
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1.1: View of the Chestnut Hill Reservoir from the Overlook (2005)

Overview

Historically, the Chestnut Hill Reservoir was an important part of the City of Boston’s public water supply. As reported in the 1989 Boston Landmarks Commission Report, “Chestnut Hill is among the most significant, and certainly the most highly visible, complex within the Metropolitan Water Supply System.” In addition to supplying water to the city, the Reservoir and its adjacent landscape served as the first large-scale public park in Boston, pre-dating the design of the Emerald Necklace. As it exists now, the Chestnut Hill Reservation includes the Reservoir, several of the water supply structures north of Beacon Street, and the adjacent landscape. The Reservation continues to provide an important recreational, natural, cultural and historic resource to the residents of Boston, Brookline, Newton, and other communities. The Reservation is a unique and special asset to the local and Boston metropolitan area, with its large open water body and surrounding historic pathways, buildings and landscape attracting a wide range of park users.

The Reservation is located among two densely settled, mixed-use Boston neighborhoods (Aberdeen and Cleveland Circle), the heavily populated Boston College campus, and the residential areas of Brookline and Newton. On a clear spring day the Reservoir pathways are

filled with runners and walkers, old and young, who walk or bike to the park from the surrounding neighborhoods. The transient student population is balanced by a stable base of long-term residents, both property owners and tenants of elderly residences. This demographic represents the park’s base constituency, which is expected to remain stable or slowly increase as more existing buildings in the area are converted to condominiums. In comparison to other DCR properties in more rural or suburban areas, Chestnut Hill Reservation’s visitor profile will remain relatively unchanged over the next ten years. The primary visitor management challenge is to improve the quality of the visitor experience as the level of use steadily increases. However, based on this expected residential growth for the local area, the desired uses at Chestnut Hill Reservation will remain focused on passive recreation.

1. General Site Description

The Chestnut Hill Reservation is a 133.28-acre parcel located north of Beacon Street and south of Commonwealth Avenue, within the central portion of Brighton, Massachusetts in the City of Boston and immediately adjacent to the City of Newton and Town of Brookline. The area within the boundaries of the

Reservation includes the 84.65-acre Chestnut Hill Reservoir, Chestnut Hill Driveway, Saint Thomas More Road, the Reilly Memorial Rink and Pool, and Shaft #7 (approximately 4.47 acres), a Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) controlled parcel. The Reservoir is bounded by Chestnut Hill Driveway to the north, Beacon Street to the south, Chestnut Hill Avenue to the east, and the Boston College campus to the west.

Chestnut Hill Reservation is a historically significant property, which includes a cultural landscape and many contributing buildings, structures, and site features including the Reservoir basin and dam, perimeter path and fence, Chestnut Hill Driveway, and several gatehouses. Two historic gatehouses are located immediately adjacent to the Reservoir basin, with a third gatehouse located along the Boston College side of Saint Thomas More Road. The large earthen dam that runs parallel to Beacon Street is a visually prominent feature. A network of walking trails provides passive recreational use, including the stonedust perimeter path that encircles the Reservoir. A four foot high metal picket fence, with sections installed in both 1928-29 and 1977, surrounds the Reservoir. Several benches of different styles are located throughout the Reservation. Street lights line both Saint Thomas More Road and Chestnut Hill Driveway. Pedestrian lights also line some of the pathways, many of which are non-functioning.

The site supports several habitat types, ranging from upland forest, successional shrub upland, open grass areas, to open water habitat. Ornamental trees and plantings line Chestnut Hill Driveway and Saint Thomas More Road.

The underlying bedrock geology of the Reservation is commonly known as Roxbury Conglomerate or Roxbury "Puddingstone". There are several areas around the site where the bedrock ledge is exposed. A prominent drumlin exists in the northeastern portion of the Reservation, with a large outcropping of bedrock visible on the Reservoir side of the hill parcel. The southern slope descends moderately towards the Reilly Rink building. Alongside the Chestnut Hill Avenue sidewalk, the slope is held back by a three-foot high retaining wall. The slope descends more gently as it slopes towards Commonwealth Avenue. Between the Chestnut Hill Driveway and the Reservoir, the land slopes down steeply to the water, which likely indicates a cut slope created when the Reservoir was constructed. Glacial boulders and ledge are exposed in this wooded slope.

The landscape immediately around Saint Thomas More Road and the wooded areas north of the Chestnut Hill Driveway are relatively flat. The inner pathway remains roughly at the same elevation as it encircles the Reservoir. The shoreline abruptly drops off from just beyond the inner edge of the inner path at an approximately three to one slope. South of the Reservoir, the grass-covered dam slopes down at the same angle to meet the sidewalk along Beacon Street.

