



# Decay under the ground

Officials stall  
as pilings rot

*By Mary Hurley  
TAB Staff Writer*

**B**OSTON — Once in a while, the residents of lower Beacon Hill are reminded of a costly problem that exploded into headlines a half-dozen years ago but has now largely faded from view.

Cracks appear in the woodwork and windows slope — telltale signs that the foundation has been damaged due to wooden underpiles rotting because of low underground water levels.

Most passersby hardly take a second glance at workers, like those at the back entrance of a Beacon Street townhouse who were recently burrowing into the foundation to investigate and remedy the situation.

And at a steep price. Residential homeowners pay an average of \$150,000 to repair foundations, said James Lambrechts of the Cambridge engineering and environmental consulting firm, Haley & Aldrich, Inc.

*see Decaying, page 8*

# City fears liability for decay

DECAYING,  
from page 1

Four years ago, property owners on Brimmer, Pinckney and Mount Vernon streets filed suit in Suffolk Superior Court against city and state officials for "carelessness and negligence" resulting in the lowered water table. The lawsuit is still pending. So is action.

## Neighborhoods on filled land

The extensive publicity of the mid-1980s surrounding the problem motivated city officials and residents to focus on the need for preventive action.

Neighborhoods built on filled land in the 19th century, such as the Back Bay, Fenway and Bay Village, faced a potentially serious problem because a majority of the building foundations constructed before 1920 were supported by wood pilings.

When groundwater levels drop, the wood is exposed, causing it to deteriorate.

The problem is, no one really knows how serious the situation is.

A 1985 report on Back Bay groundwater by Haley & Aldrich to the Boston Redevelopment Authority emphasized the need for a comprehensive, groundwater level monitoring program.

In the 1930s, Trinity Church and the Boston Public Library faced serious foundation problems caused by deterioration of wood pilings and, since that time, have closely monitored the water table. But residential areas do not have any such monitoring system.

In the mid-1980s, when the publicity was at its height, the City Council, at the urging of District 8 City Councilor David Scondras and neighborhood activists, established a Groundwater Trust to monitor the water table and find out what areas might be in danger.

But nothing has happened.

"The only thing that has changed since 1985 is time," Scondras said, noting that it is a hidden problem rather than a high-profile disaster like a hurricane or an earthquake.

"The important always gets displaced by the urgent," he added.

Today, the trust is largely inactive, due to a lack of money needed to open observation wells. The city government, fearing it would be held liable and be faced with millions of dollars in renovation costs, has kept a distance.

## "Many different players"

A number of factors may alter groundwater levels, including settling fill, subways, traffic and sewage. Among the agencies that may contribute to the problem are the MBTA, the Massachusetts Turnpike, the Metropolitan District Commission, and the Boston Water and Sewer Commission, officials say.

"There have been so many different players in this play that the city could be paying for something it has no responsibility over," said Ed Burke, who is the mayor's liaison to the Beacon Hill, Back Bay and Fenway neighborhoods.

"The issue of who is liable has been a



PHOTO BY WINSLOW MARTIN

**A quiet day on Beacon Hill. Under ground, however, the scene may not be as innocent.**

factor in postponing a solution," said Scondras, who has begun yet another campaign to seek federal and state assistance.

"It's a problem money can solve," he added.

In addition, the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay is seeking \$50,000 in community benefits from the renovation of the Prudential Center for a Back Bay monitoring program.

The deadline for submitting requests for community benefits money was last week. The neighborhood association is also requesting \$140,000 to maintain the Commonwealth Avenue Mall.

"On the theory that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, we'd like to see that the groundwater level be monitored," said Elliott Laffer, the neighborhood association's chairman. "That's why the trust was set up, and we saw this as an opportunity to provide some funding."

Because the Prudential renovation, which began last week, will be done in stages, neighborhood groups who are approved for financing won't be receiving the total amount requested.

## A letter to Gov. Weld

More than \$50,000 is needed, and Scondras, who attempted to seek the state's help several years ago, is hopeful that a new state administration will be more inclined to provide assistance.

Last week, he wrote a letter to Gov. William Weld, seeking his support and requesting that he "initiate investigations into the possibility of obtaining federal funds."

"With appropriate backing from local officials," Scondras wrote, "it is possible that Boston could obtain money either from the Army Corps of Engineers or from Federal Disaster relief monies."

Financing prevention, however, is a tough sell. "It's the kind of issue people think about only when they recognize a problem," Laffer said.

As for now, "we don't know what's going on," he added. "We do know that if those piles are exposed because the water level has been drawn down, the damage will be irreparable without jacking up the buildings and stupendous costs."