

# City Weekly

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE FEBRUARY 10, 2008 | BOSTON.COM/CITYWEEKLY

ALLSTON-BRIGHTON

## This bus's destination: town-gown heaven

By **Andreae Downs**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Imagine a cordial town-gown relationship, where the university sees neighborhood needs aligned with its own interests. Imagine neighbors inviting college employees to consider buying local property, investing in affordable housing, and coming to local barbecues. Imagine college students and local high school students knowing one another by name, sharing classrooms and recreation facilities, or just chatting together on street corners.

Imagine this in Allston and Brighton, two Boston neighborhoods that have suffered more than their share of institutional expansion and loud weekend beer bashes.

A number of Allston-Brighton residents listened avidly to presentations by neighbors and Clark University staff members recently after boarding a bus with a group representing local officials, Harvard University, and the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation, which organized the trip to the university's Worcester campus and surrounding neighborhood.

Clark vice president Jack Foley gave the group a thumbnail history of the school's interest in securing what was once a drug-infested, arson-plagued neighborhood around its then-gated campus.

According to Foley, two decades ago Clark had to decide whether to move, to build barbed-wire-topped walls, or to reach out and work to improve the neighborhood. "We chose the latter," he said.

The college started by helping found a community development corporation, then lending it money to rebuild affordable housing in the area. When those measures didn't reverse the area's decline, further steps were taken: full scholarships to any neighborhood resident accepted at Clark; the founding of a grades 6-12 public school, where Clark faculty and students work alongside regular school staff in one of "the top urban high schools in the country," Foley said; summer



GEORGE RIZER/GLOBE STAFF

**Karen Smith (left) and Mary-Helen Nsangou, of Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation, on the bus.**

campus, extra police details, tutoring, and college prep courses.

And Clark made all these moves with community involvement.

"The neighborhood was an equal partner at the table," said Barbara Haller, a Worcester city councillor.

And it all worked.

The neighborhood has just unveiled a \$9 million Boys & Girls Club facility, developed by the community organization, where deserted factories once stood. And a nearby site owned by Clark will have an athletic field installed for neighborhood, club, and college use.

Empty lots have been filled with energy-efficient, owner-occupied triple-deckers. The heroin dealers are gone. Roughly 30 faculty members have bought homes in the neighborhood, with help from the college. Plans to build bike paths and an industrial park are in the works.

"It was not an easy road," Foley said. "It involved a lot of meetings, late nights, and thick skin."

But the results clearly impressed the visitors from Allston-Brighton, which included community development professionals, involved neighbors, Harvard officials, staff from the offices of state Representatives Kevin Honan and Mike Moran and Boston City Councilor Mark Commo, and Michael F. Gla-

vin, the Boston Redevelopment Authority's "point person" for Harvard's planned expansion.

Of course, neither Harvard nor Boston College, the largest institutional residents of Allston-Brighton, are facing neighborhoods in arson-fueled decline. But their neighbors dreamed aloud about replicating parts of the Clark model in their backyards — turning the local schools into places where "it's cool to be smart," for instance.

Foley warned that without a commitment from the top, similar partnerships wouldn't work. He also noted that the Clark experiment had involved years of hard work and consistent relationships. Most of the people involved in the neighborhood-university partnership signed on in 1988 and have stayed.

He also pointed out that Clark benefited from everything it did, including training teachers and community developers, learning about successful urban education programs, stabilizing its neighborhood, and getting a diverse student body. He called it "enlightened self-interest."

"Instead of pretending we aren't in Worcester, Clark attracts students and faculty who want that community involvement," he said. "It gives Clark national and regional visibility." It also eases any pressure

Worcester's government might put on the university to pony up payments in lieu of taxes.

Jerry Rubin, an Allston Brighton CDC board member and Boston College neighbor, noted that helping BC and Harvard figure out how their interests and his coincide — for instance, getting his street back to the point where less than 50 percent of the houses are inhabited by students — might be difficult.

"Finding the enlightened self-interest is the challenge," Rubin said. "We really need to change the paradigm of how we relate to each other."

Kevin McCluskey, Harvard's Allston negotiator, said the university understands that rather than revitalization, the neighborhood needs "reinvigoration and stability."

He pointed out that the university's proposal for an "education portal," proposed as part of the community benefits from a science complex, was a way to look together at "what benefits all of us going forward, a mutual benefit."

He later said that for all the talk of changing the town-gown relationship, he felt that it was "already good, and, as those on the bus noted, the question is how to go from good to great."

Neighbor and community blogger Harry Mattison noted that the task force process, where an institution offers a plan that neighbors react to, often doesn't allow time to explore wider collaborations, such as Clark has with its neighbors.

Tim McHale, a neighborhood activist and musician, agreed. "These are concepts that could be part of the community benefit master plan," something Harvard has promised to work out with the neighborhood. "We want to align our interests."

Maile Takahashi, who works in Harvard's Allston Development Group, agreed.

"There are a lot of things to think about," especially ideas for the area west of North Harvard Street, she said. "We will make a proposal based on what we think we need to take care of."