

# Urban Planning, Community Participation, and the Roxbury Master Plan in Boston

*By*  
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This article examines the role and impact of community participation in the development of the Roxbury Master Plan in Boston, Massachusetts. It describes how residents and activists utilized the Roxbury Master Plan as a tool to raise challenges to planning ideas perceived as detrimental to the neighborhood. Discussion of this master plan provides a laboratory for examining race and class relationships and tensions generated by proposals for economic development strategies based on benefiting powerful institutional players as a way of helping low-income neighborhoods. Review of the development of this neighborhood master plan between the period 1999 and 2003 shows how residents can use community participation to ensure adoption of broad economic development strategies advocated by proponents of big business that do not spell dislocation and gentrification for poor and working-class neighborhoods. The case study also represents a critique of smart growth and New Urbanism as planning concepts in terms of how issues of race, class, and social inequality are approached or ignored by some planners. The study is based on the author's involvement in the development of the Roxbury Master Plan, including participation in meetings and interviews with residents, elected officials, and representatives of city government between 1999 when the Roxbury Master Plan was officially launched and its completion in 2003.

*Keywords:* poverty; progrowth politics; smart growth; Roxbury; Massachusetts

History “from the ground-up” is replete with examples of resistance to, as well as political and economic exploitation of, the spatial restrictions of the color line. It also shows that, for all their internal divisions, residents of “poor” urban communities have organized themselves most consistently as members of a racially conscious industrial, if not post-industrial, working class. The third insight from historical research has to do with the legacy of the racial past in creating opportunities, impediments, but especially in establishing imperatives for organized action to promote social change.

—Alice O'Connor,  
“Historical Perspectives on Race  
and Community Revitalization”

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A growing body of literature documents the significance of community participation in strategies for urban development and neighborhood revitalization. Proponents argue that participatory planning not only nurtures local democracy but has a utilitarian value as well. As noted by W. Dennis Keating and Norman Krumholz, “If there is little likelihood of expanded federal urban aid or a reduction in racial segregation coupled with concentrated poverty, then what are the prospects for these neighborhoods? As the case studies show, where there are strong community-based organizations, there is hope for the betterment of the neighborhood” (Keating and Krumholz 1999, 199). In some instances, local governments are taking the lead in calling for community participation in decision making about physical development. In Boston, for instance, the city’s planning and development agency—the Boston Redevelopment Authority—published a pamphlet in 1997 titled *Boston 400: Guide to Community Participation*. This is a short manual describing how residents can become more involved in working with the city to resolve a range of neighborhood concerns.

This is not an isolated or new invitation for community participation. The call for community participation in the field of urban planning today has some roots in the emergence of “advocacy planning” and “equity planning” in the late 1960s and 1970s, which was closely associated with the civil rights and black power movements. It was the explosion of local black political influence that played a role in establishing a foundation for these earlier schools of planning. As explained in “The Theory and Practice of Equity Planning: An Annotated Bibliography” (Metzger 1996), the election of black mayors attempting to respond to social and economic inequities led to a genre of planners who developed strategies to redistribute public and private resources for the benefit of poor and working-class neighborhoods.

Throughout the field of urban planning, community participation is currently considered an integral component of ideas like “smart growth” and “New Urbanism.” But how do planners and city officials use community participation to help implement innovative planning ideas and propel progressive visions for the economic development of low-income neighborhoods? What is the impact of community participation on the “modern antagonism between the administration of space for rational planning and economic accumulation, and the use of space for everyday purposes, that is, the ‘inhabiting’ of space” (Venkatesh 2002, 39)? Why does this antagonism intensify when participation involves communities of color that are poor and working class? And is it always accurate to generalize that these groups are not representative or supportive of “rational planning and economic accumulation”? What is the balance between community participation and the adoption of progrowth economic development favoring “downtown”? Are there

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situations when community participation is in conflict with smart growth or New Urbanism proposals? Is community participation a panacea for neighborhood distress?

There are several reasons why the Roxbury Master Plan provides a useful case study for investigating these kinds of questions. First, as noted below, the development of this master plan involves the poorest neighborhood in Boston. Second, it highlights fundamental differences in how community representatives approach economic development in contrast to key institutional actors in a city's governing coalition. Third, the evolution of the Roxbury Master Plan sheds light on how Boston's governing coalition is attempting to respond to the two "fundamental yet conflicting transformations" facing cities and described by John D. Kasarda two

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Another reason that the Roxbury Master Plan is important in the field of urban planning is that it serves as a lens by which to critique planning theories that call for community participation but ignore racial and class obstacles to participatory democracy at the local level. Ideas associated with New Urbanism or smart growth represent refreshing and constructive approaches to urban planning. But these ideas easily can be implemented in ways that ignore the distribution and use of power and resources based on race and class (Krumholz 2002). In fact, smart growth and New Urbanism can be a cover for perpetuating structural inequalities at the local level. As one analyst explains,

Unless New Urbanism is part of an overall strategy for revitalizing distressed inner-city neighborhoods, it remains simply a shell, a vessel to be filled randomly by whatever the marketplace wills. As an isolated approach, New Urbanism is open to the criticism that it represents a quick real estate fix that relies on the discredited notion of physical determinism. As part of a coordinated strategy, however, it provides a flexible, incremental approach for revitalization that blends with the city and complements it, rather than fragmenting, and dissolving it. (Bohl 2000, 795)

Some discussions about smart growth overlook the critical role of political power in terms of who has it and how it is used to maintain social and economic benefits for certain interests. John Friedman warns that "the biggest problem we face in theorizing planning is our ambivalence about power" (Friedman 1998, 249). As Joe Grengs recently argued, however, planners have to be cognizant of political and social divisions that may be hidden within government planning initiatives. To take advantage of political opportunities and frame issues in ways that empower workers, planners should be aware of historical and current conflicts based on race and ethnicity, as well as class issues. As he states, "If planners do not

learn how to take action in political settings, they risk failing to make constructive change” (Grengs 2002, 165).

