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Harvard offers \$38 million in community benefits to Allston

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Harvard University this week offered Allston residents a 10-year community benefits package worth \$38 million as the university prepare to seek city approval for plans to expand its campus in the neighborhood over the next decade.

Some residents said they were generally impressed with the proposal, while others said some aspects are too vague and also want the university to address questions and concerns over the development projects the benefits would be tied to.

The proposal includes establishing AllstonX, which the university said would offer residents a hybrid of in-person and online education, applying what Harvard is learning through HarvardX, the university's free online education portal established last year through the edX collaborative founded by Harvard and MIT.

AllstonX would be one component of a \$10-million, "transformative" project within the benefits proposal that would establish "a community hub offering education and training, health and wellness, and arts and culture programming for Allston-Brighton residents" at a building at 224 Western Ave., where the existing and popular Harvard Allston Education Portal would be relocated to.

Harvard would also establish a \$2-million "public realm flexible fund," which would be used to fund various ideas residents may have for community improvements that are not addressed by the rest of Harvard's community benefits package.

The community benefits package, unveiled at a community meeting Wednesday night, would include another \$6.5-million work of public realm improvements: building two new ground-level pedestrian crossings along Soldiers Field Road to create better access to the Charles River, making a variety of streetscape and street signal improvements, and funding park maintenance.

There would be a total of \$4 million worth of education programs, \$4 million worth of workforce development and a \$500,000 to extend an annual, Harvard-funded program that provides grants for neighborhood improvement projects, cultural enrichment, and educational programming.

The proposal would also include Harvard paying \$11 million to the city of Boston's linkage program, which requires developers of large-scale projects seeking zoning relief to pay an amount, based on the size of their development, to fund affordable housing elsewhere.

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The community benefits Harvard proposed Wednesday would be provided in addition to prior benefits agreements the university has made with Allston, university officials said. Some the benefits in those prior agreements would continue to be rolled out as parts of the new deal are implemented.

The proposed benefits would be rolled out over the next decade, during which Harvard plans to develop 1.4 million square feet through nine new projects in Allston, including a new basketball arena, a refurbished football stadium, a hotel and conference center, and new business school buildings.

Kevin Casey, associate vice president for public affairs and communications for Harvard, said the benefits outlined reflect much of the feedback residents have given over several recent community meetings.

"We believe this proposal presents an exciting opportunity for shared growth and we look forward to continued discussions with the city and the Allston community," he said in a statement Thursday.

Ray Mallone chairs the Harvard Allston Task Force, a group of neighborhood residents appointed to oversee the university's development plans.

"On the whole, [the benefits proposal] was quite extensive, there was a lot to it, and for the most part, I felt it was well-received," he said by phone Thursday. "Generally speaking it looks like it might be a fairly positive outcome, but who knows the devil is in the details."

But, another task force member, Harry Mattison, said he and many other residents are focused on getting Harvard to answer questions and address concerns about their [10-year development plan](#) before its scheduled appearance on Oct. 17 before the Boston Redevelopment Authority board, which almost always votes to approve projects and plans that come before it.

"The task force and the community are unified about some real major problems with Harvard's master plan which have nothing to do with the community benefits," he said.

Mattison said there are worries about how the large development plan will impact traffic, parking, retail and public spaces.

"That's where there's really concern," he said by phone Thursday. "We're not supporting the master plan in its current form so we're looking for some changes there."

As for the benefits proposal, Mattison said parts of it are too "vague" and in some instances the university calculates value for projects that benefit the university more than the community.

"For example, this AllstonX thing," he said. "No one really has any clue what it is. Maybe it will be good. Maybe it won't. But these aren't things the community has been clamoring for."

The university's presence and development plans in Allston have been [rife with controversies](#). In recent years, residents and city officials have called for Harvard to be more transparent about its development plans and to do a better job of following through on its promises. Many residents have said they have a hard time trusting Harvard.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).

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