



Mystic River Watershed Association
your community • your watershed

May 26, 2016

Commissioner Leo Roy
The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation
251 Causeway St.
Boston, Massachusetts 02114

Dear Commissioner Roy,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Macdonald Park Improvements presented at the May 11 meeting. We appreciate DCR's intention to revitalize this park and its commitment to the public process. As the largest park along the Mystic River, this important open space is a community asset that must be preserved, enhanced and maintained to reflect the environmental and health benefits it brings to surrounding communities, many of which include environmental justice populations.

The Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA) was founded in 1972 "to protect and restore the Mystic River, its tributaries and watershed lands for the benefit of present and future generations and to celebrate the value, importance and great beauty of these natural resources." MyRWA accomplishes its mission through a combination of science, advocacy, and public engagement. We involve 1,200 volunteers annually and forge links with citizens' groups, universities, businesses, municipalities and government agencies.

We are pleased to see that DCR is committed to revitalizing Macdonald Park. The effort underway **underscores the value of public-private partnerships**. Working together, we are able to bring more resources to the table and engage local stakeholders. MyRWA is interested in and well-positioned to support this ongoing work as a community partner vested in the future success of the park. In addition to the specific feedback we provide herein we suggest that the project under review points to a great opportunity to build upon the Mystic River Master Plan and provides a moment to more thoroughly assess the needs and desires that will ultimately make Macdonald Park a destination. **We believe a more substantial master planning effort will result in a park that is well-used and well-maintained, setting a new standard for urban riverfront parks.**

MyRWA recently launched the Mystic Greenways Initiative, a multi-year, multi-stakeholder effort to renew and stimulate more active use in waterfront lands. One of the goals of this initiative is to engage a broad constituency in planning and programming of Mystic River parklands. To work towards this goal at Macdonald Park, we circulated a survey to garner feedback on the improvements that are most important to current users. **MyRWA received feedback from 107 community stakeholders, which included local residents and constituents of more than a dozen organizations.** The results of this survey are further down in the text and in the appendix (page 5-7).

I. Feedback on Concept Designs

The plan presented on May 11 has many compelling elements. Removing invasive plants and repaving the deteriorating paths are crucial first steps. We thank you for prioritizing these improvements. As far as the proposed designs, we used the survey to find out which of the proposed park improvements were most appealing to respondents. Given the ability to choose one or more options, the responses are as follows:

70% Pollinator Meadow

59% Boat Launch and Seating

53% Playground

40% Labyrinth

25% Enhanced Entrance

In addition to sharing this feedback to help prioritize improvements, we encourage DCR to consider several specific suggestions to ensure that the design successfully revitalizes the park.

River Overlook and Boat Launch- We believe that this element will enhance the existing conditions and draw additional visitors to this area of the park. We encourage DCR and Shadley Associates to widen the boat landing area (increase the width of cleared vegetation and gravel shore) to increase access and views to the river, the main draw for this area. The seat wall is a nice addition to the space but if this needs to be paved for ADA, the seating area could be made more into plaza - the asphalt path along the front edge of the plaza is superfluous as it doesn't continue to existing paths. We also continue to hear that people want more stone dust paths rather than asphalt and urge this to be included where site conditions allow.

The rain garden placed near the river does not appear to be useful, aesthetically or functionally. It will not filter runoff from adjacent pervious surfaces nor does it appear to have a visual benefit as the primary attraction is along the water's edge. The budget allocated for this element may be better served in enhancing the river's edge with native vegetation and/or providing additional seating.

Entrance- As a substitute for just widening the path, a design more similar to a plaza would be advantageous. The atmosphere of an entry plaza could be further enhanced with less asphalt and additional trees/plantings, creating a gateway. Public art that references the history of the park would help to create a sense of place within the park and could engage local artists.

Stormwater Infrastructure and Maintenance- It's a priority to insure that proposed rain gardens within the park have an aesthetic value as well as functional (see comment on River Overlook), while still acknowledging the constraints on maintenance labor for the DCR. We encourage that implementation of these rain gardens be strategic, as to maximize visual and ecological benefits. We've also heard lots of positive responses to the idea for a pollinator meadow for increasing plant and animal diversity, and want to emphasize the importance of having a solid maintenance plan for such a park element.

