

THE PUBLIC PROCESS

IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

A Partnership Between the
Boston Redevelopment Authority
and Boston's Neighborhoods

City of Boston
Thomas M. Menino, Mayor
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Since its establishment in 1957, the Boston Redevelopment Authority has evolved into one of the nation's pre-eminent urban planning and economic development agencies, with responsibility for overseeing residential, commercial, and industrial development throughout the City of Boston. From its inception, the BRA has used its statutory powers to revitalize various areas of the city and to help the city meet the needs of an evolving economy. The redevelopment of the old Back Bay rail yards into the Prudential Center complex in 1959 is an early example. More recently, the BRA has moved forward the construction of the headquarters of the Genzyme Corporation – a biotechnology company - in Allston, the new FleetCenter arena above North Station, the World Trade Center office towers and the Seaport Hotel on the waterfront, the Landmark Center in the Fenway, and hundreds of units of market rate and affordable housing both downtown and across the neighborhoods of the city. Currently, projects such as Millennium Place - a mixed use residential, hotel, and retail project - and the rehabilitation of the old Lafayette Mall into Lafayette Corporate Center offices are leading the rebirth of lower Washington Street in downtown, while the renovated Ferdinand Building in Dudley Square and a supermarket and other retail stores in the Grove Hall Mall will help to strengthen these neighborhoods.

This successful track record reflects not only the BRA's commitment to helping support Boston's economy but also its concern with ensuring a comfortable fit between new development and the city's neighborhoods and residents. The unique character of Boston and its neighborhoods is one reason many people choose to live and work here, but it is also one of the city's strongest competitive advantages in the modern global economy. The BRA has the responsibility to balance the need for sustained economic growth and the quality of life that Boston residents value. This balance is only accomplished by addressing the concerns of neighborhood residents and community organizations as part of the planning process.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino and the Boston Redevelopment Authority are committed to continuing the city's tradition of community involvement in planning Boston's future development. Today, there are numerous channels of communication between Boston residents and the city government on development issues. Some are through city staff in the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services, The Department of Neighborhood Development or the regional managers at the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Others are established via the Mayor's appointed citizen review groups or the many community meetings held by the BRA each year. Each plays a role in the city's economic development decisions and provides a different avenue for citizen and neighborhood input.

The BRA's efforts to include neighborhood groups and residents in City planning and redevelopment efforts have been rewarded by more productive working relationships between the City and its neighborhoods and consequently have produced better end results. Projects are more likely to reflect the vision and character of Boston's diverse neighborhoods while at the same time bringing to the City the economic development and expansion needed to provide jobs for residents and sustain the quality of life that makes Boston such a desirable place to live and work.

LEVELS OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The extent of public participation in city planning and project reviews varies according to project type. Long-term planning initiatives are predictably more involved and formalized, often with appointed advisory groups or task forces. Project reviews, especially those under the recently revised city zoning code (Article 80), may include review groups but will always provide for several scheduled public comment periods so that all interested parties can share their concerns or suggestions with the BRA. Nearly every project or plan typically includes several public meetings between BRA staff and neighborhood groups and residents. In addition, the BRA often arranges for project developers to attend these meetings or to meet one-on-one with residents. The BRA's goal is to ensure that neighborhood residents always feel confident that their concerns and ideas are being heard throughout the project planning and design process.

The following is a guide to the most typical elements of public involvement. Keep in mind that the level of public interest in a project or plan is also important in determining how many people become involved. Given the many available options, Boston residents have numerous opportunities to have their views heard by the BRA and incorporated into the city's development efforts.

Neighborhood Councils. One of the most integral forms of community involvement on zoning and development issues comes through local neighborhood councils. These neighborhood-based councils are independent groups designed to provide advice on issues of local concern. Their membership is elected by the people living in these neighborhoods. Neighborhood councils are included in the planning process from the very start. The BRA notifies them at each

stage of review for large projects, Institutional Master Plans, Planned Development Areas, or zoning issues. The notice includes information on the type of review being undertaken, where, when, and how access to relevant documents can be viewed or obtained, a summary of the proposed plan or project, and the dates by which public comments must be received by the BRA. In turn, neighborhood councils are a valuable resource for city residents who might wish information on development activity and civic activity in their community. A recent example of the work of a neighborhood council was in West Roxbury, where the council worked with BRA planners for more than two years to successfully rezone the entire neighborhood. Boston residents can contact the BRA or the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services for information on how to contact their local neighborhood council.

