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Neighborhood Watch

Fenway spark: Striking changes for iconic Hub area

Premium content from Boston Business Journal - by Denise Magnell, Special to the Journal

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It's an area of Boston best known for its beloved namesake ballpark -- and an area undergoing stunning transformation thanks to a number of high-profile projects.

Sometime this fall, Samuels & Associates' 1330 Boylston project will bring 215 units to the Fenway area when it opens. Across the street is Trilogy, which opened in the summer of 2006. Harvard bought 171 of the 576 units for student housing, and most of the remaining units have been rented out.

"We're so delighted with the reception in the marketplace and the neighborhood," said Trilogy's developer, William McQuillan of Boylston Properties. "In the fall, when 1330 Boylston opens, you'll start to see that new street life. ... It already feels different down there."

Such projects, coupled with new entertainment venues and restaurants and a \$450 million mixed-used development tied to a commuter rail station, are turning the Fenway area into Boston's newest revitalized enclave.

That brings the usual worries that longtime residents may be priced out of the new housing market, but community groups generally support projects that have been announced.

"We've always known that would be the toughest part of this," said Carl Nagy-Koehlin, executive director of the Fenway Community Development Corp., which owns 500 of the 2,000 subsidized housing units throughout the Fenway district. "But developers are taking a risk with building the first new housing in the area. They have to be given some latitude because they are jump-starting the plan."

The area's first development jolt came in 2000 with the transformation of the historic Sears warehouse into the Landmark Center, a retail-office complex on Brookline Avenue near its convergence with Boylston Street -- called "the point" by locals. (McQuillan and Samuels also are planning "The Point," a complex of 200 rental units at that corner.)

But when the city approved new zoning for the district in 2004 -- controlling building height and density -- and the Red Sox decided to renovate Fenway Park rather than move elsewhere, developers kicked into high gear.

"We worked with the community for five years, and it was the rezoning that spurred development," said Randi Lathrop, the Boston Redevelopment Authority's deputy director for community planning. "We've always wanted the universities to house their students so there would be more room for condos, and the developers are adding housing that's not there today."

West Fenway has always been known for the home of the Red Sox, its rental housing for thousands of students attending nearby colleges, and the Kenmore Square commercial hub of parking lots, small taverns and restaurants.

Later this month, developer John Rosenthal, president of Meredith Management Corp., is expected to file initial papers with the BRA for his five-building, One Kenmore project -- part of the city's "Parcel 7," which accords

air rights over the Massachusetts Turnpike in the West Fenway area. The Red Sox organization is a minority partner in the project.

He said One Kenmore calls for about 300 rental units, office and retail space and an expanded Fenway Community Health Center; in the transit component, the outdoor Yawkey train station will be transformed into a commuter rail center. Roadway improvements also are planned. The state Legislature has approved \$55 million for the transit plan, including major improvements to the MBTA's green line.

"It's a transit-oriented, smart-growth development built around a commuter rail station, right near the state's No. 1 tourist attraction," said Rosenthal. "I think it will feel contemporary, a new area of Boston surrounded by a mature neighborhood."

Just outside Fenway Park, nightclub owner Patrick Lyons is joining two of his Lansdowne Street clubs into a 2,500-capacity "music hall," and two others will become restaurants. Construction won't begin for a few months, said Lyons Group vice president Mindy d'Arbeloff, adding the eateries will be "daytime friendly for families, as well as nighttime friendly."

East Fenway, a residential district of late 19th-century townhouses and walk-up apartments, is offset by art museums, Symphony Hall, several colleges and the Longwood medical community.

And a building boom is going on there as well. The Museum of Fine Arts is undergoing a \$500 million expansion that will add a new American arts wing, a glass-enclosed courtyard and a visitor center. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in its \$60 million expansion, is adding a performance hall, and new exhibition and visitor spaces.

Berklee College of Music recently withdrew a plan to build a 35-story dormitory when residents complained it was out of sync with the Massachusetts Avenue neighborhood, but the music school now plans smaller buildings to house 600 students. Northeastern University also is planning a 600-student dorm near Symphony Hall, in addition to a 1,200-bed dormitory under construction in Roxbury.

A 34-story tower proposed by Dallas-based Phoenix Property Co. also was withdrawn when neighbors complained. The project is being reduced by as much as 10 stories, as Phoenix tinkers with a new design.

"Even with all the dormitory construction going on, we believe the demand will exceed supply," said project spokeswoman Kristen Reed.

In the Longwood Medical Area, developer McQuillan plans to break ground this spring on a six-story research center at 121 Brookline Ave. The BRA also has approved an academic center for the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences on Huntington Avenue and a new science building for nearby Emmanuel College.

McQuillan said West Fenway is a natural housing area for those working at Longwood's medical facilities.

"I see more housing needed for graduate students, and young professionals, and they could end up being the 'age bridge' to the Back Bay," he said.