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An Emergency Report for Bangor, Maine (article from Landscape Architecture)

Landscape Architecture

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Landscape Architecture

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

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No. 1

AN EMERGENCY REPORT FOR BANGOR, MAINE

A MONG the interesting ^{Steel} reports that have been prepared on the subject of Civic Improvements during the last few years, the recommendations that were made for Bangor, Maine, are unique. On April 30, 1911, fifty-five acres, extending from the heart of the business district nearly to the outskirts of the city through a good residence district, was devastated by fire. One hundred business blocks, two hundred and eighty-five dwellings, the Library, High School, seven churches, and many magnificent trees, were swept away.

A mass-meeting of the citizens was immediately called, and by its direction the mayor appointed a Civic Commission. Its duties were to study the burned district, and to report on it, with suggestions for improvements. As most permits to rebuild were withheld until the report could be publicly considered and acted upon, speed was imperative. The Commission retained Warren H. Manning, of Boston, who was somewhat familiar with the conditions, as their advisor. The report was presented with plan and sketches for proposed improvements, on May 24. Mr. Manning's report was adopted and published by the Commission, with a short introduction.

For description of the general position of Bangor, we can do no

better than use that found in the first Bangor directory, 1834. "Its local situation is at the head of navigation on one of the finest rivers in the United States, near the center of the territory of Maine, surrounded by a superior country—a basin of 10,000 square miles, of a soil unsurpassed in fertility—and it must eventually become the great depot of its produce and the great mart of exchange for this eastern (and northern) portion of the state."

The town itself, now having about 25,000 population, and slowly growing, was originally settled in the narrow valley of the Kenduskeag stream, where it passed to the Penobscot River between steep hills and bluffs. Buildings for business and residence were all crowded into this narrow space, into which the steep roads made their way down as best they could. Gradually, as the town grew, its buildings were forced up and over the hills. The results are often picturesque and charming, and form with the fine old street trees, and the dignified architecture of seventy-five years ago, the chief characteristics of the town as arranged by man. But the street grades are very steep, and east of the Kenduskeag, where the fire cleared the land, it is impossible to cross the city to the north and eastward on grades easier than 12 per cent, except by long detours which, in places, are almost as steep. And this is but one of the serious faults in the plan. Another is the lack of transportation facilities across the Kenduskeag, as there is no bridge affording direct access from the railroad station to the extensive business and residence section west of the stream, so that, at present, a long detour must be made by State street bridge and Exchange street (in the burned district). These are no wider than is sufficient for their legitimate traffic, and are badly congested at times in consequence of the extra transportation they are called upon to carry.

The two other bridges on Center and Franklin streets, north of State street bridge (which has a suitable, if steep, outlet in State street), are on narrow and crooked streets, turning a great part of the

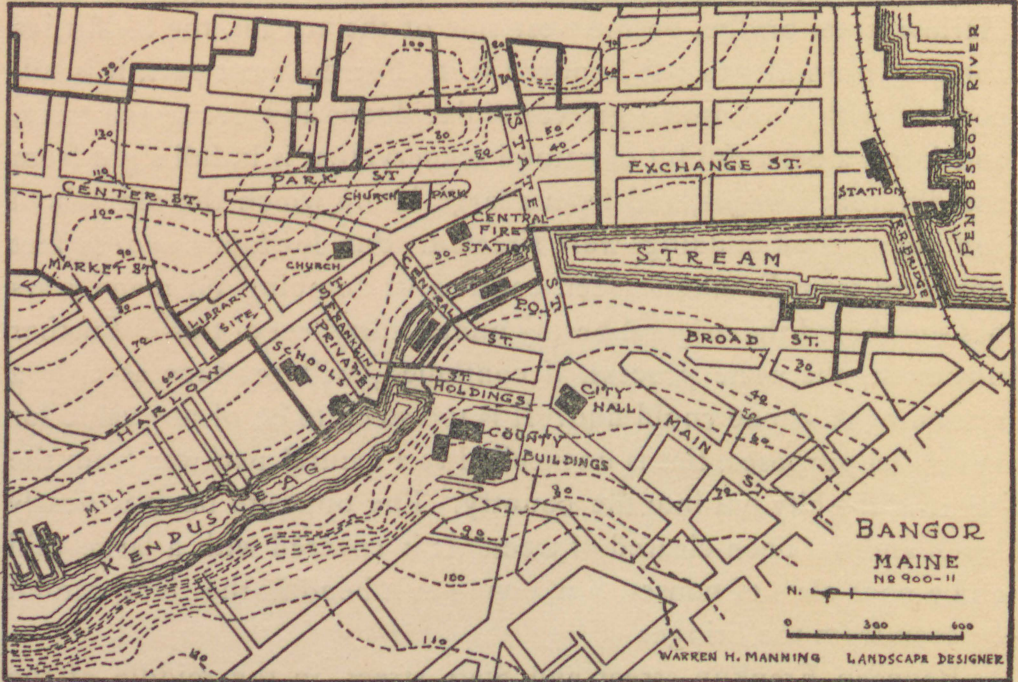
traffic for north and east at right angles into Harlow street, to follow in indirect route, because of the steepness (17 per cent grade) on more direct streets.

