AN ASSET FOR A NEW CENTURY

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By William Flynn

The Quarry Hills golf course project is the largest single land project ever attempted in Quincy or Milton, covering 446 acres of the two communities. The amount of dirt and cash being pumped in is mind-boggling.

By the time the first golfer tees off in the summer of 2002, nearly 11.5 million tons of Big Dig dirt (that's 600,000 truckloads) will have been dumped. And the Massachusetts Highway Department will have paid out about $ 90 million to the city of Quincy. The city, in turn, will have passed most of this money along to the developer (Quarry Hills Associates) and the contractor (McCourt Construction).

With numbers like that it's natural for taxpayers to wonder whether their money is being wisely spent. Will the 27-hole golf course benefit Quincy and Milton residents for generations or will the project turn out to be great boondoggle?

So far, Quarry Hills seems to be meeting or exceeding the vision of the developers.

Initially, the project was for an 18-hole course, but now it will be 27 holes. Initially, only a clubhouse was in the plans, but now a 400-person function hall will also be built. Admittedly, all this means more profits for the developers who are leasing the public land.

But the entire project will be owned by the city in 50 years. Few reading this now will be around for that event, but it will be a boon to residents of the city at midcentury.

And Quarry Hills will pay Quincy and Milton a percentage of the course's revenue each year until the ownership change.

Last Saturday, Patriot Ledger reporters Elizabeth Crowley and Tom Walsh did a thorough job in following the project's trail of dirt and money. They described a sophisticated system to verify the delivery of truckloads of dirt (which is needed to trigger cash payments) and noted how money passes from the state to the city and into the developer's hands. The key role of the state Department of Environmental Protection in facilitating the project, including work on the fastest off-ramp construction in federal highway history, was also described.

Not included in the reporting project (because of space considerations) was the work of Quincy DPW Director David Colton in getting a good deal for the city for the rights to fill Swingle's Quarry.

The state highway department was nearly desperate to find a place to deposit hundreds of thousands of tons of excess slurry from the Big Dig. It investigated several options but chose the quarry as the best possibility.

But before the dumping could begin, Colton insisted that the city be paid for those privileges and negotiated a good deal of $ 1 a ton. That amounted to $ 541,660 in unexpected cash for the city's coffers. That, added to money the city was already getting from the 1984 contract with J.F. White Construction, has earned the city more than $ 800,000.

Not everyone believes Quarry Hills is the best use of the land. But no one has ever been able to offer a plan to reclaim the landfills and scrub land that made any sense, either economically or environmentally.

The serendipity of the Big Dig project and its boundless need to get rid of excavated dirt combined with the vision of the Quarry Hills developers made this golf course project possible.

With the ever-growing popularity of golf combined with the splendid views and convenient location, some would argue that not making money at Quarry Hills would be hard to do.

But this is a highly complex project requiring the cooperation of several state agencies, the developer, the contractor and a fleet of truckers, along with Quincy and Milton.

The uncertainty and sheer audacity of the project could have prompted several state agencies to reject it and several million dollars that were already invested would have been lost.

In fact, as the Patriot Ledger report pointed out, one DEP official was surprised to find out that the project was still alive. One official called it the project with nine lives.

The final truckload has not been dumped and the final audit has not been completed, but Quarry Hills will likely turn out to be a major asset for Quincy and Milton for an entire century.