

The Leonard Zakim Bridge

Bridges are one of the most prominent and appreciated physical representations of what civil engineers do. A bridge is also a metaphor for connecting things, not just physically but spiritually. Indeed, it is a great honor to have a bridge named after you.

The late Leonard Zakim died of cancer two years ago. A symbol of his accomplishments will live on in the Central Artery cable-stayed bridge that will be named after him. For 15 years, Zakim was the director of Anti-Defamation League of New England, an organization dedicated to opposing hate crimes and bigotry. He was widely regarded as a bridge builder between Boston's often-fractious racial, ethnic and religious groups. He created the annual black-Jewish seder, an event that has attracted hundreds of attendees and juxtaposes the biblical story of escaping slavery with contemporary efforts to end oppression and prejudice. He started the Lenny Fund, which provides support to community and social service organizations. His efforts have helped to make Boston today a much different place than the provincial, strife-torn city of the 1950s and 1960s. While there are still many problems yet to address, there has also been much overall improvement.

The Leonard Zakim Bridge is one of the most visible features of the Central Artery/Tunnel (CA/T) Project, particularly since most of the project's massive structures and engineering achievements are buried underground. The bridge crosses the Charles River between North Station and Charlestown. It will eventually replace the existing truss bridge river crossing as the connecting I-93 Central Artery tunnels are opened for traffic in 2002 and 2003. The bridge was envisioned as more than just a transportation structure, but as a link and a symbol for Boston. The preliminary and final designs included efforts not just to design a structure, but to design a bridge that would act as a bridge in its symbolic sense. The CA/T Project has been envisioned as a project that would physically knit a divided Boston back together again. It is appropriate that the structure is to be named after the late Mr. Zakim, an individual who spent his waning energy battling a fatal disease, who wanted to accomplish the same goal.

Leonard Zakim was a personal hero to me. He was a great example of a man who learned to make lemonade out of the world's lemons. He stood up strong and energetically for those who could not stand well for themselves, and he devoted much of his time and effort in attempts to bridge divides between people. Since we all have to live on this planet next to each other, Zakim's efforts provided a guideline of a way to do it besides throwing Molotov cocktails and rocks. In the strife and warfare that has greeted the start of the new millennium, Zakim's passing is a great loss for all of us. He was the personal embodiment of the concept of a bridge, which is perhaps the civil engineering feature best appreciated by the public at large. As the sleek symbol and icon of Boston of the twenty-first century, the Leonard Zakim Bridge will stand for more than a transportation highway structure; it will be a reminder of the ideal of bridging the divide between people.

Brian Brenner

Brian Brenner,
Chair, Civil Engineering Practice Editorial Board