

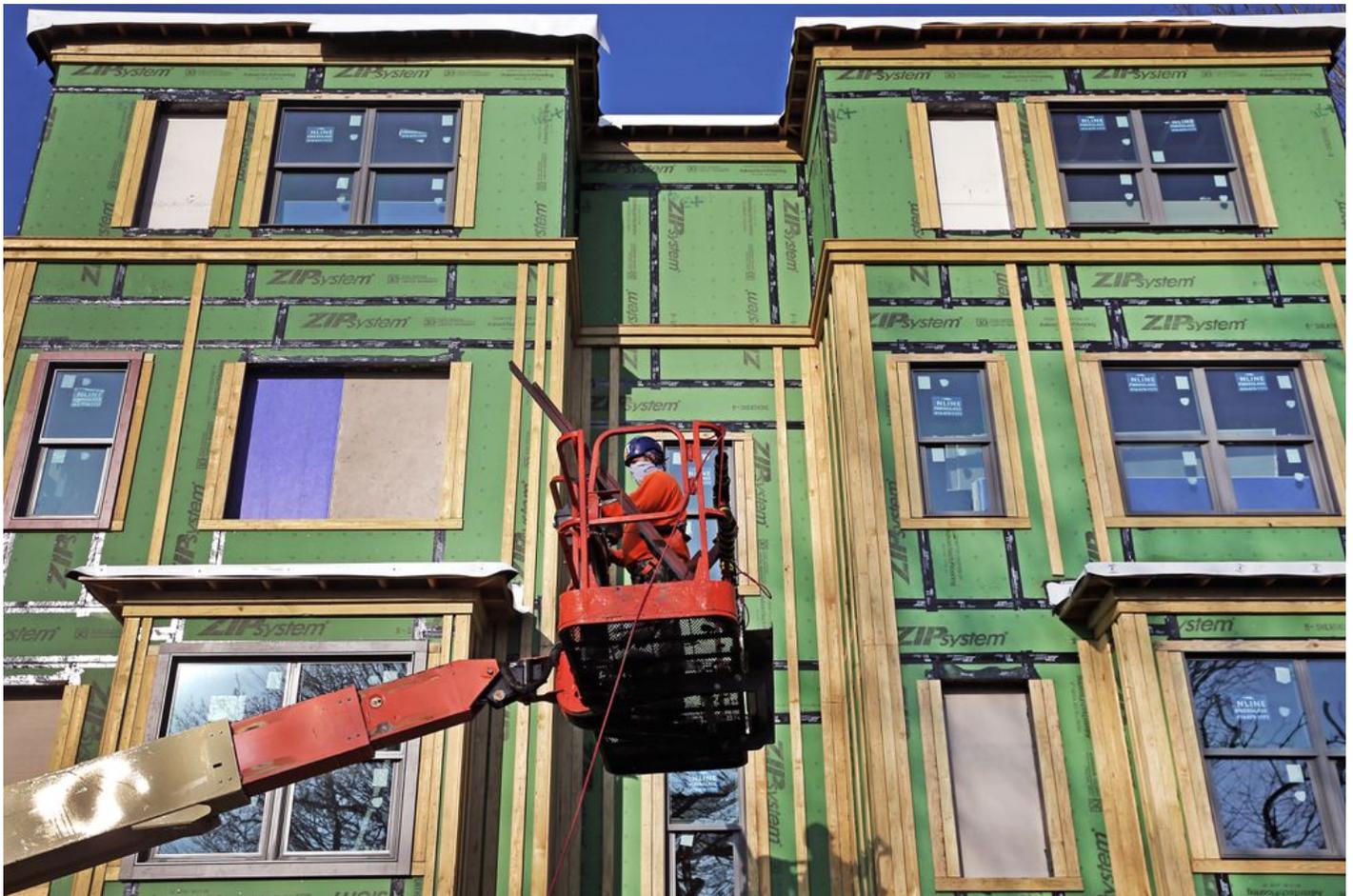
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RED SOX SECOND BASEMAN DUSTIN PEDROIA ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

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Housing is one of the biggest challenges facing Boston's next mayor

By [Tim Logan](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 27, 2021, 8:47 p.m.



A construction worker at Cote Village in Mattapan. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For the last six years, anyone who wanted to build housing in Boston knew they had a friend in the corner office at City Hall.

But with Mayor Martin J. Walsh bound for Washington, D.C., to become [US labor secretary](#), developers and advocates are wondering how his successor will tackle one of

Boston's thorniest challenges: the steep cost of housing.

Since taking office in 2014, Walsh has consistently made the city's affordability crisis a priority. He set ambitious goals — such as adding 69,000 units of housing by 2030 — and helped foster the biggest building boom the city has experienced in decades.

The idea was to drive down rents — among the highest in the United States — by increasing supply.

At the same time, Walsh leaned on developers to help fund more housing for the city's poorest residents and launched an array of programs to create and preserve apartments they could better afford.

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It's a strategy that has led to nearly 36,000 apartments and condominiums being permitted, more than 7,000 of them set at rents affordable to lower- and middle-income residents. That has increased Boston's housing stock by about 13 percent in a decade. They're big numbers, but not enough to help preserve the city's vanishing middle class, advocates say, or to provide opportunities for young and first-time home buyers to put

down roots.