These are not unfamiliar warnings to planning professionals working in urban areas. The proposal by Paul Davidoff decades ago is still relevant today: planners should not only be cognizant of the consequences of planning on the inequitable distribution of political power and economic benefits but also seek to expand civic participation in determining the visions for the well-being of neighborhoods and the city. He wrote, “The recommendation that city planners represent and plead the plans of many interest groups is founded upon the need to establish an effective urban democracy, one in which citizens may be able to play an active role in the

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process of deciding public policy” (Davidoff 1965, 332). Residents and activists involved with the Roxbury Master Plan provided the leadership and major push for supporting a participatory planning framework. This included several components: (1) frequent, open, and widely advertised meetings; (2) opportunities for resident feedback regarding proposals; (3) decision making after consultations with many individuals and organizations working in the community; (4) outreach and distribution of information; and (5) partnership with a community organization, the Roxbury Neighborhood Council, in planning public dialogues.

Admittedly, insistence on a participatory framework for making decisions did delay the completion of the Roxbury Master Plan. An agreed-upon governance structure required several drafts and many meetings. But governance regarding the disposal of public properties was perceived as a critical tool for ensuring accountability to local participation and to counter the political weight and influence of bigger institutional and private-sector actors. Clarity about procedures and participants in decision making regarding disposition of properties would also help to ensure that smart growth is implemented in ways that benefit residents.

The Smart Growth Network has established several key principles for smart growth, including mixed land use; compact building design, a range of housing opportunities and choices; walkable neighborhoods; attractive communities with a

strong sense of place; preservation of open space and critical environmental areas; development aimed at existing communities; predictable, fair, and cost-effective development decisions; and encouraging community stakeholder collaboration.<sup>1</sup> These kinds of proposals were widely supported by residents and leaders. Many community residents, however, believed that while lofty, the ideal planning concepts did not answer, ipso facto, two basic questions facing Roxbury residents: Who would benefit? And who would control decision making regarding the application of these ideas? “The plans can be the prettiest in the world,” said one highly respected resident and president of the Garrison-Trotter Neighborhood Association, Dan Richardson, “but it won’t matter if we get moved out.”<sup>2</sup> Another Roxbury community activist, Penn Loh, wrote in an article, “Equitable development is about who receives the benefits and burdens of development as well as where development happens. . . . Too often, smart growth focuses only on the where” (Loh, quoted in Marsh 2003, 1; see also Kalinosky 2002). This sentiment was echoed throughout many community meetings.

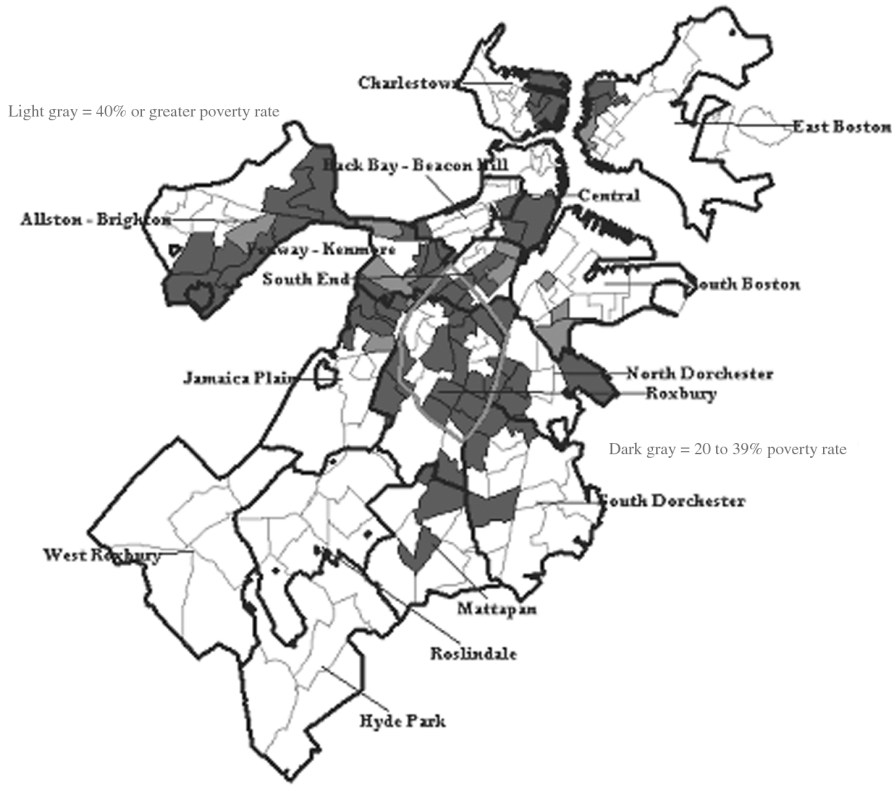
## The Neighborhood of Roxbury

Communities of color, represented by blacks, Latinos, and people of Asian descent now represent a majority in Boston. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, the total population of the city was 589,141 persons. African Americans numbered 149,202 persons, or 25.3 percent of the total population, while there were 85,089 Latinos (14.4 percent), and 44,284 Asians (7.5 percent). Roxbury, one of seventeen neighborhoods in Boston, is a predominantly black neighborhood located in the geographic core of the city. Its total population, based on the boundaries used for the Roxbury Master Plan, is 47,517 persons. About 65 percent of this number (30,851 persons) are blacks, 24 percent (11,373 persons) are Latino, and 10 percent (4,831 persons) are white. The Asian-descent (434 persons) and American Indian and Alaska Native (420 persons) populations are relatively small in this neighborhood.

