
Next to Greenway, a fine site for Boston history museum

March 28, 2011

IN AN age of instant communication, when people can live and work anywhere, a city's key selling point is its culture, built over time. It's what stays solid in a fluid economy. It's what makes a place intriguing to outsiders and familiar to those who live there.

Boston's history is everywhere, but is explained nowhere. The sad reality is that Boston, the American city with the greatest connection to its past, is among the least adept at showing it off. The Freedom Trail draws millions of visitors a year on the strength of Boston's leading role in the American Revolution. But visitors don't learn as much as they could, and the rest of Boston history — the city's role in the Industrial Revolution, the abolition of slavery, the immigrant ascendancy, and political and intellectual leadership — is almost entirely invisible.

That's why the people of Boston should embrace plans for a Boston Museum. Originally set for the Greenway, where the need to cover the ramps to the old elevated Interstate 93 made construction unfeasible, the museum project remains shadowed by the failures of the Big Dig. But unlike the other cultural attractions once planned for the Greenway, the Boston Museum is an idea that's all but certain to attract fund-raising clout. What it doesn't have, but does deserve, is a site to build on.

There's an obvious answer: the so-called Parcel 9, beside the Millennium Bostonian Hotel, on the edge of the Greenway. It's a few blocks from Boston's Revolutionary sites, and could be the epicenter of the city's tourism sector. Though some developers want to put housing or offices on the site, it's clearly a place for a landmark public attraction. And the poor economy has reduced the likelihood of a successful commercial project. Of course, the museum itself faces a daunting financial task, having raised and spent about \$9 million, with \$150 million necessary to build a first-rate attraction. But without a designated site, donors are understandably reluctant to pledge money to something that may never be built, and without the state's blessing there's no way to reassure them that plans are moving ahead.

Transportation Secretary Jeff Mullan, whose department controls the site, has been reluctant to grant his approval for some good reasons. One is that initial plans called for the state to contribute \$40 million to the museum. Mullan rightly believes that any extra dollars should go to improving the desperately underfunded T. But the museum's leadership has agreed to forgo the \$40 million. In addition, Mullan wants the museum to obtain greater community backing.

So far, neighbors have been reluctant to go along, perhaps believing they can get more givebacks from private developers. Some have complained the proposed five-story structure is taller than most buildings in the North End. But Parcel 9 is across the Greenway from the North End, and while there's room for negotiation on the building's height, the current architectural design is very community friendly, including, among other touches, a ground-floor market for local vendors.

Still, Mullan and Governor Patrick are justifiably wary of raising expectations for a museum without greater assurance that the project is viable. But over the course of 12 years, museum president Frank Keefe and his 25-member board have developed a plan that inspires confidence. Consultants believe the museum should be able to operate with as few as 417,000 visitors a year at an average of about \$11 per person — about a third of the number who plunk down \$21 to go to the New England Aquarium every year. The more challenging task will be raising the upfront money to fund the exhibits and build a modest endowment; but the city's philanthropic community just distinguished itself by raising \$150 million for the new American Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts.

The same families whose generosity enriched the art museum should make their next cause the promotion of Boston history. The current board of the history museum includes distinguished figures who can contribute perspectives on Boston history, but fewer proven fund-raisers. Once the museum is awarded its site, it will need to expand its roster of civic leaders.

It will be an ambitious project, but one that will attract new visitors to Boston and inspire them to see other sites in Massachusetts. And those who support it will be putting their money where their pride is, in their city's past and its future.