

Slow Build-Up
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A massive redevelopment is slowly, almost invisibly, gearing up near the west bank of the Schuylkill River.

It's not on the bank itself, which consists principally of the traffic-choked Schuylkill Expressway and isn't slated for any major changes. Nor is it, at least for the near future, in the railroad-track-filled channel that runs along the west side of the highway around Chestnut and Walnut streets.

But the new development does include more than 21 acres of prime real estate south of 30th Street Station, and constitutes a major expansion for the University of Pennsylvania. The school bought the old post office property last summer for \$50.6 million, sold the landmark building to a developer, and is designing park areas, several athletic fields and a north-south boardwalk on the site's sprawling parking lot.

The developer Brandywine Realty Trust has grand plans for a complex dubbed Cira Centre South on part of the property. It would include a 42-story office, hotel and condo tower on Walnut Street, a large adjoining parking garage, and an apartment tower on Chestnut Street.

Construction of the garage is slated to begin by early fall and end in 2010; the towers are tentatively expected to be finished in 2011. Demolition has begun inside the post office building, which will be renovated to become an IRS office.

Collectively, the projects will cost more than \$2 billion, create a new West Philly skyline, expand the university's reach, and potentially revitalize a barren district dominated by traffic and industrial uses.

"This provides Penn the opportunity to connect the campus to Center City," says Anne Papageorge, vice president for facilities and real estate at the university. "There's been somewhat of a wasteland or a barrier between Center City and Penn, and this allows us to bridge that gap and to create more opportunities for a host of activities."

The university has heralded the project as the consummation of years of aspiration. The public, not so much.

"It's been discussed in the neighborhoods, but not with the passion that comes with some of the developments Penn undertakes, mostly because it doesn't have any direct impact on the neighbors," says Carol Jenkins, University City's Democratic ward leader.

"It's hard to get people all enthused about development that's totally within institutions themselves," she says.

Public reaction to the project might also be muted because it's part of an even larger plan so ambitious that it seems speculative.

For example, this year Penn plans to build a meandering elevated walkway over the Amtrak lines, to give access to Hollenback athletic center while the South Street bridge is torn down and rebuilt. The university's master plan then calls for a new pedestrian bridge over the Schuylkill, connecting the elevated walkway and the school's Locust Walk to the Fidler Square area.

"I have to take these things with a grain of salt," Jenkins says of Penn's proposals. "It's a pretty massive undertaking they're proposing. I'm sure there are going to be many, many, many revisions."

The long-term plans also call for four 15-story medical-related towers near the southern tip of riverfront property Penn owns, about a mile down the river from the postal lands. The university is already constructing two hospital buildings just to the west, in the growing medical district near Children's Hospital.

At the same time, the massive scope of Penn's and Brandywine's ambitions won't completely remake the landscape, or improve access to the river.

When Providence, R.I., underwent revitalization in the 1990s, it relocated train lines out of its central district. But the Amtrak and freight lines along the Schuylkill will remain for the most part untouched. Penn's design sketches show students strolling under an old elevated train track on their way to the picturesque new bridge.

And the prospect of Brandywine buying the rights to cover and build over the Amtrak lines adjacent to the post office site seems dim. Cira Centre South would be oriented to the north, south and west, but not toward the rail lines, highway and river to the east. Papageorge says Brandywine is in discussions about the track area with Amtrak, but Brandywine says it knows of "no plans" by Amtrak for the property.