Roxbury is the city’s poorest neighborhood. As the following map shows (Figure 1), there are some census tracts outside of Roxbury that can be classified as experiencing extreme poverty. But only in Roxbury do we see such a significant concentration of census tracts where 20 percent or more of the population is poverty stricken and where one neighborhood touches so many poverty-stricken tracts in adjacent neighborhoods.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, approximately 29 percent of all persons in Roxbury were impoverished compared with 20 percent for the entire city of Boston. A very high rate (40 percent) of children under eighteen years of age are impoverished in this part of the city. In 1998, Roxbury was composed of zip codes that contained among the highest proportion of families on public assistance in Massachusetts (zip codes 02121 and 02119). The average household income in this neighborhood is \$34,682 compared with \$55,865 for Boston. Residents of public and project-based subsidized housing represent a significant proportion of

FIGURE 1  
 DISTRIBUTION OF POVERTY AREAS IN BOSTON  
 BY CENSUS TRACTS AND NEIGHBORHOODS, 2000



Roxbury’s population. There are at least 3,400 housing units (out of a total 18,946 housing units in the neighborhood) that are owned, operated, or subsidized by the Boston Housing Authority or the federal Housing and Urban Development Department.

In spite of the many people who are low income, Roxbury is home to enormous economic resources. For example, one of its most valuable resources is the land that is available for development since relatively few open spaces remain in Boston for physical investment. With so many sizeable and well-located parcels, writes Professor William Nelson, Roxbury is

a primary focus of urban gentrification. For developers, Lower Roxbury has the advantage of being only two and one-half miles from the center of downtown Boston. Given the paucity of available land for development downtown, Roxbury stands as an ideal location for downtown expansion. Roxbury is also one of the few sites in the central city with large par-



cels of vacant land. The strategic position of Lower Roxbury has stimulated strenuous efforts by private developers to push Blacks out of this community. These efforts are buttressed by city policies that raise property taxes, encourage condominium conversions, and increase the price of rental units beyond the reach of low-income citizens. (Nelson 2000, 97)

Interestingly, while this is Boston's poorest neighborhood, high real estate prices put homeownership out of reach of most Roxbury residents.

Significant economic activity and potential exist in Roxbury. In 1999, there were approximately 1,200 small businesses. According to a survey for the year 2000, there were 17,250 Roxbury households that own assets, including Certificates of Deposit (14 percent), savings bonds (23 percent), retirement accounts (45 percent), investment real estate (18 percent), and business assets (12 percent). The median value of the certificates of deposit was \$10,240 during this period; bonds, other than U.S. saving bonds, \$24,041; mutual funds, \$18,372; home equity, \$82,089; investment property equity, \$48,466; and business equity, \$55,283.<sup>3</sup> The aggregate value of assets in Roxbury tell an even more remarkable story given the usual perceptions of impoverished neighborhoods. The aggregate value of certificates of deposit stood at \$85.9 million in the year 2000, stocks at \$100.1 million, mutual funds at \$165 million, retirement accounts at \$563.7 million, cash value life insurance at \$98.5 million, and the home equity at \$2.9 billion. These characteristics clearly contradict the view of this neighborhood as an economic wasteland. They suggest that the driving question about improving the quality of life might be how to leverage the assets and resources of Roxbury to increase social and economic opportunities for residents. This is a very different approach than one that sees the neighborhood as a relatively inexpensive opportunity for meeting the interests of big institutional and private-sector actors.

## Roxbury and Political Influence

The paradox of poverty in the midst of wealth can be partially explained by the degree of political power held by Roxbury residents, and generally, people of color in Boston. Black, Latino, and Asian communities have seen many important political victories, including the 2003 election of Felix Arroyo to one of the four city council at-large seats. This was a result of an impressive mobilization and coalition of communities of color and others. Although these communities of color now comprise the majority of Boston's population, they remain underrepresented among elected officials. But one citywide elected official now is from these three communities. The two city elected officials who are black and hold district seats on the city council, Chuck Turner and Charles Yancey, serve on a body that has little political influence in terms of mayoral decision making. An appointed school committee with one black and one Latino member (but a student population that is approximately 75 percent black, Latino, and of Asian descent) has become virtually invisible and described by one community activist as "meaningless, and totally out

of the equation for truly responding to the needs of our children.” Dianne Wilkerson serves as the only black member of the Massachusetts State Senate, while five black and Latino state representatives comprise less than one-third (29.0 percent) of the city’s total number of state representatives.

A few high-level black mayoral appointments work in City Hall. But according to Nelson, these appointments do not enhance the collective political power of the black community. Nelson explains that the lack of political representation at the local level means that “Black political incorporation and empowerment are stifled by the inability of the Black community to exercise countervailing power through the city bureaucracy and the city council. . . . The structure of council representation and the prevailing political culture effectively limit Black access to the

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levers of power in the council to the offices of the two Black councilors” (Nelson 2000, 85). The dearth of political power on the part of a rapidly growing population majority composed of blacks, Latinos, and Asians is coupled with relatively minimal participation in major economic development initiatives of the city, including the nationally known Big Dig, renovation of Fenway Park (home of the Boston Red Sox baseball team), and construction projects associated with improvements in Boston’s Logan Airport, other transportation systems, and the Boston Seaport district. While there are some exceptions, most of the big capital projects are pursued with relatively little participation on the part of people of color in terms of holding business contracts of significant size or jobs in the labor pool. There are relatively few decentralized capital investments for neighborhoods. According to a paper by the late Professor Bette Woody, “Boston recently developed a five year capital plan, for fiscal years 1999 to 2003, which includes ‘ordinary’ functional capital expenses. The overall total costs is about \$1.6 billion to be dispersed over the five year period, through annual authorizations . . . decentralized capital investment designed for neighborhoods — neighborhood development and parks—represent only 6.0 percent and 10.4 percent respectively of the total, if sewerage and schools (\$931 million) are excluded” (Woody 2000, 11).

