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On July 2, 2007, Dr. John H. Jackson will officially begin leading The Schott Foundation for Public Education. He is uniquely well suited to take the Foundation’s mission to the next level. He joins The Schott Foundation after serving in leadership positions at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 2000. He served as the NAACP Chief Policy Officer and prior to that as the NAACP’s National Director of Education. Before joining the NAACP, Dr. Jackson served as Senior Policy Advisor in the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Education during the Clinton Administration. He is also founder and chairman of the National Equity Center Inc., a national non-profit established to promote diversity and democratic values by providing youth with leadership, academic, research and advocacy skills to eliminate existing local and national civil rights and social justice disparities.

To learn more about Schott’s new President, please visit our website: www.schottfoundation.org.

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Winner of the Council on Foundations’ 2007 Critical Impact Award, The Schott Foundation for Public Education provides and promotes grant-making, strategic convenings and planning, and donor collaborations to develop and strengthen a broad-based and representative movement to achieve high quality, fully funded pre-K through grade 12 public education in Massachusetts and New York.

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MassINC’s Citizens’ Circle brings together people who care about the future of Massachusetts. The generosity of our Citizens’ Circle members has a powerful impact on every aspect of our work. We are pleased to extend significant benefits, including invitations to our private Newsmaker series, to those who join with a minimum annual contribution of $1,000.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY KATHLEEN DOOHER
New England’s needs are changing faster than public education. That is why Nellie Mae Education Foundation is realigning its investments to help ensure more of our region’s students are equipped to succeed.

While our funding winds down for much of our program work, we will define our future based on what we have learned. We will investigate and re-evaluate long-held assumptions about the way underserved students are educated. And, we will partner with educators, policymakers, funders and others to help significantly greater numbers of New England’s learners to achieve true academic success.

Nellie Mae Education Foundation: Helping today, creating extraordinary results for tomorrow.
AN OPPORTUNE TIME FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Once I got past the inflammatory cover headline (“College Try: Why Aren’t Mass. Community Colleges Making the Grade?” CW, Spring ’07), I was glad to see CommonWealth present such a thoughtful and balanced assessment of the challenges and the potential of our state’s community colleges.

This is a timely topic. Gov. Deval Patrick acknowledged as much in his proposal to make community college free for all Massachusetts residents. The governor’s proposal has merit: It is a good thing to signal the importance of higher education to high school students in the Commonwealth who may think that college is too expensive. And it is important to make an explicit link between public higher education (two- and four-year) and the state’s economic future. A public commitment to community colleges playing a key role in that economic future is long overdue.

However, the state can probably make more efficient investments. Scarce public resources should be targeted to those for whom cost is a serious obstacle, not to any resident who chooses a two-year college. Moreover, while the governor is sending a powerful signal about access to college in an era when at least two years of postsecondary learning are needed to secure a family-supporting wage, the more pressing challenge facing Massachusetts community colleges and their students is success in postsecondary education. Whatever we think of graduation rates as a measure of community college performance, too many students who want to earn a credential never reach their goal—and this is unacceptable. Access without success can be a hollow promise.

As CW’s Michael Jonas notes, this may be a moment when community colleges not only get the attention they deserve, but when focus shifts more deliberately to how to help more students succeed once they get to college. Four Massachusetts community colleges—Bunker Hill and Roxbury in Boston, Springfield Technical, and Northern Essex in Haverhill and Lawrence—have been selected to join a national initiative on community college student success called Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, launched several years ago by the Lumina Foundation for Education (www.achievingthedream.org). Four local funders have stepped up and pooled resources to support this effort for five years: the Balfour, Boston, and Davis Foundations and the Educational Resources Institute. (Jobs for the Future is a national partner in Achieving the Dream.) A state team led by the Board of Higher Education will identify and promote changes in policy designed to improve outcomes, particularly for low-income and minority students. This is a real opportunity—one that the governor, the Legislature, and the higher education community should get behind and make the most of.

The future of Massachusetts is its human capital. Too often, we think of graduation rates as a measure of community college performance, too many students who want to earn a credential never reach their goal—and this is unacceptable. Access without success can be a hollow promise.

MEETING THE NEED FOR FUTURE PUBLIC LEADERS

Richard Freeland’s Considered Opinion essay (“Turnaround Time”) offered a no-nonsense assessment of the state of coordination between the Commonwealth’s economic engine and the academic assets throughout metropolitan Boston, but his calculus missed an important element of managing any bold partnership over the long haul: growing the next generation of public leaders and managers needed by our nation’s federal, state, and local governments. Bureaucratic reformers may call for personnel cuts and contractor downsizing, but if we are to properly align academic institutions to support economic development ends, we should also look at educating the public stewards necessary for this dynamic, multiyear effort.

We welcome letters to the editor. Send your comments to editor@massinc.org, or to Editor, CommonWealth magazine, 18 Tremont Street, Suite 1120, Boston, MA 02108. Please include a city or town, as well as a daytime phone number. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.
While not yet a crisis, the time for action is well before crisis conditions exist. I believe Freeland’s ideas must be expanded in a post-9/11 environment to reflect national service needs. Recently, two determined young men who served in Teach for America in rural Mississippi offered a bold vision for growing the public-sector workforce through the creation of a civilian equivalent of West Point, called the Public Service Academy.

The Public Service Academy would educate the professionals needed for the numerous functions of our federal, state, local and tribal governments. In exchange for a paid education, individuals would join public service for five years, providing needed expertise and passion—and perhaps remaining to help replace the 44 percent of government workers eligible to retire in the next five years.

Freeland identifies the need for a strategic plan to align diverse stakeholders’ efforts. More visionary leadership from the state’s university presidents can help. Our universities are on the front lines of developing new solutions to the world’s problems, from global warming to stem-cell research. So why not implement a better system for educating our best and brightest to ensure our nation’s critical infrastructure, essential services, and national security programs?

However, when it comes to building future generations of leaders, the best option the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration could come up with was to create a virtual academy, thus disparaging the “brick and mortar” concept of education. Everyone gets spam from various virtual universities, but would you trust them to train future diplomats and air traffic controllers? Does anyone think Congress should replace West Point with a series of video teleconferences and instant messages?

In addition to Freeland’s recommendations, there are three things educators and public officials need to do. First, federal agency leaders must assess the skills needed to deliver smarter, better service. The federal Office of Personnel Management should also work with agency heads to establish a clear pipeline for recruiting workers with these skill sets. Once colleges understand the pipeline, they can align their programs, courses, and job placement efforts to provide graduates with the right skills and job opportunities.

Second, governors, mayors, and university presidents should convene a summit to assess local university capacities and to align scholarship funding and service requirements in order to produce the types of gradu-
ates needed for the future workforce. They should set up a “strategic think tank” with a rotating pool of graduate school fellows in diverse fields to support the development of Freeland’s framework and other essential joint endeavors.

Third, hearings on the Public Service Academy concept should be held on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures. The hearings may lead to a state-level public service adaptation of the ROTC concept as a way of providing economies of scale through existing degree programs—with the added esprit de corps and unit cohesion coming from weekly training classes and hands-on summer training.

To increase economic opportunity for the Commonwealth, our elected leaders must ensure the effective management of the public trust. And college graduates deserve additional public service options in order to build businesses, lead diplomatically, protect our environment, teach our children, ensure the quality of health care for veterans and elderly, and protect our national security. It is our responsibility as leaders in our various professions to act now so there is a new generation of public servants ready to receive the torch when it is passed.

Bridger McGaw
Task Force on Homeland Security
The Century Foundation
New York

**HOMEOWNERS PAY DEARLY IN SPRINGFIELD**

Robert David Sullivan (“Money from Home,” Head Count) has it wrong. Springfield is not a city that does not “squeeze a lot from homeowners.” Residential property taxes in Springfield are 59 percent above the state average for cities in Massachusetts (according to a recent Northeastern University study), thanks to a Proposition 2/3 override that now contributes about $18 million extra to the city each year. Commercial property tax rates, according to the same study, are 44 percent above the state average for cities.

The idea that Springfield residents are somehow getting a free ride via local aid is a myth, not a fact.

Paul Peter Nicolai
Nicolai Law Group
Springfield

**Correction**

The State of the States feature in our Spring issue erroneously stated that Massachusetts ranked 39th in the number of municipal employees per 100,000 residents as of 2004. Massachusetts actually ranked 36th by that measure; it was 39th in the number of state employees per 100,000 residents.
Letter of introduction

ON BEHALF OF the MassINC board of directors, we are delighted to introduce readers to Gregory Torres, the new president of MassINC and publisher of CommonWealth magazine.

Greg brings an uncommon set of qualifications that make him the right person to lead MassINC into its second decade. MassINC is now one of the most respected policy institutions in Massachusetts, a stature that is amplified by the universal recognition of CommonWealth as a leading journal of politics and civic life. Such an enterprise requires deft leadership in day-to-day management and organizational development, as well as knowledge of the issues and personalities that drive public policy in Massachusetts.

With a background that encompasses government, business, and the nonprofit sector, Greg offers expertise and much more. As the board searched for a leader who could spark the organization to new levels of impact and relevance, we were guided by the mandate for an individual who truly gets what MassINC is all about. Greg stood out with an informed grasp of the qualities that make MassINC unique, and he revealed a clear-eyed view of our mission and our future possibilities.

On the organizational side, Greg is a seasoned executive. Before joining MassINC, he was chairman of the Mentor Network, a Boston–based company that provides an array of human services through community programs across the United States. Over the course of 15 years at Mentor, he also served as CEO and vice president of public affairs and development.

Greg’s government and policy work is equally impressive. His 16 years in state government culminated in a seven-year stint as chief of staff for the Massachusetts Senate Committee on Ways and Means, a post that honed his policy-making skills and gave him a detailed understanding of how things get accomplished on Beacon Hill. Earlier assignments with the Executive Office of Human Services, the Massachusetts Committee on Criminal Justice, and a special state Senate committee investigating the Department of Mental Health added depth to that experience. During his time in government, Greg also earned a master's degree in public administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

All of this activity underscores a lifelong dedication to public service and civic life. This dedication was evident right at the beginning of Greg’s career, when he counseled youths through nonprofit social service agencies in Boston and Cambridge.

Being the president of MassINC requires rigorous attention to the operational demands of a nonprofit. Here, too, we found Greg to have impeccable qualifications through his role as board president of Roca Inc.—a multicultural human development and community building organization serving Chelsea, Revere, East Boston, and Lynn—and as chairman of the Mentor Network Charitable Foundation.

WHEN IAN BOWLES left MassINC in January to become the state secretary of energy and environmental affairs, several members of the MassINC board took on the formidable task of finding the right person to build upon and preserve the organization’s many achievements. In selecting Greg Torres for the job, they have succeeded in a most impressive way.

Greg lives in Winchester with his wife, Elizabeth Pattullo. They have two sons and have recently become doting grandparents as well.

Please join us in welcoming Greg to MassINC and the publisher’s page of CommonWealth. Your support is more important than ever as he leads our organization and our publication to new goals and accomplishments in our second decade.

Gloria Cordes Larson
Peter Meade
The healthier you are the better we feel.

Nothing affects our collective quality of life quite like our health. Which is why Blue Cross Blue Shield is working hard to improve the health of not just our members, but also the broader community. Through initiatives like Jump Up & Go, which focuses on childhood obesity, to supporting Mayor Menino’s initiative to address racial disparities in healthcare, we’ve found that real progress can be made when we work together as a community.
Transit-Oriented Development.

With financing from MassHousing, National Development is building 180 units of high-quality, mixed-income rental housing at the Woodland Station MBTA stop. With the train to Boston just steps away, residents can leave their cars at home more often.

Yet another example of new housing that will improve the quality of life in our Commonwealth.
Study says CPA steers money to wealthy towns

> BY JIM O’SULLIVAN

**WHEN THE COMMUNITY** Preservation Act emerged from a tortuous legislative process to become law in 2000, state officials heralded it as the most significant land-use bill passed in years. Simultaneously adding to the state’s affordable-housing stock, preserving open space, and restoring historic buildings, it was billed as a planning and funding tool to help communities maintain character without blocking all new development.

But a new study suggests that the law has functioned as a sort of Robin Hood in reverse, with money flowing from lower-income urban centers and rural communities to some of the state’s most exclusive suburbs and vacation centers.

The study, being released by Harvard’s Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, also says most of the spending focus by communities has been on acquiring open space, with very little support going to the development of new affordable housing units, a tilt toward the land-banking aspect of the law that may only make it more difficult to find sites for new housing.

Fed by dual concerns in the late 1990s about unchecked development and the rising cost of housing, the law allows local voters to approve a property tax surcharge of up to 3 percent. Municipalities that adopt the Community Preservation Act receive matching payments from the state’s Community Preservation Trust, which is funded through a $20 surcharge on all property transfers recorded statewide.

The law requires communities to spend at least 10 percent of CPA monies on each of the three areas defined in the law—affordable housing, open space projects, and historic preservation—but the remaining 70 percent can be directed among the categories at the city or town’s discretion.

**MOST OF THE FOCUS HAS BEEN ON OPEN SPACE.**

Fed by dual concerns in the late 1990s about unchecked development and the rising cost of housing, the law allows local voters to approve a property tax surcharge of up to 3 percent. Municipalities that adopt the Community Preservation Act receive matching payments from the state’s Community Preservation Trust, which is funded through a $20 surcharge on all property transfers recorded statewide.

The law has been adopted in 127 localities and has generated more than $360 million in project expenditures. But because approval of the CPA has been heavily weighted toward more affluent communities, the state matching funds drawn from deeds fees have flowed from communities with large low-income populations to wealthier cities, suburbs, and vacation spots, says the report, coauthored by Robin Sherman and Rappaport Institute executive director David Luberoff.

The preservation act has been approved by 60 percent of communities in the top quintile of median statewide household income, a figure that drops to 30 percent for communities in the second and third income quintiles. The CPA passage rate falls into the 20s for communities in the bottom two income quintiles.

“I see the problems I’ve identified with the Community Preservation Act as part of the law of unintended consequences,” says Sherman, whose analy-
sis won a Taubman Urban Prize for excellence in research at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. “It’s only the communities with extra resources that are going to benefit from a policy like this.”

Stuart Saginor, executive director of the Community Preservation Coalition, an umbrella group representing organizations that support local passage of the law, says wealthier communities enjoy inherent advantages, including less political risk to local officials who support a CPA surcharge, that increase the likelihood of passage there.

While acknowledging that adoption of the CPA was weighted toward wealthier communities during the early years after passage of the law, the coalition says the passage in the last two years has been more balanced. Of the 27 communities adopting the CPA since late 2005, there were seven in each of the three middle income quintiles, according to Saginor.

But the distribution of funds to date has been weighted overwhelmingly toward wealthy municipalities. Ten communities, home to just 6 percent of the state’s population, have received almost 42 percent of the matching funds distributed by the state, according to the Harvard study. Cambridge, because it is the largest community in the state to adopt the CPA, has collected the biggest share of matching funds—15 percent of all funds distributed from the state trust fund. Rounding out the list of top 10 recipients are Newton, Weston, Nantucket, Westford, North Andover, Duxbury, Barnstable, Sudbury, and Plymouth. On the other hand, Boston, Worcester, and Springfield accounted for nearly 10 percent of all property transfers generating payments to the trust fund — and have received back none of it.

“The thing that’s basically stunning is that we appear to be taxing people in the poorest communities so they can give money to the richest communities,” says Luberoff, noting that Weston has received nearly $500 per capita in state CPA funds.

The balance of spending on open space preservation versus housing creation is also of concern, say the study authors. They point to data from the Community Preservation Coalition showing that between 2002 and June 2006, 42 percent of CPA funds were spent on open space protection, while 32 percent was spent on affordable housing. What’s more, say the Harvard authors, a report issued last year by the Massachusetts Housing Partnership suggested those figures are skewed by CPA spending by Cambridge, which accounted for 55 percent of all CPA allocations to affordable housing.

When spending by Cambridge is excluded, only 17 percent of total spending by all other communities was devoted to housing, while the total directed to open space preservation rose to 53 percent.

A total of $68 million has been spent to establish 871 units of affordable housing, but many of those were not newly built units but rather existing housing units purchased with the funds, says the study. Only 315 new affordable housing units have resulted from CPA projects, according to the Housing Partnership study.

The law does not establish timeframes within which minimum spending on the three areas of CPA focus must take place. Thus, while communities have stashed money in reserves for future projects, 60 percent of those cities and towns that had adopted CPA had appropriated under 10 percent of their annual CPA funds for affordable housing, according to the Mass Housing Partnership report.

The law also includes no requirements for detailed reporting on the use of CPA funds. The Rappaport Institute study says that the lack of any statistical touchbacks prevents any deeper analysis of the law’s success.

“There needs to be some transparency and accountability,” Sherman says. “It’s really difficult to figure out how the money is being spent.”

Saginor says the preservation coalition, working with the state’s Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, this spring finished work on a system that will collect standardized data on CPA uses. The information will be available by the fall on a publicly searchable Web site, he says.
Sherman thinks a commission should be formed to consider revisions to the CPA, including more state oversight of how state funds are used locally. She also thinks cities and towns should be forced to spend state funds within a certain time and devote a minimum portion of funds to new affordable housing units, rather than simply restoring or maintaining existing stock.

Anthony Flint, public affairs manager at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, says the law has fostered “successful public policy” and a number of innovative projects, but he qualifies his praise.

“Think of the name—community preservation,” says Flint. “I think what was behind it was an idea that there was a real need for people to see that their children could live in the town if they so chose, and policemen and teachers could afford to live there as well. I think this idea of community preservation was the meadows and the woods and the historical character—all very important—but that also you’re preserving a kind of economic diversity. And if that affordable housing piece is being underemphasized, then, yes, it is missing some of its intent.”

Jim O’Sullivan is a reporter for State House News Service.

Falling membership doesn’t affect PTA’s political clout

By Gabrielle Gurley

Gov. Deval Patrick’s selection of Ruth Kaplan, a Brookline School Committee member and longtime MCAS critic, as his first pick for a seat on the Massachusetts Board of Education was viewed by some as a wink and a nod to anti-MCAS activists determined to scrap the high-stakes test as a statewide high school graduation requirement. What the appointment unquestionably did represent was a victory for a state parent organization that lobbied for years to have a representative on the nine-member board.

In 2004, the Massachusetts State Parent Teacher Association won legislative approval of a measure designating a seat on the board for a member of the organization. The following year, however, when the group submitted three names for consideration, as called for in the law, then-Gov. Mitt
Romney rejected them all. “When I went to in to meet with his people, I got the real sense that that they didn’t want someone on the Board of Education who would disagree in any way with their education agenda,” says Ruth Provost, a former state representative from Sandwich who was one of the PTA nominees.

Romney said that all three appeared to be opponents of charter schools and MCAS, positions at odds with his own, and he asked the PTA to submit new names. The group refused.

Following Patrick’s election, the organization cast a wide net for nominees for the seat, says Ellie Goldberg, Massachusetts PTA’s vice president for legislation. Kaplan was actually not even a dues-paying member when she was nominated, but she has now joined the organization, says Goldberg.

The fact that Kaplan wasn’t a PTA member—or that none of the schools in Brookline is affiliated with the organization—is hardly surprising. With its new seat on the state board of education, the Massachusetts PTA, an affiliate of the 110-year-old national group, now wields a level of influence that far outpaces its membership reach.

According to 2000 statistics compiled by the Web site PTO Today, Massachusetts is among the states with the lowest proportion of schools—only about 5 percent—housing a PTA chapter. There are 119 local PTAs with 19,000 members in Massachusetts, a number down dramatically from the 1960s, when the organization boasted some 100,000 Bay State members.

The Education Reform Act of 1993 mandates local councils at all schools, and many also have independent parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) that support fundraising and other enrichment activities. But Goldberg says only PTAs provide a strong parent voice on broader policy issues, aided by the organization’s state and national research and advocacy capacity.

“The PTA is strong and clear on what works for kids,” she says, “representing political parent involvement, not ‘bake sale parent’ involvement.”

Allowing one organization with a distinct policymaking perspective to nominate the parent representative on the state board—never mind a group with such a small foothold in Massachusetts schools—doesn’t sit well with some. “I’m not a fan of constituency-based appointments,” says James Peyser, the former chairman of the Board of Education, who views naming particular organizations to furnish nominees as “inappropriate and unhelpful.”

“There are [nearly] 1 million students in Massachusetts, which means there are plenty of parents of school-age children to choose from,” says Peyser.
Still working on the railroad: funding fuzzy for South Coast rail

GABRIELLE GURLEY

“It’s easy to say, ‘Give me this, give me that,’” said Rep. Joseph Wagner, the Chicopee Democrat who co-chairs the Joint Committee on Transportation, during testimony on a commuter rail proposal this spring. “It’s not so easy to finance it.” That sums up the South Coast rail conundrum. But Gov. Deval Patrick says he will accomplish what at least three previous governors never did—namely, move beyond plans and designs to running actual trains between Boston, New Bedford, and Fall River.

At an estimated $1.4 billion, South Coast rail is the first mass transit project to gain Patrick’s imprimatur. How does he plan to pay for it? Clues are scarce.

The administration has committed $17 million in state bonding to the project through fiscal 2010, $2 million of which will go to a land use and economic development study team. A financing plan for design and construction isn’t scheduled to hit the streets until January 2010, but the sticker shock is already here. According to the administration’s South Coast Rail: A Plan for Action, the line will be “one of the most expensive public works projects in Massachusetts history” after the Big Dig ($14.7 billion and counting) and the Deer Island Sewage Treatment plant program ($3.8 billion). That’s a stomach-churning thought in a state that “has a history of poorly estimating the costs associated with new spending for programs and projects,” according to a report by the Pew Center on the States.

That’s not even considering the billions of dollars needed just to maintain the state’s existing transportation infrastructure over the next two decades. “‘Fix it first’ is not an adequate solution,” says Administration and Finance assistant secretary Jay Gonzalez, referring to the Romney administration’s emphasis on maintenance. The Transportation Finance Commission takes a similar view, concluding in a recent report that it is not “practical, plausible, or prudent” to avoid enhancements or expansions.

South Coast rail has had a “long, frustrating history,” says Sen. Mark Montigny, a New Bedford Democrat, who negotiated a $600 million transportation bond bill to fund the line in 2002. That measure was signed by Acting Gov. Jane Swift, but Gov. Mitt Romney did not follow through with implementation. That didn’t stop him from later signaling support for the project, at least on paper, budgeting $670 million for it in his 2005 draft transportation plan.

Montigny’s experience with the project actually dates to 1994, when he wrote legislation to fund a $3.5 million study. “Since that date, obviously, we have studied it to death,” he says. (See “South Coast railing gets commuter rail on track—sort of,” CW, Summer ’04.)

Yet Stephen Silveira, chairman of the Transportation Finance Commission, sees Patrick’s funding of a study team as a “perfectly reasonable thing to do,” adding, “if you want to have commuter rail to the South Coast or anywhere in 2017, 2018, you need to come up with a plan today.”

