

## COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

## Not Without Dispute, Boston Tries to Mend a Tear

By TERRY PRISTIN

BOSTON — The Massachusetts Turnpike extends two and a half miles into this city, creating ugly, windswept canyons that force pedestrians to cross bridges with chain-link barriers as they travel between well-preserved historic neighborhoods.

For years, state and local officials have wanted to repair what Mark Laloney, the director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, describes as "a tear in the urban fabric," but the economy was not strong enough to allow for costly air-rights development over the highway, a segment of Interstate 90.

In April, however, Winn Development, a local company, plans to begin relocating utility lines in preparation for building Columbus Center, a \$500 million complex that represents the city's first turnpike air-rights development in more than two decades.

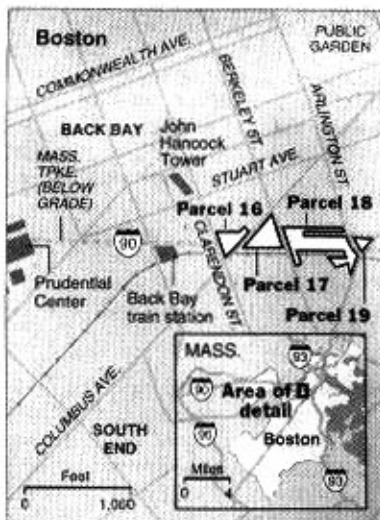
Though largely a residential complex with 451 condominiums, the project will include a five-star hotel with 180 rooms and suites, nearly 100,000 square feet of retail space and a parking garage with up to 200 spaces for sale or lease to local residents. Most all of this will be built on a 1.3-acre deck directly above the turnpike.

It has taken more than seven years to get to this point. Even in a city known for drawing blood from developers, the 1.3-million-square-foot Columbus Center, which will close the 140-foot gap between the Back Bay and the now gentrified South End, stands out as one of the more contentious recent projects. The developer has met with community groups more than 130 times and has spent \$20 million, including \$10,000 on a digitally animated video, said Roger M. Cassin, Winn's managing partner for the project.



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

Roger Cassin, managing partner of Winn Development, described the plan to build over the Massachusetts Turnpike in Boston.



The New York Times

Development over I-90 in Boston is about to begin.

Eventually, he and his partner, Thur Winn, won over the advisory committee by agreeing to create a parking garage with 595 spaces in a separate structure to the east of the tower, eliminating the need for a second tall structure. The garage will be surrounded by condominiums so it will not be visible from the street.

In one unusual concession to the neighborhoods, Mr. Cassin agreed to install a system to capture rainwater that falls on the roofs of his building and pipe it back into the ground. Since much of this city is built on landfill, with buildings supported on wood piles, groundwater depletion is a major concern. "The pillings will last forever, so long as they stay wet," said Elliott Laffer, the executive director of the Boston Groundwater Trust, a city-financed agency. Despite his promises, Mr. Cassin's critics remain unmollified. Some object to his request for a \$20 million subsidy to cover the cost of providing 45 units of housing to be priced substantially lower than the market rate condominiums, which are expected to sell for \$500,000 to \$3 million. He said that other cities, until this one, routinely subsidize "affordable" housing.

As approved by the advisory group, Columbus Center will consist of a variety of structures of different styles that could have almost evolved separately during the normal growth of the city.

Like the Prudential and Hancock towers, Columbus Center's tallest structure will be on the Back Bay side, an area that has long been considered the city's "high spine," where high-rise development ought to be situated, Mr. Dixon said. The other buildings will diminish in scale as they approach the South End.

The south side of Cortes Street, which was demolished when the turnpike was built, will be restored with new town houses. "The buildings are in the neighborhood of that

former head of the turnpike authority and led to the creation of a master plan for air rights and a more competitive selection process with community review. Winn was allowed to proceed with its quest for the Columbus Avenue site, a fact that rankled members of a citizens' advisory committee.

