

Cassin Going Underground

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Developers of Columbus Center, the air rights project over the Massachusetts Turnpike behind Back Bay Station, have begun to research ways to make their proposal groundwater-friendly.

Beneath the area of the proposed project, near Arlington, Berkeley and Clarendon Streets and the turnpike, data collected from test wells show groundwater levels among the lowest in the city. Depleted groundwater threatens buildings on wood pile foundations, because upon exposure to air, the pilings rot. When groundwater is low for too long, buildings can crack, sag and even collapse altogether.

Excavation from construction projects and improperly sealed underwater structures can allow groundwater to drain off. Measures to protect groundwater did not appear in the original Columbus Center plans but began to take shape during the past several months because of concerns from the community, according to co-developer Roger Cassin.

"I've been contacted by a number of concerned neighbors," Cassin explained. "What I've heard a lot of is, 'Enough of more test wells and studies; how about doing something about it?' So that makes sense."

Cassin said he has begun work with private consultants, engineers and the Boston Water and Sewer Commission to develop a system that will collect rainwater from the development and channel it into the ground. Cassin added that such a plan would actually help increase groundwater levels, recycling water that would otherwise fall on the turnpike and flow away in the sewer system.

"Up until now we assumed that what we'd do is put the [rain]water back into the storm drain system that it already goes into," he said.

Columbus Center, proposed by Cassin and Arthur Winn, will include two hotels, between 300 and 400 residential units, a park, retail space and parking. During a public comment period in January, the Boston Groundwater Trust (BGT) sent a letter asking the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) to

continued on page 23

Cassin

continued from page 5

recommend certain groundwater measures as part of the project's environmental review process. These included creating an inventory of potentially affected buildings nearby, investigating current sources of depletion, proposing methods to bring water levels above existing pilings, constructing in a way to avoid depletion and monitoring the situation after construction ends. The BGT has also communicated these requests to Cassin, according to co-chair Tim Mitchell.

"There are houses in that area, the owners of which are absolutely desperate for help," Mitchell said. "It's absolutely one of the worst [groundwater] areas in the city."

Cassin said he plans to turn monitoring wells created during construction over to the BGT after completion. He added that he does not expect construction to cause significant groundwater depletion because the excavation will be "such a small percentage" of the project. The majority of the structures will lie above the turnpike, with a relatively small amount of "anchor" land on either side. The developers will continue to fund

adjustment and monitoring of groundwater levels after the project's completion, Cassin said.

The city requires developers to maintain water levels during construction and to replenish groundwater if it drops as a result.

"More stress is placed on maintaining, though, so hopefully we don't even have to get to the recharge stage," explained BRA spokesperson Jessica Shumaker.

According to Cassin, the developers' preliminary plans to recharge, monitor and adjust groundwater after the project's completion mean that they are "offering to do more than we're required."

The potential impacts of construction, however, still remain only speculation.

"Literally, it could have a lot of impact or it could have none, and that's what remains to be found out," said David Dixon, a principal at the planning and design firm Goody, Clancy & Associates. Dixon has consulted for the project's city-sponsored Citizens Advisory Committee.

"The CAC has expressed real concern around groundwater as something that needs to be paid real attention to as [Cassin] goes about the environmental review process," he added.

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5

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