Bangor has natural advantages that are unusual in determining a city plan. First, is the natural beauty along the Kenduskeag stream and the Penobscot, and the possible civic uses to which their waters and this beauty may be put. From Franklin street northwestward to Harlow street bridge, on the west side of the stream, the bluff rises abruptly from fifty to one hundred feet. For the most part, it is still covered with a handsome growth of deciduous and evergreen trees, and forms a beautiful bit of natural scenery, that is in full sight from the different bridges, and from a large lot on which the old school and high-school buildings were situated. But, for four hundred feet upstream from Franklin street, continuous dumping for many years has smothered the original beauty under thirty feet of trash. Further upstream, the same process, if continued, will produce as ugly a stream bank as one could find. It is too steep to be of any value for industrial purposes, but is unexcelled as a natural parkway from the heart of the city out into the country. The opposite bank is nearly level, and has been cleared of trees. It is covered with a large mill and a poor class of houses, but, owing to a bend in the river, cannot be seen from the bridges.

Between Franklin street and State street, in the middle of the stream, a long, narrow island was built which chokes the stream in time of floods. On it was placed the Post Office, and later it was extended to provide for Norumbega Hall. And it may not be amiss to explain here, as an example of earlier city planning in Bangor, that the government was forced to create this bad situation because of a quarrel between the east and the west sides of the city. From State street to the Penobscot, the ill-kept backs of business blocks border the wide basin of a river that at low tide, in the dry season, trickles down through a waste of mud flats.

The Penobscot banks are preëmpted by the Railroad yards and docks. Future treatment could only be suggested, in any event, as it bears only an indirect relation to the actual burnt district, which is on both sides of the Kenduskeag, but nowhere touches the Penobscot river front.

Another feature that makes Bangor interesting is the number of



Plan Showing Conditions Before April 30, 1911. Burned District Heavily Outlined

buildings that form street terminals, visually if not actually. Generally this was by chance, although some terminals were obviously the result of careful study. It happens so often that it has become a characteristic feature of the city, that is worthy of preservation where it exists, and that should be planned for where it does not.

Another feature of interest is the unconscious headway that has been made toward building a civic center.

City and county own much of the land on both sides of Kendus-



View from City Hall After the Fire, Showing: 1. Library Site; 2. Ruins of School, Play-ground Site; 3. Land Taken to Straighten Franklin Street; 4. Beginning of Norembeqa Mall Site; 5. Land Chosen for Playground; 6. Land Chosen for Building Extension, etc.; 7. County Building; 8. Wooded Bluff on Kenduskeag Stream; 9. Mill and Tenements.

