

A visit to litter 'graveyard' might resurrect Bottle Bill

Chester Smolski

Thousands of people drive over it every day and never notice it. Even when identified as being located at the junction of Clifford, Friendship and Chestnut Streets at the edge of downtown Providence, few would know where to find it. More people would know it as the parcel of land situated between Leo's and the Met Cafe, surrounded by a broken chain-link fence and a favorite depository for "dead" bottles. Inconsequential as this lot appears to be, it presents an opportunity and a problem in the capital city.

This approximately 5,000 square feet of space downtown is vacant because it is under Route 195 East; thus it remains a piece of land that is an eyesore and serves no useful purpose other than to collect litter. Yet here is a piece of property that is roofed, in this case by a highway. Could it not be put to some useful purpose, especially in an area where land demands a premium price?

The idea of utilizing such wasted space is not a new one. In New York City there is a scheme to use space in Manhattan under the Queensboro Bridge to restore a former open market. In London there is a major project under way to utilize 23 acres of wasteland found under an eight-lane, one-mile-long, elevated highway.

The English project is an interesting one because of the many purposes for which this land is being used. In addition to some industrial facilities there, including small workshops, factories and garages, there are activity centers for social, educational, recreational and commercial purposes. A doctor's office, lunch club, children's nursery, play areas, cycle paths, garden and paved mall are being utilized, with further plans for various enclosed sports facilities. An interesting spinoff of this development in North Kensington under the London-to-Oxford highway which split the neighborhood into two parts is that people from these divided areas are being brought together as they shop, work and play "underneath the arches." Certainly an exciting development to watch, but only time will tell if such activities are compatible in this setting under an overhead highway.

In the case of Providence, where demand for land is not as intense as it is in London, it is not necessary to be thinking in terms of such development for the aforementioned Met lot, but in a city where parking is at a premium, one wonders why this piece of property which could store about 40 vehicles is not being utilized as a car park. With the soon-to-open, state-built courthouse nearby and the necessity to find more

parking spaces, it would seem appropriate for this state-controlled land under the highway to be put to such passive use. In addition to creating more parking spaces downtown, it could also generate needed income for city and state.

Possible development of the downtown lot is an opportunity, but a quick drive by the site will also reveal the problem — one common to vacant lots in the city and along highways — litter. If there were a 10-cent deposit on beer bottles, someone would quickly pick up at least \$20 worth of them within five minutes of this lot.

Discarded bottles assault the eye and, when smashed — a common occurrence — endangers anyone walking by, especially children who often play in such areas. Yet the General Assembly has the power to change this by simply passing the Bottle Bill, a measure that has regularly gone down to defeat over the years.

At a time when more Rhode Islanders are becoming increasingly aware of environmental concerns, it is incongruous that state representatives do not listen to the many people who have often expressed the view that they want controls placed on bottles. Seven states, including three in New England, have already done this with gratifying results, so why not pass the Bottle Bill?

The answer, quite simply, is well illustrated by a recent event on our Capitol Hill. A beer salesman, one of our representatives, showed a film, produced by the California Beer Wholesalers Association, that attempted to show how a voluntary program in California was operating better than in Michigan, which has bottle legislation.

It is obvious who is applying muscle, persuasion, favors or whatever to our legislators. The lobbyists for the beer and soft-drink industry, retail food stores and organized labor are actively working for their own special interests and the public are the losers.

If only legislators would walk to the city parking lot at the foot of the Capitol to see the disgrace and filth of littered and smashed bottles; would think in terms of the \$703,000 spent by the state last year to clear bottles and litter from our highways; and would realize that downtown Providence businesses will spend \$110,000 this year to clean the downtown of bottles and litter, they might realize how ineffective are voluntary efforts to maintain a decent environment by saving and recycling bottles.

The empty lot between the Met Cafe and Leo's can tell us much — if we only look. Opportunity for development and the problem of littered bottles: both cases need state action to get results which could help Providence.

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