Citizen Advisory Committees (CAC) and Community

Review Groups. Both are generally referred to as CACs and are organized to facilitate public participation in the review process on a specific development project. These groups review the work of developers and the BRA throughout the process to ensure that community priorities are addressed at all stages of project design and planning. Members are chosen by the Mayor to reflect the community and to involve other expertise required by the project. Occasionally appointments to the CAC are made in conjunction with other public officials. A recent example of this would be with the Millennium Project CAC, for which members were appointed both by Mayor Menino and the chairman of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority.

Task Forces. These are organized as part of individual planning initiatives to help meet specific planning goals or information needs.

Depending on their size and their mission, task forces might break into smaller subcommittees or study groups to research a specific issue or problem and report back to the full group. Members are not necessarily drawn solely from neighborhood residents and, depending on their purpose, these groups might include planning experts or policy activists from across the city. The number of members and longevity of a task force or study group are determined by the scope of the development or planning project. They are an invaluable way to tap into the knowledge and experience of policy experts across the community and enhance the expertise that BRA staff bring to the planning process. They also provide good networking opportunities for neighborhood residents, enabling them to establish relationships with people across the city and share information they can bring back to their own communities. An example of a successful task force is the Mayor's Washington Street Task Force.

Community Meetings. A less formal but no less important element of BRA planning efforts are the community meetings which are scheduled periodically throughout a project planning or review process. These meetings are open to any city resident or group representative who wishes to attend. They have three purposes: to update and inform residents about ongoing development plans or projects in their community; to provide an opportunity for residents to ask questions and share concerns directly with BRA staff; and to solicit input from neighborhood residents to improve the project. The BRA publicizes these meetings in community newspapers, through newsletters, fliers, and mail, and by asking neighborhood groups to alert their membership. The number of neighborhood meetings on a particular project varies, but BRA staff typically attend more than a hundred in any given year.

Article 80. The most recent change to Boston's zoning code, Article 80 streamlines and consolidates the many facets of previous zoning processes for both large and small project reviews as well as institutional master plans. By simplifying the process, Article 80 makes zoning review procedures more easily understood and thus more accessible to individuals or neighborhood groups. Article 80 has several features to encourage and facilitate community participation in the zoning process. For both project reviews and long-range plans, Article 80 requires public notification at the outset, both through the neighborhood councils and through published notices. Compared to earlier processes, Article 80 gives interested groups or individuals additional time to study proposals by extending (in most cases) the length of the public comment period at each stage of the review process. As always, the BRA makes filed project or plan documents available for public viewing and the public is also welcome to attend BRA Board meetings. To help community groups and interested individuals learn more about their role in the new process, the BRA is publishing A Citizen's Guide to Article 80. Copies of Article 80 and the Citizen's Guide are available to members of the public at no charge from the BRA.

Elected Officials. The BRA is a public authority that answers to your elected representatives at many levels. The BRA Director, in addition to managing the Authority, serves as Chief Economic Development Officer on the Mayor's cabinet and so develops BRA policy under the leadership of the Mayor. On specific development, planning, or zoning projects, the Director and BRA staff typically work closely with members of the City Council as well. This close collaboration between the BRA and your elected representatives across the city helps keep the BRA accountable and ensures that it brings a genuine

understanding of neighborhood and city priorities to development decisions.

The BRA Board. The governing board of the Boston Redevelopment Authority consists of five members, four appointed by the Mayor and subject to confirmation by the City Council, with the fifth member appointed by the Governor. The Board is a cross-section of Boston, including representatives from the neighborhoods, and the law, labor, and business communities. The Board plays an important part in oversight and decision-making for Boston zoning and development policy through its power to consider BRA recommendations on a wide range of zoning and development decisions. This includes evaluating BRA staff recommendations regarding individual appeals to the Board of Appeals. The BRA Board's hearings on large project reviews or to review comprehensive development plans are open to the public, as are its monthly meetings. The BRA Board is also responsible for appointing the Director of the BRA.

