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## Construction has begun on Rindge Commons, combining affordable housing with job training

By [Marc Levy](#)

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**Construction is underway Thursday at the Economic Mobility Hub at Rindge Commons in Cambridge's Alewife area. (Photo: Marc Levy)**

A ceremonial groundbreaking Thursday doubled as a fundraising drive for Rindge Commons, a project of the nonprofit developer Just A Start that by completion in 2026 will bring 100 units of lower-income family housing

to Cambridge's Alewife area, along with an education and job-training center.

Though construction is underway on the first of two buildings – at one point during the event, the noise of pile drivers became a distraction – the 15 speeches given over the course of an hour were equal parts giving credit for the complex work of preparing the project and reminders that more was needed before the building opens early in 2024.

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“We’ve got more work to do,” said Wayne Patenaude of Cambridge Savings Bank, a campaign chair. He noted that the \$3.2 million raised so far gets fundraising 80 percent of the way to its goal. He directed the audience to get involved that day by seeking out campaign cabinet members and making a pledge.

The total cost of the combined projects is more than \$37 million, of which philanthropy is expected to provide nearly \$4 million for the nonresidential part.

Another campaign chair, real estate agent Lisa Drapkin, noted that every board member “had skin in the game” by giving some of their own money to the project, with donations ranging from \$100 to her own \$100,000. “The amount that the insiders have given is particularly extraordinary,” she said. “Together the board and executive staff ... have committed close to \$300,000.”



**Around 100 people gathered Thursday for the groundbreaking ceremony. (Photo: Marc Levy)**

She also pointed out waiting Just A Start campaign crew members to the audience, which included city councillors, staff and City Manager Yi-An Huang; state-level politicians; and others active in the community, such as Geeta Pradhan, president of the Cambridge Community Foundation, lawyer and former city and state politician Anthony Galluccio and Tom Evans of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority. The event and underlying project is a who's who of Cambridge, with a fundraising campaign that includes Sam Gebru of Black Lion Strategies, former city councillors Jan Devereux and David Maher, developers such as John DiGiovanni of Trinity Property Management and Chris Chandor of The Davis Cos., architect Mark Boyes-Watson and many more.

“Affordable-housing development is the ultimate team sport. It requires so many people coming together to get things done,” Said Mike Kennealy, secretary of the state Office of Housing and Economic Development. Before Huang – in his seventh week on the job – got up to speak, that message was underlined by Just A Start’s executive director, Carl Nagy-Koechlin: “I think what he’s seeing here today is how well we work together in Cambridge, whether it’s CEOs at banks or the housing authority, and how well we all work with the Community Development Department and the Office of Workforce Development. He’s coming into a role where he not only has top-flight professionals in these positions, but a progressive City Council that is aligned with this vision of making sure that Cambridge remains the diverse place that we’ve come to know and love.”

The first dollar commitment to the campaign was IQHQ, a life-sciences developer relatively new to the city, and its \$500,000 – matched by the Massachusetts Life Science Center – gives it lead donor honors, Nagy-Koechlin said. IQHQ went further, making its Chrissy Gabriel a representative on the capital campaign committee to assist with other donors. “They are committed to connecting us with their eventual tenants to help us establish partnerships whereby these employers hire the graduates of our training programs and support our programs in other ways,” Nagy-Koechlin said.

### The project



**A rendering of Just A Start’s two-part project as it’s expected to look in 2026. (Image: Just A Start)**

The two-structure project replaces a section of the parking lot for the affordable Rindge Tower Apartments at Rindge Avenue and Alewife Brook Parkway, across from the Alewife MBTA red line T stop.

The second building will hold 77 new affordable homes. The six-story first building, known as the Economic Mobility Hub at Rindge Commons, includes 24 affordable units over 32,000 square feet; 10,000 square feet of preschool classrooms; 6,000 square feet of office rentals; and 22,000 square feet of Just A Start headquarters program space for biotech and information technology workforce training programs, a Youthbuild wood shop and job training center, and housing and finance resources.

“It’s a better use for this windswept parking lot,” Nagy-Koechlin said, though combining housing and the other uses added complication.

It puts job-training in innovation fields within easy walking distance of a fast-developing biotech hub at a time more workers in the field are

needed desperately, said Kenn Turner, chief executive of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center.

### Need for skilled workers



**Subrata Das speaks Thursday at the Rindge Commons groundbreaking ceremony. Just A Start executive director Carl Nagy-Koechlin listens. (Photo: Marc Levy)**

With the state on target to add 25 million square feet of life-sciences space through \$1.5 billion in investments, there's imminent demand for some 40,000 skilled workers. "I have criss-crossed the state meeting with all of our major private partners. Literally every single one of them is telling me that they cannot meet their talent demands," Turner said. "To keep that engine running, we have to have talented people. So the work that organizations like Just A Start is doing is critical."

Speakers also included Subrata Das, who graduated from Just A Start's biomedical career program in September but has been involved with the nonprofit since arriving in the United States from Bangladesh in 2011. "I spent my first night here at a Just A Start affordable rental unit," Das said, then "was fortunate to hear about" the city's affordable homeownership program. He bought a home through Just A Start in 2018, he said, and, while working with the real estate team, learned about its biomedical program. "I have always had great passion for science, but I wasn't able to pursue that in Bangladesh," he said. "Just A Start has helped me get a home and build my career and future."

## Foundation for families

Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui also spoke, recounting how she grew up “around the corner” at Rindge Towers affordable housing and used Just A Start’s job program as a high schooler trying to perfect her résumé. “I was helped by so many of their staff,” Siddiqui said. “I’m just so happy to now see them provide the services here as well that made such a difference in my life ... Every one of these new apartments will provide a stable foundation, a home and an opportunity for growth for a family that would not” have it otherwise.

The 24 apartments in the first Rindge Commons building are budgeted at \$15 million. The \$22.3 million needed for the rest comes together through a complex formula, according to a campaign presentation: The biggest chunk is \$11 million in debt financing in the form of a mortgage; Just A Start’s land reuse accounts for \$700,000, and sale of its Wellington-Harrington headquarters ahead of its relocation to Rindge Commons means another \$3.1 million; there’s a \$2.7 million tax credit; and then \$3.8 in philanthropy for which Patenaude, Drapkin and others urged people to consider contributing. That money goes to fit-out, furnishings and equipment for the nonprofit’s headquarters and jobs programming, said director of philanthropy Carmen Chan on Friday.

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*This post was updated Nov. 21, 2022, to note the contributions of IQHQ to Rindge Commons.*

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### ◀ Previous story

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