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# Paying for the parks on Greenway

By Paul McMorrow

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THE INTRODUCTION of a proposed business improvement district for the Rose Kennedy Greenway didn't go as planned. The Greenway's sponsors thought businesses would leap at the chance to throw money at the 15-acre park system. Fistfuls of cash failed to fly through the air, though, and the group charged with the parks' upkeep, the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, retreated into a quiet period. The Conservancy is currently tweaking numbers, in hopes of finding a voluntary payment system that will be palatable to the large landlords who will ultimately decide the district's fate.

The problem, however, isn't with the numbers behind the Conservancy's proposal, which is seeking up to \$2.7 million per year from abutters. The problem is with the business improvement district itself. It exists to preserve the status quo along the Greenway, the string of parks created by the demolition of the old elevated Central Artery. But the fact that the district is so badly needed is an indication that the status quo is badly broken.

The Greenway is the orphan everybody wants to see succeed, but nobody is willing to let into the house. It's uniquely a product of Massachusetts's tribal political system. The state picked up a sizable chunk of the \$15 billion price tag for the tunnels running underneath the Greenway, but it was unwilling to take full responsibility for the parks above. Boston Mayor Tom Menino has long been a vocal booster for the park system, but he has famously refused to hand it any of his money, since he doesn't actually own the real estate in question.

At the Greenway, the city and the state did what they often do when they're long on ambition and short on cash: They foisted the problem on an underfunded nonprofit, pushed the Greenway Conservancy out of the boat, and hoped it wouldn't drown.

The business improvement district represents the Conservancy's last gasp. State funding has shrunk, and private fundraising efforts haven't met lofty expectations. The business improvement district asks private landlords along the park to do what the Legislature and the city have both been unwilling to do — take ownership of a regional public asset.

The logic of the district is less than compelling for the property owners who are being asked to submit themselves to the new voluntary tax. That's not because the Greenway landlords despise trees and flowers; it's because they're being asked to bail out a broken Greenway system that has plenty of political capital behind it, but little actual capital.

The property owners along the Greenway benefit from having an address along Boston's newest park system, and they're taxed accordingly. Boston Redevelopment Authority data show that, for all its flaws, the Greenway has boosted assessed values by an average of \$45 per square foot. An office tower along the Greenway is worth tens of millions of dollars more than an identical tower six blocks away. Since 2005, the Greenway's promise has created \$3.1 billion in extra property value. Greenway landlords aren't free riders. They benefit from the parks' presence, and they pay for that benefit every quarter, by way of inflated property tax bills.

The benefits and costs of Greenway real estate are misaligned, though. Property owners essentially already pay a Greenway surcharge. It's the city, not the Greenway Conservancy, pocketing this surcharge. The city, of course, doesn't spread this windfall around. Instead, it promises to use its political clout to knuckle property owners into paying a second surcharge, via the business improvement district, to maintain the Greenway.

Business improvement district opponents worry about cutting a sizable annual check to the Conservancy, an organization that is currently only spending half of its annual budget on parks maintenance. There's tough talk about letting the Conservancy's finances crash, picking up the pieces afterward, and creating a new, streamlined steward for the parks.

Such chatter might be overreach, but the Conservancy shouldn't shrug it off. Its proposal shouldn't be a take-it-or-leave-it offer. The Conservancy's fiscal worries invite a larger discussion about how the Greenway's leadership is structured, who pays for the parks, and where that money actually goes. It's a chance to rethink the whole system and correct obvious flaws.

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