The Board of Appeal. The 7-member Board was established by the state legislature to hear appeals on decisions or orders arising from Boston's zoning code as well as to grant relief from zoning requirements. As specified by the enabling legislation, members of the Board of Appeal (along with seven alternate members) must be Boston residents, and are chosen by the Mayor of Boston and confirmed by the Boston City Council. Members serve staggered three-year terms. One member is chosen at-large and four are nominated by professional planning, building, or architectural organizations. In 1993 the Board was expanded from five to seven members, to include two members representing neighborhood associations. Residents or neighborhood groups can find published

notices of Board hearings in city newspapers or can file a written request with the Board to receive advance notice by mail. All hearings are open to the public and impacted neighborhoods can request, through the Mayor or their City Council representative, that a hearing be held in the evening so as to maximize neighborhood attendance. The BRA plays an advisory role to the Board by making recommendations on pending appeals. Neighborhood concerns are of vital importance in helping the BRA make its recommendation, and BRA staff are available to meet with appellants to discuss pending appeals. The Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services (ONS), through its Early Notification System, alerts neighborhood activists and leaders on a weekly basis of impending hearings affecting their neighborhoods. In addition, ONS is also available to help appellants organize neighborhood support for their appeals to the Board.

Public-Private Conferences. Periodically, local universities, professional groups, the media, and government agencies convene panels or conferences to discuss specific planning efforts or important economic issues faced by the city. The BRA is a frequent participant or sponsor of these forums. They provide the Authority with opportunities to get feedback and learn from other planning professionals, and give the public a chance to hear a broad range of opinions on economic development questions. Conferences often produce supplemental research reports and economic analyses which can be helpful in assessing proposed development projects or plans. In addition, these conferences are typically covered by local media outlets, which helps promote community awareness of current development issues and encourages broader public participation. Examples of successful public-private conferences in which the BRA participated include: The Boston Tomorrow Conference, designed by

community leaders to generate ideas for economic and social development in the city; the Boston Harbor Conference sponsored by Channel 5, the Boston Globe, MIT, and the BRA; and the Boston Herald-Suffolk University Forum on Megaplex-Convention Center Development.

Community Development Corporations. Although they are not a formal part of the planning or zoning process, Community Development Corporations (CDCs) are central participants in neighborhood redevelopment efforts. There are 21 CDCs in Boston and they act as partners as well as advisors to the City and the BRA. As defined by state statute, CDCs are quasi-public nonprofit organizations specifically created to carry out and promote economic development within a designated geographic area of the city. Membership in a CDC is open to all residents aged 18 or older in that area and its governing body is elected by residents. CDCs are a source of both expertise and financing for community-based development projects throughout the city. The BRA has worked successfully with Boston CDCs on projects ranging from affordable housing opportunities to revitalizing local business districts. Most recently, the BRA worked with the Madison Park Development Corporation in a joint venture with Northeastern University to create Davenport Commons, with 60 units of home-ownership opportunities for neighborhood residents and 595 beds for Northeastern students, freeing up apartments in Roxbury and the Fenway for the community. Along with other neighborhood groups, CDCs play a vital role in public and civic affairs. Boston residents interested in becoming involved in city development efforts should consider working with an active CDC in their community as a means of sharing their ideas and expertise with the BRA.

CASE STUDIES

Whether it be as part of a long-term planning effort, review of an individual project, or a highly-publicized conference, Boston residents willingly donate their time and energy to ensuring the vitality of their neighborhoods. The following are only a few examples of various ways in which the BRA has worked with the community to make economic development happen in Boston.

Public-Private Conferences Periodically, economic development issues faced by the city or region require broad public discussion and debate. Whether they be about significant changes in Boston's economy or the historic challenge of recreating an entire neighborhood, they require innovative ideas and broad consensus on solutions. A public conference that draws upon the best ideas of the city's professional, academic, and business community is often a way for the BRA to access the expertise and ideas within these different communities.

