

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS



The Fenway Alliance revitalizes a cultural district by improving walkability

In the late 1970's, high crime rates and lack of perceived safety brought together concerned organizations to address the vitality of an area that boasts many of Boston's finest arts institutions, some dating back to the early 1900's. To help remedy these and other neighborhood problems, local businesses and cultural organizations continue to levy their collective influence through the Fenway Alliance, a coalition whose mission is to "achieve an improved physical environment, sense of community, and quality of life for members, residents and constituent patrons of the Fenway Cultural District." Fenway Alliance represents 22 well-respected arts, culture and academic institutions and boasts a high degree of credibility within the city. Today, it shepherds multi-million dollar infrastructure projects that focus on making the Fenway area walkable, beautiful, and accessible to both visitors and residents. Their success serves as a model of how a partnership can encourage a walkable community. Improving the walkability of a community increases opportunities for physical activity that can result in positive health outcomes for community residents.

THE PLACE

Home to Symphony Hall, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and The New England Conservatory (among other arts centers), the Fenway area also boasts Harvard University's School of Public Health and Northeastern University. Both the nation's first YMCA and Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox, have adorned this rich cultural district since 1912.

The area also features a 19th century linear park system called the Emerald Necklace, designed by

Fredrick Law Olmsted, one of America's great landscape architects and the creator of New York City's Central Park. When he conceived the park landscape, Olmsted hoped it would serve as a refuge where city dwellers could regenerate and restore mind, body, and spirit. The Fenway area is not the most ethnically diverse neighborhood, with only 22% of its population comprised of African American, Latino, Asian, and "other" residents. However, nearby Roxbury and South End communities are considerably more diverse with ethnic groups making up 94% and 55% respectively. The Fenway Alliance is working to make the district attractive, affordable and accessible to diverse residents (including Russians and elderly in and near the Fenway community).

THE PROJECT

When ten organizations first joined to form the Fenway Alliance in 1977, the group's primary concern was safety. Gradually, as their efforts began to positively impact safety concerns, the group's focus expanded.



AERIAL VIEW OF THE MUDDY RIVER PARK WITHIN THE EMERALD NECKLACE IN THE FENWAY.



PATRONS VISIT THE MARY BAKER EDDY LIBRARY (LEFT). RENOVATION OF HUNTINGTON AVENUE INCLUDES WIDENING OF SIDEWALKS AND INSTALLATION OF ANTIQUE STREET LIGHTS (RIGHT).

The Fenway Alliance shift in mission came about as representative institutions observed that, despite the beautiful and historic institutions embedded in the Fenway, the surrounding area was simply not very attractive or inviting. Two major thoroughfares funnelled high-speed traffic through the area, creating traffic patterns at odds with pedestrian and bicycle safety. By the late 1980's the Fenway Alliance began efforts to increase pedestrian traffic by improving both the walkability and aesthetics of the area. Today's Alliance is made up of 22 member institutions.

Among other projects, the Fenway Alliance serves as an organizer, overseer and watchdog for the massive reconstruction of Huntington Avenue/Avenue of the Arts. To promote foot traffic that is both good for the community and good for business, the group has lobbied for pedestrian enhancements to the major roadway including widening sidewalks, adding stop signs, planting hundreds of trees, and installing antique-looking lights, public art and "street furniture." To keep reconstruction moving forward,

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representatives from the Fenway Alliance visit construction trailers biweekly and attend team meetings to ensure progress and ongoing funding. "There were many times when things would not have gotten done if the Fenway Alliance wasn't there watching out," said Kelly Brilliant, Executive Director.

Through the Alliance's advocacy efforts, the city of Boston (Department of Public Works), the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Highway Department) and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) were able to access state and federal funds to implement changes to the avenue in the heart of the Fenway Cultural District. Nevertheless, "Funding is constantly in jeopardy, and we repeatedly plead our case to the city and the state," says Brilliant.

