Drought Is Increasing Groundwater Worries

by Christian Bergeron

The state’s severe drought is complicating the area’s already precarious groundwater levels.

“I would not characterize it as a crisis, but we are seeing some of the lowest groundwater levels since 2000,” said Christian Simonelli, executive director of the Boston Groundwater Trust (BGT). “We really need rain.”

Simonelli said 18 inches of rain have fallen this year with only 2 inches in June and July, making it the “ driest seven-month stretch since 2000 when we began measuring precipitation.” Boston typically receives 43 inches of rain annually, according to U.S. Climate Data. Engineers and environmentalists caution shrinking groundwater can cause century-old pilings supporting buildings across the Back Bay and adjacent neighborhoods to rot by exposing them to wood-eating microbes.

Simonelli noted that sewer lines, subway tunnels and subterranean parking garages can damage aquifers that hold groundwater, causing them to leak.

He is monitoring a 1-foot drop Continued on Page 2

Car-Free Newbury May Happen Again

by Tanner Stening

A car-free Newbury Street could well happen again in the near future, say city officials.

In the coming days and weeks, the city will be meeting with residents and businesses to discuss the impact of Open Newbury Street, which saw vehicles banned from the bulk of the thoroughfare on August 7, according to Jerome Smith, Mayor Martin Walsh’s chief of civic engagement. Smith said Jacob Wessel, Walsh’s neighborhood liaison, will “go out with an evaluation team and provide businesses with a survey” to gauge the possibility of a repeat pedestrian day.

“Now’s the time where we want to get the real data,” Smith said. “We can expect to have a better feel for things a week or two after Labor Day.”

The day was deemed a success by most accounts. By noon on Sunday, Smith said pedestrians “just started filling the streets from what seemed like nowhere.” While neither the city nor the Boston Police Department have crowd estimates, Smith said the turnout was easily in the thousands. He added, “We had a couple businesses say they had increased foot-traffic and sales.”

Beginning at 10 am and ending at 6 pm, the event brought together Mayor Martin Walsh’s office, local

Street Scene

Graffiti and murals are cornerstones of urban living. It is unusual to see them paired together, yet here they are in a Harrison Avenue parking lot. The art was created in 1998 as part of the South Cove Community Health Center’s tobacco control mural project. When the graffiti came, is anyone’s guess. We’ll leave it to the art critics to rhapsodize on the juxtaposition.

Some Find Gap in Sunday Ticketing

by Christian Bergeron

Maybe you drove to the Pearl Jam concert at Fenway Park on August 7 and parked in a space designated for residents, expecting city parking enforcement officers take Sunday evenings off.

That was a $100 mistake.

On a night Eddie Vedder brought
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Groundwater
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in the groundwater level in the area bounded by Exeter and Gloucester Streets, along Beacon and Marlborough Streets.

Since the drop was “substantial,” Simonelli attributed it to a break in the aquifer from a sewer line or “some other infrastructure” but not the drought.

He said, however, “Across the network we have been seeing (groundwater) levels dropping since May.”

Since the BGT measures groundwater levels in 800 “wells” throughout Boston, Simonelli said, “It’s very hard to take an average for the city.”

“A good number of wells are high. Others are low,” he said. “It depends where you are.”

Robert Zimmerman, executive director of the Charles River Watershed Association, said the current drought “has been building for quite a while from below-normal rainfall since March 2015.”

“If it continues through the winter, Boston will have to worry,” he said.

As a result of reduced rainfall, Zimmerman said the Charles River is at “a record low flow.”

“The average flow is 300 cubic feet per second, which is like 400 Olym-
pic-sized pools. Now, it’s less than 12 (pools). That’s a scary low,” he said.

He stressed shrinking groundwater levels have dire economic consequences.

“We’d be looking at big bucks. The cost of replacing pilings is off the charts,” he said.

Elliott Laffer, who served as the BGT’s first executive director, said thousand-dollar portions of the Back Bay, Fenway, South End, the flat of Beacon Hill, Bay Village and several other neighborhoods were built on reclaimed land.

“After the Suez Canal, it was the sec-
ond largest public works project of the 19th century,” he said.

A trained mechanical engineer, Laff-
er stressed that maintaining stable groundwater levels is a vital economic necessity.

