

Everett site has better use than a casino - Opinion

Written by Administrator

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The Mystic River and a pair of rail lines are all that separate Assembly Square in Somerville from the wasteland in Everett that casino magnate Steve Wynn wants to transform into a resort casino. The two properties are so close that a decent golfer could tee off on one and hit the other. They share a common industrial heritage. Until work crews began clearing Assembly Square for construction, the land on the Somerville side of the Mystic looked just as forlorn as it does now in Everett.

Assembly Square and the old riverfront Monsanto plant in Everett are, in many ways, two sides of the same coin. Now, however, they're on sharply divergent development paths. One builds a new economy, and the other builds an elaborate structure for siphoning cash into the hands of one wealthy corporation. Somerville is creating a new neighborhood, while Everett's mayor is parading Steve Wynn through City Hall. Everett's is a considerably less ambitious and less constructive endeavor, and it's one the city doesn't have to settle for. Somerville could have had what Everett now has (a less than certain shot at one of three state casino licenses), and turned that offer down. That alone should give Everett pause — especially because the city could easily replicate what is happening at Assembly Square.

Steel beams are now rising — forming space for new shops, and for hundreds of apartments. The four new city blocks currently under construction will eventually mushroom into a mixed-use neighborhood with 2,100 new residences and well over 2 million square feet of office and retail space, all sitting on a new Orange Line subway stop. And there's more coming, as the decision by the furniture retailer IKEA to sell its 12 acres in Assembly Square opens the door for a significant expansion of the new neighborhood Federal Realty Investment Trust is currently building.

Assembly Square is booming now, but its success was far from a foregone conclusion. The site was once a forgotten, isolated corner of Somerville, left behind by industry and cut off from the rest of the city by Interstate 93. It was the site of an old auto plant and a failed mall, and not much else. It didn't look like much, but Assembly Square's neighbors had vision. They saw the immense potential in a large parcel of open land sitting on the river and on a subway line, and they fought for development that would live up to the site's unique location.

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The 37-acre former Monsanto site Wynn toured last week isn't quite Assembly Square's twin — it's on a commuter rail line, not the subway, and it faces a more intensive environmental cleanup — but it's a close relative. Both have transit links. Both sit on the water. Both are sizeable open parcels sitting close to Boston. The fundamentals are baked into the real estate. They're just waiting for the vision to catch up.

Those fundamentals are why Somerville Mayor Joe Curtatone told a Globe reporter last week that he'd repeatedly rebuffed developers looking to build in Assembly Square what Wynn wants to build across the river. "Over my dead body would a casino come to Assembly Square or any part of Somerville," Curtatone said.

Somerville activists pushed for a mix of offices, retail, and new homes laid out in city blocks — because this mix will allow Assembly Square to become a building block in a broader economic development strategy. The neighborhood's builders are hoping to capture development overflow from red-hot Cambridge. The Orange Line links the neighborhood to Boston, and to the Station Landing development near Wellington station in Medford. The new residences, new office space, and new restaurants are additive. They grow the economy organically.

The Everett casino, on the other hand, would be an end unto itself. And worse, it would squander the location that's enabling Assembly Square's transformation. Casinos, like IKEA furniture stores, come in pre-cut boxes. These boxes are designed to maximize profit wherever they're plunked down. They are indifferent, if not hostile, to their surroundings. They can go anywhere, which means they're awful fits for waterfront, transit-adjacent real estate, of which there's a limited supply. A site like Assembly Square, or like the Monsanto site, needs to live up to its full potential. There are too few of them to waste.

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