Another ongoing project is the restoration of the Muddy River, which serves as the backbone of Olmsted's Emerald Necklace. The Fenway Alliance joined restoration efforts already underway when flooding in 1977 and 1995 caused millions of dollars of damage to artwork in the Museum of Fine

Arts, and damage within several of the surrounding academic members. The system of linked parks, which integrates glades, dells, sweeping vistas, reflecting pools, bike paths, and walkways, is one of the most uniquely designed historic urban waterways in the nation. The Fenway Alliance is currently collaborating with preservation groups to achieve a balance between historic landscape preservation principles, resource protection regulations, public safety measures, and modern engineering practices. Their goal is to create a place that people will want to walk to and enjoy.

THE PEOPLE

Diverse Partners Collaborate to Build Healthy Environments

The Fenway Alliance includes 22 member institutions: Berklee College of Music, Boston Arts Academy, Boston Conservatory, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Emmanuel College, The First Church of Christ Scientist, The Forsyth Institute, Harvard School of Public Health, Huntington Theatre Company, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Mary Baker Eddy Library for the Betterment of Humanity, Massachusetts College of Art, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, National Braille Press, New England Conservatory, Northeastern University, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Simmons College, Wentworth Institute of Technology, Wheelock College, and YMCA of Greater Boston.

The Alliance operates as a nonprofit organization with a budget of approximately \$300,000 per year to facilitate project planning, implementation, and membership support services, as well as its yearly “Opening Our Doors” event. In addition to institutional support, key individuals, like project consultant Jack Martin (formerly of Northeastern), provide invaluable expertise in navigating bureaucracies and lobbying for resources to effect change.

Though “each of the member institutions faces pressing operational, financial and programmatic challenges,” according to Brilliant, “the Alliance seeks to identify areas of common interest to benefit the greater good.” These organizations lend financial and in-kind

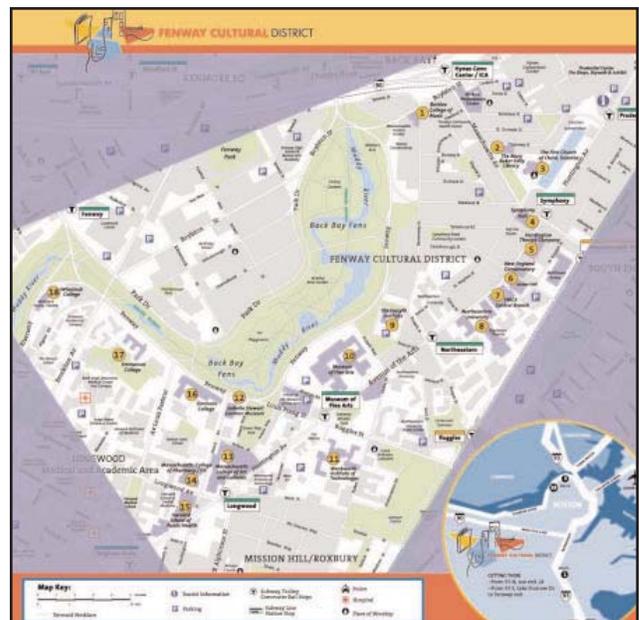
support as well as technical expertise to the conceptualization and implementation of Alliance efforts.

THE RESULTS

Healthy Change in Local Environments

Renovation of Huntington Avenue/Avenue of the Arts is almost complete (expected: fall 2004). In an area where people once feared for their safety, pedestrians stroll the avenue at all hours. Much of this transformation has been attributed to efforts to make the area more pedestrian friendly and vibrant for passers-by. Upgrades to the physical environment are also underway in the Muddy River Park. When the river restoration project is complete, the park will be a beautiful place for residents and visitors alike and threats of flooding will be greatly reduced.

