Town-gown peace
Suffolk University brokers peace deal with historic neighborhood

By Lawrence Harmon | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 02, 2013

The modern look of Suffolk University’s planned classroom building contrasts with Beacon Hill’s historic style.

BEACON HILL is ideal terrain for town-gown battles. Foot-loose students from Suffolk University and no-nonsense homeowners are pressed tightly together. The university needs elbow room but receives little quarter from the historic preservationists who pop
up from behind every bush or the Beacon Hill Civic Association — the Special Forces of Boston’s community groups.

Yet peace reigns on Beacon Hill while the fight over institutional development intensifies in other parts of the city, including neighborhoods bordered by Harvard and Northeastern universities. So how did Suffolk, which didn’t open an office of community relations until 2006, become such a symbol of contentment?

On Valentine’s Day, city officials approved Suffolk’s plan to demolish a building on Somerset Street on the edge of Beacon Hill and build in its place a 10-story academic building with classrooms for 1,200 students. The project got the blessing of its Beacon Hill neighbors partly because of its sharp contrast with Suffolk’s original proposal — an out-of-scale 31-story dorm. But the project also benefitted greatly from Suffolk’s efforts over the past few years to genuinely listen to the concerns of neighbors, leading to a “non-expansion” pact on residential Beacon Hill. Suffolk opted instead to branch out into Downtown Crossing, where it has built new dorms and renovated a historic theater.

John Nucci, Suffolk’s vice president for community affairs, led the peace-making efforts. The campus and student body are small compared with other universities in Boston. Still, the success is so great that Suffolk deserves to be a case study in town-gown relations.

“I treated it like a political campaign, walking the streets and listening to people,” said Nucci, a former Boston city councilor. “I realized that this job is about earning trust and credibility. You can’t go to neighborhoods only when you are looking for something.”

Ears should be burning at Harvard University, where long-range plans to expand into Allston stalled along with the economy in 2010. Now the university is eager to move ahead with plans for everything from an enormous science center to a residential and retail complex along Western Avenue. But the university’s relations with its Allston neighbors have hit the skids. In January, the Harvard Allston Task Force — a group of local leaders who advocate for the neighborhood — complained to city officials that Harvard was taking a “piecemeal” approach to planning as well as backing away from specific commitments, including the construction of a three-acre park.

“Until Harvard has agreed with the community on an Allston/Brighton Community Master Plan,” they wrote, “we intend to oppose all other Harvard projects and zoning requests.”
Harvard officials predict the resumption of a healthy dialogue with their neighbors as early as next week. They point to Harvard’s inclusion of community members on the committee that chose a developer for a residential and retail complex at the intersection of North Harvard Street and Western Avenue. But task force member Harry Mattison said that the imbalance of power is omnipresent.

“Everything Harvard wants speeds along at 70 miles per hour,” said Mattison.
“Everything the community wants gets stuck in a ditch.”

Across town, several elected officials, including city councilors Tito Jackson and Michael Ross, are charging that Northeastern University has abandoned its commitment to house its undergraduates on campus. That leaves working families in the Fenway and Mission Hill areas at a disadvantage when trying to compete for apartments. In a recent letter to the city’s planning agency, the politicians charged that “the number of undergraduates living in these neighborhoods is at an all-time high.” Now the signers are refusing to support the filing of the university’s master plan.

Northeastern officials cite plans to add 720 new dorm beds next year. They argue that the university can’t concentrate solely on new dorms when the campus requires new recreational facilities for students already living on campus. But it is the communication breakdown — not the arguments and counterarguments — that leaps out in this case, especially at a university that cultivates a close relationship with City Hall.

Northeastern officials, said Ross, “ought to have their ears to the ground.”

University officials actually do a lot of listening. But what they hear rarely leads to deep changes in university development plans. Neighbors, meanwhile, say they are sick of scraps. And that’s why Suffolk University stands out. For once, neighbors actually sat down at a university’s table and came away full.

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