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"Editor Letter"

Page 3

So Near and So Far

Most Bostonians don't really know East Boston, despite the fact that many of them drive through or fly over it on a regular basis. And most of them have no idea of the magnitude of the change that is underway in this neighborhood. In the last two decades, the largely Italian population has become increasingly Latino. Now new construction is underway, including waterfront condos that will lure a population of affluent professionals to the working-class community.

There are many reasons why Bostonians — or for that matter, anyone who cares about any city — should pay attention to the neighborhood on the other side of the harbor. East Boston — “Eastie” to its residents — is a microcosm of issues that are playing out in many communities across the country, issues such as waterfront development, conversion of industrial lands, reuse of obsolete buildings, changing identity, transportation and open-space pressures, and an increasingly diverse population.

Despite all that it has in common with so many other communities, East Boston has some unique physical features: its isolation from other Boston neighborhoods; its unparalleled harbor views of downtown Boston; Logan Airport; the Suffolk Downs racetrack; Chelsea Creek and the tank farms; the Belle Island Marsh nature reserve; Constitution Beach; and the McClellan Highway — Route 1A — which bisects the community. The fact that a community of 39,000 people has five rapid-transit stops is remarkable. As is the 35-foot Madonna — the statue at the Madonna Queen National Shrine at the top of Orient Heights, which offers breathtaking views of Boston. A short trek from the shrine to Saratoga Street, with its views across the Belle Isle Marsh, to Bayswater Street, with its view south to Logan across a cove, offers an imagined alternative history for Boston, one free of trade and politics, leaving a coastal landscape much like Duxbury or Newbury.

These features have in many ways shaped the personality of East Boston. Residents often refer to the experience of living on an island (in fact, the neighborhood was once five islands), and the spirit of island self-sufficiency reinforces Eastie's strong identity. Its residents fight fearlessly to protect their interests, with political skills honed over decades of fighting Logan Airport and Massport. Experts at negotiating mitigation packages, they have created a remarkable open-space network. They have weighed in on waterfront development, working with the BRA and Massport, to ensure public access to the harbor and connections to the rest of the community.

Given this David-and-Goliath history, the most remarkable aspect of East Boston is its openness to change. To be sure, there are residents who resent newcomers — especially those from other

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cultures. But if any community today can have shared values, the recognition that East Boston has been home to generations of new immigrants seems to bind residents of all ages and ethnicities. Established in 1844, the Temple Ohabei Shalom Cemetery on Wordsworth Street, the first Jewish cemetery in the state, is a reminder of East Boston's once-large Jewish community. Today, neighborhood Catholic churches with previously dwindling congregations are filled again with Latinos who share with previous generations of Irish and Italian immigrants a commitment to church and family. Ethnic stratification has built East Boston as much as the layers of soil that filled its islands and saltmarshes. Still, ethnic diversity is one thing; economic diversity is another. It remains to be seen if money proves to be more divisive than language and skin color.

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Editor