

# The Riverwalk and Canalway System 6

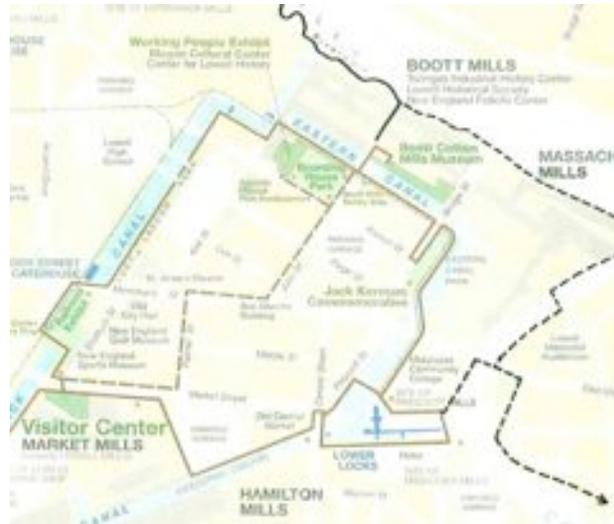
The city's Riverwalk and Canalway systems, which are best conceptualized collectively as a single network, make a strong contribution to the downtown that has the potential to be even stronger. The Park Service's current improvements to the Western Canal will make a big difference in the attractiveness of the system, and several of the interventions ahead are intended to make fuller use of this unique asset. However, the system will not achieve its full potential until it becomes *more continuous*, with *better wayfinding*, *better visibility*, and *more frequent and attractive gateways* into walkable neighborhoods.

## More Continuous

Walkway systems can be used in three different ways: as recreational circuits for walking and jogging, as convenient paths between destinations, and as destinations unto themselves. Right now a limited number of people treat these walks as destinations—



*The Riverwalk and Canalway systems provide an appealing alternative path through the downtown.*



*The continuation of the Riverwalk eastward around the Massachusetts Mills will better integrate it with the Canalway and connect it to regional trails to the east.*

for fishing and hanging out—and also as recreation circuits, and a yet smaller number of people use them as convenient pathways. This last category is the most tenuous, because people who walk for mobility do not feel fully safe on these paths unless they are relatively well populated; and they will not be better populated until they are more useful as recreational circuits, something that is limited by their lack of continuity.

Currently, the incomplete nature of the system—particularly where the Riverwalk ends at the Boott Mills—is preventing it from achieving the critical mass of visitors that would make it successful. While the means at its disposal are limited, the City needs

to maintain a high priority on the completion of the planned Riverwalk as it passes the Massachusetts Mills, rounds the peninsula at the confluence of the Merrimack and Concord Rivers, and connects back into the Lower Locks Canalway. With this important connection added, the system would be more useful as a recreational circuit, and would begin to attract a healthier population.

Additionally, Lowell's as-yet-incomplete connection to the 200-mile Bay Circuit Trail begins just across



*Boston's freedom trail is easy to follow thanks to inlaid bricks.*

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the Concord River from the Lower Locks, so connecting the Canalway and Riverwalk system to the east would make it a part of something much larger, and thus all the more useful. Incidentally, Lowell is the unfortunate owner of one of very few remaining gaps in this regional trail. The map of that trail, in which gaps are shown in red, suggests that this item belongs on the front burner.