Because its interest lies in bringing more foot traffic to the area to support local businesses and institutions, the Fenway Alliance has not attempted to document increased physical activity as a result of restoration efforts, as they are more interested in increasing admission to, and patronage of, local institutions. However, previous research suggests that improving pedestrian access increases walking activity. In *Health*



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and Community Design: The Impact of the Built Environment on Physical Activity, Frank et al. synthesize diverse literature from urban planning, transportation and health and describe myriad factors associated with walking and community design. “Pedestrians require good sidewalks and crosswalks [as well as] highly detailed, interesting spaces along their route (store fronts, building facades, so-called ‘street furniture,’ etc.),” the authors explain. They also suggest that recreational walking “is best suited to either social environments wherein people stroll along a pedestrianized street or other type of highly social space, or quiet environments for fast walking or exercise.”¹

Similarly, Cervero and Kockelman found that amenities such as street lighting and sidewalks increased trips by modes other than by car.^{2,3} Likewise, research by the Task Force on Community Preventive Services, among others, strongly suggests that enhanced pedestrian facilities promote walking,⁴ and increased walking leads to improvements in health.

WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

According to Brilliant, “Although keeping all 22 agencies on board when each has its own budget and bureaucracy requires ongoing negotiation and communication, the collective influence of the Alliance is a testimony to the power of collaboration.” She says that she has really had to “learn how to be patient but persistent in dealing with different timeframes to better connect with different constituents. For example, community groups and city government often move in slower timeframes than institutions and the Fenway Alliance itself, so when attempting to receive input from many constituencies, it often takes time to get groups together.” Brilliant also mentions that her multifaceted role has taught her to “figure out when to ask questions and go deeper and to know when a quick decision based on available infor-

“People matter and should be the first priority of any initiative. Changes to the built environment alone—no matter how necessary or excellent—will not bring people to the area if they don’t feel ownership, comfort, or at home there.”

mation is needed.” She believes that one important aspect of her work goes much broader than the Fenway itself and that is to “advocate to restore funds to arts and culture by describing how much the creative economy brings to the area.”

Most of all, she says, “Remember people matter and should be the first priority of any initiative. Changes to the built environment alone—no matter how necessary or excellent—will not bring people to the area if they don’t feel ownership, comfort, or at home there. Work to break down barriers by really learning what different types of people like, want, and need.”

LOOKING AHEAD

As another important prong in its attempts to engage the community, the Fenway Alliance is ramping up efforts to increase pedestrian traffic and public use of area institutions by expanding its “Opening Our Doors” program, a popular single day event of free cultural activities. To complement these infrastructure enhancements aimed at pedestrians and use of institutions, the group is currently looking at “deeper issues of access” that include identifying ways to increase the diversity of patrons and bringing more Latino, African American, Russian, elderly, and disabled residents from neighboring communities to visit institutions in the area.

The group plans to conduct focus groups to better understand what features might draw Latino and African American visitors. Additionally, the Fenway Alliance has submitted a proposal to partner with schools to bring more youth to local institutions. The member institutions are also planning to implement a “Culture Pass” program that will give discounts or free admission to local attractions. All of the efforts of the Fenway Alliance are woven together in the common fabric of its mission to use the strength of the institutions to improve the physical environ-

ment with the end result of enhancing the quality of life for residents and stakeholders.

PROGRAM CONTACT

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Frank LD, Engelke PO, Schmid TL. Health and Community Design: The impact of the built environment and physical activity. Island Press, Washington D.C., 2003.
- 2 Saelens BE, Sallis JF and Frank LD. Environmental Correlates of Walking and Cycling: Findings from the Transportation, Urban Design and Planning Literatures. *Ann Behav Med.* 2003;25(2)80-91
- 3 Cervero R, Kockelman K. Travel Demand and the 3 D's: Density, Diversity and Design. *Transpn Res-D* 1997;2(3):199-219.
- 4 Recommendations to Increase Physical Activity in Communities. Task Force on Community Preventive Services, *Am J Prev Med.* 2002;22(4S)67-73

This is one in a series of 11 profiles that reveal how improvements to the built environment can positively influence the health of community residents. The examples illustrate how changes to the built environment can be particularly meaningful in communities that have historically lacked important features such as pedestrian infrastructure, services and institutions, or public art. Taken more broadly, the profiles demonstrate how improvements to the built environment have the potential to reduce health disparities.

The profiles were written and produced by Prevention Institute. Funding and guidance were provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health. It is our hope that these profiles will stimulate and inspire partnerships between community residents and practitioners from multiple fields and sectors to design solutions and take action to improve the built environment for the health and well-being of all.