Playground- We appreciate the proposed playground elements that stimulate different types of play and integrate with the landscape. We are encouraged to hear that a new DCR hire with playground expertise will be assisting with this design – best practices in playground design continue to change and thus looking to examples, bringing in experts and gaining feedback from focus groups will make this an

amenity that will bring families from around the area. There are many successful models to reference, including the new playground on the Esplanade. As much vegetation as possible, existing or newly planted, should be used to screen noise and pollution from the road. Lastly, there should be several bike racks and ideally a picnic area and/or small pavilion for adults, as well as children, to use.

Path and Signage- Currently there is no signage system within the park, making way finding difficult. For example, those traveling West-to-East within the park are often unsure about how to get to Wellington T Station and Station's Landing. We appreciate the idea to emphasize the path along the road as the primary route but also believe that one path could be selected within the park as the primary travel lane. This can be done with signage and with a wider path (as compared to the secondary paths that circulate through the park).

II. Feedback on the Overall Park Design

MyRWA, its partner organizations and local citizens have shared their ideas for the types of activities and elements that would allow this park to thrive. **Given this feedback, MyRWA urges DCR to lead a master planning process that will inform and prioritize elements of the overall park design and ultimately, foster a strong network of stewards.** This will set the stage for a successful park that is used, maintained and loved. At well over 100 acres, we believe there is ample space to accommodate many of desires expressed in the survey, a few key themes are as follows:

Connectivity

Several of the park entrances are disconnected from development that has occurred over the past decades, including:

- The Mystic River Condos and Meadow Glen Mall should have a safe connection to the park such as crosswalk (preferably signalized or a HAWK, High-intensity Activated crosswalk).
- Station's Landing connection to the park needs to be vastly improved. The park entrance along 28 should be moved or made more visible from Presidents Landing Road. Both this road and Earhart Landing need better pedestrian crossings across Route 28.
- The pinchpoint on the path at the stormwater outfall near the parking lot on Mystic Valley Parkways should be addressed.

Amenities

Additional programming and amenities called-out in the survey include:

- Desire for playgrounds/play areas for children, potentially with water features and away from noisy and polluted areas such as the roadways.
- Permanent and temporary public art installations to facilitate use and programming within the park.
- Removal of invasive species, dead trees and debris; addition of native trees and perennials to increase the diversity and quantity of plants and animals in the park.
- Better signage throughout the park, informing visitors of relative distances to other nearby locations and of the history of the area they are visiting.
- More paths and seating along the river to prioritize vistas; boat/canoe/kayak launch and potentially a rental station to encourage the public to engage the water directly.
- Safety needs- Increased lighting for walkers and cyclists, removal of garbage with the addition of more garbage cans and trimming back of vegetation from pathways would all add to a safer atmosphere.

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- Due to the often observed dog-walkers at the park, a designated, enclosed off-leash area, or stronger leash regulation with more doggy bag stations, is encouraged.

In closing, **we appreciate the excellent work that DCR has started to revitalize Torbert Macdonald Park and hope to support ongoing design and planning efforts for this important open space.** It's time to thoroughly evaluate how the park looks and functions – it has the potential to provide physical and mental health benefits for tens of thousands local residents and contribute to the health of the Mystic River which continues to improve each year.

If you have any questions or require additional information please contact MyRWA at (781) 316-3438 or by emailing EK@mysticriver.org.

Sincerely,



EkOngKar Singh Khalsa
Executive Director
Mystic River Watershed Association



Amber Christoffersen
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cc:

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Metropolitan Area Planning Council, David Loutzenheiser
Mystic River Watershed Association, Policy Committee
Solomon Foundation, Herb Nolan
State Representative Christine Barber
State Representative Paul Donato
State Representative Sean Garballey
State Senator Ken Donnelly
State Senator Pat Jehlen
WalkMedford, Syrah McGivern

APPENDIX

Below is a summary of the 107 responses to other survey questions.

