Part Two

Site Analysis and General Recommendations

2.1 | Park History

While the current Herter Park is a product of a mid-20th century design, its origin is associated with the early days of the Boston Metropolitan Park System. The park was born and later re-shaped by grand visions that embodied the spirit of their respective eras. This historic overview seeks to provide a cultural perspective, enrich our understanding of the present park design, and inform the planned evolution of Herter Park.

Charles River and the Impact of the Industrial Revolution

In its historic natural form Charles River was a tidal estuary. An early map of the area, the "1770 Boston Harbour Map and Its Surroundings" shows swampy terrain along the meandering river and a few topographic high points of which the most prominent one is located across the river, in what later became the Mount Auburn Cemetery.

In the 1800's, the industrial revolution exploited the Brighton banks of Charles River and the land of present-day Herter Park for rail yards, coal and lumber yards, and other industry, as seen on the maps of the 1875 '*Atlas of Suffolk County*.'

Figure 2-1. Closeup of the ca. 1770 map "Boston Harbor and Its Surroundings' by John Hills with the project area outlined.

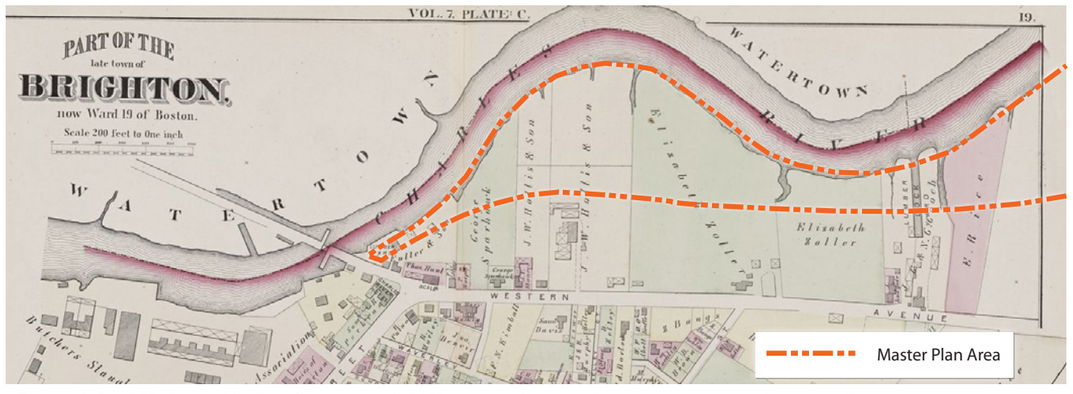

Figure 2-2. 1875 "Atlas of Suffolk County" by G. M Hopkins & Co. showing industrial uses prior to the Speedway establishment, in the presently west area of the park.

A massive slaughterhouse, the Brighton Abbatoir, was built in 1873 just west of Arsenal Street Bridge contributing to the river's already heavy pollution; it remained in operation until 1956.

The society's rising concerns about industrial pollution and its effects on public health led to that era's advocacy for parks and open spaces. Boston became a leader in the parks movement with the establishment of its linear park system -the Emerald Necklace, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr; and the subsequent Boston Metropolitan Park System creation.

Boston Metropolitan Park System Creation

The Boston Metropolitan Park System grew from the efforts to expand the open space network beyond Boston to the surrounding region. Landscape architect Charles Eliot, an Olmsted disciple and a partner in his firm, and journalist Sylvester Baxter were the key figures in the creation of the system. As a result of their efforts, the Metropolitan Park Commission (MPC) was created in 1893 and immediately began acquiring lands for the Reservations and the connecting Parkways. Eliot's firm Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot was hired to prepare a plan for the metropolitan parks, with Eliot having the primary responsibility.

Among the lands to be acquired were the banks of Boston's three tidal rivers: the Charles, the Mystic, and the Neponset. Unlike other natural and scenic reservations in the system, the Charles River's land was industrial, and the water heavily polluted. Eliot and the MPC recommended that a dam be built, to transform the river from a tidal estuary to a basin with a controlled water level allowing the creation of parks by filling the mud flats. Charles Eliot's design vision for these parks included recreational elements such as promenades, plazas, concert grounds, outdoor halls, and playgrounds, to complement their naturalistic landscape design. The Charles River Dam was completed in 1910, establishing the Charles River Basin.

The Charles River Speedway

The Charles River Speedway was the first major park constructed in the Charles River Reservation. Eliot envisioned it as a scenic drive with a riverside promenade and a horse harness racetrack. After his death in 1897, the Olmsted brothers continued the work. In 1898 H.P. Nawn Company constructed a dike, graded and drained the site; then in 1899 the 1.75-mile park drive was laid out with tear-shaped loops on each end, and a 1-mile oval in the middle. Soon after its opening in 1899, the Speedway became a popular destination for horse racers, pedestrian, bicyclists, and automobiles.

Adjacent to the parkway (Soldiers Field Road), a handsome administration building complex was erected the same year, designed by architects Stickney and Austin in a blend of Shingle and Colonial Revival styles. The Charles River Speedway Headquarters included offices, police headquarters, stables, and park superintendent's residence.

Figure 2-3. Ca. 1900 photo - the Charles River Speedway Headquarters.
Image from DCR Archives, Metropolitan Parks System Lantern Slides Collection.

