

Allston Development will demolish and rebuild (Justin Roshak, The Bulletin: January 28, 2021)

A proposed redevelopment would demolish and replace an Allston building at 119 Braintree St.

The Blake family has owned the building since 1964. The family's credit card manufacturing company relocated to West Roxbury in 1987, when the building was divided into smaller, residential units.

"We created an eclectic community of tenants," said Michael Blank, who led the redevelopment and whose father Arthur Blank purchased the property.

"We've tried our best over the years to maintain this business and to put as much into it as we could, to keep it a good community," said Blank.

But he added, "It's pretty much reached the end of its economic life."

Planning for a new use began about five years ago. A letter of intent was filed Aug. 11, 2020.

The buildings would be demolished and replaced with two new structures, a commercial/ laboratory space and a complex of residential units of several types.

A northern, commercial building at 93 - 129 Braintree St. would have ground-floor retail, artist space, and bike storage, as well as utility rooms and a loading dock. The upper 11 floors would be offices oriented toward biotechnology. It would be 179.5 ft tall, include a shorter section at 121.5 ft, and be about 401,000 square feet.

Loading and unloading for offices would occur off-street via a driveway on Braintree Street. On-site transportation coordinators would manage both properties. A southern, residential building at 95 Everett St. would have two types of housing: seven ground floor townhouses and five floors of studios and apartments. The ground floor would include retail space and bike storage. The building would be about 86,400 sf with 97 units, 20 percent of which would be set aside for tenants with 60 percent of area median income.

The remaining units would be "a typical market rate mix" of studios, apartments, and townhouses, said David Bracken. At a similar development seen as a model for this one, studio apartments were 515 square feet, one-bedrooms up to 615 square feet, two-bedroom, 815 square feet, and three-bedroom townhomes 1200 square feet.

Estimates of possible rents provided at Thursday's meeting were \$1125 for a studio, \$1300 for a one-bedroom, \$1,500 for a two-bedroom, and 1,600 for a townhome. Rents have been very volatile and reflect the impact of the Covid pandemic, said Ryn Moores, VP at Bracken Development, who said rents on similar properties have fallen by more than half.

Even so, the projected rents may be higher than current tenants, some of whom are artists, could manage.

"We need a little more range," said Jenna Connolly of the Impact Assessment Group. She observed of the estimated rents, "I know a lot of artists aren't even managing that"

No daycare services are planned for either site. That decision was made to maximize the number of units.

Significant changes are also planned to the building footprints.

The commercial building would be pushed more than 30 feet back from Braintree to make room for outdoor spaces. The northern facade, which currently abuts train tracks, would also be moved back. This side of the building, currently old-fashioned industrial brick, would be redone in steel and glass to accentuate the experience of entering Boston along I-90.

A plaza with green space at the west end of the office building, adjoining the Everett St. Bridge, with a new stairway connection to the nearby commuter rail platform is planned. Planners emphasized improving bicycle and pedestrian access. Also, "We're committing to remove those billboards from the site." said David Bracken, CEO of Bracken Development LLC.

Asked whether a dedicated exhibition gallery for local artists was envisioned, Bracken said that his research suggested there is a greater need for artist work space. He added that "We have not determined yet what kinds of artists these will be."

A public meeting on the project is scheduled for Feb 8 at 6 p.m. The public comment period closes Feb. 19.