including voices that have often been excluded from the decision-making processes around conservation (O'Shea et al. 2021).

OFFICE OF CLIMATE INNOVATION AND RESILIENCE

On January 6, 2023, Governor Healey signed *Executive Order No. 604: Establishing the Office Of Climate Innovation and Resilience Within the Office Of the Governor*. The Office is charged to advance climate innovation, mitigation, adaptation, and resilience policies. Each Cabinet Secretary is required to appoint a Climate Officer responsible for implementing climate-related efforts within their department. The order included a “Whole of Government Approach” towards implementation. Independent agencies and authorities, public institutions of higher education, the judiciary, and other public entities are encouraged to participate in climate initiatives and otherwise to adopt policies consistent with those advanced by the Office (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2023).

PLANNING FOR A GREEN NEW DEAL AND A JUST RECOVERY

While City Councilor, Michelle Wu issued *Planning for a Green New Deal and Just Recovery* which called people to “envision a city where every resident enjoys a healthy home, beautiful public spaces, plentiful local food options, fresh air and clean water, and strong social safety networks,” (“Green New Deal” 2020).

The plan proposes that there should be clear, standard Community Benefits Agreements for development projects over a certain size or impact, in order to guarantee transparency, predictability, and public benefit at the scale to match community impacts. These agreements can include requirements regarding resiliency, open space, and public amenities.

BOSTON PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

BPRD advocates for permanently-protected, publicly-owned open space that ensures that: all residents have equitable access to a wide range of passive and active recreation; open space acreage is maximized for climate resiliency; natural urban wilds provide respite for all living things; tree canopy is preserved to mitigate global warming and heat islands; an abundance of open space options allow people to be in community in the COVID-era; and civic space is provided for civil engagement and discourse in a democracy, such as demonstrations and protests that are only truly possible in publicly-owned open spaces.

SECTION 2.2:

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

WHAT IS OPEN SPACE?

In this plan, open space is a general term for lands that are managed for conservation and recreation purposes. They support a variety of uses including: natural areas, play areas, passive recreation, athletic fields, courts, waterfront areas, community gardens, cemeteries, and burying grounds.

Open spaces come with varying levels of public access and protection and can be owned by public or private entities.

In this plan, Boston’s open spaces break down roughly into two groupings:

- The park system, which is a subset of open spaces that are publicly-accessible and permanently protected. They are generally publicly-owned by the Boston Parks and Recreation Department, Boston Conservation Commission, and the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation.
- The remaining open spaces are largely unprotected and have varying levels of public access with a mix of public and private ownership.

Looking at open space from the perspective of these two groupings provides a picture of what the public can reasonably rely on for open space access and what spaces may be more precarious in terms of access or permanency.

VALUE OF PARKS

Public parks contribute to the quality of life and sense of place in the city. Parks express our history and culture, cultivate community by drawing people to a shared space, and connect city residents to the natural world. Green spaces offer opportunities for stakeholders to engage through participation in activities and events, community design, and stewardship.

PARK SYSTEM BENEFITS

The park system provides significant environmental, health, civic/social, and economic benefits:

Environmental benefits include: buffering increasingly extreme storm events; absorbing stormwater run-off; reducing strain on traditional infrastructure systems; providing shade and cooling; and enabling carbon sequestration from tree canopies. Urban parks systems also support wildlife habitat and provide opportunities for city dwellers to engage with the natural world.

Health benefits include access to opportunities for physical activity for children and adults, as well as access to the mental health benefits associated with the restorative aspects of green space. Social connectedness is a huge component of mental health and is particularly important for older adults. Social isolation has been associated with increased risk of dementia, heart disease, stroke, depression, anxiety, and suicide for adults aged 50 and older (CDC 2021).

Urban trees offer health benefits by improving air quality and creating cooler environments which make our city more livable year-round, including providing protection for children and older adults against heat- and air-quality related illnesses (“Quantifying the Contribution” 2014). This has become particularly critical in the climate crisis and era of COVID-19.

