

Fan Pier work pushes harbor change forward

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By Scott Van Voorhis

After decades of planning, and sometimes crushing setbacks, the vision of a new neighborhood along the waterfront near the Moakley courthouse and Fan Pier is starting to finally take hold.

At Fan Pier, longtime waterfront builder Joe Fallon is pushing ahead with plans for roughly 3 million square feet of new development. He has kicked off work on his first building, a 500,000-square-foot office complex, and is busy planning for new condo and hotel high-rises, retail-lined boulevards and parks.

Across Northern Avenue, John Hynes, another longtime city developer, has filed plans with City Hall for an even more ambitious undertaking, Seaport Square. Like Fallon at Fan Pier, Hynes envisions a neighborhood within a neighborhood that would include a school, civic and cultural space, as well as office high-rises, shops and condos and homes for 5,000 residents.

Hynes – whose Gale Co. is also busy developing a new city in South Korea – has just begun the city review process, but hopes to start work later this year on a couple of smaller condo buildings.

If Hynes' project wins approval as proposed, it would be the largest single development in Boston history.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, another longtime veteran of the waterfront development scene, John Drew, hopes to start work soon on his long-planned Waterside Place. That \$600 million endeavor calls for 425,000 square feet of retail space, 200 condos and 300 hotel rooms.

The new projects join a growing neighborhood that features a battleship-size convention hall and Fidelity Investments' World Trade Center hotel, office and meeting complex. Not to mention other assorted luxury condo and office buildings and a Fort Point warehouse district that has become a nexus for artists and office and condo developers.

"I think it's in transition," said Drew of the waterfront. "It should be all of the above – a city in the city and an extension of the downtown. Both are appropriate and not at odds with each other.

"There is room for everything and all those everythings are able to mesh pretty nicely together," he added.

As these megaprojects prepare to move forward, it ends a decade's long chapter of sometimes bitter debate over the area's future.

As early as the 1980s, City Hall began eyeing the development potential of the sprawling surface parking lots and industrial businesses clustered around a few waterfront icons, such as Anthony's Pier 4 and Jimmy's Harborside.

But plans to turn Fan Pier into a new neighborhood collapsed in the late 1980s amid legal feuds among the project's developers. Chicago's billionaire Pritzker family, owner of Hyatt chain, took over Fan Pier and started putting their own plans together in the late 1990s.

But the Pritzkers and their development team got bogged down in battles with neighborhood and environmental activists over the project's size and design. While the Pritzkers eventually won approval to build, the market went south after the 2001 recession.

A few years later the Pritzkers sold the site and its plans to Fallon, a local developer well-versed in city politics.

Fallon has succeeded where others failed; starting construction on Fan Pier's first building last year.

Meanwhile, the public sector has entered the waterfront development race.

The FBI has been eyeing a site near the convention center for a large, new Boston headquarters. And Mayor Tomas Menino has proposed building a new city hall farther down the waterfront at the city owned Marine Industrial Park.