

# With GE move, John Barros again finds his stride

## From 'Mr. Mayor' hopeful to 'Mr. GE'

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JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

John Barros's cellphone kept buzzing, long after General Electric confirmed its move to Boston. A friend had texted him, neatly summing up Barros's role in the deal and his resurgence in City Hall.

"Congratulations, Mr. GE," the text read.

Barros, who made his mark as a community activist, first gained widespread attention when he ran for mayor in 2013. His campaign was unsuccessful, but his smarts and style won over Mayor Martin J. Walsh, who brought Barros into the new administration as chief of economic development.

Since then, he has maintained a low profile. The GE decision catapulted Barros back into the spotlight.

He spent Wednesday at Walsh's side, fielding reporters' questions about the multimillion-dollar incentive package that helped woo GE, the potential job growth, and the city-state team that swayed the company. When the mayor slipped out of the City Hall press conference, hardly anyone noticed. Barros took charge.

"Boston doesn't have the same economic development tools to attract big corporations . . . as other cities mentioned in the competition, but we proved to be more creative. We've proven obviously to be more attractive," Barros told reporters.

Afterward, the city's chief financial officer, David Sweeney, bounded down the stairway in the City Hall mezzanine and into Barros.

"Good job," Sweeney said, hugging Barros.

A woman in the elevator grinned at Barros, congratulating him. In hallways and conference rooms, he got thumbs up.

"Great day," Barros replied.

In the hours and days after the announcement, it was still dawning on him what had been achieved: luring one of the nation's biggest corporate headquarters to the Hub.

"It hit me again — the magnitude of the company and what this could mean for our city," Barros said.

Barros's first contact with GE began in the summer with a cold call to the company to extol Boston's business virtues.

As time went on, the mayor began reading in the press that GE and other companies were unhappy in Connecticut, where GE's headquarters is located.

"What we all were reading and hearing was that GE was expressing dissatisfaction with not only the tax conditions but the business climate in Connecticut," Barros said. "We quickly began calling."

Walsh and Barros are old friends who grew up blocks apart in Dorchester and campaigned in the same mayoral contest in 2013. When Walsh considered running for mayor, he asked Barros to join his team. But Barros had his own plans.

After Barros placed sixth in the preliminary mayoral contest, he campaigned hard for Walsh and eventually joined the mayor's administration in 2014.

He came with considerable credentials — a policy wonk with a Dartmouth College degree; a stint in corporate America in Manhattan; and a long tenure in community development as executive director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

The mayor put Barros in charge of his economic development cabinet, a new position and an office critical to Walsh's vision for revitalizing not just downtown and the Seaport District, but other neighborhoods. Barros's job is to sell Boston internationally, boost job growth, and back small businesses.

Barros would help take Boston "to the next level," the mayor said when announcing Barros's appointment in February 2014.

A married father of two young children, Barros, 42, is of Cape Verdean descent and lives in Dorchester. He has deep roots in the city. At 14, he was a member of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, a nonprofit that transformed blighted lots in Roxbury and Dorchester into a flourishing urban village.

On the mayor's team, Barros — who has a \$135,000 annual salary — has been working behind the scenes to untangle troublesome community problems, including helping to usher along a hotel project at Melnea Cass Boulevard and Washington Street that stalled amid protests for higher wages.

"He fixes problems, always in the background," said Jorge Martinez, a close friend of Barros's who heads the community group Project R.I.G.H.T. "He's very good about speaking to people. He doesn't overpromise anything, but he also delivers."

At City Hall, Barros began as the sole person in economic development. In those early days, the department struggled to find its voice, vision, and footing, the mayor and Barros said. Walsh gave Barros a staff of 10, a budget of \$500,000, and a mission. In December 2014, Walsh organized a retreat at Harvard Business School, where the team fleshed out strategies for the cabinet.

In the meantime, Barros has been a traveling man, jetting to Israel, England, France, Mexico, Netherlands, and China. He was spreading the word that "Boston is open for business." And in doing so, he and his economic development team recruited software companies Acquia, Autodesk, and InsightSquared to move to Boston, which is seeking to build its new business portfolio.

"GE came at the right time," Walsh said, just as economic development was getting into a groove.

Barros began to court GE and other Connecticut companies. By mid-summer, it became clear the company was serious about finding a new headquarters. GE had set up a committee that began scouting for sites that was headed by Ann Klee, the company's vice president for global operations for environment, health, and safety.

Barros had assembled a team of at least 16 city officials, including representatives from transportation, finance, and development to sway a giant. Jay Ash, the state's secretary of economic development, later set up a state team of more than a dozen people, Barros said.

Quietly, they got to work. Barros helped to shore up connections with GE officials, including Klee.

By September, GE officials and city leaders were sharing dinner at Tresca in the North End, Barros said. The following morning, they took a chartered bus ride around Boston. They passed through Dorchester and Dudley Square, with Barros as the tour guide selling the neighborhoods.

They zipped through the Financial District, North Station, and the Seaport, he said.

Barros's team handed out glossies, titled "Welcome to Boston," that highlighted office space opportunities and life in the neighborhoods.

"I remember John being in the mayor's office and showing him the route they were planning to take," recalled Daniel Koh, the mayor's chief of staff. "He said, 'We want to make sure we go through Dorchester so they can see what Boston is all about. . . . That this city has character and is not just a bunch of buildings.'"

After the tour, Barros said he felt the Seaport had a chance.

In the following weeks, Barros and the team worked the phones, holding conference calls and trying to respond to GE's inquiries. GE officials had plenty of questions as they homed in on waterfront sites.

Company officials were concerned about transportation in and out of the Seaport, ferry access to the airport, and other sites along the waterfront that piqued their interest. Barros's team responded by addressing each site's proximity to major institutions, mileage to Logan Airport, and access to public transit, he said.

"We were aware there were competitors out there," Barros said.

About 10 a.m. Wednesday, Barros was in Koh's office on the fifth floor of City Hall when he received a call from Klee, the head of GE's site search committee.

Barros turned on the speaker phone. Klee told them she was impressed and excited, and that GE had made a formal decision. Boston was it.

"Wow. We're so excited to hear that," Koh said, according to Barros.

Barros added: "This is good news."

The men gave each other high-fives.

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