A plan to pay for the rail line could be the toughest part of all. One concept being floated by the administration is “value capture,” a mechanism that rests on projected economic development to help bankroll, or at least recoup, some of the costs of a project. According to Gonzalez, revenue from economic activity along the rail corridor—including 15,000 new jobs, new development, and higher values of existing real estate—will pay for the state’s investment and ongoing operating expenses.

He points to the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center as a successful use of a value capture model. Sales and meal tax revenue from the convention center’s “finance district” (with boundaries defined by state legislation) help to pay off the center’s bonds, as well as a portion of operating expenses after debt service.

“Obviously, we can’t say with certainty today that this will absolutely happen, but that’s what we are working toward and conceptually trying to do,” Gonzales says.

Using value capture to finance transit has yet to produce any significant success stories that could be duplicated in a
New Bedford–Fall River rail scenario, transportation experts say. But one system counting on projected development revenues to help finance a new commuter rail line is the Triangle Transit Authority that serves fast-growing Durham, Orange, and Wake counties in North Carolina.

The TTA signed an agreement with Cherokee Investment Partners, which will build and manage transit stations, housing, and other structures along a proposed $810 million, 12-station, 28-mile commuter rail corridor. The plan is to create two development areas by amalgamating TTA-owned land with adjacent acreage purchased by Cherokee. The transit system will get a percentage of the profits from investments in these areas.

According to Paul Vespermann, senior manager for transit corridor planning and development, the authority hopes to see $60 million from the arrangement, to be used for the line’s construction and operation. Lee Norris, a Cherokee managing director, says the sites for four or five of the planned stations are already great development opportunities. “Hopefully, the train will show up one day and enhance [the value of] the area even more,” says Norris, whose company is also working on a rail project in Charlotte. Partnering with a private sector master developer is “very, very cutting-edge,” says Gloria Ohland, a vice president of the Oakland, Calif.-based nonprofit research group Reconnecting America. “Because transit agencies are desperate, they are really interested in pursuing these kinds of opportunities.”

But Paul Regan, the MBTA Advisory Board’s executive director, warns that the Bay State has not done a particularly good job at capturing nontraditional revenue streams. He argues that tax increment financing business development districts, whereby developers gain tax breaks to invest in certain areas, have not been a strong success in Massachusetts largely because there are too many stakeholders. Municipalities will try to capture and retain as much value provided by commuter rail as they possibly can, according to Regan. Could the MBTA and local governments end up squabbling over any rail-generated windfall? Steve Smith, executive director of the Southeastern Regional Economic Planning and Development District, says: “I know that the cities and towns wouldn’t necessarily willingly fork it over to the state.”

“We’re going to need more than that,” says Rep. Antonio Cabral, a New Bedford Democrat, of value capture. Cabral is a sponsor of a proposal to set up a Massachusetts Transit...
Fund, divided into one statewide and five regional accounts, to finance the New Bedford–Fall River extension and another four rail lines. The fund would rely on a mix of existing taxes (gasoline and vehicle sales taxes, plus Registry of Motor Vehicles fees, all of which had been going toward the Big Dig) and new revenue (from charges on greenhouse gas emissions and tourism-related money such as fees on hotel rooms, rental cars, and airline tickets). Former governor and rail enthusiast Michael Dukakis labeled the bill “very creative” during his testimony before the transportation committee, but the levies-laden measure got a lukewarm reception from committee members.

Most observers concede that Massachusetts will have to rely on bonding to finance new rail. But should the state add to its per-capita debt load, already one of the highest in the country? Regan sees the state’s ability to bond $1.4 billion as “limited.” He says that the judgment that needs to be made is, “How much of available revenues do you want to spend on debt service and how much of it do you want to spend on services?”

Montigny, who co-chairs the Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures, and State Assets, admits that even though “any new revenue stream is nice,” the rail line “will be paid for by the users and the Commonwealth.”

Then there’s the “fuhgeddaboudit” option. With no revenues yet available to offset the line’s already projected $21 million annual operating deficit, Sen. Richard Tisei is calling for a moratorium on new commuter rail projects. A nine-year moratorium, in the form of an amendment to the fiscal 2008 Senate budget, recently failed. But the Wakefield Republican says that the proposal may resurface as an amendment to a future transportation bond or a capital improvement bill. “We’re just saying that before the administration really charges ahead with a new rail line, they really do have an obligation to take a look at the big picture,” Tisei says.

“The financing strategy doesn’t have to be painstakingly precise, but it has to be not so far wrong that you can’t put it right,” says Joseph Giglio, a professor of strategic management at Northeastern University’s College of Business.

“Before you start running a New Bedford or other expansion line, you’ve got to ask, ‘What is it that I’m trying to achieve with my transit system and why?” he says. “Financing tools are tactical questions. We can give those to the [Administration and Finance] guys and add up the numbers.”

And, as Montigny well knows, financing schemes come and go. “Until I’m riding on the train coming down here someday, I will not be anything other than a healthy skeptic,” he says.
Give Her an “A”!

Maybe it’s a subliminal reminder to do well in school, but girls’ names ending in “a” are all the rage in Massachusetts. According to the Social Security Administration, the top five names for newborn girls in the Bay State last year were Ava, Isabella, Emma, Sophia, and Olivia. Nationally, the top five included Emily and Madison, but they got less love here. The good old Irish name of Mary, a standby in the Bay State’s top 10 until 1969, fell all the way to 95th place.

On the boys’ side, Matthew, Ryan, Michael, Nicholas, and Andrew headed the list. (This was the only state where Matthew was on top.) Jacob, Joshua, and Ethan were in the national top five but got snubbed here. The president’s first name, George, didn’t make the top 100 at either the state or national level. Less surprisingly, Mitt and Deval were also absent. But John continues to poll well in JFK’s home state, coming in sixth; it’s one of the very few names that has been consistently popular over the past 50 years.

Mosquito Patrol

The risk of contracting eastern equine encephalitis in Massachusetts peaks during the second half of August, according to the Department of Public Health, due to the prevalence of adult mosquitoes. The DPH recommends aerial spraying to kill mosquitoes (using an “adulticide” called Anvil that targets fully grown insects but is not considered harmful to humans), but some communities are voicing doubts about the technique.

In May the town of Grafton took its chances and opted out of the 38-member Central Massachusetts Mosquito Control Project, saving $47,000 and pleasing residents who voiced fears that the spraying was also killing honey bees. And last fall the town of East Bridgewater became the first in the state to opt for a more natural form of pest control. It spent $1,000 apiece to set up 10 “bat houses” in areas that attract both humans and mosquitoes, such as athletic fields. (Bats were not included in the purchase price, but officials are counting on the structures to do well on the housing market for upwardly mobile skeeter-eaters.) A representative of Atlantic Termite and Pest Control, which installed the houses, told the Boston Globe that each structure can accommodate 300 bats and that each bat can eat 1,200 insects an hour. Actual results should become known this summer.

Rush Hour at the Emergency Room

The Division of Health Care Finance and Policy recently calculated that 1.02 million visits to Massachusetts hospital emergency rooms in FY 2005, which resulted in charges of $959 million, were unnecessary or could have been avoided “with timely and effective ambulatory care.” It turns out that avoidable ER visits are most frequent between 6 and 9 a.m. — perhaps because of the stress of getting ready for work combined with the fact that many health clinics are not open yet. Women, minority groups, and Medicaid recipients make up a disproportionate share of these ER visitors. The agency’s report concludes, “Even if some percentage of visits by Medicaid and uninsured patients were moved to clinic or office settings, a substantial savings to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts could accrue.”
Almost one-third of Bay State communities — including most of the territory west of Framingham — are part of a “dental shortage area,” meaning that they have a people-per-dentist ratio of more than 4,000-to-1, according to a new report by the Oral Health Collaborative of Massachusetts. A separate MassINC tally (using June data from the state Division of Professional Licensure) found that Charlton and Northbridge were the biggest towns without any currently licensed dentist, while Chelsea was the least-served city, with six dentists for a population of 33,000.

By contrast, Brookline had 185 dentists, or one for every 300 people. The Collaborative warns that the dentist-to-population ratio is in a steady decline across the U.S., due to a lack of newcomers to replace retiring practitioners (see Statistically Significant, CW, Winter ’04).

One possible solution to the shortage is not getting much support among the tooth squad: The Massachusetts Dental Society is fighting a bill in the Legislature that would allow dental assistants and hygienists to practice without the direct supervision of fully licensed drillers.
A quiet revolution has begun. And 125,000 people have already signed up.

When Massachusetts passed a new health care law last year to expand health insurance coverage, it was cheered around the country.

Since the publicity died down, much less attention has been paid to the fact that the law is already working — for more than 125,000 previously uninsured people who now have coverage.

These are people who can now see a doctor on a regular basis. Who won’t have to postpone or go without care. Who won’t have to wait until their health problems get so bad they need emergency care. Who won’t have to worry about losing insurance if they lose their jobs.

Those 125,000 people are now covered through an expanded MassHealth program, the Commonwealth Care program of subsidized insurance, and the new Commonwealth Choice affordable health insurance products.

While 125,000 people have been covered, there are more uninsured people who need to know about these new insurance options.

That’s why the state’s Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector and the Massachusetts Healthcare Reform Coalition, composed of organizations that support the new law, have teamed up to get the word out about the new coverage that is now available.

A quiet revolution in health care is underway. It’s a major step toward achieving the goal of quality care for all. And there are already 125,000 examples of how the new law is working.
we’re still in a state of invention, according to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Massachusetts ranked fourth in the total number of patents granted last year, outranked only by California, Texas, and New York. We’re third when the numbers are adjusted for population size, as on our chart. Perhaps more important, the Bay State ranked sixth in the increase of all patents compared with 2000, better than any other state in the Northeast or Great Lakes region. That doesn’t mean we have no worries looking ahead, however: States with relatively youthful populations, such as Colorado, may have more growth potential than a state like Massachusetts, where most people are already well into their most inventive years.

Idaho and Vermont top our per-capita ranking, but most of the patents in Idaho regularly go to Micron Technology, which makes “memory and imaging devices,” and the bigfoot among inventors in Vermont has been IBM, which operates a semiconductor factory just outside of Burlington. Patent awardees in Massachusetts are much more diverse, with a plurality going to individuals rather than companies. There has also been more turnover in the list of top patent-generating firms, with a shift from high-tech to biotech and pharmaceuticals.

MIT leads the state in winning new patents. During the latter half of the ’90s, the top five were Digital Equipment Corp., MIT, Polaroid, General Hospital Corp. (Mass. General), and Analog Devices. From 2001 through 2005 (the last year for which detailed information is available), MIT was on top, followed by EMC Corp., Sci-Med Life Systems, Sun Microsystems, and Millennium Pharmaceuticals.

Whether all these new-industry inventions lead to jobs is another matter. An April report by the Massachusetts High Technology Council and UMass Donahue Institute warned that the state has slipped from fifth to seventh in the number of people employed in the biotech and pharmaceutical sectors; Michigan and Pennsylvania both passed Massachusetts between 1998 and 2004. “The Bay State is undeniably a world leader in the research and development of biological and pharmaceutical products and treatments,” according to the report, but so far it “has not been as successful in attracting bio-pharma manufacturing activities.”

Brainstorms by Robert David Sullivan

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Not-so-prime spots  by robert david sullivan

HOME FORECLOSURES IN Massachusetts continued to climb this spring—up 40 percent in May compared with the same period last year, according to the Warren Group. The map below is based on the number of foreclosures during the 180-day period ending on May 30, as reported by ForeclosuresMass. Some of the highest rates, when adjusted for population size, were in towns that have significantly expanded their housing stock over the past few years, including Cape Cod’s Mashpee (68 foreclosures during the period that was studied), Worcester County’s Charlton (29), and South Coast’s Dighton (14). Still, most of the foreclosures overall were in urban areas. There were 1,114 in Boston, though that amounted to a rate of just under 20 for every 10,000 residents. Things were considerably grimmer in Springfield (662 foreclosures, or 44 for every 10,000 residents) and even worse in Brockton (506 foreclosures or 53 for every 10,000 residents).

The latter cities are also distinguished by high numbers of “subprime” mortgages, or home loans with extraordinarily high interest rates that are given to individuals who are considered bad credit risks. According to a January report by the Massachusetts Community and Banking Council (whose members include banks and community groups), 54 percent of all home-purchase loans made to Springfield residents in 2005 had interest rates more than three points above U.S. Treasury securities of the same maturity. The comparable figure in Brockton was 59 percent. Even higher rates included 60 percent in Everett and a staggering 68 percent in Lawrence.

In Boston, the subprime share was only 25 percent for the entire city—but it was 57 percent among blacks and 52 percent among Latinos, versus 13 percent for white borrowers. In Milton, the racial gap was even greater: 50 percent of all home purchase loans to blacks were subprime, versus 7 percent for loans to whites. There was a much smaller difference in Revere, but only because the subprime share of loans to whites was so high (46 percent, versus 61 percent for blacks).
Tax and mend

If fixing the alternative minimum tax is such a popular idea, why isn’t Congress doing it?

BY SHAWN ZELLER

ASKED WHY HE’S taken a lead role in the bid by House Democrats this year to enact an overhaul of the little-known alternative minimum tax, U.S. Rep. Richard Neal of Springfield points to Maggie Rauh, a Chicopee accountant and mother of three in his western Massachusetts district.

Rauh and her husband are among the many Bay State residents trying to raise a family on a middle-class income. Saving is hard, she told Neal’s Ways and Means subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures earlier this year. And the tax code is only making it harder. After working the numbers, Rauh told the subcommittee, she was “dumbfounded” to realize that, in 2007, unless Congress acts to limit the projected hit of the alternative minimum tax, her family will be among the 23 million American households forced to pay more under the separate tax system, increasing their tax burden by $1,300—no small sum on a family income of $75,000.

That’s not what Congress intended when it created the AMT back in 1969. At the time, Congress was reacting to news that 155 high-income taxpayers had avoided taxes that year altogether by claiming unusually large deductions. The idea was to ensure that wealthy Americans couldn’t pull that stunt anymore.

But Congress made a crucial mistake by failing to index the AMT to inflation, the result of which has been a steady expansion of the people who find themselves hit by the tax, particularly among those with larger-than-average families or substantial deductions for state taxes and home mortgage interest.

Here’s how it works: Taxpayers must calculate their taxes under both the regular tax system and the AMT’s rules and pay whichever bill is highest. AMT filers cannot claim deductions for home mortgage interest or state and local taxes. Instead, single filers may claim a $42,500 deduction (or $62,550 for married couples filing jointly) and then pay 26 percent on income up to $175,000 and 28 percent on income above that.

Beginning in 2001, Congress has passed annual “patches” to the AMT, or one-year adjustments that have shielded most taxpayers from its bite. In 2006, only 4 million Americans ended up paying the AMT, thanks to the patch. But because of high property costs and state and local taxes, Massachusetts is one of the hardest-hit states in the country—seventh overall, according to a recent study of 2004 data by the Tax Foundation, a Washington think tank. Nearly 4 percent of state taxpayers paid the AMT that year.

The hardest-hit congressional district in the Bay State was the 4th, which runs from western Boston suburbs such as Brookline and Newton down to the South Coast and is represented by Barney Frank. There, nearly 5.5 percent of taxpayers were hit with an average AMT bite of $4,500 beyond what they would have paid under the regular tax structure. Neal’s 2nd district, anchored in Springfield, had a relatively low burden, with only 2 percent of taxpayers paying the AMT there.

But Neal, because of his role as the only Bay State representative on the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee, has been more attuned to the growing AMT problem than most, first proposing legislation to fix it a decade ago. Now, with Democrats in control of the House for the first time since 1995, and Neal chairing the Ways and Means subcommittee with oversight authority on the issue, he’s leading the effort.

“This was part of the promise we made during election season: to make sure middle-income people are not going to get hit by the alternative minimum tax,” he says.
But it’s proving a lot easier said than done. Neal and his allies want to end the AMT hit on middle-class households, while paying for it with tax increases elsewhere. (Price tag: $800 billion over 10 years.) “We don’t just want to do it that way, we have to do it that way,” he says. That’s because House Democrats, upon taking control of the chamber in January, put back in place so-called pay-as-you-go rules, which require legislation to be revenue-neutral.

Neal says his plan would benefit 87 taxpayers for every one who has to pay more because of it. “The anger of the one is relatively insignificant compared to the 87,” he says. But most of the 87 who stand to benefit from Neal’s fix—people like Chicopee’s Maggie Rauh—have never actually felt the tax’s hit, because of the patches Congress has passed each year. That’s why the political calculus is that those who would benefit from a permanent AMT solution are unlikely to know the difference, while those stuck with the tab to pay for it surely will.

Meanwhile, despite the Democratic takeover of Congress, Neal isn’t getting much help from the Senate, where finance committee chairman Max Baucus, a Montana Democrat, is pushing a two-year patch for the AMT at a cost of $110 billion that he doesn’t intend to pay for by raising taxes elsewhere.

Neal says he’s not worried about how the Senate approaches the job, saying that it’s the House’s role to lead on revenue measures, and let the chips fall where they may. He wants to raise the AMT rates from the current level of 28 percent on joint income tax filers with incomes of above $500,000, in order to pay for an elimination of the tax for filers below $250,000. Families with incomes in between would still be subject to the AMT, but would get a rate reduction. (But if the legislation does not include indexing for inflation, the AMT squeeze on the middle class could reappear down the road.)

For their part, Neal’s Republican counterparts on the Ways and Means Committee have blasted the approach as a surefire way to short-circuit economic growth. President Bush hasn’t said whether he would support it, but most Washington prognosticators think it’s unlikely.

Neal says that for every year Congress passes another temporary fix—and fails to pay for it with tax increases elsewhere—other federal programs and urgent funding needs are left unmet. “It takes away your ability to do other things you’d really like to do,” he says. “I think there’s more political risk to not fix it.”

Whether enough of his colleagues come to see it that way, of course, is the real question.
A GAY TIME IN WASHINGTON?

It may be no surprise that a state known for exporting political talent and for its first-in-the-nation sanctioning of same-sex marriage has also become a prime source of top-flight gay political leadership in Washington. What is surprising is that the gay rights efforts those leaders are spearheading are actually gaining some traction in George Bush’s Washington.

The Bush era has been tough on the gay rights lobby, with the president’s support for a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, by some accounts, serving as the wedge issue that carried Bush to his close 2004 reelection. But with a sympathetic Democratic majority now ensconced in the Capitol, things may be looking up for gay rights causes.

In May, the House passed long-stalled legislation that would define violent crimes targeting gays and lesbians as hate crimes, allowing federal authorities to contribute to their prosecution. In April, Newton Democratic Rep. Barney Frank — the first openly gay member of Congress — joined with Republican colleague Christopher Shays of Connecticut to introduce another high-priority bill that would bar discrimination against gays and lesbians in hiring.

At the center of the DC lobbying on behalf of the bills is Bay State native Joe Solmonese, who in 2005 became president of the nation’s largest gay rights group, the Human Rights Campaign. Solmonese follows a parade of gay rights leaders who have gone from Boston to Washington, including former Bill Weld aide Rich Tafel and Patrick Guerriero, a former Melrose mayor and state representative — both of whom helped turn the Log Cabin Republicans into a well-regarded advocacy group — and past Human Rights Campaign leaders Tim McFeeley, a longtime activist in Boston, and Cheryl Jacques, a former Massachusetts state senator who left the organization in 2004 after a bruising national election in which constitutional amendments banning gay marriage passed in 11 states.

Solmonese, who was chief executive of EMILY’s List, a leading Democratic political action committee, before joining HRC, says the new air of possibility in Washington has been invigorating. “It’s a very different Congress that looks more like America with a leadership that is exponentially more supportive of our issues,” he says. (HRC has been harshly criticized by some grass-roots activists who argue that the group could make better use of its limited resources fighting battles at the state and local levels.)

Lately, Solmonese has been up to what he did best at EMILY’s List, and what surely helped win him the job at HRC: fundraising. Every penny donated, he says, will go toward winning what could be the biggest gay rights victory in Congress ever, if either the hate crimes or employment bill were to pass.

Convincing President Bush to go along, though, may be a tall task. The President has already promised to veto the hate crimes bill, should it reach his desk. But given the long drought for the gay rights movement in Washington, Solmonese is looking on the bright side. Even getting gay rights legislation “passed in both bodies of Congress and on the president’s desk,” he says, “would be an incredibly historic gain in and of itself.”

— SHAWN ZELLER

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On second thought
Smart-growth forces enjoy a reversal of fortune in Kingston
BY ROBERT PREER

Residential growth, smart or otherwise, is rarely an easy sell in the outer Boston suburbs. Townsfolk fear that too many new homes and residents will erode the quality of life that attracts people to these communities in the first place.

But this spring, the South Shore community of Kingston embraced a 109-acre development with more than 700 new homes. Four years earlier, the town had killed a similar proposal for the same property, dealing a setback to the smart-growth movement, then in its formative stages in Massachusetts. (See “Growth Smarts,” CW, Winter ’03.)

Backers say that smart growth prevailed this time because the benefits were clearly laid out—as were the consequences if it failed.

The new project, known as 1021 Kingston’s Place, would be the largest development in the town’s history by far, and its residents would be within walking distance of the Kingston commuter rail station. “This is an opportunity to locate affordable housing in a place that makes sense,” says Thomas J. O’Brien, a former Kingston state representative who became Plymouth County treasurer last year.

It is also an opportunity to take advantage of Chapter 40R, the three-year-old state law that financially rewards communities—in this case, with more than $600,000—for rezoning to allow high-density and affordable housing near public transit or town centers. (See “Chapter 40R on the Rise,” CW, Spring ’07.) As the law requires, 20 percent of the units at 1021 Kingston’s Place would be affordable for low- and moderate-income households. But almost every possible housing type is included in the plan: 245 condominiums, 260 single-family homes, 225 apartments, and 33 home-office-workplace units.

The idea for Kingston’s Place was hatched by Thorndike Development of Norton, a company known for its “new urbanist” projects such as Chapman’s Reach (Quincy), and Pinehills (Plymouth). For Kingston, the company came up with a village-style development with green space and walking paths not only to the rail station, but also to soccer fields and the town’s elementary and middle schools.

Selectman Mark Beaton opposed rezoning the site for housing when the idea was first proposed in 2003. But when Thorndike offered detailed plans about what would be built and how the town might benefit, he liked what he heard.

“The first time the zoning was proposed, the town had a lot of questions…and, basically, the people who put it forward said, ‘Don’t worry about it,’” according to Beaton. “This time, the developer came forward and said exactly what he was going to do.”

Still, Kingston’s acceptance of Chapter 40R did not come easily. Opponents have compared the project to plunking the neighboring town of Plympton (pop. 2,800) right into the middle of Kingston. At the same time, Dennis Randall, a member of the town planning board, found it hard to believe that the location—an abandoned sand and gravel pit—was suitable for such an ambitious project. “It looks like an Iraqi war zone,” he says.

