



Build Homes, Not a Convention Center

Boston Herald — June 18, 2001

By James Stergios

In a recent report commissioned by Cardinal Bernard Law, Northeastern's Barry Bluestone and Charlie Euchner of Harvard depicted the bleak housing situation in Greater Boston. The report projected that 36,000 new housing units will be needed over the next five years, while the supply is increasing at a snail's pace.

Meanwhile, over 60 acres of developable land in the Seaport District may be sacrificed for a proposed convention center that industry trends suggest would be virtually empty.

Sitting directly adjacent to the proposed convention center are 5.6 acres zoned for residential housing. After a long period of uncertainty due to the Mayor Menino-Southie brawl over linkage money, Cathartes Investments finally received approval last fall for construction of 695 apartments, 19 percent of which are for low-income households, at the proposed 371-401 D Street site, just a 12-minute walk from South Station.

By zoning the convention site to allow the same concentration of residential units as the adjacent land, Boston and the Commonwealth could create 7,600 housing units — over 20 percent of the five-year demand projected by Bluestone and Euchner.

More than 1,400 of those units could be made available to help low-income households achieve greater domestic and financial stability. From government's point of view, lowering the demand for housing vouchers and public housing lessens the demand for other costly public services.

A 1997 Boston Municipal Research Bureau report said that city revenues needed for schools and other essential services would be at risk if the assumptions made by convention center advocates did not come to pass. Among those assumptions was a projection that 2,400 new hotel rooms would be developed in the area around the convention center by 2003. Currently the number of new hotel rooms being built around the convention center site is the same as the number of bookings the proposed center has secured — zero.

Building 7,600 residential units would create more construction jobs for a wider range of trades than building the convention center and, unlike the convention center, would benefit Bostonians for generations to come. The site's proximity to downtown would make it attractive to families, and the density of the development and access to transportation alternatives would help relieve environmental pressures.

And it is also a financial win for the city. The naively optimistic projections in the 1997 Boston Convention and Exhibition Center Final Report claimed that direct economic activity in Boston related to BCEC events would bring in \$271 million per year. Yet even that amount of spending would not generate the \$40 million in (property) tax revenues that would pour into municipal coffers were we to choose the housing option.

Finally, using the convention center site for housing would alleviate other obstacles to home ownership and business creation that inner-city residents face.

To help fund its convention center obligations, the city is auctioning off taxi medallions for upwards of \$175,000 each, putting them out of the reach of all but large cab companies. For the less affluent, the inability to become proprietors of such businesses means less wealth accumulation, lower rates of home ownership, and fewer dreams realized.

It's time to rethink our priorities. Job creation, healthier city and state finances, and real progress on housing are within our grasp. But first we must find the courage to face the fact that the conventional wisdom upon which Boston and the Commonwealth are basing their economic development policy is dead wrong.

A decade of public sector economic development programs has resulted in sluggish growth in both the housing supply and the number of businesses owned by inner-city residents.

Let's abandon the failed strategy of government-sponsored mega-projects and unleash the energies of local businesses, would-be entrepreneurs, and housing market forces.

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