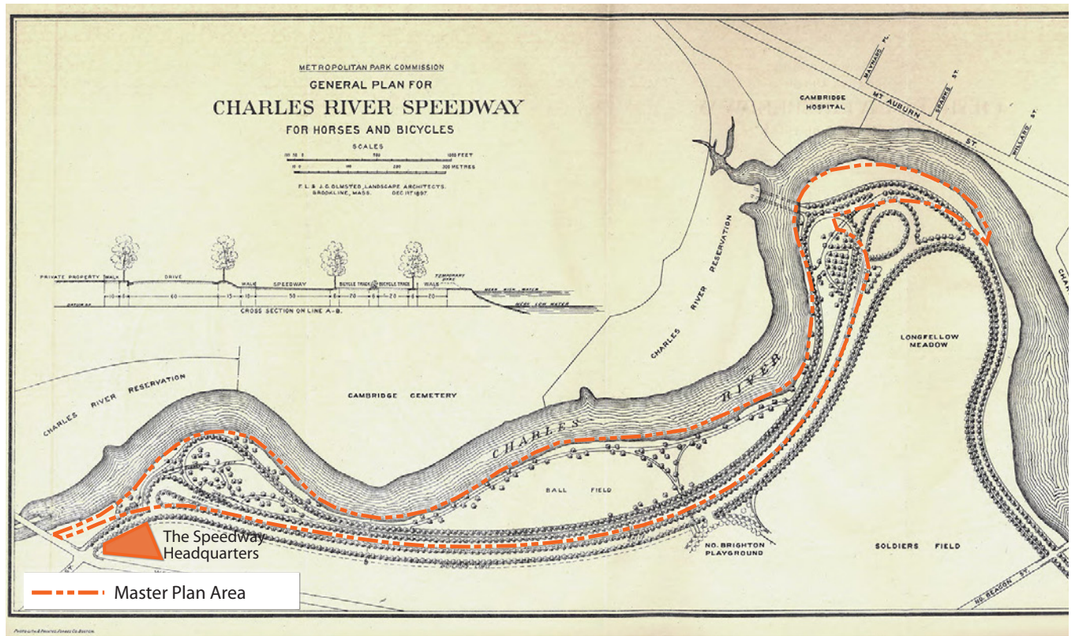

Figure 2-4. The1897 General Plan for Charles River Speedway for Horses and Bicycles.

Figure 2-5. 1902, Third Annual Speedway Parade. Image credit: Massachusetts Historical Society.

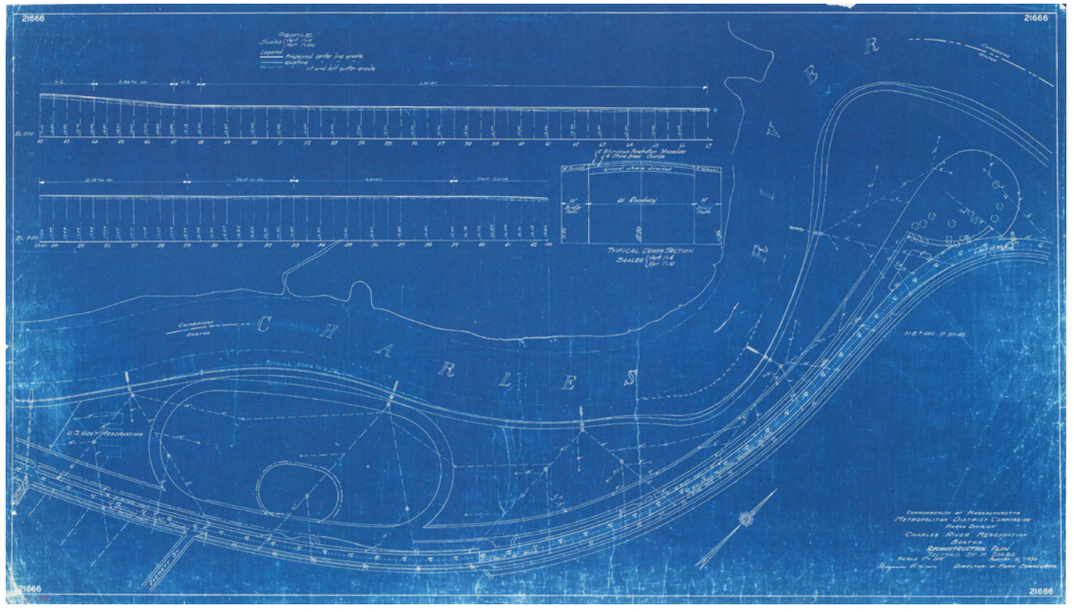

Figure 2-6. 1933 Reconstruction plan for the Speedway, showing a typical cross section with 40' wide roadway and 10' wide bridle paths on each side. Plan courtesy DCR.

Figure 2-7. 1928 aerial photo of the Speedway and Soldiers Field Road. Image credit: Boston Public Library.

