

# MASS. MARKET: South Boston waterfront plans finally taking shape

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Well-dressed lawyers hustle into a new glass-enclosed building on one end of Northern Ave. Halfway down the main drag, a construction crew puts the finishing touches on Legal Sea Foods' new flagship restaurant. At the avenue's eastern endpoint, asbestos workers in white Hazmat suits pick clean the skeleton of an unused factory to prep it for its demise.

The South Boston waterfront. The Seaport District. The Innovation District. Call it what you want. If you visited Southie's northern shoreline on a recent winter's day, you would have seen that the area's long-awaited redevelopment is finally taking shape.

The waterfront – with its windswept lots and rows of parking meters – was often viewed by commuters as just a cheap place to park. But that's about to change.

Most notably, Vertex Pharmaceuticals is eyeing a relocation that would move its headquarters from Cambridge to Fan Pier. There's also Legal and the other restaurants coming to Liberty Wharf where Jimmy's Harborside used to stand – and that's not including the 20-plus restaurants that have already opened in the past two years. And the Menino administration is making headway with an effort to encourage tech startups to open here.

The Boston Redevelopment Authority has long approached the 1,000 acres or so along the northern edge of South Boston as the city's greatest development opportunity – and arguably its greatest development challenge. The momentum has been slow and, to many people, disappointing. But with the local economy on the mend, the area is being seen by many companies as promising real estate.

Much of the neighborhood's development potential can be traced to a series of big-ticket public projects. The Deer Island sewage plant helped clean up Boston Harbor, making a waterfront walk a pleasant experience. The federal courthouse that opened in 1998 helped spur law firms to set up shop nearby. The Boston Convention & Exhibition Center's opening in 2004 fostered the development of restaurants and hotels. And, of course, the Big Dig connected the area to the Mass. Pike, I-93 and Logan Airport.

The real estate near the Fort Point Channel, a short walk from downtown Boston, is particularly valuable. It's here where developer Joseph Fallon and his company are finally making headway with Fan Pier. Fallon landed his first big tenant when law firm Fish & Richardson moved across the channel last year into his new building, One Marina Park Drive. He says nearly half of that 500,000-square-foot building is leased, and the new Strega restaurant has been a big success.

Louis Boston, the high-end apparel retailer, decamped from its longtime home in the Back Bay last year for a smaller outbuilding on the water.

Fallon's game-changing deal will materialize if Vertex signs on the dotted line. The company just unveiled plans to move to Fan Pier if it receives federal approval for a key drug this spring. Fallon says construction would start this summer on two buildings, both similar in size to One Marina Park, with a targeted completion date of late 2013. He says he would expect the company to fill both buildings, occupying more than 1 million square feet.

Fallon says he's also encouraged by the crowds that the Institute of Contemporary Art next door has drawn since opening in late 2006, and by the plans that are taking shape for Seaport Square across the street.

Like Fan Pier, Seaport Square would fill a longstanding sea of parking spaces. A city-backed incubator for startups would be among the first things built on the 23-acre collection of parcels. Richard McGuinness, a deputy planning director at the BRA, says work on this "innovation center" should begin later this year.

McGuinness says he expects apartment buildings will dominate much of the construction that takes place at the Seaport Square site and other underdeveloped parts of the waterfront area in the near future. The BRA is trying to foster a new concept in Boston for some of these units: so-called "innovation housing" where college graduates can find small apartments – studios that rent for \$1,000 or less, for example – with shared common areas.

The new Liberty Wharf promises to be a distinctive landmark in its own right. Fama PR moved in this month, becoming the complex's first tenant to open. The place will fill out quickly during the next few months, with the Legal showcase restaurant to be joined by a Jerry Remy's and a Del Frisco's steakhouse.

Even the city's marine industrial park at the low-rent end of Northern Ave. is getting a makeover. McGuinness says the industrial building at the corner of Tide and Northern is coming down so the city can market a flat pad to potential tenants. The BRA is also entertaining proposals for a massive waterfront structure at the far end of the industrial park. McGuinness says he expects a seafood freezer plant will eventually be built there, although no final decision has been made.

The redevelopment of the waterfront area hasn't been without its challenges. For example, many artists ended up leaving after the former Boston Wharf buildings began changing hands in the Fort Point area. McGuinness says the BRA tries to prevent further erosion of this important artists' community by requiring some developers to include artist lofts in their plans.

A bigger challenge for the BRA could be getting the public to believe that the redevelopment plans are finally materializing, after nearly two decades of fits and starts. While the agency hasn't completely pulled it off yet, meaningful success shouldn't be too far away now. And when that happens, you can bet another generation of commuters will be looking for a new place to park.

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