It is important to emphasize that this scenario does not connote apathy among black and Latino residents and leaders. As a matter of fact, Roxbury has an impressive neighborhood history in leading struggles aimed at expanding social and eco-



conomic democracy in Boston (Bailey 1993). In the areas of housing, education, public health, and youth, the residents and leadership of this neighborhood have pushed Boston to expand opportunities for all people (Bush 1984; Jennings 1992). Actually, it is this backdrop of community activism that served as a context for the initiation of the Roxbury Master Plan.

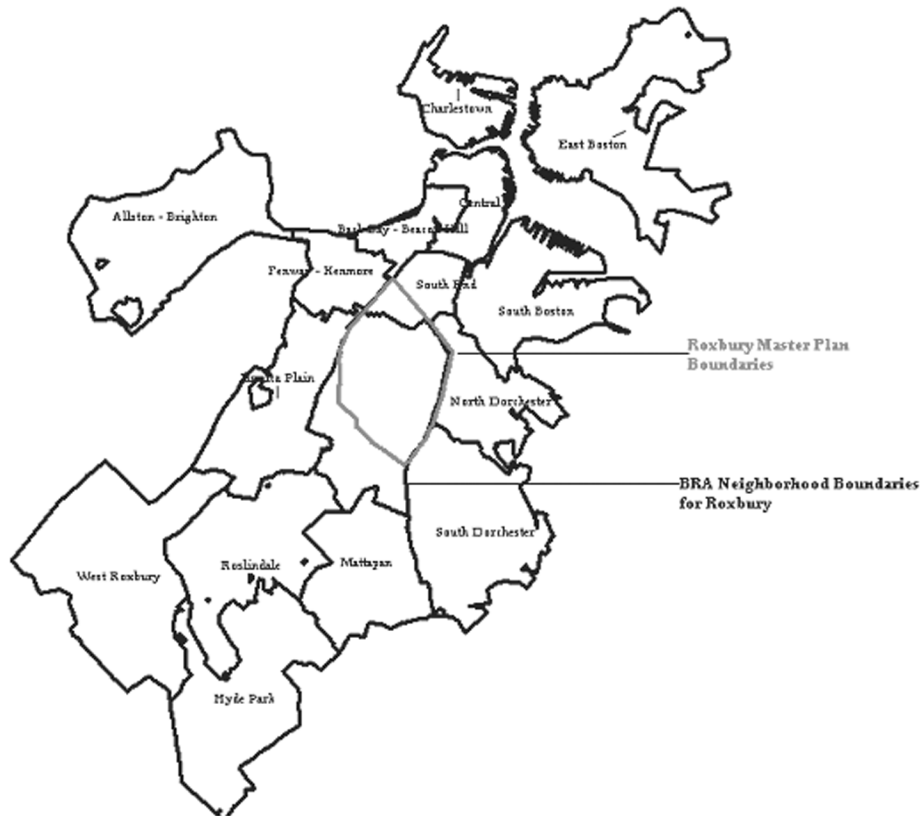
## Empowering the Roxbury Master Plan

In response to growing concerns about the disparities of public parcels in Roxbury, the Boston Redevelopment Authority issued a call for proposals to help design a master plan for the Roxbury neighborhood in 1999. The *Roxbury Strategic Master Plan: Building a 21st Century Community* would be a plan to help build a vision for the neighborhood and a framework for decision making about economic development and the disposition of land. An elected neighborhood body, the Roxbury Neighborhood Council provided much leadership in working with the Boston Redevelopment Authority to organize community input. Many residents and local elected officials believed that the plan could provide an opportunity for thoughtful and effective approaches to improving living conditions in the neighborhood. The plan would reflect the ideas of residents regarding relationships between zoning and physical space and strategies for enhancing the social and economic fabric of the neighborhood and its connections with other neighborhoods and the city.

One of the first issues that arose in meetings between community representatives, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and the architectural company (Stull and Lee, Inc., under the direction of the prominent architect David Lee), retained by the city to initiate the planning process, was determining Roxbury's boundaries. City government had been using two different boundary maps for planning purposes. One map of Roxbury was part of the planning district boundaries established by Boston in 1988.<sup>4</sup> Many city departments use these boundaries to define and work with neighborhood-based agencies in Boston. However, another neighborhood boundary map for Roxbury emerged from earlier planning processes. Its boundaries are indicated by the diamond shape line in the map (Figure 2); these are the boundaries that demarcated the land covered under the Roxbury Master Plan project. These boundaries show that the area is relatively large and, generally speaking, in the middle of the city.

Another planning issue involved the treatment of Roxbury's "sub-neighborhoods." In line with what is referred to as New Urbanism, some planners proposed during early community deliberations that subneighborhoods should be acknowledged and treated as such in terms of resident needs and responses. Although residents and community representatives were sensitive to some variations in these areas, they believed that Roxbury should be treated as one neighborhood in that its assets, resources, and challenges overlap geographical pockets. There was concern about treating various subneighborhoods differently on the part of city government depending on its makeup and political leadership. A few residents were con-

FIGURE 2  
CITY BOUNDARIES FOR BOSTON NEIGHBORHOODS AND THE ROXBURY  
MASTER PLAN



cerned that certain areas might be treated differently and become more susceptible to gentrification and ultimately not even be considered part of the Roxbury neighborhood.