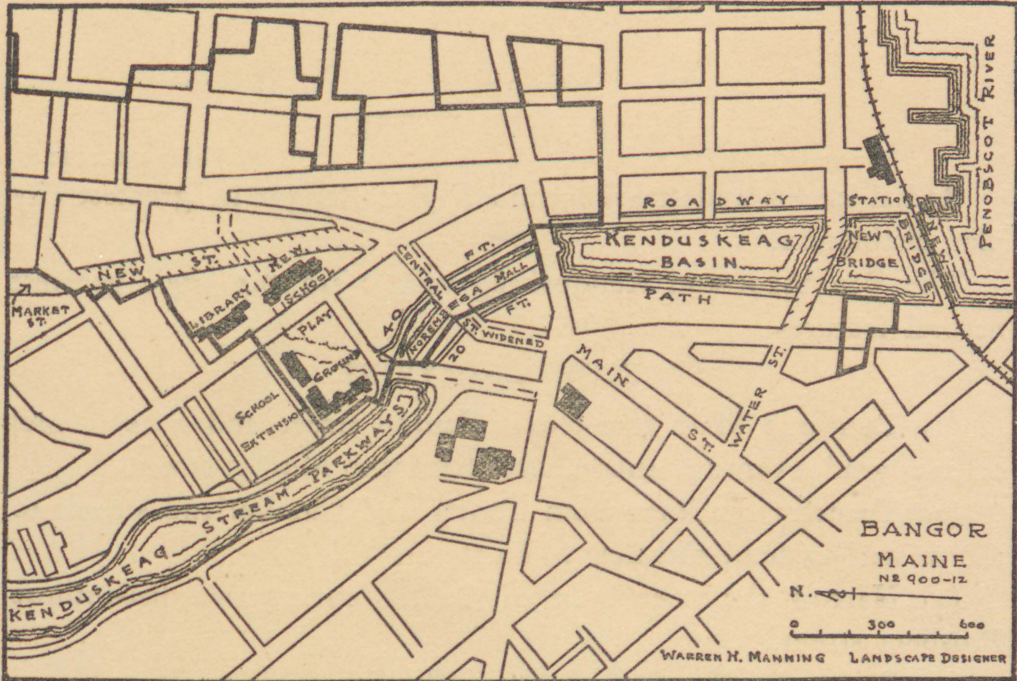


View from State Street Bridge of Site of Proposed Kenduskeag Basin, Showing Existing Ugly Conditions Along the Banks and the Railroad Bridge in the Background



City Hall Tower from Playground Site, Showing Proposed
Terminus of Civic Center Axis

keag street for some distance from Franklin street northward, with the exception of a narrow lot along Franklin street on both banks. On the west side are the City Hall and County buildings; on the east the schools and the site for the new Public Library, a lot bought before the fire. The buildings were arranged in a haphazard fashion, but the land owned by the public lends itself easily to an



Plan Showing Proposed Conditions

interesting, if unconventional, treatment, especially now that all the buildings on the east of the stream have been cleared away by fire.

The report is called "Bangor City Plan. The Burned District." It consists of a short introduction, analyzing the present city plan and its relation to the outlying districts, followed by ten recommendations for improvements, each of which is given in one definite sentence. Later, each recommendation is repeated and amplified. This treatment is doubtlessly suggested by the newspaper scheme of

headlining, to coax the fleeting American attention into study of the more detailed articles following. As the success of the report depended on the strong immediate support of the public at large, and as time did not allow the use of photographs to attract the eye, such tactics were ingenious. For the same reason, the report was printed in a cheap form that could be widely distributed. The synopsized recommendations are given in full.

BANGOR CITY PLAN

THE BURNED DISTRICT

May 22, 1911

Radial streets and street terminals give Bangor its greatest city plan distinction.

The Penobscot and Kenduskeag valleys are the city's greatest natural features.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Continue Main street over Central street, and a new street on easy grades through the burned district to Market street.

(2) Transfer car lines from Center and Cumberland streets to the westerly side of this new Main street.

