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At least they had a plan

By Adrian Walker, Globe Columnist | October 2, 2007

The people who don't think memorials should be part of the Rose Kennedy Greenway suddenly have a lot to fend off.

The longstanding plan for a memorial to victims of the Armenian genocide has been joined by suggestions that room be made for victims of the tragedy in Darfur and by a Boston Peace and Heritage Park, proposed by the Turkish-American Cultural Society of New England.

Caught in the middle of the dueling memorials is Peter Meade, longtime mover and shaker and chairman of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy board. Meade has never cared for the idea of an Armenian memorial.

The Armenian Heritage Foundation has been pushing for a memorial for at least seven years, raising close to \$3 million in support of the idea. The group envisions parkland with a sculpture that would discreetly pay homage to the Armenians who were massacred in and around 1915. Despite an informal decision years ago that the Greenway would not contain any memorials for at least the first five years of its existence, the Armenian group went through a planning process and won designation to build the park. That decision should stand, even if the conservancy doesn't like it.

At one level, I can understand the notion that the Greenway was intended for other purposes.

Like many major cities, Boston has its share of memorials.

However, this process, or lack thereof, has been indefensible from the beginning. The fact that the no-memorial policy is not even binding is emblematic of the back-room negotiations that have plagued the Greenway.

Meade told me yesterday that he is not opposed to the Armenian memorial in particular. His beef, he said, is with memorials on the Greenway, period.

"I think an Armenian Holocaust Memorial is an important idea and a good idea, and if the world had admitted the Armenian genocide, we'd all be better off," Meade said. "The question is where it ought to go, and I think that's an open question."

That position strikes Armenians as disingenuous. "The Armenian Heritage Park represents, in our estimation, an opportunity to be part of the fabric of the city, part of the fabric of Massachusetts," said Anthony Barsamian of the Armenian Assembly of America, a lobbying group.

State Representative Rachel Kaprielian, a Watertown Democrat, insisted that the proposed park falls within the guidelines for the Greenway. "It's not a memorial; it's a park," she said. "Unless you look closely, you won't even see what's on the plaque."

This dispute has echoes of the recent battle between the Armenian community and the Anti-Defamation League over the ADL's reluctance to embrace the term genocide to describe the massacre of Armenians by Turks. The Armenian community won that round handily.

The decision on what will be allowed on the Greenway seems headed for the desk of state Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen. He has not taken a position, though the Turnpike Authority has supported the Armenian Heritage Park thus far. Many have complained, though, that their decisions were made in the absence of a real public process.

No one I know wants to see the Greenway covered with memorials. It was never meant to be the Washington Mall. But the Armenian group has pursued its goals with determination and vision for years, in the face of a process that could charitably be called chaotic. Even now, no one can say when, or exactly how, this is all to be resolved.

I say going through the process, such as it was, coming up with the only real and viable plan for the parcel, and raising the money to make it happen should count for something. If that means the conservancy has to live with one idea it doesn't like, so be it. Ultimately, it is public land, not Meade's backyard.

Meade sounded as if his fondest wish is for the whole controversy to end. When I asked him when a final decision would be made, he quipped: "Someone told me Aug. 15. I forgot to ask which year."

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