In addition to meetings and information sessions organized by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, a plethora of public and informal meetings among residents, elected officials, and many community groups were held regarding the development of the Roxbury Master Plan between 1999 and 2003. Several themes emerged from meetings and charettes throughout the first year of the planning process. These included calls for better delivery of municipal services; improving the overall image of Roxbury as a vibrant neighborhood; government accountability in the delivery of quality municipal services; stronger physical and social linkages between Roxbury and other neighborhoods; expanding opportunities for youth; better transportation to serve Roxbury residents but also as a tool for local

economic development; more activities that reflect generational linkages between older and younger residents in the neighborhood; improving the environmental conditions; increasing cultural opportunities for residents and preserving the historical resources of Roxbury; planning that aims to benefit the residents and progeny of Roxbury; building affordable and mixed housing; expanding economic opportunities that result in a stronger small-business sector and living wage employment for residents and youth; increased accountability on the part of bigger institutions that operate in Roxbury, including banks, hospitals, and universities; and using zoning to discourage ad hoc economic development that does not reflect consistency with the needs and resources of residents, local businesses, and community organizations.<sup>5</sup>

Two key victories for residents permitted the development of a progressive master plan that would meet the needs of the neighborhood and the city. According to State Senator Dianne Wilkerson at a community meeting held on October 6, 2003, these features made the Roxbury Master Plan different compared with other neighborhood plans. One innovative feature of the development of the Roxbury Master Plan was the design of a basic body of principles or values that guided decision making about strategies for neighborhood revitalization but also as a tool aimed at encouraging collaboration. The general purpose of this set of principles was to ensure that any ideas or final decisions about what to include in the Roxbury Master Plan would reflect the concerns and needs of residents in the neighborhood. Collectively, these principles were aimed to ensure (1) that residents would not be displaced as a result of this planning effort, (2) that the needs of residents would drive the design of strategies for housing and other services, and (3) that the plan would be holistic in terms of linking economic development with other areas such as housing, the building of public schools, and improvement in transportation.

The principles were adopted in the early stages of community meetings and consequently endorsed as a guide by the Boston Redevelopment Authority. They were published in the first public newsletter for the Roxbury Master Plan (*Roxbury Update*, October 2000; Boston Redevelopment Authority 2000) and presented at various community meetings to help guide discussions and debates about particular features of the developing master plan. The principles include the following:

The Roxbury Master Plan will help to identify activities and institutional relationships that enhance opportunities for youth to become involved in the civic life of Roxbury.

The Roxbury Master Plan will help to identify ways that the history of the community struggles of Roxbury can be incorporated into civic life through historical preservation.

The Roxbury Master Plan will seek to identify potential institutional and programmatic linkages between the areas of economic development, housing, and transportation.

The Roxbury Master Plan will help to increase residential stability by developing institutional, programmatic, and social connections between people and people

within the neighborhood; organizations and organizations within the neighborhood; youth with elderly; neighborhood with other neighborhoods; neighborhood with the city; and neighborhood with the region.

The Roxbury Master Plan will seek to identify institutional, programmatic, and policy mechanisms to generate and keep wealth in the neighborhood for longer periods of time.

The Roxbury Master Plan will help to identify ways for increasing opportunities for small businesses and linking this sector to the civic well-being of the neighborhood.

The Roxbury Master Plan will consider ways to utilize public dollars as leverage for additional private dollars and resources.

The Roxbury Master Plan will be planned and implemented in ways that enhance the civic education and public involvement of residents and organizations, including community agencies, faith-based organizations, and small businesses.

The Roxbury Master Plan will consider how to increase housing opportunities at different income levels for residents and protect existing housing that is affordable to residents by utilizing the potential and actual assets of the neighborhood.

The Roxbury Master Plan will consider how to enhance and increase the educational, cultural, and recreational activities in the neighborhood.

The Roxbury Master Plan will help to develop a civic understanding of the role of public infrastructure, including transportation, as a key tool for economic and community development of the neighborhood.

These guiding principles, initially drafted by the author on behalf of community representatives, represent a synthesis of findings in earlier reports and neighborhood plans as well as input from a range of activists participating in the development of the plan. The principles reflect a fundamental commitment to the participation of citizens and neighborhood organizations in decision making about the conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation of economic development strategies. They acknowledge, in effect, that there continues to be a need for expanded government and legal efforts to eliminate racial and community discrimination in housing, banking, insurance, and real estate sectors.

A second important achievement for residents and the city was adoption of the final governance plan for implementation of principles and features of the Roxbury Master Plan. Governance includes the establishment of a Roxbury Strategic Master Plan Oversight Committee with the overall charge of overseeing the implementation of disposal of public land that is consistent with the Roxbury Master Plan. This Oversight Committee would be composed of fifteen members, with the chair appointed by the mayor. However, the mayor would only appoint members from thirty nominations proposed by the Roxbury Neighborhood Council and elected officials. Specifically, this body has responsibility for proposing land-use programs, recommending the order of parcel disposition, coordinating public comment and input, reviewing drafts of proposals, recommending changes in proposals, working with other neighborhood review committees, creating subcommittees to review individual parcels, setting benchmarks to evaluate progress of approved plans, and

reviewing zoning to ensure consistency with the Roxbury Master Plan. More important, Project Review Committees would be appointed to review specific proposals approved for individual parcels. This committee would be composed of nine to fifteen members. The Roxbury Strategic Plan Oversight Committee would appoint five members to serve on this body, and the director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority would appoint between four and ten members from a pool of

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child-care programs and facilities, and  
jobs paying living wages for residents.*

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fifteen nominations made by the Roxbury Neighborhood Council and elected officials. Nominations would be required to include representatives of residential abutters, including business abutters, local neighborhood associations, and other parties that could be impacted by development plans.

This arrangement includes a detailed land-disposition process that would be followed by all concerned. Overall, it represents a major accomplishment in terms of community participation in two ways. First, the Oversight Committee would compile the list of potential nominees from which the mayor has to select. In other neighborhood plans, elected officials and the Boston Redevelopment Authority appoint members who have to be approved by the mayor. Second, members of the Oversight Committee would not simply serve in an advisory role but could also serve as members of the Project Review Committee that would review and make relevant recommendations regarding local economic development and land-use decisions.

