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PATIENT CAPITAL

Nubian Square Queues Up for Cranes

Commercial Component Counted on for Economic Jolt

BY STEVE ADAMS

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Steve Adams

The 2-acre parking lot sits in the heart of Roxbury's once-thriving commercial district, before urban renewal and disinvestment emptied Nubian Square of restaurants, theaters and destination retailers in the mid-20th century.

Named after a long-departed grocery store, the Blair Lot represents the epicenter of a potential new commercial cluster firmly reconnecting Roxbury to Boston's economic drivers.

"The life science industry is the heart of the city's economy right now, and the people in this community are unaware of the careers," said Richard Taylor, who leads the Nubian Ascends Partners development team that's preparing to break ground on the project's first phase in early fall.

While Greater Boston's life science development boom has spread into transforming industrial neighborhoods such as South Boston's marine park and inner-ring suburbs, it has bypassed urban centers such as Roxbury.

In the past decade, the Boston Planning & Development Agency has attempted to lure private investment to Nubian Square. Nine publicly-owned parcels, including the Blair lot, were offered to developers whose



Image courtesy of Stantec and Dream Collaborative

Nonprofit lender BlueHub Capital is providing financing for the Nubian Ascends project's soft costs as it prepares to break ground on its five-phase development.

proposals reflect community goals such as affordable home ownership units, job creation and workforce training.

Led by Taylor, one of Boston's prominent Black developers and director of the Center for Real Estate at Suffolk University, Nubian Ascends Partners won the BPDA's nod for the Blair lot in 2020. The five-phase, 390,000-square-foot project also includes a food hall and culinary arts training center, performing arts center, artist workspace and storefronts occupied by Black Market and Nubian Gallery.

The relocation of Benjamin Franklin Cummings Institute of Technology from the

South End to a new, nearby building in 2024 provided an opportunity to address the workforce training element. A life science training center in the 135,000-square-foot office-lab tower will be reserved for the tech school's programs.

The first phase of Nubian Ascends, 15 home ownership units with preference for artists, is finalizing cost estimates in anticipation of a groundbreaking this fall, Taylor said. The project will receive funding from the Mayor's Office of Housing, MassHousing and Eastern Bank.

Continued on Page 2

Following construction of a 300-space parking garage, Nubian Ascends hopes to secure tenants and break ground on the office-lab tower.

A Lender with Local Knowledge

Without shovels in the ground yet, Nubian Ascends has relied upon predevelopment financing from a lender located steps from the Blair lot: BlueHub Capital. The nonprofit economic development firm does business in 22 states, financing projects ranging from affordable housing to charter schools in low-income neighborhoods.

BlueHub assembled the \$3 million predevelopment financing package, which included a \$1.5 million guarantee from Mass-Development, along with partners Local Enterprise Assistance Fund, the Life Initiative, Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation and The Property and Casualty Initiative Fund.

While BlueHub has historically focused on multifamily lending in Boston, the Nubian Ascends proposal represented an opportunity to participate in the rebirth of a commercial district.

The loan pays for soft costs such as architectural services, and has played a key role keeping the project moving ahead, Taylor said. Commercial lenders are wary about lending to a project without real estate to pledge as collateral, and Nubian Ascends will ground-lease each of the five project sites from the BPDA.



An office-lab tower and job training programs connecting Nubian Square with Boston's life science industry is a critical component of Nubian Ascends Partners' plans for a 2-acre site in Roxbury's former commercial center.

Under terms of an agreement approved by the BPDA in March, Nubian Ascends is required to pay \$3,563 per year for the artist housing, \$88,302 per year for the parking garage and \$87,766 for the lab-office site. Deadlines for the first three phases are October 2023, January 2024 and February 2024 respectively.

BlueHub has a history of lending for affordable housing projects in Roxbury, including a \$5.9 million construction loan in 2017 to Dorchester-based Windale Development and Nuestra Comunidad Development Corp. for their Bartlett Station apartments at a former MBTA bus yard.

Arnold Johnson, president of Windale Development, said the potential growth of commercial office and lab space in Nubian Square would generate more demand for retail and service businesses.

"More stores will come in because the

people will demand services in the area. More people will invest, from national chains to mom-and-pops," Johnson said.

While BlueHub has historically focused on multifamily lending in Boston, the Nubian Ascends proposal represented an opportunity to participate in the rebirth of what was once one of Boston's main commercial districts.

Michael Niles, interim president of community development financing for the BlueHub Loan Fund, likens Nubian Square's untapped potential to neighborhoods such as the Seaport District and the Fenway.

"Coming out of the downturn in 2010, suddenly cranes started going up, and they're still up," Nilles said. "Deals got queued up, and as soon as credit became available, they were in the ground." ◀

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