
Mobility means more vigor for state's gateway cities

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Second in a series of gateway-cities editorials appearing on Sundays.

FOR THE state's gateway cities to thrive again, they have to be within easy reach of the 21st-century economy. Extending commuter rail from Boston would help, but these cities also need a more ambitious strategy to restore their position as local transportation centers.

Because of its fine harbor, New Bedford was once the nation's whaling capital. Mill cities such as Springfield, Lowell, and Lawrence grew up where they did because of their location in a network of waterways, railways, and roads that moved people and goods around. But now that once-reliable industries are a distant memory, and many new businesses emerge in suburban office parks or in the high-tech corridors along Route 128 and Interstate 495, inhabitants of the gateway cities are left with uneven access to jobs — and a tougher sales pitch to make to newcomers. Meanwhile, there are back-office industries, such as medical record-keeping, that could thrive in smaller urban settings but need easy access to outside workers and affiliates.

As policymakers in Massachusetts have come to grips with the possibilities of “smart growth,” an answer has emerged: By beefing up the MBTA commuter rail system, Massachusetts could spur the transformation of old factory buildings near train stations in mill cities into complexes that mix residential and commercial uses, while taking pressure off the state's ever-diminishing amount of open space. In this spirit, Governor Patrick has vowed to start work on the long-planned commuter rail line to Fall River and New Bedford.

Critics point to the underused Greenbush line as an argument against rail expansion, but the rationale for that line — persuading upscale suburbanites to commute by trains rather than cars — is quite different from connecting gateway cities with opportunities to prosper. The role that commuter rail can play may be most evident in Lowell, which has marketed itself as a low-cost alternative for artists and others seeking more space than they could ever afford in Boston or Cambridge. MBTA figures indicate that, every weekday, 1,400 people board inbound commuter trains in Lowell, presumably for jobs closer to the heart of Greater Boston. With sufficient frequency, the same could be true for trains from New Bedford and Fall River.

Of course, gateway cities can be more than bedroom communities for Boston, and they have other transportation needs, which quickly become evident the farther one strays from a commuter rail station. The inadequacy of local transit systems outside the T's core area makes a car a near-necessity. That's not just an expense for individual workers; it also requires real estate developers and potential employers to make provision for parking. This is easy in many suburbs, but not in a compact, long-developed mill town.

While the Legislature began committing extra money last year to the regional transit authorities scattered across Massachusetts, the state should be looking for innovations that significantly reduce the need for cars and parking in at least some parts of the state's gateway cities. Adam Baacke, Lowell's thoughtful planning and development chief, recognizes that getting by without a car in his city would be a challenge, but argues that even promoting more single-car households would produce dividends for developers, businesses, and residents. He points to Bellingham, Wash., and Boulder, Colo., as smaller cities that promote mobility through a well-conceived local transit system and a web of bike and pedestrian lanes.

Vital as it is, improving transportation within gateway cities shouldn't come at the expense of better connections to larger urban areas. Springfield's Union Station has been boarded up for 38 years, but a planned refurbishing of the building as a commuter rail, Amtrak, and regional bus center could dramatically increase the possibilities for that city. The \$70 million project — which is still at least \$20 million short in financing — would turn the city into a hub for high-speed rail service between Vermont and New York. With 28 trips through that “knowledge corridor” every day, under a \$121 million expansion funded through President Obama's rail initiative, Springfield would suddenly become a lower-cost alternative for office work that might otherwise be done in New York; meanwhile, the planned 800 daily bus departures and arrivals would draw students and other travelers from throughout the Pioneer Valley and Western Massachusetts.

Many of the Commonwealth's old industrial communities feature similarly grand train terminals, solid transportation infrastructure, and historic downtowns that dwarf those of much larger Sun Belt cities. With better local transit, the gateway cities will be better placed to recruit new employers and residents. And with better links to bigger cities, the gateway cities can once again tap into the humming Northeastern corridor whose economic bustle so often seems to pass them by.

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