



## **Remarks by Jim Canales to the Friends of the Public Garden Members Meeting “The Imperative for Aspiration”**

**Four Seasons Hotel, Boston**

**October 16, 2017**

I am honored by the invitation to join you this evening. I would like to begin by acknowledging Barr’s board chair, Barbara Hostetter, whose vision, dedication, and partnership have been essential to what I will be sharing with you this evening.

I have entitled my remarks this evening: “The Imperative for Aspiration” because I am persuaded that aspiration is an essential ingredient to ensuring Boston’s status as a world-class city.

We are already a great city—with many assets and resources at our disposal—but we can sometimes resist change. As a city, and because of our many strengths, Boston can run the risk of being self-satisfied. Perhaps more damaging is that we are not immune from complacency. And, as a result, we can sometimes avoid being as bold, adventurous, and imaginative as we should be and need to be.

We need to combat these forces in order to shape the public realm that our city and its residents and visitors deserve, much as we see in other great cities around the world.

And the best way to achieve this vision, I believe, is through the power of aspiration.

This is especially true in our ambitions for a great public realm for Boston, a shared concern for all of us in this room. It is what you have helped to do in this part of our city, but we must build on that success.

The Boston Common was the first such common in our nation. It stands as a centuries-old testament to the power of aspiration, of long-term thinking, of sacrifice for the common good. It is a treasure. But it too depends on continued investment, creativity, innovation, and activation to sustain its relevance and its power for our times and for generations to come.

While I am a relatively recent Boston resident, having arrived in 2014 just in time for our epic snowstorm, I offer my remarks this evening from three distinct vantage points:

First, as a downtown Boston resident who lives a block from the Boston Common and Public Garden and as one who utilizes these public parks practically every day. Indeed, the Friends was one of the very first organizations that my partner, Jim, and I joined as members when we arrived in Boston. We knew these parks were a wonderful amenity for us as local residents and we wanted to do our small part in support of your important work.

Second, I speak this evening as a native San Franciscan who had the great fortune of benefiting from thoughtful planning for and investment in great parks such Golden Gate Park, the downtown waterfront

along the Embarcadero, and the Crissy Field/Presidio redevelopment, which was a huge success. I will return to Crissy Field later in my remarks.

And third, I offer my observations this evening as a foundation professional, working on behalf of an organization that is committed to a great public realm for Boston—I would like to start there this evening.

### **The Barr Foundation**

The Barr Foundation has now been around for 20 years. Today, we grant \$80 million per year, focused on three core areas: Arts and Creativity, Climate, and Education. In recent years, we have broadened our focus beyond Boston to be more of a regional funder, with targeted national engagement. As we have done this, however, we retain an unwavering focus on Boston, as our home city, and that's what I'll talk about tonight.

We have also evolved Barr's work in recent years. Indeed, during my time with Barr, the one aspect of our work that has evolved the most, and that I think is particularly relevant for the Friends—is communications.

Increasingly, across our work at Barr, we are exploring ways to use our voice at targeted moments to elevate key issues, to help frame a public conversation, and to advocate in ways that advance our mission and support our partners. We are not alone in this approach, as many foundations are coming to realize that communications can serve as a powerful tool for impact on the issues they are funding.

Tonight, I want to describe one particular initiative at Barr, which unites the theme of aspiration with the tools of communications, to advance an ambitious, hopeful and exciting vision for our City's public realm.

### **Waterfront Initiative**

In the past 18 months, we have invested over \$6.5 million in an initiative focused on Boston's waterfront. Our interest in the waterfront is a direct reflection of one of our core values: adopting a long-term view.

Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to do that. We are not subject to the market pressures of delivering to shareholders, and we do not have to answer to an electorate. As a result, at our best, philanthropic institutions can embrace a long-term perspective.

Our work on the waterfront aims to do just that.

We realize that there are market pressures for the waterfront in Boston related to supporting growth and development, stimulating economic activity, and encouraging job creation. And Boston must remain attentive to those needs.

At the same time, we have watched how the waterfront has developed, especially in the Seaport District. Many, including Barr, have expressed concerns that market considerations were often the only—or certainly far too dominant—drivers. As many, including ourselves, have noted, too many

development decisions in the City are made on a parcel-by-parcel basis, with individual projects reviewed one at a time and related community offsets negotiated on a one-off basis.

Indeed, in an article published this fall in *Architecture Boston*, real estate attorney Matt Kiefer observed that in Boston: “We’ve become dependent on private development to address more incremental needs, so the advantages of growth are unevenly distributed, and the fruits of development sometimes fall short of our civic aspirations.”

It should not be this way. And Boston deserves far better.

Our current approach to the waterfront is not yet grounded in a larger vision, although with *Imagine Boston 2030*, there are glimmers of hope. With our support, the City included a focus on the waterfront in its comprehensive planning effort, the first such effort undertaken in more than 50 years. I credit Mayor Walsh for his commitment and dedication to this planning work, which holds the potential to make a big difference for Boston in the years ahead especially if we are able to shift from planning to execution.

