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S. Boston Innovation District takes shape (in all sizes)

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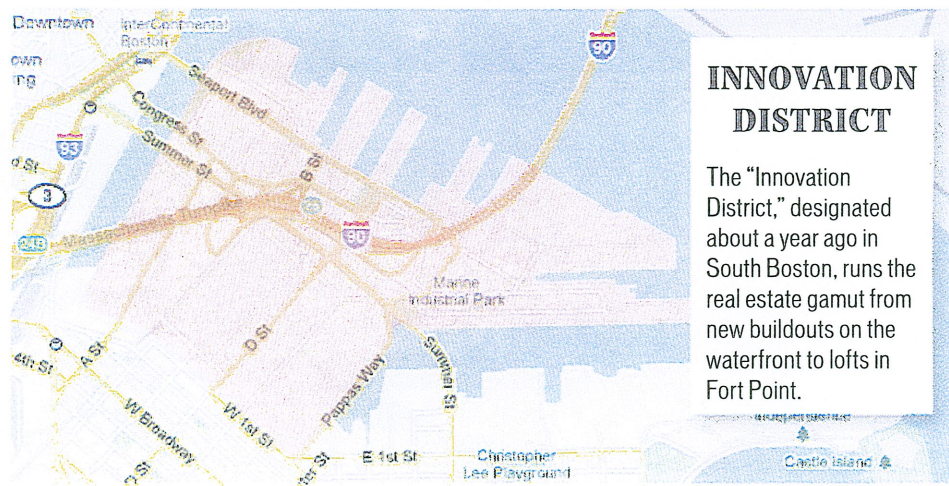
In one fell swoop on Jan. 24, **Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc.** (Nasdaq: VRTX) took care of 1 million square feet of untenanted real estate in South Boston's waterfront.

But most of the companies moving to South Boston's so-called Innovation District are a few blocks inland, in a very different market.

In Fort Point, small high-tech businesses are filling the brick-and-beam loft space vacated by architects and the deflated dreams of luxury condominium developers. At least seven such firms have moved into Fort Point District in the past six months. They range in size from single-digit personnel to head counts in the low hundreds, lured by rents that start at about \$20 per square foot per year.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino's public efforts thus far have highlighted life sciences and clean tech. In an interview this week, Menino said he's not wedded to any particular industry.

"There's no set pattern of 'everything's going to have to be biotech,' " he said. "We're looking for the best available use for that property." That includes **Babson College**, he said, confirming a November report in the Boston Herald that the city is working with the Wellesley business school to negotiate space for a satellite campus on the waterfront.



Meanwhile, rents are edging up in Fort Point, as the district develops an identity around high-tech, said Roy Hirshland, president and CEO of **T3 Realty Advisors LLC**, a Waltham firm that works with high-tech clients. Most of the companies are small fry — but a culture of Internet firms is developing, he said. "The next **Twitter** or **Facebook** — a meaningful employer that's going to make a difference — one of those companies is going to be emanating out of these lofts in the Fort Point Channel," he said.

"We didn't really want to be in Cambridge," said Boaz Sender of **Bocoup Labs**, a Web development shop that has made a name for itself in the tech business community by leasing oversized loft space for hosting events and nomadic de-

velopers. Last week, **Bocoup** moved into larger space down the street from a Fort Point address it had occupied for the past year. Sender said the growing community of like-minded companies is giving the city's old industrial district its own high-tech identity.

"Cambridge is more like Silicon Valley," Sender said. "We don't want to be just another company in Kendall Square."

Most of the new companies moving into the district are in Internet-related businesses, with a few exceptions. **Heartland Robotics**, a Cambridge industrial robot developer founded by **iRobot Corp.** (Nasdaq: IRBT) co-founder Rodney Brooks, told sister publication **Mass High Tech** this week it is planning to move into 18,000 square feet on Worm-

wood Street in Fort Point on Jan. 31. Brooks is a professor at MIT, and Heartland was founded just down the street in Central Square, but CEO Scott Eckert said Heartland, on a hiring spree after raising a \$20 million Series B round of venture capital in November, couldn't find anything big enough in Cambridge.

"We could have put together a couple of properties, but to find that size contiguous space, we struggled to find any at this point in time," he said.

The neighborhood has its challenges. Some of the old warehouse and factory buildings have notoriously slow Internet access. That situation has shown no signs of improving, leaving some small firms hopping from building to building, looking for more reliable service.

BuzziEnt Inc., a small social media software maker, just moved to Fort Point after outgrowing its space in the Cambridge Innovation Center, a Kendall Square hive of high-tech startups, where hundreds of small firms rent offices and desks. The company is month to month for now, said CEO Tim Jones, and is looking for more permanent space — but it's a difficult hunt.

"The killer issue is broadband; coverage is spotty and **Verizon**, **RCN**, **Comcast** won't share coverage maps," Jones wrote in an e-mail. "So, you have no idea whether you can get high speed and have to check building by building. Kind of like looking for land mines with a bayonet."