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OPINION



ZACK WITTMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Guests enjoy large art interactive pieces at the Lawn on D grand opening in South Boston earlier this month.

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Can a park jump-start a neighborhood?

THE LAWN on D, a new temporary park at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, sits in what might seem like a bizarre spot to build a new outdoor space. It runs along a weird stretch of no-man's-land on D Street in South Boston. A decade from now, the D Street corridor will be the gateway between Southie and the Seaport, but now it's mostly an empty stretch that doesn't know what it wants to be. Strangely enough, that makes the area a perfect spot for the park.

The Lawn on D is testing the theory that a new park can jumpstart the redevelopment of the neighborhood around it. It's a strategy that has worked elsewhere, and Boston should repeat the experiment in a different setting: By building new parkland on platforms above the spaces where highways cut through the city.

Once a weed-strewn patch of dirt, the Lawn on D is 2.7 acres of greenery tucked around the back side of the South Boston convention center. It's a collection of orange lawn furniture and bocce courts, ping pong tables and food trucks, and function space, all wired for Internet, and all plunked onto a block that won't be a vibrant, organic neighborhood for years to come.

Across the street from the park, construction crews are finishing up work on a new 200-unit apartment building and breaking ground on a pair of convention center hotels. In addition, a 225-unit apartment complex a block up the street is opening, on a fading industrial stretch that used to mark the border between the Seaport and Southie. The convention center's billion-dollar expansion will sprawl out next to the Lawn on D, and part of the lawn will eventually become the convention center's second front door.

This stretch of South Boston is a work in progress, and the Lawn on D is bringing new people to a seriously underused part of Boston. Putting compelling open space on D Street makes the unbuilt parcels around the park more valuable, and if they're more valuable, they'll get developed far more quickly than if they bordered a patch of dirt and weeds.

The strategy is familiar. The Rose Kennedy Greenway helped shift the downtown's center of gravity away from State Street and toward Boston's waterfront. In New York, the transformation of an old freight rail line into an elevated park, the High Line, has spurred billions of dollars in private development. New York is also in the process of capping two blocks of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway and covering the highway with new parkland. That suggests a way for Boston to push its own park frontier.

Boston has a habit of trying to cap its highways by chasing mega-developments like the Prudential Center and Copley Place. But these massive projects can take years, if not decades, to materialize. New York's park-building gambit atop the Brooklyn Queens Expressway is a far less costly approach.

From the Fenway to Bay Village and Chinatown, Boston is littered with stretches of highway that sever neighborhoods. But even the most promising highway development sites take forever to advance. So instead of fighting the brutal economics of putting buildings on top of its highways, Boston should take cues from New York's experiment and from the Lawn on D. The city should focus on topping dead spaces on highways with new parks that spruce up their surroundings immediately, and fuel

new development around them in the longer term.

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