
Enjoying the View

Beauty is, indeed, in the eye of the beholder. And, of course, many times it is not so apparent upon first glance.

BRIAN BRENNER

Over the years, the scenery adjacent to the Southeast Expressway has been spruced up quite a bit, to the point where it's actually one of the more aesthetically pleasing highway rides. Driving north from the Braintree Split (at the southern portal entrance), you pass beneath the new East Milton deck, which has reconnected the village with a park and pine trees. Then it's on to a pleasant tidal marsh, and across the Neponset River to a ride next to the new Pope John Paul II Park. This site used to contain a landfill and drive-in movie theater but is now a beautiful, grassy space adjacent to the river and estuary. Further north, you see sailboats and sparkling sunlight reflecting off Boston Harbor, with views of tidal flats and sand beaches near Marina Bay. Even the KeySpan gas tank, seemingly an industrial eyesore, has been transformed to an abstract work of art, with its rainbow painting by artist Corita Kent. Beyond that, north of Columbia Road, the decrepit garbage plant with its massive smoke stacks has been demolished. At the

northern terminus of the expressway, the decaying Mass Pike interchange has been completely rebuilt by the Central Artery/Tunnel Project into a series of soaring, sculptured concrete bridges. As part of this work, an abandoned building at the old Broadway Bridge was demolished, and the crumbling bridge itself has been replaced by a nicely detailed concrete viaduct.

Remarkably, almost every mile along the expressway has been redone. Through a variety of projects, old eyesores and decaying structures have been demolished and replaced. Visitors to the city from the south get a much different and much improved visual perspective of the city, especially with the ugly garbage plant at Mass Ave demolished. It's a good thing that the sites are so much better to look at, since viewers get a close, long look with speeds of 20 mph or less during "rush" hour. Watch the seagulls soaring over Malibu Beach in South Boston and you can imagine for a moment (or much longer than a moment) that you're on Cape Cod.

Landmarks New & Old

Over the years, radio traffic reporters have developed a list of markers and shorthand comments to convey just how bad the traffic is. If, for example, the expressway is described as a parking lot from Furnace Brook, then it's best just to stay home. Probably the most prominent landmark along the route is the gas tank, an appropriate icon for the traffic reports. The tank is filled with fuel, and the

cars sitting in the traffic jam burn it off, in a sort of commuting equilibrium (yes, and I know it's liquid natural gas in the tank and gasoline in the cars, but literary latitude is being taken here). So it was a bit startling in May 2005 to see new competition for icon status when a windmill popped up along that linear shrine to fossil fuel consumption. The windmill was built by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 103. It provides electric power to some adjacent buildings.

The windmill project is ingenious on many levels. For provision of power, it's placed at a good site next to windy Boston Harbor. For educational purposes, the project is a winner. Instead of talking about renewable energy, IBEW went out and built a windmill. As an addition to the scenery, the windmill is quite beautiful. It is a sleek, stark kinetic sculpture, with a simple cylindrical shaft and white blades. Recently, blue illumination was added at night and the turning blades glow. Funding for the project was provided, in part, by the Massachusetts Renewable Energy Trust, which in turn collects funds from electricity rate payers. In a sense, the fossil fuels are helping to subsidize development of renewable energy sources.

Dressing Up, or Dressing Down?

The IBEW windmill was planned and built during debate over another, much larger windmill project proposed for Nantucket Sound. For this project, the developer has proposed to build a large swath of windmills in the shallow waters north of Nantucket. According to the developer, the wind farm would provide upwards of three-quarters of the electric power needed for Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. The proposed farm would be a non-polluting, renewable energy source that would greatly reduce demand for fossil fuels. What's not to love?

Apparently, there's plenty not to love. A citizen's group, the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, was formed to protest the project. The crux of the protesters' argument appears to be that the windmills would convert pristine Nantucket Sound into essentially an industrial wasteland. On an earlier version of the

group's website (www.saveoursound.org), a black and white artist's rendering pulled no punches in its depiction of a despoiled seascape, with sailboats menaced by the sinister-looking windmills, beneath a gray, smoky sky that probably contains clouds but was drawn to suggest industrial waste.

There are many challenging issues to be debated by a proposal to build a wind farm in the Horseshoe Shoals area of Nantucket Sound. The issues include who is entitled to build in and profit from what is public land (or in this case, water), how wildlife (in particular, birds) is protected, how facilities like the wind farm should be regulated and what arrangements would be in place to ensure that the windmills are properly maintained and removed, if necessary.

But of all the issues to be debated, the one that seems to most energize opponents is the concern for the visual pollution and the potential industrialization of Nantucket Sound. This concern seems slight and unintentionally ironic. It is a slight argument, because windmills are dramatic and quite beautiful, at least in many viewers' eyes. For some, myself included, they can be less visually intrusive than the behemoth yachts that currently ply the waters of the sound. It is ironic, because many of the people protesting the wind farm are perhaps some of the highest per-capita consumers of energy in the world. I'm not aware of a study to document this, but if you visit Nantucket, you will see very large homes, very large vehicles on the cobblestoned streets and enormous yachts cluttering the harbor. Cape and Island residents use a lot of energy, almost all of it provided by non-renewable sources. Using wind power to satisfy these needs would seem to be a good thing in that context. Deepening the irony, remember that one of New England's greatest environmental disasters occurred in 2003 when a barge dumped oil in Buzzards Bay, despoiling significant areas of the coastline. The barge was en route to the Canal Electric Generating Station in Bourne, which generates electricity for Cape Cod.

For alternatives to the proposed wind farm project, the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound states on its website:

There are other far more appropriate ways to achieve the same emissions reductions as the Cape Wind project. In fact, given that we do not have a current need for additional power, we should start with an aggressive energy efficient and conservation program. We should also explore land-based wind options prior to going offshore due to economics, risk, and regulatory process.

This argument is a curious one. It seems to be a combination of not-in-my-backyard, there's no need for it anyway and use of conservation. Even if it were true that there's no need for additional power, it would still be good to replace current fossil fuel consumption with wind power. However, opponents to the windmill farm have a good point in emphasizing the need for aggressive energy conser-

vation. But for now, the SUVs filling the narrow Cape and Island streets keep getting bigger and bigger. A good start would be to replace these vehicles with compact cars and smaller sedans. Some more modest sailboats and dinghies instead of five-story yachts would also be helpful.

Back along the expressway, the white blades from the new IBEW windmill lazily turn in the sunlight, spinning a bit faster than the long lines of traffic moving in fits and starts. A news radio helicopter hovers above, broadcasting a dire prognosis for commuters. This morning, it's another slow roll to Columbia Road. But now there's something new and nice to look at along the way.

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