Civic and social benefits of the park system is largely supported by public access and ownership of these spaces. Public spaces provide a platform for civic life including protests, rallies, events, and gatherings that may be truly possible only in publicly-owned parks. Public parks are shared spaces where children play, where neighbors come together to create communities, and where the diversity of urban life is celebrated. Parks provide venues for arts and performance of all scales. These spaces also hold cultural meaning for their role in the history of our city and our nation as well as their role as a stage for contemporary events. Privately-owned open space can

offer health, economic and environmental benefits, but the full spectrum of social benefits of parks are only found in the public foundation of these places.

Economic benefits of the park system is multi-faceted. Parks and the events they support draw people and that foot traffic can benefit local businesses and vendors. Many of Boston’s parks are cultural destinations which contribute to the economic engine of tourism. Parks are venues for programmed activities that provide economic benefits to the city, and help sustain a quality of life in the city that’s highly valued (“Measuring the Economic Value” 2009).

Presence of nearby green space can increase the property values of homes, which in turn brings benefits to those homeowners as well as the municipality. While park stewardship and improvements benefit existing park users, creation of new parks can lead to gentrification and displacement. Park creation must be complemented by anti-displacement strategies where such impacts are a possibility.

The OSRP takes a full accounting of all open spaces in the city which enables an understanding of the system in place and envisions the open space needed in the future. Boston benefits from the park system vision that our predecessors provided for the city 150 years ago. The value that these spaces bring to the quality of life and sense of place needs to be ensured in the future.

SECTION 2.3:

PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

As the owner and caretaker of the largest and most complex municipal park system in the Commonwealth, BPRD has taken a multi-layered approach with several methods and approaches for raising awareness about the 2023-2029 OSRP and soliciting input.

BPRD used **two survey questionnaires** to gather information about use of the city's open spaces, changes desired by respondents, and priorities for future investments. The first survey was part of the *Parcel Priority Plan* effort and focused on priorities for open space protection and acquisition for expansion of the park system. The second survey was dedicated entirely to OSRP input and focused on use and needs within the current park system.

An element of the Parcel Priority Plan outreach involved the development of the **Virtual Public Open House** for learning about and participating in the project's analysis and survey. The virtual format for this engagement grew out of necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic, but resulted in an engagement model that continues to be incorporated into ongoing project work. BPRD has seen an increase in participation in meetings and outreach efforts for all projects as we've shifted to a virtual format for those events.

An information sharing and engagement initiative called **Healthy Places** explicitly tied together resources and updates about concurrent and complementary City of Boston planning efforts into one website and newsletter to make it easy for constituents to stay up to date and engaged. Healthy Places updates included the *Heat Resilience Solutions for Boston* report, the *Urban Forest Plan*, and the *Open Space and Recreation Plan* so that constituents who engaged in one of these planning efforts could connect in with the others.

For more information: boston.gov/healthy-places

Direct constituent engagement took place in spring and summer of 2022 while the dedicated OSRP public survey was active. BPRD planning staff attended each Mayor's Coffee Hour event which brought staff to 16 different neighborhoods for outreach and conversations. This **tabling effort** allowed us to engage in **face-to-face conversations in each neighborhood** about open space priorities, and encourage attendees to provide their input via the online survey.

Further complementing all of these efforts, BPRD staff attended **neighborhood meetings hosted by others** to bring the OSRP engagement efforts to those existing groups. The intent of this method was to reach people at meetings they were already attending, rather than asking them to attend additional meetings for our specific benefit. The content and discussions at these neighborhood meetings focused on the same questions that were being asked via the online survey.

