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Rebirth at the river's edge

Long-delayed construction starts on Phase 1 of a three-city development to bring offices, apartments, and parks to the once-tainted corridor



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|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1 Logan Airport | 4 Interstate 93 | 7 Route 28 |
| 2 Downtown Boston | 5 Back Bay | 8 Wellington Station |
| 3 Charlestown | 6 Cambridge | 9 Route 16 |

RIVER'S EDGE More than a decade after Everett, Malden, and Medford joined to reclaim 200 acres of industrial wasteland, construction has begun on the first office building and work on apartments will begin soon.

By Eric Moskowitz
GLOBE STAFF

MEDFORD- Once known as TeleCom City, the massive redevelopment project called River's Edge has faced its share of challenges - obstacles to land acquisition, lawsuits, and the dot-com crash, which dashed plans to turn the contaminated Malden River corridor into a hub for high-tech innovation.

But now, more than a decade after Everett, Malden, and Medford became partners in an attempt to reclaim 200 acres of industrial no man's land, construction crews are at work on the site. They are preparing the foundation for the first office building, and they are poised to do the same for a luxury apartment complex, said city officials and the project's private developer.

Those involved hail the start of construction as a signal achievement for River's Edge, which has attracted funding and fanfare - \$30 million and counting in state and federal money, and praise from environmental groups - but also has been beset by delays.

"The question I've had over the last 10 years - and a lot of criticism - is, 'you keep talking about this, but it's not happening,'" said Medford Mayor Michael J. McGlynn, chairman of the Mystic Valley Development Commission, the body created by the Legislature in 1996 to oversee the three-city site. "Well, it's happening, and it's happening now."

This first phase, on about 30 acres in Medford, is to include three office buildings totaling 410,000 square feet and a 220-unit apartment building, with 15 percent of the units set aside as affordable housing.

Although the housing market is in a slump, developers and officials say there is strong demand in the area for office space and rental housing that is rich in amenities and is near the MBTA. The area is less than 5 miles from downtown Boston and a short walk from the T's Wellington Station.

The first phase will encompass 10 acres of open space and parks, including a sports field and 5,100 feet of paths, half of which will wind along the river. In addition to offices and housing, a \$3 million boathouse has been completed by Tufts University for its crew program, and the school holds a long-term lease at River's Edge.

The state rebuilt the road serving the sections in Malden and Medford, for \$17 million, and has earmarked an additional \$60 million for improvements associated with later phases, including a new bridge over the river, said Stephen M. Wishoski, executive director of the Malden Redevelopment Authority, the project manager for the three-city commission.

The project's master developer is Preotle, Lane & Associates, a New York firm that is developing the grounds and offices itself and has an agreement with Criterion Development Partners of Waltham for the Phase 1 housing. Preotle pulled permits for the first office building in December and began digging the foundation this month, said John J. Preotle Jr., a principal in the firm. Housing construction is likely to start next month or in March, he said.

The parks and paths are about 85 percent complete and should be open this summer,

Preotle and officials said. The first apartments could be available in spring 2009, with the remaining units ready in 2010, said Heather Culp Boujoulian, development manager for Criterion. Preotle plans for the first office building to be ready early next year. Phase 1 could be fully finished in five years, he said.

"We're really far along in the program," said Preotle, whose firm has already spent an estimated \$17 million and lent the Mystic Valley commission \$2.5 million more. Phase 1 spending could reach \$200 million in private, state, and federal funds.

Preotle spent \$12,000 alone to save an ailing willow tree that was scheduled to be torn out during the site cleanup. The developer removed contaminated soils from the area and capped the land with a membrane and 3 feet of fill, which threatened to choke the fragile, rat-infested tree. But after community members expressed interest in the willow, Preotle hired an arborist to protect the tree with a stone basin, nurse it to health with vitamin shots, and install a deep-root watering system.

"Everybody loves the tree," said McGlynn, who points to it as a sign of the attention to detail paid throughout the project.

The willow stays, but gone are 1,200 tons of steel and debris along with a 100-ton, 270-foot trash barge that was rotting on the riverbank. Wetlands plantings replaced the barge, and bird watchers have spotted a number of migratory birds there. Officials marvel at the change and are eager to see the project proceed.

"I'm thrilled to see Phase 1 of River's Edge start



Construction on Phase 1 is finally underway at River's Edge in Medford. The parks and paths on 10 acres of open space are about 85 percent complete, according to the developer and officials. They expect them to be open by this summer.

construction," US Representative Edward J. Markey, who helped secure federal funding, said through a spokeswoman. "This project has transformed a contaminated, industrial site into a national model for urban renewal."

The second phases, in Everett, and the third, in Malden, are being planned. The Mystic Valley Development Commission does not yet own that land. Acquiring land for the first phase meant negotiating with about 20 property owners and relocating nearly 30 businesses to present a complete parcel to Preotle, Wishoski said.

That fragmented ownership and threat of real and perceived contamination had made the area unattractive

to developers for years. The land - which straddles the Malden River, north of Route 16 and east of the MBTA's Orange Line and commuter-rail tracks - had served as an industrial center for more than a century.

Monsanto, Converse Rubber, General Electric, and others operated there, producing chemicals, gasifying coal, and manufacturing goods, including boots for Union soldiers, moth balls, and urinal deodorant cakes, among other things, Wishoski said. They used the river to move materials and to dump waste. Over time, the area grew scarred and pockmarked. By the 1990s, abandoned buildings and trailers vied for space with the remaining industrial tenants.

Although the three cities had long been athletic rivals and economic competitors, officials began talking about ways to collaborate and spur the area's rebirth. In March 1995, the mayors signed an agreement to redevelop it as a large-scale office and research campus for the telecommunications field, along with open space and river access. The Legislature followed by creating the Mystic Valley commission, which has eminent-domain powers and zoning control. The commission hired the Malden Redevelopment Authority in 1997 and signed a development deal with Preotle in 2000.

The project was an elected official's dream - an opportunity to eliminate contaminated eyesores, spur the economy, expand the tax base, and build parks, without local tax dollars. Local officials called it the most significant area project in generations. Lawmakers directed millions for cleanup and infrastructure. By now, property taxes were supposed to be pouring in from TeleCom City, where a projected 10,000 highly skilled employees would work in more than 1 million square feet of office space. But the tech sector tanked, thwarting those plans.

The commission and developer started almost anew, broadening to cater to a wider market and including housing at the request of the state, in exchange for continued support.

After a few stalled years, the project's recent progress occurred largely behind the scenes. The cleared land is nearly out of sight, obscured by a fence. Officials and the developer perceived that the public was tired of not seeing

tangible progress, McGlynn and Preotle said.

But now things are clicking, and the steel beams should rise above the site this year. McGlynn said it could not have happened without continued belief, and investment, from Preotle. Tom Lincoln, a community advocate from Medford, similarly complimented the developer's vision and patience.

"I can't say enough nice things about John Preotle," said Lincoln, chairman of the Malden River Park Task Force and a citizens advisory group for the project. He said the challenges to reclaiming the area for economic growth and restoring the environment for public use cannot be overstated.

"If you can do this, anything ought to be possible

in terms of brownfield re-development."

Preotle acknowledged as much. "There were times along the way when we could have quit," he said. But "you don't have the opportunity that often to be involved in something as good as I think this will be."

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