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Don't sweat the shadows on Boston Common



By **Dante Ramos** | GLOBE COLUMNIST FEBRUARY 26, 2017

In Back Bay and Beacon Hill, some very well-intentioned people think even a little more shadow on Boston Common and the Public Garden [would be catastrophic](#). From the anguished comments [now on file at City Hall](#), you'd think a proposed new skyscraper downtown in Winthrop Square would block enough light to turn the two parks into the Arctic tundra.

Sorry. It won't. There just isn't a problem here.

I'm a frequent visitor to both parks, which contribute immeasurably to the urban fabric. But the increase in shadows will be entirely bearable, while the upside of development for Winthrop Square and the rest of the city is enormous. Although the campaign against the project has a certain emotional appeal — “Keep Our Parks Sunny,” [the slogan declares](#) — the underlying sentiment threatens a growing city's ability to meet its own needs.

The back story: Mayor Martin J. Walsh and his Boston Planning and Development Agency want to get rid of a decrepit city-owned parking garage on Winthrop Square, east of Downtown Crossing. After looking at [five other plans](#), the agency settled on Millennium Partners, which would pay upwards of \$150 million for the site and build a 775-foot mixed-use tower on it.

Because Logan Airport is so close, the final height is [subject to wrangling](#) with Massport and the Federal Aviation Administration. More challengingly, the project would also [require a change](#) in [Billy Bulger-era state laws](#) limiting new shadows on the Common and Public Garden. But the new shadow would move across the parks quickly and vanish by 9:30 a.m. on Sept. 10, when, by Millennium's calculations, the shadows would be longest.

Meanwhile, relief from the law would allow a bigger mixed-use project that would add hundreds of new housing units in Winthrop Square. That would be a god-send for an area that might as well not exist after 5 p.m. on weekdays. The older buildings around the square have lots of charm, and in a parallel universe people would flock there seven days a week.

Yet, as I wandered around downtown this past Sunday, on an oddly balmy afternoon that brought people onto sidewalks elsewhere in the city, Winthrop Square was conspicuously dead. Not enough people



Millennium Partners' proposal for the site of the Winthrop Square Garage.

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live there. The restaurants and stores, which serve the Monday-to-Friday crowd alone, were closed.

Allowing an area like Winthrop Square to languish is like having a room in your home that you can't use at night or on weekends. This waste of space becomes all the more egregious as jam-packed Boston keeps drawing new residents. To breathe life into Winthrop Square, any new development needs to be tall. Joseph Larkin, a principal at Millennium, says that, at a mere 365 feet, a building at Winthrop Square starts casting shadows forbidden under current law.

The way we discuss proposed buildings in Boston focuses heavily on hassles: noise, congestion, shadows. But new development can also solve problems, as Millennium's recent mega-project at Downtown Crossing shows. The area had grown shabby even before the recession hit, and before the old Filene's site became [a hole in the ground](#) for years. Things perked up palpably when [a supermarket opened in 2015](#) on the lower levels of the new Millennium Tower. The subsequent opening of Godfrey Hotel, a lovely restoration of [neglected his-](#)

[toric buildings nearby](#), hints at how one burst of reinvestment can trigger more.

Under existing law, there's a "shadow bank" that would allow a limited number of new developments in specified parts of downtown to cast new shadows on the Common during the day. To placate parks advocates, Walsh would give up what's left in the shadow bank in exchange for an exemption that lets the Winthrop Square project proceed — and lets the city maximize its take from the sale of the garage.

"Do I want the shadow in the early morning that comes with \$150 million," Boston Planning and Development Agency chief Brian Golden asks, "or do I want the midday shadow that doesn't come with \$150 million? To me, the choice is clear."

From all that money, Walsh has promised to devote tens of millions of dollars to the Common, Franklin Park, and the Emerald Necklace, and tens of millions more to affordable housing and other neighborhood investments. These commitments mesh with the mayor's broader — and underappreciated — [strategy of generating more money for public needs by broadening the city's tax base](#).

If anything, the city's sales pitch on Winthrop Square underplays the potential benefits of the project to its immediate surroundings. Instead of fretting over passing shadows on the Common first thing in the morning, Boston should jump at the chance to get better use out of a sleepy downtown.

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6am - 6pm
Mon - Fri

Lobby Hours:
Monday - Thursday
9:00 am to 5:00 pm
Friday
9:00 am to 6:00 pm
Saturday - Closed
Sunday - Closed

STORE HOURS
Mon - Fri 8am-6pm

BUSINESS HOURS		
MON.	11:00 AM	TO 6:00 PM
TUE.	11:00 AM	TO 6:00 PM
WED.	11:00 AM	TO 6:00 PM
THU.	11:00 AM	TO 6:00 PM
FRI.	11:00 AM	TO 6:00 PM
SAT.	Closed	TO Closed
SUN.	Closed	TO Closed