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February 4, 2024

Via email: Natalie.Deduck@Boston.gov

Boston Planning and Development Agency
Attn: Natalie Deduck
One City Hall Square, Floor 9
Boston, MA 02201

Re: Pier 5 Engineering Study

Dear Ms. Deduck,

Boston Harbor Now respectfully submits the following comments on the *Pier 5 Engineering Study* commissioned by the Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA). Our staff has followed this project since its inception and previously submitted a comment letter in April 2021. Most recently, we attended the January 2024 Public Meeting.

As longtime stewards of the Boston Harborwalk, Boston Harbor Now is committed to ensuring that the waterfront we build today is designed for a more resilient and inclusive future. We use the term “Harborwalk 2.0” to capture the aspirations of this work to ensure the waterfront is accessible and welcoming; is prepared for the coastal impacts of climate change; and centers equity and inclusion in the development of its design, construction, and programming. An accessible waterfront should have both linear and lateral connections between the city and the water, as well as numerous activation strategies to serve all Bostonians. A resilient waterfront includes a variety of climate adaptation strategies to protect and serve Boston at a district scale. To center equity in waterfront design is to focus on strategies that make the waterfront feel safe and inclusive through lighting, signage (preferably multi-lingual), full ADA accommodations, and the elimination of features that make users feel unwelcome or excluded.

A Use for the Public

The BPDA’s most recent study has confirmed that Pier 5 in Charlestown is currently unfit for public access. The study found that the pier is in “serious” condition with “advanced deterioration overstressing, or breakage [that] may have significantly affected the load-bearing capacity of the primary structural components.” With a fence to prevent visitors from walking on the unsafe structure, Pier 5 walls the public off from the water. We, therefore, appreciate the BPDA’s most recent study to reopen the pier or convert the pier to a watersheet, thereby, providing opportunities for the public to reconnect with the harbor at this stretch of the waterfront.



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The BPDA’s study evaluates the cost of three hypothetical uses for the site and potential shapes for a reconstructed pier. The study considered improving the existing pier for pedestrian access, improving the existing pier for a public park and sailing center, and demolishing the pier to create open watersheet, which could be used for “future potential uses”. If the pier were to be reconstructed, the study contemplated a scenario in which the whole pier was repaired and a scenario in which only a portion of the pier was restored, resulting in an “L” shape.

In accordance with our Harborwalk 2.0 vision, we hope the new space will be welcoming and accessible to everyone and prepared for climate change. As such, we are open to the various proposed configurations and uses so long as they are able to achieve these goals. In particular, the improved site should be fully made available and welcoming to all members of the public. If the pier remains in place, we would like to see public amenities that encourage exploration of the site, like interpretive signage, seating, shade structures, and other community-identified amenities that enhance the pier. If the pier is removed for structural and economic reasons, we hope the proponent introduces replacement infrastructure, such as a floating barge, that offers visitors additional opportunities to touch the water. We hope to see more chances for people to sail, kayak, and even swim in the area. Though the water around the Charlestown Navy Yard can be wavy, we believe that a sheltered access down to the watersheet could provide the community with a unique amenity.

Designing for Coastal Flooding

As the pier is being designed, it will need to contemplate rising sea levels and be able to withstand coastal inundation. The design should be coordinated with the other resilience efforts in the Charlestown Navy Yard, including those of the National Park Service (NPS) to ensure decisions about the future of Pier 5 are coordinated with the NPS’ resilience planning. Flood-resilient infrastructure must connect to provide a continuous line of defense, and as such, the BPDA and NPS need to coordinate their efforts and alignments. Coordination between the two agencies is not only necessary for effective district level flood protection, but may also impact the design of Pier 5. Understanding where Pier 5 falls in relation to the two agencies’ flood alignments and the site’s role in contributing to district flood protection will greatly impact its future design. In the same vein, it would be helpful to understand how the existing pier contributes to coastal flood protection. It is possible that the pier provides wave attenuation even in its weakened state.



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If it does provide wave attenuation, the pier may be worth preserving after any necessary stabilization.

Boston Harbor Now is pleased to see Pier 5 moving forward, reopening a part of the waterfront that has been closed for quite some time. Though it is unclear what the future configuration and use of the pier will be, we appreciate that all contemplated scenarios envision a future where the site is open to the public. As the site is being designed, we hope the BPDA considers activation strategies that invite the public to explore the pier or enjoy the water. We also hope they will shape future pier with climate change in mind. The ultimate fate of the pier's design should reflect the broader flood strategies of the BPDA and NPS, which will need to work together to devise a coordinated strategy to protect the neighborhood.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this project and look forward to following its progress toward implementation. We would be happy to speak with you further if there are additional questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathy Abbott".

Kathy Abbott
President and CEO
Boston Harbor Now