Herter Park and Soldiers Field Road with the Speedway Layout Overlay

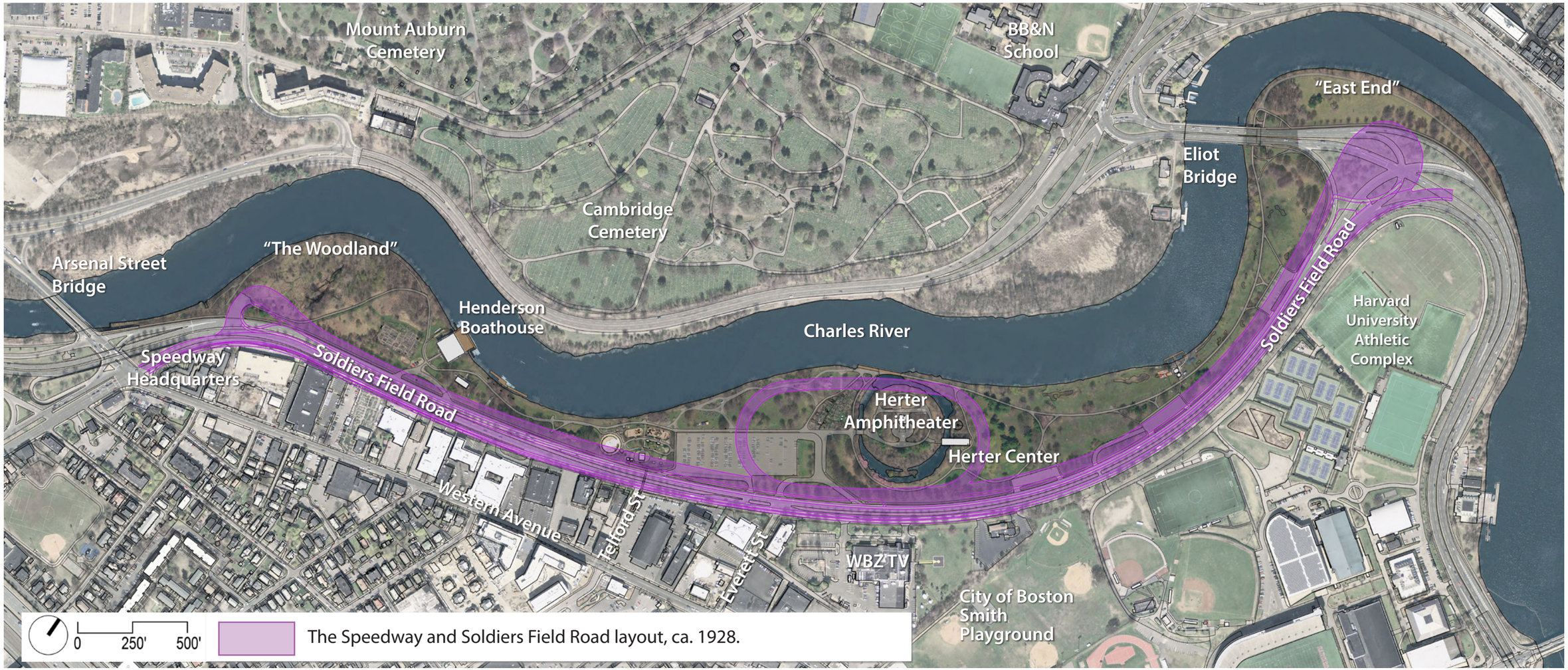

Figure 2-8. Herter Park and Soldiers Field Road with the Speedway layout overlay, ca.1928.

1958 Redevelopment and the Metropolitan Boston Arts Center

By the 1950s, horse racing and the use of the Speedway waned in popularity as the automobile use exponentially grew. Starting in 1958 the Metropolitan District Commission (the MPC successor agency) razed the Speedway and redeveloped the park with lawns and trees, meandering paths, benches, children's playground, lighting, and other visitor amenities. Soldiers Field Road around this time became a divided 4-lane road as we know it today.

The new park was organized around a bold design idea: creating a Metropolitan Boston Arts Center (MeBAC) clustered around a circular man-made island surrounded by a moat. The MeBAC vision included a theater on the island, a bridge-like art gallery building, an opera house, boat landing, and a restaurant. Only the Theater and the art gallery (later named the Herter Center) were constructed. The MeBAC facilities had poor success with attracting audiences, most likely a result of their remoteness from public transportation and from the active city centers.

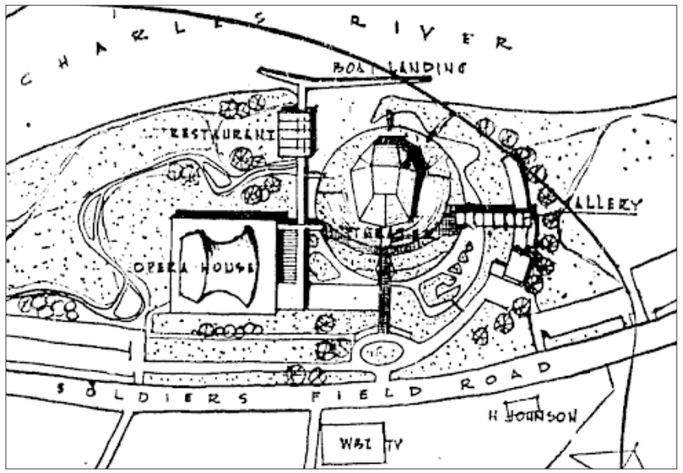

Figure 2-9. Conceptual sketch for the Metropolitan Boston Arts Center development

