Coastal Zone
Information
Center

Boston Harbor Islands Comprehensive Plan Summary

Massachusetts [State] Department of Natural Resources

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Introduction

The Islands of Boston Harbor have long been recognized as badly misused natural resources of great potential. Pollution, institutional abuse, land fill, and a variety of military and private uses have pre-empted the public enjoyment of one of New England's finest natural resources. Numerous proposals for the future use of the Islands have been advanced over the years. These proposals ranged from intensive residential and recreational development to conservation and restoration of the Islands' natural beauty.

The Massachusetts Legislature, by enacting Chapter 742 of the Acts of 1970, brought to a close these years of public debate.

This act specified that the privately held islands of Boston Harbor should be acquired by the Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources and, together with the islands already under public control, developed for conservation and recreation purposes.

The landmark act specified that the Islands be developed in accordance with a Comprehensive Plan for the proposed recreation and conservation purposes.

Boston Harbor History & Present Condition

The existence of a large well-protected harbor was the original reason for settling Boston. The Harbor offered safe channels for travel and the surrounding hills diminished the northwest winds. The Islands and the numerous peninsulas and hills offered easily defensible locations for communities around the Harbor.

Use of many of the Islands was continuous from the beginning of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Even before the first colonial settlers arrived, in 1619, a trading post was established on Thompson Island. Here Indians exchanged beaver furs for articles of European civilization.

In the early days of the colony, most of the Islands were occupied by one or more families as farms. The Islands were originally covered by forests, but gradually the settlers cut down the trees for firewood for the nearby towns and for shipbuilding. Cultivated fruit trees were planted on Governor's Island by Governor Winthrop in 1632. Deer Island was a famous hunting island, the deer swimming to the island to seek refuge from the wolves on the mainland.

In time, many of the Islands were granted to Boston and the other surrounding communities. The settlers on the Islands paid rent to the respective towns, the rentals were often used for support of free schools and teachers. The settlers used the land for farming and grazing cattle and sheep. Many of the Islands were famous clamming areas for mainland settlements. Slate, from Slate Island, was used in the construction of many homes.

As early as 1679, there was some kind of beacon at the entrance to the Harbor. Bales of pitch were burned in a basket or iron grate. In 1713, the first lighthouse on the continent was built on Little Brewster Island. This lighthouse stood until 1776, when it was blown up by the retreating British. The present structure was erected in 1783.

The military significance of the Islands began in colonial times. The first military post built in the Northeast was on Castle Island. The Harbor, its Islands and hills had military significance during the Revolution. A raiding party of American infantrymen raided a loyalist farm on Peddock's Island and carried off eight hundred cattle and sheep to the mainland. A year later, British militia were

encamped on the Island. Yankee privateers with batteries on Long Island destroyed one of the King's transports.

Boston saw little action during the War of 1812, although some of the Islands had fortifications. However, the British amphibious attacks launched against other east coast cities stimulated construction of fortifications by the United States to protect the shores. Fort Independence on Castle Island and Fort Warren on George's Island were built at this time. Fort Warren had its greatest use during the Civil War when it served as a prisoner of war center.

The Harbor was considered to be of strategic significance throughout World Wars I and II. Deer Island, Long Island, Lovell's Island, Outer Brewster and Great Brewster were fortified and still have the remains.

During the nineteenth century, many of the Islands were provided with piers and were used as summer resorts and residences. Sunday excursions were made for picnics and clamming. During this time many of the Islands were used for penal institutions, homes for the poor or aged, and homes for children.

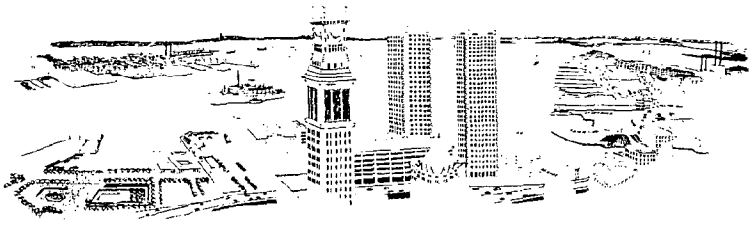
Many of the Islands have become ignored or misused in the twentieth century. Piers have deteriorated and most of the Islands are now inaccessible, poorly vegetated, and badly littered.

