

on the boards

BY PAUL BENNETT

A Mason-Dixon line of sorts has traditionally divided cosmopolitan downtown Boston from the working-class neighborhoods across the harbor. At times the line has been racial; almost always it's been economic. And lately tensions have been running high.

Much of the problem stems from the Central Artery project, otherwise known as the Big Dig, which is having a strong impact on East Boston. On this side of the harbor, the highway project emerges above ground over a series of new interchanges that will suffocate one of the only small park areas in the neighborhood, further reducing the district's already paltry amount of open space. To assuage protest, which according to local papers has been vehement, the city has promised to construct several new parks as a mitigation.

One such park is a rails-to-trails project along an old sunken rail corridor through the heart of the district that cuts across the peninsula, connecting the harbor to the ocean. The two-and-a-half-mile greenway has been divided into four segments, two of which are being designed by Brown & Rowe, one by Pressley Associates, and the westernmost portion that connects with the harbor by a joint venture between John Copley Associates and Lynn Wolff Associates.

According to Lynn Wolff, ASLA, residents of East Boston wanted two paths in the corridor in order to separate foot traffic from bicycles and rollerbladers; however, in some places the corridor for these pathways becomes exceedingly narrow. To accommodate this, the landscape architects proposed lifting one path above the other to create a vertical separation that will decrease the hazard of bicycles running

over joggers, or vice versa. The designers also had to deal with contaminated soils that had to be removed in some instances and capped in others, as well as restrictions on importing fill because the corridor is part of the hundred-year floodplain. The way Wolff tells it, bringing all these constraints to bear on the design required a bit of a balancing act.

In part as a response to the industrial, blue-collar heritage of the surrounding neighborhoods, Copley/Wolff are incorporating railroad imagery and materials into the design. Steel rails will be integrated into the bituminous paving to demarcate boundaries and pathways; in other places these rails will be "planted" upright at intersections to slow down bicycle traffic and roller-bladers. A renovated caboose will be placed at the entrance near the harbor, where it will house a small refreshment vendor.

This first portion of the greenway is being funded through ISTEA, which forced the designers to produce their design on a fast track. In fact, according to Jane Shoplick, Associate, ASLA, project manager on the design, Copley/Wolff was producing its design at the same time as planners at Goody Clancy were preparing a coordination plan to integrate signage and other appurtenances along the entire corridor. In some instances, decisions made on the design end about vocabulary and engineering have been incorporated into the larger plan.

So many different people and entities are involved in the greenway that it will probably become difficult to trace any one influence above another in the end. The possible exception to this might be the impact of the local residents, who Wolff says, "treat advocacy almost as a recreational sport." To her mind, they will be the measure of the park's ultimate success.

LA

This plan shows the western portion of a new linear park in an old rail corridor through East Boston, designed by John Copley Associates and Lynn Wolff Associates.

