

Bill Lamb was an urban visionary. His creativity and persistence led directly to what are widely regarded as among the most dramatic improvements in appearance and livability which Charlestown has seen.

Back in the mid-1970's, government and business leaders were considering replacing the Central Artery in Boston with a tunnel, hoping that the project would result in the reconnection of downtown to the waterfront and open up new areas for development. Separately, the state highway department was planning to reconstruct the S-shaped western end of the Tobin Bridge, which then ran above-ground through City Square, to make it straighter and less dangerous for traffic. At that point City Square had been crisscrossed by both the elevated Orange Line (then in the process of removal) and the Tobin Bridge, leaving virtually nothing remaining of the park which had once anchored Charlestown in the nineteenth century.

At lightly-attended public meetings in Charlestown, Bill urged the state to use the same approach in Charlestown as was proposed for the Central Artery: depress part of the Tobin Bridge in an underground tunnel beneath City Square to have it re-emerge above-ground away from the core of the neighborhood and closer to I-93.

Removing the Tobin Bridge's overhead barrier in City Square, Bill argued, would have several important advantages: reuniting the former park area, re-connecting Charlestown with its harbor, opening up the entrance to the neighborhood from downtown, and creating a greater sense of community pride and rejuvenation.

State officials at first were skeptical: Charlestown at the time seemed an unlikely place for innovative infrastructure improvements. But by the early 1980s, after several years of schematic drawings and meetings, Bill's logic and quiet drive, aided by a cadre of Charlestown supporters, eventually won the officials over.

Unfortunately, just as the state agreed to Bill's underground concept, the US government announced that the project would not be eligible for federal funding, making it prohibitively expensive for Massachusetts to undertake alone. Bill then participated in the ultimately successful lobbying efforts of the North Area Task Force, a Charlestown neighborhood organization, with the assistance of Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, to obtain Congressional legislation that authorized federal funds for what became the Central Artery North Area project.

It is remarkable that Bill's idea eventually inspired a federal law that opened up in excess of \$100 million in national highway funding that allowed CANA to move forward with his underground design. The completion of CANA in the late 1990's, twenty years after Bill's initial proposal, accomplished all of the rationales he had listed for depressing part of the Tobin Bridge.

We now have a fabulous park in City Square which serves as an inviting gateway to Charlestown from downtown Boston and a centerpiece of family and civic activity. A hotel, commercial developments and housing have replaced the unsightly bridge off-ramps and abandoned warehouses in the immediate vicinity of City Square. Bill's farsighted concept enabled City Square to regain the physical and social preeminence it had enjoyed in the nineteenth century as a gateway Charlestown.

But Bill wasn't finished with the City Square area. When Bill Weld was elected Governor in the fall of 1990 and the state was struggling with how the main Central Artery Project -- the Big Dig

-- would cross the Charles River between North Station and Bunker Hill Community College, he appointed a Bridge Design Review Committee with about 30 city planners, architects, businesspeople and community representatives, including three from Charlestown. Bill's fame in enabling CANA led to his appointment to the Bridge Design Review Committee.

Bill tirelessly advocated for a Charlestown-friendly design that included moving the bridge further away from City Square and minimizing the number of ramps. Eventually the committee's work resulted in the signature Zakim Bridge, with ample distance from the new park in City Square.

Bill spent a great deal of time in discussions about the design and ornamentation of the park itself. In more recent years he was a relentless advocate for a more neighborhood-oriented redesign of Rutherford Avenue between City Square and Sullivan Square. It is fair to say that virtually the entire rejuvenated City Square area bears Bill's imprint.

Over the years, Bill and I attended probably several hundred public hearings and meetings of the North Area Task Force, Bridge Design Review Committee, Friends of City Square Park and Rutherford Avenue/Sullivan Square working groups.

Several of his qualities particularly impressed me. First, despite his busy professional practice as an architect, he almost never missed a relevant community meeting. Second, while Bill had been the unquestioned catalyst -- and hero -- of the underground CANA project, he never acted as though he deserved more credit than other neighborhood advocates.

And besides being the inventor of bold big-picture concepts, he also paid close attention to minute and necessary design details. Finally, notwithstanding the passion of Bill's convictions, I never recall him raising his voice or resorting to intemperate arguments. He relied instead on his mastery of the facts and polite persuasiveness to convince government officials and some dubious residents that his positions made sense.

For all these reasons, we in Charlestown owe Bill lasting gratitude for having brainstormed and helped to will into being the transformation of a key part of the neighborhood. Stop and imagine what Charlestown would look and feel like today if Bill had not dared to suggest and press for his long-shot idea to depress part of the Tobin Bridge -- and the state had simply rebuilt the bridge overhead in City Square. Thanks, Bill, for your imagination and masterful advocacy.

Rich Johnston was co-chairman of the North Area Task Force, one of three Charlestown representatives on the Bridge Design Review Committee, and one of the original Directors of the Friends of City Square Park.