

New life (sciences) in South Boston

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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 two 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.

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.