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Kenmore Square catches up with the boom

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The Rat is long gone. So is Deli Haus. The old Kenmore Army & Navy Store many years ago decamped to Downtown Crossing, and there's an oyster bar where Charlie's Cafeteria used to be.

But much bigger changes to Kenmore Square are on the way. Finally.

Developers this week filed plans for a pair of towering hotels on either side of Beacon Street on the western edge of

the expansive square. Now that it has resolved a dispute over the fate of the landmark Citigo sign, another big developer is drafting plans to redo an entire block on the north side of Commonwealth Avenue. Several other big projects — from long-delayed Fenway Center to a 340-foot condo tower on Charlesgate West — are gradually pushing forward.

All of it highlights how much the neighborhood, long a haven for college students and Red Sox fans, is evolving from its scruffy past — years after the city's development boom has transformed other parts of town.

It has, after all, been 14 years since the Commonwealth Hotel opened and the Eastern Standard restaurant supplanted the greasy spoons of Commonwealth Avenue. And while Boylston Street nearby in the Fenway is lined with new high-rises, the contours of Kenmore Square can feel dipped in amber by comparison.

"Kenmore Square has transformed to some degree, but it has really lagged behind much of the rest of Boston," said Robert Korff, chief executive of Wellesley-based Mark Development, which is planning one of the new hotels. "It just hasn't gotten much attention."

That's beginning to change.

On Tuesday, Korff's firm and the owners of the historic Hotel Buckminster — where the plot to throw the 1919 World Series was hatched — teamed up to propose a pair of hotel towers on Beacon Street. Mark would put a 24-story hotel on the site of a squat Citizens Bank building, while across the street the Buckminster would expand to the west with a 19-story tower on Beacon Street. Combined, they would add 763 hotel rooms, in bids to capitalize on the visitor traffic to Red Sox games, Boston University, and the nearby Longwood Medical Area.

A little farther up Beacon Street, developers John Rosenthal and Gerding Edlen are nailing down details for the first phase of Fenway Center — 313 apartments in two buildings — with a goal of starting construction this year after more than a decade of delays and planning.

And across Kenmore Square, Boston University is giving its Myles Standish Hall a \$130 million face lift and

is building a new public plaza.

The biggest part of the area's makeover could take place in the heart of Kenmore Square, a block bounded by Commonwealth Avenue and Deerfield Street that Boston University sold for \$134 million last year to the developer Related Beal.

While most discussion about that project has focused on the fate of the illuminated Citgo sign perched on the roofs, the broader development represents a chance to remake the entire northern side of Kenmore, bookending the Hotel Commonwealth across the street.

Since reaching a deal in March to preserve the famous sign, Related has been planning what to do with the buildings beneath it, talking with neighbors and holding preliminary meetings with City Hall officials. So far, company executives have shared few details about what they have in mind, or when they might file a proposal. In a statement, Related Beal's president, Kimberly Sherman Stamler, said she was "excited by the possibilities."

"Kenmore Square has long been home to a dynamic mix of visitors, students and longtime Bostonians," Stamler said. "We are eager to add to this legacy with a mix of uses including retail and marquee office offerings."

When it put the block on the market, BU said it wanted a buyer that would improve the street-level experience in an often-busy neighborhood where it can be tricky to walk around.

Three major streets converge in the square — spanning seven lanes at one point — with a web of crosswalks and traffic islands and an MBTA bus station in the middle. To the west, wide street-level bridges over the Massachusetts Turnpike create a kind of dead zone on Beacon Street, where blank walls and ventilation shafts from the backs of buildings facing Commonwealth Avenue dominate the sidewalk.

It's an environment, Korff said, that he and his partners hope to make more welcoming.

"We're really focused on the ground level and improving the experience of walking through Kenmore," he said. "We're toying with a lot of different ideas."

If they succeed, their projects could hasten the upscaling of Kenmore Square, where convenience stores and casual restaurants aimed at college students and Red Sox fans share the street with higher-end establishments.

There would be more room, and more foot traffic, for the sort of retailers that now line nearby Boylston Street in the Fenway and nearby streets in the Back Bay.

It's a transformation that has been underway for a long time — albeit slowly — said Stuart Freedman, owner of the Nuggets record store, which has been on Commonwealth Avenue since 1978 and is one of the last holdouts from Kenmore Square's grittier era.

"Things change," Freedman said. "I remember one time maybe 20 years ago, my father came by and was talking about how different Kenmore Square was. I thought, 'I've been here a decade now, and it doesn't seem like it has changed that much.' Now I'm seeing it, though. Maybe I'm becoming my father."