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Blocked path to the Greenway

By Pasqua Scibelli | July 30, 2007

The Armenian park is stalled for a curiously evolving set of reasons.

PICTURE THIS: At the entrance to the North End, between Faneuil Hall Marketplace and Christopher Columbus Park, a tiny and beautiful public park sits on parcel 13 for all to enjoy. At about a third of an acre, it's one of the smallest parcels on the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway.

There are trees and benches, and a single jet of water at its center is surrounded by a stone labyrinth bordered by green grass. At the corner of the park, sitting atop a reflecting pool, is a 12-sided sculpture, reconfigured annually, its changing form representing the common immigrant experience of breaking apart from one's homeland and reshaping one's life in America.

The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority publicly designated this parcel for the park's construction. In turn, the Armenian Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit organization, raised millions of dollars to endow a fund to construct and maintain the park in perpetuity and endowed a separate fund to support an annual lecture series on human rights with The Bostonian Society at Faneuil Hall.

But instead of a park, there's an ugly dust patch enclosed by a chain-link fence on that same site, waiting for political forces, seen and unseen, to redetermine this site's future.

Why?

For more than four years, the Armenian foundation has adhered to the public process set forth by the Turnpike Authority, the entity responsible for designating parcels on the Greenway. Despite this history, and in the face of the North End's overwhelming public support for this park, the Greenway Conservancy, the city's Artery Completion Task Force, and others are endeavoring -- at the 11th hour -- to block this park, for a curiously evolving set of reasons.

The project's opponents first tried to argue that no memorials of any kind should be constructed on the Greenway, as if memorials were some blight on our public spaces. It's a weak argument, at best, given that the Greenway itself is a memorial to Rose Kennedy, and we believe that memorials at the Chinatown end of the Greenway have already breached that line. In any event, their argument failed because, as the site's design makes clear, this project is primarily a park, not a memorial.

Opponents also asserted that permitting this park's construction would "open the floodgates" to other groups seeking to erect memorials on the Greenway. This argument also failed to gain traction: The foundation is not seeking to erect a memorial on an existing park parcel but, rather, trying to build a public park.

The park includes a small memorial component -- a modest-sized plaque will commemorate the Armenians who perished in the 1915 genocide and those victims of all genocides that follow. The American immigrant experience is one of diversity, and recognizing this diversity only strengthens us. The historical fact of genocide reminds us that the more we celebrate and memorialize our diversity and the more tolerant our world will become, the less likely we are to repeat that terrible history.

Only after the weaknesses of these arguments were exposed did opponents turn to a "process" argument to block the park's construction. Opponents claimed that the process preceding the Turnpike Authority's

public designation of the site for the foundation was inadequate. It was a strange plea, since a number of these opponents had met with foundation sponsors in late 2005 and raised no concerns over process. This was made clear during the last community meeting in the North End, where supportive comments far outweighed opposing ones.

Now, after much political and legal wrangling initiated by the completion task force, project opponents have succeeded in persuading the state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs that the Turnpike Authority's process was inadequate. The office has called for an "expedited process" for this parcel, giving "fair consideration" to the good faith efforts for years in following the Turnpike Authority's process.

Having endured two decades of disruptive Big Dig construction, the North End deserves to enjoy this fully funded and beautiful park, a gift to Boston and to the Commonwealth. Whatever "expedited" process unfolds should unfold quickly, without delay to this project's construction.

Pasqua Scibelli is vice president of the North End/Waterfront Residents Association and a North End resident. ■

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