The BRA has worked with numerous civic groups, universities, and corporate sponsors as both a participant and organizer on public-private conferences like Boston Tomorrow in 1993 or the more recent Boston Harbor Conference in 1998. These highly-publicized events also provide a way for BRA staff to educate themselves and the public on important issues and engage Boston residents in a public discussion about the choices we face. For example, the Boston Harbor Conference held a televised town-hall meeting from Faneuil Hall that drew both a large live audience and substantial television viewership.

For the BRA, these are also opportunities to listen. The Mayor and the BRA Director are frequently invited as guest speakers, and BRA staff attend these events. Conferences like the Insight Panel on Manufacturing allow them to hear first-hand the experiences and stories of the business leaders and workers who are struggling to keep the city and its workforce competitive in the face of today's global economy. These conferences also serve as the start of a collaborative process. They engage a broad range of participants in serious dialogue that can continue throughout the strategic planning process. They establish connections between the BRA and members of the community, thus providing the foundation for long-term working relationships.

The most successful conferences produce results. Sometimes it is invaluable survey data or economic analyses that can be used by policymakers, such as 1994's Boston Globe-MIT Transportation Conference. Many conferences provide rough drafts for the eventual blueprints of neighborhood master plans, as with the Boston Harbor Conference. Other conferences plant seeds for future action. Boston Tomorrow's call for a new city-wide master plan helped generate Mayor Menino's innovative Boston 2000 and Boston 400 planning efforts.

The BRA will continue to look for ways to expand its dialogue with the Boston community on issues of city-wide magnitude through its sponsorship and participation in public-private conferences.

South Boston Waterfront Development. In March 1996, Mayor Thomas M. Menino directed BRA to create a master plan for the South Boston Waterfront. The final plan, released at the beginning of 1999, is the culmination of more than two years of work with South

Boston residents, elected officials, planners, design professionals, environmentalists, land owners, and concerned citizens. Based on the comments and concerns raised in more than 33 public meetings and forums and hundreds of private meetings, the BRA arrived at a set of basic principles upon which all interested parties agreed.

Many elements of the plan were designed to address South Boston residents' concerns with preserving the economic viability of the current working port, slowing the growth of new residential housing units, and increasing the availability of affordable housing options. A Community Benefits Plan will bring jobs, job training, and public realm improvements to the residents of South Boston. The community was also active in reviewing the design of the new Convention and Exhibition Center that will be built in the area. Many architectural features of the Center were designed in response to local concerns on issues ranging from traffic and parking to the size and scale of the building.

Because the waterfront will be developed as part of a diverse city economy, previous experience shows that we can expect its build-out to take 20-30 years to complete during this time, development of the Seaport will be monitored through the BRA's review process and by the community to ensure that the required balance of uses and their respective amounts as specified in the plan are strictly followed.

Boston 400. Boston 400 is the city's first comprehensive long-term citywide planning initiative since 1965. Its mission is to develop a set of planning priorities for Boston's neighborhoods that will be enacted in the coming years in preparation for the city's 400th anniversary in 2030.

As a city-wide planning effort, Boston 400 has worked from the outset to make community and neighborhood input an integral part of the process. Through neighborhood and task force meetings guided by Boston 400 staff, Boston residents developed a set of four themes which can serve as guidelines for the city's future planning efforts: (1) a city of neighborhoods; (2) a vital natural environment; (3) New England's employment and transportation hub; and (4) a civic and cultural center. Participants then focused on developing specific recommendations and guidelines within these four areas.

Extensive public involvement has been a hallmark of Boston 400. Approximately 130 policy and neighborhood specialists from across the city serve on Boston 400 task forces, which have met more than 40 times to frame issues and assess local input. The task force's work has been presented to neighborhood groups and residents at over 175 neighborhood meetings. Newsletters update residents on the results of previous meetings and alerts them to upcoming events. Participation has been extensive. Over 1,000 city residents have contributed to the process thus far, as have dozens of neighborhood organizations. Boston 400 staff have also reached out to other planning groups, such as Urban Edge, Neponset River Watershed Association, Historic Boston, and the GreenSpace Alliance for their expertise and perspective.

Boston 400 has worked hard to keep residents abreast of their work. It exemplifies the city's commitment to grassroots participation. Their final report, connecting the City and its people, is currently being prepared for distribution.

