



THE EAST CAMBRIDGE FRONT (IN)

Lechmere Canal to Broad Canal

KEY RESOURCES

- *Broad Canal (1805)*
- *Lechmere Canal (1874)*
- *Seawall with decorative cast-iron fence and filled land behind (circa 1899)*
- *Longfellow Bridge (1906)*
- *Cambridge Parkway (1928)*

HISTORY

The Lechmere Point settlement (now known as East Cambridge) was developed in the early nineteenth century. The Cambridge Improvement Company built the Lechmere Canal in 1874 to serve industrial uses. Demand for recreational open space increased as Lechmere Point developed. The Olmsted firm was retained in 1892 to transform the riverfront area into a recreational park known as “The Front” that would preserve

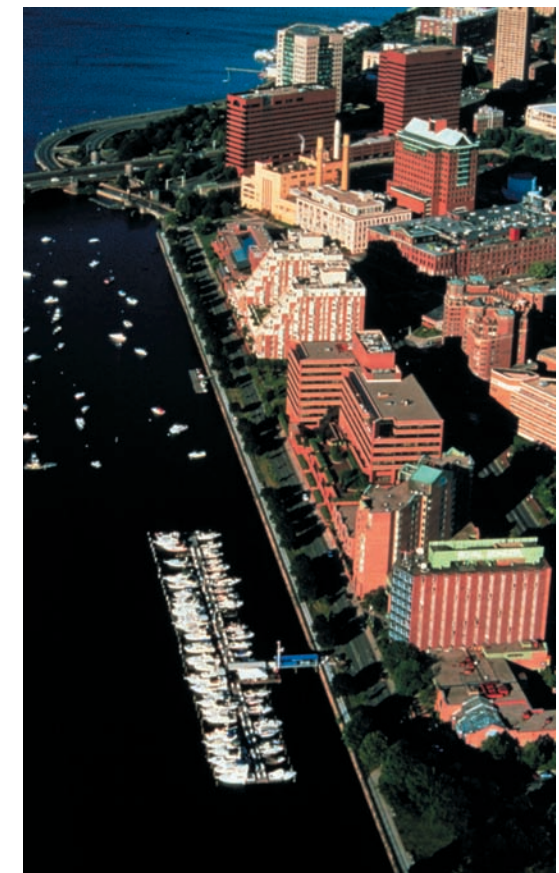
river basin views and provide boating facilities, a beach, and a place for children’s games. The landscape architects also envisioned a dam upstream of Craigie Bridge to connect the Charlesbank in Boston with The Front. Plans for The Front were never implemented, though the dam was later built as a connecting park.

The City of Cambridge began building the present seawall, filling the remaining flats in 1895. The Cambridge Parkway was opened between the dam and the Longfellow Bridge in 1928. Resulting traffic hazards forced the closure of the existing bathhouse and ball field. The East Cambridge Riverfront Plan, published in 1978, shaped the redevelopment of the Lechmere Canal and the so-called Lechmere Triangle. Land Boulevard and Cambridge Parkway were reconfigured as part of this \$190 million redevelopment project in the early 1980s. Later Cambridge Parkway was narrowed from a two-lane parkway with parking on either side to a one-way drive twenty feet wide with parking on the land side only.

EXISTING CONDITIONS AND ISSUES

The Front is approximately 2,200 feet long and 80 feet wide along most of its length. Despite the stunning views it offers of the Lower Basin, the Longfellow Bridge, and the Boston skyline, the riverfront here fails to draw large numbers of people due to poor pedestrian access, intrusive development, and lack of visitor amenities.

Mature Norway maples line the walkway along the Charles. Younger little-leaf lindens are set back in the parkland, in some cases blocking views



THE EAST CAMBRIDGE FRONT

of the river. No trees line this segment of Cambridge Parkway. On the river side of the parkway, the eighteen-inch planting strip between the curb and the asphalt path is too narrow to sustain grass. There is no room on the land side for trees. As a result, commercial development fronting onto the parkway lacks a buffer and intrudes aggressively upon the Basin.

Multiple parallel pathways dominate this narrow strip of parkland, leaving little green space for picnics and sunning. The depressed swale between the walkway and the bike path further discourages use of the



CARS INTRUDE ON THE EAST CAMBRIDGE FRONT.

green area. Nevertheless The Front is a model of a dedicated pathway system: pedestrians/joggers, cyclists, and drivers each have their own paths. The curving turnout for the yacht club encourages occasional parking on the grass. The segment's straight alignment, while

historically accurate, is monotonous. These conditions combine to diminish use of what should be a very popular segment of the Charles River Reservation.

