

THREE FOR THE CITY | GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Cultivating a compromise

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THE DESIRE for a quiet place for families to reflect on loved ones who died violently and the need for more dormitory space to satisfy Boston's growing student population could be on a collision course on Beacon Hill. How the issue is resolved will say much about the institutional character of Suffolk University.

The Garden of Peace on Somerset Street behind the former Saltonstall building was created in 2004 to commemorate Massachusetts homicide victims, both famous and obscure. The central feature of the 7,000-square-foot garden is a dry streambed embedded with stones on which the names of homicide victims are inscribed. The garden's supporters, mostly relatives of murder victims, spent hard years cobbling the project together. Now they fear that the quiet integrity of the garden will be compromised should Suffolk University succeed with a proposal to build a 31-story dormitory on an adjacent lot on Somerset Street that once housed state offices.

The livability of Boston depends, in part, on housing the area's many college students in dormitories. Students often drive up rents in apartments near campus, placing them beyond the reach of working families. The Menino administration has been on a years-long, largely successful effort to convince universities to build more dormitories. That way, the neighborhood gets the economic and intellectual boost of the colleges with a minimum of displacement. Suffolk's dorm plan is consistent with that policy.

The Garden of Peace is thoughtful and designed to breathe hope into the lives of survivors. Its creators understand that the life of the city goes on despite their personal tragedies. But they have yet to hear a comprehensive description of how Suffolk University proposes to protect an area that Evelyn Tobin, whose daughter Kathleen Dempsey was murdered in 1992 in Lexington, describes as "sacred ground."

John Nucci, Suffolk's vice president for government and community affairs, says the objective of the university is "to coexist peacefully with the garden." That opens the door for numerous possibilities, including an endowment for maintenance, fund-raising help to retire the garden's debt, and design elements for the dorm that protect the passive nature of the garden. The greatest contribution might be a university-sponsored course or lecture series on violence reduction that could one day reduce the need for future inscriptions in the Garden of Peace.

The archdiocese's move

After it became clear in June 2004 that the Archdiocese of Boston could not be dissuaded from closing the Presentation parochial school in Brighton, a community group formed to explore ways that it might buy the building and reuse it to promote educational and civic stability in the neighborhood. Little progress was made at the negotiating table, and relations between the church and community collapsed in June 2005 when Archbishop Sean O'Malley inexplicably locked Presentation students out of school two days before graduation.

Sensing a public relations calamity, the archbishop reinvigorated discussions with the Presentation School Foundation, which hoped to create pre-school, afterschool, and adult-ed programs at the site. A purchase and sale agreement seemed within reach. But in recent weeks, the archdiocese sent signals that a deal was off, or at least too complicated to craft.

The negotiation is extremely complex. A civil suit filed last August by a separate group of former parishioners contends that it, and not the archdiocese, owns the entire parish property, including the school. That problem seemed to abate, however, when the archdiocese demanded, and the Presentation Foundation agreed to, an 18-month sunset provision. If the suit wasn't resolved by then, no deal would be concluded. Another sticky issue was resolved when the Presentation Foundation abandoned its effort to create an elementary school that might compete with another archdiocese school in the area. In short, the community group did most of the giving.

Archdiocese spokesman Terrence Donilon insists that the church's "first choice" is still to sell the school building to the

community group, though a Feb. 28 letter from Archdiocese Chancellor David Smith seems quite negative, especially regarding the barrier of the lawsuit. But now, Stephen Ashcraft, one of the former parishioners who is suing the archdiocese over ownership of the parish, is saying, "We would let that [school] parcel go if it would help the community."

That creates new opportunity to get this deal done, provided the archdiocese stays at the table and makes a good faith effort.

Back in the swim

The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority greatly advanced the likelihood that the Charles River will be safe for swimming with its recent proposal to activate a 54-inch pipe that would divert raw sewage and dirty storm water away from the Charles during heavy rains. It's a strategy that raises hopes for the creation of unique urban beaches.

While some of the Charles is swimmable now, narrower areas west of the Massachusetts Avenue bridge, including Magazine Beach in Cambridge, are still dicey because of the pollutants that pile up after heavy storms. Yet it is that stretch from the Mass. Ave bridge to the Watertown dam that offers the greatest opportunities for recreational swimming.

Sediments of industrial waste, often a foot or two deep, still pose a serious barrier to waders. But the MWRA's \$20 million initiative could eliminate 99 percent of the combined sewer-water overflow along much of the important stretch. Some day, a dip in the Charles will no longer be just a photo opportunity for environmentalists and politicians looking to score points with the public. ■

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