The Theater

The 1800-seat theater was originally planned to be covered with a canvas circus tent canopy. However, the architect Carl Koch wanted to avoid the center post, so an alternate structure for the roof was proposed by the engineer Paul Weidlinger, using an inflated vinyl coated nylon fabric membrane in the shape of a lens, attached around its perimeter to a still ring supported by columns. The intent was to use this inflated structure as a form for pouring a thin reinforced concrete shell, to convert it into a permanent roof. However this was never done, and the roof was scheduled to be dismantled at the end of its first summer season. Unfortunately, a hurricane tore apart the fabric roof before it was taken down; the remaining structure burned down in 1964 and was never restored.

The Publick Theater group came in to perform open-air performances in 1971, and in 1979 the theater was redesigned as a much smaller venue than the original MeBAC theater, with a platform stage, improved lighting, and seating for 375. Today's configuration of the Herter Amphitheater, with mounded landforms and rough granite blocks surrounding a steeply sloping audience area, is the product of this 1979 redesign. The Publick Theater continued its summer performances here until 2008, after which the amphitheater fell into disrepair. In 2015 the Friends of Herter Park was formed for the purpose of restoring the amphitheater; since then they have provided a few updates and have organized multiple free performances in this space.

Figure 2-10. Then and now: the original theater with its short-lived canopy (left), and the Amphitheater today (right). The Metropolitan Boston Arts Center (MeBAC) summer theater, architect Carl Koch, engineers: Weidlinger Associates, Boston, Massachusetts, 1958. Historic photo credit: from (Levy, 2016).

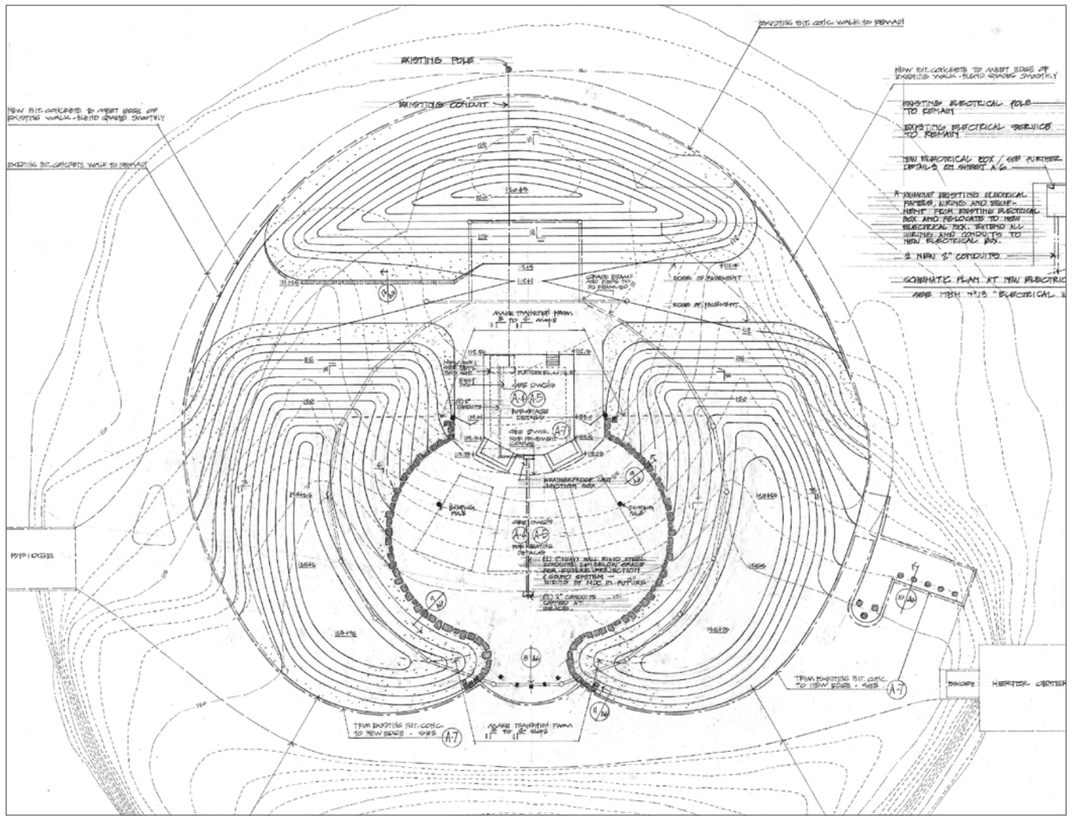

Figure 2-11. 1979 redesign for the amphitheater created the mounded landforms surrounding a much smaller venue than the original theater design. Plan credit: DCR Archives.

The Art Gallery (Herter Center)

Designed in 1959 by Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) founder Nathaniel Saltonstall, today's Herter Center was originally conceived as an art gallery for the ICA as part of a larger waterfront performing arts hub for the City of Boston. The performing arts center was never fully realized and the Herter Center's existence as the ICA's new home was short-lived. By 1963, the ICA had relocated to the Back Bay, followed by a brief, two-year return to Saltonstall's building in 1968 before permanently vacating it in 1970.

