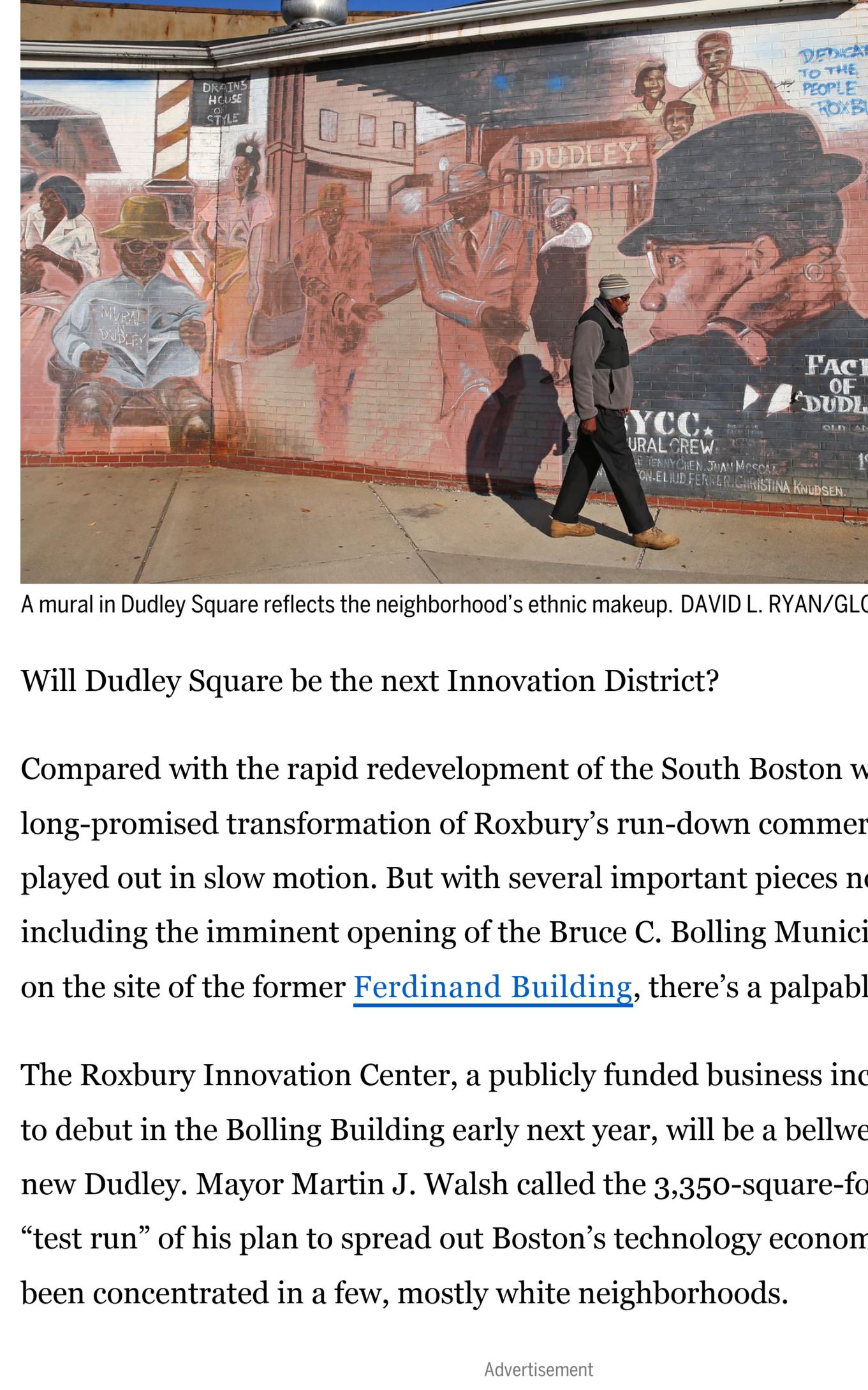


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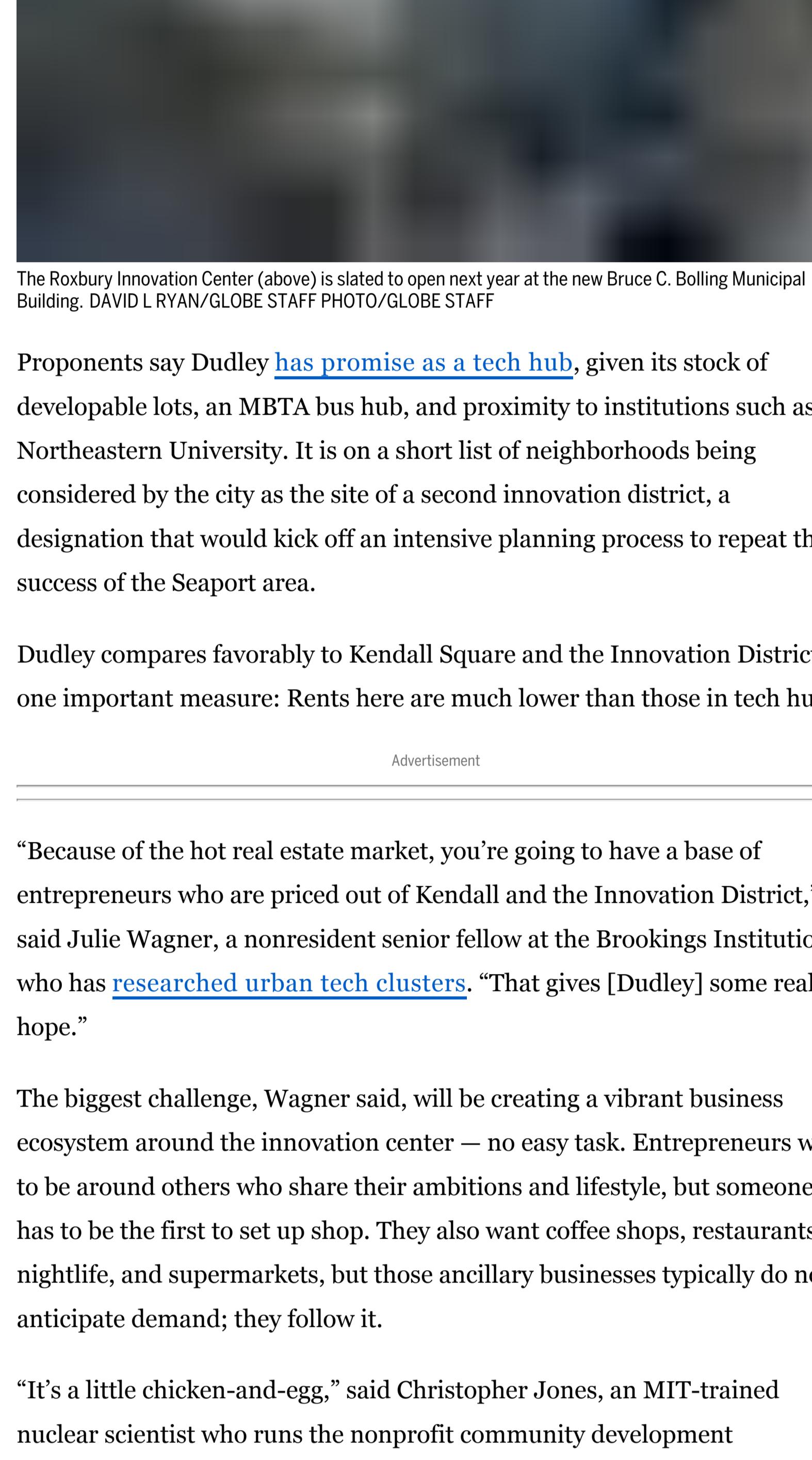
Could Dudley Square be an incubator for tech firms?

Boston officials are counting on its new center to be the spark that turns promise into production.

By Dan Adams Globe Correspondent,

December 9, 2014, 10:15 p.m.

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A mural in Dudley Square reflects the neighborhood's ethnic makeup. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Will Dudley Square be the next Innovation District?

Compared with the rapid redevelopment of the South Boston waterfront, the long-promised transformation of Roxbury's run-down commercial hub has played out in slow motion. But with several important pieces now in place, including the imminent opening of the Bruce C. Bolling Municipal Building on the site of the former [Ferdinand Building](#), there's a palpable [buzz](#) here.

The Roxbury Innovation Center, a publicly funded business incubator slated to debut in the Bolling Building early next year, will be a bellwether for the new Dudley. Mayor Martin J. Walsh called the 3,350-square-foot facility a "test run" of his plan to spread out Boston's technology economy, which has been concentrated in a few, mostly white neighborhoods.

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"We need to give people in Dudley the chance to understand what the tech and innovation economy can be for them," Walsh said in an interview. "We have to make sure wealth is shared, so people who grew up in Roxbury can come back and invest there."

