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DOWNTOWN , NORTH END

## Critics attack Greenway Conservancy salaries, lack of transparency at State House hearing

Posted by Jeremy C. Fox

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By Jeremy C. Fox, Town Correspondent

Critics of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy voiced their dissatisfaction to state legislators on Monday, saying the public-private partnership set up to manage the 15-acre park operates in secrecy, mismanages taxpayer money, and should be

shut down.

“The greenway is public land, and the state can no longer knowingly waste public funds, time, and energy on an experiment that has not worked,” said Diane Vallee, who chaired a Massachusetts Horticultural Society project that maintained three greenway parcels until the conservancy revoked the society’s lease in 2009.

Vallee and other critics testified before members of the Joint Committee on Transportation, which is considering a greenway funding bill filed last year by Representative Aaron Michlewitz, a North End Democrat.

The bill would extend state funding for the conservancy through 2017, require open meetings of its board of directors, and give veto power over the conservancy’s budget and contracts with vendors to the Greenway Leadership Council, an advisory group that currently has no voting rights.

The hearing came amid ongoing criticism from both state officials and regular citizens who have

decried high salaries and a lack of transparency at the conservancy.

Controversy over salaries other financial dealings had quietly simmered until an errant email from Nancy Brennan, the conservancy's executive director, showed that Brennan contacted a public relations consultant for advice before revealing her salary to a Boston Herald reporter.

After a \$20,000 raise in 2011, Brennan's salary is \$185,000 a year, making her one of five conservancy staff members earning six figures.

Brennan did not testify at Monday's hearing, but Georgia Murray, chairwoman of the conservancy's board, defended the group and its policies in nearly a half-hour of testimony.

Murray said the conservancy already holds four public board meetings each year, as required by the statute that created it. But she stressed again, as she had at a February board meeting, that the conservancy needed to maintain the privacy of anonymous donors, and she questioned Michlewitz's plan to give the Greenway Leadership Council veto power.

"We recognize the GLC has value, but we question whether approval authority over budgets and contracts is the best way to integrate them into the life of the greenway," she said.

Murray expressed hope that the conservancy could move forward with a "three-legged stool" of funding that would include ongoing state support, private donors, and a business improvement district, which the conservancy has attempted to launch for two years.

Under the BID, owners of commercial buildings abutting the greenway would consent to a tax to support the conservancy. Murray said the BID would likely generate roughly \$2 million per year, giving the conservancy the funding it needs to run a complex string of parks built atop a highway tunnel.

"It costs more to run those parks than it does for a grass park with trees. We should be at a \$6 million budget, not a \$4.7," she said, referring to the conservancy's current \$4.7 million budget.

Murray told lawmakers that the conservancy had been in discussion with state Secretary of Transportation Richard A. Davey and was working on a written response to his letter of Jan. 31.

The secretary wrote that MassDOT would not extend the conservancy's lease unless it made itself subject to state open-meeting laws and Freedom of Information Act requests, arranged an independent review of staff salaries, and provided a business plan that would make it self-sufficient by 2019.

Murray promised an independent survey of salaries to meet Davey's requirement while also defending existing salaries, saying that Brennan's \$185,000 was well below the average of \$226,000 the conservancy found at comparable parks and non-profit organizations last year.

State Representative Peter Durant, a Republican from Spencer, pressed Murray further, asking how she would justify such high salaries to "the common man on the street" or someone who might be unemployed.

"Regardless of whether they're paid in line [with comparable positions], I just don't know if that's an argument that rings true with people," Durant said.

Murray said she appreciated that perspective, but that there were specific sets of skills required to

run a large non-profit organization and a public park, and that was the standard against which salaries were compared.

“I don’t think there’s anything I can say or anyone can say to someone who’s out of work and say any amount of significant salary is going to feel right, necessarily,” she said. “But I do think that it is right, and it is right if we want to have a really terrific park in the city of Boston, that we have to pay people the comparable wage to get them to work there.”

Representative Timothy R. Madden, a Nantucket Democrat, asked why the conservancy had no existing plan for financial independence, given that the state funding set up by 2008 legislation was due to expire this year.

Murray responded that she was not involved with the conservancy at the time of that legislation, but that it was her understanding that the state had an obligation to ensure the greenway’s maintenance. She said ongoing conversations with MassDOT officials before Davey took office had always indicated that state funding would continue.

