

## Towering hopes for downtown



*Site preparation has started at 659 Washington Street, where The Kensington, a 27-story luxury rental apartment building, will be built. (Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff)*

By Casey Ross  
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Boston's Downtown Crossing district, long one of Mayor Thomas M. Menino's priorities, is finally seeing development after years of inactivity.

The construction, however, will not be part of the stalled redevelopment project at the former Filene's site, a blighted block that has become the bane of the mayor's effort to revitalize the shopping district.

Instead, it will be a few blocks down Washington Street, where developers today will begin construction on The Kensington, a 381-unit apartment building.

The 27-story glass-and-stone tower will rise on a vacant lot at LaGrange and Washington streets that once hosted the Gaiety Theater. Scheduled for completion in the summer of 2013, it will also include two or three small retail shops.

The \$170 million project is expected to provide a boost to Menino's effort to enliven Washington Street with stores, refurbished theaters, and hundreds of new homes. The start of construction follows other positive developments in the area, including the sale of several commercial buildings. In addition, leases have been signed with Five Guys Burgers and Fries, Back Deck Grill, the Mexican fast-food chain Chipotle, Capital One bank, and the yogurt shop Fresh Mango, among others.

The neighborhood has also recently gotten a Business Improvement District, which is using fees collected from owners of commercial property to pay for stepped-up cleaning services and uniformed guides to assist tourists and shoppers.

While the efforts have improved the district's appearance, some real estate specialists say, a revival won't be complete until work resumes at the old Filene's property, which had anchored the district from the corner of Washington and Franklin streets. Construction on a 39-story tower there stalled in 2008.

"To make the area vibrant you need to tie down the retail at that location," said David Begelfer, chief executive of NAIOP Massachusetts, a commercial real estate association. The Filene's site, he said, "is just too big a hole in the retail market."

Menino's development chief, Peter Meade, appeared to offer an olive branch of sorts to Vornado Realty Trust by suggesting recently in a speech that the New York developer will be part of the solution to restarting construction at the site. Months ago, the Menino administration revoked Vornado's building permit and threatened to take the property by eminent domain because of inaction at the site.

Meade said he has met with Vornado's representatives and is working with them on plans to move forward. "I believe they are serious about doing something with the property," he said.

Vornado did not respond to a request for comment yesterday

Also weighing on Downtown Crossing's revival are vacancies at several large retail stores, including those that housed two bookstores, a Borders and a Barnes & Noble. The latter is across from the Filene's site and has been empty for nearly five years, according to city officials. The owner of that building, Robert Posner, declined to comment.

Attracting tenants could be easier in coming years after hundreds of new residents are living at The Kensington and other planned housing developments. An executive leading the Kensington project said it will cater to a younger demographic interested in its urban location near the refurbished performing arts spaces at the Boston Opera House and the Paramount and Modern theaters.

"The area has an excitement about it," said Ralph Cole, executive vice president at Kensington Investment Co. "It's not staid and stodgy, and that will play well in attracting the demographic we're talking about."

The building, designed by The Architectural Team Inc., of Chelsea will include one- and two-bedroom apartments, with the two-bedrooms renting for \$4,000 to \$4,500 per month. Its sixth floor will feature an open-air heated pool, a fitness center, recreational lounges, and work spaces.

To obtain city approvals for the project, Kensington Investment agreed to contribute more than \$7 million to Hong Lok House, an affordable assisted-living facility in Chinatown that will provide 75 housing units.

Also seeking to move forward in the area is the developer of Hayward Place, a planned tower with 265 rental and ownership units across from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Towers.

A start date has not been set, although the developer, Millennium Partners-Boston, has said it intends to proceed within months.

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