



reated ninety years ago from tidal marshes and mud flats, the Charles River Basin was designed to provide city dwellers access to outstanding river scenery and recreational opportunities on both water and land.

Recognized as both a National Register Historic District and a National Civil Engineering Landmark, the Basin lies within the Charles River Reservation, one of twenty-one reservations in the 19,500-acre Metropolitan Park System and its geographic and symbolic heart. It is a critical link in a network of open spaces and greenways that allow users to travel safely and comfortably throughout the metropolitan district. The Basin embraces the river, shore lands, and parkways between the Historic Charles River Dam and the Watertown Dam and borders the municipalities of Boston, Cambridge, Newton, and Watertown. It is a defining feature for businesses, three of the leading institutions of higher education in the nation, and at least twelve neighborhoods. The eight-and-one-half-mile Charles River Basin is a complex weave of historic and natural resources, including two dams, 1,500 linear feet of granite seawall, eighteen miles of parkways, eleven vehicular and six foot bridges, twelve smaller parks, three and one-half acres of marshland, more than thirty-two miles of pathways, nine public boat landings, nineteen boathouses and yacht clubs, and twenty recreational facilities such as swimming pools and ball fields.

Though entirely designed—and in that sense artificial—the Basin is also a wildlife habitat for hundreds of animal and plant species that play a role in the ecology of the region and enrich the experience of urban park users. Water quality in the once heavily polluted Basin has improved dramatically in recent years, creating better habitat for wildlife and attracting people back to the river.

Views of the boat-dotted Basin framed by Beacon Hill, the Esplanade, the Longfellow and Harvard Bridges and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology symbolize the region, its vibrancy, and its livability.



BEFORE THE BASIN WAS CREATED IN 1910, THE CHARLES WAS A TIDAL RIVER WHOSE LEVEL ROSE AND FELL DAILY AS FAR WEST AS WATERTOWN. WITH THE ATLANTIC TIDES.

The Basin is within walking distance of more than 300,000 urban residents. It welcomes between five and twenty thousand users each day in the spring and fall. In summer as many as half a million people crowd the river and its shores during special events. The Basin hosts more than 150 such events each year, including regattas, walkathons, road races, concerts, and theatrical performances.

## INTRODUCTION

After a century of use the Basin is showing signs of wear. Decades of underfunding, reduced park staffing, and deferred maintenance have placed a strain on its resources and compromised the visitors' experiences. Hundred-year-old trees are dying. Granite steps and balustrades are deteriorating. Parkland turf is severely compacted and worn, historic bridges need structural work, paths and parts of the river are overcrowded, and invasive exotic plants have choked off river views and compromised the habitat of banks and wetlands.

Only three of the twelve residential neighborhoods that abut the Basin—the Back Bay, Cambridgeport, and the uppermost stretches of the Basin in Watertown—have relatively unimpeded access to the river. For the past two centuries, industrial, commercial, institutional, and recreational users have shared and sometimes competed for the river and its

shoreline lands. Today large-scale industries, businesses, and institutions, high-speed parkways, the Allston rail yards, and the Massachusetts Turnpike act as barriers between users and the Basin.

Numerous agencies and associations have begun to address and correct signs of deterioration at individual sites, but no overarching study or plan for the Basin has guided these efforts. No strategy for achieving its recreational and scenic potential has been developed—until now.



THE MASSACHUSETTS TURNPIKE (ABOVE LEFT) WALLS OFF POTENTIAL USERS IN BRIGHTON AND NEWTON FROM A SIGNIFICANT STRETCH OF THE BASIN.

**BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE MASTER PLAN**

In 1997 the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), which has managed and maintained the Charles

River Basin since its completion in 1910, took the initial steps toward developing the first master plan for the Basin in more than sixty years. The Master Plan is a guide for management, planning, and design decisions.

The Charles River Basin Master Plan emerged from an intensive public process stretching over two years. Hundreds of Basin advocates and users volunteered more than four

thousand hours of their time to the planning effort. With them, the planning team created the Charles River Basin Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) and four subcommittees—Landscape and Ecology, Parkland Use and Design, Access and Circulation, and Water Use—to study existing conditions and devise recommendations that would enhance the Basin’s structure, appearance and use. Seven full CAC meet-



ings, three large workshops, and dozens of subcommittee meetings were held in 1997 and 1998. Detailed studies of the Basin’s natural and historic resources, river depth, and ecology were compiled. A comprehensive survey of 500 residents and students who live within abutting neighborhoods was undertaken to develop a broader sense of public needs, issues, and recommendations.

The Master Plan aims to mobilize this broad public support to implement important parts of the plan over the next five to fifteen years. With constructive public participation, efforts to revitalize the Basin will succeed. A concerted effort to raise public understanding of the Basin and its value is central to the implementation strategy.

The plan first describes the Basin’s geography, topography, prehistory, and history. The significance of its resources in natural, social, and cultural terms is explored. The use of the

Basin and evaluations by its users are considered. The Master Plan describes the Basin’s existing condition, examines current issues, reviews efforts

underway to improve it, and recommends actions for its future. Management and implementation issues and standards are presented. The final section outlines in detail the resources, condition, and recommendations for each of thirty project areas in the Basin, proceeding upstream from the historic Charles River Dam.