East Boston. Over the past year, the BRA and East Boston neighborhood residents worked together to develop a master plan for this long-time Boston neighborhood, one that balances the revitalization of East Boston's waterfront with residents' needs for housing and services. In 1998, the BRA launched the process by appointing a project manager to oversee the creation of a Master Plan for East Boston. Also central to the process was an 18-member neighborhood Planning and Coordinating Group, which included representatives for the Mayor, East Boston's elected officials, and various East Boston neighborhood organizations. The Group met monthly to review the Plan's progress and share ideas and concerns with each other and with BRA staff. These meetings were open and all residents were welcome to attend.

The BRA worked hard to involve all East Boston residents in the planning process. Once the plan was officially underway, the BRA held a community kick-off meeting to explain the planning process and introduce BRA staff and project architects to East Boston residents. Over the course of the planning process, BRA planners published and distributed a newsletter to keep residents informed about their progress. For residents who wished to get involved in the substantive decisions being made, the BRA sponsored three community workshops to help residents reach a consensus on planning goals and alternatives.

The BRA has also worked to help Boston's business community better understand East Boston. BRA staff led a tour of East Boston for members of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce to introduce them to the area and let members see for themselves the unique opportunities available for economic development in East Boston.

Parcel 8/Boston Center for the Arts. It is not by chance that the newest addition to the Boston Center for the Arts (BCA) is destined to be one of the highlights of the city's South End neighborhood. As with many other development projects, neighborhood residents, developers, two mayoral task forces, and the BRA worked closely together to develop plans for the mixed-use project that will bring art galleries, neighborhood housing, retail, and office space under one roof.

City-resident collaboration began in 1994 when Mayor Menino appointed a 15-member community Task Force. The Task Force's mission was to reach a consensus on redevelopment goals for the parcel that were consistent with residents' broader vision for the neighborhood. The city published their Final Report and recommendations in 1995. With those in hand, the BRA began work to write a Request for Proposals (RFP). Soon after the Mayor appointed a second Task Force to review all submitted proposals and recommend two finalists for BRA consideration. To ensure that their review process maximized community involvement, the Task Force held five widely advertised open meetings during 1997-98, which were attended by several hundred residents, abutters, and neighborhood group representatives.

Community input is continuing during the course of the remaining project review. The BRA received and reviewed public comments in response to the published Project Notification Form (PNF) and, per request, extended the comment period before issuing its scoping determination, which generated an additional round of public comments. During this time, BRA staff attended numerous neighborhood meetings and public forums in the South End

neighborhood. As the review proceeds, interested individuals and groups who wish to remain actively involved can easily do so. At each stage there are public documents available for review and public comment periods so that BRA staff can incorporate feedback into their evaluations. Finally, BRA staff will continue meet with South End residents and neighborhood groups through the final stages to ensure developer compliance and response to neighborhood concerns.

ROXBURY STRATEGIC MASTER PLAN

The genesis of the Roxbury master plan was in the vision Roxbury residents had for their own neighborhood. In the course of working with the BRA on other issues, community leaders convinced the BRA that the Roxbury neighborhood needed a comprehensive plan to guide its future development.

Beginning in 1997, BRA staff began facilitating a series of public meetings and presentations that brought neighborhood residents together to share their ideas and concerns for the future of their community. Members of an 80-member working group, with representatives of community groups, the Roxbury Neighborhood Council, and elected officials, met frequently to draft a master plan that addressed the neighborhood's priority issues: quality of life, economic development, housing, and transportation.

Working closely with Roxbury residents, the BRA drafted a Request For Proposals (RFP) to select a lead consultant who would be able to pull together the many elements of the Roxbury Strategic Master Plan. The neighborhood's choice, architecture and planning specialists Stull and Lee, Inc., was introduced at a February 10, 2000 public meeting attended by more than 250 Roxbury residents. As work to

implement the plan progresses, the BRA continues to hold public meetings and workshops in Roxbury, and maintains a mailing list of nearly 1,000 residents who want to stay informed about the city's planning and development efforts in the Roxbury neighborhood.

