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- home
- news
- events
- discussions
- search

< Back to front page

Text size - +

ALLSTON BRIGHTON, CAMBRIDGE

## Allston residents say Harvard's progress good, but not yet enough

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 14, 2011 07:58 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Harvard University's president sent a progress report to neighborhood residents Monday in a letter highlighting how the school has made efforts in recent months to continue to develop Allston and reach out to the community.

Over the past year, the university has rented "all but one of the available, marketable vacancies in our retail properties," signed 11 new leases, and filled over 118,000 square feet of vacant commercial space in Allston, Harvard president Drew Faust said in a letter to the community.

Faust said the school signed a lease last week with retail and commercial bakery Swiss Bakers, which will occupy the former Volkswagen dealership. Two other recent Harvard lease signings Stone Hearth Pizza and Maki Maki will open "later this spring" in their respective locations at Barry's Corner and the Brighton Mills Shopping Center, Faust announced.

However, some residents – albeit thankful for the school's positive steps forward – say until Harvard resumes work on its bigger promises for developing that area – most notably a \$1.4-billion science center complex stalled since late 2009 – the university will not have the complete trust and backing of the Allston community.

"There's a great deal of anxiety in the community on this [science center] site, and until that gets resolved that anxiety won't go away," said Paul Berkeley, a member of the Harvard Allston Task Force, a city-appointed group created to provide civic feedback to the school as its Allston campus expands.

"I'm pleased that she's communicating with the community about what's going on. Overall, it was a positive letter, but nothing's really going to break here until that science center gets resolved .... That project was the key to changing that neighborhood ... All of these things are positive things, but they're scratching around the surface," he said, moments after reading the letter.

Harvard President Drew Faust wrote that an internal work team was created a year ago to analyze how the university's "growth needs" can be addressed "structurally as well as financially, in a fully integrated vision for Allston. That team is expected to come back with recommendations "later this year," the letter said.

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"The [Allston] Work Team has been gathering information from a range of sources both inside and outside the university to help determine the best route to resumed development for the Western Avenue site, which will undoubtedly be tied to one or more science-based uses, and options for development and co-development around that anchor project," Faust wrote. "They are also developing recommendations on how our available land resources can be utilized to support the University's academic needs and future opportunities."

Resident Harvard Allston Task Force member Brent Whelan had not yet read the letter when reached Monday, but he expressed disappointment that, "they have not let the community involved in [the Allston Work Team process] at all."

"There's been a big vacuum in the interest of the community's opinions," he said. "We would like to be partners, and they would like us to be the grateful recipients of their 'gifts.'"

"In a sense I'm grateful, but in another sense, I'm like 'why so little,'" Whelan said. What Harvard has done in Allston thus far "is peanuts compared to the bigger projects, and they're not letting the community get involved with those."

(To see the full text of Faust's letter, [click here.](#))

Berkeley also said some residents have a lack of faith in Harvard because "we've had these experiences with other universities."

Pending the work team's recommendations, two Business School projects are at the forefront of Harvard's academic development in Allston. Plans to convert an existing Western Avenue facility into a \$20-million Harvard Innovation Lab received city approval last week. Meanwhile, Tata Hall, a \$90-million to \$100-million project, has been proposed for a vacant space on the Business School campus along Soldiers Field Road.

While Berkeley and Harvard Allston Task Force Chair Ray Mellone expressed optimism and excitement for the innovation lab project, Whelan and task force member Harry Mattison remained skeptical.

"I think it's a big win for us," Berkeley said. "There's a need to get something going on Western Avenue ... If you hold up the project until you have everything you've wanted, it can sometimes keep it from ever getting done."

But, Whelan contended, "The iLab is certainly going to happen and it will be a good thing. I'm just not certain it's going to be a benefit to the community ... They're going to give a tiny bit of access to the community."

"If this is just a building where a very small amount of public services are

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offered ... that's not a whole lot of community revitalization," added Mattison.

"Campus development, including of the science site on Western Avenue" are the third phase of a three-part vision outlined one year ago. Campus development is "a longer-term focus" and will be done "as resources allow," Faust's letter said.

The first two phases of the school's vision are "property stewardship and community engagement" and a "planning and greening," she wrote.

The university has signed leases to fill vacant business space it owns, expanded a youth educational program, funded community grants, and advanced in planning for added green space and expansion of its academic campus in the neighborhood, said the president's letter.

"Ours is a common future. Harvard is an institution whose vitality depends on new intellectual connections, new spaces in which to work and live, and new ways of engaging each other and our neighbors. We are working toward that future, and along the way, we will be investing in the health and well-being of this unique, historic neighborhood and the City of Boston," wrote Faust. "We understand that we are neighbors in every sense of the word, and that the future of our shared neighborhood requires careful planning based on an understanding of our intertwined needs and expectations."

Three of the more recent lease signings - Stone Hearth, Maki Maki and Swiss Bakers - are expected to create 90 new jobs in Allston, she said. Harvard has businesses in 59 of its commercial properties in Allston that together employ around 900 people.

Though glad to see vacancies being filled, Berkeley does not agree with how that is being done.

"I don't think they understand they've removed a lot of retail from the neighborhood. But if you only offer one type of business [food establishments] you're only meeting that demand and not fulfilling the full potential," for varying business types there, he said.

The school has also attempted to use vacant properties in ways to serve local residents until they are filled, including opening a batting cage and mini-golf facility for summer and fall use, and an ice rink last winter.

Additionally, Faust said the Harvard Education Portal, which has been well-received by the local community, continues to expand and now delivers services to over 1,200 residents and is benefitting from a recently-built "learning gardens."

"In many ways, the Ed Portal has become a neighborhood hub, and continues to deepen ties with the community," she wrote.

The school has opened a "learning gardens" and Library Park behind the Honan-Allston Branch Library will open this summer, converting a space was once home to a cement factory.

The school will hold a series of public discussions, in conjunction with Boston's redevelopment authority, to plan urban design for the area.

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