

## Over 91-Acre Allston Purchase, a Fresh Political Maelstrom

WHEN HARVARD PURCHASED land from the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority (MTA) in 2000, it was an historic moment: for the first time, the University owned more land in Boston than in Cambridge. Harvard paid \$151,751,636 then (see “Allston Expansion,” September-October 2000, page 74) for 48 acres. Now Harvard has acquired an adjacent parcel of 91 acres for \$75 million, bringing the University’s total Allston holdings to 341 acres versus just 219 in Cambridge. The much lower price paid for the most recent acquisition from the MTA—about one-fourth as much per acre—reflects not only a much cooler real-estate market but also the heavily encumbered nature of the property, which is split by the turnpike itself and by great swaths of railway line, both with permanent easements.

Within days of Harvard’s high bid on March 31, state and local officials, including the chairman of the MBTA (the public transit authority), the chairman of the Massachusetts Port Authority, and the state secretaries of development and of transportation, asked that the sale be delayed. The property has the potential to accommodate a rail link to the port of Boston, and includes the turnpike’s Allston/Brighton interchange, as well as the largest facility for the transfer of freight between rail and trucks in the city. The MBTA revealed that it had hoped someday to build a layover facility for commuter-rail trains on part of the property.

The turnpike authority sought to reassure other state and local agencies that the public interest would be protected under the terms of the agreement, and vowed to go ahead with the sale. But the MBTA, although nearly bankrupt, responded on May 2 with a plan to take part of the land by eminent domain for just over \$33.25 million, setting the stage for an improbable legal battle between two independent state authorities, both with land-taking powers. Then state senator Jarrett T. Barrios ’90 intervened. An outspoken critic of planned MBTA fare hikes, he demanded that the situation be resolved

without spending taxpayer money. He pointed out that even if Harvard bought the land and the permanent easements, the state transportation secretary retains the right to approve any development affecting railyards and could also require Harvard to accommodate mass-transit needs. At the same time, reported the *Boston Herald*, the turnpike authority produced a letter saying that Harvard was “fully prepared to include terms and conditions necessary to facilitate the continuation of commuter rail and freight services to ‘run with the land’ should there ever be a cessation of the [rail] easement.” Eventually,

though over the objections of an irritated Boston mayor Thomas Menino, a deal was struck at the end of May. The MBTA got what it wanted, paying the MTA and Harvard \$1 each for future easements and a layover facility. What wasn’t clear was what was in it for Harvard, which has now spent nearly a quarter-billion dollars on former MTA property in Allston. The *Harvard Crimson* raised that question in its own report on the deal.

“Great institutions grow over time, and with a vision of continuing their excellence over hundreds of years,” says Harvard’s

vice president for government, community, and public affairs, Alan Stone. “It is very rare that public land comes up for auction, and even more rare that it is contiguous to your own land—to the campus. In this context, how can you not buy it?”

The University says that it has no development plans for the land at the moment. The parcel is strategically important, however. The *Boston Globe* reported that one of the easements granted to the MBTA “would allow a second main-line track through the property, a move that could bring a new commuter rail stop to Harvard’s doorstep.” And the paper reported that the deal also gives Harvard the right to move the turnpike and reconfigure the busy Allston toll interchange. Harvard officials have previously stressed the importance of developing an adequate transportation infrastructure for any future Allston campus.