The building underwent a substantial renovation in 1977, which included the construction of approximately 1,800 square feet of conditioned interior space at the ground floor level. By the 1980s, the building was being used as exhibit space for the New England Sports Museum, although lack of attendance led to its use over time for the museum offices and archival storage. By 2010, the New England Sports Museum removed its remaining belongings and the building has been vacant for the past decade.

Although over the years its originally mostly open ground floor was enclosed, the building still retains the integrity of its exposed metal structure and glass facade overlooking the river; its presence in the park is vital as a character-defining feature and as a cultural landmark.

Figure 2-12. Then and now: The MeBAC theater and art gallery in 1961 (above, Boston Globe archival photo, Bob Backoff - Globe Staff) and in 2021.

Park Changes Over Time

The park to this day has largely retained its 1959 layout and configuration, with few improvements and upgrades. The Herter Community Garden was added in 1976 as part of the efforts of Adele Seronde, Christian A. Herter's daughter, to bring in varied programming to the park. Henderson Boathouse and the Charles River Community Garden were added in the 1980s, while the Canoe and Kayak rental facility is of a more recent date.

Across from Soldiers Field Road, the long-neglected Charles River Speedway Administration Building recently reopened as a rehabilitated mixed-use facility poised to become a center of community gathering and interaction. Its extensive rehabilitation was thanks to the DCR's Historic Curatorship Program, in partnership with the Architectural Heritage Foundation, holding a long-term lease.

Cultural History Recommendations

- Recognize and preserve the valuable contributions of the past, while allowing change and evolution to meet the needs of the future.
- Rehabilitate the Herter Center as a jewel of mid-century modern architecture, and an actively utilized space.
- Rehabilitate the Herter Amphitheater with up-to-date infrastructure, better visitor and performer amenities.
- Provide historic interpretation signage and other elements that tell the stories of the land, the Charles River Speedway, and the 1959 park redesign.

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2.2 | Past Planning and Development Context

Recent and Ongoing Planning Studies

The area of Herter Park and immediate vicinity have been subject to several recent and ongoing planning studies. The most relevant include the following:

- 2009 North Allston-Brighton Community Wide Plan
- 2014 Charles River Basin Connectivity Study
- 2020 DCR Parkways Master Plan
- 2021(ongoing) Western Avenue Corridor Study and Rezoning
- 2021 Herter Park, Brighton, MA, Program Accessibility Assessment (p.51)
- 2022 (ongoing) Charles River Basin Vegetation Management Plan

Brief summary of select plan's recommendations, relating to Herter Park, are included below.

North Allston-Brighton Community-Wide Plan (2009)

The North Allston-Brighton Community-Wide Plan (CWP) was a community planning and urban design study developed by the former Boston Redevelopment Agency (BRA), now BPDA. The CWP emphasized the community's desire to improve the neighborhood connections with the Charles River Reservation and Herter Park. The plan proposed new pedestrian-friendly neighborhood connections to Herter Park, including improvements to the Telford Street Footbridge, new crossing at Everett Street, as well as two other new pedestrian / bike crossings. These recommendations are yet to be implemented and remain relevant to the present Herter Park Master Plan.

Figure 2-13. The North Allston-Brighton CWP emphasized the goal of connecting the neighborhood to Charles River and Herter Park. Image credit: BPDA

Figure 2-14. CWP Development Framework Summary proposed multiple pedestrian / bike connections between the neighborhoods and Herter Park. Image credit: BPDA.

Charles River Basin Connectivity Study (2014)

The Charles River Basin Connectivity Study was commissioned by the DCR and MassDOT to make specific recommendations on how to improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity within the Charles River Reservation and to and from the surrounding neighborhoods. The study recommendations ranged from new crosswalks, bike lanes, signs and signals, to more ambitious work such as a proposal to reduce the vehicular width of Greenough Boulevard in order to accommodate pedestrian and bicycle path along the roadway (this work has since been implemented).

Specific to Herter Park, the plan proposed improvements to the primary shared-use path along Soldiers Field Road, including a signaled crossing at Everett Street intersection, a new crossing between Smith Playground and Herter Park, and resolving the path pinch point at the Telford Street overpass. Within the park, the plan noted the need to provide ADA accessibility on the shared-use path connection near Eliot Bridge. These recommendations are still relevant as part of this Herter Master Plan.

Western Avenue Corridor Study and Rezoning (estimated completion in early 2022)

The ongoing planning study by the Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA) is focused on Western Avenue and the adjacent urban blocks, between Leo Birmingham Parkway and Barry's Corner (North Harvard Street). At the time of writing of this report, the study is in its final recommendation stages; final report is anticipated in early 2022. According to the BPDA, this study will inform recommendations for new or modified zoning, public realm improvements, as well as multi-modal improvements to Western Avenue in coordination with the ongoing Allston-Brighton Mobility Study.