That’s exactly what Diane Vallee and other conservancy critics hope won’t happen. Vallee said she spoke on behalf of many horticulturalists disappointed with the conservancy’s management of the parks.

“Many of us envisioned beautiful green space, with interesting plantings instead of acres of barren hardscape and boring spans of grass,” she said.

“How can the greenway be green when the conservancy only spends 1 percent of its \$4.7 million on plants? That means 99 percent of their budget is spent on high salaries, administration, public relations firms, and consultants.”

Vallee said she had a letter from the Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts, which represents 12,400 members across 197 garden clubs, calling for the establishment of a Friends of the Greenway organization.

Such a group, she said, could help manage the parks through a partnership with the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. Alternatively, she said, the parks could be maintained by Work Inc., the contractor that currently does maintenance for the conservancy on a \$500,000 annual contract. Or the state could put a maintenance contract out to bid.

“When the conservancy goes, no one will notice, because we don’t know what they do,” Vallee said.

Shirley Kressel, a landscape architect and longtime activist, also called for eliminating the conservancy. She argued that it was the state’s original intent that the conservancy be self-supporting, but that the conservancy had lobbied for legislation that included 50 percent state funding.

Kressel said the conservancy uses its non-profit status to keep its meetings and records closed to the public while using public money to manage public property. She echoed Vallee’s charges that the conservancy has spent disproportionately on salaries at the expense of park improvements.

“The conservancy is loath to disclose its finances, because then we will see how little of the money they have collected is going into the park,” she said. And according to her, the Greenway

Leadership Council is ill-suited to provide the oversight Michlewitz intended.

“The conservancy leadership council is not really a voice of the community, as it was originally intended to be,” she said. “If you look online at the people that are in it, it’s chaired by the vice president for development of Boston Properties. Only a handful of the seats are even filled right now, but it’s all corporate and political interests. It’s not a group of disinterested neighborhood people and park lovers.”

Kressel doesn’t believe it’s possible to reform the conservancy. Her solution was to have either DCR take over or for MassDOT to put management of the parks out for a competitive bid. Community support, she suggested, could help take up any slack.

“As you can see, there are friends waiting to spring into action, enthusiasts to take up volunteering and a community voice, and community input,” she said.

Matt Conti, a North End resident who has criticized the conservancy at his community blog, [NorthEndWaterfront.com](http://NorthEndWaterfront.com), took a softer tack, saying he supported Michlewitz’s bill “as a solid first step, but I think the committee can do better.”

Conti said the conservancy can’t take credit for much of what the public enjoys on the greenway.

“I think it’s important to point out that the state created pretty much everything that you see on the greenway — all the fountains, the structures, the gardens, the pathways, the parks themselves were all done under the direction of state agencies, not the conservancy,” he said.

Conti accused the conservancy of using deceptive benchmarks for its funding and said its board meetings include “no real debate or discussion; they’re basically just announcements of what’s already decided behind closed doors.”

He also complained that the conservancy has made no substantive effort to work with residents of surrounding neighborhoods and has failed to maintain fountains in the North End parks.

He said the neighborhood has been made to suffer because the conservancy hasn’t built any public restrooms in the parks. “We see tourists, college kids urinating in our alleys and sidewalks,” he said.

Conti supported giving veto power to the leadership council and applying the open-meeting law to the conservancy, and echoed Davey’s call that the group be subject to records requests.

“Accountability and transparency is really the only remedy for what ails the greenway conservancy,” he said.

Richard Parr, director of policy and development for A Better City, spoke in support of both Michlewitz’s bill and the conservancy. A Better City is a downtown business organization representing many businesses abutting the greenway and is a donor to the conservancy.

Parr said the state’s current \$2.2 million annual contribution to the conservancy’s budget was a “modest commitment” that would help send a positive message to private donors.

He said his organization had done an independent analysis of park maintenance costs and estimated them to be about \$700,000 per year more than the state currently pays.

He spoke in support of the BID and said potential members would benefit from greater transparency. But he expressed concern about “adding another layer of governance to the mix” by giving the leadership council veto power.

Doing that, he suggested, could complicate efforts to build a BID that would already have a complex governance structure limiting the power of the property owners.

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