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Pieces are being put in place for a Dudley Square revival

By [Paul McMorrow](#) | GLOBE COLUMNIST JULY 17, 2013

THE CRANE soaring over Dudley Square right now is one of the tallest structures the neighborhood has ever seen. Cranes are commonplace in the Fenway and the Back Bay and the Seaport, but they're a rare sight around Roxbury. For the first time in awhile, this crane says, huge things are happening in Dudley.

And huge things are happening. The construction of a six-story, \$115 million municipal office building on the historic Ferdinand block will be the tallest new building to go up in Dudley in a century. But if it doesn't become a beacon for private investment, it's largely worthless.

Dudley Square is Boston's geographic heart, and the iconic flatiron-style Ferdinand furniture store once marked the center of Roxbury's commercial core. The postwar years saw massive disinvestment and ineffectual urban renewal efforts hollow out that core, though, and until a city construction crew erected its landmark crane and started replacing the old furniture shop with a new headquarters for the Boston Public Schools, the Ferdinand block had sat vacant, and rotting, for more than 30 years.

The new Boston Public Schools headquarters is aimed at lifting up all of Dudley Square. The new Ferdinand block will contain 18,000 square feet of new retail space. It will be the first mixed-use building owned and operated by the city. And 500 new Boston schools employees should provide a boost to area businesses. But unlike the mammoth urban renewal-era courthouse, library, and police complex up the street, the new Dudley municipal building isn't meant to be an end unto itself.

The city is spending money and moving employees to Dudley so private firms will follow

suit. It will be development all around the Ferdinand block, and not the old furniture parcel itself, that really alters Dudley's course. The new municipal building will be just over 200,000 square feet. City officials believe the Dudley Square area can accommodate up to 2.4 million square feet of new development — a huge influx of new homes, offices, and shops that will have a much deeper impact than 500 municipal employees could on their own. The municipal building is a \$115 million invitation to outside developers.

The follow-on development may happen relatively quickly, since the most meaningful vacant parcels around Dudley are either publicly owned, or were recently transferred to private hands.

The Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation should break ground later this year on the first phase of Bartlett Place, an ambitious redevelopment of a huge former MBTA bus yard just outside Dudley Square. Nuestra plans to construct 323 mixed-income homes, plus retail shops and offices. The momentum the city is creating in Dudley gives Nuestra something to piggyback off of and gives assurance to potential investors.

The same thing goes for the other side of Dudley, where the Boston Redevelopment Authority is in the middle of handing off land that the city and state took, and cleared, for a highway that was never built. On one side of Melnea Cass Boulevard, Tropical Foods and the Madison Park CDC are building a new grocery store, offices, and apartments on a long-vacant former highway parcel; on the other, Urbanica will construct a hotel and housing complex that's far bolder, architecturally, than any building rising along the waterfront right now. Between these Melnea Cass developments and the new Dudley municipal building, the BRA and the city's Department of Neighborhood development own acres of surface parking lots that are crying out for redevelopment.

Construction crews are currently using the old Dudley Square police station as a staging ground for the new Boston Public Schools building; when they're done, that real estate will go out to bid, too. All this development activity creates a self-reinforcing cycle: New residents support new shops, which create an environment that attracts even more

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outside investment. Already, Sheila Dillon, the city's director of neighborhood development, says she's getting developer calls on publicly owned Dudley Square properties like she's never seen. The city can't bring back Dudley Square on its own. But if it does its job right, it doesn't have to.

Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at Commonwealth Magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.