

BEYOND THE BIG DIG | GLOBE EDITORIAL

Time for Greenway action

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MASSACHUSETTS POLITICS has made the Rose Kennedy Greenway's existence as tortuous as its winding path through the heart of Boston.

Now the greenway is at another crucial crossroad.

Even as bold plans for two beautiful parks straddling Hanover Street in the North End are coming to life in shrubbery and steel, other key parcels are mired in uncertainty. Three public-spirited non profit groups have proposed cultural and community centers for the greenway, but none of the three has raised enough money to guarantee success.

Fortunately, there is a way forward, if political and civic leaders can summon the will to take it.

The new leadership of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority has asked the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy to review all plans for the project. The conservancy's report, due Oct. 16, could be the splash of cold water that the project badly needs.

Already, in an interim report, the conservancy has signaled that it will suggest realistic standards for the non profits: fund-raising and other benchmarks that will test their viability.

The conservancy is on the right track. It owes an unsentimental, clear-eyed assessment to the turnpike board of directors, to all of Greater Boston, and to the future generations so often cited as the ultimate beneficiaries of the greenway. If the tough issues aren't confronted now, when will they ever be? The final recommendations should include:

A demand that the non profits prove they can build the planned facilities and have enough resources left over to operate and maintain them. The projects are a roughly \$50 million YMCA and community center planned opposite the Government Center Garage; a \$90 million museum project north of Christopher Columbus Park; and the \$80 million New Center for Arts and Culture just south of Rowes Wharf. If these projects are viable, their fund-raising efforts should actually be helped by reasonable deadlines. Any not viable should step aside and give someone else a chance.

This goes double for the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, which has retained its designation as developer of three key parcels north of South Station for 16 years, through a succession of diminishing proposals. Even the least ambitious has had to be subsidized by the turnpike. There is no need to snatch these parcels from MassHort peremptorily, but they should be opened up to alternatives. There is enough room for crowd-pleasing amenities not now planned elsewhere on the greenway, such as a skating rink or carousel, or a relatively high-volume restaurant drawing inspiration, say, from Anthony's Pier 4 and the Tavern on the Green in New York's Central Park. Another possibility: the museum project and the New Center could combine their visions, and their fund-raising efforts, into one facility, perhaps located on the New Center parcel and the adjacent MassHort parcel. MassHort might still produce a viable attraction on one or two parcels, but to date it certainly hasn't shown it needs three.

The proposed memorial to victims of the Armenian genocide is well-intentioned and handsomely designed, but should find another home. The greenway should not become an avenue of monuments.

Excellence and only excellence should be the goal in every phase of the project from planning to construction, including materials, to operations, maintenance, and programming.

Continuing emphasis should go into making sure the greenway becomes a common ground attracting all of Greater Boston, in all its diversity.

The conservancy should also challenge the turnpike board and other leaders to confront the two overriding questions that still -- amazingly -- have no final answer: who will run the greenway, and who will pay?

Progress on the greenway has been hobbled for years by a classic case of Massachusetts political gridlock. Turf wars among the turnpike, the City of Boston, a succession of governors, and the Legislature created a quagmire. In Barcelona, Paris, San Francisco, Chicago, and

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elsewhere, city governments have done the best job of creating vibrant new parks. But it does not appear that Boston can amass the political or financial support to assume that role.

If that is the case, the conservancy itself -- with greater public financing and a greater emphasis on the public side of its public-private partnership -- would be best positioned to take charge.

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino has expressed growing support for the conservancy. Recently, at the first of a two-part forum organized by the Boston Society of Architects, Menino said that the conservancy "has demonstrated its commitment and its ability to achieve results." (The second part of the forum, to focus on programming, is scheduled for Oct. 17 at Faneuil Hall.) Menino urged the turnpike chairman, John Cogliano, who is also the state transportation secretary, to give the conservancy more authority, at least over the development proposals from the non profit organizations.

Financing is still a big question mark. Menino favors some form of business improvement district, through which nearby businesses would be assessed, based on the increase in their property values due to the greenway. This would be one way to turn private dollars into public funding. In any event, private contributions, while welcome and needed, should never threaten the greenway's character as a public space.

Senator Edward Kennedy is pushing for resolution. Key members of the Romney administration are showing admirable flexibility. Both Senate President Robert Travaglini and House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi have the greenway in their districts.

The conservancy report can be the needed catalyst. The time is right, but it is also short, if the greenway is to realize its extraordinary potential.

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