Boston Harbor, part of the so-called Boston Basin, is a geological phenomenon created by a shift in the earth's crust millions of years before the glaciers. In a later geologic period, glaciers covered the Boston area, grinding down the ridges and leaving new hill formations behind, called drumlins. A subsequent gradual sinking of the land produced flooding. The easternmost drumlins, isolated by the rising water, became the Boston Harbor Islands. The outer Islands, like the Brewsters, have been exposed to rough seas and have been worn away through the action of wind and water. They consist of exposed sections of eroded rock.

Vast amounts of raw and treated sewage along with some industrial wastes are discharged into Boston Harbor to be disposed of by tidal flushing. Parts of the Inner Harbor are grossly polluted and water quality in some areas is so marginal that it threatens to close beaches and restricts shellfishing.

The Harbor still contains almost six square miles of shellfish growing beds, containing a good supply of soft shell clams. The finfish supply in the Harbor consists mostly of flounder and cod.

The Boston Harbor Islands are physically outstanding because of the variety of landforms and landscapes. Each Island has a special character



of its own and each is naturally suited to a different function.

Summary of Comprehensive Plan Policies

The Boston Harbor Islands, if properly developed, can realize their potential as a major conservation and recreation resource for the metropolitan area. Scattered across Boston Harbor, the more than 30 islands, totalling an approximate 1200 acres, lie within a 25 mile radius of a population in excess of three million people. The Islands' potential for boating, swimming, fishing, and other forms of outdoor activity, while an asset, is also a challenge for the people of the Commonwealth to conserve and protect as well as develop this great natural resource.

In order to best preserve the natural characteristics of the Islands while developing their recreational potential, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council makes the following recommendations:

1. Develop a ferry system which provides frequent and inexpensive access to the Islands. A publicly-regulated, privately-operated ferry service using conventional craft will best fufill the goals and policies established for Island access.
2. Recognize the unique character of each Island by emphasizing its historical and natural attributes in the park system development.
3. Limit future uses of the Islands to such facilities as derive an immediate benefit from, or make a direct contribution to, their waterfront location, and use materials indigenous to the Islands when designing facilities wherever possible.
4. Minimize the potential adverse environmental impacts of the development of recreational facilities and required utilities by locating them away from important natural areas.
5. Minimize the alteration of natural landforms and topography by locating facilities in areas that are topographically suited.
6. Provide for the planned management of the natural resources of the Islands to prevent their exploitation, destruction, or neglect by concentrating intensive-use activities and facilities in areas that can support large numbers of visitors, and by providing only limited access to fragile ecosystems.
7. Protect salt-marsh areas on the Islands because of their value as estuary nurseries for marine and other wildlife. Protect rare or unusual forms of animal and plant life which contribute greatly to the special character of the Harbor Islands.
8. Provide a wide range of recreation alternatives which reflects the demand for such facilities in the Boston Metropolitan Area.
9. Improve and manage the historical resources of the Islands to achieve their maximum enjoyment as recreational and educational facilities.
10. Provide facilities for fishermen including fishing piers, fish cleaning facilities, boat launching sites, and equipment rental centers wherever possible.
11. Locate private recreational boating facilities throughout the Islands Park System and relate them to the amount of use that each Island can properly support.
12. Provide appropriately located and designed facilities for swimmers, picnickers, campers, and other persons seeking a variety of forms of passive and active recreation.
13. Emphasize the Boston Harbor Islands Park System as a recreation area for the Commonwealth and particularly for the metropolitan core communities of Boston, Brookline,

Cambridge, Chelsea, Everett, and Somerville, which have limited open spaces for recreational activities.