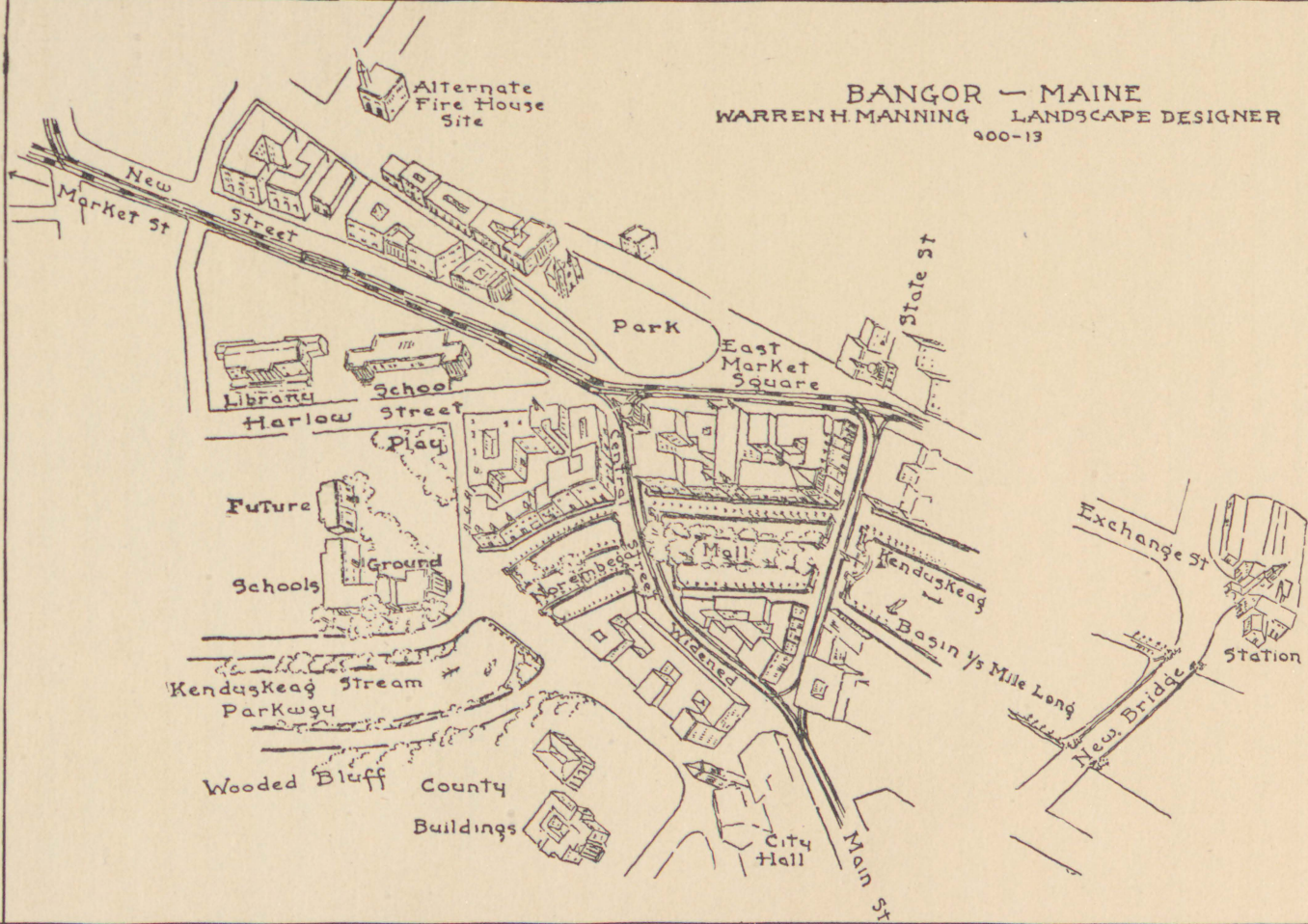
(3) Narrow the steep part of Center street, and discontinue Prospect street.

(4) Bridge the Kenduskeag from Washington street through the burned district to Independent street or to Water street, to give a direct passage to the station from the west side and relieve congestion on Exchange street and State street bridge.

