

Charlestown Walk Audit, July 19, 2018

Sponsored by Mystic River Watershed Association

Prepared by WalkBoston

Attendees:

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The ten walk audit participants spent several hours on a warm Thursday morning walking along Medford Street from Chelsea Street to the Schrafft's Center and then discussing what we had seen and observed. The purpose of the walk was to identify opportunities and challenges to creating stronger connections between the Charlestown community and the Mystic River waterfront and Harborwalk.

This report is divided into three sections:

- A discussion of the big picture questions that were raised by the walk
- Summary observations about the conditions of the walking environment along Medford Street and the Harborwalk
- Detailed information about sidewalk and street conditions



Charlestown Harborwalk, Source: Boston Harbor NOW

1. Is Medford Street a reasonable alternative to connect the eastern and western sections of the Harborwalk that already exist along the Mystic River?

The Charlestown Harborwalk near Medford Street includes a section around the Little Mystic Channel (about 1,500 feet long) and a section adjacent to Ryan Playground and the Schrafft's Center (also about 1,500 feet long). The two parts of the Harborwalk are separated by about 3,000 feet along Medford Street (a bit more than ½ mile or about a 12-minute walk).

The length of the walk along Medford Street, and the low intensity of active, walker-friendly attractions (like shops, restaurants or offices) along the street make it a formidable barrier to serving as a walking link in a continuous Harborwalk. Rather than thinking of the Harborwalk in linear terms, over the foreseeable future it makes more sense to think about providing better connections from Medford Street and the neighborhood to the existing portions of the Harborwalk.

2. What could happen quickly and at low cost to connect the neighborhood and all walkers to the Harborwalk?

There are three locations along Medford Street where there is a direct connection to the Harborwalk:

- Adjacent to Barry Playground (near Chelsea Street); #2 on the map on page 7
- Opposite Monument Street adjacent to the Charlestown Community Center playing field; #3 on the map on page 7
- Opposite St. Martin Street; #10 on the map on page 7
- At the Schrafft's Center, with a walkway along the building and then through the parking lot; #13 on the map on page 7

The Harborwalk is not easily visible from Medford Street at any of these locations, nor are they well marked and signed (there are small signs opposite St. Martin's Street and at the Schrafft's Center). Each of them also feels somewhat "private," and they are not likely to attract new users to the Harborwalk without interventions to make them feel more welcoming.

Making such changes will likely require conversations with the property owners – the Boston Housing Authority, Charlestown Community Center, and the Flatley Company, as well as local residents. Inviting greater use, especially of the Harborwalk around the Little Mystic, would entail bringing the public within close proximity of people's homes in an area that is hidden from street view, and currently feels a bit like the backyard of the adjacent residences. The Harborwalk at the Schrafft's Center does not feel private, but since getting to the Harborwalk requires crossing a large surface parking lot, it does feel like it is a part of the development and is also not visible from the street.

Each of these locations could be opened up for greater public access and use by being given a gateway treatment with signs and landscaping, and through the provision of wayfinding along Medford Street and on other Charlestown streets. The few signs that are now provided are modestly scaled and do not read as announcements that there is public open space nearby.

3. Is pedestrian safety on Medford Street an impediment that is keeping people from using the Harborwalk?

While there are a number of safety improvements that could and should be made for pedestrians along Medford Street, overall, we believe that pedestrian safety concerns are not likely to be the key impediment to the use of the Harborwalk. Traffic volumes along the street are relatively modest (approximately 8,500/day, by comparison with 21,000/day on Rutherford Ave.), and at least during the walk audit, traffic speeds were moderate.

Among the safety concerns that have been noted on the City's Vision Zero Boston public comment map are: not enough time to cross the street, vehicles traveling too fast, no bike facilities, hard for people to see each other (cars parked too close to the corners), and people crossing the street where there are no crosswalks. There is also a long gap in crosswalks across Medford Street, with none between Terminal Street and St. Martin Street (about 500 feet).