A posted ban on parking from 7:00 to 10:00 a.m., intended to discourage commuter parking, is not well enforced. As a result, employees of local businesses, rather than park visitors, take these spaces. The alternative, to impose short-term parking regulations, would be problematic for boaters who are often out for hours at a time.

Public access to the float for the public mooring field is minimal and not well marked. There is no handicapped access to the water. The lack of fire hydrants is a liability: Charlesgate Yacht Club has lost three boats to fire in the last five years.

There are two park areas within this segment. Front Park is sandwiched between Cambridge Parkway and Land Boulevard. Lechmere Park, at the mouth of Lechmere Canal, is not well connected to other areas in the Basin, including the Museum of Science, a major regional draw. The nearby Royal Sonesta Hotel has expressed interest in supporting public programs here.

GOALS

- Develop better bridge and path connections to the reservation.
- Screen adjacent development with parkway trees.
- Broaden the usable area of the grass strip.
- Animate The Front with increased activity.

ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

Two alternatives for this segment were considered.

Alternative A would maintain the existing road and pathway alignments with minor changes. The yacht club turnout would be removed and restored to grass. Parking would be re-signed and regulations enforced in order to reserve spaces for park users. Because it cannot support grass, the planting strip between the bike path and the curb would be paved with cobblestones to give it a manicured appearance. A series of benches would be set back from the river path edge to provide places to view the Basin and the Boston skyline. Alternative A has two advantages. It reserves parking along Cambridge Parkway for the boating community and other reservation users. It preserves a sense of accessibility and visibility (and thus safety) at night. It fails, however, to provide room for passive uses and special events or to increase the area's visual appeal.

Alternative B calls for the closure of Cambridge Parkway and the transformation of the entire area into parkland. Drop-offs would be provided at either end of The Front for access to the boating facilities. The ramp and float for the public mooring field should be moved closer to Broad Canal for better drop-off access. Seventy to eighty spaces of long-term parking along The Front would be eliminated. Boaters and other users would need to explore alternative parking options, including estab-



EAST CAMBRIDGE FRONT,
ALTERNATIVE B

lishing arrangements with nearby private lots. The bicycle path would be moved to the former parking lane, next to the land-side pedestrian walkway. The inner line of trees would be transplanted to the edge of the new bicycle lane, and additional trees would be introduced to break up the linearity of the space.

One of the advantages of

Alternative B is the creation of a generous space for picnics and lawn games by widening of the grassy parkland from 25 to 45 feet. This alone could attract many more users. Automobiles would be eliminated entirely in order to create a quiet zone and to connect Front Park directly to the reservation. Such a ban would support the potential for the Royal Sonesta and other private abutters to provide ground-level cafes. Floating restaurants might also be possible at this location, though access for servicing would be difficult. Disadvantages of Alternative B include the lack of convenient parking for boaters; the loss of vehicular access along Cambridge Parkway for enjoyment of river views; and the potential decrease in night security along The Front in the absence of the parkway. In addition the public may perceive it to be the private domain of adjacent properties, a perception that would have to be countered with better pathway connections to the rest of the reservation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Alternative A is recommended**, given the need for access to existing and future boating facilities along The Front. Should other access and parking strategies emerge over time, Alternative B should be reconsidered.
- **Phase out both the Norway maples and the little-leaf lindens and replace them with trees more suitable for the reservation** (see Appendix E). Wholesale replacement of all the trees along The Front would allow the filling of the sunken area between the road and the seawall, creating raised parkland for sitting. Short of this drastic action, a number of incremental improvements are possible. Trees along Front and Lechmere parks should be thinned to increase visual connections to the Charles. The lindens at the eastern end of the parkland should be thinned to open up water views. Parking spaces should be removed at intervals along the entire length of the parkway and converted to planting zones for parkway trees.
- **Improve the existing public landing with a new ramp and float for rowboats.**
- **Preserve space for a future public-access boating facility at the northern end of the seawall**, just downstream from the mouth of Broad Canal. The mooring field would need to be reconfigured and could be supported by such a facility. A number of guest moorings should be established for visiting vessels.