

THE BEST PLACES TO LIVE

Boston

EXCLUSIVE

We rank 147 cities and towns. Pullout chart, page 80

The Healthiest Towns

Cancer, Crime, Air Pollution—Where Does Your Town Rank?

PLUS» Take a Pill and Live Forever—Scientists Discover the Fountain of Youth

The Gangs of Chinatown—Drugs, Murder, and Dim Sum



SAFE AT HOME

A house in Concord, ranked 19th-healthiest town. Median home price: \$610,000.





CHANGING LANES: John Rosenthal surveys the neighborhood he's set to develop.



Ever seen that gun-control billboard on the Mass. Pike showing the smiling faces of kids who were killed by handguns? That's John Rosenthal's work. Now he's about to completely transform the face of Kenmore Square with an 885,000-square-foot complex that will bridge the highway itself. What's that—a developer with a conscience? Meet...

MR. NICE GUY

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS CHURCHILL

By Michael Blanding

This is the unlikely center of John Rosenthal's life.

An environmentalist and gun-control activist, he has pinned his future on an unsightly stretch of urban highway. A twisted bicycle lies chained to a parking meter. Crushed Bud cans litter the sidewalk. Over a barrier, cars speed by the graffiti-blotched backs of dance clubs. Only the tips of the light towers of Fenway Park give any hint that we are blocks away from one of the city's foremost attractions. ♦ Pulled over in his silver Volvo convertible, Rosenthal envisions a different scene. At the corner of the street, he sees two cylindrical residential towers looming above Kenmore Square's landmark Citgo sign. Where the highway zooms by, Rosenthal pictures a massive deck covering the traffic, crossed by pedestrian streets "like in Europe" with

shops and restaurants connecting long-neglected upper Newbury Street with Lansdowne Street. They'll lead to a brand-new 3,000-seat performance center, more shops and parking, and an upscale jazz bar or two if all goes well.

Rosenthal isn't just dreaming about transforming one of the city's most famous neighborhoods. He's drawing up the blueprints. With almost nobody noticing, he's about to remake Kenmore Square. He already owns a good chunk of the real estate and now holds the exclusive right to plan a massive new development above the Massachusetts Turnpike. "Our development could make Kenmore Square the most appealing place in Boston to live," says Rosenthal. "There's no developer in the world that wouldn't want a shot at this location, and the stars have lined up for us."

In fact, when the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority asked for bids for the air rights over the highway here, nobody else even submitted a proposal. That's because Rosenthal was the hands-down favorite, bolstered not only by his property on Lansdowne but also by his close ties to the mayor and to neighborhood heavyweights Patrick Lyons and Don Law, who have added their own real estate to the master plan. You may not have heard of him or about his plans for this colossal project, but the low-profile Rosenthal is on the fast track to approval, skirting the backlash that has met other proposals to build above the turnpike.

Little about Rosenthal is typical. For starters, in the clubby world of Boston real estate development, he has cultivated his political goodwill not through backroom deals and *quid pro quos*, but along the much less traveled path of doing good works.

Above this stretch of highway is the 252-foot-long billboard Rosenthal owns that, after the Citgo sign, is the neighborhood's most recognizable icon. In the last eight years, he has used it not to sell beer or banking services, but to display the likenesses of dozens of children killed prematurely by handguns, accompanied by chilling captions: "The cost of handguns keeps going up. 15 kids killed every day." "Bullets leave holes." The billboard, even more than his future development project here, is at the center of Rosenthal's work—and has made him some of his most important connections. This isn't just some charity started by a businessman to grease community relations. It's the latest in a long history of activism that started with an arrest for protesting nuclear power and continued with the founding of a group to help Boston's homeless. He started the nonprofit orga-



nization Stop Handgun Violence, which he credits with helping put Massachusetts at the bottom of the list among all states in the rate of firearm deaths in 1999.

In a post-Enron world where whistleblowers are American heroes and businesspeople are book-cooking crooks, Rosenthal is a walking oxymoron: "a businessperson with ethics, big-time," as Boston City Councilor Michael Ross puts it. He's a builder who's an environmentalist, a developer who advocates for cheaper housing. Before he submitted his turnpike plan, he held several years' worth of meetings with city and community leaders. Then he actually incorporated their concerns into his current design. "John spent a lot of time listening to people," says Ross, whose district encompasses the neighborhood. "He is a social leader. That's why people are willing to trust him."

His unlikely success attests to the rewards in this town of doing good—especially when the good appeals to the people who can help you do well.