If groundwater levels dropped for a long period of time, pilings would rot, leading to loss of support of the buildings above and uneven “settling” of the land they sit on that could require costly repairs or, even, demolition.

Laffer said when the problem affect-
ed the Boston Public Library, major repairs in 1929 cost $250,000, the equivalent of several million dollars today.

“A huge portion of Boston’s tax base is sitting atop those pilings,” he said.

“If you lose those pilings, you lose that history that makes Boston viable.”

Sunday Tickets
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the crowd to its feet with a rousing rendition of “Rodin in the Free World,” parking enforcement officers issued 42 tickets for violations of the Fenway/Kenmore resident parking regulations, said Boston Transportation Department (BTD) spokes-
person Tracey Ganiatsos.

While some residents complained concert-goers grabbed their “resident-only” spaces, she said officers who had just begun their 10 pm Sun-
day evening shift issued $4,200 worth of the dreaded orange tickets.

Ganiatsos explained that BTD’s parking enforcement officers work around-the-clock in regular shifts from Sunday evening through Sat-
urday at 11 pm because they have to enforce parking laws when the Public Works Department is cleaning city streets during the night.

She said the only time parking of-
ficers do not work is from Saturday at 11 pm through Sunday at 10 pm, when a new shift starts 23 hours later.

“Although we do not, as a rule, add a shift to cover concerts or ball games, the (parking) regulations are covered during normal working hours,” said Ganiatsos.

She cautioned potential scofflaws that police officers also write parking violations, so there never is a time when they are not liable to be ticket-
ed.

However, Vicki Smith, chairperson of the Neighborhood Association of Back Bay, said the lack of enforce-
ment on Sunday proved to be a problem during a recent Open Newbury Street event to encourage new visitors by closing the busy street to traffic.

“Visitors took advantage of the absence of parking enforcement agents by taking ‘resident-only’ spaces on parallel streets. People called 311, but the office was closed,” she said.

Smith worried that “if people get in the habit” of taking resident-only spaces on Sundays knowing they will not get tickets, residents with the le-
gitimate right to park will be left in the cold.

Ben Starr, who chairs the traffic and parking committee for the Beacon Hill Civic Association, said the area is generally too far from Fenway Park to be impacted by baseball or music fans “poaching” resident-only parking spaces.

He did say, however, that some “people in the know take advantage” of the lack of parking enforcement on Sunday and grab spaces designated for residents.

“No question that takes place. We want enforcement,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s that significant enough a number to be impacting our neighbor-
hood yet.”

Longtime Fenway resident Charles Martel has suggested to City Coun-
Cillors that Boston use revenue from parking fines to install signs alerting drivers that grabbing a resident’s space is potentially more expensive than paying to park in a lot.

Noting the city receives more rev-
ues from tickets issued during Fen-
way Park events, he would like to see BTD data that shows how many parking officers are working during weekend ball games and concerts and how many tickets are being issued.

“What we’re looking for is enforce-
ment,” said Martel. “What’s the point of having laws if they’re not enforced.”

Another Fenway resident, Frederic-
ka Veilkey, said effective enforcement of resident parking regulations “helps out everybody.”

She urged non-residents attending Fenway events to be aware that park-
ing in a lot is cheaper than getting a ticket for taking a resident’s space and that using public transportation was the most economic approach.

“There’s absolutely enough park-
ing,” said Veilkey. “There’s too many cars.”

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businesses and visitors on foot, the result of which was a display of spont-
aneity and creativity on the parts of pedestrians and retailers.

Restaurants set up impromptu street cafés, Fris-
bees and footballs were flung and bees and footballs were flung and triple for that day,” he said.

said that there were several complaints concerning parking.

“At 7:15 pm all the trash barrels were empty, the traffic was flowing as normal,” Wessel said.

Amid all of the positives, Wessel said that there were several complaints concerning parking.

“There was some car displacement, and it was a little tougher getting around that day,” he said, brushing them off as “trade-offs.”

Smith said residents should call 311, the city’s non-emergency line, and submit feedback regarding the event.

Wessel and Smith praised the Public
Works Department and merchants for “an exemplary job with cleanup.”

By “7:15 pm all the trash barrels were empty, the traffic was flowing as normal,” Wessel said.

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