If ratified by a formal rezoning, the recommendations of this plan will enable the transformation of the urban zone along Soldiers Field Road in ways that might have both positive and negative impact on Herter Park. The positive aspects include improved connectivity from the neighborhood to Herter Park with four new or improved pedestrian / bicycle connections. However, the proposal to allow development heights ranging from 90' to 150' along Soldiers Field Road, a significant change from the present low-height urban fabric, has met with community concern about increased traffic, diminished visual connections to the river, and shadows cast onto the open space by future tall

Existing Planning and Development Context Summary Diagram

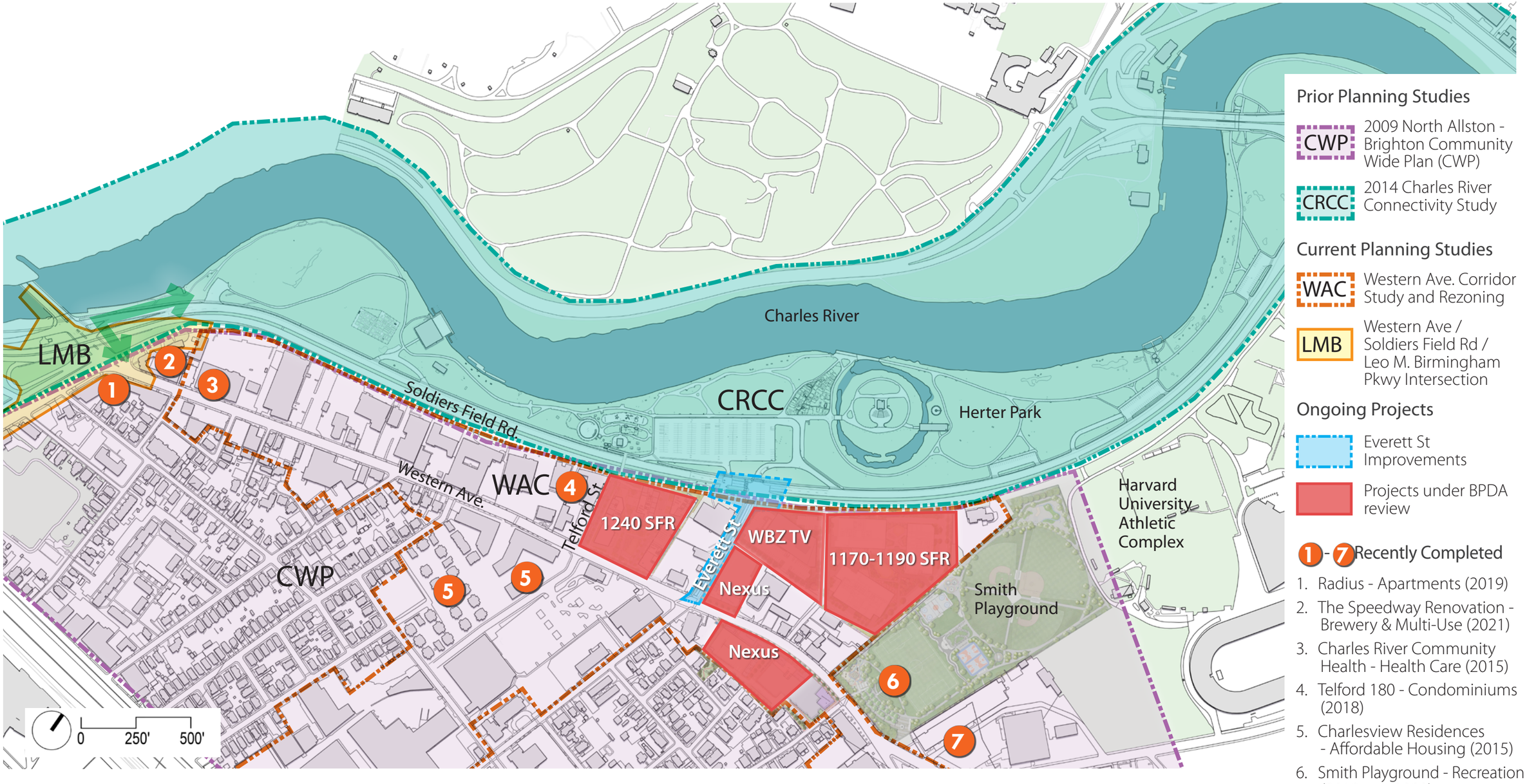

Figure 2-15. Existing planning and development context summary diagram.

