

FERRY ME HOME

COMMUTING BY BOAT SPURS DEVELOPMENT IN OLDER PORT CITIES

by Alice Brown

Just 10 miles north of Boston, 80 acres of undeveloped, post-industrial property sit forlornly along the shore of Lynn. The only waterfront residential property in this diverse city is the 1985 condominium development at Seaport Landing. But change is coming, fueled by new zoning that allows for denser mixed-use development and by the alluring promise of regular ferry service at the Blossom Street Pier.

At the long-dormant former site of a Chevrolet dealership, a development called North Harbor is breaking ground this year on a 344-unit residential project and constructing a boardwalk that will link future residents to the ferry dock. According to the City's economic development agency, EDIC/ Lynn, the investors in this \$100 million project cited the commuter ferry as a major reason for their interest in the site. Elsewhere in Lynn, the promise of ferry service as a multi-modal option for reaching downtown Boston, and possibly other destinations such as the Seaport or Dorchester's Columbia

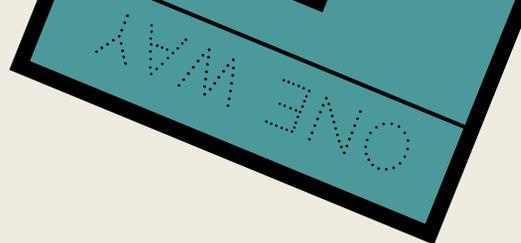


Illustration by **KYLE NELSON**/
Stoltze Design

Point, has drawn developers attracted to this kind of amenity. The 35-minute trip by boat promises to be the most reliable and appealing way to get directly downtown—more consistent than driving on Route 1A—and with closer connections to jobs in the Financial District and the Seaport than the commuter rail.

“We are seeing new development projects take shape, and shovels are in the ground for mixed-use and residential properties with water views of the Boston skyline,” says Lynn’s newly elected mayor, Thomas M. McGee. “Property values have gone up, and projects that languished for years have now moved forward specifically because there is a commuter ferry option.”

The new mayor has spent more than two decades representing his community in the State House and has been a champion of water transportation. Significant public investments and planning over the past decade have laid the groundwork for bringing permanent regular ferry service to Lynn. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and the state’s Seaport Economic Council invested nearly \$8 million between 2007 and 2011 to build a new ferry terminal, complete with ADA-accessible ramps, bulkheads, wave attenuators, and a new parking lot in order to support robust ferry service. Pilot service, for three months at a time, tested the ridership demand between Lynn and Boston in the summers of 2014 and 2015, with more than 15,000 passengers in the second year. Though suspended in 2016, ferry service returned for the summer of 2017, with funding from MassDOT as mitigation for roadway construction along 1A and around the Summer Tunnel.

Although this momentum has attracted developers, guaranteed year-round service has not yet arrived to spark additional construction. Wanting the autonomy to implement schedules as it sees fit, Lynn received a \$4.5 million federal grant to purchase its own ferry in 2016, and a business plan for permanent ferry service to Lynn, commissioned by MassDOT, was completed in February 2017. Now MassDOT and the MBTA are working with City Hall to procure a vessel, and with state support, the nonprofit Boston Harbor Now is working on a comprehensive water transportation study that is expected to lead to expanded ferry service in the region.

Whether ferry services catalyze development or waterfront development attracts ferry service is a question answered both ways.

At Hewitt’s Cove in Hingham, the ferry came first. The Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard, a hive of waterfront industry during World War II, was largely abandoned in the 1950s and ’60s. Ferry service began there in 1975 and gained traction with state assistance beginning in 1977. It has grown to become a year-round MBTA service, with 32 daily weekday departures—at a fare of \$9.25 one way—and more than 1 million passenger trips annually. Meanwhile, a mixed-use development has been evolving around the ferry dock over

the past decade. Hewitt’s Landing, a 150-unit townhouse development, opened in 2007 and condominiums followed, along with several blocks of familiar name-brand stores. The ferry terminal building was rebuilt by the MBTA in 2016 for \$7 million, and additional development is planned or under construction.

At Squantum Point in Quincy, by contrast, ferry service is now being demanded after 30 years of gradual development. The peninsula was a naval air station from 1923 to 1953, and the western half of the site has slowly been built out since the 1980s as the mixed-use Marina Bay neighborhood, with 6-to-12-story buildings clustered around a marina and boardwalk dotted with local shops and restaurants. The other half of the site served as a staging area for the construction of the Deer Island Water Treatment Plant. Materials and workers were ferried across Boston Harbor in the 1980s and ’90s. The staging area is now a state park and a parking lot, and the pier built for the construction barges has temporary ramps and floats that have allowed ferry pilots to operate over the past two summer seasons.

1,482,251 NUMBER OF MBTA FERRY PASSENGER TRIPS IN 2016
Source: MBTA

But the 352-unit Meriel apartments that have just been constructed adjacent to the pier are the first to embrace commuting by ferry in their sales pitch, advertising “by boat” as an option for reaching downtown Boston. With a new access road planned and a federal grant application for pier improvements submitted, the City of Quincy is working to implement more regular and permanent ferry service that can support new and continued development.

Ferries are not a silver bullet for attracting development and establishing a sense of place. Downtown Lynn was activated this summer by Beyond Walls—a public-art initiative that included the installation of 15 building-sized murals and more than 400 linear feet of dynamic LED lighting on underpasses below the commuter rail tracks. Even McGee notes that Lynn is benefiting from a thriving arts and cultural district as well as the attraction of relatively affordable housing options.

Still, there’s something about daily commuting by boat that captures the imagination, and public investments in water transportation are attracting new development all around Boston Harbor. Beyond the romance of sea-borne travel and the benefits of new transportation choices, the busy docks and maintenance facilities signify a rebirth in the region’s marine industrial cities. ■