

# Letters Letters Letters

**Go Hillers indeed!** Thank you for your issue focusing on Hopkinton [March/April 2008] and, through it, on small towns in the metro Boston region. Each is filled with residents, like those profiled in Ken Richardson’s “Beyond the Highways,” who either grew up and stayed or moved into town because it is a special place. No wonder the dramatic growth rates seen in the last decades give pause — doesn’t that inevitably mean the loss of something special, the danger of becoming just like everywhere else?

As towns across the region grapple with these concerns, they confront the challenges and constraints of land-use planning in Massachusetts. Within this context, each town acts rationally — but together, unintended consequences are created and all municipalities in the region ultimately suffer.

Fred Merrill is right that we don’t have regional planning with teeth in Massachusetts, but the 4,500 people who came together to create the MetroFuture growth plan have done a pretty good job of defining a future that capitalizes on the region’s greatest assets: diverse people and landscapes, a history of innovation, and a commitment to education and civic engagement. MetroFuture would help the region to overcome its challenges and embrace its future, one in which towns are full of character and cities are more vibrant, where healthy families are connected with their communities, where the economy and the environment are both stronger, and where communities work together to find common solutions to common problems.

No, it won’t be easy to achieve MetroFuture by 2030. But we have a history of making bold decisions here in Massachusetts, and I have every confidence we will continue to do so.

*Amy A. Cotter*

Senior Program Manager, MetroFuture  
Metropolitan Area Planning Council

**As an example** of a Commonwealth town poised between a historic past and a healthy future, Hopkinton is an excellent

case study. One of the things that makes the town unique — and a truly fantastic place to live — is the level of participation in town decision-making among its residents.

Since my election to the State Senate in 2005, I have seen the people of Hopkinton work hard to balance the inevitable pressures and opportunities that come from growth. While the transformation of open space to residential property in the form of the Weston Nurseries development was difficult, the fact that a large number of people became involved in the ongoing discussion about preserving the community’s character in the face of change, and indeed continue to stay involved, has meant that the town continues to move forward in a positive direction.

One of the potential favorable outcomes of this process is Boulder Capital’s offer to preserve a historic farmhouse on the edge of the property. Not only will this building serve as a visual reminder of Hopkinton’s not-so-distant past, but it will also house the first-ever Marathon Museum, dedicated to preserving the history of and promoting the sport that has put Hopkinton on the global map.

Like all of my communities in the MetroWest, Hopkinton faces some unique challenges and opportunities. I have faith that Hopkinton will continue to embrace its opportunities and tackle its challenges. A community with this much dedication to stewarding the town’s future is truly a great place to live.

*Karen E. Spilka*

State Senator  
2nd Middlesex & Norfolk

**As a local planning advocate**, working in small-town planning issues, historic preservation, and now affordable housing, I was drawn to the article on Accessory Dwelling Units [“Not Just for Grannies Anymore,” March/April 2008]. Nantucket has consistently turned to these attached apartments and secondary structures as a method for keeping affordable housing for islanders. Nantucket has been successful in creating a permanent restriction that

allows secondary dwellings to be permitted as condominiums for affordable housing.

However, I was thrilled as I continued to read through the remaining articles. The manner in which they tied together was superb. As I read on, though, I found the key to the whole issue in Jeff Stein’s interview with Dolores Hayden. Hayden says “every American should understand how to read the landscape from the ground and from the air.” She goes on to say that if Americans could read these landscapes, “it would affect how people vote on these issues and ensure that the issues were put on a ballot instead of handled under the table.” If we are going to take a stand to protect our communities, our historic buildings, and our community housing, we must take the 10,000-foot view: look beyond the local political infighting and see our communities from the air — either literally or metaphorically.

*Aaron Marcavitch*

Executive Director  
Nantucket Housing Office  
Nantucket, Massachusetts

**Everywhere in New England** we take pride in the intimate scale of our landscapes and townscape. Our village centers, often featuring streets and greens that date back centuries, are emblems of a quality of life that seems to be harder and harder to sustain under the pressures of the 21st century.

Generally, we protect our town centers by passing rules that make it hard for property owners to develop their land. Residential zoning districts with large minimum lot sizes limit density; height and lot-coverage limitations, and floor-area restrictions all reduce the size of the buildings that can be built without special-permit approvals. We often restrict “as of right” development to assure that every project must pass review by a battery of committees, commissions, and appointed and elected councils.

What’s the result? Bigger developments that undermine the community character that we’re looking to preserve in the first place. Why is this happening despite every barrier to development that we can erect?

Because these regulations make it hard to get a project developed. It takes time and a lot of well-paid lawyers to pull it off. It means land must be assembled into larger parcels to make it worth while to spend the time and money required. It means families who may own a couple of acres of land in or near a town center can't raise the capital to get a project off the ground so they have to sell it to those who can. This hurts local people and companies.

Barriers to development can play into the hands of the larger developers. They reduce the value of the land held in smaller parcels by local people and enable the big players to "create value" by getting their large plans through our protracted development approval processes. They squeeze local land owners and local builders out of the picture, eliminating the smaller, more fine-toothed projects that they would build.

One way to stop this is to zone out the uses that national developers might seek, like commercial space or hotels. But if uses like that are excluded, our taxes will inevitably rise and local people will be hurt again. Stopping growth isn't the answer.

Governor Patrick has called for simplifying our construction permitting process to help keep the Massachusetts economy competitive. That makes a lot of sense. But let's streamline our development review to promote the right kind of development. Let's create rigorous special-permit review processes with high mitigation requirements for large projects and offer easier approval and incentives for small projects. Let's fast-track modestly sized houses and cluster housing on smaller lots and let's promote infill housing in our smaller downtowns. We should decide the kind of development we want and use our regulatory authority to help make it happen.

If we want to keep the treasured New England feel of our towns and cities, we need regulations that encourage smaller projects on smaller parcels — ones that strengthen our village centers and preserve our community character.

Russel Feldman AIA  
TBA Architects  
Waltham, Massachusetts  
Chair, BSA Legislative Affairs Committee

**Editor Elizabeth Padjen FAIA** framed the November/December 2007 issue with the idea that the architect can be well advised to better understand the client. As stated, "Clients give architecture its purpose: without clients, it is fine art, inhabitable sculpture." With the exception of the GSA article, which identified an important area of public architecture, the issue missed a large group of individuals who have taken another road to architecture in representing public institutions and their projects.

Seldom do we as public architects have the same influence as the group that was assembled for the "Serial Clients" roundtable. Yet we still represent a very large number of clients. Today, 50 percent of buildings utilize public funding, be it local schools, public universities, or other government buildings. I am disappointed that this area of client representation was not included.

An architectural team must understand that in most public projects it has two clients: the organization that is responsible for the management (scope, schedule, and costs) of the project and a second group, the actual users. Both of these groups have the same objective, yet have different processes to adhere to. The users' objective is to get everything they need and more; the managers need to stay within the appropriated funding mandate. Neither group wishes to undermine the best creative solution possible. This point of view might have been interesting for discussion in this issue.

Bruce Bockstael FAIA  
Chief Architect  
Administrator of Client Teams  
Department of Public Works  
State of Connecticut

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Send changes of address to *ArchitectureBoston*  
52 Broad Street  
Boston, MA 02109  
ISSN 1099-6346