(5) Establish a dam at the new bridge, to hold water at a fixed level in a Kenduskeag Basin, to be held for circulation of air to city center, fire-protection and recreation.

(6) Acquire the old post-office and Numembega Hall sites for Norembege Mall, a public resting- and walking-place, and to protect against fire-spread.

BANGOR — MAINE
WARREN H MANNING LANDSCAPE DESIGNER
900-13



Sketch Made to Accompany the Report

(7) Establish, for business frontage and waterside promenade on the Kenduskeag Basin, a forty-foot passage on the east, and a twenty-foot walk on the west bank from the railroad to Franklin street.

(8) Acquire all land between county and city property on the westerly side of Franklin street, and straighten the easterly side of the street.

(9) Establish Library and High School north of Harlow street, reserving the area between Harlow, Franklin, and the Kenduskeag, for playgrounds and future school extension.

(10) Establish the Fire Station at its old site, or at the corner of Somerset and Park streets.

The introduction emphasizes the great commercial future of Bangor as a distributing center. It prophesies that motor vehicles will come into general use, as they will easily come in from a radius of sixty miles in a day, while teaming is now almost impracticable at twenty. Thus an area of 7,238,246 acres will be opened up to the motors, where now only 804,236 are open to horse-drawn vehicles. "From, at, or near its business center, sixteen roads lead to a state-wide territory in all directions. The weak point in this wheel of roads is at the hub, which was planned to meet the requirements of one hundred years ago."

To remedy this condition, it is proposed to continue the main business street of the west side across the stream by widening and straightening Central street and its now inadequate bridge, to connect with a new thoroughfare through the Burned District. This street would be on an easy grade and would lead directly to a large segment of the city and the surrounding country. Car lines would be transferred from dangerously steep routes and abrupt turns to this new thoroughfare, and one old street would be discontinued. If this be not done at once, congestion will soon result that will involve great expense to cure, while now the new street can be laid

out within the burned district, where there are no buildings to condemn. Furthermore, immediate increase of values will ensue.

The needs of traffic also prompt the advice to "bridge the Kenduskeag from Washington street through the burned district to Independent Square or to Water street to give a direct passage to the station from the west side and relieve congestion on Exchange street and State street bridge."

The treatment of the Kenduskeag stream as the main feature of the city is not unexpected, but the scheme proposed is original and practicable.

The new bridge will be the monumental entrance from the Penobscot River to this great passage through the city. From the city it will form one terminus of the "Kenduskeag Basin," with State street bridge for the other, while either side will be lined with shops and office buildings, fronting here, and on the parallel streets through to which they will extend, and on which they now front. Public ways will separate the buildings from the water. They will extend from the new bridge to Franklin street. Great crowds will be able to look down at water-sports from these paths, and from the balconies and roof-gardens that are suggested for the buildings. A dam at the new bridge is advised, which will maintain water at an even depth, and sports should be encouraged both winter and summer, for the pleasure of Bangoreans and the attraction of strangers.

The width of the island between State and Franklin streets should be cut down to diminish the chances of flooding, and it should be planted with trees, through which one could get glimpses of the wooded banks farther along, with a future school building as a terminus. If ever necessary, this "Norembega Mall," as the Report designates it, could be made into a road; moreover, it continues, "until such an emergency occurs, it will be of great value as a resting-place and agreeable passage into the heart of the city. Remember that, for a large share of your people who come and go

to business daily, this water-basin view will be the most refreshing incident of the day. Bear in mind, too, that the air drawing through this Kenduskeag basin from the river valley will make it one of the most refreshing spots in the city on hot days. It is the kind of

beauty that will represent dollar values to the city."

From Franklin street upstream, the city is to acquire the steep banks for a park, and to have drives and paths along the stream on both sides, connecting with the passages along the Basin, and leading directly out into the country. The Report advises taking all the land that might later interfere with the achievement of this project. This includes all not already owned by the city or county bordering on the west side of



Franklin street. This land will also provide for future extension of the public buildings, and is in the center of the view through the civic center.

