

## **Taste of N.Y. on the Common?**

Boston considers Central Park-style restaurant  
By Jonnelle Marte

NEW YORK - A clutch of Boston officials journeyed to New York City parks yesterday in search of ways to rejuvenate their own urban centerpiece, Boston Common. And they found that serving food - whether it be hamburgers and milkshakes, or wine and cheese - may be the answer.

Boston officials, marveling at the vibrant scenes they found in New York, said they are exploring the idea of establishing a full-scale restaurant, a simple food kiosk, or something in between to attract diners to the Common.

By establishing a lively attraction in the park, they hope to drive away illicit brown-bag drinkers, drug users, and other unsavory characters who have added a touch of menace to the Common, especially at night.

"Safety issues arrive because the park shuts down at night," said City Councilor Michael Ross, who represents Beacon Hill and the Back Bay and is leading a City Council review of ways to bring Boston Common back to its rightful glory.

The planning is in its earliest stages. Boston officials say they want to balance any commercial development they introduce with the need to preserve the park's character. Its 50 acres have been the scene of countless civil demonstrations, Little League games, family picnics, and performances of Shakespeare's plays. But its charms are not infrequently marred by the sounds of gunfire, drunken arguments, or police sirens.

Last month, police chased and shot a man on the Common in broad daylight. They believed he was hiding a gun, but it turned out to be a replica. In August, a bullet went through the window of the governor's office in the State House, which has a commanding position uphill from the park.

"I think the security is considerably good, but it is a great empty space and there is still considerable drug traffic," said Henry Lee, president of The Friends of the Public Garden.

Not that New York's parks are free of crime. Although there were no killings reported by the Central Park precinct in 2007, there was one rape, 33 robberies, and 10 felonious assaults.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino's administration is open to the idea of a restaurant or food stand on the Common, but he has not embraced the concept, said Antonia Pollak, a commissioner for the city's Department of Parks and Recreation.

"The mayor is always interested in creative ideas for a park," said Pollak, who accompanied the group on the New York tour. "We haven't assessed the impact of a [restaurant] yet."

The delegation of 20 Boston officials and civic leaders visited the Shake Shack at Madison Square Park on 23d Street, the Bryant Park Cafe in Bryant Park in midtown, and the Boathouse, a full-service restaurant at Central Park.

Interviews with frequent park-goers at Shake Shack, a tiny restaurant that had a long, winding line of customers yesterday, indicated that Boston might be on the right track.

"It makes people stay in the park longer and they come just for that," said Kelly Ault, who had just picked up vanilla ice cream with her 6-year-old son, Aja Martinez. "We will go out of our way to come here."

The Boston contingent yesterday took careful notes. They asked questions. They reviewed menus, and they ate. They also probed into specifics of general park maintenance: how often garbage gets picked up, how the greenery is maintained, and how New York officials prepare for large concerts and other events - which have taken a serious toll on lawns and walkways at the Common.

"The more positive energy you can generate in the park, the safer it is," said Boston City Councilor Bill Linehan, from South Boston.

But there are risks and barriers involved with building a park restaurant, at least in Boston. A cafe established by Emerson College on the Boylston Street side of the Common has been losing money. And attempts to set up a restaurant at the Frog Pond have been unsuccessful because of difficulties with winning a city liquor license, operators say.

"People wanted wine or beer with their dinner," said Thomas Kershaw, chairman of the Frog Pond Foundation and owner of the Hampshire House Corporation who also runs Cheers, the bar of TV fame on Beacon Street. "They wouldn't come back unless they could have that."

Strolling through Madison Square Park, the Boston contingent passed sunbathers and lunch-goers scattered among colorful and abstract sculptures throughout the grounds. They stopped to admire a dog run. At Bryant Park, the group found diners seated at forest green lunch tables, some basking under the sun on the lawn, others sipping cocktails in the shade.

Daniel Biederman, president of Biederman Redevelopment Ventures who introduced the Bryant Park Cafe to its site, said adding restaurants, a reading center, and a wireless Internet connection transformed Bryant Park from a hotspot for drug dealers 28 years ago into the cool hangout it is today.

In Central Park, the Bostonians sat in the coolness of the upscale Boathouse restaurant, against a backdrop of the city skyline and couples rowing on the lake in the park. It was the last stop on a day that provided inspiration, but no specific plan, participants said.

"Sometimes it's fascinating to see other parks, but they aren't all adaptable," said Lee. "The Common has its own set of problems and the Common serves a different purpose."

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