



— TRANSPORTATION —

## The Harbor Master

*Alison Nolan is the future of Boston's waterfront. (So long as lawsuits, competitors, and city planners don't sink her, that is.)*

**By Madeline Bilis**

**O**n a frigid morning in March, Alison Nolan leads me down a dock near Long Wharf, her black ballet flats clacking against the wood, to a gently bobbing water taxi she's arranged for us. It's just after 11 o'clock, and there's not much activity on the water. A biting wind whips my hair in front of my face and I must look cold, because Nolan assures me that the boat, shielded by clear plastic windows, is heated. She wraps a pink scarf around her neck, pausing to untuck her long black hair from it, and slips onto the boat with the ease of an old salt. Then, she offers her manicured hand to help me aboard.

Clad in a black Burberry trench coat, Nolan looks more like a creature of the Financial District than the scion of a long line of seafaring Bostonians—maybe because, improbably, she's both. As the fourth-generation principal and general manager of Boston Harbor Cruises, she has transformed her family's formerly seasonal business into not just the heart but the lifeblood, arteries, and veins of Boston's revitalized waterfront, putting it, and her, smack in the middle of the city's most

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dramatic economic transformation. With bright-blue eyes and a collected—if stiff—affect, the 41-year-old is the most influential figure on the waterfront—and yet you've probably never heard of her.

In the 11 years since she took over, Boston Harbor Cruises has built the single largest passenger fleet in the nation—58 vessels worth just under \$50 million in fair market value—and forged partnerships with almost every stakeholder in the harbor. It's the sole provider of MBTA boats, Harbor Islands transportation, and whale watches in Boston. It also runs sightseeing cruises, a Provincetown fast ferry, charter boats, water taxis, and a 70-foot, jet-powered speed monster called *Codzilla* that rips around the harbor all summer long, leaving behind a wake that is the bane of virtually anyone nearby on the open water. If you've ventured out on any excursion in the harbor, chances are you've set foot on one of Nolan's boats.

Now, she's going to show me the future.

This morning she's walked over from her temporary digs in Millennium Tower (she's cooling her heels in an ultra-luxe apartment while waiting for her condo in the Seaport to be finished) to trace a vision of a new ferry route connecting North Station to the South Boston waterfront. Outlined in Imagine Boston 2030, the city's first general development plan in more than 50 years, the route would be not just another conquest for Nolan's armada, but a link that many people believe could change the waterfront, the suburbs, and the city itself.

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## Transportation

A pilot program, which could embark on a test run later this summer, may offer a 149-passenger boat from North Station to the Seaport every 15 minutes during rush hour. And Nolan is gunning to make sure her company is running it.

As we putt east toward Logan Airport, the boat is as toasty as Nolan promised, though the air blasting from the heaters heightens the engine's stink. Raising her voice over the hum of the motors, she starts to pitch me on her vision. There used to be a robust ferry system in the harbor, she explains. From the early 1800s through the mid-1900s, boats like the East Boston Penny Ferry toed passengers, horses, carriages, and dry goods to and from downtown and East Boston. When the city carved out the Sumner Tunnel in 1934 and erected what eventually became the Tobin Bridge in 1950, the new connectors scuttled demand for the boats. The last penny ferry ran in 1952. But now, Nolan argues, the city has outgrown these roadways. The new North Station ferry line—or even better, a network that reaches to East Boston—could cut down on traffic and become a vital conduit to the booming Seaport.

It's a fine story, but not everyone is buying it. Former Governor Michael Dukakis is skeptical of the service, calling it "irrelevant" and arguing instead for the long-proposed North-South rail link. "You're not gonna solve the serious congestion and transportation problems in eastern Massachusetts with a boat, for God's sake," he told me. Plus, past attempts at innovating with ferries have run aground. Commuter boats from both Lynn and Winthrop didn't make it past their test runs. Although they drummed up enough demand, they lacked the funding to continue operating under Boston Harbor Cruises. (Winthrop has since debuted its own town ferry service.)