At Barr, we increasingly recognize that the decisions we make today have implications for future generations, so we wanted to find a way to shift how the conversation was happening, and to anchor this public conversation in a larger vision for Boston’s waterfront.

Barr’s work has as its goal the realization of a great public realm throughout Boston’s waterfront, one that advances five interrelated priorities:

First, climate resiliency—we are vulnerable to sea level rise; we now have more data than ever before on what the future will bring, and we need to prepare.

Second, accessibility and inclusiveness—we are investing in a waterfront that benefits all, not just some who can afford to live in proximity to it.

Third, parks and open spaces—this is a huge opportunity for Boston, especially as we activate a part of the City that had been traditionally cut off by the Central Artery. In addition, with population growth in Boston in recent years as well as the related development, we now have larger residential communities along the waterfront who deserve great parks and open space to enjoy this great resource.

Fourth, excellent design—which we know is critical for a world-class city. And we also know that we have work to do in this regard. Indeed, the *Globe*’s Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic Robert Campbell has written about the Seaport that it is “a serious failure of urban design.”

And fifth, mobility—with a focus on water transportation and ferries. We have funded Boston Harbor Now, which is playing a vital leadership role in exploring the options for expanded water transport. Indeed, following the publication of a recent Pioneer Institute study lauding the potential of water transportation, *Globe* columnist Dante Ramos observed that support for water transportation cuts across ideological lines leading to the promise that its full potential may well become a reality.

We have now been at this work in earnest for about 18 months since the public launch of effort, so what have we learned? I want to share a few lessons that I believe are relevant for any of us working on public realm issues:

First, a long-term perspective is essential. We have to be in this for the long haul. I reference Crissy Field in San Francisco earlier this evening, and that is an excellent case study for a long-term perspective. The planning for Crissy Field started in 1986, and the park did not formally open until 2001, 15 years later. During this period, over \$35 million was raised privately to create a 100-acre urban park that is enjoyed by millions each year.

Second, we must work on various dimensions simultaneously. Barr supports a range of partner that bring different strengths and competencies to this effort: Trustees of Reservations focuses on parks and open space; Boston Harbor Now brings experience with planning, resilience issues, water transportation, and advocacy; the Conservation Law Foundation has deep knowledge of the regulatory environment and focuses on protecting the public's rights conferred by Chapter 91; and GreenRoots in East Boston underscores the importance of authentic community engagement to advance this work. As we support all of these partners, and others, the related challenge is how to ensure that the various parts integrate with each other and that the whole effort can be greater than the sum of the parts.

Third, engaging the public is vital. Some of you may have read the recent news of the Barry Diller's decision to withdraw support for the Pier 55 park in New York City. This was to be a \$250 million floating park on the west side. A recent article in Fast Company on this topic observed:

“Community engagement is an essential ingredient of making successful urban open space. A park designed and developed from the singular perspective of a wealthy individual bestowing a “gift”—no matter how well intentioned—can't achieve space that is truly for the people and their needs. Without community involvement, such projects can come off more like impositions on the city than additions to them.”

Acknowledging this important facet of any waterfront-related work, we released a request for proposals earlier this summer that invited group to submit projects for Barr funding with a focus on building constituencies and activating groups of residents on waterfront related matters. We received a robust response and expect to award grants later this year.

Fourth, communications play a critical role in this work. Perhaps one of the most important contributions that Barr has made has been to help shape public understanding of the importance of this work. Our conversations about this treasured asset have been happening in all the wrong way – on parcel by parcel basis, fighting and arguing over individual projects while we should be anchoring in a larger vision. We have to shift away from debating the merits of an individual project and reframe the conversation with a focus on the long-term view, anchored in shared values, and highlighting our aspirations.

And finally, perhaps the most fundamental lesson has been that there is great power in pushing for aspiration. In doing so, we can animate the discussion, create excitement for a new and larger vision, and help Boston to be positioned as a leader. Indeed, I have concluded that being aspirational is vital to shaping our future public realm, one that further accentuates Boston's position as a world-class city.

## The Role of Aspiration

So, let's talk about aspiration and what we should be striving for in our public realm. In order to consider how best to proceed, I think there are five questions we need to address, and I conclude my remarks by outlining these questions. I hope they will stimulate discussion for us this evening, and more importantly, I hope they prove useful to the Friends, as you consider the key leadership role you are positioned to play in promoting aspiration.

First, what does public engagement with our public realm look like today?

We need to reconsider what engagement is and means. In doing so, we can draw inspiration from the arts field, where research has shown that in view of declining audiences, arts organizations need to reconsider how they engage their audiences. Whereas in the past, passive enjoyment of great art curated by experts was sufficient, today, engagement must embrace a much more expansive definition including active engagement by audiences themselves. In what has been a promising trend, museums and other arts organizations are testing new approaches and adapting their work.

There is a parallel for the public realm as well: we should not just enjoy great horticulture and beautiful design, but we must invite people to engage with our parks as well.

This is a theme that John Alschuler touched on last year in his talk to this group when he said: "Our parks cannot just be about lawns, flowers and statues: it's about programming, events, people. Every citizen should want to love the space."

