



SEEKING RENT

Baseball, students, and hospitals have long defined Boston's Fenway neighborhood. Now a high-rise building boom has everybody – except for maybe a few folks at Fenway Park – eager to see the area's new skyline.

BY KRIS FRIESWICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For most people, Boston's Fenway neighborhood has long been associated with two things, and two things only: Fenway Park and student housing. Those factors have been its greatest perks, but at the same time they have prevented it from evolving since the 1950s, the last time the city rezoned there. The Fenway also meant all the things that come with students and baseball – parking and traffic, crime and loud parties, seedy bars and fast food, and, of course, vomit on the streets. Some hardy souls own their own homes, but even today, they represent a scant 7 percent of the total neighborhood population of roughly 30,000.

But if you've cruised down the extension of Boylston Street that snakes through the Fenway recently, you've probably noticed some mighty tall cranes, symbols of a dramatic makeover underway in the shadows of the nation's oldest ballpark. When all the scaffolding comes down and all the barriers are carted away, a shiny new neighborhood will emerge that's expected to attract a slew of new residents. At the same time, the makeover could leave its current crop of condo and apartment dwellers wondering what happened to its charming, if imperfect, corner of the city.

What's driving all the changes? New zoning laws, propelled by the people who live and work in the Fenway and enacted by the city in 2004, made it more financially viable for developers to build here. And many students decamped to the new dorms that BU and Northeastern built at the strong encouragement of Boston's mayor, Tom Menino. Moreover, in 2005, the new owners of the Red Sox formally announced that they were keeping Fenway Park right where it is until at least 2012 and that they intended to build up the neighborhood around their quaint little landmark.

As a result, the Fenway is undergoing an unprecedented building boom. At 1330 Boylston Street, what is now a city-block-sized steel skeleton will eventually include 215 apartments, 15,000 square feet of ground-floor retail space, a garage, and an 80,000-square-foot expansion of the Fenway Community Health Center. And the 17-story, 536-unit Trilogy apartment complex, being developed by longtime Fenway landowner Steven Samuels and Bill McQuillan, shines

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like a futuristic vision at the end of Brookline Avenue near “The Point,” the nightmarish confluence of Brookline Avenue, Boylston Street, and the Fens. But even that is going to change soon: The neighborhood’s streets and public transportation facilities are scheduled for massive upgrades using \$55 million in infrastructure funds set aside by the Legislature last year. The Point area, which Samuels has under option, is zoned to become a new gateway into the Fenway neighborhood and to include another building just as big and impressive as Trilogy. New restaurants and stores like West Elm, Burtons Grill, and Emack & Bolio’s have already opened up along the lower end of Brookline Avenue, near the Landmark Center, which was the redevelopment pioneer in these parts.

Meanwhile, as the Sox owners make the ballpark more public-friendly, turning it into a year-round destination, restaurants are springing up on Landsdowne Street and Brookline Avenue. Developer John Rosenthal is seeking approvals for a 353-unit condo/retail/transportation complex to be called One Kenmore that will straddle the Mass Pike near the Yawkey commuter-train station. Nightclub magnate Patrick Lyons is in the midst of his next project, building a \$15 million music hall where Axis and Avalon were, and he has plans to reincarnate at least three more of his properties. Predictably, building values all over the neighborhood have jumped – the Shell station at the corner of Ipswich and Boylston, which its owners purchased for \$4 million in 2006, is on the market for \$10 million.

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Lyons says he is only surprised that it took so long for the Fenway revitalization to catch on. “It’s amazing how myopic we’ve all been, and when I say ‘myopic,’ I put myself on that list; I put everybody on this list. We all missed it. That’s the bad news. The good news is, guess what, we get it now. Everyone gets it and understands it.”