Outreach and information gathering for the OSRP extended through the pandemic and required consistent adaptation to incorporate new strategies and evolving best practices for engagement. All efforts incorporated the following strategies:

- Surveys translated into the top languages spoken in Boston
- Communications about the survey availability, website, duration, and project purpose also translated into the top languages
- Efforts to capture the broadest constituency in the city by sharing information with media targeted to different ethnicities, social media platforms, and different city websites
- Sustained social media outreach - BPRD dedicated Instagram, Facebook and Twitter - throughout the times when surveys were active to encourage participation

We used various means of notification to inform constituencies of the public participation processes. Project email communication from BPRD reaches the following target audiences:

- 150+ Park Partner Organizations (non-profits, Friends groups, volunteer networks)
- Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services
- All City Councilors and State Representatives for Boston Districts
- City of Boston Main Streets Organizations
- Neighborhood Associations
- BCYF Community Centers
- Boston Public Schools
- Churches and religious institutions throughout the city

Press releases about the OSRP survey, the *Parcel Priority Plan* survey, and neighborhood coffee hour meetings were issued to all major and neighborhood press outlets. A notice among the rotating banner items was provided on the City’s website home page. A special web page on the Parks Department website boston.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/updating-seven-year-open-space-plan served as a portal to OSRP information and was complemented by other City-hosted websites for the *Parcel Priority Plan* and *Healthy Places*. A notice on the Parks Department home page also alerted viewers to the survey. Community design review meetings for park projects during the survey period also gave notice to attendees of the survey’s availability.

SECTION 2.4:

ENHANCED OUTREACH AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES

Boston is an immigrant city and a majority-minority city. The total population of Boston that falls within an Environmental Justice Block Group is 544,030 or 79% of the population.

Our public outreach program aimed to better reach environmental justice populations, and that program was described in the previous Section 2.3: Planning Process and Public Participation. We will highlight here the more specific measures we undertook to reach out to environmental justice populations.

The surveys used for this project were offered in languages other than English. The first survey was offered in six languages: English, Cape Verdean, Haitian Creole, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese. With revised Language and Communications Access guidance, the second survey was offered in the 11 most commonly used languages in the city: Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, French, Russian, Somali, Arabic, and English.

Parks Department planning staff attended community and neighborhood meetings in environmental justice communities to expand input and target communities that are often under-represented in survey responses. In most cases we attended existing community meetings hosted by neighborhood-based groups. These meetings are often well-attended and have established meeting schedules that local residents can predict and plan ahead to attend.

Neighborhood meetings attended included:

- Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation
- Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council
- Hyde Park Neighborhood Association
- Fields Corner Main Street

- Garrison Trotter Neighborhood Association
- Orient Heights Neighborhood Association
- Greater Mattapan Neighborhood Council
- Boston Green New Deal Coalition

BPRD planners also sought opportunities to layer outreach onto other City planning work (i.e. the Healthy Places initiative), which led to engagement via the following BPDA meetings:

- PLAN: Charlestown
- PLAN: Roxbury

Other targeted outreach to environmental justice communities included tabling at an Earth Day event held in Chinatown, as well as engagement with the SPARK Boston Council which is composed of 20-35 year olds from throughout the city.

SNAPSHOT

PPP survey was active: January 2020- November 2020

- Number of respondents: 1,218 and 1,943 pins placed on map
- Respondent or someone respondent lives with has a disability or chronic health condition that affects access to, or enjoyment of, open space (14%)
- Greatest number of responses from:
 - People aged 35-54 (36%)
 - Identifies as a woman (55%)
 - Identifies as white (70%)
 - Does not identify as Hispanic or of Latino origin (82%)
 - English language response (99%)
 - Has dependents (54%)
 - Zip codes containing Roslindale, Charlestown, Jamaica Plain, and Back Bay/Beacon Hill (combined shared of 34% of total responses)*

*Of the responses that had zip codes.

OSRP survey was active: April 14, 2022 - May 31, 2022

- Number of respondents: 1,054
- Respondent or someone respondent lives with has a disability or chronic health condition that affects access to, or enjoyment of, open space (13%)
- Greatest number of responses from:
 - People aged 35-54 (49%)
 - Identifies as a woman (63%)
 - Identifies as white (68%)
 - Does not identify as Hispanic or of Latino origin (83%)
 - English language response (one response out of 1,054 in language other than English)
 - Zip codes containing Roslindale, Charlestown, and Jamaica Plain (combined share of 37% of total responses)