

Brian McGrory

Waterfront hits its stride

By [Brian McGrory](#)

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It was strictly out of pity that I pointed my car toward the South Boston Waterfront Sunday night to trade a few coins for clams at the massive new Legal Sea Foods complex. Poor Roger Berkowitz, I figured, had eaten so much mercury-tainted swordfish that he had completely lost his mind.

I mean, who builds three restaurants with 700 seats under one roof hard by an industrial park in a corner of Boston where precious few people actually live?

As I pulled up, something unusual caught my eye — people. Everywhere, people, people walking, people sitting at outdoor cafes, smiling, happy people. Then the nice hostess at Legal glanced at a computer screen and announced, “It’ll be about a 30- or 40-minute wait.”

A couple of hours later, after a memorable dinner in an open-air room on the harbor’s edge that feels like a public market in Sydney or Seattle, the scene suddenly seemed surreal. The portico of the massive convention center shone from the hill. The modern Institute for Contemporary Art shone against the harbor.

And one thought kept echoing through my tiny brain: Menino was right.

You know Tom Menino — mayor of Boston, likes to get his way, always said the waterfront is the city’s future, even as one developer after another left nothing but dirt-strewn parking lots behind.

But gradually, and then suddenly, something changed. Berkowitz was on the phone yesterday saying that his Legal Harborside served 2,000 people on Sunday. That’s even before his third restaurant, with a retractable roof, opens on the top floor this weekend.

“It’s exceeding expectations,” he said coyly.

The nearby Morton’s steakhouse is going full-blast. The Italian grocer J. Pace & son serves 1,000 sandwiches on a good day. You have pioneering restaurateurs from Jerry Remy to Barbara Lynch, the latter the most talented chef on earth.

This morning, the boldfaced world will gather for the official groundbreaking of two new Joe Fallon buildings totaling 1.1 million square feet of research and office space, the headquarters of a pharmaceutical company called Vertex.

To put this in perspective, the \$800 million development will mark the largest private construction project currently underway in the nation. It will employ 1,200 construction workers and, later, 1,800 full-time Vertex workers.

“I can remember the days when I was talking to the Pritzkers,” Menino said, referring to the Chicago family that owned Fan Pier. “We’d fight every gosh darn day, we’d work out our issues, and then they’d have a family fight over it.”

The Pritzkers sold the property in 2005 to Fallon, the uncommonly understated developer who had built an upscale apartment building and two hotels down the street. Fallon opened his first building on Fan Pier last year. Menino led me up to the 15th floor yesterday, swept his hand along the floor-to-ceiling windows, and said, “Look at the possibilities.”

You don’t have to look far. Vertex is going in right next door. Other developers will quickly follow on the acres that remain. A neighborhood that is suddenly sizzling is now poised to explode.

Nobody has pushed harder than this mayor. He insisted from the outset on something different, something unlike anywhere else. And in the end, with a convention center, a courthouse, an art museum, world class highways, and spanking new restaurants along the harbor’s edge, he will get it.

“It took a little longer than we expected,” Menino said. “We took a lot of hits. There were a lot of naysayers, but Joe Fallon wasn’t a naysayer. I wasn’t a naysayer.”

With that, he gazed out the window, a rare moment of true accomplishment in a city that allows too few of them.

“It’s really something,” Menino said.

It really is.

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