Town meeting deliberations spanned three consecutive nights in April. The plan almost died amid parliamentary maneuvering by both supporters and opponents, but a dramatically increased turnout on the last night—orchestrated, critics complain, by Thorndike Development—put the zoning change over the top. The project will need one
more approval from town meeting in the fall, and opponents may try again to scuttle it.

**THE DEBATE OVER** smart growth in Kingston started more than a decade ago, when local officials and housing advocates eyed the huge expanse of open land next to the train station, which opened in 1997 with the revival of the Old Colony line to Boston. The first rezoning plan would have allowed 800 homes on the site, owned by local businesswoman Mary O’Donnell. A majority at town meeting supported the proposal, but it fell well short of the two-thirds needed to change local zoning bylaws or ordinances in Massachusetts.

After that, the land stayed vacant, and other uses for the site were pretty much ruled out. A nature preserve was highly unlikely in such forbidding terrain. Retail stores preferred to set up near the Route 3 interchange with the relocated Route 44, a four-lane highway linking Plymouth with Providence. And given the distance from Boston, the site wasn’t ideal for office space.

Meanwhile, developers began to target Kingston for Chapter 40B housing. There are now six separate plans in the works that total 590 units of housing, about 150 of which would be affordable. All of the projects, which were filed after 2003, are designed to trigger Chapter 40B, a state law that can negate local zoning if less than 10 percent of a municipality’s housing stock is deemed affordable.

“The town is inundated with 40B proposals,” Beaton says. “We’ve been asking the state to stop jamming these things down our throat.”

While the pressures of 40B were mounting in Kingston, Chapter 40R passed on Beacon Hill. O’Brien, then a state representative, was a co-sponsor. “I believe if people are given the appropriate incentives, they will embrace affordable housing,” he says.

However, the state’s financial incentives may matter less than the fact that the Thorndike project would add 146 units to the town’s supply of affordable housing and, according to town officials, push Kingston over the 10 percent affordability threshold. The town thus would be immunized against future 40B proposals. (The 40B applications already filed would not be affected by such a change in the town’s status.)

The 40B dilemma is presumably one reason that the town was newly receptive when Thorndike and its president, Lloyd Geisinger, appeared on the scene in January 2006. Thorndike had the property under agreement from O’Donnell and began pitching ideas for 40R zoning and a smart-growth project on the site. In March, the board of selectmen initiated talks with the state Department of Housing and Community Development on establishing a 40R district at the property—the first step in getting state certification of the zone and, ultimately, state payments.

Through the summer and fall, Thorndike representatives met with town boards, civic groups, and individuals who lived near the site, hashing out solutions to such things as increased traffic and the added strain on the public works, police, and fire departments. By the end of the year, the developer had put together a tantalizing package of incentives. Thorndike promised to build a new ramp that would lead from the development and the train station to Route 3 southbound, promising an end to the frustrating evening traffic jams that regularly occur near the station now.

Thorndike also promised to pay for a new town well, an expansion of the sewer system, playing fields for local youth sports programs, and a new fire truck with a 100-foot ladder that could reach the tallest buildings in the complex. When a citizen advisory group asked that Thorndike construct environmentally friendly, energy efficient buildings made of recycled and recyclable materials, the company agreed to have the designs certified by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Under Chapter 40R, Kingston should also get money from the state—$600,000 upfront and $3,000 every time a building permit is pulled for the project. But the town, like others across Massachusetts, is watching with interest developments on Beacon Hill, where Gov. Deval Patrick and some lawmakers are trying to find a steady source of 40R funds to ensure that cities and towns get their promised cash (a detail that the Legislature and Patrick’s predecessor, Mitt Romney, didn’t attend to when the law was passed). Administration officials said they expect to make an announcement on the matter this summer. But Thorndike has promised to pay the incentives itself if the
state doesn’t come through.

Another boost for the Thorndike project came in the results of a study commissioned by the town and issued this past March by the Boston consulting firm Community Opportunities Group. The report concluded that the high-density development would not be that attractive to families with children and instead would draw mostly young professionals and older people. The project would bring in only about 200 new schoolchildren, who could be absorbed into existing schools, according to the report. Community Opportunities Group predicted that the project would produce a net benefit for the town’s coffers of $707,000 a year.

For some Kingston residents, all of this was too good to be true.

“The developer played the town like a fiddle,” says planning board member Dennis Randall.

Randall maintains that residential growth inevitably strains municipal resources and produces higher taxes, which are already a major concern in Kingston. To close a budget gap this year, Kingston voters approved $1.5 million in Proposition 2½ overrides, which will boost taxes on an average home by about $300 a year. “I don’t buy the analysis,” Randall says. “It argues that the way to get out of a budget deficit is to grow your way out of it. If that were the case, our taxes should be going down now.”

Of the 40R cash the town would get, he says, “It’s a one-time payment. The long-term impact is for the life of the town.”

But town planner Thomas Bott says that a housing development is the best thing that can happen to the property. “This is going to take an ugly landscape and turn it into something attractive and much more profitable for the town,” he says. (And as he told CommonWealth four years ago, “The whole idea [is] to take the people who were going to move to Kingston and put them by the T instead of other parts of town.”)

Kara Brewton, project manager for Thorndike, also argues that the development’s affordable housing will benefit the entire community: “When your children are coming out of college, where are they going to live? Wouldn’t it be nice if they could live in the town where they grew up?”

ON THE FIRST night of town meeting in April, supporters of the project turned out in force, and they tried to get the measure taken out of order so that it could be voted on
right away. The debate bogged down, though, and no vote was taken before the meeting adjourned for the evening.

On the following night, after a couple of hours of debate, a vote was finally called, and the tally was 506 to 291 in favor of the plan—a simple majority but not quite the needed two-thirds to amend the zoning bylaws.

Health Board chairman Dan Sapir, an outspoken opponent of the project and publisher of the Kingston Observer newspaper, made a key strategic move right after the vote: He called for reconsideration. Sapir reasoned that if the measure could have been immediately defeated a second time, the project would be dead. “Once a motion for reconsideration fails, the prior decision is sealed and can not come up again, either that day or at a reconvened session,” Sapir wrote in the Observer.

Before the vote could be taken, though, a supporter of the project called for adjournment. A simple majority is all that is needed to adjourn, and the motion to continue the matter to the next night carried.

Over the next 24 hours, both sides mobilized their forces, and the result was one of the largest turnouts ever for a Kingston town meeting. There was a big showing from the 230-home Indian Pond Estates next to the site, but opponents cried foul over an agreement between Thorndike and the Indian Pond Neighborhood Association. Thorndike had agreed to pay for improvements to a road in the development, and in return, the association agreed to undertake a get-out-the-vote effort. While Sapir and other critics called the deal unsavory, Thorndike and the association defended it as legitimate town meeting politicking. After a lengthy debate, the vote was taken and this time the margin was overwhelmingly in favor: 925 to 341. The zoning change had finally passed.

“It was a very high-stakes poker game,” Randall says. “Town meeting was dramatic after this long drawn-out process. It certainly was an exciting three nights,” agrees Brewton.

Opponents have not given up. An easement is needed to build the new ramp to Route 3, and that will require town meeting approval at a session scheduled for the fall. Critics of the project say they will carry the fight to the voters again.

The project also has to undergo extensive state regulatory review under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act and will need permits from a number of state and local agencies. “We’re really at the beginning of the permitting process,” says Brewton, who projects a 2009 construction start and a decade for full build-out.

Selectman Beaton acknowledges there is a long way to go before Kingston’s new village-inside-a-town becomes a reality. And while he understands there are risks in accepting such a dramatic change for the town, he believes the rewards will be worth it. “I think to Kingston’s credit, we took the leap of faith,” he said.
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PAY UP — AND SHUT UP?

Under one school of thought, second-homeowners are a major asset to the Massachusetts economy. They pay property taxes, constantly renovate those second homes, and buy up all the heirloom tomatoes and artisanal goat cheese the natives can crank out, without requiring much in return in the way of services.

But there’s another point of view: Part-time residents are colonizing weasels, driving up home values (and everyone’s taxes) by overpaying for properties and then destroying the character of a town with their Land Rovers, chi-chi wine stores, and walk-in Bikram yoga classes. When second-homeowners outnumber year-round residents, it can feel a bit Upstairs, Downstairs.

In response, many towns charge second-homeowners a personal property tax in addition to residential property taxes. Condominium owners in Dennis, most of whom are seasonal residents, faced a quadrupling of the fee for beach parking last summer. And the town of Dartmouth charges nonresidents more for waterway permits. The general thinking is that anyone who can afford two homes can probably spare the dough. Plus, where else are they going to go, Illinois?

But second-homeowners are beginning to push back. New Yorkers Thomas and Miriam Curnin, who say they’ve paid about $150,000 in property taxes on the 120 acres and second home they own in Egremont, filed a lawsuit last year after residents denied them the opportunity to speak at a special town meeting. The couple lost their first round this spring in U.S. District Court, but they are appealing. Thomas Curnin notes that second-homeowners pay 46 percent of the town’s property taxes, and that should entitle them to be heard.

“We think it’s a denial of First Amendment,” he says. “We’re not asking to vote. We just want the right to speak.”

BY POPULAR DEMAND

Citizens may not always exercise their right to vote, but they still like to know the opportunity is there. A Nantucket study committee proposed at April’s town meeting to make the membership of three bodies—the planning board, historic district commission, and shellfish and advisory board—appointed rather than elected. One reason: Qualified people might be shying away from the rough and tumble of the electoral process.

“It can be hard,” says town clerk Catherine Flanagan Stover. “People say things that might not be true, and [candidates] might not want to put themselves through that.”

The appointment process would result in better qualified candidates and stronger accountability, argued the study committee. But critics, including current members of the planning board, said that the move would take power away from voters. A majority of town meeting voters agreed.

At the other end of the state, town meeting voters in Williams-town had the opposite decision to make. In May, residents of the small college town narrowly approved the switch from a planning board that was appointed by selectmen to one that will be chosen by the voters. Anita Barker, who has served as both selectman and planning board member, made the proposal, saying that the vetting process for possible board members has not always been thorough, especially given concerns over the impact of new development.
A BUMPER CROP

Bay State farmers are facing another tough year, thanks in part to increasing fuel and fertilizer costs. Things have gotten so bad for dairy farmers that Gov. Deval Patrick declared a state of emergency in the industry. And despite the growing popularity of farmers’ markets, farmland acreage is declining.

But some see opportunities as more consumers worry about food safety and vow to eat “locally.” That may be one reason for the sudden proliferation of agricultural commissions. Some 103 communities—including some unlikely locales, like bustling Newton—have established boards that advocate for farmers, help protect farmland, and work with town boards on agricultural issues. (See the complete list at massagcom.org.) In 2001, there were just six.

Scott Soares, acting commissioner of the state Department of Agricultural Resources, also attributes the increase to smart-growth regulations. Towns are recognizing the value of farming in maintaining open space, he says, and “AgComs” can represent agricultural interests in the development process.

Sure, everybody likes local milk and produce, but the new residents of a town may not be so enthusiastic about the fine bouquet of cow manure on a hayfield in spring, the sawmill running at five in the morning, or those roosters, which tend to exercise their freedom of speech not just in the early morning, but All. Day. Long.

So the town of Rutland, in comparatively fast-growing Worcester County, last year established both an AgCom and a “right to farm” bylaw that gives farmers the legal rights to do their job, despite complaints from their new neighbors.

“It means you have to live with it,” says Skip Clark, who owns the 150-acre Ketonen-Clark Farm, where he and his family raise cattle, hogs, and chickens.

Is all this interest too little, too late? According to the U.S. Agriculture Department, Worcester County lost about 12,000 acres of farmland between 1997 and 2002. (Plymouth County lost 22,000 acres, or about a quarter of its farmland, during the same period.) When Clark was a kid, he says, there were almost 100 farms in Rutland; today there are fewer than 10.

But farmers are an optimistic lot—they have to be. And it helps to have a voice.

“Every time you turn around, there’s a new house going in somewhere,” he says. “The AgCom is a good buffer between the farmer and the people who are going to complain.”
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Full disclosure
The New England News Forum pulls back the curtain on local journalism

BY DAN KENNEDY

LESS THAN A year after its launch, the New England News Forum is a work in progress. At a time when the mainstream media are under assault from bloggers, political partisans, and an unprecedented financial squeeze, the Forum has the potential to educate the public about the importance of journalism in a democratic society, while at the same time holding journalists up to scrutiny. Precisely how that is to happen, though, has yet to come into focus.

Based at UMass–Amherst, the fledgling organization has so far sponsored a few public events and launched a hodgepodge of a Web site at www.newenglandnews.org. The main purpose, organizers say, is education. And a panel discussion they sponsored in May at the Boston Public Library may give some idea about how the Forum could contribute to the civic life of the region.

John Wilpers, the editor of BostonNOW, a free weekday tabloid, was explaining that his morning news meetings are broadcast live on the Internet, with viewers typing in comments that he and his staff read on the spot. One morning, he said, someone listening to an idea being pitched wrote, “I’m bored already, and you haven’t even written the story.” Wilpers continued: “So we killed the story. We thought about it and said, yeah, they’re right, that was a boring story. It was a government story. Journalists tend to be somewhat drawn to government stories. Maybe it’s some new DNA they pick up when they get their diploma.”

Wilpers was funny and ingratiating, and everyone had a good laugh. Later, though, one of his fellow panelists took him on.

“Part of what you said, John, gave me a little bit of a creepy feeling,” said Ellen Hume, a veteran journalist who is now the director of the Center on Media and Society, at UMass–Boston. “You’ve got to cover government. I don’t want to kill the government stories.”

Whereupon Wilpers replied, “I would never kill a story just because a blogger or a viewer of the webcast didn’t like it. I’m not going to turn my newsroom over to whoever happens to be watching.”

Was this a breakthrough moment in media transparency? Well, perhaps not. But it was a useful look into how decisions are made in a newsroom, even one as unorthodox as BostonNOW’s. Moreover, it’s a moment that has been preserved, as the entire panel discussion can be viewed on the Forum’s Web site.

Let’s give Wilpers the benefit of the doubt and assume that the particular government story he killed was, in fact, pretty much guaranteed to induce narcolepsy. The point is that larger issues got an airing. No editor wants to bore his readers, but in a self-governing society, the media have an indispensable role in bringing to the public the information it needs, regardless of its entertainment value. It’s a perpetual conflict—and if the Forum can’t resolve it, it’s nevertheless a dilemma worth talking about.

THE FIRST THING organizers want you to know is that they do not intend for the News Forum to devolve into yet another outlet for media-bashing.

“The folks in mainstream media are vitally important to participatory democracy,” says Bill Densmore, a former newspaper publisher who serves as the Forum’s director and editor. “We are not a watchdog group if the watchdog’s role is to go bite the mailman. It’s to assess the mailman and educate the dogs about the mailman’s role.”

What does that mean in practice? One answer is that the Forum aims to be a less formal version of the Minnesota News Council, which helped launch the New England group by awarding it a two-year, $75,000 grant from the Knight Foundation. That council, along with a similar organization in Washington state, includes citizens and professional journalists who hear complaints about media organizations, investigates those complaints, and renders a judgment. (The complainant must agree not to sue for libel before the council will take on a case.) The concept got its widest airing in 1996, when 60 Minutes broadcast a report on the Minnesota News Council’s finding that a local television station had sensationalized a report about airline safety. There is no punishment other than public
criticism.

The New England News Forum is not as focused on outcomes. Visitors to its Web site can suggest “case studies” for the Forum to follow up on. They can involve privacy, diversity, coverage emphasis, conflicts of interest, citizen journalism—whatever. If all goes as planned, the Forum will assign someone (most likely from the UMass journalism department) to interview people on all sides of an issue and put together an analysis that would be posted on the Web. After that, citizens—including expert “facilitators” whom Densmore and company hope to recruit—will offer their own opinions and responses online.

“We’re envisioning this as an online conversation,” says UMass journalism professor Norman Sims, the Forum’s principal investigator, drawing a careful distinction between a “conversation” and a “hearing.” He adds, “It’s not an adversarial relationship. It’s in a lower key. I have nothing against heated debate, but I think in the political climate right now, people aren’t talking to each other, they’re talking past each other.”

Says Larry Parnass, managing editor of the Northampton–based Daily Hampshire Gazette, who’s been helping the Forum refine its approach to putting together those online analyses: “I think it’s arrogant to say we’re responsive enough. We ask people all the time to play our game and answer our questions.”

Unlike the media reporting and criticism that already appears in mainstream outlets, the Forum is intended as a vehicle for citizens’ voices as well. Forum adviser Lisa Williams, who founded the Watertown blog H2otown.info and who tracks local blogs across the world at Placeblogger.com, pictures the organization as a gathering spot for people who “feel that they have a stake and have something to say about journalism as we’re practicing it here.”

(A disclosure: I’ve been involved in some peripheral activities with the Forum, including taking part in a panel discussion in April. However, I declined Densmore’s invitation to become a dues-paying member because I knew I would be reporting on it.)

Now, this sounds well and good. But we all know that, every once in a while, the mailman deserves to have a large hunk of flesh torn out of his hind quarters. When someone has been done wrong by a news organization, the last thing she wants is to have a “conversation.” What she really wants is justice. Is the News Forum concept too wimpy?

No, says UMass journalism professor Ralph Whitehead, the Forum’s research consultant, who argues that deep changes in the media environment make the old news coun-

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cil idea untenable. We’re in a moment, he says, that is marked by “an increasing concentration of media power and at the same time a dramatic leveling of the playing field.” As Whitehead puts it, even as Rupert Murdoch attempts to add the Wall Street Journal to his vast holdings, the editors of major newspapers such as The Boston Globe must pay attention to what a proliferating swarm of bloggers is saying about them. “We want to hold the mainstream media accountable, but they’re much more fragile now,” Whitehead says.

Gary Gilson, the retired executive director of the Minnesota News Council, who was involved in approving the Knight grant for the New England News Forum, is intrigued by the course being charted by the UMass folks. “We have a lot to learn from them,” he says. “It’s partly because of the changing nature of communications. And it’s partly because Densmore is such a wiz on the interactive use of the Internet.”

Gilson points to another reason that it makes sense for Densmore to strike out in a different direction. The 37-year-old Minnesota model works because the media organizations themselves founded the council and helped fund it. Without similar cooperation in New England, it makes little sense to try to replicate that system. Adds another Forum adviser, Laurisa Sellers, a former member of the Minnesota News Council who’s now assistant director of corporate and foundation relations at Simmons College: “The hearings are sexy and fun, but they can make muddy what the purpose of a news council is about.”

Indeed, news councils have always been controversial. In the 1970s and early ’80s, a National News Council attempted to call attention to standards and ethics throughout the media industry, and its findings were published in full in the Columbia Journalism Review. Among its last reports was a thorough post-mortem of how Janet Cooke, late of the Washington Post, was able to win a 1981 Pulitzer Prize for reporting on an 8-year-old heroin addict who did not actually exist. “It’s always useful to have greater public understanding of news media. Speaking as a former newspaper editor and publisher, it’s ironic, but I don’t know that we do a particularly good job of communicating to the public how we work,” says Loren Gighlione, who was a member of the National News Council. Gighlione, who’s advising the New England News Forum, is the former dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University (he’s currently a professor there), and the former publisher and editor of The News in Southbridge.

Trouble was, as Gighlione observes, some powerful media organizations, including the editors of The New York Times, refused to take part, arguing that it was up to them to enforce their standards, not an outside group. It’s a view that many editors continue to hold, including Bill Ketter, a veteran Massachusetts newspaper editor who’s now vice president for news for Community Newspaper Holdings Inc., a Birmingham, Alabama–based chain that owns several Massachusetts papers, most notably The Eagle-Tribune of Lawrence.

“Each news organization is responsible for its own conduct, and I don’t like the notion of a press-oversight body or a so-called grievance committee,” says Ketter, also an adviser to the New England News Forum. “My position has always been that each news organization is responsible for its own behavior.”

Ketter adds: “I don’t have any problem with an organization such as the New England News Forum holding public forums on journalism issues and problems. I would not want them to get involved in specific cases.”
small and balding, wiry and intense, Bill Densmore has crafted a peripatetic career: Among other things, he has worked for the Associated Press and Crain's *Business Insurance Magazine*, is a former owner of the weekly *Williamstown Advocate*, has run Hancock Shaker Village, in Pittsfield, and is the founder of Clickshare Service Corporation. Clickshare developed a simple technology to make online purchases—something Densmore hopes will eventually be adopted by newspaper executives as they come to realize they'll never be able to make a go of it by giving away their content.

Densmore was also the force behind the Media Giraffe conference at UMass–Amherst last summer, a four-day event that brought together several hundred folks from the new and old media to talk about the future of news. This past April, he threw the News Forum's coming-out party: an all-day conference at UMass–Lowell, with more than 100 people attending discussions on subjects such as legal-liability issues for bloggers and efforts to create a shield law for reporters in Massachusetts. There have been a few smaller events as well, such as the panel at the Boston Public Library and a similar discussion at the Springfield City Library.

Despite this flurry of activity, building the News Forum into a vital part of the public conversation is a daunting task. We live in a climate awash with media criticism, from academic think tanks to hundreds of media-related blogs. As Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and a former media reporter for *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Phoenix*, puts it, “While there's always room for more, they might have to find a way to bring something to the table that others don’t.”

Densmore is well aware of that. Over lunch at the UMass–Amherst faculty club and in an interview in Norman Sims’s office, he offers a laundry list of ideas that he'd like to pursue—contracted ombudsman services (he offers the example of the Washington News Council, which was recently retained by the Spokane Spokesman-Review to assess its coverage of a commercial development owned by its parent company); First Amendment and freedom-of-information advocacy; and educational services aimed at public schools.

“The work we have to do now is a selling job,” he says. “It’s letting people know we have these ideas and finding out which ones they’re interested in using. Media issues have become a civic-engagement/political issue that garners intense interest. I hope we can figure out how to tap into that interest.”

Dan Kennedy is a visiting assistant professor at Northeastern University’s School of Journalism. His blog, Media Nation, is at medianation.blogspot.com, and he can be reached at da.kennedy@neu.edu.
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Bob Ansin’s lofty ambitions for Lawrence

Ansin has made mill redevelopment his passion — and the revival of struggling Bay State cities its hoped-for byproduct.
IF THE WALLS of the Wood Worsted Mill in Lawrence could talk, they would tell the stories of thousands of immigrant laborers who landed at its looms, hoping to scratch out a better life along the banks of the Merrimack River. A century later, the former textile mill is back in business. No longer a destination for the low-skilled immigrants who still flock to Lawrence in huge numbers in search of a better life, it is now offering those of greater means a piece of the good life.

