

SNAPSHOT - BOSTON: EAST BOSTON RAIL-TO-TRAIL GREENWAY



KEY POINTS

- The East Boston Greenway is a bike and pedestrian pathway linking parks in a mixed-income multi-racial neighbourhood while also increasing access to Boston's waterfront
- Community groups secured the land from the railroad and funding from local, state, and federal agencies
- The bottom-up NBS is innovative in its governance and reuse of resources found in the area
- Today, the Greenway is part of the city's green resilience infrastructure
- Gentrification and displacement trends raise concerns over future beneficiaries of the greenway

ABOUT THE PROJECT

NATure-based URban innovATION is a 4-year project involving 14 institutions across Europe in the fields of urban development, geography, innovation studies and economics. We are creating a step-change in how we understand and use nature-based solutions for sustainable urbanisation.



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Sustainability challenges and opportunities

Boston is undergoing rapid population growth and economic transformation¹, while struggling to address water pollution and climate change. The newly-adopted climate plan addresses these two key sustainability challenges; while bottom-up initiatives, such as the East-Boston Greenway tackle social inequalities through green space provision.

Boston is one of the oldest cities in the US, located on the northern Atlantic coast. The Boston metropolitan area is the tenth largest in the country with about 4.8 million people. Boston's universities, Harvard, MIT, and Tufts, constitute a significant intellectual, economic, and political role in the region. The city, however, is deeply segregated by income and race, and is also grappling with growing economic and racial inequality. More than half of East Boston's residents have a Hispanic background, and racial wealth disparities are high although the neighbourhood is experiencing acute gentrification and displacement.² Besides social challenges, Boston has long grappled with polluted runoff and sewage discharges. In response, in 2012 Boston Water and Sewer Commission was required to implement green infrastructure and low-impact stormwater management to better manage polluted runoff. Trade-offs between urban development and climate change also pose a challenge; a significant portion of planned residential and mixed-use development is in flood-prone areas. In response, the municipal government's first-ever climate plan, Climate Ready Boston (2016) incorporates climate change into its development planning, based on which developers must consider climate impacts through climate extreme scenario-based guidelines.³

Solution story and key actors

Community activists successfully lobbied to convert the long-abandoned Consolidated Rail Corporation track into a linear park and multi-use pathway. The East Boston Greenway now links various open green spaces and provides access to Boston's waterfront and public transit for residents of a historically segregated, working-class, multi-racial area.

East Boston has less parkland per resident than elsewhere in the city, and its parks are mostly on the periphery of the neighborhood, where the waterfront is located. After the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail) abandoned the tracks in the 1950s, they became a dumping ground for old cars and other trash, threatening public health in the area. In the 1980s, a discussion organically emerged around *"the idea of how to convert this eyesore into something that would add to the community in terms of beauty and recreation"*.⁴ In 2007, these ideas turned into action through a *"national handover to convert all such abandoned lines into spaces that people can use"*.⁵ When completed, the Greenway will serve as a 5.3 km pathway through different areas of East Boston and provide over 4.8 hectares of green open space. It will enable connections to transportation, to the waterfront, and to other neighborhoods, as well as offer a backyard for young children to safely ride their bikes and play. The Greenway is now also integrated into a larger plan for green climate resilience infrastructure in Boston.



Governance strategies

Sections of the East Boston Greenway are owned and maintained by different public agencies, while the local community plays a central role in its stewardship.

“The property itself is owned by several organizations”⁵ Boston Public Works Department, Boston Parks Department, Massachusetts Port Authority, and Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation all own and maintain sections of the Greenway. The Friends of East Boston Greenway, a local community organization, sees itself as the “head stewardship organization,” and engages the community’s needs to improve the Greenway with regular plantings, cleanings, and walkthroughs with the public agencies. ***“The Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, a foundation, gave funding to a non-profit organization, Boston Natural Areas Fund, to staff a community organizing project [Friends of East Boston Greenway] to move the vision of the East Boston Greenway forward.”***⁶ Interestingly, the Greenway was not planned as a green resilient infrastructure, but over the years it has been reframed as one and today it is part of the city’s climate resilience strategy. Community concerns have however emerged during the last few years over the gentrification pressures affecting East Boston. Long-term activists have raised the concern whether socially vulnerable residents will be able to continue benefiting from these community-driven green infrastructure projects, or if such projects will become spaces of green privilege for wealthier newcomers.



