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JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**The state Transportation Building wraps around a corner of an entire city block and encompasses 2.6 acres. The city's assessing department values it at \$121 million.**

**By Matt Rocheleau and Nicole Dungca**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 14, 2014

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State officials say they may be open to selling the massive Transportation Building in downtown Boston, and at least one potential buyer, Emerson College, is already expressing interest.

The school's president, Lee Pelton, said that acquiring or leasing some or all of the building, which abuts Emerson's campus, would be "highly desirable."

"Our long-term goal is to develop the campus in a way that would strengthen our identity and make clear our sense of place in an urban setting," Pelton said in an interview Thursday.

Pelton cautioned that any deal, if it were to happen, is still at least several years away, and that the college would face competition to buy the space. But for Emerson, known for its communications and performing arts programs, such a move would mark the latest ambitious push to expand its footprint in the dense, pricey, and rapidly evolving neighborhood on the edge of Boston Common.

In the past decade, the college has built a pair of facilities and converted several buildings into academic space and student housing. And on Thursday, Emerson announced it will soon start construction on a dorm that had been previously announced. It also is seeking city approval to expand an existing residence hall.

The hulking, L-shaped Transportation Building, at 10 Park Plaza, is prime downtown real estate.

It wraps around the corner of a city block and encompasses 2.6 acres, according to municipal data. The eight-story, red-brick facility features 850,000 square feet of offices, ground-floor retail space, and parking. The city's assessing department values the property at \$121 million, though it would probably sell for significantly more.

State transit agencies have the largest presence in the building, officials said, with some 1,600 Massachusetts Department of Transportation and MBTA employees working there. The facility also has office space for other state government workers, and Emerson rents a small amount of space there.

A law signed by Governor Deval Patrick on Oct. 31 signaled that the state could be gearing up to sell the property. The law calls for the transfer of ownership from the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance to the Department of Transportation. The transfer ensures that if the property is sold, the revenue would go to the cash-strapped transportation agency, which is bogged down by debt and a backlog of unfunded projects.

"We don't have any plans at the moment to sell the building, but I would say that it would definitely be something that we're exploring," said MassDOT spokeswoman Cyndi Roy Gonzalez.

If a sale is pursued, the building would be sold to the highest responsible bidder through a public bid process, she said.

“We haven’t even started that process,” Gonzalez said. “I’m sure that when and if we decide that’s the route we want to go, it’ll be a pretty hot piece of land for people in the development industry.”

No decisions have been made on where the state would relocate the offices.

The offices of the governor and mayor did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the possible sale.

Selling the building would appear to make sense, because one of the original goals of the facility — to revitalize what used to be a troubled area of the city — has largely been accomplished.

The Transportation Building was constructed in the early 1980s with the hope that it would encourage private development that would help clean up the areas abutting the “Combat Zone,” at the time a hotbed of adult entertainment, prostitution, and crime.

The area has since undergone a dramatic transformation spurred by new development, including privately built and renovated hotels, theaters, condos.

“The transformation has been extraordinary and striking,” Pelton said.

He said it is too early to say how much of the property Emerson would be interested in, what it would use the space for, and whether it might partner with another entity on such a deal.

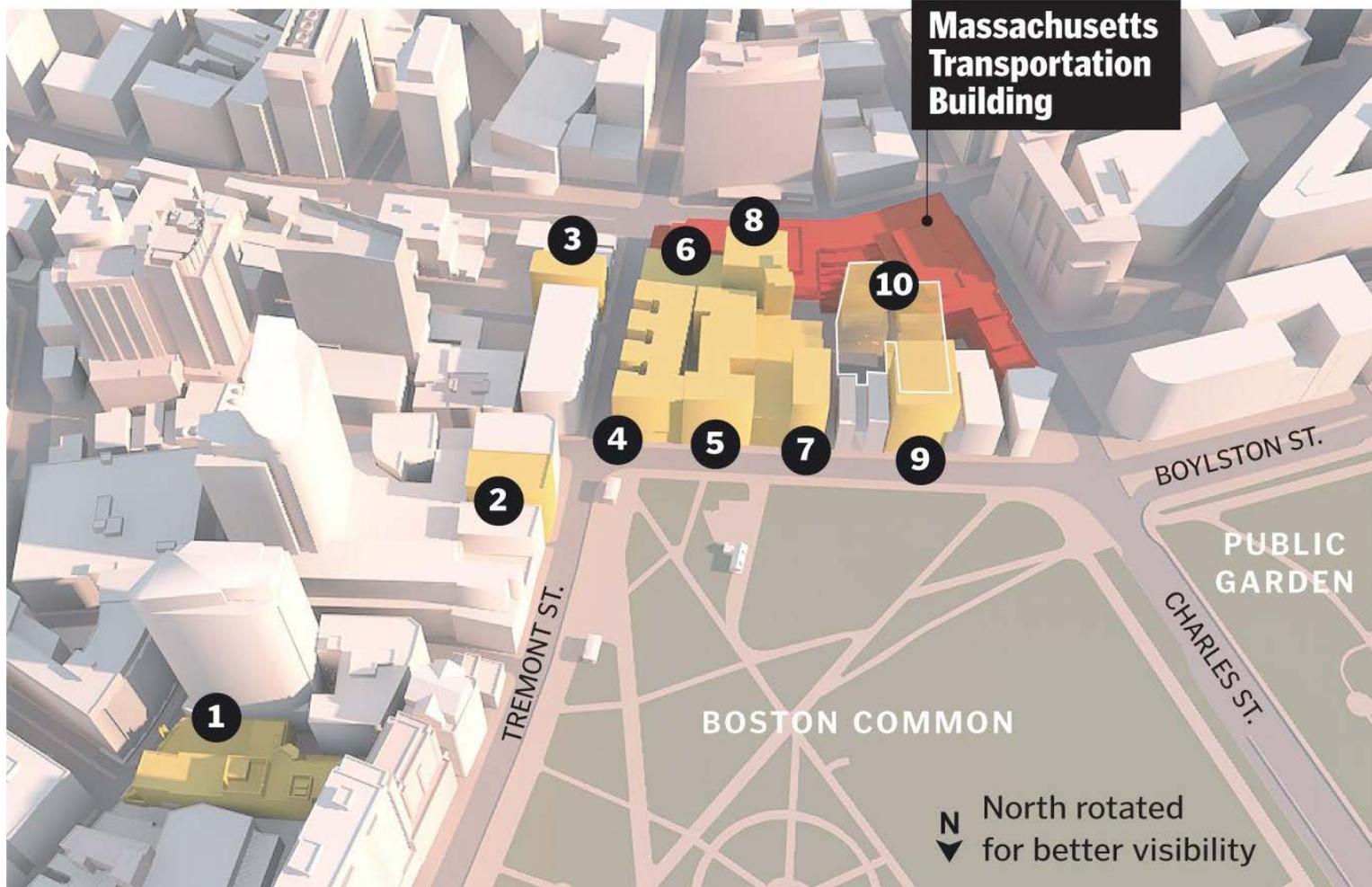
“I’m certain it would be a very expensive project to acquire and repurpose,” he said.