2. Surrounding Areas

The physical location of the Reservation places it adjacent to the urban area of Brighton, the campus of Boston College and the suburban areas of Newton and Brookline. The property is surrounded by a variety of commercial, institutional, and medium to high density residential land uses. The 20-acre Evergreen Cemetery is located immediately to the north of the Reservation. Also to the north are a series of apartment buildings along Commonwealth Avenue and medium-density single family homes along Wade Street. To the east lie more apartment buildings and the commercial uses around Cleveland Circle. To the southeast and across Beacon Street are the Cassidy Playground (a City of Boston park) and the new "Waterworks" private development, formerly part of the Metropolitan Water Supply system. Southwest of the Reservation, large single family homes line Beacon Street. The Lower Campus of Boston College is located west of the Reservation across Saint Thomas More Road. This part of campus is mostly composed of athletic facilities and dormitories. The total acreage of Boston College campus is approximately 128 acres.



Figure 1.2: Property Line of the Chestnut Hill Reservation (2002 MassGIS Orthophoto)

Three lines of the MBTA Green Line run immediately adjacent to the Reservation. Stops include the Reservoir Station on the “D” Line; Cleveland Circle Stop on the “C” Line; and Chestnut Hill Avenue Stop, the South Street Stop, the Greycliff Stop, and the Boston College Station on the “B” Line.

3. Issues and Opportunities

The management of Chestnut Hill Reservation must strike a balance between recreation, natural resource protection, and historic preservation. The Reservation is a unique recreational landscape, with a rich history tied to the development of public water works and early park design. Today the Reservation serves as a passive park, linking communities and serving a variety of users. Contained on all sides by dense commercial and residential neighborhoods and large institutions, the Reservation is one of the primary open spaces for the area. The Reservation is mostly open water, with less than fifty acres of parkland, concentrating walkers, joggers, birders and artists into a relatively small greenspace. The park is jointly managed by the DCR and the Massachusetts Water Resource Authority (MWRA) and contains both open parkland and an active Pool and Rink. There are both historic landscape features in need of repair as well as historic buildings with great potential for adaptive reuse. The urban setting, recreational demands, variety of user groups and sensitivity of the historic landscape make the management of the Chestnut Hill Reservation a challenge and reinforce the need for this Resource Management Plan.

Project Methodology

1. Composition of Consultant Team

The DCR is developing this RMP for the Chestnut Hill Reservoir property in association with Pressley Associates and their sub-consultants, LEC Environmental Consultants, Inc., Ocmulgee Associates, Inc, Judith Nitsch Engineers, Inc. and landscape historian Jill Sinclair. With the management and enhancement of this historic and recreational resource as the guiding principle, the RMP proposes to develop short and long-term goals, programming, and management strategies that will enhance the historic, recreational, ecological, cultural, and visual resources within the Chestnut Hill Reservation.

Pressley Associates utilized available documentation and resources, as well as a boundary survey prepared by Judith Nitsch Engineers and additional mapping

information from the MassGIS system, to produce scaled plans of the Reservation used to record information related to existing site resources and conditions. Data related to current features was collected through supplemental field inventory and from primary and secondary published materials. LEC Environmental Consultants provided additional natural resource and habitat inventory and analysis and recommendations for treating invasive plants species and enhancing the natural habitats. Ocmulgee Associates provided an analysis and recommendations of several of the site structures including Gatehouse #1 and the retaining walls along Chestnut Hill Avenue and Chestnut Hill Driveway. Landscape historian Jill Sinclair prepared the historic chronology for the Reservation based on an extensive survey of primary and secondary historical documents and images.

2. Planning Area

The Chestnut Hill Reservation has a total of 133.28 acres based upon the 2005 boundary survey prepared by Judith Nitsch Engineers, Inc. It should be noted that this total area includes the 84.65-acre Chestnut Hill Reservoir, the 4.47-acre Shaft #7 (officially managed by the MWRA), and two parcels immediately adjacent to Shaft #7 (total of 1.37 acres) which are licensed from the Commonwealth to Boston College. As noted on the survey plan contained herein, the two parcels of land around Shaft #7, the 0.77-acre parcel along Campanella Way and the 0.60-acre parcel along Edmond Roadway and the west side of Saint Thomas More Road (including the Cochituate Gatehouse), were licensed to Boston College in 1962. A small 0.39-acre parcel of land at the end of Edmond Roadway was sold by the MWRA to Boston College and is not within the boundaries of the Reservation. These aforementioned parcels of land within the Reservation boundaries, plus the Reilly Memorial Rink Building and Pool (approximately 1.17 acres), are not part of the planning area of this RMP.

Excluding the previously mentioned areas and the Reservoir itself, the total planning area covered by this RMP is approximately 41.62 acres. This acreage includes Chestnut Hill Driveway and Saint Thomas More Road.

3. Public Process

The research, inventory, and analysis work completed for this RMP resulted in a common knowledge base for understanding the historic, natural, recreational, and

cultural resources and prevalent uses of the Reservation. Issues identified through the evaluation of current condition were then tested and developed in partnership with the DCR and through separate meetings with the project's Working Group and the general public. The management and treatment recommendations and an early action project were identified and developed for the Reservation based on the public input and prioritization of issues.

Appendix B contains an overview of the public participation process, including a summary of public comments on the Draft Resource Management Plan and DCR response, substantive revisions to the RMP based upon additional DCR staff review, and summaries of the first and second public meetings. A third public meeting to present the final RMP is planned for early December 2006.