**BRIDGE BUILDER**

Clockwise from left, a preliminary sketch shows the massive impact of Rosenthal's proposed project; backstage with Jackson Browne; kayaking with Michael Kennedy; protesting nuclear power with Bonnie Raitt, second and fourth from right, respectively; Stop Handgun Violence's billboard dominates the Mass. Pike.



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LOCATED IN A MILL BUILDING ON THE NEWTON-WATERTOWN line, Meredith Management feels more like a funky dotcom than a bustling real estate concern. In the middle of Rosenthal's cluttered office is a hunter-green dog bed where his black Lab, Moxie, sleeps most workdays. Outside his window are the rapids where he kayaks in the spring. "Nature is my religion, and nature is balance," he says. It's one of the first things out of his mouth during our interview. "If we're sensitive and listening to nature and the way it works, we can solve all of our problems."

Hardly the words of a downtown power broker. But Rosenthal is easy to underestimate. Short in stature, with a grayish hairline pushed well past 3 o'clock, he talks with a mellow cadence and an economy of gesture. When he listens, it's with the unnerving quality of a therapist or minister who actually seems to hear what you say. Not that he's above a little name-dropping: Photos of Bill Clinton and Mayor Menino, along with a basketball signed by Magic Johnson, are on prominent display in his office. In conversation, he uses the word "friend" liberally, applying it not only to Lyons and Law, but also to Boston Police Commissioner Paul Evans, political scion Michael Kennedy, and musicians Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt.

Rosenthal met Browne and Raitt during his work as an anti-nuclear activist in California and credits them with inspiring his fusion of nonprofit and for-profit work. "John was completely plugged into the struggle," remembers Browne. "He had this light in his eyes that made you remember the higher aspects of what you were fighting for." Over the years, Browne and Raitt have continued to play benefits for Rosenthal's causes. At his invitation, Raitt once even spent a day with recovering addicts at a Boston homeless shelter. "John is one of my favorite people, period," she says. "There is a connection I've always had with him, and always will have."

It runs in the family. Rosenthal's father, Sidney, a successful real estate developer, founded Meredith in 1951. But he was also one of the state's first developers of affordable housing and encouraged his son's social conscience. The young Rosenthal's first cause: opposing nuclear power. "I didn't think that I would live to be 30," he says, now looking anything but radical in a gray cable-knit sweater, gray slacks, and hiking boots. "I thought that the nuclear threat was so great that I needed to do whatever I could to oppose it." That included dropping out of Syracuse in his sophomore year to work as a protest organizer. In April 1977 Rosenthal was among the 1,414 flannel-wearing activists arrested for occupying the future site of New Hampshire's Seabrook Station nuclear power plant. He spent five weeks in jail, where he received a second education in the holding cells.

Taking his fight to California, where activists hoped to stop the opening of the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant, Rosenthal became known for his honeyed tongue. He was tapped as a spokesman for the group. "John was our Gandhi," says Irv McMillan, a veteran of the movement. "He never made an enemy." Rosenthal became a liaison to the state police and to then-Governor Jerry Brown, who eventually opposed the plant's construction. If he hadn't known it before, Rosenthal discovered he was good at connecting with people. At 25, he sat in a rumpled beige sport coat on the *Today* show, [Continued on page 120]

citing chapter and verse of Nuclear Regulatory Commission documents.

Along with civil disobedience, the activists tried new strategies to reach the mainstream, taking out full-page ads in the local newspaper that featured names of doctors, lawyers, and businessmen who opposed the power plant and paid for the ads. They took the money raised from concerts and rented billboards all over the valley, plastering them with slogans like "Danger: Diablo Canyon Evacuation Zone." And they won the battle, if not the war. In 1981 a whistleblower revealed structural deficiencies in the plant, forcing it to delay licensing for two years and make costly modifications.

By the time Ronald Reagan took office, the hectic life of a protester had taken its toll on Rosenthal. "I almost didn't have my 20s," he says. As Diablo opened, he took his father up on an offer to move back to

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Boston and get into the family business. He spent the next few years as vice president of Meredith Management, got married, and bought a farm in Vermont. For the first time since college, he was financially secure. Then the part of him that had faced down the trucks in Diablo Canyon reawakened.

FROM THE CAUSEWAY TO THE LONG Island Shelter on Boston Harbor, you can see the tufts of the other harbor islands rising out of the water on either side. This is our third stop of the day: After a morning meeting at an architectural firm, Rosenthal drove to Dorchester to look over possible sites for a new youth center with police superintendent Paul Joyce. "This is a day in the life for me," he says. "I'm constantly shifting gears."

