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Privatization eyed for Artery park

By Anthony Flint, Globe Staff, 3/7/2002

NEW YORK - With its welcoming lawn, moveable chairs, and nearly constant throng of people, Bryant Park is the kind of place Massachusetts officials have in mind in the proposal for a privately run park on the surface of the submerged Central Artery.

Once a forbidden zone of drug dealers and prostitutes, the renovated six-acre greensward behind the New York Public Library reopened to rave reviews in 1992, and is managed by a private nonprofit organization funded in part by property owners around the park, similar to the Central Artery surface oversight plan proposed by city and state officials Tuesday.

Yet critics here are increasingly concerned that the park at times is too privatized, like when fashion shows are held in a giant tent twice a year. At those times, the velvet ropes go up and public property is off-limits to anyone without tickets.

The lesson for Boston, said Fred Kent, president of the New York-based Project for Public Spaces: When control is handed over to private interests - increasingly necessary as local governments say they can't pay for park improvements and upkeep - the democratic purity of a Boston Common can be diluted as part of the bargain.

"I support the strategy, but it can go in the wrong direction and all of a sudden it's taken away from you," said Kent, who noted that Bryant Park is getting more funding from private events like the fashion shows than from abutting property owners - even as those abutters are benefitting from the success and drawing power of the park.

"The real estate person says, 'the more we get private events to pay for this, the more I can keep my money,'" Kent said.

Daniel A. Biederman, president of the 34th Street Partnership and executive director of Bryant Park Restoration Corp., which runs Bryant Park, said that the two fashion shows and one other event held by ABC are the only ones closed to the public. Other private events, such as Microsoft's recent unveiling of its new software, including a concert by Sting, are open to the public.

"If you make a space great enough, and you have events that are basically open to the public and you get paid for them, which takes care of all the flowers and the maintenance and the signs - that's a great deal," Biederman said.

The budget for Bryant Park is about \$4 million. Nearly \$1 million comes from abutters, \$1.3 million from events, and most of the rest from a hugely successful restaurant, cafes, kiosks, and newsstands.

New York City is a trend-setter for turning over struggling areas of the city to private oversight. It has a total of 43 so-called "business improvement districts," a version of which was proposed for the Central Artery surface. In a BID, property owners and businesses pay into a fund and essentially take over management, security, and maintenance responsibilities from the city. The strategy has been used to revamp Times Square and Grand Central Station and is about to be employed on a broad scale at and around the devastated World Trade Center site.

In addition, there are hundreds of privately owned public spaces such as pocket parks, plazas, and atriums - public areas established in return, in most cases, for allowing developers to build taller buildings.

Frank Sanchis, executive director of the Municipal Arts Society in New York, said creeping privatization has been a problem in many of those places, documented in a book by Harvard Design School professor Jerold Kayden in 2000. The stakes are even higher for large public parks and public spaces, Sanchis said.

"You have to be a little more careful with parks, where thousands of people use them on a regular basis. Closing them off has to be done judiciously," he said.

In handing over management to private interests, "the devil is in the details," said Kayden. Depending on who is appointed to the boards controlling the new Central Artery surface entity, the temptation may be great to hold private activities on the space for additional revenue, he said. "That may be a bargain people are willing to make, but it should be openly discussed in advance."

While Kayden said that public-private partnerships are sweeping the country as a way to create and maintain parks and public spaces, the strategy has been less popular in Massachusetts. The state has only two fully functional BIDs, in Springfield and in Hyannis; a BID for Downtown Crossing was proposed but not adopted.

A public-private partnership led to the construction of Post Office Square in Boston, which is funded by revenues from a parking garage beneath it. A similar approach was established to redesign City Hall Plaza, but plans for a hotel and parking garage at that site met with heavy criticism.

The proposal for the surface of the depressed Central Artery -nearly 30 acres of public space that will be created when the project is complete and the existing elevated structure is torn down - calls for two governing boards and one advisory board to oversee the space, funded by businesses and property owners all around the corridor. The responsibility is focused on maintenance; unlike Bryant Park or Times Square, the original capital improvements will be paid for strictly with public funds, at least under the current plan.

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