

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 Mayoral Candidates

DAY 13: CITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

How would you organize planning and development in the City?

The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) is Boston's economic development and planning agency. The BRA was established in 1957 and assumed the planning powers of the City Planning Board in 1960. A Board of five members, four appointed by the Mayor and one by the Governor, directs the BRA's policies and, in consultation with the Mayor, appoints a Director to manage the Authority.

The BRA has broad development authority over commercial and residential development. Authority staff review proposed development projects that require zoning relief, serve as staff to the City's Zoning Commission and make project recommendations to the City's Zoning Board of Appeal. The Authority is authorized to buy and sell property, acquire property through eminent domain and grant tax concessions to encourage development.

The BRA's authority is greatly enhanced by zoning regulations that generally require variances for large and small projects which need BRA approval. "As of right" projects that meet all zoning regulations and can proceed without BRA action are rare in Boston.

The BRA is funded primarily through leases on property the Authority owns or from the outright sale of Authority property. For example, the BRA owns the Marine Industrial Park land, 191 acres home to businesses that employ 3,500 people. The BRA receives no operating funds from the City, but prior to 1988 city operating funds were appropriated annually to help support the planning function. BRA capital projects are funded through the City's five-year capital plan.

Today, the BRA's supporters argue that the current structure, housing both planning and development functions under a single Authority, is more efficient. They believe the BRA is able to guide large and small urban development projects to completion while addressing the local communities' interests and, when necessary, providing mitigation through the active participation of Impact Advisory Groups and other established community and neighborhood organizations.

Critics argue that the BRA lacks accountability and transparency and operates as an independent agency responsive only to the Mayor. Some believe that the combination of planning and redevelopment functions in one authority does not provide for appropriate checks and balances and that planning is subordinate to individual development proposals. Critics differ as to whether the BRA lacks concern for neighborhood interests or gives too much deference to them, adding delays and costs to a project.

Does the BRA sufficiently meet what you think are the key attributes for an effective municipal planning and development function? If yes, explain why, or if no, what structure would you advocate that would effectively deliver development and planning services for Boston? Do you believe Boston's Zoning Code adequately serves the needs of Boston and, if not, how should it be altered? Would you consider expanding "as of right" zoning, which would take the authority to oversee certain projects out of the BRA's hands?

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