Gulls wheel over the salt pine as Rosenthal pulls up to a campus of handsome brick buildings with a spectacular view of the city's skyline. Few Bostonians even know this complex exists, much less that it houses more than 300 homeless men and women. Rosenthal is here [Continued on page 123]

today to give a tour to some people from the Chelsea Soldiers' Home who are looking at the shelter as a model.

No one is more qualified to give a tour of Long Island Shelter than Rosenthal. He helped build it. Frustrated with what he calls a "lack of balance" in his life, he took up an offer from a friend in 1987 to inspect the decrepit brick buildings with broken windows, plywood over the doors, and birds fluttering around inside. He had found his new cause. Remembering his success in reaching businesspeople in California, he sent pledge cards to everyone he knew to raise money for repairs. Several months later, he presented a bewildered city government with \$65,000. "When we first met, I said, 'Who is this guy, and what does he want?'" says Richard Weintraub, director of homeless services for the city's public health commission.

Weintraub soon found out. With additional money from the city, Rosenthal's development company replaced

"He's woven his two main charities in with his work and his life," says a good friend of Rosenthal. "It's all intertwined."

the shelter's doors and windows. Encouraged by this success, he set up a group called the Friends of Boston's Homeless, a partnership with the city. Inside the buildings, he points out the difference that seed money from the organization has made. In a gleaming \$100,000 kitchen, shelter residents learn their way around convection ovens, steam kettles, and steel-plated prep tables. In the laundry, homeless people enrolled in a job-training program clean the shelter's bed linen, as well as uniforms for local businesses.

In addition to raising money, Rosenthal lined up a network of friends and colleagues behind his charities. One of his first calls was to Grover Daniels, a grade-school friend and a printer who contributed invitations to the organization's annual galas for more than 15 years. Another friend made the sign that hangs by the shelter's entrance. "What he's done successfully is to weave his two primary charities in with his work and his life," says Daniels. "It's all intertwined." A fellow activist from California became [Continued on page 124]

head of Stop Handgun Violence in western Massachusetts. A friend from high school, Andre Balazs, may develop a boutique hotel as part of the Kenmore Square project. "I don't think John lives different lives that he feels need to be separated," says Balazs. Another example of how his personal and professional lives intersect: Rosenthal and his second wife, Maureen, met at Meredith Management, where she works in property management and marketing. They were married last July.

A founding member of the Friends of Boston's Homeless, Michael Kennedy shared Rosenthal's passion for blending public service with private enterprise. (Another thing he had in common with Rosenthal was a love of the outdoors; he died in 1997 in a skiing accident.) Together, Rosenthal and Kennedy, whose family has a history of gun-related tragedies, founded Stop Handgun Violence. "It was a tremendous partnership," Rosenthal says, "from guns and homelessness to rafting and skiing. I miss him dearly."

Inspired by the popular Café DuBarry mural on Newbury Street, Rosenthal wanted to paint a giant decorative mural on the Lansdowne Street

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parking garage he owns overlooking the turnpike. But after hearing from another friend that 15 children a day are killed by gun violence, he took a page from his Diablo Canyon days and decided instead on a gun control billboard. Kennedy's connections opened doors to designers and donors willing to take on the Herculean task of building what became the largest billboard in the country. They also opened doors to the policymakers who could do something about the problem.

When then-Attorney General Janet Reno spoke out on gun violence in Boston, she already knew Rosenthal through Kennedy. After the event, as she was talking to then-Governor William Weld, she motioned for Rosenthal to come over. "And you must know John," she said to the governor. Weld didn't, but he soon would. As Rosenthal tells it, he got a call the next day to

come to a meeting at the State House. Weld and his successor, Paul Cellucci, helped push the state Gun Control Act of 1998, which created new controls for the purchase, possession, and storage of firearms, and the country's strictest criminal penalties for carrying a gun without a license. Since the law's passage, accidental handgun injuries in Massachusetts have dropped by almost 40 percent.

Rosenthal freely shares the credit for getting the law passed, giving Michael Kennedy his due. "It was his access and his traditional democratic political experience, together with my grass-roots direct-action experience that ended up making the difference," he says. "We couldn't have done it without each other."

ROSENTHAL KEEPS A LOW profile. But he's not bashful about promoting his causes with a well-rehearsed spiel. He never refers to his billboard without calling it "the largest billboard in America." Boston is always a "model for how to treat homeless people." And the 1998 gun law is invariably "the toughest handgun law in the country." The cause he sells most often, however, is one he comes at with a convert's zeal: the power of business-people. "I believe this as much as I believe anything," he says: "There isn't a problem in the world—environmental, societal, you name it—that if businesspeople stood up and used their clout, they wouldn't solve it. That's what we do: solve problems."

