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New England's Small Cities

A Mostly Untapped Resource



When 2008 energy prices spiked and transportation costs surged, many of New England's suburban families began to wonder if they might be better off living someplace where they wouldn't need a car all the time. Many do not realize that not far from their doorsteps are small cities offering highly desirable amenities: walkable neighborhoods, transportation access, a critical mass of stores, restaurants, services, affordable housing opportunities, historic places—all without major-metropolitan congestion or the relative isolation of suburbia.



Downtown New Haven, Connecticut. iStockphoto

Some aspects of small cities need attention and support before many suburbanites tap those amenities. Fortunately, momentum is building among policymakers, advocates, and researchers for new actions to strengthen these cities and all who choose to live in them.

Forgotten Cities

Settled before the advent of the automobile, most small New England cities were once booming industrial centers, dense with population, jobs, shopping, and infrastructure.¹ But in the wake of economic restructuring and deindustrialization, they faced plant closings, job losses, “white flight,” weakened civic institutions, and a shrinking property-tax base.

The challenges and possibilities have inspired numerous studies, which characterize these municipalities in a variety of ways. Lorlene Hoyt of MIT, for example, calls them “forgotten cities” and defines them as having a population of at least 5,000 by 1880 (implying a former industrial or commercial base), a population according to the 2000 U.S. Census of between 15,000 and 150,000, and median household income of less than \$35,000. (See “The 18 Forgotten Cities in New England.”)

Slicing the data another way, the Brookings Institution and MassInc defined 11 “Gateway Cities” in Massachusetts as having populations of at least 35,000, high poverty rates, low educational attainment levels, a strong manufacturing heritage, and a location outside of Greater Boston.²

A still different metric was used by Cit-

izens’ Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA) and Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC). CHAPA and MACDC believe that a financial vulnerability is indicated when a city gets more than 35 percent of its municipal budget from state aid, and so they focused on the 21 Massachusetts cities that fit that description.

Regardless of how you define them, small cities in New England generally share several attributes: a manufacturing and mill heritage, resources that are not equal to the big-city challenges they face—and the seeds of opportunity.

Small Cities, Smart Cities

Until the economic slowdown, New England had been losing 1,200 acres of land every week to development. Land-use and tax policies encouraged large-lot development on greenfield (undeveloped) sites along the urban fringe. Today, however, many observers question whether such policies make sense. Why extend sprawling new infrastructure when maintenance of existing infrastructure is already resource-challenged?

While sprawl was continuing in many suburbs, smart-growth developments nationwide were emulating the traditional patterns of small New England cities, with their lively and walkable squares, downtowns, and neighborhoods. Advocates of cities were drawing attention to their human scale, enriched by numerous amenities: railways, rivers, and parks; historic mills, homes, and churches; institutions

such as museums, small colleges, and hospitals; diverse populations; and competitive housing and job opportunities.

Fortunately, small cities want to grow and often have the elements others want, including commercial stock and vacant or underutilized housing. With a coordinated regional strategy, they could absorb a greater share of economic growth and allow undeveloped natural areas to remain pristine. Some cities—for example, Burlington, Vermont; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Portland, Maine; and Lowell, Massachusetts—have successfully begun to diversify their economies by investing in their historic infrastructure and improving their quality of life. Their strategies have included rehabbing mill space for housing and mixed use, attracting anchor institutions, and creating more enjoyable and welcoming environments for residents and entrepreneurs.

Challenges

Unfortunately, most small cities have been unable to capitalize on recent trends.

The 18 “Forgotten Cities” in New England

Connecticut Bridgeport
Hartford
New Britain
New Haven
New London
Waterbury

Maine Augusta
Bangor
Lewiston

Massachusetts Chelsea
Fall River
Holyoke
Lawrence
New Bedford

Rhode Island Pawtucket
Woonsocket

Vermont Burlington
Rutland

One reason is that they have both limited resources and a need for sustained strategic investment in their social and physical infrastructure.

Some of the most significant challenges include struggling public schools, a workforce unprepared for twenty-first century jobs, and the significant loss of young working adults between the ages of 24 and 35. MassInc estimates that the 11 Gateway cities in Massachusetts are home to 15 percent of the state's population but 30 percent of the families who live below the poverty line. These cities have new immigrants, many of whom need special services, English as a Second Language, and adult basic education to integrate them into the local economy.

