

# East Boston Times-Free Press

East Boston Massachusetts Newspaper

Chris Marchi | August 20, 2015

## More Water Access

I picked my 10-year-old niece up from Piers Park Sailing Center yesterday. She was enrolled in the Harbor Explorers program for little kids last year and this year would be her first year in the sailing summer camp, so I asked her how it was going. As we left, she explained that there wasn't much wind near the pier, but it picked up as you got out onto the open water, so it was fun.

It's hard to imagine the progress we've made on our waterfront already. In less industrialized areas-places like the Charles River, in the Back Bay, it's a little easier to imagine recreational use of water resources. But here, many said "you can't do that!" When it came to recreational boating in East Boston, citing water quality and dangerous shipping lanes as insurmountable safety obstacles.

Now, thanks to programs like Piers Park Sailing, we've reached the point where 10-year-olds are sailing around the Boston Harbor and we're hungry for more! Hoping to find more opportunity for waterfront activities, last summer, the NOAH Youth Crew took a walking tour around the entire coast line of East Boston taking pictures and interviewing local residents about waterfront history.

We found a wide variety of conditions and assets. While we saw that much, maybe most, of our water frontage is unused and littered with the ruins of an industrial age now long gone, we also found gently sloping beaches, accessible boat launch areas and pockets of jobs-producing industry. We learned, while talking to older residents, of our community's equally diverse water access history. Older residents remember crabbing in Eagle Hill, beaches and Jeffries Point and at the Condor Street Urban Wild and boating everywhere.

Mind you, the waterfront wasn't a Walt Disney World recreational center. There were no signs up encouraging people to enjoy! People used whatever access they could find, reporting sneaking through holes in fences in the 1930's and patching up abandoned skiffs for adventures to the islands.

So our new realized progress in getting our children out onto the water is really going back to the future. Now, with most of the industrial action gone and most of our waterfront blocked off by chain link and barbed wire, the onslaught of development is upon us and it is incumbent on us as island residents to learn from our past and build upon it.

So this summer, the NOAH Youth set a goal to provide more water access for more residents in more neighborhoods. We scheduled 15 days of salt water activities, kicking off the summer early on Memorial Day with the Battle of Noddle Island Community Regatta and Reenactment, and we've kept the events coming; with beach clean-ups in Eagle Hill and Jeffries Point and learn to kayak days all over the area. We set a goal to get 1000 people out onto East Boston waters by the end of the summer, with the centerpiece program being a 10 day free kayaking experiment in Orient Heights at Constitution Beach.

Now in mid August, the results are coming in and it's a landslide (waterside?!). With two weeks left in the summer, 1,500 people have ventured out onto East Boston waters already. 1,247 of them used one of only five single or five double kayaks at our 10 day program on Constitution Beach. And that program was cut short by one rain day, followed by a day in which the beach was closed to swimming.

The fact is that East Boston has the best share of Boston's salt water coastline resources. There are some challenges, and still some naysayers, but after this summer it's clear that East Boston residents are ready to push for more. So, the next time you are walking near the water, stop and take a look. Imagine what could be there? Where could there be a public boat launch? Can we develop better boat storage areas to increase access? How can we expand the Constitution Beach program and provide even more opportunity at Piers Park?

The day after our Constitution Beach program wrapped up, one of our East Boston Environmental Facebook members reported that her young daughter asked her if they were going kayaking again? When her mom explained that the program was over, she remarked, "Look mommy, the sun is out and the boys will be down at the beach with the kayaks!"

Let's all agree that this child is right; for families who live on an island, boating on a sunny summer day should always be an option! And if you're not already, join the conversation on East Boston Environmental on Facebook. NOAH's Youth will be working with DCR and Save the Harbor Save the Bay to try to extend more boating opportunities soon!