Various factors helped residents and local leaders realize these victories. One is that both Mayor Tom Menino and Mark Maloney, the director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, consider themselves as having strong roots in Boston neighborhoods. They both know personally many of the individuals who participated in the development of the Roxbury Master Plan. Furthermore, many of the local activists are longtime residents and have impressive and collective experiences in many political and economic issues and struggles in Boston. Individuals such as Bruce Bickerstaff, the president of the Roxbury Neighborhood Council, and other

members such as Julio Henriquez, Syvalia Hyman, Bob Terrell, and Kerrick Johnson, and activists such as Klare Allen, the director of Safety-Net; Joyce Stanley, the director of Dudley Main Streets Initiative; and Dan Richardson, the president of the Garrison Neighborhood Association are truly experts in the city's laws and regulations regarding planning and disposition issues. Their participation, as noted by a staff member of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, elevated the quality of discussions regarding the Roxbury Master Plan. But another reason for the victories described here is the strong tradition of community activism in Roxbury and the persistence of residents and local leaders, especially city council member Chuck Turner, State Senator Dianne Wilkerson, and State Representative Byron Rushing, in ensuring that the master plan would be a progressive one and beneficial to residents.

### Roxbury Master Plan as Critique of the Logic of Progrowth Politics

Like many other larger cities, Boston reflects an economic development orientation in its state and local leadership that can be described as the "logic of growth" (Judd and Swanstrom 1994). Reflecting progrowth logic, the city-corporate partnership calls for policies that emphasize the creation of new jobs through processes that essentially "improve the business climate." Invariably, however, improving the business climate means lowering wages to make businesses more competitive, depoliticizing the workforce so that it cannot organize against corporate interests, using tax abatements and subsidies for corporations and big businesses, and deregulation. To various degrees, this is the script that Boston and Massachusetts follow in the current period. The justification for this strategy is that it will attract businesses, increase tax revenue and disposable income, and create jobs. This model implies that cities have to attract investments to remain economically healthy and thereby generate jobs for residents. The idea is that what is good for big business is good for Roxbury. Public policies that serve the interests of large businesses and corporations, including hospitals and universities, will benefit (eventually) everyone through the expansion of jobs as a consequence of greater investments and profits, which will in turn generate yet more savings and investment on the part of businesses.

According to this reasoning, residents would be well served by allowing the assets and resources in the neighborhood to be used in ways that benefit Boston's governing coalition (Peterson 1981; Horan 1997).

Within this context, the Roxbury Master Plan emerged as an arena for a systemic critique of the assumptions associated with an economic development vision that prioritizes bigger institutions over the well-being of neighborhoods. The deliberations reflected thoughtful alternatives for pursuing economic development that would ensure the social and economic well-being not only of the Roxbury residents but also of other neighborhoods and the city. As suggested in O'Connor's quip at



the beginning of this article, community activists and residents in the city's poorest and predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods presented an alternative vision and strategy for local economic development that advances the interests of working-class sectors in Boston society. This may not be an isolated situation. Others have noted the contributions and impact of black and Latino neighborhood activists in enhancing the quality of local democracy by their civic participation and by representing a potential political base in opposition to wealthy and corporate interests (Betancur and Gills 1993; Jennings 1992).

A controversy emerged during the early phases of the Roxbury Master Plan that illustrated to residents and local leadership the driving assumptions regarding local economic development in their neighborhood. The controversy involved public announcements by the mayor that were inconsistent with ongoing deliberations of the Roxbury Master Plan and the endorsement by residents and elected city officials that the plan would help guide decision making about economic development. In the middle of community meetings organized by the Boston Redevelopment Authority for the purpose of involving residents with the Roxbury Master Plan, Mayor Menino announced planning for a massive biotechnology complex in a part of the neighborhood known as "Crosstown." This announcement was made during the mayor's presentation to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce on December 14, 2001. Menino stated at this meeting that "the Crosstown Corridor . . . is ripe for development. . . . It is located just a few minutes from the Longwood Medical Area with all the right elements, with easy access to the airport and new tunnel. It has great transportation. Currently, the Commuter Rail and the Orange Line serve the area. Soon the Silver Line will be there. And later, the 'Urban Ring.'" (This is a transportation initiative seeking to link Boston and some of the surrounding suburban areas.) He added, "And the community supports development through the Roxbury Master Plan. After all, Crosstown is an opportunity for jobs."<sup>6</sup>

Roxbury residents and elected officials responded angrily to the announcement. First, it caught many residents by surprise because it was disconnected from ongoing deliberations in developing the Roxbury Master Plan. Residents did not buy the argument that what is good for the biotech industry is automatically good for Roxbury. Instead, residents consistently called for a different set of priorities: affordable housing, clean and safe parks, physical enhancements to assist small businesses, quality and affordable child-care programs and facilities, and jobs paying living wages for residents. Local residents were not happy with the biotechnology proposal because it is not clear how residents or local businesses would benefit from this kind of strategy. Furthermore, research and investigations conducted by a local grassroots organization, Alternatives for Community and the Environment (ACE), as well as Safety-Net, raised concerns about the costs that would be incurred by residents. It was noted that while Boston is one of the leading cities in the field of biotechnology industry, this is still a relatively young industry requiring major public investments over a period of time.

According to a report by Joseph Cortright and Heike Mayer for The Brookings Institution, successful strategies for the expansion of biotechnology require

“strong research capacity and the ability to convert research into successful commercial activity” (Courtright and Mayer 2002, 3). Based on their national survey, they add, “The historically low odds of success and the extended stretch of time associated with developing and securing regulatory approval for commercial biotechnology products mean that metropolitan areas seeking to develop a biotech industry will need to invest a significant amount of time and resources” (Courtright and Mayer 2002, 4). This means, in effect, that residents in Roxbury, and Boston as well, might be required to subsidize innovative but risky businesses that require a lot of up-front support in the form of land, tax abatements, cheap and entry-level labor, and access to housing and other amenities to attract and keep a highly trained and skilled workforce. The end result of this kind of investment is not really the revitalization of a neighborhood but rather the facilitation of corporate profits.

