

Beacon Hill Byline by Rep. Mary Rogeness

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The perfect day

Last Saturday was the perfect day to spend in Springfield at the Hall of Fame Grand Opening celebration. I was there, so I am writing today to report on the day's events.

Everyone was prepared for the perfect gridlock on the roads. It was the last weekend of the Big E, it might have been the last chance this season to get to Six Flags, and it was the grand opening of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

The Saturday before was marked with horrendous traffic. Anyone who tried to drive on I-91 a week ago experienced a tie-up that stopped traffic for miles on both sides of the exits to Springfield and West Springfield. Rumor says that earlier gridlock may have been caused by highway planners attempting to prepare for the Hall of Fame traffic. If it was a dress rehearsal, it worked out the kinks, because Saturday dawned a perfect morning, crowds journeyed to all of the weekend events, and traffic continued to flow.

Like all I-91 commuters, I watched the new Hall take shape over the past year. Watched the basketball beacon rise on its post; saw the giant silver ball take shape and light up; witnessed the final preparations of trees, grass and sidewalks appear. I had a preview tour a few months ago when staff members pointed out the spots for future attractions, but it took a lot of imagination to envision that actuality.

The opening ceremonies took place under sunny skies outside the new Hall. A basketball opened the day's events beginning at Springfield College, the actual site of basketball's invention, and being passed hand to hand along the two mile stretch of roads to the riverfront. Children and older basketball players shared that duty, and the speaking program was heralded by the culmination of the long pass. Then came speeches from the politicians, business leaders and basketball executives. It was good to have Governor Swift in attendance to acknowledge all the effort that went into the financing, planning and construction. One highlight for the crowd was in the brief remarks from Larry Bird – very brief remarks as he announced that his plane was leaving from Bradley in 30 minutes. Another was the congregating of many returning members of the Hall of Fame on the dais and the newly inducted Globetrotters.

Then came the ribbon cutting and the first chance to see the new exhibits. Children of all ages were scouting the hall for tall or otherwise distinguishable individuals, collecting autographs or photos of the basketball stars. The people were the stars on Saturday, but the exhibits will be the enduring stars of the Hall.

Interactive exhibits make the Hall of Fame an attraction that local families will visit again and again. And the many travelers who journey through the Pioneer Valley will be tempted to make occasional stops to relive basketball's heroes and history.

I have now seen three versions of the Hall of Fame. First it was an out-of-the-way building on Springfield College. Then came the old Riverfront site, but even as it was planned, dreamers dreamed of a basketball shaped memorial. That memorial is now reality. It was quite trip and it is a trip worth taking.