



A proposed expansion of the groundwater conservation overlay district would help the city protect its tax base and historic architecture, proponents said.

Many buildings in Fenway, Back Bay, and parts of lower Beacon Hill are built on submerged wood pile construction. Individual buildings can represent tens of millions of dollars.

Property taxes today represent about three quarters of city revenues, up from half in 2002.

“A significant number of those revenues come from buildings that sit on piles,” said Simonelli, executive director of the Boston Groundwater Trust (BGT).

Microbes flourish when pilings are exposed to the air, producing rot in the wood and a gradual, uneven settling of the structure. This causes floors to tilt and walls to crack.

The cost to reinforce piles under a typical row house can be in the range of \$300,000 and up. It cost about \$3,000,000 in today's dollars to repair rotted pilings under the Boston Public Library's Copley Square McKim building in 1929, according to BGWT.

“Our reliance on stable groundwater levels is essential to communities and properties throughout the city,” said Kenzie Bok, City Councilor (Back Bay, Beacon Hill, Fenway).

Several Chinatown buildings had to be torn down entirely in the 1980s due to low groundwater levels, which have improved significantly since the Trust was established in 1986. The groundwater conservation overlay district was established in 2006 and last revised in 2007.

The district currently encompasses Back Bay, Chinatown, Fenway, the South End, Leather District, and the flat of Beacon Hill. It also includes portions of the North End/ Waterfront. Under the proposed changes, the district would be expanded to Audubon Circle, Central Waterfront, Lower Roxbury, and sections of East Boston.

Applicants must prove their project will not lower surrounding groundwater level. Under the proposal, the threshold of ‘no harm’ would be extended from seven feet to eight.

“This change is really significant to protect the buildings that have really deep cutouts.” said Christian Simonelli.

Projects in the district are also required to capture the first inch of rain on site. This boosts groundwater recharge and prevents sewer overflow. The capture requirement would be updated to include the whole lot, rather than only the structure.

In disconnected sections of the North End/ Waterfront, applicants only have to prove no harm. The proposal would require applicants to meet all requirements across the entire district. Finally, some procedural language would be added to ensure timely compliance and articulate the requirements.

“These are all important improvements in what has been a really successful zoning and regulation effort,” said Elliot Laffer, chairperson of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay. He served for ten years as the first executive director of BGT. Councilor Ed Flynn (Chinatown and Downtown) said the proposal has “my strongest support.” He said, “I’m glad that these provisions are going to be strengthened and added to other areas across the city.”