Even if the new ferry route *is* as good an idea as Nolan says, there are treacherous waters ahead for her and her company. For starters, the contract for a new ferry line isn't a sure bet. The final decision on who will operate it, if the route is a go, will come in June. If Nolan doesn't land it, a competitor would gain a vital foothold in the harbor, but if she does, any success could entice fiercer competition—maybe even from out of state—for the next round of expansion. Then there are the company's legal problems. *Codzilla* is in the jaws of two

serious lawsuits from passengers who claim that the 2,800-horsepower monster fractured their spines. And finally, a series of public mishaps last year has made Nolan's fast-growing company fodder for the local news, including the time a wedding charter vessel ran aground on a sandbar, and another episode when one of the company's ships rammed three other boats in the fleet while returning to Long Wharf.

Still, others would caution not to bet against Nolan. In this camp is Vivien Li, the intrepid former leader of the Boston Harbor Association and a guiding force in the cleanup and transformation of the waterfront. (The taxi I'm cruising in is named after Li.) Nolan "is definitely shaping what's happening in Boston in terms of the renaissance of Boston Harbor," Li says. "She is the face of the future of our city." If that's a title Nolan wants, though, she's going to have to fight for it.

BOSTON HARBOR CRUISES WAS FOUNDED in 1926, with a single boat rented by a West Ender named Matty Hughes, Nolan's great-grandfather. He offered sightseeing cruises along the Charles, coaxing his neighbors off the sweltering stoops of their apartment buildings for a cool trip up the river. The boat rides, which cost 10 cents, were a welcome treat on a hot day, even though the waters reeked of sewage and trash. Somehow, the filth didn't stop Hughes's new business from growing. He expanded his fleet and set up shop on India Wharf in the 1940s, adding tours to an even less desirable spot—the sludge-filled depths of Boston Harbor. If customers could brave the stench, they'd kick back while chugging past scenic landfills, including the one that used to be on Spectacle Island. Rick Nolan, Alison's father, remembers that when gases from the massive trash pile ignited, as they often did, he'd think, "There goes another one!"

In the late '60s, Hughes suffered what he thought was a huge blow to the business. In order to begin construction on a hulking pair of Brutalist condo buildings called the Harbor Towers, their landlord banished Boston Harbor Cruises to the bleak, industrial docks of Long Wharf. "We were brokenhearted," Rick says. "But it was the best thing that ever happened." After the move, the once unlikely spot for a burgeoning business experienced a flurry

of activity. The New England Aquarium settled in across the wharf in 1969. Then, the crumbling buildings that made up Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall were overhauled in an urban renewal project during the 1970s, and locals and tourists alike flooded in. Suddenly, Boston Harbor Cruises found itself in the center of the action.

Still, Alison's childhood typified Boston's hardscrabble waterfront before the harbor cleanup: When she was born, in 1975, the family lived in Medford and the company was seasonal and struggling. During summers, Rick worked long hours to make the most of the boom months, and in the winter he'd head to Florida to resurrect aging boats that his grandfather bought for the business. By the time Alison was 11, the work had taken a toll on his marriage to Alison's mother, Debbie, and they divorced. Soon after, Alison started putting in hours on the wharf, sweeping up trash, manning the ticket booth with her grandmother, even combing through encyclopedias at the Melrose Public Library to write scripts for the whale watches.

Despite her commitment, running the

family business was the last thing on Alison's mind. As a teenager, she was suddenly partially paralyzed from her feet to her neck, losing the ability to move or speak. "My mother thought maybe I had polio," she says, but it was Guillain-Barré syndrome—a disease that causes the immune system to attack the nerves. It took her almost two months in Tufts' Floating Hospital for Children to recover. On top of that, Debbie had enrolled her

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at the Pingree School, a tony private high school in South Hamilton with pillars and sprawling manicured lawns. She was an outsider in the midst of all that money. "I felt like all of the kids at that school would judge me because I lived in an apartment,"

Nolan says. She decided to become a doctor, and shipped off to Stonehill College, a Catholic liberal arts school in Easton, where she studied biology.

When Nolan graduated in 1997, though, the future looked different. Medical school felt daunting and expensive, while the waterfront was a natural fit. The place had changed, too. The federally mandated harbor cleanup effort, started in 1985, was having a real effect, and the dismantling of the Central Artery in 2004 opened the waterfront with help from the new Rose Kennedy Greenway. Feeling like she'd never match her father and grandfather in maritime prowess, she skipped getting a captain's license and began to carve out her own space on the business side of the operations. She was good at it. Boston was changing and Boston Harbor Cruises needed a new brand. She scrapped her dad's old-school ads in the Yellow Pages and invested in a big multimedia campaign. The ads were "tremendous," according to Kathy Abbott, CEO of Boston Harbor Now, a harbor advocacy nonprofit—they had a vision for what was coming.



