ON THE STREET

Revere was going through a revival before COVID-19. Can it stay on track?

The city, long defined by its beach, looks to a future filled with potential -- and challenges

By Tim Logan and Janelle Nanos. Globe Staff, Updated August 19, 2020, 11:50 a.m.
REVERE — On a spacious plaza next to Wonderland Station on the Blue Line, a diverse crowd dined on the patio of a hip, upscale restaurant with ocean views. Next door, construction workers laid cement for a new hotel. Nearby on the beach, children played in the gentle surf, and teenagers skateboarded along the promenade.

Amidst it all on this summer afternoon: a blue tent where the city health department offered walk-up coronavirus testing, free to all comers.

This seaside city has been having a moment, with apartment buildings sprouting along its famous beach — just a 14-minute ride from downtown Boston and renting at a fraction of the price.
Revere’s revival was well underway until COVID-19, which has hit it as hard as almost anyplace else in the state, wreaking health and economic havoc in a city that’s home to many immigrants and service industry workers. When and how it emerges from the crisis will provide a measure of the “new” Revere’s resiliency, and how well it can serve everyone from longtime lower-income residents to the more-affluent newcomers.

“At this point, it’s really important for us to keep our foot on the gas,” said Mayor Brian Arrigo. “A lot of the oxygen has been sucked out because of COVID, but we need to keep firing on all cylinders.”

That’s not easy to do this summer.

Even as development surges, Revere has been clobbered by COVID-19. Only two cities in Massachusetts, neighboring Chelsea and Lynn, currently have higher infection rates, according to state data. And at 27.6 percent, Revere’s unemployment rate in June was
second in the state only to Lawrence’s, reflecting job losses among the huge numbers of residents who work in hotels, restaurants, and other hard-hit service industries.

Helping those people will be essential to any recovery and broader growth for the city, said Wendy Millar-Page, executive director of the Revere Chamber of Commerce.

For years, Revere residents have had a sense the city was on the cusp of change. Suffolk Downs, on the Boston line, was long a front-runner for the casino that ultimately went to Everett. Then it was pitched as a site for Amazon’s so-called HQ2. Neither mega-project came to pass, but “we were winners in losing,” said Robert O’Brien, the city’s director of strategic planning and economic development. Those bids helped Revere catch the eye of builders, and suddenly, he said, the city “was no longer hidden in Boston’s shadow; it had its own spotlight.”
Today, many see revitalization being realized in the strip of glimmering new apartment buildings that dot the waterfront, and in an Amazon warehouse that opened in July in the former Necco factory.

But to some, these changes are not entirely new. They say Revere’s promising future is simply an echo of its past.

Celebrated as the first public beach in America, Revere Beach, with its noisy arcades, amusement rides, and famous fried food, served as a cheap and easy escape from downtown Boston for over a century. But gradually, the good times faded. The roller coaster came down, and the dance halls closed. The summer crowds, once huge, moved on. The destruction caused by the Blizzard of ’78 provided a final blow. A handful of beach bars and ice cream stands — and the original Kelly’s Roast Beef — serve as reminders of those glory days. So do the pictures of Revere’s heyday that hang from the walls of local restaurants, as well as the intricately designed pavilions along the oceanfront promenade that hint at lost grandeur.

But while some people bask in Revere’s nostalgia, others have a vision for a future built on its colorful past.
“Mayor Arrigo approached me, and at first I was a little turned off about Revere,” said Michael Aldi, a Boston restaurateur and developer Arrigo courted to do business in the city. “I have family here, and I know what it’s all about, but it wasn’t there yet.” But Aldi saw promise in the oceanfront views and decided to take a chance: Last fall, he opened Dryft, the city’s first fine-dining restaurant, on the plaza overlooking the beach.

“My goal was to bring a Boston-style restaurant to the beach, something they’ve never had before,” Aldi said. “What I look for in a deal is parking, waterfront and, public transportation — and this deal had all three.”

Aldi plans to open a second restaurant on the Ocean Avenue strip. He believes that more tourism and retail business is on the horizon and wants to get in on the front end of the coming boom. “This is the oldest beach in America,” he said. “It almost reminds me of a New England-style Miami Beach.”
Some of this newfound glitz is driven by forces far beyond Revere. As in other lower-cost parts of Greater Boston — especially those with good MBTA access — newcomers have arrived in Revere in droves as rents have soared in the core of the region. Developers — and restaurants and retailers — have followed, gradually drawing a wealthier clientele.

That brings opportunity, said Rafael Mares, executive director of Neighborhood Developers, a housing nonprofit that works in Revere and Chelsea. But it also risks pushing out the immigrants and working-class renters who have long called the city home.

“The regional housing crisis has made people look in places they didn’t look before. Revere is one of them,” Mares said. “It’s like the ocean. We have this high tide that’s going up.”
One of the biggest waves is forming at Suffolk Downs, where plans for a huge new neighborhood are taking shape. About 40 percent of the vast, now-shuttered horse track is in Revere, and while the permitting has been slow next door in Boston, Revere officials in 2018 quickly approved plans for about 2,400 apartments, retail space, and a cluster of office buildings on the city's section of the site. When it’s all built — years from now — the development will boost Revere’s commercial tax base by more than 50 percent, said economic development director O’Brien, and make room for white-collar jobs on a scale Revere has never seen.

It’s a long-term play, said Tom O’Brien (no relation to Robert O’Brien), managing partner at Suffolk Downs’ developer, HYM Investment Group. But it’s one he’s confident will long outlast the pandemic.

HYM is just now demolishing the old stables near the MBTA’s Beachmont Station. Construction on the first buildings won’t start until spring, O’Brien said, and by the time they open in 2023 he’s hopeful the public health crisis will be just a memory — and the Blue Line will again be a pipeline from the heart of Boston.

“We’re developers, so we’re always optimistic,” he said. “We see the bright side. But the bright side has typically worked out.”

Still, some worry all this change is too much, too fast. Especially now.

“There’s interesting growth happening, and a lot of resistance to the growth, as well,” Millar-Page said. “There’s a fear that people are going to be pushed out, and where do they go, especially during this COVID time. Where do you go if you’re already unemployed or furloughed?”
Her answer is to take steps to ensure current inhabitants will be able to stay as Revere evolves. That means reexamining transportation options to help people move around the city. It also means implementing programs to help service workers advance as their industries recover, and capturing some of those office jobs at Suffolk Downs.

It means building hotels, but also creating a tourism infrastructure to lure people who might not know there’s a fun beach resort close by Boston, while encouraging new residents to celebrate and patronize the immigrant-owned businesses that have made Revere unusual.

Some of those efforts are underway. The city released a draft master plan at the start of the year, with detailed recommendations for transportation, economic development, and housing. The plan is already providing a framework for recovering from the pandemic, with the city focusing resources on training programs for laid-off workers and allocating cash to help restaurants stay afloat.
Still, Arrigo said, today’s circumstances are unprecedented.

“There’s no handbook for this,” he said. “We’re just trying to make sure that we’re planning for and creating opportunities and a high quality of life for every single person in this city.”

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