

MAKE THE MDC BETTER BY PRIVATIZING

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The Metropolitan District Commission, the nation's oldest, and at one time finest parks agency, has been much maligned in recent years – sometimes fairly, sometimes not. Governor Romney has proposed its elimination. You can't get much more maligned than that.

With fiscal catastrophe looming on Beacon Hill and critical services on the chopping block, one can't blame the Romney administration for seeking every efficiency and cost saving possible.

But rather than a complete abandonment of the MDC with its functions taken over by the Department of Environmental Management, the state Highway Department, and the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority - themselves facing tough times and in need of their own reform - there is an alternative. Romney should consider privatization: specifically, an alliance between private entrepreneurs - both for profit and not for profit - and leaders within the MDC work force itself. The administration should consider defining a target budget for the MDC's functions and then let state government and the private sector compete to see which can deliver the best services most cost-effectively.

Unlike many states, Massachusetts has never had a truly competitive privatization process. Many blame the Pacheco law for maintaining the status quo and tilting the field against private entrepreneurship. Why not let this opportunity serve as a limited project for targeted reforms to the Pacheco law if they are necessary?

The governor and Legislature might structure a fair and competitive bidding process that offers a team of private sector entrepreneurs, in concert with MDC officials, the opportunity to see if they can deliver critical services at less cost and with greater efficiency and professionalism than the current structure allows.

The MDC is responsible for engineering, water resource, parks and parkway development, and maintenance activities that are essential to the quality of life for Massachusetts citizens. Over the next several years it will also be responsible for the creation of several parks along the Charles River and Boston Harbor to be built as part of the Central Artery project.

A consortium of private engineering firms, golf course operating companies, landscape architectural and planning firms, and nonprofit organizations - if properly motivated and led - could form a powerful force for undertaking these responsibilities under the banner of a revitalized and recharged MDC. They could well bring the necessary experience and incentive to not only update and modernize the agency but to improve dramatically the services it offers, perhaps even assuming similar responsibilities for cash-starved municipal parks agencies in Greater Boston.

Working with the Charles River Watershed Association, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and other nonprofits, such a consortium could attract hundreds of volunteers to maintain and improve the riverbanks and waterways. Working with the Massachusetts Golf Association, it could turn

Donald Ross's magnificent golf course at Ponkapoag into a facility worthy of the US Public Links and other prestigious amateur championships. Working with the Boston Foundation and the Metropolitan Association of Planning Commissions, it could tackle the challenge of laying out next-generation capital investment plans. It could bring back the tree planting, flowers, and beautification efforts that once made Storrow Drive and other parkways a greater pleasure for the driving public. All of this and more is achievable.

Mark Twain said, "Nothing focuses a man's mind at night like a hanging in the morning." Maybe the motivation provided by its impending execution is just what a core, highly competent group of MDC employees - aided by some cold, hard private sector and nonprofit ingenuity - needs. It might be just the ticket for a once proud and capable institution to again meet the challenge of providing first-class services to the citizens of the Commonwealth. More than 100 years ago the MDC was itself a nationally celebrated reform. Rather than reduce it to ashes, let's reform it again and reestablish Massachusetts as a national model for common-sense, cost-effective governance of our public lands and resources.