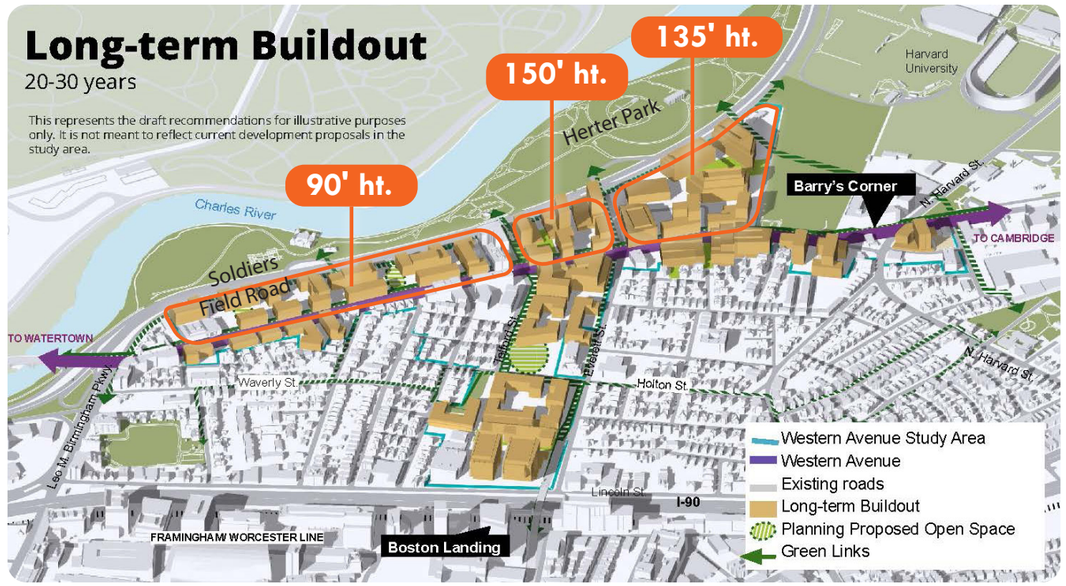

Figure 2-16. Long-term building with proposed "green links" (pedestrian/ bike connections) and increased development heights. Image credit: BPDA.

buildings. To address the community concerns about these impacts, the plan proposes street and volume setbacks to create wider street corridors between Western Avenue and Soldiers Field Road, along with enforcing lot coverage to allow light, air, and views.

DCR Parkways Master Plan (2020)

The DCR Parkways Master Plan articulates a vision for the evolution of the Boston metropolitan region's network of historic parkways, as greenways connecting communities across the region, and as essential routes for travel by multiple modes of transportation. The vision for the parkways is to provide safe and comfortable access and mobility for people of all ages and abilities, greatly enhancing the parkway role in the regional walking and bicycling networks. Short and long term specific recommendations range from repaving and restriping, to full reconstruction to meet Complete Streets standards.

The plan addresses Soldiers Field Road's high-speed traffic that presently discourage pedestrian access to Herter Park, as well as the opportunities to enhance the present pedestrian/bike infrastructure. Recommendations include:

- Widen the existing Dr. Paul Dudley White Greenway to 12' ;
- Consider a road diet and narrowing of travel lanes to slow down the vehicular traffic;
- Reconfigure the intersection of Soldiers Field Road and Eliot Bridge, as a modern roundabout, or a smaller - footprint intersection;
- Add crosswalks at Everett Street, and Smith Playground;
- Reconstruct the Telford Street pedestrian bridge, or replace it with a new at-grade crossing.

Recent and Proposed Developments in the Vicinity of Herter Park

The corridor along Western Avenue from the Soldiers Field Road / Leo M. Birmingham Parkway intersection to the North Harvard intersection has been under sustained development pressure in recent years. Some of these developments or proposals are transforming the urban facade along Soldiers Field Road with tall buildings, which have the potential negative impact of casting shadows onto the parkland. On the other hand, the public review process compels these new developments to provide wider sidewalks, green open space, and new or enhanced connections to Herter Park, which are benefits to the public realm and the community.

The recent renovation of the City of Boston Smith Playground has created the potential for a unique synergy between its active program (baseball, softball, multi-use field, basketball, street hockey, dog park) and the recreation opportunities offered by Herter Park. The community's desire to provide a connection between these two destinations has been highlighted in numerous plans, but is currently still missing. The development proposal for 1170-1190 Soldiers Field Road, which is currently under review by the BPDA, features a pedestrian walkway connection from Smith Playground to Soldiers Field Road as one of their privately-funded public realms improvements; the drawback would be that the implementation of this community link would be reliant on the developer's own timeline. Another option is to connect on public land further east, which is a less convenient location, but could be implemented with collaboration of just the two public entities: the DCR and the City of Boston.

Climate Resiliency Considerations: Climate Ready Boston

The Climate Ready Boston is an ongoing initiative to help the city of Boston and its neighborhoods plan for the imminent impacts of climate change, specifically extreme heat, sea level rise coastal flooding, and stormwater flooding. Building on scientific projections, this plan projected and quantified the risk from these impacts; the various projections can be viewed at the Climate Ready Boston Map Explorer at *https://www.boston.gov/departments/environment/climate-ready-boston-map-explorer*. Climate Ready Boston also identifies strategies to mitigate risks associated with extreme temperatures, coastal and riverine flooding, and stormwater flooding. An overarching goal is that investment in resiliency improvements will also be contributing to higher quality of life in the city, especially for its most vulnerable residents.

Relevant to Herter Park, extreme heat is a great concern affecting the adjacent Allston / Brighton neighborhoods. Increasing the neighborhood access to Herter Park 's tree-shaded green open space will serve as an important mitigation strategy. Within Herter Park it will be important to maintain or expand the tree canopy, along with landscape maintenance to increase resilient native plant communities and reduce lawns.

Coastal Flooding hazards from sea level rise are not of direct concern at Herter Park, as the existing New Charles River Dam is higher than any of the projected high tide scenarios. Furthermore, the Commonwealth is working with the United States Army Corps of Engineers on a study to modify / harden this dam as a future mitigation.

