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Boston officials approve long-delayed work on Filene's site



Millennium Partners aims to start construction, which includes a tower, by the middle of next year.

After a four-year work stoppage, the star-crossed Filene's redevelopment is finally poised to move forward.

Boston regulators Thursday approved construction of a 625-foot residential tower, and the restoration of the original Filene's building into offices and stores. The \$620 million project also includes the renovation of a neighboring park that will add a new MBTA station entrance and an outdoor amphitheater.

Once complete, the Downtown Crossing project will become a new focal point for that section of the city, where boarded-up structures will be replaced with new shops and restaurants.

No tenants have been named, but developer Millennium Partners is planning to move forward with construction by the middle of next year. The company's tower is taller and more slender than an earlier version proposed for the site. At a hearing at City Hall on Thursday, numerous supporters lined up to speak in favor of the project; no one spoke up to object.

Instead of a hotel, offices, stores, and condos in one building, as called for in the previous plan, the new tower will be nearly all residential — as many as 600 condos and apartments — with stores and other retail on the lower floors. The new project will also preserve the original Filene's building as a distinct structure from the residential tower. When renovated, that eight-story building will have stores and office space and will connect to the new tower at the lower floors.

Nudged by city officials and neighborhood groups, executives with Millennium Partners have emphasized the importance of restoring the Filene's building, which was the last structure designed by renowned architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham. Burnham, architect of the Flatiron building in Manhattan and leader of design and construction of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, died two months before the store opened in his building in 1912.

"The way this building fits into the city is really crucially important," said Anthony Pangaro, the Millennium executive leading the project. "People will know it's a historic property, that there was something important here, and that it's been restored."

The initial effort to remake the Filene's property stalled in 2008, as a deepening recession dried up funding for the project. The developers — a team that included New York-based Vornado Realty Trust and Boston developer John B. Hynes III — stopped the project mid-construction, leaving a giant crater in the middle of the shopping district.

Vornado, which became enmeshed in a battle with Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, remains a significant financial partner, but has not played a public role getting the project through city approvals.

City officials have fast-tracked review of the Millennium proposal, hoping to get the construction underway soon to remove the blight that has detracted from the transformation of the area.

In recent years, several new restaurants and retail stores have opened in Downtown Crossing.

Overall, the Filene's redevelopment will add about 1.2 million square feet of commercial and residential space.

The commercial space will include a mix of small and large stores and restaurants that will wrap the corner of Washington and Summer streets in a continuous wall of glass.

Plans for the outdoor amphitheater are still evolving, but Millennium said it will provide enough outdoor seating next to the new building to host music performances, festivals, and other events.