Good news for some, at least. But all those people now “getting it” have competing visions for what the Fenway should be. Each institution, developer, neighborhood lobbying group, and landowner is jockeying to put its interests first in the new landscape. And of the many players – including the all-powerful Longwood medical community, almost a dozen colleges

and two major universities (Boston University and Northeastern), and mega-developers Samuels and Rosenthal and host of smaller ones – none has attracted more attention and ire than the owners of the beloved Sox. Maybe it’s because they’re the new kids in town (the owners, not the team). Maybe it’s because they are so damned good at schmoozing their audience. But their efforts to dictate what happens to a large swath of the Fenway neighborhood under the heading of “preserving and protecting” the storied park have, for some, taken the shine off the friendly community image they cultivated so successfully when they rode into town like knights on white horses in 2002 and captured the long-awaited World Series championship two years later. As the owners are learning, Boston is a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately town – a message their own ballplayers certainly could have told them.

It was, at first, a love fest. The new owners could not have come at a better time if their goal was to be heartily embraced by decision makers in the Fenway neighborhood and on the local and state levels. The park’s old steward, John Harrington, had outstayed his welcome, capping off his dubious reign in 2000 by formalizing plans to move the team to a new stadium closer to the Point, something the team’s succession of owners had been threatening to do for more than a decade. And that land would likely be taken by eminent domain. The Legislature voted in July of that year to approve \$100 million in state funds for the park and \$140 million more in city funds and ordered the city to use eminent domain, if needed, for the move. Many in the community saw this as the final straw by an ownership that had never embraced its role as a responsible member of the neighborhood. “Eighty-two days a year we would be inundated by sausage vendors and hawkers,” recalls Lyons of the bad old days. “The games would come in, and it would leave the street a mess, and when the game was over, the grates would be pulled down, the sausage people would leave grease on the streets, and then they’d be done. And the only ones left here were the people who lived and worked in the neighborhood.”

Worse yet, the palpable sense of uncertainty about where Fenway Park was going to be lo-

cated ensured that no new development would take place until the situation was resolved. “It was like standing in an earthquake,” says Lyons, “and trying to find an area where the ground’s not moving.”

When John Henry, Larry Lucchino, and their ownership group bought the team in 2002, it was akin to a miracle, says the man with a front-row seat. “I think the Red Sox are fantastic,” says Lyons, who partnered with the team to create Game On, the restaurant occupying a former warehouse space at Boylston and Landsdowne, and who is in talks to open another club inside the walls of the park itself that would be open to the public. “I think the organization is fantastic. I gotta think they’re the envy of any neighborhood that has a major stadium. I’d rather be their neighbors than anyone else’s neighbors.”

The team’s community outreach was remarkable, a tall glass of water after a long drought. It was suddenly OK to really, really love the Red Sox. The ownership spent millions on the park, spruced up the neighborhood, and worked to create a tourist attraction. No wonder the city happily extended the new owners the right to close Yawkey Way, a public roadway, on game days (along with air rights over the Green Monster, for \$165,000 a year).

But during this fevered honeymoon, the Sox management claims it missed something sort of important – crucial, really – to the park’s interests. A rezoning project for the Fenway neighborhood, the first since the 1950s, when the car was king, had been crawling along at City Hall since 1997. The project was overseen by Randi Lathrop for the Boston Redevelopment Authority. It was Lathrop’s job to make sure that every voice in the Fenway rezoning process was heard. Lathrop slogged through years of chaotic public-comment meetings (at which she was sometimes required to have undercover police protection) and dealt with the added complication, halfway through the process, of the old Red Sox owners announcing their intention to move Fenway Park.

“The community was freaking out at that time,” says Lathrop of the eminent-domain announcement. The process plodded on until finally, in 2003, the BRA unveiled a zoning plan for the area. It encouraged tall buildings up to 150 feet (about 13 stories) on the north side of Boylston Street, near Fenway Park, placed an emphasis on condo developments and far less parking, and called for a pedestrian-focused retail zone on car-dominated Boylston Street. “The residents

HOT TICKETS

Clockwise from top left: Developer Steven Samuels in front of his Boylston Street project; the BRA’s Randi Lathrop engulfed by a model of the city; developer John Rosenthal, who altered his Fenway project when the Red Sox balked; new storefronts are changing the neighborhood’s face; the old Ramrod nightclub and adult-video store remain.



wanted to get rid of all the parking, to build more housing,” says Lathrop. “They wanted mixed uses; they didn’t want it to be just ballpark uses. They told us, ‘We want a neighborhood.’”