## Better Wayfinding

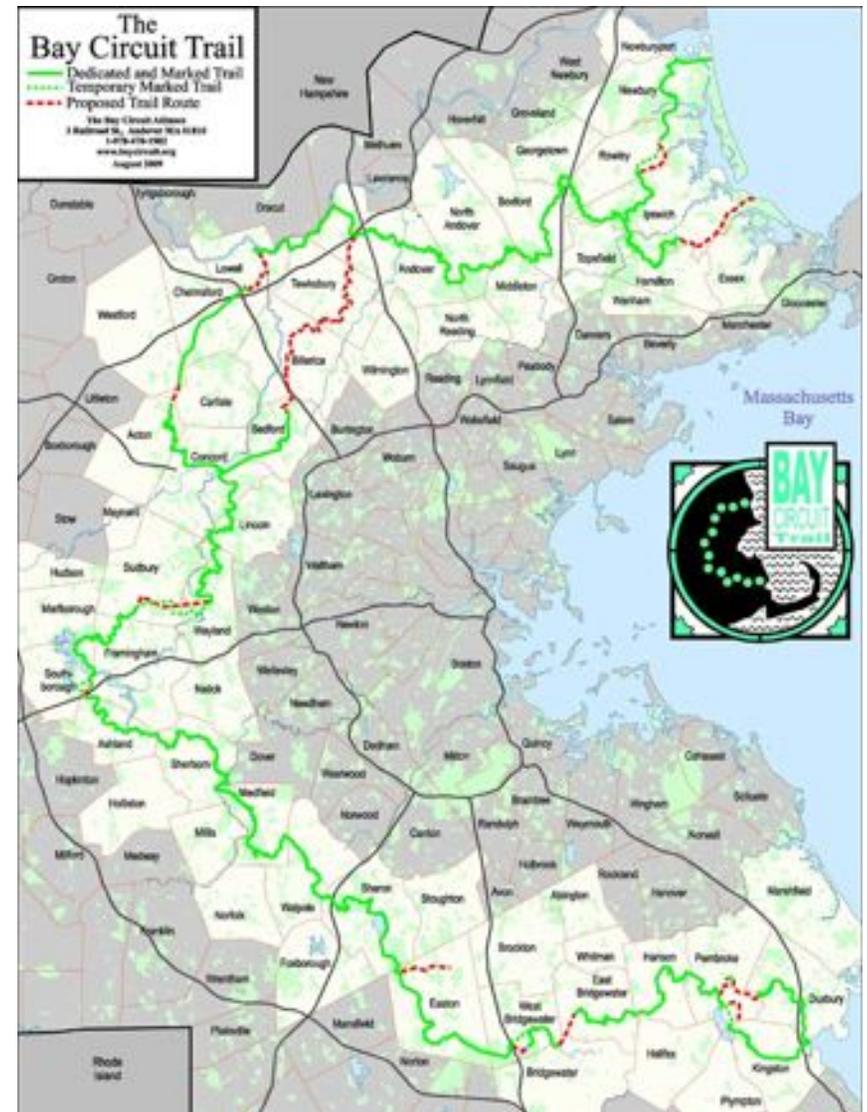
While the occasional maps along the Canalway are fairly clear, not everyone can read maps well, and fewer people yet take the time to do so. The most effective circuits, like Boston's Freedom Trail, have a continuous physical feature, like inlaid bricks, that make the route clear. In the case of Lowell's Canalway system, such a feature would be especially useful in places where the circuit does not line a canal, such as along Market Street.

## Better Visibility

Many people are reluctant to walk on the Canalway and Riverwalk because they do not feel that they are safe there. Just as cities benefit from "eyes on the street," walkways are made more safe by "eyes on the path," windows and doors that offer the possibility that one is being observed. While such an arrangement is not possible along the full walkway system, there are several places where the removal of a wall or the construction of a new building would greatly enhance the perceived safety of a segment. Several of the interventions proposed in Chapters 9 – 13 are motivated in part by this objective.

## Frequent Attractive Gateways

People are more likely to use a walking trail if it is easy to get to, and if the walk to it is appealing. For most of its length, the Canalway is fairly easy to get to, although the buildings that line it could be further encouraged to open directly onto it more frequently—even if that means making cuts into historic walls. The Riverwalk presents more of a challenge, as it runs for long stretches without any connections back into the urban fabric, which makes it less used and less safe—for example: between John Street and River Place. In addition, some of the streets where it does connect are not effective walkable environments. River Place has a lovely park where it meets the Riverwalk, but few people think to use that street as pedestrians, because it is lined by parking lots on both sides for its full length. Among the recommendations ahead are a new connection just to the east of River Place Towers, and improved edges to River Place.



*Lowell possesses one of the few embarrassing gaps in the otherwise complete 200-mile Bay Circuit Trail.*

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Finally, God bless Lowell Canalwaters Cleaners, the volunteer non-profit organization that does its best to keep the canals and the rivers' edges clean! But why are they necessary? Venice, Amsterdam, and Paris do not rely on volunteers to keep their cities' waterways attractive to tourists. Canal and river trash continues to blight downtown Lowell, and it is shortsighted to shortchange the maintenance of such a key economic asset.