Davenport Commons. This housing project in Lower Roxbury represents not only the power residents have to define development in their neighborhood but also the BRA's ability to create innovative development partnerships. For the first time, a major university and its surrounding neighborhood have joined in an economic partnership that will serve both their needs: additional student housing as well as new homeownership opportunities for Roxbury residents. Davenport Commons is part of Mayor Menino's plans to revitalize this historic neighborhood. Its success is due in large part to the active cooperation of neighborhood residents and elected officials in the BRA's planning process.

Residents of Lower Roxbury responded immediately to the BRA's initial Request For Proposals for student housing development. The BRA recognized the importance of addressing concerns as to the consequences of university expansion in the neighborhood and the need to provide opportunities for current residents. The proposal due date was extended twice to provide full opportunity for public comment, and the BRA created a community review group to advise it on how they might revise the Request For Proposals. The review group met over three months and consulted frequently with community leaders and groups for their input. They completed their work by presenting the BRA with a set of substantive recommendations on issues ranging from the number of student housing units to parking and retail space. The BRA accepted their suggestions and amended their RFP as a result.

Despite this extensive input, however, the outcomes of the first competition were still not acceptable to many in the Lower Roxbury community. Therefore the BRA continued its outreach efforts. BRA staff held another series of community meetings that included developers, city elected officials, and local leaders to further refine the proposal. The results were impressive. In November 1998 Mayor Menino announced an agreement between local officials, Northeastern University, and developers that would allow Davenport Commons to move towards a fall 2001 opening. Work began with a November 1999 groundbreaking.

25 Huntington Avenue. Located in Boston's Back Bay Historic District on the site of former 19th century residential hotel, the new 141-unit residential development at this address is the latest addition to one of the city's most scenic areas. The project's location near Copley Square, Trinity Church, and the Boston Public Library required that developers be sensitive to the architectural richness of the surrounding area.

This particular project is a good example of how Article 80's Large Project Review requirements provided a process that serves city residents well. As required, the BRA published notice of the proposed project, notified interested neighborhood associations such as the Neighborhood Association of Back Bay and the Prudential Center Residents' Association, and invited public comment. Over the course of the comment period, neighborhood associations, property abutters, and individuals shared their suggestions and concerns with the BRA. At the BRA's request, project developers met with neighborhood groups, the Boston Public Library, and local officials for further discussion and to consider other options. Project developers

also worked with the Boston Landmarks Commission and the Boston Civic Design Commission to ensure that the proposed project's design and details fit with the architectural integrity of the historic Copley Square location.

Article 80 procedures ensured that the public had additional opportunities to review and comment on later stages of the project as well. Both developers and the BRA established a constructive working relationship with neighborhood groups and residents, and eventually made several important changes in design features in response to residents' and organizations suggestions. The project was approved at the BRA Board's public meeting and requests for zoning variances were forwarded to the Board of Appeal, which also made its decision to approve the project at a public meeting. The final project design, thanks in large part to the input of neighborhood residents, is one which complements the historic atmosphere of the Back Bay neighborhood.

Washington Street Task Force. This award-winning task force is evidence of just how productive and innovative these groups can be. The 40-member Task Force was appointed by Mayor Menino in 1995 and charged with developing a strategic vision for the revitalization of historic Washington Street and recommending aggressive strategies for encouraging investment in the area. The Mayor appointed a diverse group, reaching across city agencies, area businesses, neighborhood groups, and planning professionals. Task Force members met for monthly brainstorming sessions and worked with BRA planners and other city professionals to develop themes that would guide policy and planning recommendations. Among the task force's accomplishments were the development and implementation of a neighborhood parking

plan, the collection of survey data on local consumer markets for the local business community, as well as the development of a long-term strategic plan for the corridor.

Successful as these were, it was the Task Force's outreach and mobilization of neighborhood residents and businesses that won it outside accolades. To fully appreciate the concerns and needs of surrounding neighborhoods, the Task Force invited residents and business owners to participate on numerous panel discussions and working groups. Even more importantly, the Task Force produced results: plans for a new transit line, street redesign, the establishment of a Washington Street Business Association, and the anticipated creation of a new business improvement district (BID) will ensure that this cooperation would continue into the future

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