14. Emphasize public, water-borne transportation to the Islands in order to minimize traffic impacts on local shoreline neighborhoods and eleminate the need for unnecessary and expensive road and bridge improvements. Make every effort to minimize automobile access to Islands that are connected to the mainland by causeway or bridge.

Summary of Transportation System

The Harbor Islands Park System depends upon a ferry system that provides frequent, inexpensive access. The proposed ferry system consists of four interconnected and complementary routes. The Boston to Nantasket spine begins at Long Wharf and stops at Long, George's, and Peddock's Islands and Hull. The second, the Dorchester Bay Loop, connects Long Wharf with Deer, Long, Spectacle, and Thompson Islands and South Boston. Both routes utilize conventional 300 passenger ferries.The third and fourth routes consist of small boat loops serving the Brewster Islands and the Islands of Hingham Bay from George's and Peddock's Islands.

Summary of Proposed Improvements

Dorchester Bay-Inner Harbor Sub-System

DEER ISLAND — Relocate existing House of Correction to mainland site — Utilize southern end of Island as large, informal park and initiate planting program to reforest Island and to screen sewage treatment plant — Create open grass areas for playfields and children's playground — Develop a three-mile system of bicycle trails and extensive walking trails — Expand present beach to accommodate 200 people — Develop picnic areas — Develop mooring area and dock space for 50 small boats — Construct a fishing pier.

LONG ISLAND — Construct a major Visitor Center adjacent to ferry pier, with dock facility for small boat landings, and fishing — Relocate road to facilitate Island developement — Build a launching ramp for small boats with parking for 40 cars with trailers — Renovate Fort Strong for historic interpretation — Encourage wildlife activity with limited nature trails in freshwater wetlands area — Develop two group campsites to accommodate 150 campers each — Develop a perimeter bicycle trail and extensive walking trails — Develop a swimming beach for 400 bathers on the south shore — Create two large open grass areas both with playfields, one with a swimming pool — Develop picnic areas — Phase out (with appropriate replacement of facilities on the mainland) Long Island Chronic Disease Hospital and reuse area for intensive recreational development; indoor athletic center, restaurant, public functions building, museum, and a children's playground.

RAINSFORD ISLAND — Construct pier for maximum of five small boats to facilitate maintenance — Create walking trails, and informal swimming beach — Build day use shelter.

MOON ISLAND — Develop hill-top picnic area, with gravel walking trails — Develop fish hatchery to replace sewage reservoir — Construct road as access to facilities — Rebuild large fishing pier at north end of Island with picnic area, bus stop, parking lot, comfort station.

THOMPSON ISLAND — Develop Model Farm designed to handle 100,000 visitors annually — Develop the salt-marsh as a major wildlife sanctuary with trails, floating boardwalks, viewing platforms, and towers — Develop a large beach for 300 bathers with bathhouse and picnic area.

SPECTACLE ISLAND — Reclaim dump area by periodic compaction — Establish trail system — Construct wall to retain litter within dump areas — Develop 300 acres of prime mooring areas for 500 small boats, a marina, dock space for 100 boats, locker and winter storage facilities for boats — Develop informal playfields and swimming beach at center and southern end of Island.

CASTLE ISLAND — Restore Fort Independence as historical museum — Rehabilitate and expand present MDC facilities for swimming, fishing, picnicking — Establish bicycle rental facilities — Landscape grounds.

three "clambake pits," each pit area to accommodate up to 100 people. Create open grass area for playfield — Require full-time resident administrator during peak season of Island use.

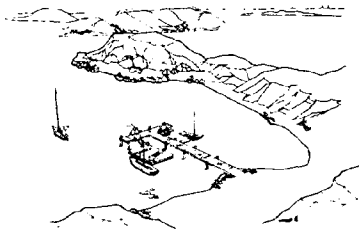
LOVELL'S ISLAND — Develop beach areas on both sides of Island with a central bathhouse and two picnic areas — Develop 30 individual campsites, with central comfort station, for tenting, equipped with wooden tent platform, stone fireplace, picnic table, and isolated by screen planting — Partially rehabilitate military fortifications — Require full-time resident administrator during peak season of Island use.