The new zoning, by allowing high density, made developing the Fenway neighborhood a far more lucrative proposition for condo and high-end retail developers than it had ever been. This was necessary if the developers were going to meet another crucial requirement of the zoning – on-site affordable housing units.

The new Sox owners were less than thrilled with all of this. Mike Dee, chief operating officer of the Red Sox and president of Fenway Sports Group, admits the team wasn’t paying enough attention to the zoning process immediately after buying the team in 2002. “We were not as in tune as we are today with the zoning change,” he says. “It had been seven years in the making. And there is no going back. We had no idea that it was going

on.” (Lathrop claims that’s not for her lack of trying: “I kept telling them, ‘Pay attention, pay attention. The new zoning is coming.’”)

IF THERE IS ONE THING THE NEW RED SOX owners dislike almost as much as they do the Yankees, it’s tall buildings. And, of course, the biggest change the new zoning allows is the construction of tall buildings. “It would be a shame if we had the Manhattanization of Fenway, with skyscrapers all along the area,” says Dee. “The charm of the open air around it would be lost.” Not to mention the revenue from all those people who could catch home games for free by simply looking down into the park from their living room windows. The owners are also concerned about preserving the uncluttered view around the park, something they have repeatedly said is an essential aspect of Fenway’s appeal.

So what the new owners had neglected to do

during the zoning process they set about to do after. They started by announcing their goal to “preserve and protect” the Fenway Park area. The only way the team could do that was by wielding the cash, political muscle, and good will they’d amassed by rehabbing the old Fenway. The team owners had bought up properties long before their 2005 announcement that they were keeping Fenway Park where it is, including the WBCN building on Ipswich and the Town Taxi building and the McDonald’s on Boylston. (The New York Times Co., parent company of *The Boston Globe*, owns 17 percent of the Red Sox.)

Several key acquisitions and deals didn’t go through, though. The team had approached Mindich about purchasing or partnering on the property he owns on Brookline Avenue, but Mindich says he told the team he wasn’t interested. The Sox owners were also reportedly rebuffed by the Vara family, which owns the Ram-

Seeing Red

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TALL ORDER The new Sox owners spent millions on the park and nearby streets to create a tourist attraction, and the city helped by letting them close Yawkey Way on game days.

rod/Machine nightclub and an adult-video store that sit across Boylston Street from Ipswich, the informal eastern entrance to the Fenway Park area.

The Varas' refusal to sell must have been particularly galling for the Sox, since the gay nightclub greets many fans as they enter or leave the park. In May 2005, Janet Marie Smith, the Red Sox senior vice president of planning and development, voiced concerns that the businesses might offend some family types who pass by. Tough luck, the locals responded. They were here first. "It would be too blatant if they tried to suddenly find fault with something that we have never had a problem with," says Mindich. "It would be too manufactured."

In published reports, the Red Sox owners claimed it was the Varas who approached them to see if the team wanted to buy the property. But Barry D. Hoffman, who was a co-owner of the property at the time, denies that version. "They offered to buy it at a very high price, and my partner turned them down," he says. Dee says that while the Red Sox owners have no intention of trying to get rid of Ramrod, "we embrace the evolution of the neighborhood. We think that there are things that over time will transition in the neighborhood. Is it the best use of Boylston Street to have a tire center? We're not going to be market makers in making those changes."

