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Planning and experience keys to urban infill development - by Ben Goldfarb

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Greater Boston has emerged as one of the world's preeminent technology and life science markets, driving demand for developable sites to unprecedented levels for both commercial and multifamily properties. Savvy developers are meeting this demand by acquiring and redeveloping underutilized urban infill sites such as parking lots and obsolete commercial buildings. While sites located in Cambridge, Boston and other urban locales offer opportunity for attractive investor returns, these sites also present a unique set of construction challenges not typically found in the suburbs. These unseen hurdles can have a major impact on a project's bottom line, and should be taken into consideration during the due diligence and preconstruction process. Trap

Diligent Preconstruction – Beware of Cutting Corners: Thoroughly analyzing sites to achieve realistic construction schedules and budgets while identifying and minimizing as many variables of delay as possible yields more profitable developments. Navigating these challenges often requires local experience, relationships and team-based creative solutions. Knowledge of how cities and utility firms operate and identifying the key players is essential. Firms with well-trained and experienced professionals supported by proven systems and processes enables them to more easily adapt to complex, site-specific requirements, and successfully manage the evolving needs and expectations of building officials, neighboring residents and businesses.

Multi-disciplinary Approach: A cohesive team representing field operations, project management, estimating and MEP coordination should assess existing site conditions and begin developing various documents that outline anticipated construction activities, logistics plans and schedules that will need to be included in the construction management plan, required by many cities. Having these major disciplines evaluate potential issues including site access, travel routes, workforce transportation and utility locations is critical. The need for utility relocation to allow for construction operations such as crane mobilization is not uncommon.

Conversion or Demolition? Unless a building is historically significant and/or economically viable to

be adapted for re-use, sites with existing buildings often require demolition. Common deterrents developers identify when evaluating building conversions include insufficient corridor widths, ceiling heights, fenestration openings and locations, and code upgrades. If razing is required, special care must be taken as to not damage neighboring properties. Surveying surrounding buildings to determine vulnerability and develop protective measures is essential. This includes testing the structural integrity of existing building conditions. Similar measures are taken for excavation and earth support for foundations and below-grade parking garages. Typical safeguards include underpinning neighboring foundations and other means of shoring abutting structures during activities such as driving steel sheeting for earth support. Continued protection is required during construction through constant monitoring of vibration, noise, and dust thresholds.

Locating Laydown Areas and Storage: Finding space for material and equipment storage and establishing a field office can be problematic. Creative solutions are often necessary – from renting nearby apartment or office space to leasing parking lots from municipalities, places of worship and schools.

Safety and Minimizing Disruptions: Keeping the public safe is the first priority. Urban zero-lot-line projects directly abut buildings, streets and sidewalks, and require preventative measures to reduce hazards. These include street and sidewalk closures, construction mesh debris tarps and canopy/sidewalk sheds to protect pedestrians from falling debris. Outreach and site visits with ISD, the fire department and EMS to familiarize them with the project and establish emergency egress locations and points of contact is crucial.

Consistent communication and coordination with city officials, neighborhood residents and businesses are the key to managing expectations. Alerting stakeholders in advance when large scale deliveries or disruptive activities are scheduled can help minimize impact, as well as establishing clear lines of responsive communication if questions or difficulties should arise.

Urban Infill Projects – Revitalizing In-Demand Sites with Creative Solutions

All projects have unique sets of challenges. By assembling the right team that works collaboratively and proactively to understand specific site conditions, addresses identified challenges with viable solutions, and engages and maintains open lines of communication with key officials and community members ensures the best possible project outcomes.

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