To develop this Civic Center, the report advises placing the Public Library and High School on Harlow street, reserving for their use all the land up to the new thoroughfare. The Library would be at one end of the main axis, if one may use the term in so informal a scheme, of which the City Hall Tower across the stream would be at the other. The land between these buildings, bounded

by Harlow and Franklin streets and the Kenduskeag stream, together with the land on which the schools formerly stood, would be reserved for a playground. This will be in direct connection with the proposed Water Basin, making it an essential feature of the playground. The possibility is also suggested of establishing a school center here along the Kenduskeag on both sides, to which the pupils would be brought from all parts of the city by trolley. "The obvious advantages of less cost and better results in buildings, equipment, and oversight maintenances will lead to this centralizing of school buildings. . . . The relation between library and schools for mental and moral training, and playgrounds for physical training, is coming to be so intimate that they ought to be closely associated."

Under miscellaneous headings, the Report declares that land is too valuable in the heart of the business district to give up for tax-free uses. Churches, parks, etc., that are not of continuous service to the public should be placed elsewhere, and "reserved spaces in the city business center should be in the nature of squares primarily to facilitate the movement of vehicles." East Market Square is evidently in mind. As Bangor has many fine examples of buildings well placed at the end of long vistas, "there are great opportunities, in the rebuilding of the city, to design, for the lots that terminate the street vistas, buildings that have some architectural feature that will be effective at a distance, as one approaches rapidly on a car or an automobile through the street."

In discussing street trees, the Report remarks on the beauty of the elms of Bangor. The unfortunate present-day curse of tree pests is brought strongly to mind by the warning against the danger of replanting the streets with only one kind of tree, lest "a fatal enemy will ruin the beauty of the city." Such might be the brown-tail moth, which will soon reach Bangor. So the suggestion is made that one kind of tree should be confined to one street. This leads

to another point of wide applicability, in the idea that "streets can be given distinction by the coöperative use of flowering shrubs and vines on private estates. One can be made a Lilac street, another Crimson Rambler Rose, another Hydrangea, etc. . . . Such work, organized by a central committee that will secure the united action of all city associations, can be executed under their direction, by helping each individual owner to do his part at small cost."

There are certain possible developments of the city and region at large, to the study of which this report should lead, the main one being the making of a series of reservations along the river and streams where the banks are unfit for commercial purposes. This can be done at low cost if the owners will turn it over to a board of trustees, to care for and regulate for public use, while retaining title themselves. For the first step, the making of an assessors' and contour map of the city is of utmost importance as the foundation for all future planning, and without which, endless litigation is bound to occur; because much of the information about the boundaries of property exists only in a memory of the city engineer, since so many landmarks have been swept away by the fire.

The report does not contemplate any radical changes. No formal grouping of buildings is advised, but rather a very informal, yet orderly arrangement, that the future growth may follow the characteristic way of the past. No extravagant takings of land will be necessary to carry out the plan, but "the land requirements recommended are only such as seem absolutely essential to meet the future needs in a conservative estimate of the city's growth and welfare." In fact, every recommendation that is made in the report will lead to an immediate increase in values, or the saving of heavy future expense.

Finally it turns frankly to the citizens to explain that the work of the commission has not ended, but rather begun, with the presentation of the report. "No business man quits after fixing upon the



View from Franklin Street after the Fire, Showing Narrow Island in the Stream and Burned Post Office in Background. The Site of Proposed Norembege Mall



View from Franklin Steet Bridge (End of Proposed Norembege Mall) up the Kenduskeag Stream, Showing Tenements and Part of Proposed Playground Site on the East Bank, and Fine Wooded Bluff on West Bank, Rapidly Being Ruined.



View Down Water Street to Railroad Station Tower Across Stream, on Axis of Proposed Bridge

general policies of undertakings. The success of these policies depends absolutely upon the working out of the details."