Six hundred “eco-luxury” condominiums are filling out the massive brick edifice, which stretches the length of 25 football fields. One of the biggest investments in Lawrence in decades, the $200 million redevelopment project, whose planned features include a cyber café, movie theater, restaurant, and rooftop bar, is the work of Bob Ansin, the son of an accomplished Massachusetts family who has made mill redevelopment his passion—and the revival of struggling Bay State cities its hoped-for byproduct. If the Wood Mill and other behemoths lining the Merrimack were the lifeblood of Lawrence at the turn of the last century, their still-sturdy bones are the scaffolding on which a new future for the city may be taking shape.

The big bet Ansin is placing on Lawrence is bold enough on its own. He has added another outside-the-box dimension by having the “Monarch on the Merrimack” lofts heated and cooled by geothermal exchange, a process that uses water pumped from underground, thus avoiding fossil fuel consumption and greatly reducing the emission of greenhouse gases. When Ansin bought the Wood Mill in 2003, many found it hard to equate “green living” with a place
whose skyline is still marked by aging smokestacks, and equally tough to envision luxury properties in a city that’s consistently ranked among the poorest in the state. But the condos have been selling steadily, and the first residents are expected to move in by late fall.

It’s still not clear how many Lawrencians will actually benefit from this undertaking. A litany of social ills be-deviling the city will not be erased by the arrival of several hundred latte-sipping professionals. But many say the project holds not only the threat of gentrification but also the promise of a more economically diverse population and the kind of spin-off economic activity—and outlook—that such change can set in motion.

“For probably the first time in 40 years,” says Lawrence Mayor Michael Sullivan, “we’re going to see people with money in their pockets living here again.” It’s hard to see how that’s a bad thing in a city whose median household income of $31,600 is only slightly above half the statewide figure of $57,200.

Ansin says his company, Mass-Innovation, aims to bring environmentally and socially responsible principles to revitalization projects, with a focus on the intersection of development and community. Last year, Ansin made a $1 million donation to build a new Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence, a contribution his father matched by pitching in an additional million. Hardly the sort of token community offerings some developers make as a way to smooth over any ruffled feathers their project may cause. Yet Ansin insists such benevolence is not without self-interest.

“That was an entirely not-for-profit investment, but I believe that over time, it will result in direct financial returns for my company,” he says. “Every young person who is able to get involved in the club and finish school and come back to Lawrence, and participate in the revitalization of the city, increases the chances that my investment will gain value and decreases the chances that I will lose money.”

Ansin’s description of how profit and philanthropy go hand in hand brings new meaning to the business concept of a “virtuous cycle.” He may describe his more generous moves as the calculations of a bottom-line-focused developer. But plenty of struggling Massachusetts cities would roll out the welcome mat for hard-bitten business types eager to make a buck the Bob Ansin way.

THE ‘A-HA’ MOMENT
Like so many boom-and-bust cities, Lawrence is a place where celebrated assets morphed, at one point, into liabilities. This city of 72,000 people living in fewer than seven square miles was founded in 1853 by a group of industrialists who packed the housing and mills together tightly, their eyes fixed on efficiency. Mammoth factories were erected over the years, enabling owners to successfully hold down costs and maximize profits. But when the textile industry pulled out more than a century later, Lawrence was faced with two daunting challenges: retaining a middle class in
such a compact, densely populated city, and finding new uses for mills that were underutilized and oversized.

“These are huge, huge buildings,” says Joseph Bevilacqua, president and CEO of the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce. “And that’s what made it more difficult over the years to get things going and get people to take over the properties.”

After the textile industry left town, Lawrence’s celebrated assets morphed into liabilities.

The largest of all was the Wood Mill, developed by Frederick Ayer and his son-in-law William Wood as part of the American Woolen Company. At a third of a mile long, the Wood Mill contains 1.3 million square feet of space. When it opened its doors in 1906, it was said to be the largest mill building in the world.

If the scale of the mill redevelopment is overwhelming, envisioning new life for big industrial buildings is in Ansin’s blood. The scion of a wealthy family with ties to manufacturing, politics, real estate development, and media, Ansin says he continues to feel an abiding connection to his roots in Fitchburg, where his family owned the Anwelt Shoe Factory and he spent summers helping out on the production room floor, sometimes with a broom in his hand.

The 38-year-old Ansin earned a degree in political science from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. But he quickly found himself drawn to the family business and, through it, to the idea of redeveloping industrial-age buildings for 21st-century uses. For example, in 1998, he converted the Anwelt factory into a mixed-use development that now houses a public charter school along with office space for several community organizations, and will soon include apartments for the elderly.

The substantial fortune amassed by Ansin’s grandfather was built from his shoe factories and also through real estate development, land speculation, and broadcasting. Ansin’s uncle, Ed, now operates three television stations, including WHDH and WLVI in Boston and WSVN, the Fox affiliate in Florida. His father, Ron, is a well-known philanthropist who served as commissioner of commerce and development...
in the Dukakis administration.

Although they had no prior connection to Lawrence, the Ansin family played a crucial role in the revitalization of nearby Lowell, whose comeback has been a longstanding point of contrast to Lawrence’s decades of decay. Bob Ansin’s late cousin, Larry Ansin, was founder and president of the Lowell Plan, a business-led initiative in the 1960s that helped pave the way for the city’s comeback.

Bob Ansin, who lives in Lincoln with his Brazilian-born wife, Adriana, and two children, hadn’t originally planned to come to Lawrence at all. But in the spring of 2003, a real estate broker invited him to view the Wood Mill, which in 1912 was the site of the famous Bread & Roses strike, a name intended to evoke the mill workers’ struggle for both fair wages and a sense of human dignity and respect. After the textile industry left in the 1950s, the building became the home of Honeywell Bull, a computer manufacturing company, until 1996. At the time Ansin was invited to see it, the site had modern passenger elevators and other upgrades, and 60 percent of it was occupied by two major warehouse tenants. Ansin says, “The last thing I was thinking I’d want to do was go to Lawrence. I’d been there twice and my impression was consistent with most people’s: negative. Actually, I conveniently missed my first appointment, but the real estate broker was persistent.”

It was the Wood Mill’s proximity to the river and major highways that took Ansin by surprise when he got there. “I went up on the roof, and that was my ‘a-ha moment,’” he says. “It just didn’t register that I could be in Lawrence and be looking at 495. Then I saw the Merrimack River. And from another angle I saw Andover.”

When the real estate broker told him that three acres of land across the street came with the parcel and that there were rumors of plans to build a transportation center there, he remembers thinking, “This is too good to be true.”

Though few at the time saw Lawrence as a good prospect for high-end development, Ansin purchased the Wood Mill for $4.4 million. He says he never viewed its size as an obstacle. “It didn’t intimidate me because I haven’t looked at it as one building,” he says, noting there are firewalls between sections of the mill. “It needs to be considered four buildings under one roof, which don’t all need to be developed at the same time.”

Ansin says he takes a “triple-bottom-line” approach to his projects: He considers the financial return, the environmental impacts, and the effects a development can have on the broader community in which it is located. “We want to bring a new sense of hope and purpose to the communities in

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which we’re working,” he says. “We want to help change the economic reality of the existing population. I get jazzed by the idea that I’m bringing not just capital and jobs, but I’m also bringing enthusiasm and energy to a place that was in dire need of a sense that it could be something great again.”

BRINGING THE MIDDLE CLASS BACK

After inking the deal for the Wood Mill, Ansin sold the land across the street to the regional transit authority, and in December 2005 the $25 million Senator Patricia McGovern Intermodal Transportation Center opened, putting commuter rail and bus service to Boston and other destinations just steps away from the new Monarch lofts. About 430 of the station’s 900 parking spots were set aside for residents of the lofts. “At first, the designers of the transportation center [wanted] a skywalk between our building and our parking area, so in theory, you’d never have to touch the street,” says Ansin. “And I didn’t like it, because I think you have to activate the street. I want to have retail. I want to have things to do.”

Monarch residents will now have to cross Merrimack Street to get to their cars or the train, but not everyone is convinced it will be so simple to keep the building from becoming a world unto itself. “It’s very easy for people to drive in, go to their units, look at the river, and have that be what they know of Lawrence,” says Bill Traynor, executive director of Lawrence Community Works, a local community development corporation. “The challenge is how to get people out of the building. And I don’t think that’s an easy challenge.”

Dave Tibbetts, a former director of the state office of economic development and a co-founder of the Merrimack Valley Economic Development Council, sees it differently. In his view, it’s the nature of cities to develop areas that serve the needs of particular residents. “If it’s a sub-community within a community, I think that’s OK,” says Tibbetts. “Beacon Hill is a separate village in Boston.” Nor is Tibbetts concerned about Ansin’s development of retail and entertainment facilities within the building. “Right now there aren’t a lot of cultural amenities here, because there hasn’t been a market for that,” he says. “Bob is helping to bring a middle class back into the city.”

Ana Rodriguez, a member of the board of Lawrence Community Works and recent past president of the board,

‘You have to activate the street,’ says Ansin. ‘I want to have retail. I want to have things to do.’

Ansin says retailers won’t set up shop in an area that’s blighted and without customers—and he is bringing in the customers. “Once we have 300 to 400 people living here, [the area] could support four or five cafés,” he says.

Ana Rodriguez, of Lawrence Community Works, sees great potential for local entrepreneurs. ‘You have to activate the street,’ says Ansin. ‘I want to have retail. I want to have things to do.’
sees great potential for local entrepreneurs. “With all the people coming into Lawrence now, it would only make sense for the business owners to get together and put together a strategy to diversify their businesses to try to meet the demands,” she says.

Still, Pedro Arce, who serves on the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board, cautions against looking upon any residential project as the key to the city’s revitalization. “I think any development of that size can only help the city,” he says of immigrant-rich Lawrence, which is 60 percent Latino. “But for the city to truly advance and revive, it has to start with the development of the people within the city. Education, training, and jobs have to be the centerpiece.”

Rodriguez knows that’s true in the long run, but she can also think of a number of economic opportunities that will present themselves, even if some of them reflect the class divide between poorer residents and the incoming loftier class.”People can start cleaning services and pet-walking businesses,“she says.”They can become nannies or teach Spanish or even offer Latino cooking and dance classes.”

Hilda Ramirez, who directs a program of the Lawrence Cultural Council, says existing businesses need to figure out how to cater, literally and otherwise, to those buying into Lawrence’s new loft dwellings. “Sometimes you walk into a Latino-owned restaurant and they don’t have an English menu,” she says. “We need to show that we want to cater to a diverse crowd. That’s a mindset that needs to happen here. It’s so important because every time you draw in customers that a business wouldn’t typically have, that’s another worker that restaurant will eventually need to hire. They already have a big Latino market, but if they made a few changes, they could capture two or three markets.”

One thing Ansin’s new development will certainly bring in is an expanded tax base—about an extra $1 million in annual taxes, which can help improve the local infrastruc-
ture, schools, and public safety. New city revenue can also create and maintain parks and open spaces. Arce says that over time, these changes will boost property values, enabling more residents to make improvements to their homes and making Lawrence a more attractive place for everyone to live.

Tibbetts says there is no longer any room for new commercial and industrial parks in Lawrence; developments these days are built in the outskirts instead. But Ansin’s approach creates a new way for wealth to circulate in the Merrimack Valley. “Lawrence is part of a regional economy,” says Tibbetts. “People could very well go from their loft overlooking the Merrimack to their workplace in the suburbs, which is the reverse of what we’re accustomed to.”
TIPPING POINT
The homeownership rate in Lawrence has lagged for decades, and Ansin believes 600 new stakeholders will help re-energize the community. To that end, he is not allowing any investors to purchase his condos, and none can be rented out. Buyers must sign an affidavit saying that they or an immediate family member will occupy their space.

What’s striking is how Ansin seems to have infused a condo project with such social meaning. Monarch’s “green development” technology, in addition to its community-building potential, has indeed helped him tap into a market of socially conscious types who want to be part of something bigger.

As of late June, deposits had been made on 52 of the units, which range in price from $190,000 for the smallest studio to $500,000 for a 2,000-square-foot riverview penthouse. About half of the buyers are young professionals in search of a reasonable commute and an affordable price. The other half, says Ansin, are empty-nesters, many with large houses in Andover and North Andover, who are now contemplating a move that few in the Merrimack Valley could have imagined only a few years ago. “The historic dynamic was that you were supposed to get out of Lawrence,” he says.

Ansin, who describes the city as an island of poverty in a sea of wealth, hopes to at least begin to correct that imbalance. “If you look at the surrounding communities, about a third of people have a direct connection to Lawrence,” he says. “Either they’re from Lawrence or their parents or grandparents are from Lawrence. And it’s really sad when you grow up in a community and have to be embarrassed to say that you’re from that place. What I’m offering people is the chance to have all the creature comforts but also the sense that they’re helping to bring back a place that’s meaningful to them.”

The Carberry family of North Andover has recently found its way back to the Immigrant City, as Lawrence is

Ansin’s market is socially conscious types who want to be part of something bigger.

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known. Sisters Karen, Kelli, and Kristina are buying a penthouse at Monarch with the help of their father, who grew up in Lawrence and whose mother used to work at the Wood Mill.

“This is my father’s old stomping ground,” says Kelli Carberry. “When we were growing up, he used to drive us around and show us the city and where he used to hang out.”

Sue and Michael Adams are trading their three-bedroom house in Andover, where they raised their son, now 20, for a two-bedroom loft in Lawrence. Sue, an interior designer, has volunteered for several years at the Lawrence YWCA and began tutoring last year at a new tuition-free private school (Esperanza Academy) that serves Hispanic middle-school girls. She and her husband, a mortgage banker, are moving for the same reason she thinks others will: because they “believe in a project and a community.” “I just got this feeling that Bob Ansin and the Monarch are going to be a tipping point for Lawrence,” she says.

Ansin doesn’t expect many residents to raise children at Monarch lofts, largely because the Lawrence public schools have such a bad reputation. “But just because they don’t have kids in the schools doesn’t preclude good people from wanting to offer opportunities,” he says. “One of the biggest potential impacts that this project will have is bringing in a relatively large group of likely activists who, in paying their taxes, will have skin in the game and will make their opinions known.”

Indeed, many of those expressing interest in the development are suburbanites who work or volunteer at the city’s many nonprofits, he says. A member of the board of directors of the Boys & Girls Club, Ansin has a theory about what draws people back to the city to contribute. “I was really struck by how the vast majority of benefactors and administrators, who really are the backbone of running that organization and doing all the good, have Irish and Italian names. You look at a roster of the kids, and it’s obvious that they’re Latinos. And you say, ‘Why do they do this? They don’t live here. They live in Andover. Why do these people give so much of their time?’ And it’s because they went to the club, they lived in the projects. And by being involved today with kids they don’t know, they give back to themselves in a way.”

INVESTMENT CLUB

Ansin is hardly the only developer to set sights on Lawrence, where the interest in vacant mills is now outstripping supply. Just next door to Monarch Lofts is the Riverwalk, a
commercial complex and former mill developed by restaurateur Salvatore Lupoli, who bought the space about a year before Ansin purchased the Wood Mill. Though some of the complex had been abandoned for decades, it is now home to about 200 companies, including a restaurant and child-care center, along with a police substation and a registry of deeds. Bevilacqua, of the Chamber of Commerce, says Lupoli’s is the other development — along with Ansin’s — that has really helped set the tone for Lawrence in recent years. “The Riverwalk complex abuts 495. You can reach out and touch it,” he says. “And for years as people drove by, that was the image they had of Lawrence: all these abandoned buildings.”

“They’re providing a substantive private investment and an incentive for others to invest in Lawrence,” Bevilacqua says of Ansin and Lupoli, adding that the Merrimack Valley Federal Credit Union will soon move its corporate headquarters from North Andover to a section of the Riverwalk that had been abandoned for more than 60 years. “This is the first time in decades that a major corporate headquarters is coming to Lawrence, instead of leaving Lawrence.”

Also within walking distance is the Bell Tower Development, a former mill that houses a campus of Cambridge College. Owned by Chet and Gary Sidell, the building has more than 40 commercial and nonprofit tenants, many with a focus on arts and culture. Just down on South Canal Street is the International Business Center, owned by Art McCabe. McCabe’s building caters to small- and medium-sized international companies seeking to do business in the U.S. and has some manufacturing, warehouse, showroom, and office space, including McCabe’s law practice. “We have all created a mixed-use environment, and we each have our little niche,” he says of the parade of developers finding their way to the city. “We all fit together as part of the bigger puzzle, which is becoming Lawrence.”

Many credit the city with boosting development by creating incentives like a streamlined permitting process. Ansin says he was able to line up all his permits in under two months. “I knew Lawrence needed something, so when Bob [Ansin] came in, I said, ‘Whatever you need. You’re the customer,’” says Mayor Sullivan, adding that it was necessary to rezone that entire side of the river for mixed use. He says Lawrence has pulled together what he calls a city team, made up of representatives from the fire and police departments, along with the city inspector and the building inspector. “We get the team to do a walk-through early on to let developers know what would need to happen in order to meet the new fire codes and various parking ordinances. This way they won’t be hit with any surprises a year down the line.”

Sullivan says that before opening the Riverwalk, Lupoli was concerned about the city’s lingering reputation for auto theft. The mayor told Lupoli that if he could spare some office space, the city would set up a police substation on the
premises. That station now has three officers that work out of 2,000 square feet of space, and auto theft has become a non-issue in this area.

A FORK IN THE ROAD
If Lawrence is not yet as vibrant as some would like it to be, it is also not as ill-fated as it once was. For a time the city was inextricably linked in people’s minds to auto theft, arson, and teen pregnancy. As Sullivan puts it, “The city went through some years when it was burning.” Lawrence Community Works’ Ana Rodriguez, who has lived in Lawrence for 21 years, says she’s watched the city change before her eyes. “There’s been a huge difference,” she says. “Back then you’d just see all these boarded-up buildings. Houses that used to be shooting galleries are now homes for two or three families. There were empty lots that have now become parks.”

Meanwhile, the city’s huge Hispanic population is beginning to flex its economic muscle. Arce, of the Workforce Investment Board, is president and CEO of a new bank slated to open in Lawrence in late fall. When he decided to found the bank, he

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Ansin wants to reverse decades of disinvestment in Lawrence.
first had to raise at least $750,000. He says that from June 2006 to January 2007, he was actually able to raise $1.2 million, 75 percent of which came from Hispanic business owners and professionals. “There’s this perception that we have to feel sorry for all the Hispanics,” says Arce. But Hispanics are following the same upwardly mobile migration path as earlier immigrant groups. “Many are now middle and upper-middle class and moving out of Lawrence,” says Arce, who now lives in North Andover himself, after coming to Lawrence from Ecuador as a young child.

Arce attributes some of the changes in the city to the success of local real estate investors, many of whom bought up rental properties in Lawrence and other nearby cities in recent years. “The new wealth that’s been created by these entrepreneurs has been circulating more in the community,” he says. “I don’t know if we’d have opened this bank five or 10 years ago. If I had to measure the pulse in Lawrence, I’d say there’s a lot of optimism now. It’s not going to happen overnight, or even in two or three years, but I think we’re going to be able to look back in five years and say that it is a different city.”

Still, during the community’s decades of economic decline, when hope was hard to find, deep-seated problems took hold that aren’t easily turned around. The city’s teen pregnancy rate is more than three times higher than the statewide rate, and Arce points out that just 10 percent of adults in Lawrence have college degrees. According to Bill Traynor of Lawrence Community Works, current figures suggest that only 40 percent of children entering kindergarten in Lawrence will graduate from high school. Of those, more than a quarter won’t have a plan in place for work or education after high school. “As a community, we don’t have great aspirations for our young people,” he says. “We want to create a new culture in Lawrence of supporting our young.”

Sullivan agrees that if future generations are to make the most of the possibilities unfolding today, the city will have to shed its sense of fatalism once and for all. “We have this mindset in Lawrence, where we condition our kids to believe that they’re always supposed to be poor because it’s always been that way. The time we’re at right now is critical,” he says. “We’re at a fork in the road, and we need to shift thousands of people down that road less traveled.”

Bob Ansin doesn’t pretend that the Monarch Lofts will be shifting too many Lawrencians down that less-traveled road, at least not directly. But he says the development is part
of a trend toward reversing decades of disinvestment in the city, a flight of capital that has surely compounded the challenges facing poorer residents.

“Lawrence needed someone from outside the city who is seen as credible—who had done this sort of development before, and who had the financial capacity to back up what they said—to come to Lawrence and validate that this is a good place to invest,” says Ansin. “And I expect to see more private investment as a result, as people begin to see that our investments have yielded an attractive return.”

Lawrence has long suffered in comparisons with Lowell, whose celebrated mill district has become part of the Lowell National Historical Park. But Dave Tibbetts says artists have begun finding it difficult to afford loft space in Lowell and are starting to make their way to Lawrence, whose location along the river and proximity to I-495 offer some distinct advantages.

Ansin says he regularly spends time in Lowell, trying to get a sense of what has worked there and how leaders have managed to bring together so many varied interests. “To their credit, they have developed a new identity for themselves,” he says. “In Lawrence, we’re in the process.” But the virtuous cycle, it seems, has begun.

Melissa DaPonte Katz is a freelance writer in Amherst.
SOARING HEALTH CARE COSTS ARE STRAINING BOTH PUBLIC BUDGETS AND PRIVATE EMPLOYERS — AND THEY COULD SWAMP THE STATE’S NEW COVERAGE PLAN.

BUT NOBODY SEEMS READY TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.
On a Wednesday afternoon in late April, I went to the John W. McCormack state office building, a pillar of bureaucracy a half-block east of the State House, and found my way into a basement-level meeting room. There, 11 members of the Health Care Quality and Cost Council sat in a U-formation in the windowless room, and about a dozen observers occupied hard plastic chairs. Presiding over the meeting was Dr. JudyAnn Bigby, Gov. Deval Patrick’s soft-spoken secretary of Health and Human Services.

Until a few days before, I hadn’t realized Massachusetts had such a thing as a Health Care Quality and Cost Council. In fact, it barely does. The council was created by the universal health care law signed by former Gov. Mitt Romney in April 2006. But its authority is vague and its budget is small. It didn’t hold its first meeting until August of last year, four months after the bill-signing. And though the council estimated earlier this year it would need $1.7 million to hire a staff and conduct research, Patrick allotted it only $200,000 in his 2008 budget proposal.
The conversation that afternoon among council members wasn’t quite what I expected. There seemed to be an uncertainty hanging in the air about how to proceed. The main idea on the table was to develop a database of Massachusetts cost and quality measurements and to make the information available to the public through a user-friendly Web site. It was noted that there was no need to reinvent the wheel—New Hampshire has already developed such a site. When one member suggested a road trip might be in order to consult with the database experts to the north, Bigby responded, “Could we get them to come here?” Probably not appropriate, responded another, since they would be doing us a favor. Resolved: Let’s look into creating a Web site like New Hampshire’s.

