

THE NORTH END'S NEW LAWN

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TO APPRECIATE the two parks that were formally opened in the North End this week, residents should remember what it was like to cross through here a few years ago. A pedestrian had to endure the looming shadow of the Central Artery, skirt a dingy parking lot, and brave a highway crossing clogged with cars exiting the Sumner Tunnel.

Yet thousands of people make this foot trip every day, and now they are greeted by a choice of crossings to Hanover, Salem, or North streets, two swaths of lawns, a perennial garden that changes color with the season, two fountains, and a porch-like linear plaza filled with tables and chairs available for a quick rest or a quiet conversation. Traffic from the tunnel is safely underground. In this section of Boston, the depression of the Central Artery was unambiguously worth the expense and difficulties of construction.

These wonderful parks are a tribute to the designers, the local firm Crosby Schlessinger Smallridge and Seattle-based Gustafson, Guthrie and Nichol; McCourt Construction, which built them; the hundreds of neighbors who offered suggestions; and the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, which supervised the project.

The parks show government at its best, so it was to be expected that public officials would be there: Senator Edward Kennedy (with his two dogs), Governor Deval Patrick, and Mayor Thomas Menino among them. "What a glorious day in the city of Boston," the mayor exulted.

And yet, even though the parks connect downtown Boston to the North End, they are not owned by the city, but by the Turnpike Authority, which will maintain them until the nonprofit Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy assumes that responsibility in the undetermined future. The Turnpike Authority is a transportation agency, not a parks manager. It is no surprise that park watchers already are noticing that the greenery is starting to show wear.

The North End parks and the other green spaces above the artery will be heavily used and require a level of expertise that the conservancy is working hard to develop. But the Turnpike Authority should not be distracted from its transportation mission. Sooner rather than later, this great series of Boston parks should be owned by the city.