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## Opinion :: Guestopinion

### I've seen the future and it's not a parking lot

by John Keith  
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Recently, I was at a neighborhood event and remarked to a friend, "You know, I hope they end up building Columbus Center."

His response was, "Well of course you do, it's to your benefit."

Ouch. I was like, "Say what?"

"Sure," he said. "You'd be able to sell some of those condos. It's to your benefit, but it's okay, I understand."

Wow. While I've heard this argument before, I couldn't believe that someone I knew so well thought that my motives were shaped so selfishly. In fact, my friend was mistaken. I, like many residents, support development all over the city - because it's not just me who would benefit from some well-planned new development, but nearly everyone who lives in the city of Boston. I'm more concerned about the future of our city than the thinness of my wallet.

So, what does "new development" represent to me? Improvement. Progress. Ideas. Creativity. Vitality.

What does no development mean to me? Well, Woody Allen may have put it best. To paraphrase him, "A city is like a shark. It doesn't live unless it moves forward." We don't want a dead shark on our hands, do we?

Of course, living in Boston and being in support of the "new" is a lost cause, some of the time. After all, neighbors, residents and visitors say that what makes Boston distinct from other US cities is its "character," its "history" - but sometimes, that's just a nice of way of saying "stodgy and resistant to change." Sure, I can appreciate Boston for what it is - I live in an historic neighborhood full of beautiful homes. But there's more to a healthy city than pretty architecture.

And that's why I was disappointed to read that the Columbus Center project has been delayed, once again. Columbus Center, of course, is the massive 1.3 million-square-foot mixed-use development that is to be developed on decks built above the Massachusetts Turnpike. As proposed, the project would include condos and a hotel, as well as parks and retail space. At the end of March, the developer stopped construction. Then, two weeks ago, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts pulled public funding for the project. On the heels of that, MassHousing withdrew a loan commitment.

Just the latest in a long history of problems with a project that's been in the works for over a decade.

Across the city, you could hear cheers and applause from the usual suspects - from public officials who've never support any new building of any size, as well as from a local cast of characters , residents whose favorite response to any proposal seems to be,

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### Quick Poll

**Boston -- and the South End -- has been the site of several movie shoots lately. How do you feel about the new Bossywood?**

- It's great -- I love celebrities!
- It's great -- I love the benefits for Boston and the neighborhood!
- We're all going to be famous!
- I just hope they put things back the way they found them
- It's an inconvenience
- I could care less

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"No I don't support that, and here's why." I think I even saw the ghost of Jane Jacobs, patron saint of the condemnation of urban renewal, rise above Clarendon Street and give her blessing to the pious few who congregated below to give thanks.

But, one thing that really bugs me is that the opponents of Columbus Center have been so selective in memory.

Eighteen years ago, there was a lot of anti-building sentiment when a developer proposed putting up condos at 75 Clarendon, which towers directly across the street from where Columbus Center will one day rise. At the time, abutters said that the building would be "too tall" and "out of scale" with the neighborhood. Sound familiar? Today, it's residents of that "too tall" and "out of scale" building that are among the most vocally opposed to the Columbus Center project. Ironic? Yes, and I think, sad. I guess it's just another case of, "I've got mine, but you're out of luck."

But let's be clear before anyone has delusions of grandeur. Columbus Center is not in mothballs because of any community opposition. It is on hold because the developer couldn't get the money together to move forward, a situation that does rightfully require scrutiny by the community and elected officials.

Still, despite that somewhat major issue, the Columbus Center is an essentially good idea. Really, what's not to love about Columbus Center? You have a hotel that brings in business people and tourists - two groups of people who spend lots of money, money that runs our city's economy. You have new revenue due to an increase in property taxes on the hotel and condos (admittedly, some of the benefits would be lost, short-term, due to tax credits granted by the city and state). You have a physical link between the long-divided Back Bay and South End. You have additional parking for residents, visitors and neighbors. Do we need to be convinced of the value of that? And, the part that's most overlooked, you have new parkland the length of a football field within walking distance from all our homes - and I promise, they'll allow dogs.

Like I told my friend, I can only hope that the project will eventually be built, preferably in my lifetime.

Obviously, where and how development happens is as important as whether it happens at all. And, as we've seen across the country during the past couple of years, "over-development" is a big, big problem. But I dare say we haven't had enough growth in Boston. The number of housing units added in the city over the past half decade is well under 10,000 - you'd think it was a lot more, I know.

But in fact, what's happened is that we've repeatedly fumbled the chance to make a change, a chance to lower housing costs through increased residential construction. Meanwhile, office and commercial rents have skyrocketed, due to lack of space - something that you don't hear about too much, but is very important when corporations consider where to place employees (we currently have the lowest vacancy rate in a decade in the downtown Boston area). And, the biggest benefit to building, the one any elected official can love? Jobs. Jobs for construction workers, jobs in hotels and shops for those in the restaurant and hotel trades and in the service industry, jobs in offices for corporate types, jobs for virtually all sectors of employment. Hey, we all gotta eat.

Still, if you're interested in a new Boston, a better Boston - and I

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hope you are - don't be discouraged by this unfortunate turn of events. There are plenty of other buildings going up in our neighborhood and across the city, many projects that are either already under construction or about to break ground.

Within view from the rooftops of your homes you can see construction under way on The Bryant condo building and The Clarendon condo and apartment project and, off in the distance, two new dormitory high-rises on the site of Northeastern University. Soon, I expect to see a new residential tower and office tower on Prudential Plaza, and another one at Copley Place. Meanwhile, the Museum of Fine Arts is reaching the end of its record-breaking \$500 million capital campaign which will allow it to display more of its vast collections of art. There's even life in the financial district. Currently, there are three large office buildings under construction - Russia Wharf, Two Financial Center, and the first of many buildings on Fan Pier.

The most exciting project planned, far more ambitious than Columbus Center, is Seaport Square, down on the Waterfront. This is a 6.5 million square-foot, multi-use project, yet, surprisingly, there has been little opposition to the proposal. Mostly, people want to know just two things: how much parking will be included and when can you start?

So, I wouldn't consider Columbus Center to be a "litmus test" of whether or not anything can be built in the city of Boston or a sign of "NIMBYism" rearing its ugly, sometimes masked head. Far from it. There's too much else going on that's good.

What I would say is that for too long in our city, the interests of a few have taken precedence and priority over the needs of the many. Now, it's time for that to change.

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