Additionally, government policy that favors large-lot suburban housing—because it is cheaper and easier than rehab or infill development—undermines small cities' interests. MassInc has found that in Massachusetts economic development dollars have largely bypassed the state's smaller, older cities.³ Moreover, local regulatory barriers may be deal-breakers for private investment.

An Agenda for Small Cities

Recent research recommendations form an emerging policy agenda for small cities. (See "Concrete Steps in Massachusetts.")

First, improve neighborhoods and urban parks. Safe, clean neighborhoods are more likely to retain residents, and owner-occupancy can promote mutual assistance and stability. Aggressive foreclosure prevention activities can head off new waves of abandonment and prevent tenants from being removed from their homes.

Second, invest in civic life. Although revitalization efforts often seem to be about making communities attractive to look at, they should focus on creating an environment among residents that raises expectations, encourages broad resident participation in public life, and results in more people demanding better services and accountability.

Third, develop transparent municipal systems. States could help by requiring reforms as a prerequisite for state aid.⁴

Fourth, prioritize state infrastructure investments that strengthen smaller industrial cities as opposed to supporting infrastructure sprawl. Agencies need to share information and apply sustainable development criteria.

Fifth, level the development playing field. Smaller cities often have higher development costs as a result of inadequate

Concrete Steps in Massachusetts

The University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth organized the Urban Initiative, led by Former Fall River Mayor Ed Lambert, which got the executives of the 11 Gateway Cities to sign a compact pledging cooperation on a statewide agenda for the revitalization of their communities. Legislators, meanwhile, formed a Gateway Cities Caucus to promote relevant legislation, such as an expansion of the state historic tax credit.

CHAPA, MACDC, and the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance convened an Innovation and Policy in Smaller Cities event at MIT, at which the state announced its new Gateway Plus Action Grants to support housing and economic development activities in smaller cities. It has awarded a total of \$1.35 million to 18 municipalities.

Local organizations such as Nuestras Raices in Holyoke, Lawrence Community-Works, Groundwork Lawrence, and the Martin Luther King Jr. Empowerment Center in Worcester, are developing new models of linking residents to wealth-building opportunities and networks of mutual support.

The Pioneer Institute has convened staff and officials from smaller cities across the state to discuss best practices, including the information-management system employed by the City of Somerville, SomerStat.

Other programs include the new Growth District Initiative to expedite residential and commercial development in the Commonwealth; the Pathways out of Poverty grants to support job training in clean energy; Brownfields Support Teams; and the Commonwealth Urban Parks Initiative.

planning, deferred maintenance, pervasive brownfields, and cumbersome regulations.⁵ When those considerations are weighed against weak real estate markets, small cities have an uphill challenge. State policies that promote regulatory reform and expose the hidden long-term costs of greenfield development could help.

Sixth, support education reform and lifelong learning, including English as a Second Language, college for adult learners, day care, after-school programs, and a strong K-12 school system.

Finally, incubate the green economy. Former mill cities could be ideal for industries like green manufacturing, construction, and energy partly because they offer inexpensive start-up space. And wide-scale weatherization could create local jobs while saving millions in aggregated energy costs.

Advocates believe that the benefits to the region as a whole would spread outward if states were to focus more capital spending on small cities, coordinate their activities across agencies, and help local governments modernize management systems and set goals based on the best practices of peer cities. Now is the time to take advantage of the energy, transportation, and climate trends unfolding. An untapped resource is right under our noses.

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Endnotes

¹ Lorlene Hoyt and André Leroux, *Voices from Forgotten Cities: Innovative Revitalization Coalitions in America's Older Small Cities* (Boston: Citizens' Housing and Planning Association and PolicyLink, 2007).

² Mark Muro et al., *Reconnecting Massachusetts Gateway Cities: Lessons Learned and an Agenda for Renewal* (Boston and Washington, DC: MassInc and The Brookings Institution, February 2007).

³ Ben Forman, "Growing for Growth: Promoting Business Investment in Massachusetts' Gateway Cities," MassInc policy brief, July 2008.

⁴ Jim Stergios, *Rehabbing Urban Development* (Boston: Pioneer Institute, February 2007).

⁵ David Soule, Joan Fitzgerald, Barry Bluestone, *The Rebirth of Older Industrial Cities: Exciting Opportunities for Private Sector Investment* (Boston: Northeastern University Center for Urban and Regional Policy, April 2004).

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