

The Boston Globe

Founded 1872

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Pointing Boston toward future, Fenway Center must go forward

THE EMPTY lots abutting the Mass. Pike as it veers west from the Kenmore Square area are familiar to generations of baseball fans heading to Fenway Park — and don't conjure up an ounce of nostalgia. They're a trash-strewn mess. They, combined with the air rights above the Pike itself, amount to the rarest of spaces in this tight-knit city: a large development plot with seemingly no historic or neighborhood ties. People should be begging for it to be improved.

But when Newton developer John Rosenthal launched plans to transform the area into a vibrant mix of housing, parking, stores, and offices, the legal dispute that followed proved once again why Boston can be a vexing place to build. The owners of a Brookline Avenue building sued to block Rosenthal's project, claiming an access road to the proposed development would limit some potential uses for their building.

It took an agonizing three years. But on Tuesday, Massachusetts Land Court Judge Harry Grossman finally dismissed the zoning challenge. Now, the five-building Fenway Center project can go forward, providing hundreds of apartments, a separate housing-and-office tower, space for dramatic new retail outlets, solar panels to heat almost the whole area, and a new state-funded commuter-rail station. All that re-

mains is for Rosenthal to secure financing. That's a big if in a challenging real estate market, but the project is valuable enough that lenders should oblige.

For the past decade, developers in Boston have slowly shifted their sights westward, toward the student-and-baseball areas around the Fenway and Kenmore Square. It's a welcome move. Through Boston's long, mixed history of urban planning, there have been some spectacular results (think of Frederick Law Olmsted's "Emerald Necklace" of parks), and some unfortunate ones (think of Government Center). But what's become clear is that mixed-use development on a moderate scale — in which people, businesses, stores, and restaurants co-exist in communities that are

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bustling but not jam-packed — is the best way to preserve Boston's urban vitality.

From the Fenway itself, where the Museum of Fine Arts now opens onto the park and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum sports a new addition, to Brookline Avenue, with new and renovated apartments being developed, a promising neighborhood is growing up. New housing set comfortably amid old parks, museums, legendary hospitals, and famous universities presents a classic Boston tableau. Fenway Center, with its solar panels and transit station, adds to that appealing mixture while pointing smartly toward the future.