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Barre's 'Zipper Park' and 'Big Dig' to be honored

BARRE — What does the “largest zipper in North America” have in common with Barre’s “Big Dig?”

Both downtown projects — one that was hastily arranged and whimsically executed and the other that took roughly 25 years to move from conceptual design to construction — were technically completed last year and are among those being honored by a coalition of organizations that recognizes “special places” when it sees them.

That’s right, the open and undulating 68-foot-long granite zipper that now sits between Studio Place Arts (SPA) and Barre City Place, and the full-depth reconstruction that transformed a half-mile stretch of the road that runs through downtown Barre, will be among 14 projects honored during a Thursday afternoon ceremony hosted by Gov. Peter Shumlin in Montpelier.

Two other notable central Vermont projects — the redevelopment of the flood-damaged state office complex that is underway in Waterbury and Montpelier’s much-discussed plans to construct a multi-modal transit center — are also being recognized. The work in Waterbury will receive one of five “honors awards” and Montpelier’s 1 Taylor Street project, like the two in Barre, has been selected for a “merit award” by a five-person jury that included members of the Vermont Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Vermont Planners Association, the Vermont Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Vermont section of the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Vermont Urban and & Community Forestry Council.

Unlike many of the other projects that will be honored, the two in Barre were largely finished near the end of 2013 with the finishing touches — plantings in the zipper garden and a final coat of asphalt in the case of the “Big Dig” — completed in 2014.

The scale of the projects are as different as their price tags, but local officials say both are symbolic of a downtown renaissance that is underway.

Unlike the “Big Dig,” which took more than two decades to design and two years to construct, the zipper pocket park was almost an afterthought, according to SPA Executive Director Sue Higby, who didn’t think much of the walkway initially proposed by Barre City Place developer DEW Properties LLC.

Higby contacted DEW President Don Wells and suggested a more aesthetic and somewhat less pedestrian-friendly plan for the narrow strip of land located between the Barre-based visual arts center and its new four-story neighbor.

“We wanted to make it more like a park and less like a highway,” she said.

Higby initially proposed a “stacked, stone garden” with strategically placed sculptures on two narrow strips of land, one owned by DEW and the other by SPA.

“The idea was to do something beautiful and create a place to linger,” she said, crediting Calais sculptor Chris Miller with proposing the massive zipper — complete with teeth and pull — that he carved and installed in October of 2013 and that she planted last spring.

“He (Miller) had a better idea and we ran with it,” she said, describing the garden as a functional sculpture that has become a favorite for families with young children and a pleasant surprise for tourists.

“There’s really nothing like it around,” she said.

Due partly to its novelty and partly to its creative and efficient use of space, Higby decided to nominate the project for one of the Vermont Public Places Awards.

“This is a really smart use of what would otherwise be throwaway land,” she said, crediting Wells for his cooperation and financial support of the zipper garden that straddles their property line.

Unlike the garden, “Unzipping the Earth,” Barre’s “Big Dig” did just that, digging 19 feet below the street as part of a massive \$17 million project that took two years to complete after a design process that first started in the late 1980s.

The finished product replaced century-old water and sewer lines, buried power lines and reconstructed the street and sidewalks from the Route 62 intersection all the way to City Hall Park.

Cobblestones recovered as part of the project were strategically repurposed, and new streetlights, benches and trash barrels were added to the streetscape, as were chain-linked granite bollards in a few key locations. The new pedestrian-friendly sidewalks with stamped concrete edges and granite curbing incorporated “bulb-outs” at crosswalks making it easier for motorists to see people waiting to cross the street.

Jane Brown, a landscape architect with the state Agency of Transportation, submitted the North Main Street project for consideration, according to City Manager Steve Mackenzie, who welcomed news it was in line for what he described as well-deserved recognition. The North Main Street reconstruction project was managed by the state and largely federally funded.

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