



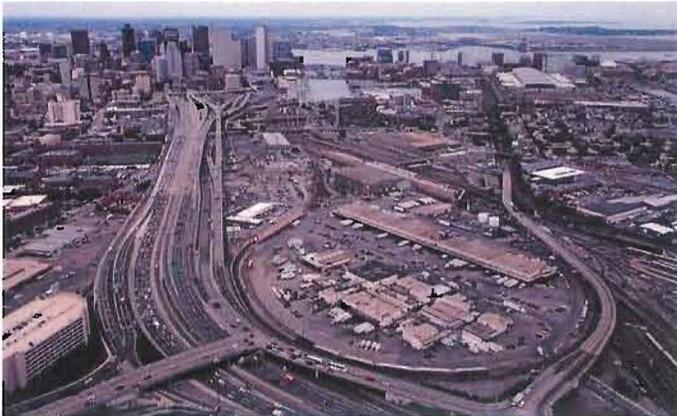
CRWA

Saving the Charles River since 1965

The best use of Widett Circle? Don't develop it at all

By Bob Zimmerman and Elizabeth Henry

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Widett Circle. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Speculation on the best use of Widett Circle has included a soccer stadium, the Olympic village and arena, housing and commercial development, perhaps even the second headquarters for Amazon. Counterintuitively, the most profitable use of the circle, sandwiched between the South End and South Boston, may lie in not developing it. City coffers would be in better shape if we scrape up the pavement, create a wetland, and invite the public into a vibrant open space.

First, the city is hungry for public green space. The property tax implications are highlighted by two development options looked at by Charles River Watershed Association and Industrial Economics. In one, Widett Circle is densely developed and harvests the increased property tax benefits. In the other, up to 300

acres become a floodable wetland, laced with public amenities and wildlife habitat. The city harvests the property tax benefits from increases in adjacent property values. This second scenario is likely better for public finances. The cleanup of Boston Harbor, the Charles River, and the Rose Kennedy Greenway teach us a lot: when we steward our natural resources, nearby property values — and the taxes they generate — increase dramatically. Tax-increment financing could purchase Widett Circle and unlock its potential.

Second, a restored Widett wetland is flood insurance. Like Back Bay and the Innovation District, Widett Circle and the surrounding area sit atop landfill. Roughly a century ago, it was an open water inlet known as South Bay. The area is low-lying and, as the city's Climate Ready Boston work has shown, is subject to both stormwater and coastal flooding. Widett wetland, together with the restoration of the buried two-thirds of Fort Point Channel and a CRWA-designed stream dubbed the Bass River running through Widett wetland and into the South End, would increase flood control for the entire district by as much as 400 times over existing conditions. It would also accommodate a seven-foot storm surge.

Since 1958, according to the National Weather Service, the largest one percent of storms in New England has increased 71 percent in power and frequency. Within the next 20 years, the likelihood we will get hit with a catastrophic precipitation event like Baton Rouge, Pensacola, and Houston is very high. When measured against the enormous cost of rebuilding Boston, investments to begin to transform the city are frugal.

Third, this dramatic re-envisioning of development invites a comparably exciting new vision for resilient, decentralized water infrastructure. An enclosed wastewater treatment plant, called a Community Water and Energy Resource Center, or CWERC, that mines existing sewers would produce renewable electricity, thermal heating and cooling energy, and reclaimed water from sewage and food waste for sale in the district. CWERCs flip the cost paradigm on wastewater, generating valuable renewable utilities and income beyond wastewater treatment ratepayer fees and

subsidize the change. They build resilience by providing both energy and reclaimed water, the key utilities necessary to recover quickly from catastrophic events. They also provide high quality flow to restored water features like the Bass River, helping protect against both drought and flooding.

Economic development and resilience are not mutually exclusive. They should not be seen as competing interests, especially if Boston intends to remain the economic and intellectual hub it has become. Reconfiguring and restoring streams and natural features will build deep resilience to both drought and flooding, reduce heat island effect, and become coveted open space. With CWERCs feeding restored streams a portion of the water they reclaim, we can revive natural hydrology in Boston and continue the economic renaissance begun by the cleaning of Boston Harbor and the Charles River.

There is a way out of the box we have created with pipes and pavement, but it will require us to think quite differently about our future and our built environment. The question is whether we begin the transformation before we get hit, or after.

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