Business models

The East Boston Greenway was financed by a mixture of private philanthropic, and local, state, and federal government funding.

The East Boston Greenway received about \$1 million in federal grants from the national government, which was matched with local and state agency grants as well as private funding.⁷ Two NGOs, the Boston Natural Areas Network and the Trust for Public Land, worked with the community to obtain a 2.4 km stretch of the more than 5 km long freight corridor as a gift from Conrail. The Trust for Public Land also secured funds from the Massachusetts Highway Department and the US Environmental Protection Agency for cleanup costs of the abandoned rail tracks and vicinity. Afterwards, the ownership of the corridor was transferred to the City of Boston and Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), the airport operating corporation. ***“With [the mayor’s] endorsement, the greenway council pursued the key landowner, Conrail, who owned 1.5 miles of rail line that we were hoping would be the spine of the greenway. Working with the Trust for Public Land, Conrail met with the council several times, became convinced that both the community and the mayor supported this idea with no undercurrent of controversy, and offered to donate the rail corridor to the project.”***⁶



Citizen engagement

Building on a legacy of activism, community members have played a key role in visioning, planning, fundraising, building, and maintaining the East Boston Greenway.

The East Boston Greenway is a genuine grassroots development. East Boston has a long history of community activism, especially starting from the 1960s, when a park and residential neighborhood were lost to airport expansion. Residents advocated for the greenway project and collaborated with city agencies and not-for-profit organizations to convert the abandoned rails into an amenity for the community. ***“With no one agency solely responsible, the community has been and will continue to be the common denominator; envisioning the greenway, gathering and increasing support, and being a catalyst for collaboration...”***⁶ The Friends of East Boston Greenway community group organizes tree planting, trash clean-up, and advocates for more resources. It also works to create more access points, improve Greenway signage and monitor the city’s work to further develop climate resilient infrastructure on and around the Greenway.



Innovation pathways

The East Boston Greenway, in contrast with other top-down NBS in Boston, is a result of a grassroots movement. It features innovative reuse of existing infrastructure and materials. The Greenway is now also part of Boston’s green resilience infrastructure.

The rails-to-trails model of turning abandoned railways into public space has been successful in the US. While the conversion itself was not radically transformative, planners noted that it reused existing materials found in the area in an innovative way and also experimented with flood prevention measures, such as a seven-foot high deployable flood wall at the entrance of the greenway. ***“... we re-utilize some older material, some old granite blocks, adapted for use. Some of the materials that were out there that we could use given we were under a tight budget...”***⁸ Its innovativeness is also seen in how the East Boston community persistently advocated for the conversion of the previous eyesore into an amenity for the neighbourhood. The community has helped in designing, implementing and maintaining the greenway, as well as acquiring funding for it. Thanks to this, the Greenway provides multiple benefits to commuters and the residents alike, such as increased open child-friendly spaces, enhanced connectivity, and bike and pedestrian access.⁷ The Greenway also became a key part of the city’s green climate resilience infrastructure.

¹US Census Bureau. (2015). 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates; ²Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. (2017). Reducing Racial Wealth Inequalities in Greater Boston; ³Boston Redevelopment Authority. (2014). A Citizen’s Guide to Development; ⁴East Boston Greenway. *What’s up Eastie?* Zumix Radio, Boston. 9 May 2018; ⁵Community organizer, 2018; ⁶Former leader of local open-space advocacy organization in Burns (2008); ⁷City Parks Alliance. (2018). East Boston Greenway; ⁸Program manager, City of Boston; Photo credit: <https://www.asla.org/guide/site.aspx?id=41163>