

Brunswick Station: *Redeveloping an Abandoned Brownfield for Downtown Infill*

by Randall Arendt

Location: Maine Street, Brunswick, Maine

Developers: JHR Development of Maine, LLC (Marblehead, MA), Town of Brunswick

Site Engineers: Mactec Engineering and Consulting, Inc. (Portland, ME), Sitelines PA (Brunswick, ME)

Architects: Michael Wang, Arrowstreet (Somerville, MA); Gawron Turgeon Architects (Scarborough, ME)

Dates: 2007-present

Brunswick Station is a mixed-use commercial real estate development on a 5.8-acre downtown site fronting onto the town's principal thoroughfare (Maine Street) and bordering the Central Maine and Quebec Railway and Amtrak Downeaster rail lines. It is also nearly adjacent to the Bowdoin College campus.

After Brunswick's passenger rail service ceased in 1960, the train station was closed and the entire site fell into disuse for several decades. Although the property is situated in a key commercial location, adjacent to a large supermarket at the southern end of the downtown business district, redevelopment efforts were thwarted for many years because the rail yard had become contaminated with coal ash deposited by train operations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, recognizing the site's significant potential for new development, and eager to alleviate the visual blight and to revitalize the property, town officials seized the initiative and proactively acquired the acreage, buying it in 1998, after purchasing an option on it in September 1977, actions that were strongly encouraged by Planning Director Andrew Singelakis. These bold moves, which were loudly criticized by some at the time, were almost unprecedented, but were absolutely necessary and were the right things for the community to do.

To kick-start the project, the town wisely partnered with Bowdoin College, which agreed to purchase two acres along Union Street to construct the \$5 million McLellan Building. For more than a decade this three-story structure housed some of the College's administrative offices plus studio art space and community meeting space. In 2013 the town bought this building and moved its municipal offices there the following year, allowing its former premises along Federal Street to be razed and redeveloped as headquarters for Coastal Enterprises, one of the nation's leading community development finance institutions. Brunswick essentially swapped the redundant Longfellow elementary school (built in 1924) with the College as part of its deal to occupy the McLellan Building. Bowdoin then spent \$6.5 million to renovate the school, adjacent to its campus, as a dance and art center.



Figure 1. The McLellan Building, the first structure built at Brunswick Station, originally provided office space for Bowdoin College, but was later purchased by the town for use as its municipal building.

Town officials expanded the scope of the original Maine Street Station (now Brunswick Station) redevelopment effort in 2004 when it appointed the Maine Street Station Steering Committee to create an ambitious master plan for an additional 17 acres of adjoining land including parcels owned by the Maine DOT and a feed and farm store, extending another block westward past Union Street, to Spring Street (although by 2016 no further changes have occurred on most of that additional acreage, where more than 20 new residential, retail, office, and mixed-use buildings have been envisioned).

More significantly, in that same year the town initiated a process that secured clean-up funds from the USEPA and economic development funds from both the US EDA and the Maine state government.

Three years later, in 2007, Brunswick selected JHR Development to jointly develop a \$20 million project on what remained of the original 5.8-acre Brunswick Station site. The property is located within easy walking distance of downtown restaurants and shops, Bowdoin College, and the Maine State Music Theatre, as well as the rail platform. The town was responsible for site clean-up, infrastructure improvements, and establishing Tax Increment Financing for the project. The developer (JHR) was responsible for creating a mixed-use plan in keeping with the town's Master Plan, and is being built out over three phases.

The physical plan arranged buildings along the parcel's periphery to create strong edges and to internalize and visually subordinate most of the surface parking (there are no enclosed garage spaces). Although several parking lots are visible from Noble Street and the new Station Avenue, they are all fairly well-screened with landscaping. All buildings are at least two stories in height, increasing land-use efficiency and contributing positively to the downtown townscape, unlike many projects built in prior decades, where front parking was allowed to dominate development parcels having only single-story structures.



Figure 2. The six buildings in pink represent new infill at Brunswick Station. The last structure is being completed in 2017, a 24-unit residential building in the middle of the southern half.

Phase One of Brunswick Station encompasses approximately 40,000 SF of mixed-use space including retail, restaurants, and medical offices. Bowdoin was originally a major tenant, placing its bookstore in one of the three buildings. It also occupied the second floor of another building for offices, but those spaces have since been let to commercial tenants. Current tenants include Miracle Ear, Edible Arrangements, Scarlet Begonias Restaurant, Byrnes Irish Pub and Restaurant, Mechanics Savings Bank, and the Brunswick Visitor Center. It also includes a large medical office building occupied by Mid-Coast Primary Care and Walk-in Clinic and the OA Centers for Orthopaedics. These buildings maintain a traditional relationship with the street, as per the town's design standards (which essentially produce the same results a "form-based codes"; but without the complexity often associated with FBCs).

Phase Two is the Brunswick Hotel & Tavern, a 52-room hotel with a full-service restaurant and function space for 150 people, which opened in 2011. It was built in a classic traditional style consistent with the town's architectural heritage, and is located on the corner of Maine and Noble Streets.



Figures 3 and 4: Pictured above are the Brunswick Hotel & Tavern (left) and a large mixed-use building containing a bank, a visitors' center, the Amtrak station, and two restaurants (one with an outdoor sidewalk dining area)

JHR is currently engaged in Phase Three, and in 2017 built 24 residential units on a lot facing Noble Street lot, but without covered parking (which is unusual in this snowy climate). One final lot, facing Union Street, remains to be built, and is proposed to contain retail and offices.

After a multi-million project to upgrade tracks and bridges between Portland and Brunswick, Amtrak passenger rail service began in November 2012, with two trains per day linking the town with Portland, approximately 25 miles south, and Boston, approximately 130 miles south, restoring service that had ended in 1960. \$35 million in federal funds covered the cost of laying welded rails and improving grade crossings between Portland and Brunswick. However, ticket revenues have covered only 60 percent of operating costs, requiring a continuing subsidy of about \$15 per passenger, according to federal and state officials, with 80 percent of that amount being covered by the federal government. (Although this revenue shortfall is disappointing, it is slightly higher than that achieved on routes in highly-urbanized areas, such as Metro North and the Long Island Railroad.) http://www.pressherald.com/2013/02/04/expansion-of-passenger-trains-in-maine-takes-slow-track_2013-02-04/

Currently, the rail service between Brunswick and Portland is limited, with only three trains a day, and the journey from Portland to Boston is lengthy because of numerous stops at local stations along the way. Proceeding farther south requires that passengers transfer between two stations in Boston a mile apart, by subway, taxi, or foot, with layovers of one to two hours. However, adding a second set of tracks in the four-mile stretch through Falmouth and Cumberland, planned for 2017, will make it possible to run five daily round trips between Brunswick and Boston.

Concord Coach Lines operates twice-daily bus service in both directions, from Brunswick Station to Boston (both Logan Airport and Amtrak's South Station), with only one stop (in Portland). Beginning in August 2017 the MetroBREEZE bus service will provide 13 express trips to and from Brunswick and Portland.