He's come a long way from the company of the longhaired leftists who were arrested with him at Seabrook. But Rosenthal says he never really saw himself as a wide-eyed radical. To his fans, his emphasis on results over ideology has kept his activism from being too partisan. "A lot of people who do advocacy work do it from an angry place," says Jon Cowan, president of the Americans for Gun Safety Foundation. "They are pissed off and they want conflict. John is trying to heal the world. That changes the character of the debate." Rosenthal's billboard campaign, for example, doesn't call for banning guns, only for selling and storing them more safely. He himself is a gun owner, who counts skeet shooting among his hobbies. "I'm not trying to make a political point," he says. "If I do anything well, it's how I am able to communicate in order to reach people." [Continued on page 126]

In Kenmore Square, that style of communication has won over most neighborhood groups. "He's interested in what the community thinks," says Pam Beale, president of the Kenmore Association. "He's interested in melding all the factions and tying it all together." Rosenthal has done that by stressing the same things that the public wants: a bridge between the Kenmore and Lansdowne areas and stable housing for a highly seasonal neighborhood. He put a 10 percent affordable-housing pledge on the table before the community even asked for it. "Some developers have to be dragged kicking and screaming into including that," says Carl Koechlin of the Fenway Community Development Corporation.

When Rosenthal talks about his project, his vocabulary changes little from his activist spiel. "Kenmore Square is a dream project to bring all of my environmental concerns into play," he says. Not everybody sees it that way.

Earlier turnpike projects have been derailed by the public-review process. Already, the city is pushing Rosenthal for more.

Peter Catalano of the Fenway Action Coalition is skeptical that any development can be of an appropriate scale for the neighborhood, especially given the recent expansions of the medical community and Boston University at its fringes. "Every person would like to see the Mass. Pike covered, but what price are we going to pay for that? How much can you put in one area?"

The answers to those questions will likely come during the same public-review process that has derailed other turnpike projects in the past. Already, the city has said it would like to see Rosenthal's plan include more decking over the highway—every foot of which comes out of his bottom line. "I'm sure we will stretch John," says Boston Redevelopment Authority director Mark Maloney. "But I also know from past experience that he is very flexible."

IF ROSENTHAL SUCCEEDS, IT WILL BE largely because of the connections he has made in the Fenway. Not much in the neighborhood happens without the support of Patrick Lyons, who owns most of the clubs on Lansdowne

as well as the ear of the mayor. But if Rosenthal wins approval, Lyons says he'll redesign some of his clubs to cater to the more upscale clientele of the development. "John's a consensus builder," Lyons says. "He's persistent, and he oozes good karma." Rosenthal has an even bigger booster in Law, the longtime local concert promoter and now chairman and co-CEO of ClearChannel Entertainment's music division, who is interested in joining the development project with a concert hall and dance club that can hold 3,000 people—1,000 more than Avalon. One of the first people to join Stop Handgun Violence, Law says Rosenthal's character "certainly makes it easier to do business with him."

Many a developer has started a foundation or offered community benefits to grease a project. But Balazs, the high school friend who may join the project as a hotel developer, throws cold water on the notion that Rosenthal has ulterior motives for his non-profit work. "I don't think John arrives at this calculus by his likelihood of [business] success. He arrives at it because it's the right thing to do. I've known him from the ninth grade, and he's always been exactly like this. He is really guileless." Rosenthal himself is stung by whispers that he used his ties to influence the bidding process. "I've heard it said I had it wired; I don't think I have it wired. I was flabbergasted that no one else bid; I thought there would be tremendous competition." Now that he has the rights, he promises to "be honest and direct with what I'm planning. There is no hidden agenda here."

Rosenthal is good at networking the way other people are good at chess or horseshoes. Before leaving the Long Island Shelter, he makes sure that members of the delegation from the Soldiers' Home trade business cards with Weintraub, the homeless director. As he drives home across the causeway, Rosenthal shows signs of flagging, but he's not tired enough to stop reflecting on how he balances a life of business and advocacy. "When you're in business and you have these long-term goals that may or may not come to fruition, it's easy to get stressed out. Helping a homeless person get a bed—now that's a tangible goal."

As we round the corner, the city skyline comes back into view, silhouetted by the setting sun. It's a skyline that, if Rosenthal gets his way, will be dramatically transformed. **B**