Second, how can we nurture and encourage an embrace of a culture of experimentation and risk-taking in shaping our public realm?

Here, I would cite the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy's experiments with public art and user experiences. The Janet Echelman installation in 2015 represented a turning point, showing that the Greenway Conservancy was unafraid to be bold and adventurous and to show what a large scale public art installation could mean for Boston.

This installation drew worldwide attention, positioning Boston as a leader in promoting adventurous public art. Indeed, Sebastian Smee, art critic for the Boston Globe observed about Janet Echelman: "No artist in the Boston area is working with greater ambition, on a grander scale, and with more impressive results."

Another example with experimentation has been the Aquarium's "blueway" concept. This bold vision reimagines how we envision the gateway to Boston and repositions the Harbor as our front door. The "blueway" expresses an unconstrained vision, and sometimes we need to be unconstrained. For example, today's debate about the future of the Harbor Garage is framed as a false either/or dichotomy where we are constantly reminded that we can either have an ugly garage or a 600-foot tower. That is a false choice, and there should and must be other options for such a prominent space on our waterfront.

Third, what are the ways that we can best activate public space?

We should consider the role that art and artists can play—Beyond Walls in Lynn is a terrific example of using art to activate public spaces. In this case, 15 murals were commissioned from artists representing

the rich diversity of Lynn, and the result is not only beautiful, but has created a source of civic pride and enlivened areas of the city.

Silvia Lopez Chavez's work with the Esplanade Association is another great example of art for activation. "Patterned Behavior" is the first public art commission by the Esplanade and has enlivened an active stretch of the Esplanade.

These are powerful examples of how art can play an activation role. But we also need to think about how to bring people, programs, and activities to our parks. What partnerships can be formed to advance that idea? How can we demonstrate that our parks belong to everyone?

Fourth, what is the impact of climate change on our parks?

Last summer, the Green Ribbon Commission, a group of public, nonprofit and private sector leaders committed to addressing climate change, organized a study trip last summer to learn from countries in Northern Europe. We learned principally that these countries have reframed the conversation from one focused on how to combat water to one oriented toward how to live with water.

Sea level rise is their reality, as it is for us in Boston, so they think carefully and creatively about how to design public space with climate change front and center. We visited parks that have multiple benefits, such as one in Rotterdam that functions as a recreation court and amphitheater for public events, but is designed to flood and contain water, thereby protecting the adjoining neighborhood. We also saw experiments, such as a temporary swimming pool in Copenhagen along the Port, which turned into a great success.

Locally, Martin's Park on Fort Point Channel serves as a great example of climate change influencing design. This park, honoring 8-year-old Martin Richard who was tragically killed in the Boston Marathon bombing, will serve as a great amenity for the growing numbers of families in the Seaport. Created to be broadly accessible to children of all abilities, the park's design also incorporates best practices about creating resilient parks along areas prone to flooding.

But, climate will not only affect waterfront parks. With increased heat, more storms, and other extreme weather events, all parks are affected. City Council President Michelle Wu recently addressed this issue in a WGBH op-ed, where she wrote:

"Progress on civil rights and economic opportunity is inextricably linked with climate change. Addressing the disparate impacts of climate change requires consciously addressing the underlying social, racial and economic inequalities embedded in our city, together as a community."

This is critical because addressing climate change will require the engagement of all communities in Boston, not just those who live alongside the water.

And finally, if these ideas hold merit, where do we go from here?

As I noted earlier from the Fast Company article, it's a given that public engagement is essential. This is a lesson that was clearly relevant when the Friends undertook its recent advocacy campaign on the Winthrop Square development, given the concerns about shadows on the Common and Garden.

We also need to invest—and frankly demand—that our public officials confront the hard choices that will enable us to aspire. Returning to Matt Kiefer’s article, as he reflects upon the Seaport, he observes:

“Crucially, there was no public funding for the plan’s open space and cultural amenities; these were expected to result from development exactions.”

And perhaps more critically, he adds: “The real lesson is that the Seaport is the best we’re likely to get when we rely on private development to pay not only for itself but also for the local armature of streets, sidewalks, and sewers that supports it—not to mention carrying the burden of signature open spaces and cultural amenities. Development feasibility takes precedent, at it must.”

But, I would ask: should it?

Let me be clear: development is vital to a city’s economic success. But there must be a better way, and it starts with demanding and contributing to a larger vision, engaging to ensure it is delivered upon, and doing our part to make that vision a reality.

In the end, we all need to push for aspiration or it simply won’t happen.

Indeed, we need to summon that same spirit that encouraged Frederick Law Olmsted to design a comprehensive park system that could link open space in Boston. While the grand vision of the Emerald Necklace has yet to be fully realized, what Olmsted designed and what has continued to generate enthusiasm in the ensuing decades was aspirational, and we are the beneficiaries of that vision today. It was bold, it represented making hard choices, and it required investment.

The opportunity for Friends of the Public Garden today is that you all represent what can happen when people come together around common cause and aim to make a difference. We must harness that energy and commitment today, more than ever.

And we at the Barr Foundation look forward to being constructive partners with all of you in advancing ideas that will create a great public realm for Boston. Thank you.