In other instances, the Sox have wielded their clout to great effect. In January 2004, they stepped in at the 11th hour to scotch the development plans of John Rosenthal's high-rise luxury condo/retail project, Kenmore One, with the air rights located over the Mass Pike between Kenmore Square and Rosenthal's parking garage on Landsdowne Street, directly behind the Green Monster. This sudden power play came after Rosenthal spent months working with the Sox and community groups to address concerns about the project. (Rosenthal has since resubmitted a smaller version of the plans for the Yawkey train-station area, and the Red Sox are a minority partner.) In February 2006, Smith complained that the new Trilogy building, located at the other end of the neighborhood, was changing the air flow in Fenway Park and pointed to this as just one more reason why the building height allowed by the new zoning was going to be a problem. Curiously, the team downplayed the effect of years of construction inside the ballpark and the addition of hundreds of new seats, including the highest ones atop the Green Monster, as possible factors for changing winds.

THE FENWAY BOASTS A COLLECTION OF some of the most deep-pocketed neighbors in the city. Those heavy hitters don't particularly love one another, but after having squabbled over zoning for 10 years

(and other matters for decades prior to that), there was finally some agreement, cooperation, and a sort of working detente. They had a plan. "Everyone understood what everyone else wanted," says Steven Samuels, who was a constant presence at the zoning meetings, according to the BRA's Lathrop. "You find a common ground. People trust us now," Samuels says. "For once, I'm not the [expletive] developer trying to shove something down someone's throat."

The best way to tick off a guy like Samuels, and every other player who worked to build the new vision of the neighborhood, is to be the latecomer who tries to write new rules.

That may partly explain why, in mid-2005, Menino started grumbling about money (originally part of the eminent-domain legislation) that was re-earmarked to upgrade transportation in the Fenway neighborhood. The Red Sox had been instrumental in coordinating a massive lobbying effort at the state level to free up the funds for the project under the heading of improving access for the entire neighborhood. The mayor – claiming that the Sox were using their lobbying power to leapfrog other, more deserving transportation projects elsewhere in the city – balked at the funding. Lathrop shared the mayor's frustration. "Everybody was up at the State House lobbying at one point, and we said, 'That's great, but we've done the work already. Let's concentrate on what's best for the Fenway as a whole, not just for Fenway Park, or not

just this other group, but as a whole,'" she says.

At the time, the mayor was more blunt. He was quoted at a community meeting in January 2006 wondering why state legislators could find money for the Sox but not for other needs. Then Governor Mitt Romney approved the funding later that year.

Dee defends the team's lobbying efforts as a part

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of the Red Sox' efforts to "preserve and protect." Just how much of the Fenway the owners intend to "protect" is the sticking point. Lathrop says that the Boston Redevelopment Authority has agreed to set up a sort of "protection area" around Fenway in deference to the significant historical nature of the immediate area. But that's it. "It's not like they get special treatment. We do listen to them," she says. "We are concerned, because it's one of the jewels of the city; it's very historic, and it makes Fenway what it is. But it's not like they get carte blanche."

The Sox should get used to the feeling. Many area homeowners are thrilled at the prospect of luxury high-rise condos coming to the neighborhood – a sure way to enhance quality of life and their own property values. Remarkably, advocates like Carl Nagy Koechlin of the Fenway Community Development Corporation are also pleased that the developers of residential high-rises have expressed a serious commitment to including affordable housing in their projects (which they are required to do by the new zoning laws). Only higher density zoning makes such a commitment financially viable. This creates a powerful momentum among residents – a group that Menino listens to very closely – for taller buildings, a momentum that even the charm, clout, and cash of the Red Sox owners cannot stop. Any future efforts by the team to resize or squash tall buildings it does not own outside of the protection area are far less likely to be successful than they were in the past. Mindich says the Red Sox "have played their hand as far as they can play it."

Today, after a five-year honeymoon, the Red Sox find themselves as just another one of the major players fighting for what they want at the feet of an all-powerful city agency, ruled with an iron fist by a mayor who wants everyone to be satisfied, but not too satisfied, and not too often. "It boils down to one word," says Samuels, and it's a word the Red Sox had better practice saying: "consensus." ■

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