By comparison with many other arterial streets in the City the number of pedestrian injury crashes on Medford Street does not stand out. Three pedestrian injuries occurred on Medford Street from 2015 – 2017 per the City's Vision Zero traffic crash data maps.

4. What is the “edge” condition where the neighborhood meets the industrial zone, and are there specific improvements that are needed?

The industrial/commercial uses that occupy the Designated Port Area that lies between Medford Street and the Mystic River are at considerable distance from most of the residences along Medford Street. While there are landscape improvements that could soften the Medford Street edge and make it more attractive for walking, this is not a location where intensive improvements are needed to create buffers between existing land uses.

5. Are there opportunities to create an “industrial” Harborwalk for portions of the waterfront?

There may be opportunities to explore the creation of public access for views of industrial activities along the Mystic River, for example the wind turbine testing facility on Massport property (<http://www.masscec.com/wind-technology-testing-center>). During the walk audit we did not look specifically at any sites, but agreed that there is public interest in such sites.

The Charlestown waterfront contains quite a bit of the remaining industrial waterfront in Boston and finding opportunities to open some of these up to appropriate public access could greatly enhance the appeal and use of the Harborwalk and the waterfront as a whole.

6. Does the (unused) rail line offer opportunities for a Harborwalk connection?

The MRWA, Boston Harbor NOW, Massport and the City of Boston are pondering the possible future use of the rail right-of-way. The rail line parallels Medford Street and therefore would not provide direct access to the waterfront, but could provide an off-street trail alignment.

7. In addition to the walk audit participants, are there other organizations or agencies that should be engaged in the process?

- BPDA
- BTB
- Boston Harbor NOW
- Climate Ready Boston

Summary Observations

Little Mystic Channel Harborwalk

As noted above, a good portion of the Harborwalk feels quite private because it is behind housing and not visible from the street. As the Harborwalk curves around the Little Mystic it is more open and public in feeling, and is adjacent to open space. The walkway ends at the boat launch. We saw several people using the Harborwalk during our Thursday morning visit.

The basic physical characteristics of the Harborwalk are as follows:

- Attractive but not dramatic views of the Little Mystic Channel
- Quite narrow – 8 -10 feet wide
- Very close to residences, with a tall, blank fence separating the walkway from the adjacent residences
- Hard to find from the street (described above)
- No tree canopy or shade
- No Harborwalk wayfinding signs are provided in this area

With the physical constraints noted above, and the lack of public use attractions that are accessible from this part of the Harborwalk, it does not seem likely that public use will grow significantly in the near term.

Schrafft's Center Harborwalk

This newly developed portion of the Harborwalk is well landscaped, provides seating and shade structures, and has interesting views of industrial activities across the Mystic River in Everett. A number of people were having lunch, playing games or simply enjoying the space during our Thursday lunchtime visit.

The basic physical characteristics of the Harborwalk are as follows:

- Well maintained and cared for by the Flatley Company
- The Harborwalk is hard to find from the street because there is no "gateway" at the street and the view across the site looks quite privatized in front of the building, with a view of a large surface parking lot that must be crossed before reaching the waterfront. We also were told that the vehicle gate is often closed.
- There are wayfinding signs for the Harborwalk but they are small, with only two of them visible from the street.

This portion of the Harborwalk could easily accommodate more visitors and would likely see more use if there were better wayfinding and a gateway treatment at the entrance to the site on Medford

Street. This waterfront asset could be quite easily promoted to existing and future Charlestown residents and workers.

Medford Street

The south side of Medford Street is lined by residential uses, including a mix of large multi-family developments and small 1-5 unit buildings – some of which have garage entrances onto the street. The north side of the street has a large residential development near Chelsea Street, Chelsea High School (which is actually on both sides of Medford Street with a pedestrian bridge connecting the two buildings) and athletic fields, and west of Terminal Street there are industrial and commercial uses, mostly set back from the street with a landscaped strip along the street. There are only a few commercial uses that are open to the public along Medford Street (one café and one pizza shop).

