No Worries About Groundwater

Amidst the growing economic instability unleashed by the coronavirus, homeowners in the downtown neighborhoods can at least be reassured that the foundations of their houses will remain on solid footings.

A relatively dry winter has raised concerns that low groundwater levels...

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By Dan Rabb

Many Landmarks Are Not Protected

One of the most visited sites on the Freedom Trail, the Paul Revere House is unquestionably an icon of Boston’s revolutionary heritage, a tangible artifact of the history that remains central to the city’s identity. But according to the City of Boston, the Paul Revere House is not a landmark. Not officially, anyway.

The Paul Revere House is not the only major historic site in Boston to lack local landmark status, meaning that changes to the building do not require approval from the Boston Landmarks Commission, the city’s preservation authority. Along the Freedom Trail, neither King’s Chapel nor the Old North Church are designated as local landmarks. Neither is the Old South Meeting House, although it is...

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By Dan Rabb

Virus Is Reducing Property Crime

Is the coronavirus shutdown leading to a drop in crime?

Violent and property crime rates have decreased in the downtown neighborhoods so far this year, according to new Boston Police Department (BPD) statistics. The Back Bay, South End and Fenway collectively saw a 12% drop in crime compared to this point last year, and Downtown and Beacon Hill have seen a 9% decrease, mirroring a steady dip in serious crime citywide.

A sharp decline in property crime is driving this change. The police have reported 24 residential burglaries in the downtown neighborhoods this year, a drop from last year’s 39, though robberies increased slightly. Plus, larcenies have fallen to 707 cases, a decrease of 100.

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By Joe Walsh

FIRST TIME IN HISTORY

WE CAN SAVE THE HUMAN RACE BY LAYING IN FRONT OF THE T.V. AND DOING NOTHING LET’S NOT SCREW THIS UP
Mass and Cass
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Southampton Street, with programs like needle exchanges moved to mobile or outdoor facilities. “The challenge, officials say, is finding space for homeless individuals who may be infected but have nowhere to isolate themselves. Boston Healthcare for the Homeless set up a pair of tents for isolation and quarantine at the Southampton Street shelter, but their capacity for infected patients is less than thirty. While the city has carved out overflow space at its Mary McNelis House healthcare facility, it houses a maximum of 53 patients. Most experts predict far higher numbers within Boston’s homeless community.

“The next big push is to see where we’re going to isolate folks, where we quarantine them, and how do we help patients who screen positive and are COVID infected,” said Miriam Komaromy, medical director at BMC’s Grayken Center for Addiction and part of the city’s response team. “There’s a major focus on trying to pick up people in the homeless population when they develop symptoms and need to be tested and then work to try not to introduce them to the larger population of people who don’t have housing.”

The city is now looking to commandeere college dorms, hotel rooms, and empty government properties as spaces for isolation, quarantine and treatment of unhoused Bostonians, according to Jen Tracey, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Recovery Services. Tracey says the city is in the process of securing around 300 beds, but hopes to push that number closer to 1000 as the outbreak gets worse. At the state level, the Baker administration is also looking at what properties could be converted to temporary housing or treatment facilities, a list that officials acknowledge is likely to include BMC’s Newton Pavilion in the South End.

“No one should be surprised if we start to see conversions of underutilized or available or suitable spaces, including the Newton Pavilion,” said Steve Fox, founder of the South End Forum. “We need to set expectations that it doesn’t come as a surprise that this is what’s happening.”

Widespread addiction within Boston’s homeless population also presents challenges in efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19. A person in withdrawal from opioids or alcohol is unlikely to effectively self-quarantine and could spread the virus among other users.

In response, the city and service providers have expanded the availability of medically assisted recovery options like suboxone that only require periodic doctor visits. Expecting medical facilities to become less accessible in the coming weeks, officials are rolling out telemedicine portals around Newmarket. BMC’s Komaromy is optimistic these efforts will work.

“I think we’ve been able to maintain or even increase access to treatment,” she said. “Fortunately, the feds and the state have been working to actually loosen restrictions and make it easier for medical providers to treat substance use disorders medically, so that’s been really helpful.”

SEBA
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one stop source of information for business owners and a conduit between the South End’s commercial interests and government. Along with providing up-to-date information via its website and social media, the group hosted a series of webinars that allowed the business community to ask questions directly to legal experts and elected officials like State Representatives Jon Santiago and Aaron Michlewitz. SEBA is also collecting detailed information at the same time,” he said. “We’re trying to get information out there and gather feedback as fast.

“Some small businesses in the South End, are so important not just to our economy but to our culture,” she said. “If we don’t keep them alive, a little bit of Boston is going to die with them.”

Groundwater
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could destablize many of the downtown neighborhood’s oldest buildings. Built atop artificially filled marshlands, more than 6000 buildings in the Back Bay, South End and Fenway are supported by wooden piles driven into the soil nearly two centuries ago that rot when exposed to air.

Yet despite the lack of recent precipitation, there is no immediate cause for alarm, according to Christian Simonelli of Boston Groundwater Trust, an organization created by the city to measure and control groundwater levels. Although Boston had almost no snowfall this winter, and the 10.42 inches of precipitation that fell in downtown from December through February was below average, Simonelli says groundwater levels have stayed within normal limits.

“(The water level) is down a little bit, but it’s pretty typical for what we see,” Simonelli said, adding that levels have bounced back quickly after recent dry winters. “In 2016, the levels were also low, but by the fall they raised back up again.”

This will come as a relief to homeowers throughout the downtown areas. Rotting piles can cause the buildings atop them to “settle” or sink, causing structural damage and leading to a risk of collapse. The cost of repairing damaged piles and re-stablizing a building often runs into the millions of dollars. With a freeze on construction due to the coronavirus outbreak, it would be difficult for homeowners to move quickly to stabilize at risk buildings were groundwater levels found to be dangerously low.

Groundwater levels in the downtown neighborhoods are impacted by more than just rain and snowfall. While rotting piles in the Back Bay were reported as early as the 1920s, the problem grew over the course of the 20th century as nonporous paving surfaces limited the amount of rainwater absorbed into the ground and the construction of deep subbasements and tunnels redirected groundwater unpredictably.

The city created the Boston Groundwater Trust in 1986 after a number of buildings were condemned due to their rotting piles. The Trust monitors water levels using a series of wells dug around the downtown neighborhoods. Most frequently, cracked sewage lines and other infrastructure problems result in the sudden loss of groundwater in small sections of Boston’s landfilled neighborhoods.

Yet the city has also made changes to ensure that the annual ebb and flow of groundwater stays close to acceptable limits. The city now uses porous paving surfaces, and mandates the installation of “groundwater recharge” systems, which collect rainwater and allow it to absorb into the soil.

“We’re in a much better place than we were 30 years ago,” Simonelli said. “In the 1980s, there was no Groundwater Trust. No one was monitoring the levels. That’s why we were established. You have to look, and no one was looking.”

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