

Thoreau Path Master Plan

Final Draft

prepared for:
The Boston Redevelopment Authority
West End Community
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C R J A

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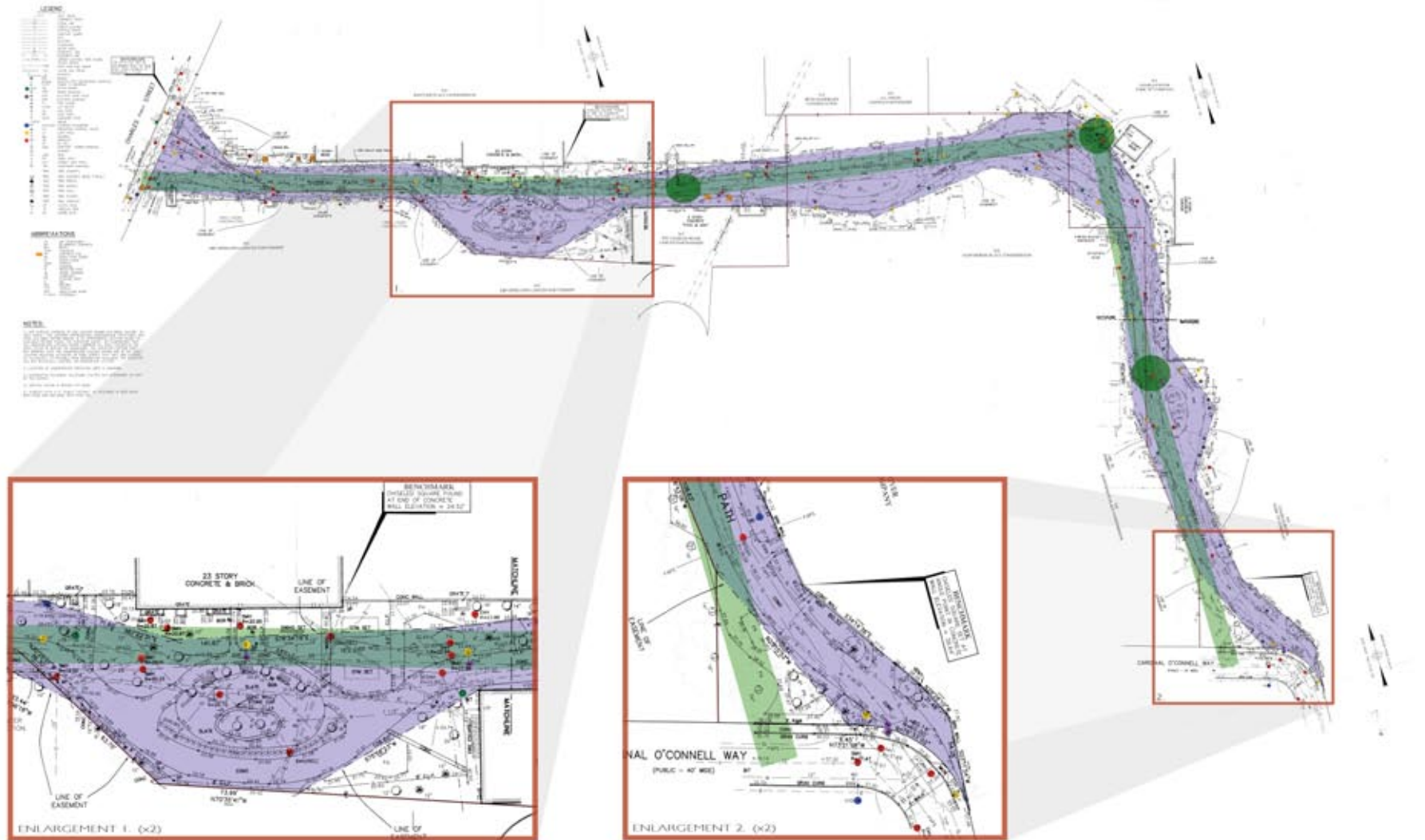
Introduction

Carol R. Johnson Associates (CRJA) was retained by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) to take part in the review and initial Master Planning Phase of the existing circulation way known as Thoreau Path. The task called for the review and assessment of the current path, its general condition, its connections to immediately adjacent properties, as well as its greater connection to downtown Boston. The result of these processes is to be an accepted guide to the future redevelopment and renovation of Thoreau Path, creating better connections to and from the space, and anticipating the immediate and future needs of the path to its wide variety of users.