Zip Codes

The responses represent the following 16 zip codes, in order of frequency:

02155, 02145, 02148, 02143, 02144, 01801, 02474, 02138, 01821, 02150, 01890, 01845, 02129, 02115, 02421, 02122

How often do you visit the park?

41% 2+ times per month
13% once a month
32% 2-3 times per year
14% hadn't been or selected "other."

How do you get to the park?

29% drive and park in the main lot
27% walk
27% bike
8% drive and park in another lot
2% transit
7% other

What do you do in the park?

65% run/walk
57% access nature/wildlife
43% bike
36% picnic/relax
24% play area for children
10% boating

What do you want to see changed in Macdonald Park?

Playground/Play Areas - 31 Instances

Children

"Play Area for my kid" (2)

"Water sprinklers, features would be a tremendous asset"

"Sprayground/water feature"

"Natural playground"/"Natural landscape playground" (2)

Rethink playground location

"American Woodpecker" consideration and "pollution from 16 & 28"

"Need a playground in safe location near the river, far from route 16 - safe, not noisy and not polluted area."

Adults

"Adult Playground: ParCourse" (1)

Paths/Connections - 26 instances

"Improvements/repaving of paths" (3)

"More trails"

Bikes

"Bike path connections to flow freely through this [park]"

"Thoughts on use for Bike commuters...Designated bike path"

"Easy bike access and connectors to other bike trails"

Connections - 26 Instances

"See it be connected to Medford Sq."

"Pathway from Shore Drive in Somerville and Rt 16"

"I would like to have a path connection the length of the Mystic."

"Connect all river paths to Fellsway"

"Access to Wellington Station"

"Provide additional pedestrian crossing from Meadow Glen Mall"

Material

"Eliminate the cement walkways, put down stone dust instead"

"No new asphalt (dirt paths are best for runners and walkers and the environment)"

"Not too many paved pathways. The dirt pathways are better"

Size

Wider sidewalks

"8'-10' path"

Other

"Update walking path with clear views of the river"

Water - 14 instances

"Access to water"

"...tables for picnics along the waterline"

"More fishing areas (we love the little dock) & access for canoe/kayak & bubbler to refill water bottles"

"Water access & seating"

"Seating area along the water"

"Trails closer to the water"

"Access to water and restored shoreline with salt marsh and shellfish beds; educational labs for kids and schools"

"...picnic benches by the water would be nice/also a boat launch"

"Improve water access/visibility (sometimes hard to know you're right next to the river)"

"Boat rentals"

Public Art - 9 instances

"Public art should be programmed into the park"

"Have public art in this park"

"Nature-related public art would be cool"

"Public art - yes (sculpture garden)"

“Public art (permanent and temporary)”

Plants and Habitat- 8 instances

“Native plants” (2)

“Remove invasive plants”

“More colorful blooming plants”

“New Entrance with flowers”

More diversity of native plant and animal species

“Maintaining variety of trees with mixed open space will keep the park a good habitat for birds.”

“More space for wildlife”

Dogs - 8 instances

“...posted signs for dog waste clean-up”

“Dog park” (3)

“Dog waste trash can or bags to use”

“Off leash dog area”

“An enclosed dog park”

“Designated off leash dog area”

Signage

“Better signage that directs to other destinations and routes of access with time and distance indicated”

“Including a map or other information on the signage about other parklands along the Mystic “

“Educational signage about the environment”

“Entrance signage with map and history of the river”

“...some historic facts on plaques around the park about the Mystic”

Other

“Better lighting for evening walks”

“Improved collection and removal of [garbage]”

“[Removal of] dead tree debris”

“Food truck area in the parking lot”

“Timer and motion detection lighting for dusk”

Do something about the sexual activity in the park

“Improve entrance from west side”

“More trash cans”

“I’d like to see it get use more”

“Removal of trash/graffiti and making the park feel safe”

“Place designated for family gatherings and picnics”