No doubt the database will get built. It has an influential advocate in council member Charles Baker, the chief executive of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care. But to my ear, this sounded like another one of those “consumer-driven health care” approaches that rests on the idea that we can cut health care costs by getting patients to shop around for bargains. Granted, the Quality and Cost Council has to start somewhere, and the push for “transparency” in health care pricing is not a bad thing. But how will such small steps, tinkering around the edges, address the powerful economic forces that have been driving up health care costs?

If you consider the combined effect of high spending with high health cost inflation (think about driving a Winnebago when gasoline goes to five dollars a gallon), you have to wonder if a day of reckoning is approaching for Massachusetts. Spending on health care for low-income residents and for former state employees is eating up much of any new revenue the state brings in. Meanwhile, municipal governments are struggling under the weight of soaring health care costs. As schools cut extracurricular activities and town libraries are closed, health care is cited as the budget-buster that is crowding out other worthy demands on public dollars.

Massachusetts has drawn national attention for its bold plan to extend access to health care coverage to virtually all state residents. But the long-term, or even medium-term prospects of the plan may depend on finding ways to hold medical cost inflation in check. And in this Massachusetts is no pioneer: State government spending on health care from 2001 to 2007 went up 49 percent in real terms, according to a report released in June by the New England Healthcare Institute.

**WHEN IN DOUBT, PUNT**

Under the state’s new health care law, more low-income peo-
People are being fully covered by Medicaid. And new low-priced insurance policies, subsidized by the state, are available to low-to-moderate-income residents who don’t qualify for Medicaid. A public relations blitz has been making sure that Bay Staters know the requirement for all residents to carry health insurance becomes effective this summer. By June, more than 120,000 people who didn’t have insurance last year were covered.

The biggest challenge for the reform law will be to sustain this new coverage umbrella over time. And this spring, some close observers began to warn that the Massachusetts experiment could fail if it doesn’t bring health care spending under control. The state’s top budget officer, Leslie Kirwan, put it in stark terms at a forum in May at the John F. Kennedy Library. “If we do not constrain health care costs, the system we worked so hard to create and implement will collapse,” Kirwan said, according to a Boston Globe account.

As director of the advocacy group Health Care for All, John McDonough has been a leading champion of the new law. And when it comes to most aspects of the way it’s working out, he is determinedly optimistic. But on the cost question, he admitted, “I’m not optimistic at all.” He worries that rising costs are to health care as global warming is to the ecosystem: a steady, gathering threat.

McDonough pointed to the difference between the Health Insurance Connector Authority, which was set up as the central driver to implement universal coverage, and the aforementioned Health Care Quality and Cost Council, which was attached to the reform law like “a caboose.” “There is a real significant commitment and sense of urgency to figuring out the Connector,” he said. “And I don’t see a parallel sense of urgency in figuring out what we’re going to do about what, to me, is pretty close to a cost-control emergency.”

It’s not as if the cost question just slipped the minds of those who crafted the reform. As MIT economics professor Jonathan Gruber said in an interview earlier this year, architects of the law focused on covering the uninsured because there was a clear strategy for how to do it. But the law “punts on the issue of cost control,” he said. (See Conversation, CW, Spring ‘07.) According to Gruber, this was by necessity. There’s no consensus among health care economists — or among policy-makers — about how to put a lid on costs, he said. McDonough says it’s time to forge a consensus. “I don’t know how anybody could think it’s too soon to be talking about this,” he said.

Per-capita spending on health care is 33 percent above the national average.

COST CENTER

The starting place is to understand why health care — especially in New England — costs so much. A recent report by Harvard Pilgrim noted that in 2004 health spending in Massachusetts was $7,075 per capita, or 33 percent higher than the national average. Not surprisingly, health insurance premiums are higher here, too — about 26 percent above the national average.

Some of the reasons are obvious enough. Since the overall cost of living in Massachusetts is high, the health care sector tends to have relatively high labor costs. And with
younger people fleeing the state, we’re left with an older population, which means a higher-spending clientele.

Another reason is that community hospitals have been closing here, and the state's health care market is increasingly dominated by academic medical centers. According to Baker, 45 percent of all “health care encounters” in Massachusetts are at academic medical centers or with academic medical center-affiliated physicians, a far higher share than in most states. Costs at these teaching- and research-oriented hospitals, he says, are about 50 percent higher than at community hospitals, even after adjusting for the severity of illness of patients. But the academic medical centers have a good deal of political influence in setting health care policy in Massachusetts — and growing market clout to set health care reimbursement rates.

In short, Massachusetts has more expensive hospitals and higher-paid doctors (including lots of specialists). It also has patients who are used to getting top-notch health

Harvard Pilgrim’s Charlie Baker says the state must start collecting meaningful cost and quality data.

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care, with all the latest technology.

But that, in capsule form, describes the American way of medicine—Massachusetts is simply on the high end of a high-end health care system. A report published by the McKinsey Global Institute in January found that the United States spends more of its national wealth on health care than any other country in the world. The report notes that in 1960 we spent 5.2 percent of GDP on health care; by 2004 that figure was up to 16 percent. By comparison, the median figure in 2003 for the 30 free-market democracies that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was 8.5 percent.

The McKinsey study looked at detailed health data for 13 of those OECD countries (including Canada, Mexico, and most of Europe), adjusted for national wealth, population, and disease mix, and found that we spend about $477 billion a year more than we would if we spent at the level of those other countries. In 2003, U.S. health care spending was about $5,635 per capita. The figure would be $3,990 per capita if our system were in line with the baseline OECD countries. The report notes that the excess costs in the system represent a bad bargain for taxpayers, as federal, state, and local governments spend more than they should. But the other ultimate payers for insurance—private-sector employers—are also dragged down by health costs.

The “overriding cause” of high U.S. health care costs, the authors write, is the failure of the American system to hold down demand-side pressures (from patients) and supply-side pressures (from hospitals and clinics, doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and insurers). Yes, that about covers it. As Washington Post business writer Steven Pearlstein wrote in summing up the McKinsey report in a February column, “The reason the system has been so resistant to change is that lots of powerful interests do very nicely with things just the way they are.” And any effort to wring excess costs out of the system, Pearlstein noted, will face “determined opposition from well-financed lobbies.”

That will undoubtedly be the case in Massachusetts if state leaders get serious about controlling health care spending. The state’s largest network of hospitals, Partners HealthCare, and its largest insurer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, were intimately involved in crafting the health reform law. No one will need to be reminded that health care is not just...
a cost center in the New England economy, it’s an engine of innovation, employment, and economic vitality. That’s one of the reasons to wonder whether an aggressive statewide effort to hold down spending is possible in Massachusetts if that effort comes at the expense of big players in the state’s health care world. Another is a basic fact of political life: Where there is no clarity about the problem, there is no chance of a solution.

It isn’t hard to make a long list of factors that drive up health care spending. It’s hard to come up with a short list (or, at least, one that major players could agree on). Insurers say hospitals have too much power to command constant price increases. Hospital leaders say insurers don’t pay the right amounts for the right things — and the state doesn’t pay enough to cover care for the poor and the aged. And no one has a coherent theory of when expensive technology helps and when it hurts, or which procedures are worth the money and which aren’t, or how to respond to overly demanding patients — not to mention how such questions should be decided.

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“One of the problems we have in this state is that there are not enough primary care doctors,” says Beth Israel’s Paul Levy.
Baker calls attention to ever-increasing prices charged by hospitals and clinics.

doesn't mean other stakeholders see things the same way. Talking about costs and prices is different from talking about “access”—who is covered and not covered. There is plenty of good data about the human side, and general agreement about what the data mean. “Then you get into a conversation about what is it that’s driving up the cost of health care,” Baker said, and “you get 20 different answers—I mean, literally 20 different answers if you talk to 20 different people.”

Baker’s answer was what you might expect from someone who is in charge of paying medical bills. In a blog he started in April (http://letstalkhealthcare.org), Baker has articulated what might be called the “payer’s perspective”: What’s driving costs is ever-increasing prices charged by hospitals and clinics. In one recent posting, he noted that payments to physicians have been rising by double-digit percentages each year, as have both outpatient costs (due in part to high-end radiology, lab services, and outpatient surgeries) and inpatient costs (as hospitals charge more for every bed in use). In each case, Baker said it is the “unit cost” that is mostly responsible for the rise in overall costs—higher prices per service, not overall higher use of services.

He had posted that data to make the point that an oft-cited reason for medical inflation—high priced pharmaceuticals—is not currently the major factor. Spending on drugs at Harvard Pilgrim over the last three years has been rising at only 5 percent annually.

Baker does concede that heavier use of high-end medical services is also a factor driving health care spending. Technology can be “a double-edged sword,” he said. Take new methods of cataract surgery as an example. “One of the things that’s happened over the last 10 years with cataract surgery is the technology has gotten more sophisticated and less invasive, and as a result the unit price of that service has...
actually come way down,” he said. “What’s changed is the number of people who can access that service has gone way up.” This is the other side of the spending picture. Though Baker argues that higher use of services isn’t the chief cost-increasing factor, it’s part of the whole. Even when innovation and efficiencies reduce the unit price of something like a CAT scan or an MRI, overall costs can go up when the new techniques become popular.

But nobody has a full view of how such factors add up across the entire system. This is why Baker is an ardent proponent of “transparency” in health care pricing—and why he believes a state effort to collect meaningful cost and quality data is the best place to start. “Unless we have decently available and understandable data on costs that’s pretty provider- and procedure-specific, it’s pretty hard for anybody to draw any conclusions about what’s driving up the cost of health care,” he said. “It’s just a big amorphous blob.”

But suppose Massachusetts follows the lead of New Hampshire and makes all the latest cost and quality data available to the public on a consumer-oriented Web site? How will people use that information?

The key factor isn’t how consumers will use it, Baker said. What he wants is to shine a public light on how providers—from the largest hospital groups to the smallest community clinics—compare with each other. One group that would benefit from having meaningful information in the public domain is the state’s policy-makers, he contends. “I mean it’s pretty hard to make policy about what to do about health care costs and quality if you don’t have any baseline information to measure whether we’re doing better or worse in a particular area year over year,” he said.

“So when people say to me, ‘Well, publishing that data won’t matter, folks don’t own a piece of the cost of the care,’ that’s true. Except that I could easily see situations where state legislators might choose to have hearings on this data every year, where they would bring people in and they’d say, ‘Gee, the average cost of a particular procedure in Massachusetts is x. And you deliver this service the same as everyone else, your outcomes are no better, and your cost is 2x. Why is that?’ People would not enjoy that. They wouldn’t enjoy the publicity associated with it, they wouldn’t enjoy the possible policy ramifications from it, they wouldn’t enjoy the public discussion about it, and they would, in my opinion, do something about it.”

What Baker is talking about is a problem economists began to notice decades ago about health care. Not only do insured consumers have an insensitivity to prices, there is no such thing as real price competition among those who provide health services. Indeed, while consolidation in other sectors of the economy leads to price declines driven by economies of scale and other factors, there has been no Costco effect in health care. “[The] leverage of larger players in health care doesn’t drive down prices for purchasers,
it drives them up!" Baker wrote in a lively exchange on his blog in May.

In Massachusetts, he wrote, this has been because large provider networks, led by Partners HealthCare, have been able to push prices on insurers, who feel they cannot compete for subscribers if they don’t agree to contracts that cover care at the state’s marquee teaching hospitals.

But, I asked Baker in a later conversation, why should we believe public information on prices will change this dynamic in the health care marketplace? How does “transparency” address that kind of economic power? Baker noted that he’s not just talking about information on cost, but on quality as well. He envisions a comparative database being actively monitored by hospitals and clinics—which will not want to see their cost and quality ratings slip in relation to their competitors.

There’s a leap of faith involved here, as Baker admits. But in his view, providing more information about the health care system is the logical next step. “If you look at most other industries where a lot of information has found its way into the public domain, the use for that information goes way beyond what anybody could have possibly imagined,” he said. He pointed to the way price information on the Internet has changed the airline and hotel industries. Health care is different, he said, but “I’m working on the theory that in a no-information market, we shouldn’t be surprised that nobody knows how to define value.”

**PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE**

On the first day of May, I ventured into that dense agglomeration of health care institutions in Boston known as the Longwood Medical area. I had an appointment at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center—fortunately not with a doctor, but with hospital president Paul Levy. He has a modest second-floor corner office that looks out onto Brookline Avenue and the entrance to the hospital’s underground parking garage. On one of his shelves is a foot-long...
section of an old water main with hardened, encrusted crud on the inside. It’s a “tuberculated” pipe dug up years ago in Brookline, he explains, a relic of his earlier career as a public works manager. Levy earned a reputation as a brash, out-of-the-box player when he ran the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority in the 1990s, and he has lived up to that billing during his new career in health care.

Like Baker, Levy started a blog several months ago (http://runningahospital.blogspot.com). If he wasn’t already seen as something of an outlier in the world of hospital administration, his blog-writing confirmed it. Starting last winter, he began publishing regular reports on the rate of hospital-acquired infections at BIDMC, challenging other hospitals to do the same. None took up the challenge.

Levy oozes self-confidence, in person and online. When asked by one reader recently if colleagues at other hospitals disapprove of his blogging, he surmised that he is held in “disdain” for it. “Of course, they have never said anything to me directly,” he wrote. “Then they would have to admit that they read it.”

So Levy’s views may not be entirely representative of those held by other hospital CEOs. But in this respect they are: When asked to name the most important factors driving the rising cost of health care, he did not begin, as did Baker, with the power of hospitals and clinics to charge more for services. Instead, Levy pointed to three trends. First, the elderly are living longer, and that has obvious effects on the system, since older patients need more health care and get more expensive treatments. Second: “The Baby Boomer generation, of which I’m a part, is the most narcissistic, entitled generation to come through America. We expect to have everything we want, when we want it. And we’re not even really that old yet.” The third factor, which will kick in over time, is that “the next generation is highly at risk” because of increasing obesity rates, a lack of exercise, and a high incidence of diabetes.

Levy said prices at his hospital are in control. That is, they are rising at the general rate of inflation “plus a little.” The total amount spent at BIDMC has gone up steadily in recent years, he said, because more patients are getting care—and as noted earlier, academic medical centers “in essence are the community hospitals for Boston.” Levy added,
“What you’re seeing is greater utilization of the system, and the utilization that is occurring is toward the high end of the spectrum, the more expensive procedures and therapies.”

At the same time, Levy offered a technology tale that illustrates the commercial pressures hospitals face. A new robotic machine has been developed to assist in prostate surgery. It’s marketed as something that could improve surgical outcomes, but Levy said there’s little evidence it does. “That’s a million-dollar machine,” he said. “It has no clinical advantage over human hands. It’s in use in many hospitals around the country because the manufacturer has convinced the doctors, and the doctors and hospitals have convinced the patients, that unless you have a robot to take out your prostate it won’t work as well. And it’s not true.” Yet nearby Boston Medical Center has purchased the robotic technology and may well lure more patients because of it, he said.

Meanwhile, he said, the payers are consistently putting the incentives in the wrong place. “The whole reimbursement system is designed to provide a better return to hospitals for the high-level procedures, compared with the kind of doctoring where you do evaluation, measurement, thoughtful consideration of the patient,” Levy said. “One of the problems we have in this state is there are not enough primary care doctors. And here’s the irony: It’s because they’re not paid well enough by the insurance companies. So people are choosing not to be primary care doctors.” Instead, he said, they’re turning to specialization.

Patients in New England are part of the problem too, according to Levy. “If you talk to primary care doctors, they will tell you that their patients often demand to see a specialist in Massachusetts,” he said. From the viewpoint of the primary care physician (PCP), it’s a common scenario that a diagnosis is delivered and a treatment recommended, whereupon, said Levy, “the patient says, ‘Well, don’t you think I should see a cardiologist?’ And the PCP says, ‘Well, no. In essence, I know what I’m talking about, and you don’t need to.’ ‘Well, I insist.’ And so, you’re the PCP and you say, ‘Well, if you insist.’ You’re going to say yes, because you don’t want to be sued in case something goes wrong.”

Does that mean that Levy thinks patients need to be made more aware of costs by paying more out of their own pockets? In fact, he doesn’t emphasize that approach.

Like Baker, Levy wants more attention put on quality of health care. He favors a system of “risk-adjusted metrics” that would show which hospitals are delivering the best care, so that health plans could use incentives to steer patients to higher-quality providers. “If the insurance company is paying the hospitals relatively different amounts based on the results, we’ll see people respond. You’ll see patients respond, and you’ll see hospitals respond,” he said.

This approach upends the experiment led by health maintenance organizations in the 1990s, when cost increases were temporarily held in check but patients and doctors felt
the quality of care was compromised. Levy argues that by starting with quality — such as by cutting the rate of hospital-acquired infections, to use his favorite example — you save not just lives but money. Higher-quality care should equate with less expensive care.

In fact, the kind of cost and quality rankings that Baker and Levy are talking about are already being used by the Massachusetts Group Insurance Commission, which supervises health care for almost 270,000 state employees and their families. Under the leadership of Dolores Mitchell (who is also a member of the Health Care Quality and Cost Council), the GIC three years ago pushed insurers who cover state workers to rank hospitals by quality and cost data. That led to a system of “preferred providers,” with patients paying smaller co-payments when admitted to hospitals that are ranked as more cost-effective. Last summer, the GIC set up a system for ranking the performance of doctors. Patients who choose doctors from the low-cost, high-value tier make lower co-payments. Not surprisingly, those being put under the cost and quality microscope have been less than thrilled — and have raised objections to the GIC’s ranking criteria. The state’s doctors “are not saying I ought to win the Nobel Prize,” Mitchell told a trade publication last year, “but the level of discourse has been civil.”

THE PUBLIC PURSE

When former Gov. Romney got behind the reform effort in 2005 and 2006, he insisted that insuring the uninsured would “help bring health care costs under control.” (See Argument & Counterpoints, CW, Winter ’05.) The idea was to balance the higher costs of universal coverage with changes that would end up saving money elsewhere. But now the promise of universal coverage without additional state spending, as Romney envisioned it, has given way to nervous tracking of the state’s rising health care tab.

In the first week of June, I paid a visit to Leslie Kirwan, who was appointed by Patrick in January as secretary of administration and finance. We met in her spacious office on the third floor of the State House. Kirwan knows the office well; she worked as Charlie Baker’s chief of staff when Baker was the A&F chief in the Weld administration in the mid 1990s. But in one important respect, the job has expanded since Baker’s day: The A&F Secretary is also the chairman of the 10-person Health Insurance Connector Authority. Upon taking the job, Kirwan was immediately immersed in the details of health care reform.

As we sat at a conference table with four of Kirwan’s spreadsheet-wielding aides, I asked whether she was worried about the future of the health care reform law now in place.
“It’s absolutely worrisome,” she said. Health care services already take up about half the state’s budget. When health costs rise faster than everything else, something’s got to give—and in recent years that situation has led to sizeable cuts in higher education spending and in state aid to localities. “It’s pushing on a lot of things, and to the extent that revenue’s not going up very fast, it’s tending to squeeze other things in the budget at the state and the local level,” Kirwan said. (The administration has tried to offer some health care cost relief to cities and towns through a proposal to allow municipal employees to join the large state GIC, where sizable health care cost increases have nonetheless been much lower in recent years than those faced by local governments.)

To grasp the way health care inflation affects state and local government, consider the big picture. The Commonwealth is spending about $7.8 billion in Medicaid this year and is projecting about $8.1 billion for 2008—almost a third of the entire state budget. Costs this year associated with health care reform are almost $1.7 billion (including about $308 million in new Medicaid spending). Health insurance for state workers costs another billion dollars (for 2007) on top of that. Then there is the $61.5 million in health care costs paid by the Department of Corrections. And a good deal of the almost $5 billion in state aid to localities goes to help municipalities pay for their health care costs. Very quickly, one sees how close to half the state’s almost $27 billion budget is gobbled up by health care expenditures. And health care could consume an ever-larger share of the budget if costs increase, say, 10 percent a year, while state revenue growth remains in the low single digits.

With the costs of expanded Medicaid services and the subsidized plans for low-to-moderate income residents, Kirwan says the new health care law has added $300 million to the state’s bottom line—money that comes out of the General Fund. Based on the governor’s budget, that number is expected to grow to $413 million for fiscal year 2008.

Given this obvious departure from Romney’s original
no-net-cost-increase idea (and not just his: when the legislature passed the law, it projected a positive balance for 2007), I asked Kirwan what happened. Her answer suggests that the idea of expanding access without increasing state costs was wishful thinking, at best. “There’s potentially a couple hundred thousand [people] to be covered in Commonwealth Care, the subsidized products,” she said. “It’s sort of hard to imagine how that would be completely cost-neutral.”

Here one could almost see Kirwan take off her green eyeshades and speak as a member of the Connector authority, which has labored long and hard to create better health insurance options. “I still think there would be a very good story to tell if you were providing better care to people for somewhat more money,” she said. “You’re potentially giving people a chance at better health, at avoiding financial ruin if they should get into a situation where a family member got sick or injured.”

Speaking of the decisions made by the Connector board, Kirwan said, “We have made it through some of those tough decisions by reminding ourselves that we are doing something without really knowing what all of the outcomes are going to be.”

As for the $300 million impact of the new law this year and the projected $413 million next year, I asked Kirwan how soon that kind of increase could become unsustainable. “Really quickly,” she said. She admitted that she spent her first few weeks on the job in January “being very cranky about this.” Looking at the prospects for upcoming budget years, she said, made her feel that “Somebody’s going to hang a shingle outside the State House that says ‘FOR SALE, TO PAY FOR HEALTH INSURANCE.’”

TOUGH MEDICINE

The law that created the Health Care Quality and Cost Council says it is expected to set goals “to promote high-quality, safe, effective, timely, efficient, equitable and patient-centered health care,” all the while serving as the center of the state’s cost containment strategies. It’s a tall order.

Though the governor’s budget called for only $200,000 to fund the council, both the House and Senate versions of the budget more than doubled that amount this spring. In April, the council hired its first staff member: Katharine London, who previously worked on health policy in the attorney general’s office, is now the executive director. Discussion continues about how to compile a useful database of quality and cost information. Charlie Baker says it
could take a couple of years before it’s up and running.

In the meantime, more than a few observers are talking about the need for Phase II of health reform in Massachusetts—in which cost control, the political football that economist Gruber says was “punted” last year, is brought back into play. And for all the complexities that are involved in the economics of this question, it’s the politics of it that makes even an experienced reformer such as Health Care for All director John McDonough say, “I’m not optimistic at all.”

“I think at this point the Quality and Cost Council is not envisioning steps which would make a noticeable difference,” he told me in a conversation in June. “To create a serious cost-control agenda would require a higher-level political intervention, which could be legislative. It could be the governor, as well.”