The college has an enrollment of 3,500 undergraduates and 760 graduate students and employs 460 full- and part-time faculty.

While undergraduate enrollment has risen only slightly over the past decade, Emerson has built two buildings and renovated five others during that period to add a total of nearly 900,000 square feet and more than 1,000 dorm beds, along with theater, restaurant, office, library, classrooms, and studio spaces.

Emerson’s property holdings are worth \$240 million combined, the fifth-highest among colleges in Boston, according to city data.

**EMERSON BUILDINGS**



- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>1</b> The Paramount Center<br><b>2010</b> ← OPENING DATE        | <b>5</b> The Colonial Building<br><b>2009</b>   | <b>8</b> Tufte Center<br><b>2003</b>                     |
| <b>2</b> Ansin Building<br><b>1992</b>                             | <b>6</b> Cutler Majestic Theatre<br><b>2003</b> | <b>9</b> Piano Row Residence Hall<br><b>2006</b>         |
| <b>3</b> 216 Tremont Street<br><b>1996</b>                         | <b>7</b> Walker Building<br><b>2004</b>         | <b>10</b> 1-3 Boylston Street<br><b>2017 (SCHEDULED)</b> |
| <b>4</b> Little Building<br><b>1995 (SCHEDULED EXPANSION 2019)</b> |   |  |

SOURCE: Boston Redevelopment Authority

CHIQUI ESTEBAN/GLOBE STAFF

In a campuswide e-mail Thursday, the college said it is seeking city approval to expand and overhaul its largest dormitory, known as the Little Building. The project, which would start in spring 2017, would add a floor to the 12-story facility at the corner of Boylston and Tremont streets, increase the number of student beds from 750 to 1,040, create new common rooms and social space, and update and expand a dining hall that will seat 450 students.

The latest proposal is a more extensive project than the school laid out previously, which called for simply

replacing the building's ornate but deteriorating stone facade.

Emerson also said Thursday that it would soon move forward on city-approved plans to tear down two buildings that house a restaurant, nightclub, and offices to construct an 18-story, 380-bed dormitory along an alley behind the Transportation Building.

Work on the project, at 1-3 Boylston Place, is scheduled to start in May and take about two years to finish.

College officials described both undertakings as expensive but declined to disclose cost estimates.

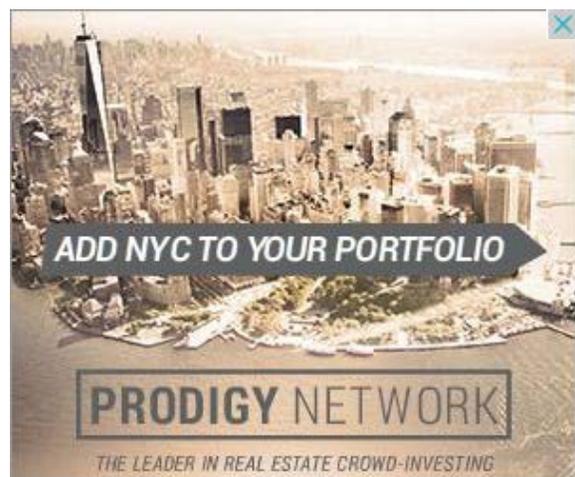
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