Rethinking Allston

Harvard in late June announced a major new set of recommendations for developing its landholdings in Allston. Besides constructing a health- and life-sciences center on the existing unfinished foundation there, the plan envisions partnering with third-party developers to construct new housing, retail establishments, and a business “enterprise research campus,” as well as a hotel and conference center in a kind of spine along Western Avenue. Land in the triangle between Western Avenue and North Harvard Street—south of Harvard Business School—will be reserved for future academic use.

The new vision represents, at least for now, a realistic phasing in and paring down of the 10-million-square-foot academic campus proposed in Harvard’s 2007 Allston campus 50-year master plan—before the economic crisis—which contemplated new homes for some of the graduate and professional schools, vast research facilities, a possible museum and performing-arts center, relocated and renewed athletic facilities, and new undergraduate Houses. The new plan, created during the past two years, provides a path toward resuming some academic development in the area while allowing time for further planning as the University moves toward a large capital campaign.

The Allston Work Team, co-chaired by Bill Purcell, special adviser on Allston, Peter Tufano, Coleman professor of financial management at Harvard Business School, and Alex Krieger, professor of practice in urban design at the Graduate School of Design, and made up of deans from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Kennedy School, the schools of medicine, public health, education, and of engineering and applied sciences, as well as three alumni with relevant business experience, makes five specific recommendations:

- Resumption of planning and development for a new building on the foundation of what was intended initially as a massive, $1.4-billion science complex on Western Avenue. (Construction was halted in December 2009, after the financial crisis shrank the endowment and forced the University to increase its indebtedness.)

Now planned is a similarly sized but redesigned 500,000- to 700,000-square-foot facility that will afford more dedicated space to accommodate the growth of Harvard’s health- and life-sciences efforts. In addition, Krieger explained that, after consulting within the Harvard community, the work team identified the building’s windowless, vibration-free basement, once slated for parking, as an ideal location for imaging services that will be used by the affiliated hospitals and other University groups.

The University’s burgeoning global-health initiative and part of the Harvard School of Public Health are potential tenants of the upper floors, which could also accommodate future expansion of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute. A planned capital campaign has been identified as a source of financial support; new plans and permits will also be required. (The newly envisioned facility is likely to differ significantly from the four-building design unveiled in 2006—and to be less expensive to construct and operate; the privately funded hotel and conference center called for in the Allston Work Team recommendation may provide the parking areas and conference and meeting facilities incorporated in that plan.)

- Creation of a privately developed “enterprise research campus” on a 36-acre parcel near Genzyme, south of Western Avenue near the Charles River (east of the science complex), in order to “open a gateway to a collaborative community for business, investment capital, research and science development”—in other words, a commercial facility similar to Research Triangle Park, situated near three universities in North Carolina. This potential major technology hub between MIT and Harvard is ready for development now, and is larger even than Cambridge Center, the technology center near MIT, notes Katherine N. Lapp, the executive vice president who supervised the work team. She said expert consultants believe that the land—which Harvard would lease out—could accommodate 1.5 million to 2.5 million square feet of development. Tufano described it as a potential link between Harvard and the outside world, noting that interest is “already there. It is practical, feasible, and viable.”

- Construction of housing for Harvard faculty and graduate students near Barry’s Corner, at the intersection of Western Avenue and North Harvard Street. Although this element of Allston planning is not new, noted Krieger, the approach is: engaging several large, third-party developers to build the housing in an area where Harvard once hoped to construct a museum of modern art and other cultural and performance facilities. The University would likely enter into multidecade
lease arrangements with these developers, retaining ownership of the land. The new housing is expected to provide swing space for graduate students displaced by the impending undergraduate House renovations (another campaign priority). Stores and other amenities such as daycare facilities would be part of a development expected to bring large numbers of Harvard affiliates into the Allston community.

- Placement of a hold on the land in the triangular parcel south of the business school and bounded by Western Avenue and North Harvard Street, banking it for future academic uses yet to be determined, but previously identified as a possible home for the schools of public health and education. Krieger noted that “prior proposed uses,” such as cultural centers, are not precluded, but the report “recognizes that those uses may change given current economic conditions and University needs.” Harvard plans to use the two-year interval, during which new apartments to replace the existing affordable-housing Charlesview units are constructed on a separate Allston site, to advance planning for institutional use of the site.

- Construction of a 30,000-square-foot conference center in conjunction with a 180-bed hotel built and operated by a third party. Research indicates that demand for such a facility already exists.

These five recommendations are “related to each other but are not dependent on each other,” noted Lapp. They were presented at two Allston community meetings in June—at which some residents expressed their continued displeasure that Harvard generated a new plan without involving them. The report will also form the basis of continued academic planning discussions throughout the University; gone is the one-time recommendation to construct new undergraduate Houses on the Allston side of the river.