McDonough’s group is backing legislation that includes 17 proposals to help control costs. Some of the planks would be sure to be opposed by the hospital lobby. Others would meet disfavor from insurance and pharmaceutical lobbies. McDonough, who spent 13 years in the Legislature, doesn’t pretend otherwise. To enact a comprehensive plan would take a leadership alignment that is not now apparent, he said. “I don’t see right now the necessary summoning of political will to address the level of systemic change that we think would make a meaningful difference,” McDonough said. That could change, but “it will take some kind of significant event.”

Then he raised perhaps the most daunting challenge of all for reformers who promote “systemic change.” With so much of this region’s economic vitality tied to health care, policy-makers have to find ways to control spending without “throttling the only sector of the economy that’s giving you any real growth.” Any strong medicine that state leaders propose is going to be met with reminders from health care lobbyists about how many jobs depend on a thriving health sector. How to find the mix of serious measures—on the supply side and the demand side—that could survive the political process?”When you ask yourself that question,” McDonough said, “you come then to the Pogo pronouncement: We have met the enemy and it is us.”

Does that mean we’d be better off accepting the fact that modern health care costs a lot and there’s not much to be done about it? That’s not a long-term option, according to McDonough. “It really is like global warming,” he said. “Every year it gets a little hotter. And when do you reach a point when people say, ‘This can’t go on? I don’t see us as being there, at this point. That isn’t to say we couldn’t get there in a hurry.”

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Saline solution

Desalting seawater can bring relief from water shortages, but it may come at a steep price—to ratepayers and the environment

A SMALL GROUP of Hull residents have roused themselves early on a Saturday morning for a presentation at the local senior center on the feasibility of getting drinking water from the sea. In a sunlit meeting room where a portrait of President John F. Kennedy sits on top of an upright piano, Jeff Musich, the vice president of Wright-Pierce—a Topsham, Maine–based engineering firm—darts between his PowerPoint slide show and several large charts on easels. He explains the technical, economic, and legal issues surrounding the removal of salt from seawater, a process known as desalination (or “desal,” as it’s called in the water industry). By the end of the morning, desalination emerges as within the realm of the possible for this peninsular community. “There’s very energized local support,” Musich says later.

With no sources of fresh water for public use within its boundaries (the town gets its supply from a Hingham treatment plant and pays one of the higher water rates in Massachusetts), Hull is looking to the Atlantic Ocean as a source of potable water. If it follows through on the idea, the town will join Brockton and Swansea, which have already broken ground for desalination facilities.

The JFK portrait at the senior center may reflect the enduring reverence for the Kennedys in Massachusetts, especially among older Irish Catholics. But it turns out the 35th president had at least a minor fascination with the subject of the early-morning presentation there. In a 1961 speech marking the dedication of a Texas desalination plant, Kennedy said, “One of man’s oldest dreams [is] securing freshwater from saltwater,” a development he called one of the “great scientific breakthroughs of history.”

Desalination isn’t exactly cutting-edge these days. Caribbean and Middle Eastern countries have been doing it for decades, and a long-ago-shuttered desalination plant was constructed for military personnel on Boston Harbor’s Outer

BY GABRIELLE GURLEY
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MANNING
Brewster Island during World War II. But the process seems like a radical step for Bay State municipalities anxious to end water worries. Indeed, pursuing the technology in a state that receives roughly 45 inches of precipitation each year is raising eyebrows across the country, as desalination is usually equated with drier areas in Texas or California.

“Massachusetts? People are absolutely shocked because they assume it’s a wet state that should have no problems,” says Zach Corrigan, a staff attorney for Food & Water Watch, a Washington, D.C.–based advocacy group that opposes desalination as a solution to water woes. Yet according to the organization’s Web site, Massachusetts is one of a handful of states that desal companies are looking to turn into “guinea pigs” by pushing a technology that environmental advocates say poses a danger to ecosystems, while often proving far costlier than other approaches to water resource management.

It may not be a desert state, but Massachusetts does have water-supply problems. Development is playing a key role in compromising already stressed watersheds, as terrain is paved over for office parks, residences, and roadways, creating more impervious surfaces that reduce natural opportunities for recharging those water sources. So storm water ends up getting drained out to sea, and treated wastewater often doesn’t return to its original source.

According to Peter Shelley, vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation, the state bears the blame, having failed to integrate storm water, sewage water, and drinking water policies. The turn toward desal, he says, even if only by a few communities at this stage, underscores this larger problem. “Desalination in Massachusetts is a symptom of a totally broken-down water resource management system,” says Shelley.

Massachusetts is finally working to change the way municipalities, consumers, and developers think about water, in part by updating regulations to require storm water infiltration (reducing runoff by getting water back to the ground using vegetation, drainage ditches, and other means) around state-controlled wetlands and rivers. The state also plans to issue draft regulations later this year for certain types of wastewater reuse.

However, the Commonwealth did not anticipate the turn to desalination by communities, and it has had no policy governing the use of the water treatment technology. State authorities are now trying to catch up. This summer, the Water Resource Commission will distribute a draft of the state’s first-ever desalination policy for public comment. It clarifies the review process and addresses some of the environmental issues posed by the treatment process.

Because they eat up electricity, desal plants add to the production of greenhouse gases.

In the meantime, not everyone is jumping on the desal bandwagon. Stoughton rejected a proposal to get desalinated water from Brockton in 2001, and instead joined the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA), the giant regional authority that provides water to 50 communities,
the following year. Provincetown abandoned desal last year when state officials said that brine disposal would run afoul of the Ocean Sanctuaries Act, which protects Cape Cod Bay. Residents weren’t exactly enthused about the idea anyway: A 2004 “community vision” survey found nearly 65 percent of residents opposed to a desalination plant that could fuel more development in the town or harm ocean water.

But officials in Brockton and Swansea are sold on desal, and Hull may not be far behind. Plenty of questions remain on whether an expensive technology with poorly understood environmental impacts and high energy costs is one to pursue. The experience of these desal pioneers may determine whether other Massachusetts communities follow suit or the technology is dismissed as a quick fix that is no fix at all.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Water shortages have been especially acute in southeastern Massachusetts, where the demands of population growth have plagued municipal systems for decades. (See “The Drying of Massachusetts,” CW, Fall ’00.) But even slow-growth communities such as Hull are bracing for dwindling water supplies in the coming decades.

Then there are the pressures of the marketplace. Massachusetts has some of the country’s highest water rates, and last year the average Hull household paid $548 for water, putting the town in the upper third among Bay State communities. Many residents complain they’ve been socked with high bills since the 1996 construction of a Hingham treatment facility by Aquarion, the private firm that supplies water to Hull and several other South Shore towns.

Some of those who turned out for the desal presentation in Hull are counting on the technology to lighten that water-bill load. “I can see my own pocketbook affected,” says resident Martha Donovan, of a possible move to desal. But her optimism may be misplaced. While a desal facility would address concerns about water shortages, current estimates of desalinated drinking water costs are “in the ballpark of what we are paying now,” Rick Mattilla, chairman of Hull’s water resources committee, tells residents gathered at the senior center.

It may lack the historic sweep of his challenge to land a man on the moon by the close of the decade, but President Kennedy had big dreams for desal, too, proclaiming in his 1961 speech that desalted water would be produced “at an economic rate” by the end of the 1960s. More than 45 years later, however, desalination remains one of the most expensive water treatment processes available.

What’s more, the high cost of desalinating water is linked directly to its high energy use, making the process a significant secondary producer of greenhouse gases. Energy is the
“largest single variable cost” in producing desalinated water, according to a 2006 study by the Oakland, Calif.-based Pacific Institute, a nonprofit research organization. The study found that in a reverse osmosis desalination plant, where brackish water (fresh water mixed with seawater, often found in estuaries) or seawater is forced through filtering membranes at high pressure, leaving the salt behind, electricity consumption is about 44 percent of water costs. In the desalination process, the lower the salt content, the less electricity required to remove it, and the lower the production costs. Hull is studying the extraction of seawater with lower salinity using angled wells drilled below the ocean floor from land. (The Brockton and Swansea plants are sited on brackish rivers, which offers some energy cost savings.)

Yet electrical costs can take communities by surprise. In 2001, three years after the Northeast’s first municipal desalination plant went online in Cape May, N.J., the city’s budget review prepared for the state government indicated that electrical costs were “considerably higher than anticipated.”

Officials in Hull are also working to dispel the misconception that wind power could run a desal plant and cut costs. Two turbines currently provide 13 percent of the town’s energy, but wind power is not in the plans for the proposed desal facility, whose energy cost estimates are based on current electricity prices from conventional sources.

Cost misconceptions aside, for a good many people at the Hull meeting, the most attractive feature of a desalination plant is the prospect of long-term stewardship of the water supply through a town-owned operation. “People in Hull tend to like projects that give them an aspect of control over the resources around them,” says Selectman Joan Meschino, a water resources committee member.

The Wright-Pierce study outlines municipal, private, and public-private partnership options that could provide Hull with 2.5 million gallons of water per day, as well as a Brockton has cut water use, but local leaders say desal is needed to avoid shortages in the long term.
regional scenario that could serve neighboring towns with 4 million gallons per day. (As of April 2006, costs varied from up to $24 million for a facility serving the town to $28 million for a regional plant.) Meschino cautions that enthusiasm for any one model is “premature.” Town meeting must weigh in on funding further studies and any bond authorizations, while the Wright-Pierce study projects completion between 2012 and 2014, with five to six years to complete the permitting, design, and construction phases.

In these early days, reservations in Hull have been muted. Although there is concern among fishermen about effects on shellfish beds, no opponents showed up at the recent presentation at the senior center. “We aren’t necessarily for or against a desal plant,” says Samantha Woods, a board member of the Weir River Watershed Association, a local environmental group.

As Hull weighs the possibilities, the Swansea Water District’s Palmer River desalination plant, the state’s first municipal facility and the second in the Northeast after Cape May, is slated to go online by the end of 2008. Swansea experienced water supply emergencies in 1999 and 2002 and imposed a water main extension moratorium. Robert Marquis, the water district superintendent, says that the benefits of going it alone became more attractive as several other options fell by the wayside, including a connection to the Taunton River desal plant that will supply Brockton. (The cost and the politics of running a dedicated pipeline to Swansea through adjacent communities from the Dighton site doomed that proposal.)

Recently, increased water rates and taxes to support the desal plant’s development and operation sparked outcry from some Swansea residents. Owners of a $350,000 home using 100,000 gallons of water per year, a typical usage level, now face an annual water bill of about $550 to $600. Still, Marquis suggests the certainty of supply that desal will bring makes the project worth it. The $18 million plant, he says, “shall end the water shortages that have existed in Swansea forever.”

DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE
From Brockton, it’s 16 miles to the construction site along the Taunton River to which the city has hinged its water future. Getting there requires a step back in time, waiting at a traffic light to cross the Taunton via the single lane Berkley-Dighton Bridge, built in 1896. At the Dighton construction site, backhoes excavate earth below silver-colored beams that are already in place, forming the outline of the state-of-the-art plant. The circular floor of what will be a 3.5 million gallon storage tank has taken shape, as has the concrete-walled pump house nestled into the riverbank. Operated as a public utility by Aquaria Water, the Taunton River desalination project is a private joint venture of InimaUSA, a subsidiary of a Spanish construction firm, and Norwell’s Bluestone Energy Services. Scheduled for mid-2008 completion, the $75 million project, the first and largest permitted to date in Massachusetts, will produce up to 10 million gallons of water per day, supplying Brockton with 10 percent to 15 percent of its water as well as all of neighboring Norton’s.

The project went on the drawing board in the early 1990s, but construction began only last year, after the Taunton River Watershed Alliance and the Jones River Watershed Association, the last two environmental groups opposing the project, dropped their appeals upon securing Brockton’s commitment to a water management plan. The
city submitted its draft plan to the state Department of Environmental Protection this May.

Growth is the buzzword these days in the City of Champions, and local leaders say desal is the key to making up for lost time. Brockton’s population increase from 1950 through 1980 (from 63,000 to 95,000 residents, about where it is now) led to periodic water droughts, and in 1986 the state imposed a moratorium on residential and business water connections in Brockton, compounding the challenges the former mill city already faced in bringing its economy into the post-industrial age.

The state lifted the water emergency in 1995, and the city ended a ban on outside water use just last year. How much business did Brockton lose during that period? “It’s probably more than we would really want to know,” says Mary Waldron, executive director of Brockton 21st Century Economic Development Corp. For Waldron, desalination is a new economic tool signaling to business and New Economy powerhouses like the biotechnology sector that now “the water is here.”

Although Brockton instituted water management strategies, including leak detection and repair, that brought water usage down from 11.3 million gallons per day in September 1996 to 9.3 million gallons per day in April of this year, officials see desal as a long-range solution. The city has “made tremendous strides,” says Pine Dubois, the executive director of the Jones River Watershed Association. But the Taunton River project is “nerve-racking,” she says, because it’s “an indication that the city wants more growth and that they are not satisfied with the amount of water they’re getting.”

The city currently relies on Silver Lake, which supplies about 95 percent of its water. Brian Creedon, the city’s water systems manager, says that to ensure future water supplies, the state suggested three potential solutions: procuring freshwater from the northern end of the Taunton River; getting brackish water from the river’s southern end, using desal to process it; or joining the MWRA. Despite similar costs to desalination (current estimates run $50 more per household per year for desalinated water, Creedon says), Brockton ultimately decided against joining the MWRA, and concerns about the effects on wildlife in the low-flowing waters in the northern Taunton ruled out the freshwater option.

Creedon argues that the desal option is environmentally sound because it circulates water locally, as opposed to the city using the MWRA’s Quabbin or Wachusett reservoirs, in central Massachusetts, whose waters ultimately end up in Massachusetts Bay. But that view of desal is not universally shared, especially by environmental groups that have raised concerns about everything from its effect on marine plant and animal life to the greenhouse gases produced in order to satisfy desal’s high energy demands.

In an effort to address the ecosystem concerns, the

The big unknown may be the effect desalination plants have on nearby marine ecosystems.

Taunton River facility’s intake system was redesigned to reduce “impingement,” the sucking in and killing of fish and other animals against intake screens, and “entrainment,” the killing of eggs, larvae, and smaller organisms that slip past
the screens and die in the treatment process. To alleviate potential environmental stresses caused by brine, the salt-rich waste product of the reverse osmosis process, plant officials plan to discharge the concentrate at high tide after it has been treated to match the salinity of the river water. Swansea will use a similar process to help protect the spawning grounds of the ocean-dwelling shad that return to the Palmer River to reproduce.

Nevertheless, more attention has been paid to desalination technology and its energy consumption than to its marine ecosystem impacts, according to Heather Cooley, an author of the Pacific Institute desalination study. “That’s the big unknown,” she says.

To secure renewal of their 2005 state discharge permit, the Cape May desal plant operators were required by New Jersey officials to conduct quarterly tests on one shrimp and one minnow species in the estuary where the plant is located. Tests showed no harm to either. “We have had zero net effect on the receiving body of water,” says Carl Behrens, the facility’s chief water treatment plant operator. But Jennifer Samson, principal scientist with Clean Ocean Action, a New Jersey advocacy group, argues that to gauge the true impact on the local ecology, more studies should be conducted on the larger environment, not just on the plant’s effluent or selected species. “It’s important to know how [desalination] is affecting the entire system,” she says.

As for Brockton’s dive into desal, Shelley, the Conservation Law Foundation vice president, says, “There are a lot of questions around water that things like [the Taunton River] desalination plant will start to trigger in people’s minds.”

GOING EASY ON THE SALT
What desalination triggered on Beacon Hill was the realization that current regulations and policies were lagging behind municipalities’ embrace of the technology. Local, state and federal officials, and private sector representatives met for five months in 2005 to hammer out what would become the state’s first draft of a desalination policy.

The draft policy, to be distributed this summer, directs communities to look to all other water sources first before considering a desal project, including wastewater reuse, storm water recharge, and other water conservation strategies. Further, a water supplier should demonstrate that available water supplies are insufficient for anticipated business and population growth, while a community would have to outline how it plans to grow with any new water supply. “We don’t want water to become the fuel for growth,” says Kathleen Baskin, the executive director of the state Water Resources Commission.

Any large desalination plant proposal is already subject to review under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act, which assesses the environmental impact of a project,
its alternative options, and identifies mitigation measures that may need to be undertaken. The new policy supplements MEPA by closing gaps in environmental protection and streamlining the current lengthy and, at times, uncertain multiple-agency environmental review process. For example, while discharges into bodies of water are well protected under existing state and federal measures, there are fewer protections concerning the drawing of water that affects fish and larvae; the new policy provides additional protections. Siting plants on estuaries or near other sensitive habitat areas also will be discouraged, while co-locating desal plants with power or wastewater treatment plants (in part, to dilute brine discharge by combining it with the effluent produced by those facilities) will be encouraged.

Future desal plant proponents will also have to anticipate their facility’s contribution to regional greenhouse gas production and consider ways to reduce such output, a requirement of all large development projects under new climate change policies the Patrick administration announced in April.

One uncharted area of regulatory oversight relates to international trade and investment. Currently, water services, such as providing drinking water, are not subject to the General Agreement on Trade in Services, or GATS, a major international trade agreement. But as European multinationals like Inima, whose U.S. subsidiary is a majority partner in the Taunton River plant, venture into the American private water market, the European Union wants those services covered by international rules. If U.S. negotiators agree, desal projects owned by multinationals could be subject to new rules that could potentially jeopardize the ability of states to impose limits on those companies. Some environmental regulations, for example, could be viewed as impermissible trade barriers.

“European ownership brings local water service within the reach of international trade rules,” concluded a 2004 study on international trade rules and state regulation of desalination facilities by the Georgetown University Law Center’s Harrison Institute for Public Law. While international negotiations are very much in flux, municipal and state officials “definitely should be aware of” potential effects on water system regulation, says Cooley, the Pacific Institute researcher. “It could be on the horizon.”

For all of desal’s complexity, Baskin sees municipalities’ interest in desalination as ultimately limited—by dollars and cents. “While we’re expecting the proponents to look at environmental concerns and alternatives, certainly the cost is going to drive them away from desal,” she says. But for the water-poor communities that have seized on desalination as the answer to their water management issues, there is no turning back. “This is a state problem, a southeastern Massachusetts problem, not an individual city problem,” says Brockton’s Creedon, “but we’re handling it.”

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Smart-growth policies are often associated with leafy suburbs in commuter rail territory (see Town Meeting Monitor, page 29). So it’s easy to forget that there are older cities in Massachusetts that already have all the right elements—high density, mixed-use zoning, extensive public transit—and have still fallen short of the urban village ideal.

The city of Malden, where I grew up, is a particularly frustrating example. Its once-vibrant downtown has few pedestrians, and there are as many empty storefronts as viable businesses. This lack of activity has continued despite the area’s advantages: Malden has recently added a significant number of housing units, it’s on a subway line, it has a poverty rate slightly below the state average, and the crime rate is no worse than in thriving parts of Boston or Cambridge. But the city of 56,000 just hasn’t been fertile ground for the principles of smart growth—or New Urbanism, to use the older term. (It may also be the more accurate term, given that many cities in need of smart planning have already reached their population limits.)

Many Malden residents are unhappy with this situation, and about 300 of them were at City Hall on a Wednesday night in June, attending a “Visioning Workshop” facilitated by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. The turnout “elated” City Councilor Gary Christenson, who said he expected to find 30 or 40 participants, given how few people attend regular government meetings.

I attended one of nine smaller discussion groups at the Visioning Workshop and was impressed by the enthusiasm of participants, if not totally sold on their chances of achieving consensus. A poll of the two dozen or so members of my group revealed that the two most popular goals were revitalizing downtown and limiting development, but the first may be incompatible with the second.

Still, things are happening. Strolling through downtown after the workshop, I came across several places buzzing with activity—a new pan-Asian restaurant, a martini bar, a couple of Italian eateries, two Irish pubs. Unfortunately, no two were next to each other, and there were no way stations—no cafés or convenience stores—to help glue the area together. The upscale Asian restaurant, for example, was between a discount store that closes early in the evening and a space formerly occupied by a lingerie store. (The sign in the window informed customers that Lady Grace had moved to a site in Woburn with “plenty of free parking” and “easy access” from major highways.)

The city touts its accessibility via public transit, but visitors who take the Orange Line to Malden Center can look toward downtown and see nothing but parking garages and the plain brick cube that serves as City Hall, though the city is promising to put up signs that indicate life beyond these forbidding structures.

If you turn south from the T stop, you’re within walking distance of two supermarkets, but don’t expect any window shopping along the way, since you must walk past more parking areas and such anti-pedestrian businesses as a muffler shop and a liquor mart. The Super Stop & Shop has been here for years, but the Super 88, farther down on Commercial Street, just opened this February, extending a chain of Asian supermarkets that had been highly successful in Chinatown, Dorchester, and Quincy. Many of the staff did not seem to understand English, reported a longtime resident (my mother), but eggs were cheap, and the fish selection was mind-boggling. I haven’t seen the fish yet, but I am bemused by the changes that have taken place in a city where I remember “Chinese food” as something you got in Polynesian restaur-
perspective

rant—s and where there were twice as many supermarkets as there are now, but none of them carried anything you couldn’t get at the A&P.

Disembarking Orange Line passengers can also walk north on Summer Street, past a family-style restaurant in a converted train depot. The next block features mixed-use zoning, with apartments above first-floor storefronts, but none of the businesses attract many pedestrians (certainly not the gutted remains of a typewriter-repair shop), and the neighborhood convenience store turns out the lights at 9 p.m. A couple of years ago, I was elated to see a café with an art gallery open on this block, but it didn’t last very long. “I was making money but not enough to hire somebody to help me,” the café’s former owner, Sylvie Moretto, e-mailed me from her new home in Paris, “and doing it all by myself was just too much. Besides, the Dunkin’ Donuts was just a few blocks away [right next to the T stop]; it didn’t help.” After the café closed, it became an office for a home-mortgage company.

Mystery Town

Perhaps the lack of a “brand” has hampered commercial development in Malden. The city seems to be an enigma to most people I talk to, even though it has almost twice as many people as (admittedly more cinematic) South Boston. When the Boston Globe named Kevin Cullen as a columnist for its Metro section in June, editor Martin Baron pronounced Cullen “Boston to the core,” even though the writer grew up in Malden and graduated from Malden High.

You probably have been in Malden, even if you don’t realize it. Its most heavily traveled road is a stray-hair section of Route 1, between Saugus and Revere, that’s too short to have any exit ramps. If Boston is “All That Jazz,” Malden is “Mr. Cellophane.” (“You can drive right through me/And never know I’m there.”)

Or you might have a dim knowledge of it as one of those “M” cities to the north of Boston, along with Medford (Malden’s opponents in a 101-year-old high-school football rivalry) and Melrose. Its name brings to mind such words as middling, mediocre, and run-of-the-mill—unlike those wonderfully wealthy “W” towns of Wellesley, Weston, and Westwood. (“There’s just a lack of grace and beauty in this town,” said an older woman at the Visioning Workshop.)