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# Transportation

Nolan had to rebrand herself, too. It wasn't enough to be a shy waterfront kid with some business savvy—she needed to become a part of the new, moneyed Boston growing up all around her. “She walked out of her comfort zone to build a lot of relationships within the Boston community,” knowing it would be good for the business, says her close friend Dominique Danca. Her aspirations grew from just keeping the family business afloat to something grander and more sweeping:

turning it into a link for the city, crafting the waterfront into a command center. She started to spend her evenings in Planning & Development Agency meetings, and joined the Wharf District Council, the advisory board for Boston Harbor Now, and the board of directors for A Better City, among other organizations.

People such as Li started to notice, and wanted to honor her with awards from the business community. “We would be the ones who'd say, ‘Would you allow us to

nominate you?’ And she would say, ‘Oh, I don't need that,’” Li explains. Keen to highlight a young local face who was making waves, she'd cajole Nolan into accepting nominations for honors such as the *Boston Business Journal's* “40 Under 40” award, and others from the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, by making the case that it was good for the harbor. (Several of the awards I saw in her office were still waiting to be hung.)

For Nolan, it's the greater good of the harbor that matters most. “The more water transportation there is,” she says, “the more opportunity there is for all of us in the harbor.”

BACK ON THE WATER TAXI, WE ROUND THE tip of the North End, and Nolan gestures to a spot called Lovejoy Wharf through the taxi's plastic windows. This, she says, is where a floating dock could soon be installed—the launching pad for commuters trying to get from North Station to the Seaport that could bring a flood of traffic in from the North Shore.

Plans for the pilot—and who will run it—may be put out for bid this month by the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority. James Folk, the authority's transportation director, says the bid will be open to competitors. “It's not necessarily going to be Boston Harbor Cruises,” he says. Other forward-thinking operators, such as Bay State Cruise Company—or even out-of-state vendors—could see this as a prime moment to cash in on Boston's aquatic renaissance. Some might even be encouraged by Nolan's rousing success. “Given the fact where Boston Harbor is today, it would not surprise me that other companies over time also want to bid on what's happening in Boston,” says Li, though she cautions that “they're gonna recognize very quickly they have a formidable opponent.”

First, though, Nolan faces other opponents. Attorney Carolyn Latti is representing two plaintiffs who are suing the company for injuries they allegedly sustained on *Codzilla*. This is Latti's fifth personal-injury case involving the speedboat, and “people are still sustaining the same injuries,” she says. “I mean, it's a thrill ride, but a thrill ride doesn't mean you come back with a fractured spine.” Latti hopes a warning sign could make a difference. “People go on board this vessel. They don't know that they can



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come back with a fractured vertebrae, and it has happened,” she claims.

Previous claims against *Codzilla*, Latti says, were settled and filed away, but these recent plaintiffs won’t exit quietly. In one case, the plaintiff claims that the boat sent her airborne after hitting a wake and that she came crashing down on the seat so hard she suffered a burst fracture, in which the vertebra breaks from a sudden compression. The woman walked off the boat before alerting crew members to her injury; now she’s seeking punitive damages from the company, which denies the allegations. Nolan declined to say much

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about the lawsuit, offering only: “As a company, passenger safety and satisfaction are our top priority and we are proud of our safety record.”

Whatever happens—with the lawsuits, the ferry route, or the harbor—Nolan has no intention of slowing down. Just last month, Boston Harbor Cruises announced its partnership with noted chef Barbara Lynch, who will be providing food and beverage service for the company’s private charter fleet. Next summer, the ICA intends to open a satellite location in East Boston, and it plans for visitors at its flagship in the Seaport to cruise straight across the harbor in a water taxi to get there—another contract Nolan is watching closely. As the harbor changes, she’s dead set on changing with it.

Decades ago, Matty Hughes never could have dreamed his business would cater to folks heading to the Seaport, of all places, where they’d make money building new technology inside of shining glass towers. It’s all a far cry from the 10-cent tour through sewage—and the grimy Charles—where Boston Harbor Cruises started.

Some would argue that’s probably a good thing. “How lucky Boston is to have Alison and Boston Harbor Cruises,” Li gushes. After all, if anyone is going to lead the charge, it might as well be Nolan, a living bridge between the old harbor and our new waterfront. □