The new Allston recommendations also involve more contingency, unlike the ambitious institutional master plan presented in 2007. Among those contingencies is competition within the commercial real-estate market: further construction is already authorized in Kendall Square, the life-sciences hub near MIT (where Biogen Idec is consolidating its operations); on the South Boston waterfront (which was just chosen as a new headquarters

In a job where the workload is steadily expanding—a record 35,000 individuals applied to Harvard College last year—Sally Donahue, director of financial aid at the College and senior admissions officer, replenishes her energy by expending it—in sports. Each week, she swims two or three times, runs five miles, and on three mornings rises at 4:15 to drive from Duxbury to row at Union Boat Club, on the Charles. “I love rowing,” she says. “It’s like being a kid again.” In fact, one of her own kids, daughter Mairead Wilson ’99, got her into the sport: “I had so much fun watching her row for Radcliffe crews that I took it up myself.” Last summer Donahue won a gold medal in the mixed quad at the World Rowing Masters regatta in Canada, making her a bona fide world champion. Sally Clark Donahue grew up in Duxbury, where her parents still live; Mairead and son John Patrick Donahue ’01 live nearby with their families. Donahue’s own significant other, Jim Miller, is dean of admission at Brown. She attended Milton Academy and Cornell, graduating in 1975 in English, and soon married Brad Donahue, a pilot and fish spotter who died in a plane crash in 1987. She found her own career early, getting hired by Cornell’s financial-aid office. In 1981 she joined Harvard’s admissions office, then worked in financial aid and career services at the Law School from 1987 until 2000, when she took her present job. “It’s such a compelling mission we have,” she says. “Who couldn’t love to go out and find the most talented students worldwide, admit them, and then fund them to come to Harvard? We’re blessed with a wonderful ability to fundamentally change people’s lives.”
and laboratory site by Vertex); and in the less-expensive suburbs. The Harvard site is highly visible, but will require expensive infrastructure investments in parking, transportation, water and sewer connections, power, and so forth to accommodate redevelopment. The financial condition of life-sciences and other prospective tenants will shape demand to lease any new facilities. The location of the conference center remains undecided, said Mahmood Malhii of Leggat McCall, a company hired to assist with developing the property.

If the University attracts developers for the housing, hotel, and commercial developments, that could create new revenue from land leases that would help defray the costs of servicing prior Allston expenses—useful during a period of continued financial constraint. Whether such an income stream might relieve the need for strategic infrastructure fund assessments against the schools’ endowments—the mechanism by which Allston land acquisitions and debt service have been funded—and whether any thought has been given to divesting or monetizing any other of the University’s assets, remain unknown.

The former master plan ran afool of the economy; the financial crisis changed everything from the plans themselves to the underlying process. “When I was hired by Drew Faust in October of ’09,” recalled Lapp, “she laid out clear steps of what she wanted us to do.” That involved not only good property stewardship and leasing in Allston and support for the work-team process, but implementation of “a multi-year capital-planning process with rigorous guidelines and oversight...for large building projects. In addition we did for the first time a five-year financial-planning process. We’ve brought all of that discipline to the University and are developing a five-year capital plan that also informs the whole campaign. As those plans solidify, it allows us to look at what we need to build, how are we going to build it, and what are our targets in terms of fundraising. Allston has been knitted into the fabric of all of that,” rather than being managed separately.

Cambridge, Allston, and the Longwood Medical Area, she said, “should all speak to each other and play off each other in this integrated process we have rolled out over the last year.”

The new financial circumstances and better financial controls Lapp detailed have led to more realistic assessments of what is possible. Tufano described a more humble Harvard: “I think we have all learned that things work best when we balance our aspirations with the realities of, for example, our ability to finance them...We have high aspirations as a university, but at the same time they have to be practical ones...For example, we now acknowledge that it might be possible—in fact, even desirable—to work with other parties. Exactly how? We are going to have to learn about that.”

And Then There Were 10

On July 5, the Corporation’s Web page—its relative novelty for Harvard’s venerable governing board—displayed a startling transformation: after 361 years, with the listing of three new members, the ranks of the Fellows expanded from seven to 10. That shift marked the most tangible evidence of the changes in governance announced late last year (“The Corporation’s 360-Year Tune-Up,” January-February, page 43), and of progress toward an ultimate enlargement to 13 Fellows, including the president and treasurer.

One rationale for that growth was to bring to the board diverse kinds of expertise, so the first appointees, named just before Commencement (“Fellows Three,” July-August, page 55), have been scrutinized accordingly: Lawrence S. Bacow, M.P.P.-J.D. ’76, Ph.D. ’78, past president of Tufts and former chancellor of MIT; Susan L. Graham ’64, Chen Distinguished Professor emerita of electrical engineering and computer science at Berkeley; and Joseph J. O’Donnell ’67, M.B.A. ’71, a Boston business executive. Bacow and O’Donnell live locally, as does William F. Lee, who joined the board last year (“The Corporation’s Crimson Newcomer,” July-August 2010, page 58)—making for ready engagement with the campus and the Boston and Massachusetts communities. Graham and O’Donnell have extensive experience with both the Board of Overseers, the junior governing board, and the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA), at a time when the Corporation seeks to become more involved in alumni affairs and development. Graham, as a faculty member and engineering scientist, and Bacow, as a high-ranking educational leader, complement and strengthen those perspectives on the Corporation.

The trio, who assumed their new roles on July 1, made time for separate summer conversations about how their experiences might bear on their new service, and their outlook on Harvard.

In a meeting at the Graduate School of Education, where he taught in summer executive programs for new senior college and university administrators, Bacow emphasized that he hopes to “contribute to a great institution” of first importance for “all of higher education and the nation.” His direct ties to the University, he noted, dated back to his graduate work; since then, he said, he had been “two stops away from Harvard on the Red Line for 34 years—two stops north [Tufts] and two stops south [MIT].”

Apart from the caveat that he has much to do to get up to speed on the University now, Bacow joins the Corporation as a seasoned academic leader, like fellow Nannerl O. Keohane, president emerita of Duke and Wellesley. Reflecting on his