

ADVISORY BOARD

Visitors' Center Makes Business Sense

By Samuel R. Tyler

BOSTON DOES NOT HAVE A FULL-service visitors' center that is needed for a city that is so rich in history and culture and a major center for tourism. The city has many individual historical sites, the Freedom Trail and the Black Heritage Trail, but no central visitors' center to provide the broad introductory perspective of the role that Boston has played in our country's history or the New England region or to exhibit historical artifacts important to telling the city's story. Such a center would also be a place to orient visitors to the many other sites and activities available in Boston.

Tourism is big business in Massachusetts. The Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau estimates that 11.5 million domestic and international visitors came to Boston in 1998, which produced an economic impact of almost \$7.1 billion for the Greater Boston region. Approximately 11.9 million visitors are forecast for 1999.

Because Boston is so rich in history and culture, a laissez faire attitude has persisted that visitors will come and no special services are needed. The existing visitors' centers, managed by the National Parks Service and the city of Boston, are too limited in scope. Based on the experience in other cities, Boston must do a better job of serving the needs of the visitors to help make their stay enjoyable. In Philadelphia, the Pew Charitable Trust sponsored a report advocating a new full-service visitors center and contributed \$10 million to the building fund.

The idea of a central visitors' center is not new, but issues of program scope, finances and location have not been resolved. The role of the center should be to orient the visitors and entice them to explore the actual sites. The central visitors' center



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should not only help visitors understand Boston's past but also to enjoy its present. The center should be a one-stop shopping place where visitors can make dinner reservations, book a hotel room and purchase tickets for a play, sporting event or tour. Interactive computers and maps should help visitors plan their day. A complete gift shop should be available. The center should be designed to take advantage of current and future technology so that it con-

tinues to be relevant.

Funding for the multi-faceted visitors' center should come from a partnership including federal, state and local government, foundations and related business interests. Once established, operation of the center should become self-sustaining.

Location for the main center should be in the downtown area of the city from which visitors easily could fan out to the various sites, activities, trails and islands. A site for a visitors' center should be considered in planning for the reconfiguration of City Hall Plaza or on a parcel of land that will be available once the Central Artery structure is taken down.

Many groups and individuals support the idea of a visitors' center but a common vision on how to make the center a reality is missing. Leadership must emerge to achieve consensus among the individual interests and to insure that creating a full-service visitors' center in Boston is given a high priority in government, foundation and business planning. ■

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