

# Is a truce possible in Boston's shadow wars?

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**Conceptual rendering of the proposed Longwood Place on Brookline Avenue and Pilgrim Road in Boston.**

On a sunny October day in 1987, hundreds of protesters toting black umbrellas formed a long line in New York City's Central Park. The group — including such luminaries as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Paul Newman — was opposing a planned development for nearby Columbus Circle, which would have featured a 68-story tower. On a signal, they opened their umbrellas at once, mimicking the long shadows the new building would cast on the beloved park.

That celebrated protest 35 years ago helped persuade the developer to modify his plans, but controversies about shadows falling on urban parkland — from the “supertall” pencil towers in Manhattan to high-rise housing in San Francisco to the Winthrop Square garage redevelopment in downtown Boston — have continued ever since.

Now a massive development in the Longwood Medical Area is the latest flashpoint in Boston's shadow wars, as imperatives such as lab space, housing, and university consolidation conflict with parks advocates who fear that part of Frederick Law Olmsted's revered Emerald Necklace will be thrown into the dark by tall buildings. “It's important to understand that we're trying to protect a public resource, which is sunlight,” said Karen Mauney-Brodek, president of the Emerald Necklace Conservancy, which opposes the development.

The project, known as Longwood Place, received a key approval from the Boston Planning and Development Agency last week. It brings together several current issues: life sciences research, the housing shortage, traffic congestion. It also epitomizes Boston's one-off, ad hoc development process of extracting benefits from the private sector to fund the public realm.

If fully realized, the 6-acre Longwood project would create 1.3 million square feet of office and laboratory space; allow Simmons University to complete its campus master plan; rationalize traffic patterns; and add 338 new housing units (with 20 percent affordable, more than currently required). The city also would get \$17 million in linkage payments for housing and job development.

Skanska, the project developer, has agreed to pay \$7 million in mitigation fees for park maintenance. Intriguingly, this includes \$1 million for a shadow study that could be the start of a citywide policy that brings clarity, and possibly even comity, to parks advocates and developers alike. "We have to have binding rules that people can count on," City Councilor Kenzi Bok, who represents the area, said at last week's BPDA board meeting.

The Longwood mitigation agreement echoes the deal struck for the Winthrop Square garage redevelopment, which initially included a 775-foot tower casting shadows on Boston Common and the Public Garden. Approving the development required amending a state law protecting those parks from new shadows. In 2017, when she was City Council president, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu voted against asking the Legislature to lift the shadow restrictions for Winthrop Square. But in the end, the city negotiated a \$23 million payment from developer Millennium Partners to support maintenance on the Common, the shadow ban was lifted, and Winthrop Square's development moved ahead.

At the hearing Jan. 19, many residents cited "interim guidelines" for the Longwood Medical Area that the BPDA (then the Boston Redevelopment Authority) adopted in 2003, stating that "no project will be approved if it casts any new shadow for more than one hour on March 21st on the Emerald Necklace" or other nearby parks. But the guidelines were never codified into zoning, so they have limited power.

Skanska and its design partner, Sasaki, acknowledge the current plan will cast "limited" shadows in the early morning and late afternoon on March 21 (the spring equinox; midpoint of the solar year). Whether these are substantial enough to damage the park or reduce its use by the public is debatable. Kelly Farrell, a landscape ecologist at Sasaki, said her firm doesn't believe there will be "a substantial negative impact." But for some, any amount of new shade is a slippery slope.

Arthur Jemison, director of the BPDA, said it's both "possible and necessary" that the shadow study the city will conduct over the next year will provide a dependable methodology for establishing impacts, which can then be anchored into the zoning code. "We need a common set of facts to evaluate these things," he said in an interview. "We will meet the moment if we can use this analysis and take it as a template for the rest of the city."

Just so. The combatants in the shadow wars can reach détente only if the rules are fair and clear, and no one is left in the dark.

*Renée Loth's column appears regularly in the Globe.*