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Route 128 projects now offering more places to work -- and live The Boston Globe

By Robert Preer, Globe Correspondent | October 8, 2006

NEEDHAM -- In the beginning, there were woods, wetlands, and fields spread across the outskirts of Boston. Then came Route 128, built in sections over 25 years and completed in 1959.

Campus like business parks sprouted next to the highway's arc and became home to the high-tech companies that would transform the Massachusetts economy and make "America's technology highway" one of the world's most famous roads.

Now, in Needham's New England Business Center, the first industrial park on the highway, a new age may be dawning for Route 128. This road will have a new name to many people: Home.

A development team led by Cabot, Cabot & Forbes is preparing to demolish an old industrial structure once occupied by lab instrument maker Thermo Electron Corp. and replace it with a four-story, 350-unit apartment building, to be called Charles River Landing.

Jay Doherty, president of Cabot, Cabot & Forbes, said both residences and stores will soon be appearing at New England Business Center and other older business parks on Route 128.

"It is a trend. It is something that Charles River Landing supports," Doherty said. "You will see growing elements of it in this park."

Also on Route 128, in Waltham, two projects involving significant retail development are on the drawing board in older business parks. And in Westwood next to the Route 128 Amtrak station, a suburban village with homes, shops, and offices is planned where business once reigned supreme.

"You are going to see more of these mixed-use projects as opposed to the sprawling office parks of old," said Jason S. Weissman, founder and principal of Boston Realty Advisors, a real estate brokerage.

Among the reasons for this change in the suburban landscape are the shortage of housing and surplus of office space in Greater Boston, observers said.

Tom O'Rourke, president of the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce, said, "It's a way to fill space with a highest and best use, and it creates more housing, which is a problem for all of our communities."

The most dramatic change occurring on Route 128 now is in Westwood, where a development team led by Cabot, Cabot & Forbes has started demolishing the sprawling General Motors parts warehouse to make way for 1,000 homes, an upscale shopping center, and 1.7 million square feet of offices.

In Waltham, The Related Cos. of New York recently purchased the 119-acre Polaroid campus on Main Street, just off Route 128. The firm has not announced plans for the site, although company officials have said they envision a mixed-use project that would include a significant number of stores.

On nearby Green Street in Waltham, off Route 117, a team of developers is planning a 570,000-square-foot retail and office development. [Continued...](#)

Page 2 of 2 -- The shift to mixed uses is due in part to changing attitudes of communities, according to Mark Roth, executive director at the Boston office of Cushman & Wakefield, a global real estate firm based in New York.

"Towns and zoning boards are more forward-thinking on zoning and mixing uses," said Roth. "The architects of the world have thrown the New Urbanism at us for so long, people finally are accepting it."

New urbanism calls for back-to-the-future development creating areas that resemble traditional downtowns, where people can live, work, and shop in one place.

Westwood rezoned the University Avenue industrial district to allow the mix of uses. Waltham also recently rezoned areas along Route 128 to permit mixed uses. Although a 2001 plan to allow mixed uses off Route 128 in Needham failed to win approval, the town has been cooperating with the developers on the Charles River Landing project.

Charles River Landing is being developed under the state's Chapter 40B housing law, which allows projects with a significant chunk of affordable units to bypass most local zoning.

New England Business Center, developed in the early 1950s, is the oldest business park in New England and one of the oldest in the country. Built by Cabot, Cabot & Forbes, the Boston-based firm that developed most of the early 128 parks, New England Business Center was first a home for manufacturing and warehouse companies.

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, defense firms and high-tech companies began moving into the park, which is visible to thousands of motorists driving past on the highway every day. In recent years, other uses have found a home there, including a health club and child-care center.

Doherty said the residential use would relieve traffic problems in the park. The apartments would generate fewer trips than a business would and the traffic would be counter to the normal flow, he said.

The site is ideal for housing because it is next to the Charles River and is on the edge of the business park, abutting a residential neighborhood, Doherty said. Not all areas in the park would be suitable for residential development, he added.

The addition of retail to business parks has tended to be more controversial because stores can generate considerable traffic.

In Waltham, some residents and officials fought the mixed-use rezoning plan.

"We're all concerned about traffic and the traffic buildup all around the area," said William Whyte, who lives on Livingstone Lane, near both of the Waltham sites.

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