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DESIGN MATTERS

The Charles River Conservancy Ramps Up Skatepark Plan

By Jeffrey Stein

"OUR MISSION IS TO HAVE PEOPLE FALL IN love with the parklands!" This is the way Renata von Tscharnher describes the work of the Charles River Conservancy, a citizen initiative she founded five years ago. The parklands she speaks of are the Charles River Basin Parklands, 500 acres that stretch along both sides of the Charles River, eight miles from Boston Harbor all the way to Newton and the Watertown dam. The parklands are at the very heart of the Hub's Metropolitan Park System and comprise one of the largest and best-known open spaces ever designed in an American city. They border one of the most heavily used bodies of water in the nation and are owned by the commonwealth of Massachusetts.

This last circumstance means that despite good intentions and a far-reaching, 196-page "Masterplan for the Charles River Basin" developed by Goody Clancy Assoc. with considerable citizen input, the parklands are in some jeopardy. Massachusetts ranks 44th among the 50 states in spending on the environment, including spending on maintaining its parks. And over the past 10 years, Massachusetts' environmental spending has been cut 36 percent. So the reason for the Charles River Conservancy's existence, to "help facilitate the restoration, enhancement, and maintenance of Massachusetts' most significant urban public space," has never been more necessary.

Today's parklands were first imagined by Cambridge-born landscape architect

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Charles Eliot in the early 1890s. Eliot apprenticed under Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Boston's "Emerald Necklace" and New York's Central Park. He later became a partner in the Olmsted landscape design firm and was known as the father of the Boston Metropolitan Park System after legislation creating it was passed in 1893. From traveling in Europe in 1885, he proposed a design for the Charles River Basin based on the Alter Basin in Hamburg, Germany. The Alter River was - then and now - lined with boathouses and cafes, a real European water park.

In Eliot's day, the Charles River was a sewage-laden tidal estuary. Its water level fluctuated by as much as 9 feet daily, leaving huge waste deposits to dry on the riverbank at low tide. While even now you would not want to swim in it, as von Tscharnher did recently to dramatize the need for continued clean-up efforts, the Charles and its parklands are today a huge, health-giving amenity for the region. Within walking distance of 300,000 homes and hosting as many as a half million people at summertime special events, the parklands as designed of over the last century represent tremendous opportunity in our midst for beauty, fresh air, exercise and urban ecology on a daily basis.

New Territory

And now the parklands' maintenance and further development, helped along by 4,000 Charles River Conservancy volunteers, is about to be augmented by the CRC's newest project, a skateboarding park located on the river's frontier beyond the Museum of Science. Here is new territory for Boston: 40 acres of additional parkland, the "lost half-mile" of the Charles River, part of a "mitigation proj-

Skating Along



The Charles River Conservancy is moving ahead with a plan to build a skateboarding facility at a park site along the Charles River in Boston.

PAGE 4

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ect" required of the Big Dig. This is to help improve a condition caused by new ramps and bridges that obscure the landscape in this area. Not quite \$100 million of Big Dig money is being spent here to recover brownfields, repair crumbling seawalls, remove toxic waste and create a new, active and accessible addition to the parklands. Called North Point Park, this area is widely heralded as the new jewel of the Charles River Parklands.

None of the \$100 million in public funds are being spent on the skatepark. The Charles River Conservancy is about one-third of the way to raising \$2 million in private money to fund the project. To design the project, the CRC is working with around 400 skateboarders of all ages and

with landscape architects Wormhoudt Inc., a Santa Cruz, Calif., design firm that specializes in skateparks. Zach Wormhoudt is the firm's principal, with more than 70 constructed skateparks to his credit, in places like Santa Cruz; Monterey, Calif., and even Louisville, Ky. Wormhoudt's Redwood City skatepark won a design award from the state of California. It also was highly rated (8.5) in "Thrasher Magazine," which is geared toward skateboarding enthusiasts.

Skateboarding is about space – usually designed, urban space – and how it intersects with both body and imagination. The American landscape historian J.B. Jackson noted that people who take part in "mobility sports" like skateboarding develop a fresh understanding of their environment – one that is abstract, intimate and often oppositional.

In Boston's new skatepark, there will be 40,000 square feet of full-wave undulating concrete located beneath an on-ramp to the new Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge, an intimate area of much movement, indeed, of sound and abstraction. Surrounded by an inline skating track, the skatepark itself is postmodern; that is, its space designers quote from its urban surroundings. The park will contain such things as "root bumps" that simulate Boston's tree-cracked sidewalks. There will be a portion based on a favorite skateboarding ledge at Boston Medical Center and another piece that feels like the fountain at Copley Square. These quotes are from places that are "in" with local skateboarders but where, after all, their activity worries those who are not part of the sport.

Attractive, active, accessible: words that guide the CRC in their work along the entire Charles River. Now they are carried to a new audience of athletes in motion in the new Charles River Basin. Heading over to the Zakim Bridge for an "ollie?" You'll have the Charles River Conservancy to thank for that. ■



The Charles River Conservancy is planning to build a skateboarding facility at this North Point Park site along the Charles River in Boston, part of the Charles River Basin Parklands. The skatepark will feature 40,000 square feet of full-wave undulating concrete located beneath an on-ramp to the new Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge.

Conservancy Celebrates Fifth Anniversary

On Friday, June 17, you can help celebrate the "Power of the Parklands" at a reception and luncheon for the Charles River Conservancy at 60 State St., Boston. The day marks the fifth anniversary of the conservancy. The luncheon will feature as master of ceremonies Boston news anchor Ted O'Brien and keynote speaker David Gergen, editor at large of "U.S. News and World Report." For information and tickets, call (617) 619-2850 or visit www.charlesriverconservancy.org.