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# Boston's housing solution lies in Allston

By Paul McMorrow | GLOBE COLUMNIST    DECEMBER 17, 2013

A PILE of dirt sat at Barry's Corner in Allston last Friday. It didn't look like much — it was just dirt, after all — but waves of Boston officials crowded around the heap of frigid earth, and posed over the thing, grinning. Boston's skyline rose miles down the road. The downtown is crowded with construction cranes, but the city's future hinges as much on dirt piles in Allston parking lots as it does on anything happening in a downtown tower.

Boston developers excel at building well-appointed residential towers for very wealthy residents. This isn't a bad thing, on its own. In Downtown Crossing and the Seaport, luxury residential complexes have helped bring formerly desolate neighborhoods to life. It's a mistake, though, to confuse the frothy top of the market for the market itself. High housing prices have helped drive a recent hollowing out of the city, where the ranks of the rich and the poor have swelled, while the middle class has withered. Boston desperately needs new housing for people who don't work for hedge funds. But almost all of the city's recent construction efforts have gone toward the highest of the high end.

The solution lies in places like Allston. If Boston is going to build housing for working people in any meaningful volume, it's going to come in the city's outlying neighborhoods, which offer cheaper land and lower construction costs. The future isn't the Seaport; it's the Fairmount Line in Dorchester and Mattapan, the vast parking lots around Sullivan Square, the vacant and industrial lots around Forest Hills, and Allston. Especially Allston.

Allston looms large because, unlike most of Boston's neighborhoods, it has a huge surplus of vacant and underutilized land. The neighborhood has plenty of room to grow, which means it has the ability to move the needle on the city's longstanding housing

crunch. From Charlestown to Jamaica Plain to Allston, the trick is in overcoming neighborhood politics, which can be less than friendly toward new construction.

Allston's promise lies in places like Barry's Corner. City officials descended on the corner last Friday to mark the start of construction on a \$150 million, 325-unit apartment complex. Samuels & Associates is building the development, which will also include ground-floor retail, in partnership with Harvard University.

The Barry's Corner development will be Harvard's first mixed-use project in Boston.

And it shows what can happen when a land-rich institution looks beyond dorm beds and administrative office space, and thinks more broadly about its development priorities. The project will create a gateway destination leading toward Harvard's athletics complex and its new science center. Likely residents include the school's grad students and employees, and, later, employees of the commercial enterprise campus the school will develop along Western Avenue.

A mile down the street, another developer, the Mount Vernon Company, shows where neighborhoods like Allston are heading. Mount Vernon assembled a group of older apartment buildings and scruffy industrial lots off Commonwealth Avenue, and turned a set of unremarkable city blocks into Allston's Green District, a neighborhood of environmentally advanced apartment buildings. Mount Vernon built its Green District with downtown amenities and finishes (fitness centers, roof decks, stainless appliances). The difference in the development costs between Boston's downtown and its neighborhoods is so great that, even with luxury finishes and a mostly union construction force, Green District apartments still rent for thousands less than downtown units.

"The growth is real, but not everybody is making \$200,000 per year," says Mount Vernon's chairman, Bruce Percelay. "Developers are missing the market. The city is healthy, but it doesn't mean that everybody can afford \$6,000 per month rents. Just because people drive cars, doesn't mean that Ferraris are all anyone should sell."

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