For many years, in every question of municipal policy in Bangor, the progressive people have been irritated and at times greatly exasperated by a reactionary newspaper, which has had much influence with a large body of voters. But no united effort has been made by all the best influences in the community to force an issue against this paper. As it violently opposed any general reconstruction plan from the first, a feeling was widespread that any plan would consequently fail. Fortunately, the men in charge of affairs were able and energetic, and in the lead was a mayor with a good head and strong backbone. Realizing that the report would stand small chance of adoption if laid directly before the city legislative bodies, he called a mass-meeting of citizens, that the report might be first read to the body that had created the Civic Improvement Commission.

Before that meeting, the heads and committees of all churches, women's clubs and general associations, were enlisted in general support. Sermons were preached and addresses made to explain the benefits that would accrue on adopting a far-sighted plan, and civic pride and personal interests were appealed to. An attempt was made by these means, and with the help of another newspaper, to reach all classes and kinds of people.

At the mass-meeting, the supporters themselves were astonished at the enthusiasm displayed in its favor. Realizing that the meeting was overwhelmingly in favor of the improvements, the obstructionists succeeded in postponing the acceptance of the report until another mass-meeting could be convened, frankly to work up opposition meantime. But later public approbation was even more clearly shown, the report accepted with acclaim, and the city legislators instructed to carry out the plans as far as possible. Then it was presented to the city fathers, and, though the opposition here found voice, the legislators did not dare thwart the desire of the people,

and the plan was endorsed. But each detail was fought hard, and only the unusual astuteness of the mayor in forestalling each objection with an economical common-sense alternative, followed often by an ultimatum in case it was not accepted, has carried the plan toward success. In one case, he offered to resign on condition that certain obstructionists should do the same, so that the matter might be put up to the people at a special election; thus offering to establish referendum by private agreement.

As the matter stands, the people at large have given their enthusiastic endorsement: the City Council is pledged to carry out the recommendations as far as is in the city's power; the mayor has said that a twenty-foot strip northerly from Central street will be condemned if the fifty-year lessees will not rent at a reasonable figure, and the money to buy will be forthcoming from a private individual if the city cannot finance it; the new High School has been ordered built on the lot advised in the report; and a fire station has been purchased ready-made, and the old lot on East Market Square released for tax-producing uses. The work of widening Central street was begun the first of August, and the laying out and establishing of the new street has been ordered. To help in carrying out these matters, the City Council authorized bonds up to the city's debt limit.

Many public-spirited citizens have assisted materially with large gifts and offers of help. Two owners have offered strips along the Kenduskeag basin in the rear of Broad street block to the city, in case the plan is carried out. Three large owners of property on Exchange street have offered to the city strips of land comprising a large part of the whole distance, to be used for a street up and down the stream. And another citizen has promised to try to raise money to buy the half of the Norumbega Mall that does not belong to the United States Government, to present to the city. Lastly, a considerable part of the wooded bluff has been already

turned over for park purposes, together with some money for its improvement.

A short analysis of the reasons for this success are worth while. With the business men, the evident increase of property values with a minimum expenditure of money is sufficient; for two fronts are planned along the Kenduskeag and the new street, where at present only one exists, and also the cost of hauling will be much reduced. This latter point happened to be emphasized strongly during the study for the plan, when eleven teams of horses were seen pulling *backward* on a heavy load going down a steep grade on Center street, one of the present main-traffic avenues on the east side. The attractions offered to strangers would also weigh with the farsighted, as the Chamber of Commerce said in its early endorsement. Recommendations for the new bridge and parking the wooded bluff above Franklin street had been anticipated by many, and the whole scheme endorsed such views while expanding them, thus naturally pleasing such prophets. Lastly, every recommendation is easily accomplished and generally economical, and nothing so radical is advised that the conservatives have their breath taken away. The progress of the conservatives has been well expressed lately by a member of the Civic Commission. In speaking of the attitude of proprietors toward releasing land needed to carry out the scheme, he says, "The first disposition was to say 'No;' the second was to be willing to sacrifice themselves by giving land to the city; and I believe the third will be a demand from these same people that this plan be carried out."

FLETCHER STEELE