That should be a major concern for whoever leads Boston next, said City Councilor Lydia Edwards, a former Walsh administration housing staffer who has become one of the council's leading voices on the issue.

“Mayor Walsh was a mayor of quantity. He built more than anybody,” said Edwards, who has said she does not plan to run for mayor. “Whoever comes after him has to be a mayor of quality, of bridging the gap between what we build and the people who live in this city.”

That's something Walsh tried to do, say people keyed into Boston's development scene.

With his background in negotiating labor contracts in the construction industry — he led the city's building trades unions before becoming mayor — Walsh has a keen eye for the economics of housing. He's versed in the costs of lumber and labor and adept at pressing private developers to link more public benefits to their projects than they might prefer, without asking for so much that they run away.

In 2016, for instance, Walsh's administration revamped the formula that requires private developers to help fund affordable housing, in particular making high-end condo buildings kick in more. That same year, he backed a vote to add an extra 1 percent property tax, much of it devoted to affordable housing.

That helped create more than 1,000 new units of lower- and middle-income housing in 2020 alone. And it helped to spread the benefits of downtown development around the city, said Matt Kiefer, a veteran real estate attorney at Goulston & Storrs.

“He's been really good at harnessing private investment to serve public needs,” Kiefer said. “It's not an easy thing to do.”

But Walsh's efforts haven't always translated at the street level, where large apartment buildings have brought traffic and other unwelcome changes to neighborhoods more

accustomed to three-deckers, but not much housing that people who live there can afford.

The new mayor, said Beyazmin Jimenez, vice president of the pro-housing group Abundant Housing Massachusetts, would do well to emphasize the positives that development can bring — such as customers for small businesses and housing for seniors and young families. A mayor must also connect emotionally with residents on an issue that too often is framed through a purely economic lens, she said.

“You need to find a way to bring longtime Bostonians into the fold on these issues,” she said. “We need more stories about how this helps people, not just the raw numbers.”

Longtime Boston residents must feel confident that they can afford to stay, said Vanessa Calderón-Rosado, chief executive of Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, a community development corporation in the South End. That means providing them with more opportunities to buy a home and to build wealth over time, she said. The Walsh administration has beefed up homeownership programs in recent years, such as the One+Boston Mortgage program it launched last year to help first-time home buyers.

But a lot more must be done to overcome decades of redlining and discriminatory lending that left many residents of lower-income neighborhoods locked out of the city’s real estate boom, Calderón-Rosado said.

“This is about equity and providing families the ability to build assets through homeownership,” she said. “A new mayor should definitely be looking to do that.”

Who that new mayor will be is, of course, a big unknown.

When Walsh took office seven years ago, developers were unsure what to expect, said Tamara Small, CEO of the commercial real estate trade group NAIOP. His predecessor, Thomas M. Menino, was known to take a personal interest in particular projects — sparring with developers and occasionally weighing in on design choices.

What they found was an administration that was remarkably consistent and collaborative in its approach to development, Small said. Even when Walsh did things developers

didn't like — such as implementing more stringent affordable housing requirements — he first sought input from all parties and set clear rules. That clarity bred confidence.

“We hear it all the time. The more certainty we have for development, the better,” Small said. “People want predictability.”

An open election for mayor, however, is inherently uncertain.

Several development industry experts said they expect to see a rush of proposals filed with the Boston Planning & Development Agency before Walsh leaves, or at least during City Council President Kim Janey's stint as interim mayor, when much of the agency's senior staff would be likely to stay in place. A similar rush happened before Walsh took office, at the end of Menino's tenure.

Longer-term, there are things a new mayor could do to make the development process more predictable, like cleaning up the city's archaic zoning code and continuing the raft of neighborhood planning and zoning studies launched under Walsh.

A new mayor could make more use of city-owned land and partner with the state to develop more sites owned by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, said Abby Goldenfarb, vice president of the development firm Trinity Financial. Those types of projects allow the city to more clearly set the terms of development, Goldenfarb said, but as the saga around building a 690-foot tower on the site of the old Winthrop Square Garage shows, they can take years to get off the ground.

“We can get really creative and set some big goals with those sort of sites,” she said. “And setting them is the first step to meeting them.”

And, of course, the next mayor will have to deal with fallout from the COVID-19

pandemic, which has shaken up the housing and development market. Rents have fallen sharply, particularly on higher-end units, and the downtown luxury condo market has softened. New projects continue to be filed with the BPDA, but how their economics might change is unclear.

So far, Walsh's would-be successors haven't laid out how they would address housing problems. But it's early yet. City Council members Michelle Wu and Andrea Campbell formally declared their candidacies last year, and Councilor Annissa Essaibi George plans to announce her candidacy Thursday. George's husband, Doug, is a developer. Wu, a critic of the BPDA, said she'd focus on affordable development and protections for renters. Few of the other likely candidates have said much about housing issues.

That will soon change, said Josh Zakim, a former city councilor who recently launched Housing Forward MA, an advocacy group that works to shape housing policy in the state. For many Bostonians, rent is the biggest monthly expense, and development is transforming their neighborhoods — for better or worse. Voters, he said, will want to know what the candidates plan to do about that.

“I certainly hope it's a top priority for any of them,” Zakim said. “If it isn't, they're going to hear about it on the campaign trail very quickly.”

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