Residents expressed skepticism about expected employment benefits that are touted in justifying proposals to prioritize the needs of big businesses or to pursue public subsidies to attract them. Such claims are considered meaningless if not grounded in the workforce characteristics and needs of the neighborhood. A review of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council Web site, for example, shows that most of the jobs advertised for Massachusetts require advanced degrees. Due to the quality of public schooling, inadequate resources for the provision of employment and training, and lack of guarantees of quality jobs for residents, the mere promise of jobs simply did not fly with many community participants. Instead, Roxbury activists called for development that is directly linked to workforce characteristics of the neighborhood as a stronger guarantee of local employment opportunities for residents. This position represents an important contribution to understanding how job training and industrial development can be linked for greater impact on employment. As explained by David C. Ranney and John J. Betancur, “The traditional framework for labor market policy is biased in favor of firms and cannot adequately address the needs of specific pools of labor such as dislocated workers and segregated labor pools” (Ranney and Betancur 1992, 286). As did the supporters of the Roxbury Master Plan, these authors proposed that “the employment, experience, and skills of unemployed workers in a particular area of the city or region can become a major variable in establishing development priorities for that area. Furthermore, with such priorities set, training programs can be designated that will make the fit between development priorities and residents work force even closer” (Ranney and Betancur 1992, 288). The concerns described here represent serious and experientially based challenges to progrowth logic.

A more inclusionary view of how economic development can be pursued in ways that respond to a wider net of needs is referred to as “high road economic development” (versus “low road”); it “emphasizes the redirection of government subsidies—for example, tax abatements and infrastructure support—to projects and investors committed to creating high-wage jobs and training” (Goodno 2002, 20). This approach is consistent with many suggestions offered by residents to support local businesses. They understood and experienced the fact that it is small and local businesses that help provide a secure social and economic infrastructure in many

places. Perceiving themselves as part of the neighborhood, various representatives of local business came to community meetings to listen to, respond to, and work with residents. On the other hand, representatives of companies that would stand to benefit from progrowth and business strategies did not attend any meetings. Other than goodwill, there would be no way of holding the actions or promises of this sector accountable to the community. Rather than blind acceptance of strategies for recruiting giant institutional employers, or chain corporations, residents sought more balanced approaches that can strengthen the neighborhood and city's small-business sector. Expanding small businesses means enhancing local resident

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*It is harder for small businesses rooted in neighborhoods to relocate in pursuit of lower wages. Small businesses tend to develop greater loyalty to the local community, which they depend on for business.*

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employment. This is not an argument against big businesses and employers but rather a call for a more balanced approach to deciding how to pursue economic development. Some residents also noted that strengthening small businesses can be an effective response to the problem of capital flight in a period of growing globalization. In other words, it is harder for small businesses rooted in neighborhoods to relocate in pursuit of lower wages. Small businesses tend to develop greater loyalty to the local community, which they depend on for business.

Another issue overlooked by big-business strategies for low-income neighborhoods, but raised by residents, local leaders, elected bodies like the Roxbury Neighborhood Council, and grassroots organizations like ACE and Safety-Net, is how to tap and leverage local wealth with public resources to develop programs that expand economic opportunities and increase the capacity of local businesses. Residents are certainly not against the creation of wealth, but they do not want wealth that creates only more millionaires. They believe that wealth should be leveraged to create the kind of wealth that stays in the community for longer periods of time. They want to see wealth that creates jobs for local residents, family stability in Roxbury, and opportunities for youth in this neighborhood.

To assess and evaluate economic development proposals, or the disposition of public land and its impact on local businesses and the neighborhood, residents and community activists developed a list of criteria that would be part of the Roxbury

Master Plan. The author composed a checklist based on input from community residents and business leaders in Roxbury that would become a part of the Roxbury Master Plan. This checklist is titled “Towards Economic Empowerment of Roxbury,” and it is one of the appendices in the master plan. Written in the form of questions, the criteria include the following:

- Are small businesses located in the neighborhood being utilized on capital projects and improvements, including public schools, transportation projects, and housing through (a) contracts; (b) sub-contracts, or (c) joint ventures?
- How will the bonding capacity of small businesses improve as a result of the proposed economic development activity?
- Are there opportunities to assist in enhancing the capacity of small businesses through linkages with city-level and regional development activities?
- Were representatives of local businesses included in the development of the proposals or plans?
- Was a “local small business impact” study completed by entities interested in pursuing economic development plans?
- Is the economic development proposal consistent with the workforce characteristics of residents of Roxbury and surrounding neighborhoods?
- How will the principals involved with the economic development proposal utilize joint venturing and subcontracting to enhance the capacity of local businesses?
- How will the construction of housing or physical infrastructure utilize local businesses?
- What is the projection of number of jobs by occupation and skills over the life of the economic development plan?
- How will information about the number and types of projected jobs be shared with community organizations and faith-based organizations?

These and related questions, incorporated into the Roxbury Master Plan, can begin to provide information about proposals and initiatives and their probable impact on strengthening the economic capacity of the neighborhood. They also represent a procedural mechanism for ensuring that powerful economic and political interests treat community participation seriously.

## Conclusion

The development of the Roxbury Master Plan highlighted the creativity that community participation can generate in designing strategies aimed at improving living conditions in poor and working-class neighborhoods. This case study highlights two important observations for urban planners. First, the description of low-income and predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods as ensconced in social and economic crisis, and apathy, is a suspect claim. On one hand, social and economic conditions are certainly not as hopeful or healthy as is the case in middle-

class neighborhoods. Dennis Keating's description of "distressed neighborhoods" as those "that simultaneously exhibit disproportionately high levels of poverty, joblessness, female-headed households, and dependency on welfare assistance" (Keating and Krumholz 1999, 2) certainly reflects actual conditions. But this description can lead to misperceptions about predominantly black or Latino urban neighborhoods. In fact, many poor neighborhoods have histories of inspiring political and economic struggles (and victories) on behalf of community building and revitalization. The political behavior of low-income people and what Alice O'Connor suggests is a vanguard politics, reflecting a "postindustrial" working-class consciousness, has been documented in a number of studies (Alex-Assensoh 1998).