From the outset, three of the city's most politically astute neighborhoods were fiercely opposed to the project. The South End objected because it seemed vastly out of scale with its Victorian brick-and-limestone row houses. Back Bay residents feared that putting a high-rise building in a low-rise neighborhood would create another wind tunnel, much like the one they experience near the John Hancock Tower. They also worried that Columbus Center would establish a precedent for other tall buildings. Residents of Bay Village, a small neighborhood adjacent to the South End, feared that it

During this long process, the developer has been required to scale back plans, eliminating a 38-story tower and leaving the project with one 35-story building over the air rights at Clarendon Street and Columbus Avenue and several smaller buildings ranging from 4 to 11 stories over portions of the gap extending east to Tremont Street.

It has also had to agree to provide a variety of concessions, including a new enclosed entrance to the Orange Line mass transit station at Clarendon Street, three small parks and shuttle buses to Logan International Airport for residents.

"This is the gift that keeps on taking," joked Mr. Cassin, 60, who was on crutches during a recent interview as a result of surgery to repair damage that occurred when his race car slammed into a wall in 1988.

These days, local and state governments across the country are actively seeking proposals for air-rights development, not just to erase the scars that mar neighborhoods but also to create land for housing and other needs and generate revenue to help pay for transportation projects.

With the nation's population expected to grow by 60 million over the next two decades, the demand for housing in urban cores is expected to skyrocket, said William H. Hudnut III, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, a research organization sponsored by developers.

"Most of those people are going to go to coastal cities," he said. "There's going to be a surge in the population, and these cities can't just keep spreading out."

In this city, the housing shortage is already acute. But while many residents deplore sprawl, they are also loath to see a 395-foot building added to the skyline.

"In Boston, there is an ideological concern about tall buildings, because people believe they violate the historical character of the city," said David Dixon, an architect and planner who helped draw up the guidelines for awarding the turnpike air

rights. But the height of the tower is making it possible to develop two more city blocks and close the open gap with parks, cafes, a market and housing."

Another benefit is that density will be added along the Orange mass transit line, which gets much less traffic than the overused Green Line, he said.

Opponents of Columbus Center say they are not against skyscrapers per se. "I don't mind height, just as long as it's in the right location," said State Representative Martha M. Walz, a Democrat from Boston, the former president of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay. Like many in the community, she remains unhappy with the plans for Columbus Center. She said that the tower should not exceed 270 feet in height and that at half an acre, the largest parks will be "smaller than anyone anticipated."

Columbus Center will not be the first project to rise over the Massachusetts Turnpike, whose Boston extension was built in the 1960's alongside the Boston and Albany mainline of the New York Central Railroad. First came the 52-story Prudential Center, then the garage of the 60-story John Hancock Tower and in the 1980's, Copley Place, a retail, hotel and entertainment complex.

Those projects required the kind of heavy public subsidies that generally are no longer available, said Stephen J. Hines, chief development officer for the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. "We're in an era now where projects have to float on their own bottoms," he said. "The private markets oftentimes have pretty aggressive underwriting."

Since turnpike air rights were exempt from zoning procedures, the developers were not expecting a fight when they were chosen in 1997 to try to develop two parcels, later expanded to four, that split the Back Bay and the South End, Mr. Cassin said.

But Back Bay residents were still smarting over an earlier proposal by Millennium Partners to build a 59-story tower on turnpike air rights over Massachusetts Avenue and Boylston Street.

The outcry over the Millennium proposal, which was eventually shelved, prompted a clash between Mayor Thomas M. Menino and the

city council, fearing that their narrow streets would be choked with traffic.

Initially, Mr. Cassin argued that two towers were required to attract financing. It will cost \$60 million, for example, just to build the decks over the roadway, a process that is expected to take a year because of work rules that do not permit traffic to be disrupted. He said extra floors were needed because the parking garage could not be built underground.

neighborhoods," Mr. Cassin said. "That's what really works here."

In the end, most residents had to come to accept Columbus Center. Pamela S. McKinney, a principal with Byrne McKinney & Associates, a consulting company, hired by the city, which helped Winn make his case with the advisory committee. "Maybe the measure of a compromise is that neither side feels they got everything they wish they had."