

How We Live: A Civic Initiative for a Livable New England

by Larissa V. Brown PhD, AICP

A town common headed by a spare white church...country roads shaded by sugar maples...compact cities of close-knit neighborhoods and walkable streets...small-scale farms and orchards...forested hills and shimmering marshes...meadows bounded by stone walls. These are the talismans of place in New England. They hold our imagination and, because they do so, they are also the images we use to sell New England to tourists and to ourselves. But is this really “how we live?” What about the farms and orchards turned into subdivisions, miles of commercial strip development along historic roads, struggling old industrial cities unable to provide jobs for new immigrants, traffic-jammed highways, increasing economic inequity, and soaring housing costs?

Although we are reluctant to admit it, New England has become the land of sprawl, where land consumption far outstrips population growth. During the last half-century, we saw urban population centers dissolving into a low-density periphery and the decentralization of everything — employment, shopping, education, and entertainment, as well as housing. Now, in the 21st century, each major city is surrounded by a nimbus of varying development densities, from high-tech clusters to pockets of farmland. These multi-centered metropolitan regions are composed of hundreds of separate municipalities, each attempting to shape land use and development within its own borders. But watersheds, transportation systems, and markets are not constrained by municipal boundaries. When individual communities try to control growth within their own borders through building caps, downzoning, or other efforts designed to save local “rural character” or neighborhood quality of life, they end up pushing growth farther into areas that are even more rural, setting off a new cycle of development and traffic congestion. The result is less open space, more pressure on environmental resources, more traffic, and more expensive housing.

The livability of our cities and towns is at stake and our traditional reliance on local decision-making is inadequate to the task of managing development. We need effective regional approaches to planning. The Boston Society of Architects (BSA), building on its long tradition of civic engagement, began the new century with a two-year program of events to promote the implementation of “smart growth” policies in the Boston metropolitan region and New England.

Led by Rebecca Barnes FAIA, past president of the BSA, and supported by a diverse group of civic, professional, governmental, environmental, and business groups, the program was designed to bring disparate communities together. These events, collectively called “How We Live: A Civic Initiative for a Livable New England,” focused on the Boston metropolitan region, which now extends into New Hampshire and Rhode Island. But the experience of the Boston region is not unique in New England, and smart-growth initiatives are under way in all the New England states.



Brainstorming the future:
Over 200 people participated in a 2 ½-day session combining big-picture thinking about regional growth with case studies of specific planning problems.

Designed to be participatory, inclusive, and visionary, the Civic Initiative has also been pragmatic. From the beginning, the many individuals and organizations who contributed to shaping the program of events wanted to make sure that the Civic Initiative would include an agenda for action and a strategy for implementation. The Civic Initiative was composed of a series of elements:

- **The Challenge:** More than 400 people attended a conference held in Boston in September 2000 to identify key questions and inspire participants to work for change.
- **Regional Workshops:** Workshops in February and March 2001 were held in three communities outside Boston, highlighting the relationship between struggling older cities with new immigrant populations and their neighboring affluent suburbs; obstacles and opportunities for supporting growth in urbanized inner suburbs while preserving neighborhood quality of life; and the dynamics of suburban sprawl, including the growing need for nonresidential tax revenues, and ambivalent attitudes toward affordable-housing initiatives. Over 150 people attended the workshops.
- **Regional Charrette:** A 2½-day brainstorming session (“charrette”) in late April 2001 combined big-picture thinking about regional themes with case studies focusing on specific places and planning problems. Discussions focused on the key forces that shape the character and location of regional growth and development such as transportation, economic development, housing, environmental priorities, infrastructure, and fiscal demands. The case studies were solicited through a call-for-proposals distributed to community leaders, nonprofits, and others throughout the region. Ten teams of participants, including both local sponsors and professionals, worked on nine case studies including village- and town-center revitalization; neighborhood access to an industrial waterfront; appropriate development in a three-municipality border area marked by a wide diversity of land uses, environmental sensitivity, and traffic congestion; development in the high-tech ring along I-495; and redevelopment of contaminated industrial brownfields and abandoned mall sites. Charrette participants were asked to develop proposals based on smart-growth principles and to identify how smart-growth policies would help them solve the planning problems they faced. Over 200 people participated in the charrette.
- **Future Search:** In June 2001, a group of 64 people met over a weekend to develop an agenda to bring the Civic Initiative forward from vision to implementation.

■ **Implementation:** In the fall of 2001, the Civic Initiative is moving into its implementation phase with the publication of a report, forums for political candidates to speak about sprawl and smart growth, and establishment of an ongoing coalition. This active agenda will include state legislation as well as local planning initiatives that will expand upon existing community preservation and environmental efforts.

It has been said that the only thing Americans hate more than sprawl is density, and the “density question” was fundamental to all the Civic Initiative discussions. Mixed-use development, clustering houses to save open space, and greater housing density were the hallmarks of the charrette case-study results. New investment in fixed-route public transportation was very popular with groups working on urban and inner-suburban case studies. They saw public transportation as the key to making denser mixed-use neighborhoods acceptable in existing urbanized communities.

Working on more peripheral communities or subregions, Civic Initiative participants struggled with the results of 50 years of low-density suburbanization in the context of municipal competition for the non-residential tax base, increasing economic segregation, variations in the quality of school systems, circumferential travel patterns, and an identity crisis in many towns that still believe they are rural long after they have been swept into the expanding metropolitan nebula. In these parts of the region, encouraging density in existing older communities, in town centers, and through redevelopment of sites such as brownfields and abandoned malls was seen as the key to conserving open space and environmental resources while providing a diverse housing stock and managing traffic congestion.

The Civic Initiative illuminated the need for public policy to guide our development choices on both a regional and state level. Markets by themselves will not produce balanced development. Tax-sharing, equalizing the attractiveness of urban and suburban public schools, coordinated transportation and land-use planning, and networked open space and environmental resource protection are among the efforts that require public leadership to restore and enhance the livability of our region. This is a propitious moment, when we can see that years of economic success have led us to forsake the qualities of place and the social ideals that are part of our New England heritage. “How we live” in the New England of this new century will depend on the choices we are making today. ■ ■ ■

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Editor's note: For more information on the Civic Initiative and updates on recent activities, go to: www.architects.org.