It doesn’t have the glitziness of Boston or the teetering-on-disaster problems of Springfield and Lawrence. The city rarely appears in newspaper datelines unless there’s a press release from the state Department of Education, whose headquarters are in a nondescript office building downtown. Malden was the site of one of the biggest Boston-area stories of the 1980s: the accusations (and the still-controversial convictions) of child abuse involving the Amirault family and the Fells Acres day-care center, which was about six blocks from my family’s house. But I don’t remember and can’t find any stories speculating on why it happened in Malden, perhaps because it was too hard to plug the city—not entirely urban but not quite suburban, no longer working-class but not really white-collar—into any cultural stereotypes.

The city brings to mind Gertrude Stein’s famous quip about Oakland, Calif.: “When you get there, there isn’t any there there.” In Massachusetts, that means it has no college, no hospital (Malden Hospital closed in 2001), and few entries in the Zagat’s restaurant guide.

Cities like Malden are especially prevalent in Massachusetts, thanks to Boston’s failure to annex much of the territory to the north and west of its downtown. In 2005, the Hub accounted for only 13 percent of the population in its own metropolitan area; the comparable numbers were 43 percent for New York, 30 percent for Chicago, and 25 percent for Philadelphia. There are 13 communities in the
Bay State with a population of between 30,000 and 100,000 and a density of more than 5,000 people per square mile; only California and New Jersey have more. Besides Malden, they include: Arlington, Brookline, Cambridge, Chelsea, Everett, Lawrence, Lynn, Medford, Quincy, Revere, Somerville, and Watertown. Malden is at the high end of this category, with 11,103 residents per square mile. It has an area of 5.12 square miles, or half a Wellesley, and 61 percent of its land has housing on it. (The comparable figure for Boston is 41 percent.)

In France, a place like Malden might be considered part of the banlieue, or the crowded outskirts of a major city. Paris’s banlieue received worldwide attention two years ago, thanks to several nights of rioting by people who will probably never be able to afford living in the “inner city.” That frustration, if not the violence, is becoming familiar to people priced out of Boston. None of Boston’s older suburbs is as badly off as Newark and Passaic, both in northern New Jersey, where per-capita income is less than half of the citywide average in New York. But Chelsea, Lynn, and Revere are already poorer than the Hub, and incomes in Everett, Malden, and Quincy did not grow as fast during the 1990s as they did in Boston itself. The pawn-shop and half-dozen “dollar” stores in downtown Malden, only a few blocks away but completely out of sight to shoppers at the more respectable chain stores along Route 60, also suggests a kind of economic segregation.

NO MIRACLE CURES
Malden’s population peaked at 59,804 in 1950 (when it was almost entirely white), gradually declined to 53,386 by 1980, and is now estimated at 55,871 (with a white population of 70 percent). For decades its most famous export was Converse footwear. Converse was founded here in 1908, and until the 1970s, it had a near-monopoly on basketball sneakers.

Converse’s demise was at the hands of newer sneaker manufacturers such as Reebok and Nike, which bought the company in 2003. And the overall decline in manufacturing jobs in Malden (down to 8 percent of the city’s total employment in 2005) coincided with the deterioration of a once-thriving downtown and the rise of shopping malls in nearby Medford and Saugus. Before then, Jordan Marsh was the district’s anchor store, where I’d rifle through LPs on the top floor while my mother inspected linens in the basement, but there was also a movie theater (the Granada), a Brigham’s ice cream parlor, and the family-owned Dandy

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There has been one reason after another to hope that the downtown would come back. When the Orange Line was extended to Malden in 1975, city leaders hoped that shoppers would come from elsewhere. Instead, the subway seemed to make it easier for Maldonians to get to the bigger Jordan Marsh in Boston (and for me to get to the more interesting movie theaters in Harvard Square). At about the same time, Malden built a new City Hall literally in the middle of Pleasant Street, blocking traffic from the West End of the city and ensuring that people disembarking from the Orange Line could not see that there was a shopping district a few yards away. The idea was to create a pedestrian area similar to that in Boston’s Downtown Crossing, but it didn’t help that City Hall was nothing but a brick-and-glass cube with a windswept plaza—a more mundane version of Boston’s “Brutalist”-style seat of government.

As walkers and subway riders proved elusive, the city turned back to the auto, approving the construction of two huge parking garages downtown and a bypass road that made it possible for residents to go for years without seeing Pleasant Street. Indeed, Route 60’s lower elevation makes the apartment towers and the largely vacant two- or three-story retail buildings seem rather menacing to strip-mall shoppers, like a cut-rate Gotham City. A florist and an ice cream shop—two independent businesses that would seem a natural fit for a downtown district—are instead hunkered down in a little building in the middle of a Route 60 parking lot that was built in 1994, not even allowed to touch the Walgreen’s and the Blockbuster videostore behind them.

After Route 60 made downtown even more irrelevant, the city looked elsewhere for economic growth. In 1995, Malden joined Everett and Medford as the host communities for TeleCom City, a 200-acre site on the Malden River that’s little more than a mile south of downtown. But in 2004, after nine frustrating years of trying to lure high-tech industry to the area, a multi-city commission changed the name of the development to River’s Edge and announced that it would consider other options for the land—including more housing. As it turns out, being within a couple of miles of Boston and Cambridge doesn’t necessarily mean you can be a big player in the New Economy.

**TEAR DOWN THIS HALL**

Malden’s latest strategy seems to be an embrace of the people who are moving here anyway: students, single adults...
just out of school, and mostly Asian immigrants, all priced out of Boston. Many of these people may not even realize that Malden is a separate city from the Hub, and they may wonder why Mayor Menino doesn’t extend his Main Streets program out here. (Suburbs such as Malden resisted becoming part of Boston because they wanted no part of the big city’s problems, but they also don’t get the benefits of large-scale revitalization programs.)

These newer residents are largely responsible for the scattered signs of life downtown. There are Vietnamese, Indian, and Haitian restaurants among the dollar stores, as well as the Irish pubs and Italian restaurants that recall Malden Square’s heyday in the previous century. More diversity is probably on the way: The demographics of Malden, the state’s 18th largest and fifth most densely populated community, are changing at least as rapidly as in Boston—or in relatively well-known cities such as Worcester, Lowell, and New Bedford. From 1990 to 2000, Boston’s Hispanic and non-white population rose by 26 percent; in Malden, it went up by 163 percent. At the same time, Boston’s foreign-born population increased by 32 percent; in Malden, it was up by 98 percent. Indeed, I hear more non-English-speakers on the Orange Line platform at Malden Center than at Boston’s Downtown Crossing station. In my subgroup at the Visioning Workshop, “diversity” was voted the biggest strength in Malden—but several participants cited what they diplomatically called the “transient population” as one of the city’s biggest challenges.

In accordance with the smart-growth principle that the best new housing is near public transit and already-existing housing, Malden has also been getting even more crowded. The city approved 892 permits for new housing units between 1997 and 2006 (more than two-thirds of them in multifamily buildings). Compare that with two communities of roughly the same population: Over the same period, the more affluent “streetcar suburb” of Brookline approved 342 units, and the western Massachusetts city of Chicopee—with cheaper home prices but far from Boston’s economic sphere—approved 560.

But several participants in the Visioning Workshop said that there are already enough residents to support a revitalized downtown.

“There’s a way to do it [revitalization] without piling on more,” agrees Christenson, the city councilor, adding that developments such as 160 Pleasant Street—an 11-story, 204-unit luxury apartment building primarily responsible for the rather spooky look of the downtown skyline—have sparked something of a backlash against more high-density housing.

Malden may be developing a healthy skepticism of quick fixes, but there is another Big Idea to try, and it happens to be something that Boston is also considering: Tear down
City Hall. Mayor Richard Howard reiterated his support for knocking down the building in his “State of the City” address in February, a move that could reconnect the two halves of Pleasant Street and allow subway riders to see downtown Malden from the Orange Line platform. Rather than build a new structure, Howard supports a move of City Hall operations to the “Art Deco wing” of the under-used Malden High School on Salem Street, across from the H.H. Richardson–designed public library.

More modestly, Christenson says that angled parking on Pleasant Street, which could replace parallel spots as early as this fall, would encourage quick visits to the business district.

“It makes all the difference,” he says of easier parking. “You don’t fear going downtown.”

There’s also hope that, with more people actually living downtown, Malden will reach a tipping point, with too many potential café and boutique customers for entrepreneurs to ignore. The 60-unit Central Place Apartments opened across from the T stop in 2005, and tenants have just begun moving into 160 Pleasant Street (with one-bedrooms starting at $1580 a month). Of course, that complex does include parking, and its Web site touts its location “near major highways,” but the city can hope that some of the new residents get around to exploring their immediate surroundings.

There’s already some evidence of that. The startlingly chic All Seasons Restaurant, which features a sushi bar and live jazz, seems to have established a steady clientele since opening in May. At the nearby Exchange Street Bistro, one patron told me that the 120-seat restaurant is “more South End than Malden,” and it seems to be doing a good business in drinks with South End prices; all of the seats at the bar were occupied during both of my visits there. It has a modern, attractive exterior, even if the location is a bit more cautious—not among the ghosts of Pleasant Street but on a lower-level block facing the parking lots and strip malls.

“You saw how Davis Square changed,” says Bistro owner John Carlino, who formerly worked at 29 Newbury St. in Boston’s Back Bay. “We need three or four more restaurants to become a destination place.”

Perhaps this historically working-class city may finally experience a rebirth—and prove that smart development isn’t just for towns with new growth. How will we know that Malden has finally arrived? Carlino has one suggestion that’s not terribly original but has worked in plenty of other places: “If only we can get a Starbucks…”
The Education Reform Act of 1993 established curriculum frameworks for our public schools and mandated a way “to measure outcomes and results regarding student performance, and to improve the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction.” It also required “a variety of assessment instruments...assessing whether students are meeting the academic standards...as much as practical, such instruments shall include consideration of work samples, projects and portfolios, and shall facilitate direct and authentic gauges of student performance.”

The assessment that was created, however, is the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a set of standardized tests used both to evaluate school performance and to determine individual student competency. The tests, as implemented, meet neither the intent nor the objectives of the Education Reform Act, and using MCAS in a high-stakes manner directly counters many of the goals set forth in 1993.

After five years of MCAS as a high-stakes graduation requirement, we now have enough information and experience to know how it is succeeding and where it needs to be refined. We have seen better allocation of resources to struggling school systems, and many students who previously would have been ignored or written off are now integrated into the classroom and challenged to achieve.

However, we have also seen the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing, such as narrowing of the curriculum, increasing numbers of drop-outs, and high school graduates who are still not well-prepared for higher education or the workforce. We can and must do better.

Testing in and of itself is not a bad thing, and we are not advocating for the removal of MCAS testing in our schools. We do, however, believe that there are more appropriate ways to implement and use the tests. To address these issues, House Bill 561—the MCAS Reform Bill—was filed in the state Legislature by over 30 representatives and senators and with the support of a wide coalition of organizations.

The bill creates a committee of 31 members, drawn from diverse backgrounds in education, business, and testing to develop a system that incorporates multiple relevant measures of performance. By taking the decision out of the Legislature and beyond the Board of Education, we hope to end up with a system that will best serve all students.

In states throughout the country, student assessment is done with multiple measures including course work, projects, in-depth study, and grades, along with standardized test scores. By gauging student achievement and competency in a number of ways, we give students opportunities to demonstrate their strengths, not limit them to their weaknesses. Multiple measures can ensure that high school graduates not only succeed in passing a test, but are actually well-prepared to succeed beyond the 12th grade.

Our Current Testing system has created an educational environment in which passing MCAS is not only the primary objective; it has become the be all and end all of what students are offered. We have seen numerous districts in which schools, trying to allocate scarce resources, have cut programs for arts, AP classes, physical education, extracurricular activities, and other non-tested subjects in order to hire MCAS remediation teachers and offer extra test preparation classes.
In Waltham, a revised schedule this spring cut music, drama, art, and even health classes in the name of preparing students for MCAS.

In Winchester’s McCall Middle School, expanding school enrollment and a shrinking budget have led to a strategy known as “retreating to the core,” where non-tested subjects are sacrificed to maintain high MCAS scores.

The narrowing of curricula can also be linked to a lack of interest in education among those students most at risk for dropping out. Districts struggling to improve their MCAS scores, wage a parallel battle to keep students in school; a battle that MCAS is forcing them to fight with one hand tied behind their back.

Data from the Department of Education shows that students who have not passed MCAS are ten times more likely to drop out of school. Furthermore, a four-year decline in the dropout rate ended in 2002—when MCAS became a graduation requirement—and we have since seen a 32 percent increase in the annual number of students who drop out of school.

These numbers only degrade further when looking at students of color. African American students are more than twice as likely to drop out of school as their white counterparts. For Hispanic students, the likelihood is three times higher. Sadly, these achievement gaps were narrowing before 2002 and have since risen to pre-1999 levels.

Among students with limited English proficiency (LEP) the dropout rate increased by over 50 percent between 2002 and 2005 alone and is almost three times higher than the rate for non-LEP students. Students from low-income families follow a similar trend, with a 25 percent increase over the same three years and a rate over twice as high as their non low-income counterparts. Supposed improvements in MCAS scores mean little to those students who are being shown the door.

A lack of educational stimulation was directly cited in a 2006 report on youth violent crime by the Boston City Council. The report asserts, “Students that participated in the forums and other discussions expressed massive frustration and boredom with the endless drilling and practice of the MCAS test and test preparation. Electives...
have been replaced with test preparation. After-school programs teach MCAS preparation. Far too many students describe their school experience as an MCAS-centric environment...Given the large number of annual dropouts (nearly half the number of students that graduate), as well as the pressure on teachers to improve test scores, the incentive for students to remain in school is tenuous."

In June of this year, the Boston City Council passed a resolution endorsing the MCAS Reform Bill by a 9-3 margin.

One key way to assess the success of MCAS as a graduation requirement is to examine whether high school graduates have since improved in college and business performance. As Education Reform called for, have we improved “the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction?” Not surprisingly, higher MCAS scores have not been matched by improvements in real-world skills.

A 2005 review of freshmen entering Massachusetts state colleges showed that 37 percent of those coming from public high schools had to take remedial courses in reading, writing, or math. This was a decrease of only 2 percent from the freshman class of 2002, the last class that graduated without having to pass MCAS. In community colleges, which accept all students with a high school diploma or GED, 65 percent of students required remediation in 2005, a decrease of only 3 percent from 2002.

MCAS has also shown little to no improvement in the quality of graduates entering the workforce. The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), a coalition of businesses that strongly supports the MCAS tests, released a report in 2006 of employer perspectives on work readiness skills. Focus groups, asked to discuss perceived hiring trends relating to high school graduates, were unable to come to consensus that there was any improvement in workforce preparedness of high school graduates since the MCAS graduation requirement was implemented.

When examining job applications, “none of the employers were interested in MCAS scores.” Furthermore, the skills demanded by employers include problem-solving, carrying out multiple tasks, self-confidence, and adaptability, none of which are measured by MCAS and many of which are discouraged in an educational environment focused on test preparation. While MBAE may continue to defend MCAS as a high-stakes test, their own data beg the question, “Isn’t it time to test the test?”

These results from businesses and institutions of higher education show that while MCAS scores may be useful as a measure of school performance, they do not indicate that a student has learned the necessary skills to thrive beyond high school.

**THE TASK BEFORE** us is to achieve high standards while better measuring student ability. A system of multiple
assessments will keep MCAS in place and intact while giving students more opportunities to excel. Schools, while still striving to maintain high test scores, will be given greater flexibility to meet students’ individual needs and goals, providing them with broader opportunities to learn and prepare for life beyond test-taking.

A true multiple assessment, in line with the original intent of the Education Reform Act, could take many forms, as evidenced by those in place and proposed throughout the country. It could look like a recent Washington State proposal that incorporates GPAs in state and locally required courses, a final project, a long-term education plan, and yes, a standardized test. It could resemble Rhode Island’s approach, where students demonstrate real-world skills application, expand their studies in an area of personal interest, and once again, take a standardized test.

A job interview is not multiple-choice. A driver’s license test includes a standardized portion and a real-world evaluation of skills. Why do we think a standardized test is good enough to measure our students’ education? The Education Reform Act and, later, MCAS, brought much-needed improvements to public education in Massachusetts. But once MCAS was implemented, it became sacrosanct, untouchable for fear of reverting to a time before “accountability.”

Accountability means being held responsible for the results of one’s actions. If we are to be accountable for creating good public schools for all students, then we need to examine MCAS’ flaws as well as its successes. Anything less exposes us as leaders unwilling to hold ourselves to the same standards that we demand of our students.

Carl M. Sciortino (D-Medford) is the state representative from the 34th Middlesex District and lead sponsor of House Bill 561. Martin S. Kaplan served as chairman of the Board of Education from 1992 through 1996.

MCAS is a national model for accountability

BY CHRISTOPHER R. ANDERSON AND HENRY THOMAS

THE ANTI-MCAS ACTIVISTS may not want to hear this, but the MCAS graduation requirement is here to stay. The data does not lie: Our children are learning more, achieving more, and surpassing their peers nationwide.

The MCAS graduation requirement brought true accountability to the state’s public schools, and it allows employers to feel confident in the basic skills of high school graduates. Most importantly, the pressure of MCAS has increased the performance expectations for Massachusetts students and teachers.

And they have responded in spectacular fashion.

Shortly after the passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act and the future promise of the MCAS graduation requirement, Massachusetts was closer to the middle of the nation’s academic pack. Since the graduation requirement kicked in, our numbers have risen steadily on both local and national assessments. Our SAT scores have gone up each year, placing us continually at or near the top of the country. And for two years running, Massachusetts students have been tops in the nation for math and reading proficiency according to the National Assessment of Educational Process. No other state has ever held the top NAEP math and reading rankings in the same year, let alone two years in a row.

Massachusetts and MCAS have been held up as a national model for accountability and balanced assessment. A recent Time magazine report on the No Child Left Behind law heralded “Massachusetts’ high-quality exams” as the “gold standard” that should be adopted as the national assessment system. The report concluded that the MCAS exam was more meaningful than other states’ tests that are too weak, watered-down, or not properly connected to the classroom curriculum.

The MCAS works because it’s not just an off-the-shelf assessment test like so many others. It’s a standards-based test, meaning that kids are tested on what they are actually learning in school. It requires students to demonstrate writing, reading, comprehension, and problem-solving skills.

If we backtrack now, we unravel 15 years of progress.
skills. In short, MCAS exams measure the whole education of the whole child.

Critics often assume that students who drop out of high school do so because they cannot handle the pressure of the high-stakes exam, but this is not true. A survey of district superintendents conducted by the Department of Education in 2005 found that family problems and academics were the two main reasons why students drop out of high school. Other reasons included economics, frequent truancy, health issues, and a lack of interest in school. Many high-achieving students have also reported that they dropped out to start working because they didn’t think they could afford the cost of college tuition.

And if the survey results aren’t convincing enough, consider the numbers: The Department of Education just announced that the statewide dropout total decreased from 3.8 percent of students in grades 9 through 12 in 2004-2005 to 3.3 percent in 2005-2006. Of the more than 9,000 students who dropped out that year, more than 2,500 were seniors. And of that total, more than 68 percent had already passed both high-stakes exams.

It is also worth noting that top MCAS performers are more prepared for academic success after graduation, according to a recent study by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. The Boston Globe noted that the study “offers evidence that performance on the high-stakes tests is linked to college readiness and bolsters the case that the state's academic standards are helping to prepare students for college.”

And despite the anti-MCAS activists’ anecdotal stories of students and teachers buckling under the weight of the graduation requirement, the data tell a much different story. In June, the Department of Education announced that 92 percent of students in the class of 2008 had already met the state's graduation requirement by passing the math and English MCAS exams after only three tries. This was the best performance of any class to this point, and it continues a trend of annual improvements in the passage rate after three attempts.

Mr. Kaplan and Rep. Sciortino are correct in saying that, historically, too many students have been written off and ignored. The result has been generations of students sentenced to a life of mediocrity. We cannot afford for this to continue, as a Commonwealth or as a nation. It is the social, economic, and moral imperative of state and local government to provide equal educational opportunity for every child in the Commonwealth.

The increased statewide classroom accountability brought about by the MCAS graduation requirement was one of the pillars of the Education Reform Act of 1993. In exchange for enhanced accountability, legislative leaders, then-Gov. Bill Weld and the business community agreed to a significant ramp-up in state education funding. Since
the beginning of education reform, the state has invested $40 billion in new education funding. There is no doubting the Legislature’s and past and present governors’ commitment to funding the promise of education reform.

If we backtrack on the accountability of MCAS now, we will not only do a disservice to our children, we will unravel 15 years of significant progress. In one fell swoop, we will erase the grand bargain between teachers, students, parents, administrators, and employers that has made Massachusetts the envy of the nation.

But the debate over MCAS, which for the past few years has been quiet, is suddenly growing louder. The anti-accountability activists are back again, this time trying to weaken the foundation of MCAS by adding in a laundry list of ambiguous requirements with little educational merit. If they had their way, new “assessment measures” would continue to be added until MCAS has the weight of a pop quiz. Hopefully, they are not fooling anyone.

Anti-MCAS activists should refocus their energies and join the real education debate going on both locally and nationally. For the past 15 months, key education stakeholders—union leaders, principals, superintendents, elected officials, higher education leaders, and employers—have met at Genzyme to discuss a common agenda to begin the next phase of education reform. During meetings of this group the subject of MCAS rarely comes up. Certainly no one in that room has made a push for eliminating or even weakening the graduation requirement. There is too much important real work to do.

This group, co-chaired by Genzyme CEO Henri Termeer and Analog Devices founder Ray Stata, doesn’t waste time debating the merits of MCAS. It is more focused on pressing educational challenges, such as helping the state’s lowest performing schools turn themselves around, recruiting and retaining the world’s best teachers, and finding ways to support these teachers in the classroom.

If Massachusetts is to keep its leadership national position in K-12 education—and find ways to outpace our global competitors—we need to set a 21st-century agenda. Giving up on high standards will not get us there. The children of Massachusetts need—and deserve—much, much more. GW

Christopher R. Anderson is president of the Massachusetts High Technology Council and chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education. Henry Thomas is president of the Urban League of Springfield and a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education.
Squeaky wheels

*Cape Wind* chronicles consternation among the swells on Nantucket Sound

**BY CHARLES EUCHNER**

**THE SPECTER OF** little toothpicks twirling on the horizon of Nantucket Sound is causing fits among the political elites who make summer a verb on Cape Cod, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket. On overcast days, they wouldn’t see anything but the soft line separating water from sky. But on sunny days . . .

Those toothpicks are what you may one day see of a wind farm located five miles off the southern coast of Cape Cod. Some 130 turbines—dispersed over 25 square miles in the 550 square miles of Nantucket Sound—would stand as high as 440 feet above the surface of the water. The turbines would produce 1.5 megawatt hours of energy, enough to cover three-fourths of the electricity needed on the Cape and Islands, home to 250,000 year-round residents and three times as many people during the summer.

