

Six things we know about Michelle Wu's plan to overhaul the BPDA

The mayor on Wednesday outlined her long-awaited plans to remake the powerful agency that governs planning and development in Boston.

By [Catherine Carlock](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 26, 2023, 1:43 p.m.



Mayor Michelle Wu this week outlined her plans to overhaul the Boston Planning & Development Agency, the quasi-governmental authority that has long wielded immense power over the look and feel of Boston from its offices on the top floor of City Hall. CHARLES KRUPA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

"It's a new dawn/ it's a new day," Nina Simone's voice crooned over the sound system at Fenway's newly-constructed MGM Music Hall Wednesday night at the end of Boston Mayor Michelle Wu's first state of the city address. And indeed, the evening represented a new day for real estate development in the city, as Wu outlined the long-awaited first steps in how her administration will dilute the powers of the Boston Planning and Development Agency.

The BPDA for nearly seven decades has wielded immense power over the look and feel of Boston and its neighborhoods, responsible almost solely to the mayor and a five-member board - four of whom are appointed by the mayor. The then-Boston Redevelopment Authority was infamously responsible for razing neighborhoods including the West End and Scollay Square in the 1950s and '60s in the name of urban renewal, and later was used as a tool for late Mayor Tom Menino's [personal design peccadilloes](#).

Shortly after he took office nine years ago, former mayor Martin J. Walsh launched an overhaul of the agency, with a focus on transparency and [neighborhood-focused planning](#). He even [rebranded](#) it, after a \$670,000 study, to the Boston Planning and Development Agency.

Much like mayoral candidates before her, Wu initially called for abolishing the BPDA - [long a political punching bag](#) - issuing an ambitious and widely circulated [white paper](#) in 2019 as she geared up to run. But her current plan, as outlined Wednesday night, stops short of abolishing the agency altogether (which would require approval by the Massachusetts Legislature).



Mayor Michelle Wu delivers her first State of the City Address at MGM Music Hall at Fenway on Wednesday. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

What she instead proposed is creating a separate city planning and design department - functions that are currently run out of BPDA - and "restore planning as a central function of City government." And she would make the agency more directly accountable to the City Council, not just the Mayor, by giving the Council oversight of its budget and putting most BPDA staff on the city - not the agency's - payroll.

The plan comes as Boston's real estate industry is bracing for a downturn, with [office vacancy at its highest rate in decades](#) and looming fears of a drop in property valuations and the real estate taxes that comprise [75 percent](#) of the city's operating budget. It also will take months, perhaps years, to play out, with a host of both bureaucratic and policy ramifications. But here are some key takeaways from what we know now.

Arthur Jemison's job just got a lot harder.

And it was pretty hard to begin with. Jemison, who [joined the city last spring](#) from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and whose leadership has been well-regarded locally, already had a dual role of Chief of Planning and Director of the BPDA. Now, he'll be tasked with spearheading the logistics of transitioning an agency created by state law in 1957 into City Hall, and the myriad personnel and budgetary issues that come along with that change.

Speaking of the budget...

As of now, the BPDA's is largely funded through leases on publicly-owned land, along with grants. In 2014, a [withering audit](#) ordered by Walsh found the agency had no idea how much money it was owed and by whom - nor even how much land it owned in the first place. And the agency revamped and digitized its internal systems used to track its

leases and rent owed by developers. Wu's plan would eventually move the BPDA's budget - \$75.2 million in [fiscal 2020](#) - under the mayor and chief financial officer and approved by the City Council, like most other city departments. Wu "intends for revenue from the BPDA to be used for Planning on the City side," a city spokesperson said. Moving any staff from the BPDA into a city department doesn't require approval by the BPDA board - but moving any funding does.

"While BPDA revenues will be an important part of offsetting the new costs of moving staff to the City of Boston, the creation of a central city planning function on the city side also presents the opportunity to expand the overall budget for planning and development activities over time," a city spokesperson said.

After [losing a large number of staffers](#) during COVID and the extended mayoral transition between Walsh and Wu, the BPDA and sister agency the Economic Development Industrial Corp. now employ 202 people. Since Jemison was appointed BPDA director and chief planner in May, 49 people have joined the agency, while 29 have departed, a city spokesperson said. [More than two dozen positions are](#) currently listed on the agency's website. BPDA and EDIC staff will gradually shift to being city employees.

What does this mean for Article 80?

Developers and community members are certainly familiar with the BPDA's [multi-step development-review process](#) that requires public meetings and other briefings for developers to pitch projects. The current staffers that manage Article 80 will be part of the new department, the city said. A city spokesperson said they "don't anticipate any impact on the Article 80 development review and approvals."

"The only significant change will be that staff working on these projects will be paid by the City, rather than the BPDA," a city spokesperson said. "For now, the BPDA will continue to exist as an entity that holds the planning board powers for Boston as designated by state law. Development review will continue to be managed by BPDA staff at this point."

What's the timing on this?

"The new department will be launched in the coming months associated with the FY24 budget process," a city spokesperson said. "This is a complex task and will take at least a year to fully execute. The exact specifics of what teams move on what timeline will be worked out in the months ahead."

The agency formerly known as the BRA underwent a rebranding to the BPDA in 2016. What will the city use as an acronym for the newly created planning and design department?

TBD.

Catherine Carlock can be reached at catherine.carlock@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@bycathcarlock](https://twitter.com/bycathcarlock).

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