Existing Conditions

Thoreau Path is a predominately concrete passageway which lies mostly within an easement and utility corridor among newer developments of the old West End Neighborhood of Boston. The paved easement passageway widely winds its way past the “ rear ” of condos, apartments, synagogues, and other businesses. The width of the path is at least 20 feet or greater for the majority of its length and acts as a fire lane as well. Large existing trees ranging from mature Ginkgos to Honeylocusts line the majority of the path’s length. Foundation plantings of various trees, shrubs, and groundcovers are also present when the path nears the private properties of the adjacent developments.

The path and its associated landscape is generally bounded by Storrow Drive and the Charles River Esplanade (beyond) to the west. Martha Road, Lomasney Way and various developments including Whittier Place are located to the North. Staniford Street and developments including Longfellow Towers and West End Place are located to the east. Blossom Street, William Cardinal OConnell Way, and developments including Hawthorne Place and Emerson Place are located to the south.

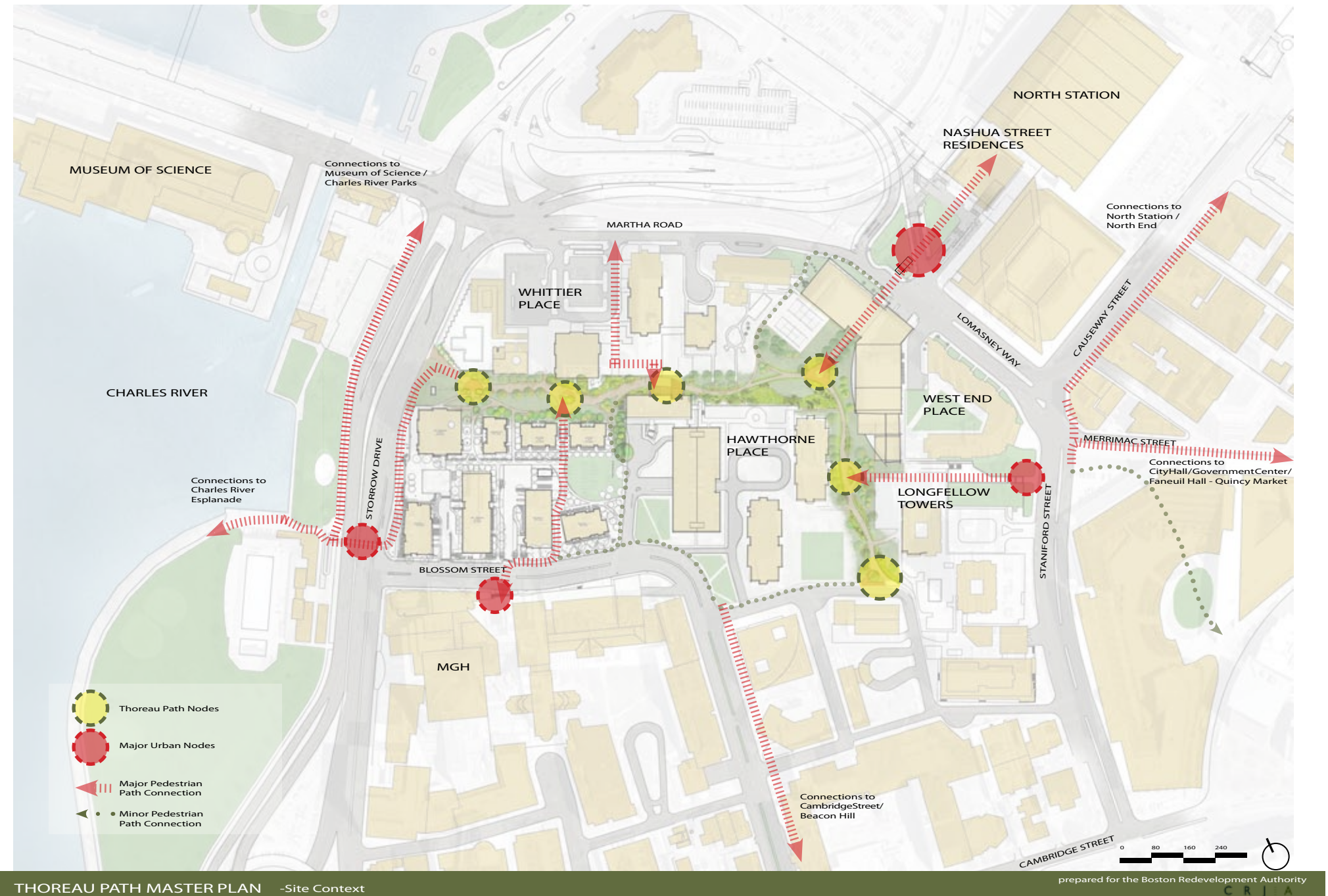


Master Plan Design Narrative

The Master Plan looks to clearly identify major entries and connection points along the path to the City grid outside of its immediate context, while still maintaining the green nature of this “hidden” pedestrian way. All suggestions and designs shown within this Master Plan are conceptual. Final design, path layout, planting plans, material selections, and signage design would need to be furthered in proceeding phases with the West End Community. At that time, the layout of walkways and relative spaces will be coordinated with each building development that abuts the pathway system to ensure adequate setbacks and buffers between the public and private property. These properties include but are not limited to Hawthorne Place, Whittier Place, Emerson Place, Pace’s, Longfellow Towers and Boston Synagogue. This Master Plan also seeks by design to clearly denote proper use of certain areas of the pathway system. While service and emergency vehicles are permitted along the majority of the path system, key path connections are intended for pedestrian access only.

Beginning at William Cardinal O’Connell Way, the path entry addresses the existing flow of pedestrian foot traffic by creating a secondary connection to and from the pathway to the west. The overall perceived width of the pathway is thus decreased by subdividing the entry into two diverging access points. Retention of an existing large maple tree allows for the possible addition and creation of retaining walls on which simple signage can be placed to designate the entry into Thoreau Path, and reinforce its pedestrian nature.

The majority of the path within this area has been significantly decreased in width, from approximately 24 feet, to 12 feet. A clear zone of 20 feet needs to be maintained for fire access. This can be achieved by providing reinforced lawn zones on either side of the 12 foot pathway (4 feet on either side), reducing the amount of paved surface within this zone, while retaining a clear, accessible, safe passageway. Future design work is necessary to further define dimensions and materials within the ‘clear zone’ to meet fire access requirements and gain final approvals from the Boston Fire Department.



Master Plan Design Narrative continued:

