

BEYOND THE BIG DIG | GLOBE EDITORIAL

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A Greenway obstacle

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NOW THAT the public has spent \$14.6 billion on the Big Dig to reconnect Boston with its harbor and improve traffic, citizens have a right to expect that the green centerpiece of the project will be inviting to pedestrians. If it isn't, the Rose Kennedy Greenway could become this generation's City Hall Plaza: grand in concept but underutilized in practice. The new public-private Greenway Conservancy has to be given more clout to ensure that permitting authorities with conflicting agendas, from the artery to the city to the MBTA to the state, maintain the greenway's original vision of walker-friendliness.

That vision is at risk with the current plan for the first big private development on the greenway, the InterContinental Hotel and condos at 500 Atlantic Ave. According to the plan, pedestrians would detour in a loop around two valet parking lanes of idling cars and under the building's portico.

It doesn't have to be this way, and wouldn't be if the project adhered both to the greenway's original design for uninterrupted sidewalks and the developer's final environmental impact submission. Both call for a straight, broad sidewalk in front of the building, with cars to be unloaded at the curb, a practice that has worked for decades at the Ritz Carlton Hotel on Arlington Street.

But in a 2001 letter, Boston Transportation Department officials insisted that cars dropping off or picking up passengers at the hotel do so off the street, creating the need for valet lanes on what would otherwise be the sidewalk, but they did not specify the current sidewalk loop plan. The city plans to ban rush-hour curb parking on that stretch. But the notion that traffic would move briskly in that lane at any time is unrealistic given the number of curb cuts there.

WalkBoston, a pedestrian advocacy organization, has suggested a compromise: The hotel would be granted a single-lane, off-street drop-off area next to the curb lane, which would allow continuous pedestrian movement. Under this proposal, the city would drop its plan to ban rush-hour parking in the Atlantic Avenue curb lane, permitting car dropoffs and pickups there, too.

The developer, the city, and the Greenway Conservancy are looking at ways to defuse the controversy. Their ideas, plus WalkBoston's proposal, should be on the table. It is a shame that more active coordination did not occur sooner. As it stands, every effort should be made -- by narrowing pullout lanes, eliminating curbs that cross the sidewalk, and other means -- to provide a straight pedestrian stroll. Whatever emerges from the negotiations, the dispute highlights the need for one agency -- the conservancy -- with authority to make sure that the greenway doesn't become more Houston than Boston. ■