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Birth of the Greenway

By Robert L. Turner | July 20, 2007

JOHN F. Kennedy liked to say that success has a thousand fathers, but his own mother's greenway is something of an orphan. A dozen people are happy to claim a part -- a midwife's role, perhaps -- in applying Rose Kennedy's name to the meandering string of parks that is now well on its way to becoming a glory of downtown Boston. But no one claims to be the actual parent.

Thousands of Bostonians are expected to flock this Sunday to Christopher Columbus Park for a "family festa picnic" that will mark dramatic improvements on the Greenway parks. Many doubtless think the naming of the Greenway was the product of Massachusetts power politics. Indeed it was, but not in the way most probably imagine.

It is clear, from interviews and contemporary documents, that the son is not the father: that Senator Edward Kennedy did not force his mother's name onto the Greenway, but that a small group of well-connected citizens lined up key support, including from some Republicans, and won the insertion into a 1996 state law of a paragraph saying: "The open space created above the depressed central artery shall be designated as the Rose Kennedy greenway."

One motive of this group was to honor Mrs. Kennedy appropriately. Another motive for many was to lock in the political support of Senator Kennedy, boosting enormously the odds for a successful outcome.

The idea was conceived in 1995, between Jan. 22, when the matriarch died at 104, and April 18, when James Aloisi, then general counsel of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, sent a memo to the Weld administration suggesting that the Central Artery open space be named the "Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Boulevard."

The most likely candidates for parenthood are:

Aloisi, now in private practice at Goulston & Storrs, who also played a key role in drafting the memorandum of agreement that created the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy in 2004.

Fred Salvucci, former state transportation secretary, often referred to as the father of the entire Big Dig project.

Ann Hershfang, a board member of the Turnpike Authority at the time, and later president of WalkBoston, an organization that played a key role in limiting auto traffic adjacent to the Greenway.

George Abrams, a lawyer with Wilmer Hale, a philanthropist and close friend of Kennedy.

Aloisi says he "can't really remember" where the idea came from and is sure he had little to do with the legislation, which passed in 1996, a year after his memo. Aloisi says he does remember being moved by accounts family members brought back from the funeral service for Rose Kennedy in St. Stephen's Church in the North End.

Salvucci has disclaimed personal responsibility for the naming.

Hershfang thinks the idea came from either Salvucci or Aloisi, but isn't sure. She acknowledges playing an active role early on, and writing letters to legislative leaders in 1996.

Abrams says he believes the idea first surfaced in a conversation he had with Hershfang.

Also key players were the chairmen of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, Senator Robert Havern and Representative Thomas Cahir, who lobbied Republicans and saw to it that the short amendment was

included in the final bill.

But since no DNA test has yet been devised for establishing political parenthood in Boston politics -- imagine what such a test would mean! -- the Greenway may have to live with the notion that it was created by a small village.

It is also clear, though, that Senator Kennedy's support for the idea was strong and quick. Abrams remembers talking with the late Eddie Martin, then retired from his job as head of Kennedy's Boston office, who in 1996 wrote a memo backing the name and stressing Rose Kennedy's pride "in her heritage and in her North End birth." Gerard Doherty, another Kennedy family insider, also remembers Kennedy being enthusiastic about the idea.

He still is. And that is the bottom line now. "Thank God it happened, or we would be nowhere," says Peter Meade, chairman of the conservancy. Without question, the conservancy would not exist without Kennedy's active support. And beyond that, as Meade points out, Rose Kennedy's reputation for a standard of excellence has helped keep planners' sights high.

Or as Abrams put it, with Rose Kennedy's name attached to the Greenway, "it would be hard to tamper with it."

So when people gather Sunday to enjoy a picnic and envision the growing potential of the Rose Kennedy Greenway, they will get the classic view of a newborn -- a large result from a small idea.

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