



CASE STUDIES

Boston, Massachusetts

TPL's Parks Initiative is dedicated to expanding equitable park access nationwide, ensuring close-to-home access to parks and their benefits for all. Through the 10-Minute Walk® program, we are building strong collaborations with mayors, cross-sector public and private partners, and community leaders to advance local policies and transform park systems. To meet the scale and urgency of parks work across the country, the 10-Minute Walk® Park Equity Accelerator works hand-in-hand with communities to advance park equity through policy and systems change. Since launch in 2022, the Park Equity Accelerator has helped 21 cities and more than 150 practitioners and community members across the U.S. create lasting change. This case study shares how Accelerator projects are encouraging civic engagement by connecting local governments and residents with one another. This case study shares how an Accelerator helped the Boston Housing Authority broaden its role as a provider of open space.

How Boston Housing Authority is Redefining Its Role in Open Space Conservation

When cities think about increasing residents' access to the joy and benefits of the outdoors, parks are often the first thing that come to mind. But only looking at traditional parks ignores the many other kinds of public spaces that make up the larger civic realm—those we interact with on a daily basis, like our streets, waterfronts, trails, greenways, and so much more. To advance “park equity,” municipalities have to radically redefine what a park can be.

How do you create new park access without building new spaces, but by strengthening what already exists?

This was the question that the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) faced in recent years, as communities clamored for high-quality courtyards, plazas and lawns within the public housing complexes they inhabited, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

BHA had a huge task at hand; with 63 developments servicing just under 10,000 units, along with providing 15,000 rental assistance vouchers, it's the largest residential land holder in Boston and the largest of its kind in New England. In terms of sheer scale, any decision the agency made to rethink open space across its portfolio would have far-reaching impacts.

Today, BHA is driving a paradigm shift by focusing not just on units and buildings, but by taking a more holistic approach to ensuring welcoming spaces are available once residents step foot outside the front door. This work carries lessons for towns and cities everywhere.

Like many public housing authorities, BHA saw most of its growth in the early - mid 20th century. But as federal and state funding was consistently reduced starting in the 1980s, responsibilities for its aging properties mainly shifted to maintenance and stabilization rather than innovation. "During the 1980s and 1990s, and as a response to ever decreasing budgets, the solution to many open spaces was to pave the areas so we didn't have to mow, trim bushes, deal with trees," said Dana Alan Dilworth, a Senior Project Manager and a long-term employee at the BHA.

Those decisions were felt downstream. More black and gray surfaces exacerbated the urban heat island effect - research from TPL found that 88% of BHA sites have surface temperatures that exceed the city average. It also meant less stormwater retention, which led to a higher likelihood of flooding. But perhaps the most damning effect of lackluster gathering spaces was the social impact, which, ultimately, caught the attention of administrators, said Dilworth: "We needed to focus on the curb appeal, safety, and resident use of our properties, making them more appealing for existing residents and perspective tenants and not to depress both our properties and the surrounding properties."

One example is the work started with a community playground in Archdale Village in 2022. Archdale's playground was destroyed in a fire in the 1990s, and the land sat vacant, sectioned off to anyone who walked by. Spurred by a group of committed residents who demanded change, BHA officials worked with Trust for Public Land and COG Design to conduct extensive outreach and lead the participatory design process, which gradually grew in attendance. The partnership went on to deliver a high-quality play space that the community actually wanted to see. "The Archdale Village Playground will not just be a playground," said Sabrina Ivory, the chairperson of the residents group there. "It will be a symbol of the strong bonds that connect us all in Roslindale."

The work at Archdale prompted BHA to take a step back and think more holistically about their open space. BHA knew that as one of the largest landowners in the city, it had a significant opportunity to help shape Boston's built environment. But staff at the Authority weren't sure where to begin. That's where the 10-Minute Walk® Park Equity Accelerator (PEA) came in.

In 2022, BHA joined the PEA to bring a new vision to life. Through the partnership, the Authority was able to conduct a full inventory of its open space, coupled

with a geospatial analysis that accounted for factors like local demographics, park access, and more. That information will empower BHA to begin to prioritize future site improvements systemwide, be they open space, parks, green infrastructure, recycling and composting areas, or playgrounds. Importantly, as a result of its partnership with TPL, BHA plans to dedicate 1% of its annual capital grants (approximately \$350,000 annually) for open space improvements across its properties. In other words: what started as a small community meeting to rethink a playground has since blossomed into an entirely new approach to open space, with multiple projects now unfolding or proposed across several properties, and with funding to back it up.

"As our data collection has increased over the past few decades, we're learning our lessons from the costs of those past decisions," said Rahul Ramesh, a Project Manager at BHA. "Now, we're really considering our properties as a community—the building that houses people and then the land that is their yard."

That change in thinking, said Ramesh, came with centralizing operations. Previously, decisions were siloed: maintenance crews didn't hear from planners or designers, and vice versa. But once BHA reassessed where parks, playgrounds or other open spaces could exist system-wide through the PEA, it could develop a strategy for future coordination and investment.

"We applied for a grant through Massachusetts' Community Preservation Act, and then won an award for Archdale Village," said Carolyn Barry, a Senior Project Manager at BHA. That allowed the agency to afford a design consultant, before the project enters construction in 2026. It also offered a playbook for another project: MLK Towers in the Roxbury neighborhood. "We applied for the same grant, and received the same award," Barry added. (Construction on a community green space there is slated to start next summer). The Accelerator also provided support to BHA as it applied to grants from the federal government.

But BHA must still consider its unique setting as a provider of open space. Archdale Village is home to over 700 people, across multiple generations and backgrounds. Meanwhile, MLK Towers is designated for residents who are 62 or older; about 115 people live there. What the participatory design sessions unearthed at each were distinct, because these profiles influence the demands for open spaces. "Each different property will need a creative solution," said Ramesh.

What else can the agency learn from this work? In interviews, BHA officials said the process has sparked a serious conversation about how the agency perceives itself—not just as a property manager, but as a multi-faceted service provider. This paradigm shift has already led to advocacy around dedicated funding streams, investments like green infrastructure and urban agriculture, and management improvements to make sites more inviting for all. And it all started with something as simple as a playground.

“Public housing has immense capital needs, with really old buildings that need a lot of work. Those projects cost hundreds of millions of dollars sometimes, and it can take 10 years to see the fruits of that labor,” said Ramesh. “Open space, though, is an easier win, in so many ways. It’s cheaper. The community can see it more immediately. And it’s something that directly addresses their quality of life.”

For those reasons and more, the work is worth it, says Ramesh: “I do think, in a way, we’re building trust with residents. And that’s something every housing authority cares about.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

sam.savin@tpl.org | 267.946.7544