

Boston College Institutional Master Plan – An Opportunity for Blue Development

By Pallavi Mande

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There is a justifiable concern among the residents of Allston Brighton about Boston College plans to develop a 43 acre parcel of land it purchased in 2004 from the Archdiocese of Boston, due to the potential loss of open space in the neighborhood. However, if designed right, the development could help restore the environment within the campus and in the surrounding neighborhoods. As a prerequisite to institutional expansion the Boston Redevelopment Authority requires BC to prepare an Institutional Master Plan (IMP) for its new campus. This process will require neighborhood participation at various stages of the planning process. While several public meetings have been held by BC to inform residents about the master planning efforts, the various stakeholders have not yet been engaged in a meaningful way. Most of the new development is being proposed in Brighton, but the impact will also be significant for Newton, as both cities are a part of the same watershed. From the perspective of water resource management, it is important for Newton residents to get involved early on to make sure that the development in Brighton will help restore the natural water cycle in our increasingly urbanized watershed.



As a part of its “Blue Cities” Initiative, Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) has focused its efforts on encouraging large institutional development projects to

incorporate measures for environmental restoration and resource conservation from the start. It is clear from CRWA's work involving Harvard University's expansion plans in North Allston that there is strong support for the public realm benefits – such as neighborhood greening and open space improvements - that result from these restoration strategies. At a 2006 workshop entitled “Building a Blue Allston”, CRWA demonstrated how Low Impact Development (LID) strategies can be applied to highly urbanized areas in a manner that creates short-term benefits and long-term environmental sustainability.

Given the proximity of Boston College to the Chestnut Hill Reservoir and Chandler Pond, it is BC's responsibility to not only mitigate the impact of their development on these public amenities, but to effectively contribute to their restoration efforts. Since existing policy and regulations already require redevelopment projects to reduce polluted runoff, increase groundwater recharge, and conserve water, many institutions are adopting practices such as green roofs, water reuse, and incorporation of public open space because of their environmental and economic benefits. It is also now widely understood that most successful urban redevelopment incorporates environmental restoration, because of the proven economic benefits as well as the generation of widespread public support. It is thus in BC's own interest to keep environmental sustainability at the forefront while planning and designing the new campus.

According to BC's consultant team at Sasaki Associates, the current plans envision building undergraduate dorms on Shea Field and graduate student housing at St John's seminary, to move the baseball field from Shea Field to St. Johns and to build a new student center on the main campus. These plans will have a huge impact on how much open space will be available for the local community to use and how student activities will interface with the residents of the Brighton neighborhood. Infrastructure changes, such as the re-routing St. Thomas More Drive and the relocation/ redesign of the Boston College T stop on the B Line, are also under consideration. In addition to affecting the surrounding neighborhood, these changes will have significant environmental impacts and need to be studied very carefully.

Infrastructure improvements to the water and sewer systems, transportation systems, open space and pedestrian amenities, and the urban ecosystem must be incorporated in large-scale urban development plans. Like Harvard's campus plan, the BC plan presents an opportunity to change current development practices, and to create a new approach to planning that is environmentally sensitive and "water friendly". The process is not easy. It requires building partnerships with many stakeholders, including city agencies such as the BRA, Boston Environment Department, Boston Water and Sewer Commission, Parks and Recreation Dept, as well as with local environmental groups, community organizations and residents. Without strong partnerships and an overall commitment to environmental restoration, the Institutional Master Plan for the new campus might end up merely as a permitting document for the BRA's review process, and miss an opportunity to plan and build a truly sustainable community.

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1965 in response to public concern about the declining condition of the Charles River. CRWA has figured prominently in major clean-up and watershed protection efforts that have dramatically improved the health of the Charles.