

The Facts About Roxbury Prep and 361 Belgrade Avenue in Roslindale

Roxbury Prep has been waiting more than 450 days just to get on the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) agenda. The average project wait time is 83 days. Recently, community members have taken a renewed interest in our plight given the clear inequitable treatment the school has received by the BPDA .

The following are some frequently asked questions about our project and the delay.

- 1. How did Roxbury Prep come to pick 361 Belgrade to develop into a school?** Roxbury Prep looked at more than 60 sites across Boston over a multi-year period. The Belgrade site is not only zoned for a school, but it is the ideal site that will meet all of our programmatic needs. This site provides the opportunity to construct a building that will include 23 classrooms, cutting edge science and computer labs, a full-sized gymnasium, cafeteria, and above and below ground parking. Further, the site is perfectly situated on multiple public transportation lines which is an essential element for our school as over 90% of our students take public transportation to get to and from school.
- 2. Why didn't Roxbury Prep wait until it had secured a building before allowing students to attend?** Roxbury Prep had been a 5th-8th grade school for over a decade, but in response to feedback from families, we opened a high school in 2015 to support our students to and through college. Our high school opened with a cohort of 9th graders and, under normal circumstances, this would have allowed enough time to build the high school facility we would need. We could not have expected that the Boston Planning and Development Agency would keep a project off of their agenda without a development-related reason. We continue to be at a loss for why we have not been given a hearing date as any other project would.
- 3. What impact would Roxbury Prep at Belgrade have on Boston Public Schools?** None. The seats allotted to Roxbury Prep already exist and we cannot add more seats. In 2016, the Question 2 vote on charter expansion was defeated, thus Roxbury Prep is not able to add more seats. We only seek to serve the students we already have in a building that they deserve. The students currently go to school in separate buildings miles apart—the 9th and 10th graders in one facility and the 11th and 12th graders in another. No cafeteria, no gym, no science labs.
- 4. Is this really a charter vs. district issue? What have elected officials of color said about the Roxbury Prep situation?** Councilman Ricardo Arroyo has made clear that this isn't a charter or district issue and that this is about being heard. He said so in an op-ed in the Bay State Banner ([Roxbury Prep Deserves a Fair and Transparent Process](#)). The school has received letters of support from other elected officials of color, including Councilor Andrea Campbell, Representatives Nika Elugardo, Russell Holmes and Liz Miranda. Representative Miranda stated in her letter asking the BPDA to place us on the agenda

that: “It is not lost on me that nearly every Roxbury Prep student is a young person of color. We as leaders in the City of Boston have a moral obligation to ensure all students have equitable access to appropriate facilities no matter where they are from.” All of these leaders’ voices have been ignored.

5. **What is the development process for Roxbury Prep? How is Uncommon Schools involved?** Uncommon Schools is the non-profit charter management organization that provides Roxbury Prep with support to help ensure it can continue its mission to get students from low-income backgrounds into college. Uncommon Schools partners with Roxbury Prep to create curricular expertise and resources, professional development and other supports in order for Roxbury Prep to provide a high-quality education to its 1,500 middle school students so that they can succeed in and graduate from college.
6. **What is the transparency around Roxbury Prep?** As a public school, Roxbury Prep adheres to the same state laws, rules, and regulations around transparency and public information that is required of a district school. Roxbury Prep’s budget and board meetings, for example, are public.
7. **Why rely on LLCs for the purchase and development of Belgrade?** Forming an LLC to purchase and develop a property is standard real estate practice and normally required by lenders when using debt to finance a project. The state of Massachusetts does not provide facilities for charter schools—very much unlike district schools, which means that charter schools are responsible for either leasing an existing school building, if one is available, leasing commercial space, or constructing its own. Consequently, Uncommon Schools, which is a non-profit organization whose sole mission is to ensure students prepare for and graduate from college, sets up LLCs in order to purchase and develop properties that its schools need. Uncommon Schools is a nonprofit governed by federal non-profit laws, meaning all of its funding is used to support its mission and there is zero individual gain. Non-profits are regulated by the IRS and by the Attorney General, and any violation would be punishable by law.
8. **What are the BPDA’s plans for the neighborhood?** The neighborhood actually went through an exhaustive planning process and decided that the site should be zoned for a school. In September of 2005, Mayor Menino appointed a 15-member Advisory Group comprised of community leaders, members of various neighborhood associations and longtime Roslindale residents. By the end of 2007, they had met 14 times, working closely with the BRA and other city agencies. In addition, there were three community-wide meetings and forums. As a result of all of the feedback, the [Roslindale Neighborhood Strategic Plan](#) was written and adopted by the BRA Board in October 2007 as the guiding document for development. In that plan, 361 Belgrade was zoned for a school.
9. **Why not just go find another site if it’s clear that some people don’t want you here?** We know there are far more supporters than opponents. Over 85% of the comments filed

with the BPDA during the official comment period were in favor of the project, including many, many beautiful letters from people who live in West Roxbury. For the most part, those letters call attention to the obvious racial overtones of the treatment of the school. For instance, one West Roxbury resident wrote that “the attacks against having the school located at 361 Belgrade are rooted in racism and there's no room for that in our community. We need to support this hard-working school and have a place for these hard-working kids to learn.” All of these letters are public on the BPDA website.

10. Who else has called attention to the inequity of not allowing this project to be heard on the BPDA's agenda? The Boston Globe editorial pages have written twice about it –in [May 2019](#) and [June 2020](#). Indeed, the Boston Globe noted this summer that “at a time when issues of racial justice and equity have risen to the top of a lot of political to-do lists, a school that has provided quality education for a largely nonwhite student body for the past 20 years ought to be a shoo-in for equitable treatment...so why is it that the well-respected Roxbury Prep can't seem to get any traction on its plans for a new high school on the site of a now-shuttered auto service center on Belgrade Avenue at the edge of Roslindale near West Roxbury” even after it has “repeatedly modified its plans to address community opposition.” It concludes that the project “deserves to be put to a vote.”

11. How has Roxbury Prep grown in the area of student discipline and suspensions? For the past several years, reducing out of school suspensions and maximizing learning time for all students has been a key focus area for Roxbury Prep, while ensuring they have a positive and safe environment where everyone can learn. Our suspension rate has declined from 28% in 2016 to 8% last year, and we are working on driving it down even lower. We have instituted increased de-escalation training as well as restorative justice practices to help our students solve conflicts in ways that will contribute to their growth.

12. Has Roxbury Prep turned down other viable sites? We absolutely have not.

Should you like to connect, please email John.Verrilli@roxburyprep.org. We have done everything that is required of us by the BPDA. We are asking for a fair opportunity for our project to be reviewed and voted on by the BPDA board.