
The Boston Globe

Founded 1872

RICHARD H. GILMAN *Publisher*

MARTIN BARON *Editor*

RENÉE LOTH *Editor, Editorial Page*

HELEN W. DONOVAN *Executive Editor*

RICHARD J. DANIELS *President*

SATURDAY, JULY 12, 2003

FORT POINT SETBACK

BOSTON OFFICIALS have big plans to enliven Fort Point Channel with dozens of entertainment and educational improvements. But a revised plan by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority to deal with the discharge of raw sewage from two outfalls into the channel appears inconsistent with floating classrooms and waterside dining.

In 1997, the quasi-public MWRA developed a plan to build a storage tunnel under A Street that would capture 80 percent of the combined sewer overflow — a mixture of storm water and sewage — during rainstorms for later treatment at Deer Island. But last month the MWRA filed a project change notice with state environmental officials that abandons the plan and replaces it with a simpler and less expensive plan that would remove the sewage but allow dirty stormwater to flow into the channel untreated.

Harbor advocates and MWRA officials are sparring over the new plan. Michael Hornbrook, chief operating officer of the MWRA, says the proposal actually does a better job of addressing the annual discharge of roughly 3 million gallons of untreated overflow, and does it at about one-fifth of the original \$15 million cost. But Bruce Berman, the harbor watcher for the the nonprofit Save the Harbor/Save the Bay group, says that, while the plan addresses the sanitary flows from the sewer systems, it increases the flow of bacteria-laden stormwater into the channel.

The MWRA is legally responsible for sanitary flows, not dirty stormwater. But it is increasingly apparent that the channel will not achieve water quality standards sufficient for safe public use without addressing the stormwater issue. That argues for better street sweeping and more frequent catch-basin cleanings by municipal officials in Boston.

MWRA officials are not off the hook, however. Both their original and their new plan view the channel in the 1990s context of a body of water suitable for barges and motorized working boats. But the future uses for the channel, unveiled last year in the Menino administration's "water activation plan," include water trails for paddle boats, floating art displays, and places where kids can connect with — i.e., touch — the water. That argues for higher overall water quality goals than currently exist for the channel.

Federal officials are already showing a willingness to press for cleaner, safer water in Fort Point Channel. In a June 25 response to the MWRA's recent progress report on the channel, the US Justice Department argues that new public uses could require reclassification. "Fort Point Channel is likely to be subject to recreational uses, and consequently additional CSO controls may be necessary," it reads.

The low expectations for the Fort Point Channel are changing, and that should require elevated attention and increased willingness to improve the water quality.