

COLUMN

# Time for a serious discussion about the ‘Superman’ building and downtown Providence

Providence needs a once-and-for-all plan for Kennedy Plaza and the bus station, a fish-or-cut-bait strategy for the proposed residential tower on Dyer Street, and a solution for the “Superman” building.

By [Dan McGowan](#) Globe Columnist, Updated August 24, 2021, [59 minutes ago](#)



The "Superman" building in downtown Providence. DAVID L. RYAN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

First, we should be honest about what the “Superman” building is not.

It’s not the Empire State Building. People visit Rhode Island to see Newport or dine on Federal Hill. No one

has ever begged me to take them downtown to see a building that kind of looks like [an office tower from a TV show](#) (“Adventures of Superman”) that went off the air 63 years ago.

Those who have been inside the 26-story skyscraper at 111 Westminster St. probably weren’t in awe of the facility, either. It was a bank, not Rocky Point. That meant stale lollipops for the kids and unnecessarily long lines for adults. My lasting memory of the place is trying unsuccessfully to argue an overdraft fee when I was 20. Not exactly sentimental stuff.

At various times in the eight years since Bank of America vacated the premises, the politicians and developers seeking public money to rehabilitate the building have spent too much time trying to capitalize on nostalgia that doesn’t really exist. That argument hasn’t worked, and Rhode Island’s tallest building is still empty.

---

That conversation should include a once-and-for-all plan for Kennedy Plaza and the bus station, a fish-or-cut-bait strategy for New York developer Jason Fane’s proposed residential tower on Dyer Street, and, perhaps most importantly, a solution for the “Superman” building.

---



Now comes word that David Sweetser, the principal at High Rock Development, which bought the building for \$33 million in 2008, is gearing up to make another request of the state. State Commerce Secretary Stefan Pryor told [The Public’s Radio](#) last week that it involves “tens of millions of dollars in subsidy.”

The exact request has not been made public, but in 2013, High Rock sought \$39 million in tax credits and other assistance to build apartments and retail space in the building. Bill Fischer, a spokesman for High Rock, said the latest proposal would be predominately residential, including an affordable housing element.

“The project would literally add a neighborhood of approximately 450 residents downtown - adding vibrancy to the city’s core, preserving the acclaimed historic character of the capital city, as well as being transformational for Kennedy Plaza,” Fischer said in prepared statement. “The project would also include a designated public meeting space within the building’s grand banking hall.”

It’s possible that any goodwill toward Sweetser has passed – especially after High Rock fell behind on its property tax bill with the city (it has since caught up) – but now seems to be as good a time as any to have a broader discussion about the future of downtown Providence once this pandemic is finally over.

That conversation should include a once-and-for-all plan for Kennedy Plaza and the bus station, a fish-or-cut-bait strategy for New York developer Jason Fane’s proposed residential tower on Dyer Street, and, perhaps most importantly, a solution for the “Superman” building.

When it comes to 111 Westminster St., we have to start by acknowledging that times have changed.

There’s deep fear in commercial real estate circles that it will be a long time before we start seeing large

businesses ready to move into new office space downtown, and the state repeatedly struck out trying to market the “Superman” building before the pandemic. Hasbro, Samsonite, and PayPal all passed in recent years.

The anchor tenant approach was always something favored by former governor Gina Raimondo, in part because she didn’t think there was a chance to win public support for a project that didn’t come with an announcement that hundreds or thousands of jobs would be created.

Raimondo’s instincts were probably right at the time, but there’s virtually no chance of landing a major company in that building in the next couple of years.

So the conversation shifts to a few possibilities: an apartment complex, a government takeover involving a years-long eminent domain process which would end up costing the city or the state (or both) millions of dollars, or we could be sitting in the same spot 10 years from now with the owner willing to sit on the vacant building.

“To tear down that building in the middle of city, it would be an absolute sin,” said Michael Sabitoni, the president of the Rhode Island Building and Construction Trades Council.

Sabitoni comes with a significant amount of political influence in the discussion. Every candidate for governor and mayor of Providence next year is going to seek the support of the building trades, and he said that he expects every candidate who seeks their support to back a “Superman” building project.

“If they don’t, then they’re not going to get my support,” Sabitoni said.

But we already know that Governor Dan McKee isn’t ruling out demolishing the building. And Providence Councilman John Goncalves told me that he plans to ask the city to study the feasibility of taking it by eminent domain.

Two of the key players in any “Superman” building discussion, House Speaker Joseph Shekarchi and Senate President Dominick Ruggerio, aren’t quite tipping their hands on where they stand yet.

Shekarchi said he and House Majority Leader Chris Blazewski haven’t been briefed on any plan. Ruggerio acknowledged he hasn’t been briefed either, but said he hopes there “will be an intriguing mixed-use plan that will attract residents, businesses, and investment into downtown.”

“The Superman Building has sat empty for far too long,” Ruggerio said. “It is time to reevaluate the merits of a residential proposal and how it can help reinvigorate downtown Providence.”

At this point, an apartment complex sounds like it might be the state’s best bet, but it should come with strings attached. For starters, a true commitment to affordable housing.

For good reason, housing was all the rage at the State House this year.

Shekarchi successfully pushed through a package of bills designed to increase the housing supply, especially for affordable housing. McKee has also asked Lieutenant Governor Sabina Matos to focus on a strategy to build more housing.

This is a moment when elected officials might have the ability to attach strong requirements to any subsidy they offer – like making 25 percent of the units available to low- and moderate-income residents. The Providence City Council could do the same if High Rock seeks a tax stabilization agreement from the city.

©2021 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC

UNTIL we know the exact request for taxpayer support from High Rock, it's too soon to say whether the project should move forward.

But dismissing a chance to build housing before we know those details doesn't make much sense, either. And it would be a disservice to downtown.

---

**Golf update:** Last week, I told you about [my ongoing quest](#) to score in the 80s in golf. I hired a coach, PGA Professional John Simmons, and we've been hard at work at the range. I'm realizing that John and I have a lot in common. I coach seven-year-olds in baseball, and I often say things like "good idea" to the kids who run to third base instead of first after they hit the ball, or "nice miss" to a pitcher who throws the ball six feet over the umpire's head.

At the end of our last session, I was a little fatigued and kept hitting the top of the ball, resulting in poorly hit ground balls. "Sounded good," Simmons kept telling me, trying not to snicker. It's early still, but something appears to be clicking. I almost reached my goal on Saturday, missing a birdie on the 18th hole that would have given me an 89.

---

Dan McGowan can be reached at [dan.mcgowan@globe.com](mailto:dan.mcgowan@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter at [@danmcgowan](https://twitter.com/danmcgowan).

 [Show comments](#)