Most of Medford Street provides reasonably comfortable walking conditions (with some rougher sidewalks at the western end of the street), but in many places there is little visual interest for walkers with tall fences, relatively blank walls, and few places that invite people into adjacent uses. Most of the street has few trees or landscaping and little shade. Some areas do have landscaping including the northern side of the street from St. Martin to Belmont Street which has more green space and is used quite extensively as a dog park – thus attracting some pedestrians to the area.

Medford Street is used as a bike route because it provides a reasonably flat and low-traffic environment that connects Sullivan Square to City Square. The adjacent rail right-of-way was flagged as the possible off-road shared use path in Boston's Imagine Boston 2030 report.

Land ownership

With its mix of large private landowners, Massport industrial uses and Designated Port Area zones, the long-term potential for a connected Harborwalk is not known at present. The map on the next page shows the pattern of ownership.

Details about street crossings, sidewalk conditions and other elements of walking conditions are provided in the section of the report that follows.

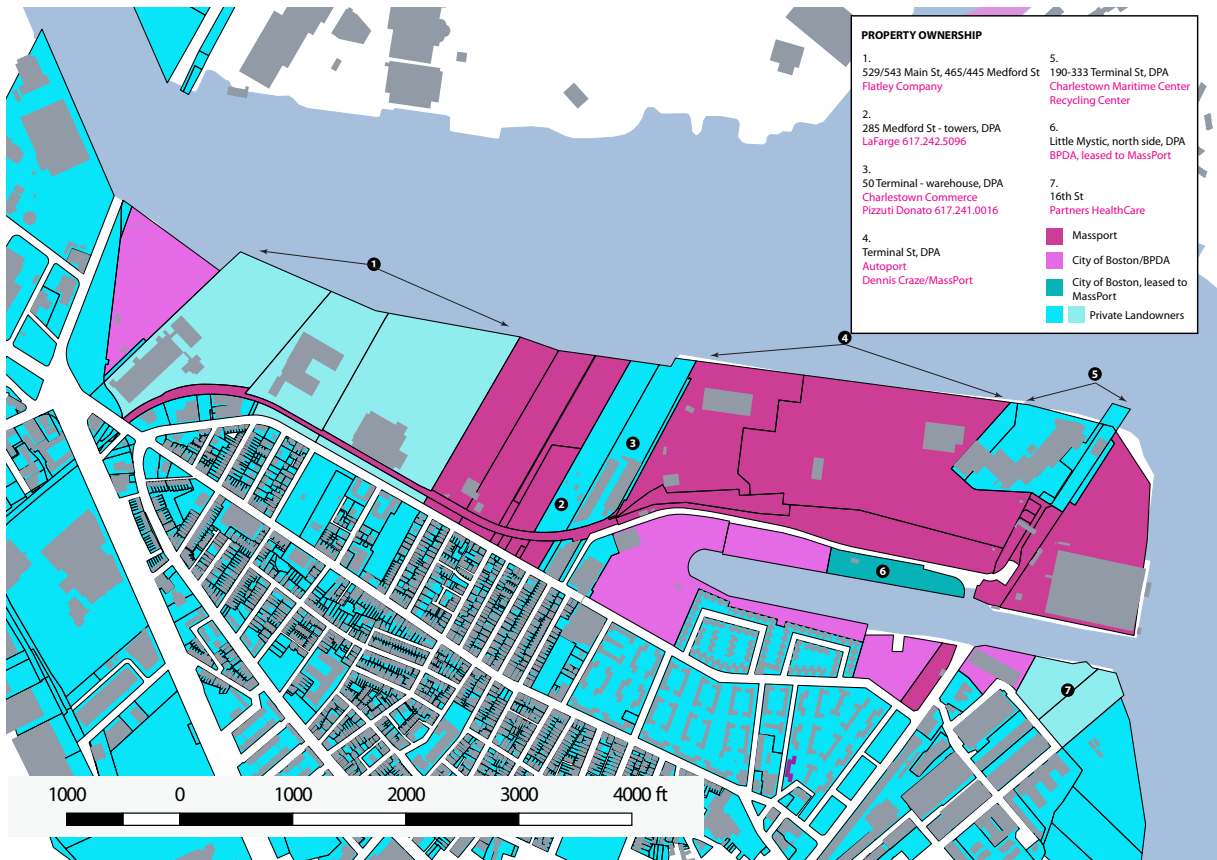
Background Information

Land use map:

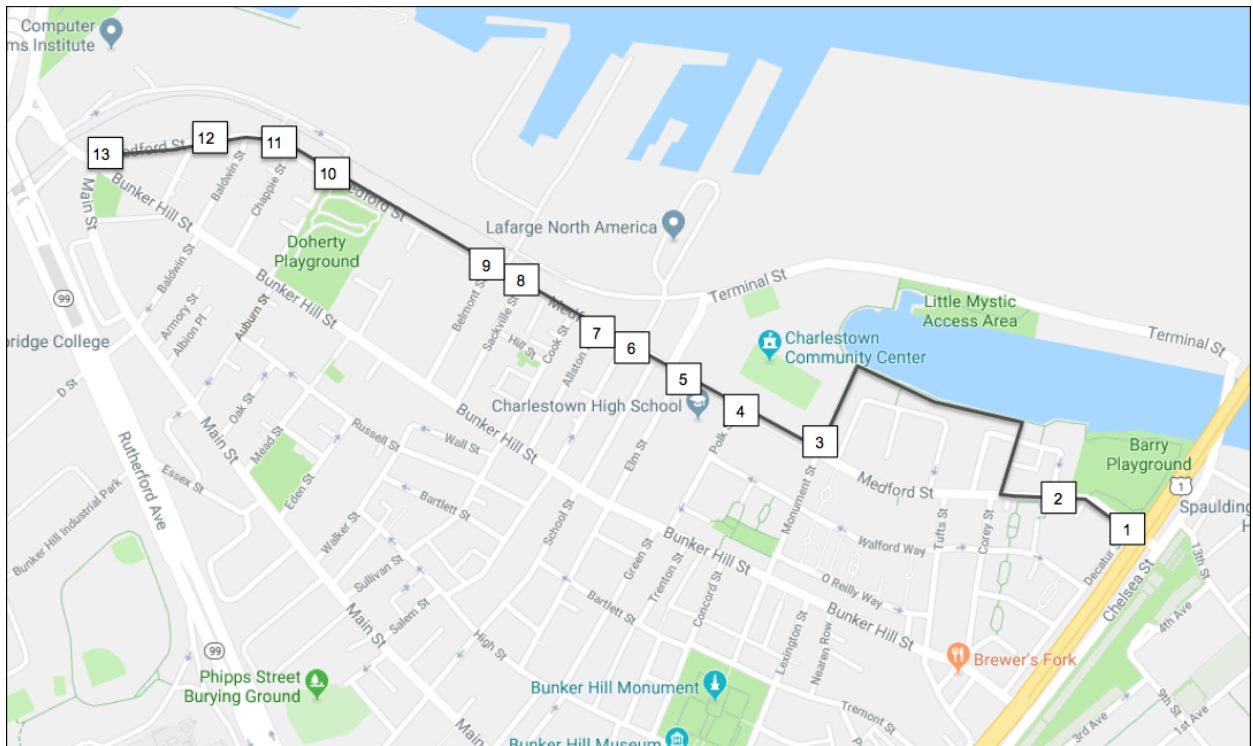
<http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/ab0f8cc1-98eb-4af8-a5af-5b403fea1f7d/>