Stormwater Flooding at Herter Park has historically been a localized occurrence related to poor drainage, compacted soils, and high ground water. Flooding due to elevated river level is less of a concern, as the Charles River level is regulated by the New Charles River Dam; however the more intense storms caused by climate change will exacerbate the existing drainage issues. A comprehensive stormwater strategy, including green infrastructure, subsurface storage and treatment, and nature-based solutions, will mitigate the impacts of more intense storms and allow the park to recover more quickly after flooding events.

Environmental Justice Considerations

Environmental justice (EJ) is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution, and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment. The Commonwealth's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) established an Environmental Justice Policy to help address the disproportionate share of environmental burdens experienced by lower-income people and communities of color who, at the same time, often lack environmental assets in their neighborhoods. Through its agencies and programs, EEA works to engage environmental justice populations in environmental decision-making through expanded and inclusive outreach, to minimize health risks through targeted environmental enforcement, and to improve environmental quality through initiatives that include reduction of pollutants, remediation and redevelopment of contaminated land, and investment in urban parks and green space. (Source: *https://www.mass.gov/environmental-justice)*.

In Massachusetts, a neighborhood is defined as an Environmental Justice population based on median household income, minority status, and lack of English language proficiency. The census block group immediately to the south of Herter Park is an EJ population based on both income (56% of the MA median) and minority status (62%) *(Source: https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgis-data-2020-environmental-justice-populations*). Herter Park is one of the principal open space assets for this EJ community, and therefore enhancing access to it and investment in its improvements are well aligned with the objectives of the Environmental Justice Policy.

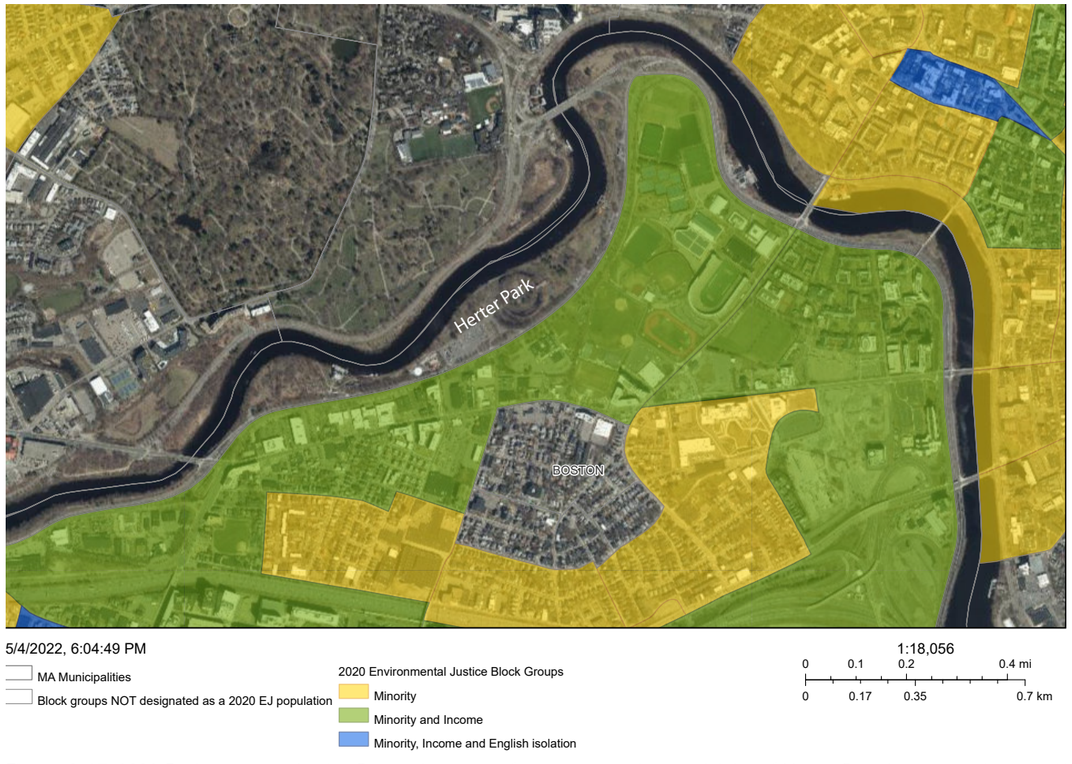

Figure 2-17. 2020 Environmental Justice Population map of census tracts in the vicinity of Herter Park. Image credit: https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgis-data-2020-environmental-justice-populations

Planning Context Recommendations

- Incorporate the community goals of safe pedestrian access to the park at multiple locations: at Everett Street intersection, at Telford Street via an overpass and / or at-grade crossing, at Smith Playground, and near Henderson Boathouse.
- Improve the Herter Park segments of the Dr. Paul Dudley White Greenway: widen to meet shared-use path standards, provide accessible curb ramps, safety markings, and signage at crossings.
- Provide accessible connection from the park path to the Eliot Bridge.
- Implement a road diet at Soldiers Field Road to slow down the vehicular traffic.
- Reconfigure the intersection of Soldiers Field Road and Eliot Bridge, as a smaller - footprint intersection.
- Collaborate with the City of Boston in the implementation of neighborhood connectivity improvements on adjacent public land, or proposed as part of the public approvals process for private developments.
- Ensure that shadow and lighting impacts onto Herter Park from new developments are considered in the public approvals process for private developments.