

Allston's Western Ave. is Boston's latest hot neighborhood

By Jay Fitzgerald GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 18, 2015



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Charlesview Residences, at 370-400 Western Avenue, contains 240 rental units, 15,000 square feet of retail space, and 10,000 square feet for a community center.

For decades, Ardo Garabedian's gas station and parking lot along Western Avenue in Brighton were surrounded by a ragtag array of used-car dealerships, and the dilapidated remnants of the old Charles River Speedway.

Then in September, the gleaming new, \$26.5 million Charles River Community Health center opened across the street, at the site of a former State Police barracks. Other neighborhood development plans were announced, including a proposed apartment and retail complex next door on Western Avenue.

Having fielded numerous calls from developers interested in buying his parcel, Garabedian now realizes his gritty neighborhood may be a real-estate gold mine. That's prompted him to approach architects to solicit development ideas for his three-quarter-acre lot at 500 Western Ave.

"Maybe I can redevelop it on my own," said Garabedian. "It's only in the early planning stages. Who knows?"

Up and down the nearly one-mile stretch of Western Avenue, from the edge of the Harvard Business School campus in Allston to the Arsenal Street bridge in Brighton, others may be dreaming of hitting it big in what many consider the latest red-hot real estate frontier in Boston.



The Continuum

- ADDRESS: 219 Western Avenue (South Tower, six stories) and 199 North Harvard Street (North Tower, nine stories); both towers interconnected via ground-floor retail
- USES: 325 apartments and 35,000 square feet of ground-floor retail
- COMPLETED: August 2015, North Tower; December 2015, South Tower
- DEVELOPERS: Samuels & Associates and Weiner Ventures

In recent months, two new projects have opened along that stretch: the mixed-used Continuum complex in Allston, co-developed by Samuels & Associates and Weiner Ventures, and the 48,000-square-foot Charles River Community Health, across from Garabedian's property.

Three other projects are in the planning stages for Western Avenue: a 132-unit residential and retail complex, near the corner of Western Avenue and the Leo M. Birmingham Parkway in Brighton; a mixed-used redevelopment of the former speedway at the same intersection; and an 85-unit condo project at 180 Telford St., just across the street from the recently opened Charlesview Residences along Western Avenue.

"We're very bullish on the area," said Bruce Percelay, chairman of the Mount Vernon Company, developer of the proposed residential and

retail complex near the corner of Western Avenue and Birmingham Parkway. “The fundamentals are all there.”

The fundamentals, according to developers like Percelay, partly mean a convenient location with easy access to Soldiers Field Road to the north, the Massachusetts Turnpike to the south and a web of MBTA bus lines serving the entire area. The price of land in the Brighton-Allston area is also less than half the cost in other booming areas of Boston, such as the Seaport District and the Fenway.

The corridor’s transformation can be traced to three major development projects in the area, two of which bookend Western Avenue: Harvard University’s plan to resume construction next year on its new 500,000-square-foot science and engineering complex in Allston, and a private developer’s plans to build a new 150-room hotel and an office building, along with a planned overhaul of the Arsenal Project (formerly known as the Arsenal Mall) in Watertown, just over the bridge from Brighton.

The third venture is New Balance Athletic Shoe Inc.’s massive mixed-use development, called Boston Landing, on 14 acres of land along Guest Street, south of the turnpike in Brighton.

New Balance has already moved into a new 250,000-square-foot world headquarters on Guest Street and is in the process of adding a hotel, along with a mixed-use complex, and a commuter rail station tucked along the Turnpike off of Everett Street.

Combined, those and other area projects are spurring intense development activity.



Charles River Community Health

(formerly Joseph M. Smith Community Health Center)

- **ADDRESS:** 495 Western Avenue
- **USE:** Health care facility
- **COMPLETED:** September 2015
- **DEVELOPER:** Charles River Community Health

“Western Avenue has been a kind of desolate area for a while now,” said Paul Berkeley, president of the Allston Civic Association. “People are happy to finally see things happening along Western Avenue. But they’re also concerned about some of the plans.”

Among neighborhood worries is the density of all the proposed developments and the number of planned rental apartments in the area. Nearby homeowners fear that “transitory” renters won’t put down roots, said Berkeley.

State Representative Michael Moran, a Brighton Democrat whose district covers the Western Avenue corridor, said neighborhood residents are also looking for more affordable housing, and amenities like bike paths and possible ride-sharing services to reduce potential traffic, he said.

“It not just developers coming in and pouring concrete for new apartments,” said Moran. “It’s got to be appropriate. It’s got to fit into the neighborhood.”

Still, Moran and others say they're guardedly optimistic about all the plans in store for Western Avenue. He's particularly eager to see the intersection of Western Avenue and the Birmingham Parkway become a "true gateway" into Brighton from Watertown.

And current property owners like David Stoia welcome the newfound interest in Western Avenue.

"Every week, I get calls from developers wanting to know if I'm willing to sell, but I tell them I'm not interested," said Stoia, owner of Boston Lock & Safety Company Inc. in Brighton. Stoia owns two parcels on Western Avenue.

"I want to hang on to the properties for a while and see what happens," Stoia said.

Then there's Ardo Garabedian, owner of the Irving Gas station and parking lot.

"I've had a few offers to sell, but nothing I really wanted," he said, which is why he decided to work on his own development ideas.

"I might take the plans to some banks to see if they like them," he added. "If it's an economic engine that will generate more revenue, I'm for it."

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