The next major node as you travel north from William Cardinal O'Connell Way occurs where the major access point from Staniford Street reaches the pathway. The connection currently exists by way of a narrow sidewalk between West End Place and Longfellow Towers. A large staircase provides the necessary grade change between the passageway and the continued connection to Staniford Street.

The Master Plan suggests a clear definition of this much missed entry point from the east into Thoreau Path. An increased presence at this entry is desired. Future research is needed to create an accessible connection at this point. The Master Plan notes the presence of the existing, gated arched entry way at West End Place at the corner of Causeway and Merrimac Streets. Through the arch, a clear, probable connection into the path exists, providing grand visibility down Merrimac Street; however, it is understood that the establishment of a public accessible way through this visible entry point is not currently desired by the residents of West End Place.

Continuing along Thoreau Path, the traveler would arc fluidly towards the west, passing another node, which includes an existing connection to North Station. This portion of Thoreau Path would remain open and "green". Proposed are opportunities for seating, as well as casual, passive recreation. As shown, there is a suggestion of a major, primary connection to North Station. This desire line should be strongly considered and incorporated into any future redevelopment of the current parking garage.

The path softly meanders west, next reaching Pace and Son's Market. The proposed path would allow clear, expanded, accessible access to the Market and associated businesses, and final pathway design should acknowledge the considerable grading challenges and underground utilities located within this small area. Adjacent to the path, light outdoor seating for customers of the Market could be accommodated. A clarified and accessible route to Whittier Place's proposed upgraded exterior space should also be created.



- Strengthen existing character of Thoreau Path
- Clarify entry points and surrounding connections to Downtown Boston
- Create focal point and accessible route at and across Storrow Drive
- Re-establish connections with Historic West End character



Master Plan Design Narrative continued:

The meandering path continues, past a redefined existing play area at the base of Whittier Place. The next major node acts as a connection point to the newly developed Emerson Place Residences and beyond to Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH). The majority of the “commuter” foot traffic is directly related to persons using the path as a connection between public transit at North Station and MGH. The creation of a clear and accessible connection along the path is crucial. This expanded node will also act as a connection to the Whittier Place Health Club and Pool area.

The Master Plan also studied stronger connections to the Charles River. This idea may be considered again as a part of future development in the form of an iconic pedestrian footbridge at the end of Thoreau Path. Not only would a bridge create a clear and safe pedestrian destination at the Esplanade and the Charles River, it would also act as a threshold to and gateway for Storrow Drive, being the first overhead structure while traveling south west. An existing pedestrian footbridge exists on the western end of Thoreau Path; however stronger connections to that bridge could also be explored and developed.

Material selections are very important in establishing a consistent and identifiable space. New lighting is proposed for the entire length of the pathway. The city standard “Van Buren” fixture is proposed to be installed and maintained by the City of Boston’s Department of Public Works Street Lighting Division.