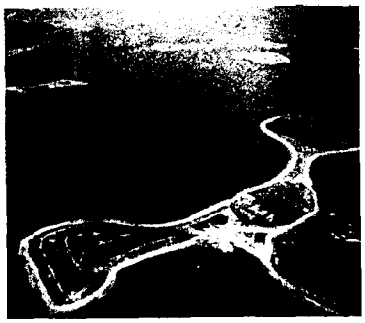
THE BREWSTER ISLANDS — Create Boston Harbor Outer Sanctuary composed of the Islands, adjacent water, rocks and flats to assure preservation and management of this resource — Develop 27 "primitive" campsites, no water, wood; chemical toilets only on Outer Brewster, Middle Brewster and Calf Islands — Establish under-

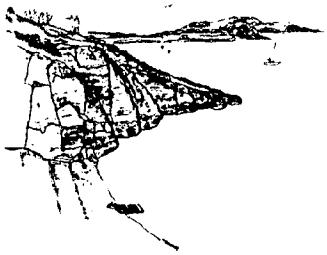
Quincy Bay-Outer Harbor Sub-System

GEORGE'S ISLAND — Renovate army building near ferry site as major Island Visitor Center for Quincy Bay Sub-System — Restore Fort Warren as historical site comparable to National Park Service program for military fortifications such as Fort Sumter in South Carolina — Add Island to Freedom Trail — Require full-time Island administrator during peak season of Island use.

GALLOP'S ISLAND — Rehabilitate existing dock to accommodate ferries and charter boats — Construct landscaped quay with multi-purpose pavillion — Develop beach for 100 bathers and picnic area east of dock — Build







water park for recreational diving for shipwrecks, marine habitat study — Encourage sanctuary emphasizing marine-dominated environment.

Hingham Bay Sub-System

PEDDOCK'S ISLAND — Rehabilitate Fort Andrews for multipurpose conference/recreation center including dormitory, meeting, living, dining space for 350-500 people, administration center, library, offices, craft center, Harbor Island Inn, rental housing, gymnasium, field research station — Renovate guardhouse for Visitor Center with display and auditorium space, year-round educational activities — Develop beach area for 300 bathers, with picnic site — Create three group campsites to accommodate 150 campers — Create managed wildlife area to maintain black crowned night heron rookery and encourage other wildlife.

BUMPKIN & GRAPE ISLANDS — Construct small dock for ferry, private boat traffic — Develop group campsite for 50-75 people, with chemical toilet, each campsite equipped with wooden tent platforms for 10 campers with fireplaces — Create walking trails — Improve potential swimming beaches.

SLATE — Institute program of selective clearing for walking trails adjacent to natural areas and historic slate quarries — Provide interpretive markers to describe Island's geology, history and wildlife — Maintain Island.

HINGHAM HARBOR ISLANDS — Maintain Islands as small natural preserves — Develop walking trails, planting and selective clearing program.

NUT ISLAND — Construct small fishing pier and landscape Island.

SHEEP & RACCOON ISLANDS — Maintain Islands with conservation program.

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View of City of Boston Skyline as seen from Outer Brewster Island...Elissa M. Landre, MAPC Staff

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View across Peddock's Island to the Islands of Quincy Bay...Reprinted, with permission, from Yankee Magazine, published in Dublin, N.H. Copyright 1972.

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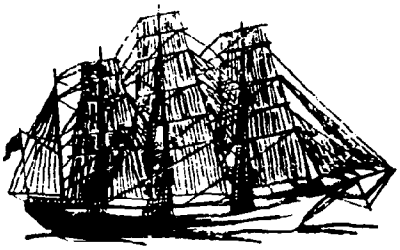

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