

Massachusetts makeover...

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November 18, 2007

THE CITIES and towns of Eastern Massachusetts are showing their age.

Since the 1980s, a moribund factory economy has evolved into one based on health services and technological innovation. Yet even in some of the region's most affluent communities, the physical environment - the roads, water lines, housing stock - hasn't changed to meet current demands. Fast-growing towns along Interstate 495 are trying to come to grips with residential sprawl. Roads that were dirt trails or cowpaths two or three centuries ago now handle tens of thousands of cars a day. Along Route 9, which came into being as the Worcester Turnpike in 1810, towns struggle to accommodate a crush of commercial and retail development.

Meanwhile, some areas have been left behind. Too far from Boston to partake in the region's overall prosperity, former industrial centers such as Lawrence and Fitchburg are still casting about for their place in the new order. On a less dramatic scale, some towns along Route 1 show signs of a suburban kind of blight: dying malls sapped by the popularity of faster highways nearby.

Planning for the future is hard enough in the gleaming new cities of the Sun Belt, where neighborhoods are built from the ground up on virgin land, and where an entire metropolitan area might have only a half-dozen municipal and county governments. In contrast, most areas inside I-495 are already jam-packed. And most land-use decisions in this state are made by 351 cities and towns.

This latter arrangement, a throwback to colonial days, gives communities an enviable level of control over their own affairs. It also means, though, that planning here is unusually subject to NIMBYism - and that cities and towns are stuck figuring out planning and land-use problems on their own.

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The longstanding forces shaping development in Greater Boston sometimes combine in ways that are pernicious to the region as a whole. The most obvious problem - a direct result of towns' reluctance to allow new home construction - is the short supply, and high cost, of housing. (That little split-level ranch costs what?) But the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's MetroFuture project has identified other threats that will emerge if present trends continue: strains on water resources, increasing pressure to build on green space far from existing town centers, the possibility that rising ethnic diversity will become a source of tension rather than strength.

Giving Massachusetts a makeover is like rehabbing a lovely but quirky old house. In upcoming weeks, the Globe's editorial page will explore the efforts of individual cities and towns to cope with the legacy of nearly four centuries of development. Which creative steps are communities taking - or failing to take - to prepare for future needs? And what are the limits to how much one community can accomplish on its own? We begin below, in Lawrence.

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