THOREAU PATH
Accent Paving and Allee'



Master Plan Design Narrative continued :

The material proposed for a majority of pathway will be reinforced concrete, scored with patterns (yet to be designed) for added visual interest. Nodes and areas of special interest will receive wire-cut brick (also to be selected during the design phase). Also proposed are curvilinear stone seatwalls and retaining walls to reinforce the pedestrian nature of the pathway.

The inclusion of clear and attractive wayfinding systems at key points along the path should be intrinsic in any future design of the space. Proper signage provides opportunity for proper use of the space as well as an opportunity for iconic placemaking of Thoreau Path.

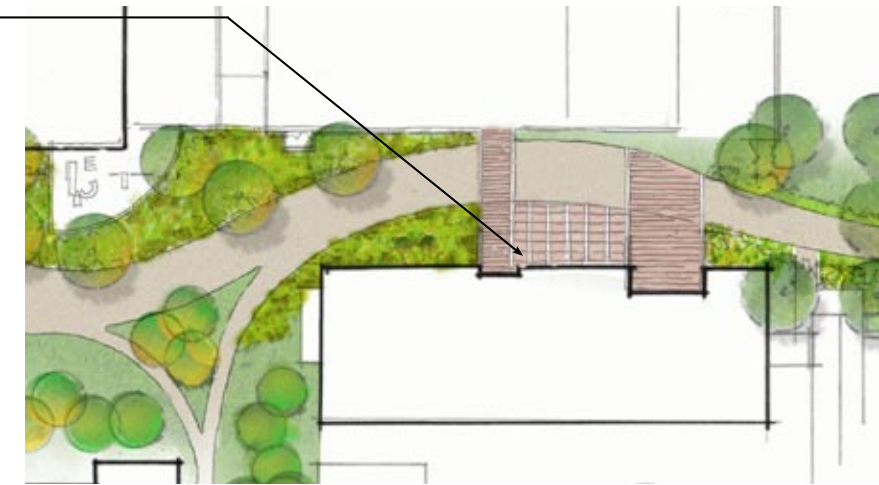
Next Steps

This Master Plan acts as a first step in the proper direction of the evolving space that is Thoreau Path. When funding for various improvements of the path come available, the BRA along with the West End Community should select a design team to prepare detailed documents based in the recommendations of this Master Plan. This process is critical, and would allow for the proper coordination of existing site conditions with community needs and contextual relationships.

The mature landscape existing all along the path is very unique to this area of the city. Great care should be taken to preserve the large trees adjacent to the pathway to and improve their condition and vigor, where possible. Generally, the following rules should be applied:

1. No major digging within the drip line of mature trees
2. No major storage within the drip line of mature trees
3. Immediate repair of any damaged trees
4. Proper protection of mature trees prior to any construction along the path

As a next step, a landscape maintenance plan should be drafted for the area. This plan would inventory the location and species of the trees and important horticulture along the path, provide specific recommendations regarding their care, and specifications for the execution of the work, including qualifications of the work force and a general maintenance schedule.



THOREAU PATH
West End Outdoor Cafe and Shops



THOREAU PATH
Re-Aligned Gateways and Entries



Next Steps continued:

Thoreau Path is truly a landscaped gem set within an evolving and dynamic area of downtown Boston. It offers its users respite from the sometimes harsh urbane nature of a large city's downtown 'grid'. Retaining the bucolic nature of the path, creating clearer connections to its outlying destinations, strengthening the continuity of the path's overall design, and providing clear visibility between the nodes- the pedestrian's decision points along the path - are all crucial to its betterment and continued success.

As adjacent development and redevelopment adjacent to Thoreau Path continues into the future, the unique, mature quality of the pedestrian space should remain. Proper steps to the development of the path should take into account its connections to the rest of the West End Neighborhood, the Charles River and Esplanade, and downtown Boston. The success of the path is dependent on these connections.

This master plan begins to discuss and suggest proper design directions to achieve this goal, but further detailed study of connection points, accessibility, materials and details is needed prior to real constructed works. With continued efforts of the West End Council and the BRA, a long range development schedule should be developed, setting goals and milestones for the redevelopment and enhancement of the pedestrian way. These tasks may include the following:

1. Upgraded Pedestrian and Vehicular Lighting
2. Re-alignment of upgrades to the pathway
3. Continued study of improved connection to North Station
4. Continued study of improved connections to Staniford Street / Government Center
5. Continued study of improved pedestrian connections to The Charles River / Esplanade

With proper planning and directed vision, the preservation and betterment of Thoreau Path can be achieved.