*Cape Wind* is the dream of an entrepreneur named Jim Gordon. A kid from Newton who discovered nature at the West End Club’s summer camp in New Hampshire, Gordon earned millions selling energy-saving devices and building natural-gas plants in New England.

In 2001, Gordon and other entrepreneurs started talking about bringing wind power to Massachusetts. He now promises that Cape Wind will lead to the reduction of 734,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year—good news for an area long dirtied by power plants and auto congestion.

Even more important, a wind farm could help make Massachusetts a leader in alternative energy. And who could be against windmills?

In their chatty book *Cape Wind*, published by New York–based Public Affairs, journalists Wendy Williams and Robert Whitcomb tell us exactly who. By their reckoning, the long and often nasty debate about Gordon’s project is all about the privilege and hypocrisy of the upper class.

At the beginning of the approval process, Gordon visited Spiro Mitrokostas, the executive director of the Cape Cod Technology Council, who agreed that the project had lots of potential for creating new jobs as well as energy. But Mitrokostas warned Gordon: “Only two or three hundred people run the Cape. If you don’t have them on your side, forget it. If Ted doesn’t like this, you’re going to have a problem.”

Indeed, liberal heroes like U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, journalist Walter Cronkite, and historian David McCullough opposed Cape Wind because it threatened to alter their posh vacation spots. (Cronkite has since switched sides.) The Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound quickly raised $15 million—a coming-together of old and new money—from such people as Listerine heiress Bunny Mellon, Paul Fireman of Reebok, and Richard Egan of EMC. The group produced a powerful infomercial with Cronkite’s authoritative voiceover, dominated town meetings, and exploited the arcane parliamentary maneuvers of Washington.

The rhetoric against the wind farm went far beyond the initial outcry about the toothpick horizon. Opponents said the project would:

• produce a “killing field,” with turbine blades slicing birds that flew in the area;
• cause awful noise pollution;
• devastate the animal life of Nantucket Sound, including sea lions and diverse schools of fish;
• interfere with air travel, especially at Nantucket and other local airports;
• ruin navigation in the area, threatening vital shipping industries;
• destroy the appearance of the whole area and cripple the tourism industry, just as surely as putting a Motel 6 in the middle of the California redwoods or in Florida’s Everglades.

Williams and Whitcomb do a good job tracking and refuting charges. Many of the claims lacked any data (even though Gordon showed a willingness to sponsor independent research). Other claims were clearly wrong.
When the policy arguments failed, activists attacked Gordon personally. In a radio debate, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. told him, “You’re a developer here who is trying to make a buck, and you’re trying to do it by imposing your costs on the public.” The Alliance placed a full-page ad in Roll Call, a Washington paper devoted to covering Capitol Hill.

WHY IS THIS MAN SMILING?, a headline asked. Nearby, a cartoon showed Gordon clutching money while stepping onto a boat in the sound.

Williams and Whitcomb ask why Ted Kennedy—whom they consider a legislative genius working behind the scenes to subvert the project—is so adamant against Cape Wind.

The authors find their Rosebud in an encounter between Kennedy and Jim Liedell, a retired utility executive. According to Liedell, a supporter of the project, he approached Kennedy at a summer concert in Hyannis. The scene is reminiscent of Cindy Lou Who asking the Grinch why he’s taking the Christmas tree.

Liedell asked him why he opposed the project. “The developer’s not paying anything,” Kennedy reportedly answered. But Jim Gordon said he would be willing to pay, said Liedell. “That’s peanuts,” responded Kennedy. Any other reasons for opposing the project? “The sight of them bothers me,” Kennedy said. But even on crystal clear days, the turbines would be mere wisps on the horizon. Is that so bad?

Then, says Liedell, came the ultimate answer from the senator. “But don’t you realize,” Kennedy said, “that’s where I sail.”

Is this how politics really works? Does Ted Kennedy really oppose Cape Wind with such ferocity just because he does not want to lose some of the mystique of piloting his 50-foot craft wherever he wants in the waters near his estate?

**INTENTIONALLY OR NOT,** Williams and Whitcomb have written a case study that could fit neatly in the 1956 classic *The Power Elite,* by C. Wright Mills. In that book, Mills argues that political, economic, and military elites occupy a tight network that shares a common worldview and makes common cause on important issues. Elections and other political activity matter, but only within the boundaries of the elites’ system.

Jim Gordon has survived this obstacle course—so far—because he has had ample supplies of both money and tenacity. The Cape Wind story might then, be seen as the ultimate proof of Mills’s argument. Elites only lose when another elite comes along!

The problem with the elite theory is that it doesn’t consider the absolute messiness of politics. Whatever its reputation as a liberal sandbox, where policy-makers can build all kinds of crazy new programs, our state is a prime example of politics by complexity and confusion, timing and luck.

Massachusetts state and local government has grown like Topsy over the years, with only occasional and weak efforts to shake out obsolete, redundant, contradictory, and irrelevant regulations and agencies. Since politics gets so tangled in process, no one really knows whether good projects can make it through the system. Whatever you try to do—build housing, rehab an old hospital, open a school, fix a park—you know that someone is going to use some arcane process to block you. If such a process doesn’t exist, they’ll invent a new one.

When Gordon proposed Cape Wind, he was challenged by the mind-bending system of Massachusetts politics as much as by the elites of Nantucket Sound. The review by the state’s Energy Facilities Siting Board alone took almost three years and produced 2,900 pages of documents. RFK Jr. told Jim Gordon, “I’ve seen grocery stores on the Cape that go through more of a permit process than this project,” and he wasn’t completely wrong. But he missed the larger truth that the state poses absurd barriers to all kinds of good projects.

Even when Gordon lined up allies, funded independent research, made his case before every civic body, and jumped through all the legal and political hoops, he still had to worry about the losers changing the rules in the middle of the game.

Consider one effort in Washington to quash the project, through something called the Environmentally Responsible Wind Power Act of 2005. This bill, introduced by Sens. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Ted Stevens of Alaska, would deny wind energy permits to any site within 20 miles of a shoreline, national park, or wildlife refuge, and would allow states to veto wind farms within 20 miles of their borders. In other words, wind power would be banned in virtually all of America. The bill didn’t get out of committee.

The good news is that it looks like Cape Wind is going to happen. Though still wary of possible lawsuits and more legislative hanky-panky, project officials expect to complete federal, state, and local permitting by the end of 2008. From the time the company begins driving pilings for the bases of the turbines, they expect to begin delivering energy in another two years.

We say it all the time, but forget too often: The region’s economy will thrive only if we constantly reinvent the economy, using the brainpower and chutzpah of people like Jim Gordon.

When will we know that Cape Wind has succeeded? When tourists are spotted on the Cape and Islands wearing chic T-shirts with images of spinning toothpicks.

Charles Euchner, a New Haven writer, was the executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University from 2000 to 2004.
**Buildings Matter.** They temper our mood, reflect our ambitions and sensibilities. At their best, they might inspire us to behave better.

“We want [buildings] to shelter us,” says essayist Alain de Botton in *The Architecture of Happiness* (Pantheon, 2006). “And we want them to speak to us—to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of.” In this abundantly illustrated book, which is being adapted into a three-part PBS documentary that will premiere on October 3, de Botton uses a raft of fascinating examples in support of his point that architecture is as much about psychology as design: Good buildings signal an understanding of who we are and what will satisfy us.

**De Botton’s Book** leads me to ask, “How do I feel in this space—how does this space make me feel?” I’m in the fifth-floor reading room of the Boston Athenaeum, on Beacon Street just a block from the State House. This is one of this city’s grandest rooms, where it is possible to read in tomblike silence amid a group of like-minded souls. It’s a quietly elegant space, unafraid to be unobtrusive.

Recently in *The New York Times Book Review* the journalist-historian Walter Isaacson not so gently disparaged the space as an “aloof perch.” I look around the room. It feels anything but aloof.

In fact, a certain humility sets in when you sit among these phalanxes of old books. As for those mute but knowing busts of marble, their implicit command is to dig deeper, look farther back in time, and absorb more of the record, before pronouncing.

True, the Athenaeum has comfy leather chairs, and “people actually do take naps here from time to time,” says director and librarian Richard Wendorf. But, he adds, “this place is put to very serious use for the most part.”

I admit to appreciating the benign stuffiness of the Athenaeum, and I’m not above absorbing its comforts. I’m getting what I came here for: a sense of propinquity to art and ideas, not just access to the stacks. Which, by the way, are terrific to explore. They’re the heart of the place, and they aren’t fussy. They lend the place a feeling of penetralia, says Wendorf, borrowing a term from Henry James: “a sense of mystery, places that need to be explored—you have to penetrate it. Handsome and stately and formal as the building is in many ways, it’s also eccentric and idiosyncratic enough to pull you in.”

Another bastion of penetralia is the Museum of Fine Arts, an institution that originally grew out of the Athenaeum’s art collection. Over the past century, the museum has grown to spectacular proportions, and it is more a civic monument than a cozy retreat, but you can get lost in there, especially in the old part that houses the permanent collection.

The main entrance on Huntington Avenue, closed in 1990 to save money, was reopened in 1995—restoring the intent of architect Guy Lowell, who won the commission for the museum in 1907.
Joined by curator Frederick Ilchman, I climb 42 steps to the Acropolis-like epicenter. “Like a temple, you are drawn higher and higher,” says Ilchman. We ascend to the rotunda, which opened in the 1920s and is decorated with reliefs and murals by John Singer Sargent.

The key painting, head on, proclaims the museum’s mission. Ilchman translates the classical iconography with ease: “Athena shielding the arts—architecture, painting, and sculpture—from the ravages of time. The irony is that sometime between Sargent’s time and ours, this knowledge of reading personifications and symbols has just disappeared. Most people walking in here in 1921 could have gotten that, and very few people get it now.”

The rotunda dates from roughly the same time as the Athenaeum’s reading room and is suffused with the same measured exuberance—grand but not overpowering. In fact, I feel coddled. “It’s supposed to elevate you, or ennoble you, which is a tricky concept in a city that defines itself as being the first to put its foot down against British rule and aristocracy and that kind of thing,” says Ilchman. “Even though New York and Philadelphia grew to much bigger size, Boston considered itself older and more cultivated. Thus, it could be the Greece to other cities’ Rome.”

The MFA grew piecemeal during the 20th century, disrupting the intended balance of Lowell’s modular plan. By 1981, the de facto main entrance had shifted to the West Wing, orienting visitors to the garage and parking lot, rather than Huntington Avenue and its trolley.

The West Wing, a vast, light-suffused galleria designed by I. M. Pei, works well for commerce, but “it’s less hospitable for works of art,” says Ilchman. It offers amenities galore but barely a hint of what lurks in the museum’s permanent collection. “You can go to an exhibition, have lunch, peruse the bookstore, see a foreign film and hear a lecture, and never get into the heart of the museum. One could happily spend three hours in this wing and never go more than a hundred feet from the doorway.”

Despite the airy feeling created by Pei’s massive barrel-vault, the galleria generates less spiritual uplift than the older parts of the museum. I feel an urge to draw the blinds, closing off the outer world.

I have a similar response to the flashy new Institute of Contemporary Art on the waterfront in South Boston. I want to like the building, but I’m put off by its gloatingly outward-looking, transparent design. Even before I enter, I sense a lack of mystery. The building says “Look at me” so loud I have to make a concentrated effort to see the art.

The MFA has hired Foster & Associates as architects of the American Wing, an ambitious addition now under construction. To Ilchman, the selection of Norman Foster is a signal of the museum’s desire to return to “a kind of classical harmony or symmetry” in the floor plan, with a renewed focus on the permanent collection. The new American Wing will act as a counterweight to Pei’s airy, modernist West Wing.

“Had you selected someone like Zaha [Hadid], Daniel Libeskind, or Frank Gehry, who might insist on an exciting, big twisting sculptural kind of thing—that would be basically saying, this is not really much of a temple anymore,” says Ilchman. “Part of the question is, what is one’s attitude toward the Sargent murals and the rotunda? If you decide you want to ignore or overpower Sargent, you can add something totally different, but if you decide you want to return the rotunda to primacy, to celebrate it, then you have to think about redirecting attention there unapologetically.”

There’s a larger lesson here for Boston, not just for our buildings but for our public spaces. We need to resist the urge to apologize for our architectural heritage, which tends to emphasize background and continuity over flashiness and singularity. The best buildings manage to avoid distracting us from our purposes in using them, or in being near them. Which doesn’t mean they have to be ugly, or even plain. But in our consumer-driven, celebrity-obsessed
culture, we run the risk of giving architects too much license for self-expression. Alain de Botton puts it nicely when he remarks that architecture is at its best when it has “the confidence and the kindness to be a little boring.”

The MFA and the ICA buildings are unusual in Boston in that they stand apart from other buildings. The Athenaeum is more the norm—it is nestled among many other buildings on Beacon Street, and you might walk right past it without remarking on its grandeur. It feels like a background building, rather than a showpiece, and to me that’s a virtue. It fits right in.

I doubt that an architect would design a building like the ICA in an environment that was already built up. As the waterfront is developed, the architects of neighboring buildings will be forced to respond to the ICA, and attempt to create some continuity—to fit right in—and that will be tricky. They’ll have to overcome the urge to compete with the ICA. The goal will be to complement it as they fill the gaps in the streetscape. Let’s hope the ICA will benefit from the context it receives from these newer buildings.

Albert LaFarge runs a literary agency in Boston. He is the editor of The Essential William H. Whyte (Fordham University Press).
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Nowadays we expect to see actors, athletes, and other celebrities used to sell products. Things were much different a century ago, when goods got their props from doe-eyed, rosy-cheeked boys and girls.

Images of cherubic-looking youngsters were used to advertise things any kid would want, of course, like bicycles, chocolates, and lace-up shoes. They were also employed in marketing items that could benefit whole families, such as pianos, lawn mowers, and sewing machines. But those same innocents were also used to sell products like “liver pills,” “nerve tonic,” and “vegetable compound”—so-called medicines for adults, whose most active ingredient was alcohol, or worse.

These images, among others, can be found in Chaim Rosenberg’s *Goods for Sale: Products and Advertising in the Massachusetts Industrial Age* (published by the University of Massachusetts Press). Rosenberg calls his book a “nostalgic tribute” to a particular marketing technique: Victorian trade cards, colorful three-by-five-inch lithographs handed out as souvenirs at fairs and expositions. These cards helped build national markets for products made in Massachusetts and were collected by both children and adults, who often pasted them into scrapbooks. Today they’re rare and valuable, and Rosenberg reproduces more than 100 of his favorites here. (Rosenberg, not a full-time historian but a professor of psychiatry at Boston University, does not include footnotes or endnotes to flesh out the skeletal bibliography. And so we have to take his word for it when he declares, for instance, that Chase & Sanborn, founded in Boston in 1862, made “the first ground coffee in America to be distributed coast to coast.”)

*Goods for Sale* also chronicles the rise and fall of Massachusetts industries, primarily between 1860 and 1920. During that period, many Bay State communities had national—sometimes international—reputations. Gardner was renowned for its chairs, Easton its shovels, Westfield its buggy whips, and Attleboro its jewelry. Holyoke became famous for the production of paper, Springfield for firearms, Taunton for silver, and Waltham for watches.

As these Massachusetts-made products became more widely available throughout the country, they were boosted by new forms of marketing. More than 100 lithographic companies were active in Boston during the 19th century, many producing the multicolored trade cards featured in *Goods for Sale*. With soon-to-be famous artists like Winslow Homer and Childe Hassam among the illustrators, it’s no surprise that some, in Rosenberg’s estimation, became “elaborate minor works of art.”

They also became idealized views of industry and its place in society. The mills and factories depicted on trade cards aren’t smoke-belching sweatshops. One of the cards reproduced in the book shows an enormous, immaculate mill on the banks of the Merrimack River. “This is where I hope to work sometime,” an optimistic person with the initials G.B.L. apparently scribbled across the front of it.

Rosenberg also shows us an 1897 calendar issued by the Malden–based Boston Rubber Shoe Co. that uses charming lithographs of the Massachusetts State House and Trinity Church to help convince people of the quality and durability of their footwear. Although familiar to Bostonians, it seems doubtful such icons would mean anything to national audiences today.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON supposedly said that if a man could make a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to his door. When Elias Howe Jr. was 24, the Spencer native heard similar words. “Invent a sewing machine,” someone at the Boston machine shop where he worked told him, “and it will ensure you an independent fortune.”

With a wife and three kids to support on a $9 weekly salary, “poverty and concern for the future of his family encouraged him” to invent just such a machine, writes Rosenberg. “After a number of false starts, Howe hit upon the idea of using a threaded needle with an eye near the point, interacting with a shuttle carrying a second thread, moving back and forth.”

In 1845 he assembled a few prototypes, found a model that worked, and applied for a patent, which he received the following year. Today people associate Isaac Singer with the sewing machine, but Elias Howe’s invention gave birth to the industry. According to Rosenberg, between 1850 and 1900 there were 250 sewing machine companies in the United States; 45 got their start in Massachusetts.

In no community was a local sewing machine company as prominent or dominant as in the Franklin County town of Orange. In 1862, Thomas White, 26, moved his sewing machine factory there (from its smaller quarters in nearby East Templeton) to be closer to a railroad line. Steam power had eclipsed water power, and factory owners, no longer dependent upon swift moving rivers to run machinery, considered proximity to rail a major advantage.

By 1866, White “decided that the country was moving to the booming West,” writes Rosenberg, so he moved his company to Cleveland, which had even better rail service. In less than a decade, a tiny Massachusetts town became both the beneficiary and victim of the fast-expanding railroad system.

Rather than pack up their families and move west with him, White’s employees formed the New Home Sewing Machine Co., and it became the most successful Bay State firm in the industry, with 750 employees and an assembly line turning out 500 machines daily. According to Rosenberg, between 1877 and 1930, more than 7 million sewing machines were assembled in Orange.

Two of the most interesting trade cards reproduced in Goods for Sale were issued by the company. One shows a young man, with two dogs nipping at his feet, chasing after a horse-drawn wagon filled with sewing machines, in a manner reminiscent of a kid chasing after an ice cream truck. But instead of seeking a cool, refreshing treat, he’s shouting, “Hello! Stop I want a New Home Machine.”

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• Homes in Gateway Cities have out-appreciated Greater Boston in percentage terms since 2000, rising 78 percent versus 32 percent.

To learn more, check out MassINC’s latest research report Reconnecting Massachusetts Gateway Cities: Lessons Learned and an Agenda for Renewal. It’s available free-of-charge at www.massinc.org
The other card, which Rosenberg describes as “delightful,” was given out by the company at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It depicts a precocious young girl with a sewing basket at her feet, wearing granny glasses as she peruses a book titled *The Song of the Shirt*. It also lists cities where the New Home machine could be purchased, including Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, and San Francisco. That list is topped not by a metropolis, but by the justifiably proud “Orange, Mass.”

For a half-century, New Home loomed large in every aspect of small-town life, providing schools, housing for workers, a company store, a post office, and a community center. When New Home was sold to an Illinois company in 1930, production moved with it and brought an end to what had been one of the Bay State’s most vibrant industries, but echoes of the past still reverberate in Orange. Thomas White has a road named after him, as does New Home founder A.J. Clark. The town library is named after Clark’s partner, John W. Wheeler. A dam on the Millers River at the site of his factory is still known as the New Home Dam, and across town is a package store called New Home Liquors.

Rosenberg describes the industry’s beginnings in England, where medicinal chemists “sought to protect their products by means of a royal patent.” By the time the term gained currency in 19th-century America, “patent medicine” covered “an infinite number of concoctions claiming a wide array of benefits.” There were no laws to prevent apothecaries from making claims without evidence, and many patent medicines got their strength from alcohol, opiates, or even cocaine—ingredients which, Rosenberg writes, accounted “for much of their appeal.”

By mid-century, 1,500 different patent medicines were for sale in America, with some of the largest companies here in Massachusetts. One of the most successful was in Lynn, where Lydia Pinkham, a mother of four in her mid 50s impoverished by an invalid husband, decided to sell a home medicine she had long been handing out free to family and friends. Because vegetables were known to promote health, she called the mixture “vegetable compound,” though it was not filled with tomatoes or carrots but rather more obscure ingredients such as unicorn root and fenugreek seed. “Despite her lifelong temperance views,” Rosenberg writes, alcohol was another significant component of Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound.

Merchants were given bottles on consignment, and the product began to sell in small quantities, but it wasn’t until a *Boston Herald* ad in 1876 brought an unexpectedly strong response that Pinkham hired an advertising company. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound was then claimed to cure a wide array of ailments, including faintness, flatulence, and “weakness of the stomach.” According to the back of one trade card, the concoction could also “dissolve and expel” uterine tumors, while curing “Bloating, Headaches, Nervous Prostration, General Debility, Sleeplessness, Depression and Indigestion.”

Sales were helped when Pinkham put her curly-haired, kewpie-doll-mouthed granddaughter on a trade card, but they really took off when the “reassuring portrait” of Lydia herself was used to market the product. “Over the years,” Rosenberg writes, “Lydia’s company spent $35 million on advertising and shipping.” Pinkham became “the country’s first great female entrepreneur” and “one of the best-known
women in the United States."

People felt they knew Lydia Pinkham and wrote her for advice. Her death in 1883 was not widely publicized (she was a national icon before there was national media), and the company simply responded to new queries with “form letters advocating continued use of the Vegetable Compound.” The upshot, writes Rosenberg, was that for a number of years after her death the company continued to gross more than $1 million annually.

In 1905, however, “the clouds of decline” moved over the company when the Ladies’ Home Journal published an exposé on the patent medicine industry. Among other things, the magazine revealed that Pinkham had been dead for 22 years and the company had “duped” its most faithful customers into believing otherwise. Then came the Food and Drug Act of 1906, which required makers of patent medicine to list alcohol content on the label. Not surprisingly, Pinkham’s customers were shocked to learn that her vegetable compound “contained a heavy dose of it.”

When the American Medical Association joined the fight against patent medicines, the death knell was struck. “None of the nineteenth-century Massachusetts patent medicine companies made the transition from folk remedies into the science-based pharmaceutical industry of modern times,” Rosenberg notes.

**THE PATENT MEDICINE bust was but a precursor to the end of nearly all the Massachusetts industries commemorative in Goods for Sale. When the Great Depression hit, owners of the red brick mills and factories that dominated the landscape and economy of so many Massachusetts communities either closed shop or fled south to escape, as Rosenberg writes, “labor strife, changing fashions [and] technological advances.”

They included the makers of footwear, automobiles, pianos, and many other industries that advertised their goods for sale on trade cards. The gilded age of Massachusetts industry was over, and the state would have to wait for a completely new set of products to rejuvenate its economy. **

Lydia Pinkham’s patent medicine was born in Lynn.

**WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY...**

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