

Slowly, the Greenway advances

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OPTIMISM will blossom soon along the Rose Kennedy Greenway. Construction of a commodious covered "porch" on two parks straddling Hanover Street in the North End is nearing completion, and lawn and plantings will be added when spring finally arrives. These parks should throb with color and vitality when they are fully open in the summer. Progress is being made on an imaginative Harbor Park Pavilion, run by the National Park Service, at the foot of State Street. The YMCA's renewed interest in building a facility over ramps next to the Government Center garage, announced last week, is a big plus. The Wharf District and Chinatown Parks are coming along. Just yesterday, the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, once at odds, agreed to collaborate on the planning of Greenway parks, including those near South Station once assigned exclusively to MassHort. And that's not all the good news. The Conservancy is expected to announce this morning that it has raised \$16.2 million, well on the way to the goal of \$20 million it is required to have in hand by the end of this year. Some of the funds were generated at an extraordinary private luncheon last month at the Parkman House, organized by Conservancy chairman Peter Meade and attended by Senators Edward M. Kennedy and John F. Kerry, Governor Deval Patrick, Mayor Thomas Menino, Caroline Kennedy, former governor Bill Weld, and other civic and business leaders. Senator Kennedy, who sees the Greenway as an abiding tribute to his mother, says he is encouraging various dignitaries to honor their mothers with support for the project. Despite all these positive developments, however, the Greenway -- stubbornly -- remains beset by significant hurdles and doubt. Designs for the Wharf District parks have received mixed reviews. The three key parcels just north of South Station don't even have an interim design yet. The major iconic feature planned for the entire Greenway is a fountain near Milk Street that will be inoperative for nearly half the year. Planned cultural centers are finding fund-raising slow, partly because they have not received enough information from Big Dig engineers to figure out how they can build. A small parcel near Quincy Market is still designated for an Armenian Heritage Park, which should go elsewhere, or the Greenway will be in danger of becoming a monument avenue.

The goal of making the Greenway a true common ground where people from all over Greater Boston will gather has been accepted by nearly everyone involved in the project, but it will take a lot of effort to make that goal a reality.

Funding and governance issues still plague the project. There is too much reliance on private donations; these are public parks and deserve more public support. Big Dig money is tight, potentially threatening quality. And there is still no client -- no entity in charge. The Conservancy is the closest thing to it and has earned the designation. But it is still operating under an agreement that gives it limited powers and authority over only about half of the Greenway.

Fortunately, there is hope of progress. House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, a Greenway neighbor from the North End, is also its strong advocate. "I want it to have the funds to sustain itself when I'm gone and others are gone," he said in an interview. DiMasi is seeking a source, possibly a fund within the Registry of Motor Vehicles, that would generate revenue reliably. Meade says he would like \$5.5 million a year, in addition to the Conservancy endowment, to guarantee world-class parks and programming.

Meanwhile, the Conservancy staff is pursuing strategies to attract diverse groups, working with schools, churches, entertainers, and various civic organizations. Even naturalization ceremonies on the Greenway are contemplated for new US citizens.

So there is plenty of reason for optimism that the Rose Kennedy Greenway will achieve its potential, but also plenty of work to do. ■

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