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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

New Balance: Brighton development to create 3,000 to 4,000 jobs; push for commuter rail station continues

Posted by Matt Rocheleau February 27, 2012 12:30 PM

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The new development will overtake an area currently occupied by surface parking lots and low-level warehouse buildings. The two sites are 77 Guest St., which comprises about three acres, and across the road 38-180 Guest St., which comprises about 15 acres and runs along Interstate 90. To see a larger version of this map, [click here](#).

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

New Balance officials say the company's plans to develop a new headquarters, sports complex and other facilities across 14 acres beside its current headquarters in Boston will create between 3,000 and 4,000 new, full-time jobs in addition to between 600 and 900 construction jobs while the project is being built.

The proposal calls for redeveloping a sprawling 609,000-square-foot area -- among the top 10 largest proposed or ongoing development sites in Boston, according to a spokeswoman for the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Following the release of its [general plan](#) outlined in a letter submitted to the city at the beginning of the month, the athletic footwear and apparel company continues to work on a detailed master plan that is expected to be unveiled and filed with the city in the "next several weeks," New Balance spokeswoman Amy Dow said in recent e-mails. The company is also continuing to push the state toward adding a commuter rail stop in the area.

Along the large underdeveloped prime stretch of real estate in Brighton at 77 Guest St., and across the road 38-180 Guest St., which sits adjacent to the Massachusetts Turnpike's eastbound side, the company intends for its mixed-use development to create a "health and wellness district" that will overtake an area currently occupied by surface parking lots and low-level warehouse buildings.

The filing of its basic plan with the city earlier this month came two years after New Balance publicly unveiled a vision it crafted for the site, despite that a different developer owned a large piece of the property and was navigating the city review and approval process for its proposal to build a Lowe's home improvement store there -- a plan that [the city denied twice](#).

That previous plan the shoe company [announced in early 2010](#) called for a \$250 million mixed-use development along 15 acres that would feature a sports

complex, hotel, park, movie theater, office buildings, and community space, along with a commuter rail station and access to the adjacent turnpike.

For its current proposal, New Balance said in a letter to the city that part of its plan involves “vast improvements to public infrastructure,” and the spokeswoman said company officials “look forward to continued discussion” about the possibility of building a commuter rail station at Everett Street, an idea the state has explored in recent years.

“We will do what we can in working with [the state transportation department], MassDOT,” she said, declining to go into more detail. “We’re not aware of further discussion regarding a turnpike ramp.”

The area where New Balance hopes to develop is a key section of a 100-acre area of Brighton that the city, in conjunction with local residents and various representatives from local business stakeholders including New Balance, [studied over the past year](#).

At a final meeting for that process to create a long-term vision for the area – general guidelines that are expected to be formally adopted by the city next month – many members of the study’s advisory group urged that [the study’s report](#) include strong language to emphasize the long-held desire to add a public railway station in Allston-Brighton, which the state’s transportation department studied in 2009 to examine the potential for a new commuter rail station.

“It’s not off the table ... [but] presently, this area has access to public transportation services in multiple locations, so at this point in time, we are not pursuing this project,” MassDOT spokesman Michael Verseckes said this week. “In the meantime, there are a host of other commitments [namely the Green Line Extension and South Coast Rail projects] that are being advanced and the T continues to have ongoing public meetings to get riders’ feedback on changes to fares and services.”

Commuter rail tracks run adjacent to the stretch to where the shoe company wants to build its new complex and there were once two stops in Allston-Brighton along that railway. However, due to scarce funding, reviving direct railway access to the Allston-Brighton area without major private financial support is likely to be decades away from being achieved, city officials have said.

As part of its plans to construct a new world headquarters, New Balance will vacate its current decade-old 10-story headquarters on Guest Street and rent that space out to new tenants. The manufacturing facility about a mile away in Brighton on Newton Street will continue its operations there.

On the eastern edge of the proposed development site, the Massachusetts Electric Construction Company will eventually vacate office space located on property New Balance bought a year ago that is adjacent to a Stop & Shop site. The site at 180 Guest St. that houses one of the national electric contractor's two headquarters is within New Balance's development scope, officials said.

The New Balance spokeswoman declined to comment on when the company hopes to begin and finish construction, how many buildings the development will entail, and each buildings' individual or the complex's total dimensions.

"We're currently working on this for the master plan that will come in the next several weeks," she said. "We're looking forward to a thorough community review after the master plan's submission."

The company spokeswoman also declined to disclose cost estimates for the current development proposal.

Amid the recent economic downturn that slowed both retail sales and construction across the globe, New Balance, like many in the [seemingly-recession-proof footwear business](#) galloped on. The company purchased a host of other sports apparel brands, opened a technology, product testing and research lab in Lawrence and saw its total sales either hold steady or climb slightly each year.

Founded in Boston 106 years ago as an arch supports and orthopedic shoes manufacturer, the company's revenue grew more than eight-fold over the past two decades. Similar to how the world's top two sports apparel makers, Nike and Adidas, fared over the past decade, New Balance's worldwide sales doubled from \$890 million the non-publicly traded company said it made during 1999 to \$1.78 billion in 2010, the most recent, available sales numbers.

New Balance employs nearly 600 workers at its Boston headquarters and nearby manufacturing plant, another 700 at its world design and production center in Lawrence and 800 more at facilities in Maine out of about 4,000 total associates worldwide.

associates worldwide.

Of the 3,000 to 4,000 jobs the company expects its proposed development to create, “a relatively small percentage” will be new positions within the company’s own workforce. The athletic apparel company is planning for between a 5 and 10 percent increase in its employment figures over the next three to five years, the spokeswoman said.

Asked how the current proposal compares with the quarter-billion dollar idea the company envisioned two years ago, the sneaker company spokeswoman said: “Our current plan fits with New Balance’s need for a new world headquarters with complimentary uses geared towards health and wellness, aligns with the BRA planning study guidelines and reflects that we now control the property.”

The current proposal calls for a new headquarters, sports complex, boutique hotel, up to three office buildings, retail and restaurant space, public open space and public infrastructure upgrades, all of which were included in the plan released two years ago.

Details included in that older vision that have not been specified for the current proposal were a movie theater, commuter rail station and access to the turnpike.

Under the current plan, the sports complex would include a 200-meter track and field facility and a regulation hockey arena.

Space for ice hockey was also part of the vision New Balance offered two years ago.

Last summer, the Skating Club of Boston [announced](#) that it plans to build a new, three-rink indoor ice skating facility on property that sits almost directly across the turnpike from where New Balance intends to build. Asked whether that news has caused New Balance to rethink plans for its own hockey arena, the New Balance spokeswoman said, “no.”

She said the sports complex facility will be “open to the public,” but declined to comment in further detail about how the company envisions it will be used.

In three separate deals – [two last March](#) and the [third in October](#) – that grew

the company's landholdings along Guest Street five-fold within seven months, New Balance spent a total of \$33.8-million to buy the commercial properties that it hopes to develop.

Asked whether New Balance is eyeing any other property acquisitions, the spokeswoman said: "We now own all of the property we need to do our proposed development. There may be other parcels that become available for sale and if that improves our project we would consider them but our goal is to redevelop the property that we have under our control. Our development plan doesn't require any additional property."

Counting its existing headquarters and a five-story parking garage, New Balance's 22.4 acres of property along Guest Street were assessed by the city in 2011 at a combined \$60.5 million. An additional property on nearby Everett Street, another on North Beacon Street and its manufacturing plant space on Newton Street put the company's total neighborhood footprint at 33 acres of land assessed by the city in 2011 at a combined \$70 million.

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