Vision Zero Boston

- Pedestrian injury maps <http://app01.cityofboston.gov/VisionZero/>
- Safety concerns map <http://app01.cityofboston.gov/VZSafety/>



Detailed Sidewalk and Street Conditions



[1] Medford St and Decatur St:

- The noise level is high because of the proximity to the highway.
- The intersection has crosswalks and curb ramps (Figure 1).
- It is not clear how to get to the waterfront from the corner at Medford/Decatur.
- A path to the Harborwalk is located next to Barry Playground.
- The wide turning radius from the parking at [1] serves trucks travelling along Medford St (Figure 1).
- There is no Harborwalk signage at the corner of Chelsea/Medford Street near the parking lot and Barry Field (Figure 2).



Figure1: Crosswalks, curb ramps and turning radii at Medford St. and Decatur St.



Figure 2: No signage about the Harborwalk at Barry Playground

- A continuous driveway curb cut at the parking on the south side of Medford Street makes it uncomfortable to walk on that part of the sidewalk (Figures 3,5)
- Large trash bins on the south side of Medford St. between Decatur Street and Brien Court make an unattractive street edge (Figures 4,5).
- A crosswalk on Medford Street, located between [1] and [2] on the map, connects Barry Playground to the residential area (Figure 5) across Medford Street.



Figure 3: Continuous curb cut on Medford St. close to Decatur



Figure 4: Large open trash bins adjacent to the sidewalk



Figure 5: Crosswalk on Medford St at the Playground

[2] Old Landing Way and Medford Street

- Crosswalks and curb ramps are on both streets (Figure 6). The wall-like fences of the residential buildings at Old Landing Way block views and create an uninviting street edge on the northern side of Medford Street (Figure 7).
- The Harborwalk lacks shade and the environment along the Little Mystic Channel is not conducive to growing trees. The addition of benches and shade would make this portion of the Harborwalk more comfortable for pedestrians (Figure 8).



Figure 6: Crosswalks and curb ramps on both Medford Street and Old Landing Way



Figure 7: The uninviting walls along the residential complex at Old Landing Way



Figure 8: The narrow Harborwalk lacks shade and is very close to the residential buildings

[3] Monument Street and Medford Street

- The intersection has crosswalks and curb ramps (Figure 9).
- Trees in the sport field provide shade and a more attractive walking environment from Monument Street to Polk Street on the north side of Medford Street (Figure10).



Figure 9: Crosswalk and curb ramp at Monument Street and Medford Street



Figure 10: Crosswalk and curb ramp at Polk Street and Medford Street

[4] Polk Street and Medford Street

- Crosswalks and curb ramps are on both streets.
- Cars park very close to the crosswalk at Polk Street creating poor visibility at the crosswalk for pedestrians and drivers (Figure11).
- There is a Blue Bikes sign on north side on Medford Street sidewalk between Polk Street and Elm Street. *Does this mean a Blue Bikes station is coming to that spot?*



Figure 11: Crosswalk and curb ramp at Polk Street and Medford Street



Figure 12: Crosswalk and curb ramp at Elm Street and Medford Street



Figure 13: Crosswalks, curb ramps, and signals at Terminal Street and Medford Street

[5] There are crosswalks and curb ramps at Elm Street and Medford Street intersection (Figure12).

- The traffic signal at Terminal Street and Medford Street has an exclusive pedestrian phase with a 13-second duration WALK plus flashing Don't Walk (Figure 13).
- There is also a school warning sign installed at Terminal Street and Medford Street.
- There are no crosswalks across Mystic Street but there are curb ramps (Figure 14).
- There is a café with tables on the sidewalk on the north side of Medford Street at the corner of Terminal Street and Medford Street (Figure 15).



Figure 14: New curb ramps are installed at Mystic Street and Medford Street. There is no crosswalk.



