

State hopes to create Southern gateway to Boston

Bids to redevelop Big Dig lots sought

By **Casey Ross** | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 02, 2012

Massachusetts officials are moving ahead on development of a large swath of state-owned property between Chinatown and South Boston in hopes it could eventually become a southern gateway to the city, akin to the Zakim Bridge area to the north.

The development - housing, offices, stores, and public parks - would take place in a 20-acre canyon of weed-strewn lots freed up by the Big Dig, which moved the elevated Interstate 93 expressway underground and created an opportunity to build a new city neighborhood.

Officials stressed that such a massive undertaking is sure to take many years, especially given lingering weakness in the economy. But they are taking the first step by seeking proposals for 1.7 acres along Kneeland Street that are seen as an entry to the rest of the property.

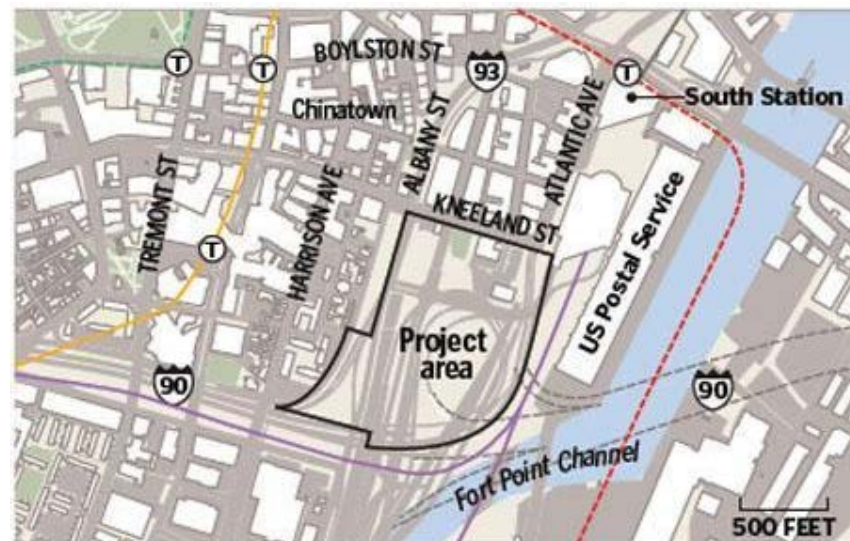
Even before completion of the Big Dig, the land became a magnet for development ideas, including a signature park that would tie into the nearby Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway and large buildings with striking architectural features.

“The whole idea is that it would be an extension of Boston and potentially create an iconic new entrance to that part of the city,” said Marc Margulies, an architect who chaired a city task force that studied the property. “There is no reason to think Boston is through growing, and this is one of the few places where land is available.”

Unlike the area around the Zakim Bridge to the north, the southern tract would be defined by tall buildings.

The task force concluded that the 20 acres could host up to 1,500 homes, several parks, recreational facilities, retail shops, and restaurants.

In 2004, an initial effort to redevelop all the parcels at once generated only one proposal; it was ultimately deemed not feasible financially. Transportation officials said they are now trying a more gradual approach,



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allowing private builders begin to redevelop it in smaller chunks.

William Tuttle, an official with the state Department of Transportation, said proposals for the first Kneeland Street site, known as Parcel 25, are due in March.

The state is asking developers to think broadly and consider the possibilities of three adjacent plots that will be part of the larger redevelopment.

“We’re thinking about it in terms of the bigger picture, even if that bigger picture is some years off,” said Tuttle, deputy director of real estate for the transportation department.

The parcels form a rectangle between Kneeland Street, Albany Street, Interstate 93, and the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Once part of Boston Harbor, the area was filled in during the mid-19th century to develop rail yards, housing, and warehouses, but much of it was cleared in the 1950s to make way for the elevated Central Artery. Now, it hosts a mishmash of parking lots, highway ramps, a state office building, a basketball court, and a steam plant.

The property is seen as attractive for large-scale redevelopment because it sits between the bustling Chinatown and Fort Point neighborhoods and is close to the South Station transit hub, as well as to access points for the turnpike and I-93.

Although it offers a rare development opportunity, the property poses engineering and construction challenges that could make proposals difficult to finance. Part of it consists of so-called air rights over roads and highway ramps that can be expensive to build over.

In bidding documents for Parcel 25, state officials wrote that even if developers do not propose to build using the air rights, they would have to cover an open section of I-93 to meet air-quality standards for any residences or office towers constructed there.

The high cost of building over the turnpike contributed to the financial problems that sank the nearby Columbus Center project, an \$800 million plan to build condominiums, a hotel, and stores over the turnpike.

But state officials said the costs for Parcel 25 and adjoining sites will not be nearly as high, because air rights account for a much smaller portion of the project.

Tuttle said the state is also testing a pilot program involving the bidding process that seeks to ensure the development team selected for the Kneeland Street project employs women and minorities as managers, investors, and vendors. The level of participation by those groups will be used as one of the criteria for judging the proposals.

In addition to winning support from the state, any developer would need approval from the Boston Redevelopment Authority. The state and BRA recently approved construction of a large project on nearby Parcel 24 along Hudson Street, where a joint-venture partnership of the New Boston Fund Inc. and Asian Community Development Corporation is planning to start construction this year on hundreds of apartments, a public green, and retail stores.

A BRA spokeswoman said the city hopes the Parcel 25 project will help jump-start redevelopment and reconnect the land to surrounding

neighborhoods.

“We’re looking forward to seeing creative project proposals for this site that will create jobs, activate a key Central Artery parcel, and improve the link between the Leather District and Chinatown along Kneeland Street,” said spokeswoman Melina Schuler. “Parcel 25 presents another great opportunity to build on momentum in the area.”

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Casey Ross can be reached at cross@globe.com.

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