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A proposed bridge would cross Charles River Basin and link this public walkway behind Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital with the NorthPoint development in Cambridge.

## Budget woes threaten walkway links

### Two of 3 bridges seen in jeopardy

By Mac Daniel  
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Advocates are concerned that the dwindling of the Big Dig budget could kill two of three long-awaited pedestrian bridges linking Charlestown, Cambridge, and Boston over the Charles River Basin.

The groups, which are pressuring both Big Dig and state officials to fully fund the projects, will hold a combination walk and rally today to highlight the links and their plight.

"Without them, this park effort is incomplete," said Wendy Landman, executive director of WalkBoston.

Big Dig project manager Michael Lewis recommitted to the projects at a citizens advisory meeting yesterday, but said the hard reality was money.

Of \$98 million budgeted for the bridges and other projects along the Charles River Basin, only \$22 million is left after the unexpected spending of \$14 million to clean up contaminated soil at NorthPoint Park and other expenses.

Now "there is a pressure on where to best spend these available resources," Lewis told a citizens advisory committee yesterday. "But we're committed to the implementation of these projects."

While the focus on the \$14.6 billion Central Artery Tunnel project has been largely on roads and transit, officials from WalkBoston, MassBike, the Charles River Watershed Association, and the Charles River Conservancy say the pedestrian bridges — promised in a 1993 agreement to offset the pollution and inconvenience of building the Big Dig — are key parts of an emerging regional network of paths and parks surrounding the Zakim Bridge.

The first bridge, which is being designed, will cross the MBTA rail tracks and link Paul Revere Park in Charlestown to the NorthPoint development in Cambridge. Depending on the width of the sidewalk, estimated costs range from \$5.49 million to \$5.75 million. Though the design work has been halted, Big Dig spokeswoman Mariellen Burns said construction is scheduled to start later this year.

The second bridge, estimated to cost \$6 million, would also cross the rails and connect Nashua Street Park to the Greenway and the Harborwalk. The third crossing would attach to the railroad bridge behind Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital and cross to the NorthPoint development at a cost of \$2.2 million for each side of the bridge.

MBTA officials have balked at the bridge plans for structural and security reasons.

The first bridge will likely survive, Landman said. But if the last two bridges are scrapped, advocates say the network of paths will be incomplete, with existing paths halting at each side of the railroad tracks.

Without the third bridge, advocates say pedestrians and bicyclists traveling from Cambridge to Boston will be forced onto busy roadways, and a long-sought opportunity to offer car-free links to Boston's new and historic parklands will be lost.

"We're now coming to the final park segment within the new Charles River Basin Parks and there are insufficient funds," said Anne Fanton, former director of the Central Artery Environmental Oversight Committee. "There are many issues that still need to be resolved."

The bridge on the south bank of the Charles has less funding than problems, including how to build the link over active railroad tracks. There are also future development plans in the area which Lewis said could be used to build the bridge without tapping the \$22 million remaining.

"It is very important to keep in mind that this is an incredible project, and has made huge improvements to this area," Burns said. "The project has honored its commitment."

Near one of the proposed bridges — now a path to nowhere that abruptly ends along near the railroad bridge — Tin Hsu, 24, Joy Tarr, 29, and Kelly Sonia, 30, all occupational therapists who work with head injury patients at Spaulding, ate their lunch in the bright sunshine.

At the end of Nashua Street Park behind the hospital, it's a wonderful place where Tarr meditates in the morning before work. But for their patients, it's a natural buffer for their recovery, a place they can walk without the urban shock of street crossings, blaring horns, and traffic.

"It provides a normal environment where they can just go," said Sonia. "Here, they can just concentrate on their therapy."

The walk to highlight the bridges will take place from noon to 1 p.m. today. The group will meet on Causeway Street in front of the North Station T stop in front of the TD BankNorth Garden.