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Race, Economic Development, and The Role of Transportation and Training

by Joan Wallace-Benjamin

As Massachusetts confronts its economic future and develops strategic plans for seizing competitive advantages, accessibility promised by proposed development plans for the transportation infrastructure must not only provide commuters with the means to get to work, but also increase the opportunity for participation in the economy for all citizens of the region. Changes in the transportation infrastructure will not ensure accessibility unless workers receive adequate training for the new types of jobs being offered. According to a recent report issued by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, authored by William P. O'Hare, "Black people who live in urbanized areas use public transportation at a higher than average rate."¹ Thus, the issue of public transportation is an important part of black economic and community development.

The African-American community and other communities of color are cognizant of the tremendous business, economic, and employment opportunities being created by the transportation development plans underway in Massachusetts. The question becomes, To what extent will communities of color, the poor and disadvantaged be able to participate in the new economy and to share the wealth?

The National Urban League has proposed a "Marshall Plan" for America, a strategic investment initiative that will be necessary to move the economy forward and secure the nation's economic future. This Marshall Plan, relevant to the work in progress in Massachusetts, is based on the following important considerations:

- African Americans and other Americans of color continue to experience exceptional disadvantages with respect to the human capital requirements of the changing economy;
- Urban centers (i.e., Boston, Worcester, and Springfield) in which African Americans and other people of color remain heavily concentrated are also areas in which educational deficiencies are most prevalent and pronounced; and,
- Urban centers with large African-American populations have seen the greatest degree of deterioration of the physical infrastructure.

The extent of improvement in work-force productivity will be determined by how well the serious deficiencies in the nation's human resources are addressed. If Boston's workers are its heart, its transportation infrastructure is



analogous to the body's interlocking network of arteries, providing a means for economic energies, ideas, and products to flow. Both the "heart" and "arteries," or workers as well as transportation systems, must be kept in good repair if the community as a whole is to prosper.

A transportation and development strategy that links the neighborhoods of Boston to one another and to the jobs and cultural institutions of the city is critical to ensuring accessibility. Linkages between the people who need employment (i.e., communities with large numbers of people who are unemployed) and the hospitals, universities, and other large employers, are required if people are to take advantage of employment opportunities. Transportation plans, therefore, must be compatible with the need to get to the work place because jobs follow transportation. Along with this realization must come a willingness to reinvest in cities. The future will require that cities be viewed as fertile ground for the development of the labor force.

The economy of the twenty-first century will have few employment opportunities for unskilled or poorly educated workers.

Accessibility does not only mean having a good transportation system in place. The development of transportation systems, roads, and bridges—or the related need for bricks and mortar—will be meaningless without skilled workers. The concern about the quality of the region's human resources stems from the increase in job skills requirements. The fastest growing occupations require postsecondary education, while demands for reasoning, math, and language proficiency are rising throughout the labor market. Ninety percent of the 18 million new jobs projected for the economy between now and the year 2000 will be in the service sector, e.g., retail trade, busi-

ness, health, and education. Although many of the new positions will not require advanced degrees, education will, nonetheless, play a pivotal role in determining an individual's economic success. Moreover, managerial, professional, and technical occupations requiring postsecondary education are, in fact, showing the fastest rates of growth.

A crucial point here is that the majority of new jobs in the future, even those that do not involve advanced education, will require solid language, math, and reading skills. The ability to give or receive directions and to think analytically is becoming increasingly important in the work place. The economy of the twenty-first century will have few employment opportunities for unskilled or poorly educated workers. The prestigious Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills estimates that presently more than 60 percent of all twenty-five-year olds lack the basic reading and writing skills necessary for employment in the modern work place, and only 10 percent of the population in that age group have enough mathematical competence for today's job market.

Curtailed federal support for employment and training programs has been drastic, down 69 percent between 1980 and 1989. Annual spending in this area is approximately 19 billion less than a decade ago, and is substantially below the percentage of the gross national product allocated to employment and training programs by other industrialized countries. In light of the issues surrounding improved economic productivity, comparisons to international efforts to assist youth in entering and performing effectively in the labor market are particularly disturbing. Other nations have been significantly more progressive in providing such supports.

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A lack of willingness to invest in youth raises serious questions about national priorities and the commitment to the work force of today and the beginning decades of the new century. America significantly underinvests in youth who are not college bound, despite the fact that the majority of today's young people do not pursue postsecondary education in a four-year institution by the time they are age twenty-five, and only one-fifth of those who do pursue a college education graduate. Why does public policy so decidedly favor college-bound youth and disfavor those who do not go to college? The answer lies in the fact that financing college educations for youth is perceived to be vital to our long-term, national economic interests. In contrast, support for employment and training for youth who do not go to college, particularly those who experience the most severe barriers to effective functioning in the labor market, is viewed more as a social than an economic necessity. Program outlays for such disadvantaged youth tend to be regarded as a current budget issue, as opposed to an investment initiative that promises significant economic returns in the form of improvements in

the work force, as well as lower costs as the result of reduced welfare dependency, crime, and related problems.

The policy issues that arise in relation to the issue of accessibility have to do with the human aspect that emerges from looking at development in a broader context. Development must be treated in human as well as physical terms. Persistent inequities are constraints to the development of the region. Progressive and aggressive actions are required to remove such limitations. Urban unrest, like that witnessed in Los Angeles in 1993 in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, is the result of overemphasis on the physical and neglect of the human development of a region. It is the price this region will pay if it moves forward without assuring that everyone will participate fully in the rewards of development.

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Economic development in a region like New England, characterized by rapidly changing demographics, will require that those most neglected and disadvantaged will be those most needed in the work force of the future. Employment and training opportunities for the members of communities that have been marginalized by inadequate education, poverty, and other disadvantages, must be provided in an atmosphere that recognizes and acknowledges the challenges and intense commitment required to develop strong and lasting employment skills in workers. Training must be rigorous, provided in a structured and supportive atmosphere over a significant period of time, and accompanied by supportive social services that address the lifestyle issues that have the potential to become real barriers to a successful work experience for many individuals.

Equity and opportunity are not new issues in the city of Boston or the region as a whole. Communities of color and the African-American community, in particular, have had to advocate strongly for their fair share of the development opportunities that transportation infrastructure and other development projects have made available to others. What does it say about a city or region when certain groups are habitually left out and feel as though they cannot depend on their leadership to protect their interests? Can such cities and regions prosper as economies become global? A fair, long-range, and equitable approach to rebuilding the region's transportation infrastructure may provide an opportunity to resolve some of the problems that have discouraged economic development.

Notes

¹William P. O'Hare, "The Urban Commuter," *Focus* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, January 1985), 5.

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