Figure 15: Anna's café table on the sidewalk

NOTE:

There are no crosswalks across Medford Street between Terminal Street and St. Martin Street.

[6] Pearl Street and Medford Street

- There are no crosswalks and no curb ramps at the Pearl Street/Medford Street intersection (Figure 16).
- There is only one curb ramp at one side of the Lafarge private roadway and no crosswalk (Figure 17).
- Cars park on the north side of Medford Street and there is a parking lot on the north side of Medford Street at Pearl Street.
- The green buffer and low fencing of the parking lot provides an attractive street edge (Figure 18).



Figure 16: New curb ramps are installed at Pearl Street and Medford Street but no crosswalks



Figure 17: Only one ramp at one side of Lafarge private driveway and no crosswalks



Figure 18: The green buffer and low fences of the parking lot



Figure 19: No crosswalk, new curb ramps and a "Slow" sign at Allston Street and Medford Street

[7] Allston Street and Medford Street

- Allston Street has Curb ramps at Medford Street but there are no crosswalks at this intersection.
- There is a "Slow" sign on north side of Medford Street at Allston Street (Figure 19).

- There is a wide driveway curb cut on the south sidewalk of Medford Street at Cook Street and Allston Street. There are curb ramps on Cook Street, but there aren't any crosswalks (Figure 20).

[8] Sackville Street and Medford Street

- At Sackville Street and Medford Street, there are curb ramps but no crosswalk (Figure 21).
- There is no stop sign or "yield to pedestrians" sign at the driveway entering Medford Street from the industrial zone, which processes quite a lot of traffic.



Figure 20: Wide driveway curb cut between Allston Street and Cook Street. Curb ramps available on Cook Street but no crosswalks



Figure 21: Curb ramps but no crosswalks at Sackville Street and Medford Street

[9] Belmont Street and Medford Street

- The Belmont /Medford Street intersection has curb ramps but lacks a crosswalk (Figure 22).
- There is a dog park along the north side of Medford Street between [9] and [10] with a tall chain link fence along the sidewalk.
- There are trees and sidewalk shade along the dog park on the north side of Medford Street (Figure 23).



Figure 22: Curb ramps with warning pads at Belmont Street and Medford Street. No crosswalks



Figure 23: A dog park with tall chain link fence along Medford Street.

[10] St. Martin Street and Medford Street

- Crosswalks and curb ramps are provided at the St. Martin Street/Medford Street intersection (Figure 24).
- There are curb ramps and warning pads without a crosswalk at the Schrafft's entrance close to St. Martin Street (Figure 25).



Figure 24: Crosswalks and curb ramps at Saint Martin Street and Medford Street



Figure 25: Curb ramps and warning pads at one Schrafft's Company entrance (opposite Saint Martin Street).

[11] Chappie Street and Medford Street

- There are curb ramps but no crosswalks at Chappie Street/Medford Street (Figure 26).
- There are no crosswalks or curb ramps at the Schrafft's complex parking entrance.
- The sidewalk next to Schrafft's Complex on Medford Street is in poor condition (Figure 27).



Figure 26: Curb ramps on Chappie Street at Medford Street but there are no crosswalks



Figure 27: Poor quality sidewalk and a driveway without curb ramps at an entrance of a Flatley company property.

[12] The sidewalk is in poor condition next to the commercial building on the north side of Medford Street in front of the Stove Factory building (Figure 28-a).

- There is also a driveway curb cut to the building's parking lot (Figure 28-b).



Figure 28: Driveways and sidewalks in poor condition without curb ramps at Stove Factory Studios and CrossFit Lando

[13] Main Street and Medford Street

- Crosswalks, curb Ramps, and pedestrian signs are installed at this intersection (Figure 29).



Figure 29: Crosswalks, curb ramps with warning pads and pedestrian sign at Main Street and Medford Street intersection

- There is a small walking trail sign pointing to the Harborwalk on Schrafft's campus (Figure 30).

