

Growing Pains

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There was plenty of open space in the Massachusetts farming village of Newtowne in the late 1630s, when Harvard College's overseers bought a house and nine acres there to site America's oldest institution of higher learning. Most of this land stayed undeveloped until the early 19th century, but as Harvard expanded its curriculum and added graduate schools, its footprint grew. Today, Newtowne is known as Cambridge, and with Harvard's holdings there completely built out, the university is planning to start a new campus on more than 200 industrial acres across the Charles River, deep into the middle-class Boston neighborhood of North Allston.

Harvard wants to add new graduate and professional school facilities and increase its student housing. There is no official price tag, but university officials expect the project to cost several billion dollars. The school's master plan emphasizes sustainability: Buildings will be energy efficient, landscaping will reduce stormwater runoff and flooding, and the campus design will encourage walking, cycling, and mass transit.

Settled in the 17th century, North Allston was dominated by railroad and livestock operations for much of its history. Today it houses longtime residents, immigrants, young professionals, and students from Harvard and Boston University. A Harvard vision statement calls the neighborhood's commercial zone, whose main streets are lined with warehouses and auto dealerships, a "blighted and chaotic landscape." And the Massachusetts Turnpike cuts North Allston off from the more thriving Allston Village, a busy zone studded with restaurants, bars, and small businesses. On paper, therefore, the makeover seems like a boon.

But North Allston also has quiet side streets of one- and two-family houses surrounded by neat gardens, and owners don't want Harvard to disrupt these areas as it builds nearby. "This neighborhood is going to be under construction for the next 20 to 40 years," says Harry Mattison, a member of the Harvard-Allston Task Force (an advisory group created by Boston Mayor Thomas Menino) who chronicles interactions with Harvard in his community weblog. "That's basically the rest of our lives."

In 1997 Harvard disclosed that it had worked through a local development company to buy 14 parcels in Allston. Harvard had used a front buyer to keep sellers from inflating prices above market value, but the strategy angered local officials. Menino called it "a full-scale attack on ... the integrity of the Allston neighborhood," and former Boston Redevelopment Authority director Thomas O'Brien said that the approach did "not make for good-neighbor policy."

Harvard regrouped, offering benefits to North Allston, such as funds to renovate affordable housing units (a perennial need in Boston's tight real estate market), support for after-school programs, and land for a public library. Two years ago, a four-year

dialogue convened by the redevelopment authority produced a North Allston strategic plan that described Harvard's expansion as an opportunity to address local concerns. The report laid out guiding principles for improving residential neighborhoods—creating a pedestrian-friendly Main Street and increasing access to the Charles River, which bounds North Allston on two sides.

In January Harvard released its institutional master plan for expansion, which calls for constructing some ten million square feet of building space, plus a new public square with galleries and retail shops in the center of North Allston. Harvard also proposes to build a new pedestrian bridge over the Charles River and put part of Soldiers Field Road, a busy riverside boulevard, underground to improve access to parkland along the river.

The plan is subject to approval from the redevelopment authority and the Boston Zoning Commission, but Harvard sought to fast-track a science complex and an art museum. Allston residents objected that the building plans violated local height limits, would increase traffic, and did not offer significant community benefits. In response Harvard postponed work on the art gallery and extended discussions on the science complex, which it now hopes to start building. "The community got anxious about moving simultaneously on multiple projects, so we agreed to take things in sequence," says Kathy Spiegelman, chief planner for the Harvard Allston Initiative.

Allstonians also want more specifics about the master plan, from numbers of planned dormitory spaces to placement of construction access roads. "It's an ad hoc, one-project-at-a-time process, which is frustrating," says Mattison. "We all want this campus to be built, but it needs a great plan to work." Ray Mellone, chair of the Harvard-Allston Task Force, is more sanguine. "There's a lot going on," he says, "and there's an unforgiving attitude toward Harvard. Sometimes the messengers don't get any respect. It can work if people have patience and take time to talk about the facts."

Negotiations will only get more complicated as bigger issues arise. For example, the Charles River boulevards are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, so burying part of Soldiers Field Road would require approval from the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Department of Conservation and Recreation, which manages land along the riverbanks. Some critics argue that burying the road could turn the riverside into a Harvard reserve, but Spiegelman says that the project will only work if the land is open to the public.

Community relations challenges are nothing new for Harvard, which is regularly assailed for everything from hosting controversial speakers to cutting down historic trees. But Spiegelman acknowledges the difficulties in sketching out a long-term master plan. "The plan has specificity for the next five years and a vision for the next 50," she says. "It's not as easy as working on an individual building project." Asked what elements of the new campus might be in place by 2012, Spiegelman didn't know: "I'd just be making it up."