

Waterfront's 'innovation district' gets a big boost

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With the approval of two South Boston projects where new companies and technologies would be nurtured, Mayor Thomas Menino says the city's waterfront is on its way to becoming one of the most prominent hubs for innovation in the world.

The projects, dubbed "innovation centers," are part of two mixed-use developments set to break ground next spring — Seaport Square and Waterside Place.

In an interview, Menino said the [Boston Redevelopment Authority](#) required some part of the two developments to be set aside as innovation space. Menino has widely touted his goal of turning the waterfront into a center for the creation of new technology, as a way to boost the economy and create jobs.

"We want to bring new ideas to the waterfront. We want that to be a special place in our city," Menino said. "Both developers said, 'Yes, how can we help?'"

Menino said he believes that with the addition of the two projects, the waterfront could become the world's largest "innovation district."

Seaport Square also includes features aimed at having a low environmental impact, and a document created by the project developers says Seaport Square alone would rival innovation districts in locations such as Barcelona, London and Portland, Ore.

The \$3 billion project would include a 10,000-square-foot innovation center that would offer low-cost office space to startups, according to the BRA, which approved the project last month.

The center would also include space for meetings, exhibitions and for the testing of new ideas and technologies that might be used elsewhere in Seaport Square or Boston, according to officials and the Seaport Square document. (The development team of [Morgan Stanley](#), Gale International and WS Development was unavailable for an interview.)

The innovation center would consist of a standalone building that would be leased to the city of Boston, which would run the center, said Susan Elsbree of the BRA. The center would be part of the first construction phase of Seaport Square and is expected to open next November, according to a project spokesman.

Seaport Square, a 23-acre development, was originally proposed in mid-2008, without the innovation center as part of the plans. The center was later added to the plans after discussions with the BRA, officials said.

Seaport Square also includes 325 “workforce” housing units, which would cost less than the typical units in the project and are designed to attract entrepreneurs who might work at the innovation center, Elsbree said.

At Waterside Place, approved by the BRA in August, the aim is also to attract people who would both work at the innovation center and live at one of the development’s housing units.

The 14,000-square-foot innovation center would comprise the top floor of a retail building in the development, said John Drew, president of the project developer, the Drew Co. of Boston. The center would provide office space and conference space for 20 to 30 technology startups, Drew said.

“I think that’s pretty exciting to offer this and to see if we could get people interested in working and living in the same location,” he said.

The innovation center would be part of the \$130 million first phase of Waterside Place, expected to reach completion by mid-2013, Drew said.

The Waterside Place plans were originally unveiled in 2004 but stalled during the economic downturn as retail spending plummeted.

The project has now been scaled down from the original proposal, with less retail and parking and other changes, Drew said.

Meanwhile, Menino said the city is also working to locate an incubator focused on clean technology startups in South Boston’s Marine Industrial Park.

The park already hosts cleantech companies including [Satcon Technology Corp.](#) (Nasdaq: SATC), which makes power inverters for renewable energy systems, and energy efficiency services firm Next Step Living Inc.

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