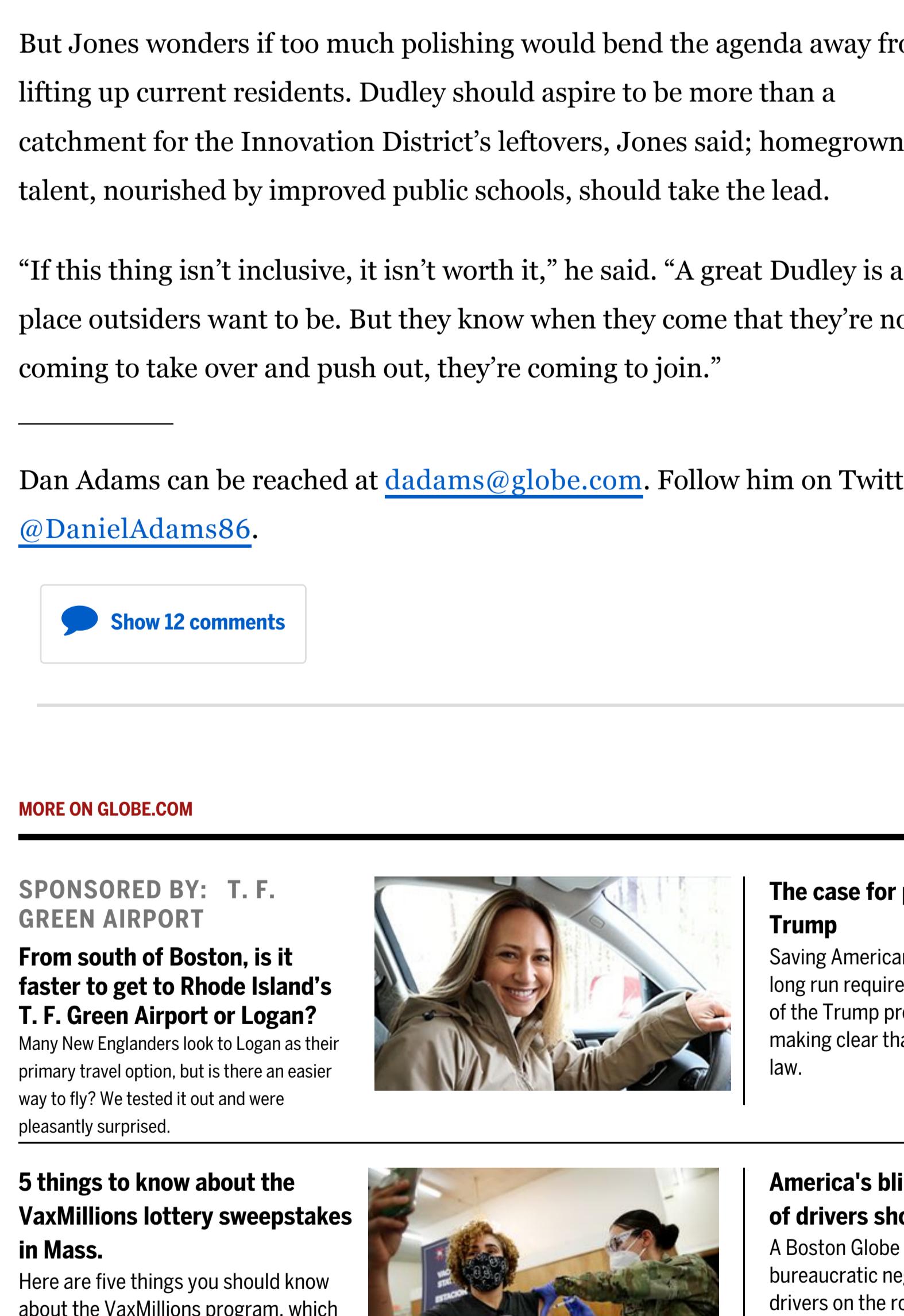
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So far, private developers and investors have been [reluctant to put money into Dudley](#), following investments by the city and nonprofits. They say the area is too isolated. But some locals wonder if it's because the overwhelming majority of Dudley-area residents are black or Latino.



The Roxbury Innovation Center (above) is slated to open next year at the new Bruce C. Bolling Municipal Building. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/GLOBE STAFF

Proponents say Dudley [has promise as a tech hub](#), given its stock of developable lots, an MBTA bus hub, and proximity to institutions such as Northeastern University. It is on a short list of neighborhoods being considered by the city as the site of a second innovation district, a designation that would kick off an intensive planning process to repeat the success of the Seaport area.

Dudley compares favorably to Kendall Square and the Innovation District in one important measure: Rents here are much lower than those in tech hubs.

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The biggest challenge, Wagner said, will be creating a vibrant business ecosystem around the innovation center — no easy task. Entrepreneurs want to be around others who share their ambitions and lifestyle, but someone has to be the first to set up shop. They also want coffee shops, restaurants, nightlife, and supermarkets, but those ancillary businesses typically do not anticipate demand; they follow it.

"It's a little chicken-and-egg," said Christopher Jones, an MIT-trained nuclear scientist who runs the nonprofit community development organization [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#). "There are a number of necessary pieces, and the innovation center is just one of them."

Proponents say its stock of developable lots and low rents make the area a prime candidate to become the city's next innovation district. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

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Efforts to create a tech cluster in Dudley will get a boost if the [Neighborhood Innovation District Committee](#) chooses it over other neighborhoods, such as Fields Corner and Uphams Corner.

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"Entrepreneurs want to run into each other at the coffee shop," said John Barros, the city's chief of economic development and the committee's co-chair. "They need people nearby who can create apps, do marketing, and take on legal issues. They need talent, and they need people willing to fund their ideas. Strategically coordinating all those pieces will be huge."

The city this month will choose a day-to-day operator of the Bolling Building's innovation center. A spokeswoman for Walsh said several experienced incubator operators, individuals, and nonprofits had applied. In line with the wishes of residents, applicants will be evaluated on the strength of their plans to work with the neighborhood.

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