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BRA poised to give a thumbs-up to bold Seaport Square project



An artist's rendering depicts a view along Seaport Boulevard, looking toward the financial district, in a future Seaport Square. The project would take 10 years and create 20 new city blocks. (KPF Architects)
By Robert Preer
Globe Correspondent / September 21, 2010

The Boston Redevelopment Authority board tonight is expected to approve zoning for Seaport Square, a planned \$3 billion project that would turn 23 acres of what is now mostly parking lots on the South Boston Waterfront into a new neighborhood.

The development team of [Morgan Stanley](#), Gale International, and retail developer WS Development plans to break ground next spring for an apartment building and innovation center, the first phase of an ambitious 10-year building process.

The redevelopment authority staff, which has been reviewing the project and meeting with developers for three years, recommends approval.

"It is a bold and optimistic plan," said Kairos Shen, chief planner for the BRA. "It needs to be in order to build the workforce and businesses that Boston needs to be competitive for the next 50 years."

The project, which would have 6.3 million square feet of floor space, would be the largest single development in Boston's history. It would include condominiums and apartments for about 5,000 residents, two hotels, restaurants, shops, office buildings, and research facilities, as well as a performing arts center, landscaped boulevard, church, and two public parks. Twenty new city blocks would be created in an area bounded by Northern Avenue, Seaport Boulevard, Congress Street, and Summer Street.

A spring groundbreaking could signal a reawakening for private development, which has been largely dormant in the city since credit markets froze amid the global financial crisis and ensuing recession.

The developers filed plans for Seaport Square in June 2008. The proposal underwent significant revisions early this year to conform with Mayor Thomas M. Menino's vision for a South Boston Waterfront innovation district, which he unveiled in his inaugural address in January.

Menino wants the 1,000-acre waterfront to become a vibrant new neighborhood that will attract entrepreneurs and young professionals to live, work, and play. The mayor hopes to build a cluster of technology-based start-up businesses in the district.

"Seaport Square has embraced the challenge of the innovation district: to be bold, creative, and keep our economy growing," Menino said yesterday.

The developers have agreed to the city's request to build an innovation center that can be used as both a business incubator and a venue for public meetings and lectures.

Although Boston Redevelopment Authority approval is the biggest hurdle for the developers, the project would still need approval from the city's Zoning Commission, which is expected to consider it next month. State environmental approvals were issued last month.

To conform to Menino's vision for an innovation district, the developers made changes to their original plans. More affordable-housing units were added, as was housing with attached work spaces that might be attractive to entrepreneurs.

The developers also have agreed to seek out retailers who are either new to the Boston market or who will offer new retail formats.

A former industrial and warehouse area, the South Boston Waterfront is largely undeveloped. The land where Seaport Square would be built was owned by Los Angeles Dodgers owner Frank McCourt Jr., who sold it to Rupert Murdoch's [News Corp.](#) The current development team bought it in 2006.

John B. Hynes III, a principal in Gale International, has compared Seaport Place to the Back Bay, which was created on tidal flats of the Charles River in the mid-19th century. Hynes is the son of Boston television newscaster Jack Hynes and the grandson of the late John Hynes, who was Boston's mayor in the 1950s.

WS Development, a Chestnut Hill firm, has built several successful lifestyle center malls in New England, including Dedham's [Legacy Place](#).

Seaport Square is the largest of several projects either planned or underway on the South Boston Waterfront. Two other important projects are Fan Pier — Joseph Fallon's planned \$3 billion, nine-block project — and Waterside Place, an apartment and retail complex.