

Could Dudley Square be an incubator for tech firms?

Boston officials are counting on its new center to be the spark that turns promise into production.

By Dan Adams Globe Correspondent December 10, 2014

Will Dudley Square be the next Innovation District?

Compared with the rapid redevelopment of the South Boston waterfront, the long-promised transformation of Roxbury's run-down commercial hub has played out in slow motion. But with several important pieces now in place, including the imminent opening of the Bruce C. Bolling Municipal Building on the site of the former [Ferdinand Building](#), there's a palpable [buzz](#) here.

The Roxbury Innovation Center, a publicly funded business incubator slated to debut in the Bolling Building early next year, will be a bellwether for the new Dudley. Mayor Martin J. Walsh called the 3,350-square-foot facility a "test run" of his plan to spread out Boston's technology economy, which has been concentrated in a few, mostly white neighborhoods.

"We need to give people in Dudley the chance to understand what the tech and innovation economy can be for them," Walsh said in an interview. "We have to make sure wealth is shared, so people who grew up in Roxbury can come back and invest there."

So far, private developers and investors have been [reluctant to put money into Dudley](#), following investments by the city and nonprofits. They say the area is too isolated. But some locals wonder if it's because the overwhelming majority of Dudley-area residents are black or Latino.

Proponents say Dudley [has promise as a tech hub](#), given its stock of developable lots, an MBTA bus hub, and proximity to institutions such as Northeastern University. It is on a short list of neighborhoods being considered by the city as the site of a second innovation district, a designation that would kick off an intensive planning process to repeat the success of the Seaport area.

Dudley compares favorably to Kendall Square and the Innovation District in one important measure: Rents here are much lower than those in tech hubs.

"Because of the hot real estate market, you're going to have a base of entrepreneurs who are priced out of Kendall and the Innovation District," said Julie Wagner, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has [researched urban tech clusters](#). "That gives [Dudley] some real hope."

The biggest challenge, Wagner said, will be creating a vibrant business ecosystem around the innovation center — no easy task. Entrepreneurs want to be around others who share their ambitions and lifestyle, but someone has to be the first to set up shop. They also want coffee shops, restaurants, nightlife, and supermarkets, but those ancillary businesses typically do not anticipate demand; they follow it.

"It's a little chicken-and-egg," said Christopher Jones, an MIT-trained nuclear scientist who runs the nonprofit community development organization [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#). "There are a number of necessary pieces, and the innovation center is just one of them."

Wagner said one way to jump-start a cluster would be to lure an anchor tenant for the neighborhood, such as an outpost of a major university or corporation. That would raise Dudley's profile and increase the pool of potential entrepreneurs.

Efforts to create a tech cluster in Dudley will get a boost if the [Neighborhood Innovation District Committee](#) chooses it over other neighborhoods, such as Fields Corner and Uphams Corner.

The committee's selection, due by the end of the year, will recommend zoning tweaks and other steps the city should take to promote the winning neighborhood and will lay out a checklist of "ingredients" that helped make tech clusters successful in other cities.

"Entrepreneurs want to run into each other at the coffee shop," said John Barros, the city's chief of economic development and the committee's co-chair. "They need people nearby who can create apps, do marketing, and take on legal issues. They need talent, and they need people willing to fund their ideas. Strategically coordinating all those pieces will be huge."

The city this month will choose a day-to-day operator of the Bolling Building's innovation center. A spokeswoman for Walsh said several experienced incubator operators, individuals, and nonprofits had applied. In line with the wishes of residents, applicants will be evaluated on the strength of their plans to work with the neighborhood.

"Unlike the Innovation District, this is a community where families have lived for generations," said Gilad Rosenzweig, who founded the Smarter in the City tech accelerator near Dudley. "We need to preserve that sense of identity."

One startup at Smarter in the City is working on a feature that would let shoppers browse clothing stores in Dudley using a mobile app on their phones — an example of the collaboration Barros would like to see repeated throughout Dudley.

Rosenzweig's first crop of five startups is thriving: One received substantial funding from an angel investor and another won acceptance to the prestigious MassChallenge accelerator.

"We're proving it was the right move," Rosenzweig said. "I have people coming here for meetings who would never come to Dudley before: venture capitalists, lawyers, angel investors, bankers. It's beautiful."

Still, Rosenzweig said, conversations with some potential investors revealed Dudley is still battling "misperceptions" based on its past. He called on City Hall to give Dudley a marketing push like the one given to the Innovation District.

But Jones wonders if too much polishing would bend the agenda away from lifting up current residents. Dudley should aspire to be more than a catchment for the Innovation District's leftovers, Jones said; homegrown talent, nourished by improved public schools, should take the lead.

"If this thing isn't inclusive, it isn't worth it," he said. "A great Dudley is a place outsiders want to be. But they know when they come that they're not coming to take over and push out, they're coming to join."

Dan Adams can be reached at dadams@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@DanielAdams86](#).