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ROSLINDALE

From MIT, the view of Rozzie

The Boston Globe

Students offer up hints for parkers, pedestrians, shops

By Ron DePasquale, Globe Correspondent | April 30, 2006

Roslindale's leaders know their neighborhood isn't a city with a budget for high-priced consultants, so to boost Roslindale Village's renaissance, the neighborhood has turned to some urban visionaries who can offer free advice: graduate students.

Making Poplar Street a pedestrian promenade, transforming the long-vacant MBTA substation into a mix of businesses and loft apartments, and adding more trees, benches, and inviting signs were among the recommendations by the 14 MIT urban-planning grad students.

The design elements will be tackled first, said Janice Williams, executive director of Roslindale Main Streets.

"They gave us an outsider's view, which is always good, because we're stuck in the day-to-day here," Williams said. "Some of their suggestions were fabulous, but they're just suggestions, not a blueprint. We aren't a city unto ourselves, so we can't just enact whatever we want."

The MIT urban planning graduate program, which has also studied Jamaica Plain, Hyde Park, and Uphams Corner, offered its students to Roslindale Main Streets. The students, taught by professors Karl Seidman and Susan Silberberg, turned over their findings last spring, and a Main Streets volunteer design team is now evaluating them.

The recommendations included adding public art and signs with a unique logo to tell visitors they have entered Roslindale Village, also known as Roslindale Square, and creating murals and old-fashioned street lamps for a pedestrian passageway underneath the commuter rail station.

Those design elements will be much easier to do than other more ambitious proposals, like turning high-traffic Poplar Street into a pedestrian way, Williams said. The street's retailers need to receive deliveries, and many shops don't have rear access, she said.

"The pedestrian promenade will be difficult, because it involves a lot of businesses, so I don't see it as extremely realistic," Williams said. "But stranger things have happened, and we'll work it as hard as we can."

Poplar Street, adjacent to Adams Park in the heart of Roslindale Square, suffers from heavy traffic and double-parked cars that "restrict store visibility and patronage," the report said, while a pedestrian way would draw customers and "be a boon to businesses."

Roslindale Main Streets' leaders were heartened to read that the area's parking constraints are manageable, because unlike other linear business districts,

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Roslindale's is compact and pedestrian-friendly, one of Boston's best examples of the "classic urban village."

The report said its public lots need better advertising. Charles McCarthy, president of the Main Streets board of directors, said that many drivers, for example, don't realize that the commuter rail station's parking lot, the village's biggest, is mostly empty in the evenings.

"It's always parking, parking, parking around here," he said. "We were glad they felt we don't have a parking problem, but a parking management problem or a parking perception problem. That woke us all up, because people want to park right in front of the place they're going to, and that's just not realistic anymore."

The perception of Roslindale Village, especially among outsiders, is that it lacks parking, although its 425 parking spaces are underutilized, the report said. Drivers often circle around in search of on-street parking, only to end up parking farther away than a nearby lot. The 108-page report held good news for restaurateurs and diners. Despite its growing number of eateries, Roslindale is far from the saturation point. The neighborhood earns only 20 cents of every dollar its residents spend dining out, the report said.

The top 10 most viable potential businesses, according to the report, are: another bookstore, an Indian restaurant, a gourmet cheese shop, an office supplies store, a sporting goods store, a pet store, a children's clothing store, a women's shoe store, a health foods store, and a cinema.

The report will be given to a class of Wentworth Institute of Technology engineering students.■

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