

Life sciences could find S. Boston Waterfront berth

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By Jon Chesto

No Boston neighborhood has seen more dramatic shifts in its core employer base in recent years than the South Boston Waterfront.

Many of the area's old industrial and marine uses have given way to financial and legal jobs. Those, in turn, are being overshadowed these days by the hospitality sector, with the convention center's success and subsequent hotel projects.

Now, with tow massive redevelopments planned for the sea of parking lots there, another industry could be poised to become the neighborhood's next rising star: life sciences.

Mayor Tom Menino's administration has had some luck with drawing small life sciences firms to the area as part of his Life Tech Boston initiative.

But the deal that could act as the turning point for that industry involves Fan Pier, one of those parking lots that's already abuzz with construction activity.

The Boston Business Journal recently reported that Vertex Pharmaceuticals of Cambridge is working on a major lease at Fan Pier to accommodate its rapid growth. Vertex isn't commenting, so it's hard to know how likely the move is. But developer Fallon Co. received the city's approval last fall to allow lab space in the mix, so Fallon clearly sees a future in life sciences for the waterfront site.

The Menino administration has tried for some time to steer life sciences businesses into alternative locations to the already jam-packed Longwood medical area.

Other parts of Boston certainly have emerged as potential biotech clusters: the area in and around the Boston Medical Center and BU campuses in the South End and Roxbury; Mass. General's outpost in the Charlestown Navy Yard; and Allston, where Genzyme has a plant and Harvard is expanding.

None of those areas, though, have quite the potential upside that the South Boston waterfront offers—with its proximity to an array of public transit options and the city's financial district.

NMT Medical was one of the first life sciences firms to figure that out, landing there at least 15 years ago when rents were much cheaper, CFO Richard Davis says the founders of the firm, which employs about 100 people in the Fort Point section, picked the location partly because it was within walking distance of the South Shore ferries.

The city has seen other modest yet promising life sciences firms hang their lab coats in the area. New arrivals in the Boston Marine Industrial park in the past few years include Immunetics, Cytonome, and BioDefense Corp.

The Dana-Farber Cancer Institute became the first well known Longwood inhabitant to branch out to Southie when it unveiled plans in January 2007 for a nearly 50,000-square-foot “Harbor Campus” in the industrial park. Paratek Pharmaceuticals will be the latest tenant to move there as it exits its current home near South Station.

But Menino hasn't landed a large, new life science tenant since he launched the biotech initiative four years ago. That's where the Fan Pier development and its next-door neighbor, Seaport Square, could play a big role.

Sen. Jack Hart of South Boston knows that attracting Vertex would be a coup that could bring at least 1,000 new jobs to the neighborhood. Hart says he talked with Vertex CEO Josh Boger about the potential move roughly six months ago, but Hart also knows the company was considering other options at the time. Fan Pier, Hart says, would give the company an unusual opportunity to design its own oceanfront headquarters.

Vertex spokesman Zachry Barber says the company hasn't made any final decisions yet. The first of its leases at its multi building campus near Central Square will expire in 2010, so it will probably make one soon. A possible move, Barber says, could involve a full relocation or just an expansion at a new site.

Few people are following what's happening at Fan Pier more closely than John Hynes, the CEO of Gale International. Hynes' firm is a co-developer of Seaport Square, a 23-acre project that will feature a mix of residential and commercial uses across the street from Fan Pier.

Hynes is interested in placing a few strong life sciences firms among the with collar tenants he aims to attract to his project, but he says building lab space for them ahead of time would be too risky. He says labs aren't flexible enough to be of much use to another kind of company. He also notes that many young life sciences firms can have a tough time landing construction financing because they haven't yet established a reliable revenue stream.

If Hynes has his way, the Southie waterfront will continue to diversify. Fortunately, the original maritime uses of the waterfront-such as fish processing and ship repairs-have, to some extent, survived the neighborhood's ebb and flow. If those elements of working waterfront can remain intact, the new wave of life sciences companies will be a welcome addition to the hotels, law firms and financial offices that have already set up shop there.