Related to the traditional wasteland description of some urban communities is the (essentially paternalistic and ahistorical) policy query about whether such neighborhoods should be revitalized or should people be given more opportunities to use exit options? Loic J. D. Wacquant criticizes this false choice and argues that it reflects "pernicious premises" that have become embedded in the paradigms of many researchers who study and write about poor and predominantly black urban communities. He writes, "This profile in defect . . . is deeply entrenched in American social science" (Wacquant 1997, 345). Choosing between destroying black and Latino communities that have a high degree of poverty versus "gilding the ghetto" is also challenged by Professors William W. Goldsmith and Lewis A. Randolph who refer to this debate as fruitless because it overlooks the role of the broader political economy (Goldsmith and Randolph 1993). The short history of the Roxbury Master Plan confirms these criticisms.

A second observation is that community participation is important in the design of local economic development strategies that are comprehensive and balanced in terms of meeting a range of needs. The Roxbury Master Plan is a response of sorts, therefore, to the critique that community building can become an empty gesture at best or manipulated by increasingly powerful city and even global interests at worst (Fraser et al. 2003). Supporters of the Roxbury Master Plan used community participation as a tool for raising (and responding to) fundamental questions about urban politics and economic development. In challenging the economic assumptions and development plans of powerful institutions, key questions at the local level are raised, including the following: Who, in fact, are key decision makers regarding economic and land development? What kinds of resources are available to community-based organizations and residents to mobilize alternative development plans? How can residents be organized effectively given imbalances in organizing resources, including money, institutional prestige, government patronage, and generally, an unsupportive media? A review of the Roxbury Master Plan indicates that these are critical questions that have to be answered if the call for community participation is not merely rhetorical.

Economic development can work for the cities of this nation, but the partnerships and agendas driving these efforts must include sectors other than just big businesses and government. Citizen input can help ensure that economic development does not become the captive of any one sector but reflects the needs of the

entire city and its neighborhoods. It is a way that facilitates a rich social and institutional network, including churches and religious organizations, health centers, community-based organizations, and neighborhood groups, all networked to efforts related to economic development strategies. Broad civic involvement may mean that the interests of businesses cannot be accommodated fully and without question in the inner cities, but this will produce more successful and longer-lasting efforts in improving the economic well-being of urban communities. Roxbury represents a model for other neighborhoods in Boston and Massachusetts not only in terms of its history of struggles on behalf of the neighborhood and benefiting residents but also for showing how neighborhoods can begin to develop visions and strategies that define the benefits for economic development for all groups in society.

Given this assessment of the Roxbury Master Plan in Boston and its implied critique of local economic development driven by the interests dominant and of powerful institutions, what kind of planning framework emerges that might be useful for neighborhoods like Roxbury? A community-based strategy for economic development that balances both the need for overall economic development and the improvement of neighborhood living conditions would have the following components according to many residents and activists. It would seek to generate wealth through activities that are based on the assets and resources of the neighborhood but not in ways that would result in massive displacement of residents or small businesses. The strengthening of small businesses would enhance the potential multiplier effect of new wealth. Increasing homeownership and equity but also investing in affordable housing is important and very much related to a stable workforce. Planning would be “holistic” in that transportation would be linked to positive impacts for housing, economic development, workforce mobility, and socially connecting residents across various parts of the neighborhood and the city. Transportation would also be linked to training of youth and adults in apprenticeable or blue-collar trades, so that the building of infrastructure has a direct benefit to residents.

These ideas, as well as the planning tools developed by residents, including the statement of principles and values, the criteria for evaluation of economic development proposals and impact on local businesses, and a comprehensive governance structure to dispose of land, show that the participation of residents in the development of the Roxbury Master Plan represented a vanguard of thinking and sophistication about many economic, social, and community issues facing the neighborhood. It was the input and insistence of residents and civic leaders—in partnership with the Boston Redevelopment Authority—that helped produce a holistic and democratic vision for Roxbury and Boston. All this suggests that in spite of claims of apathy, ignorance, and behavioral pathology found in some literature about poor and working-class urban neighborhoods (Banfield 1973; Lemann 1994), it is in the struggles of the residents of these same neighborhoods where we can find models of civic participation and support for progressive ideas for building urban economies and neighborhoods that are supportive for all people in the city.



## Notes

1. Smart Growth Network, *Getting to Smart Growth: 100 Policies for Implementation*, is published by the International City/County Network Management Association (January 2002).
2. Dan Richardson at a community meeting on December 6, 1999, held to discuss the initiation and facets of the Roxbury Master Plan.
3. The author utilized mapping software, data from the U.S. Census (1990, 2000), and projections developed by Applied Geographic Solutions to compile information for Roxbury.
4. The current official neighborhood boundaries encompassing sixteen different planning districts were adopted in the 1960s in response to urban renewal activities. In 1980, Boston started to utilize sixty-eight subdivisions of the sixteen planning districts and referred to these as "Neighborhood Service Areas." In 1988, the planning district boundaries were refined further and subareas within each neighborhood were identified.
5. A brief summary and discussion is provided in "March 25 Community Workshop Themes" Memorandum, by James Jennings to Stull and Lee (April 7, 2000).
6. Remarks of Mayor Thomas M. Menino to Boston Chamber of Commerce, December 14, 2001; see also *Boston Globe* (December 15, 2001; March 18, 2002); *Bay State Banner* (February 21, 2002; April 4, 2002).

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