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available at [www.commonwealthmagazine.org](http://www.commonwealthmagazine.org)

*CommonWealth* (ISSN pending) is published quarterly by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC), 11 Beacon St., Suite 500, Boston, MA 02108. Telephone: 617-742-6800 ext. 109, fax: 617-589-0929. Volume 23, Number 1, Winter 2018. Third Class postage paid at Holliston, MA. To subscribe to *CommonWealth*, become a Friend of MassINC for \$75 per year and receive discounts on MassINC research reports and invitations to MassINC forums and events. Postmaster: Send address changes to Circulation Director, MassINC, 11 Beacon St., Suite 500, Boston, MA 02108. Letters to the editor accepted by email at [editor@massinc.org](mailto:editor@massinc.org). The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of MassINC's directors, advisors, or staff. *CommonWealth* is a registered federal trademark.

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*CommonWealth* magazine is printed on FSC-certified recycled paper, manufactured with an elemental chlorine free process, using soy inks and 100% certified wind-energy credits for production.





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## The opposite of fake news

**WHEN I CAME** to work at *CommonWealth* in late 2008, we had four reporters putting out a print magazine four times a year.

Today, nine years later, the print magazine still goes out four times a year. But we also post stories and commentary on a daily basis on the *CommonWealth* website. We send out a daily news summary (The Download) by email every morning. We host a podcast (The Codcast) and email out a behind-the-scenes report (the Back Story) and a commentary (The Upload) once every week. And we do it all with three full-time employees, one less than we had in 2008.

That's the reality today in journalism. More with less.

But it's a reality that you, our readers, need to fully understand. We provide in-depth coverage of transportation, education, and energy and we produce periodic investigative pieces on issues of importance. We also encourage broader public debate by hosting opinion pieces from knowledgeable experts such as James Aloisi, John McDonough, Edward M. Murphy, and Carol Rose as well as a host of people from all walks of life across the state.

Our cover story in this issue is a good example of what we do. Airbnb is a company that has rocketed to prominence by matching travelers looking for a deal with homeowners looking to make some extra money by renting out an extra room or an in-law apartment. Our story illustrates how this business has morphed into something much bigger, with investors buying units and even entire buildings in Boston and converting them into what are

essentially Airbnb hotels. The conversions appear to be sucking thousands of housing units out of circulation at a time when city and state officials are desperately trying to increase the supply. All this is happening right under the noses of state lawmakers and city officials, who have been sitting on their hands for years when it comes to regulating the home-sharing industry.

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This is nonprofit journalism at its best. At a time when news operations in Massachusetts are disappearing and those that are left are increasingly homogenized, *CommonWealth* does something few other outlets do. We don't cover everything, but what we cover we cover pretty well. We're the opposite of fake news.

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# inquiries

## UMass Boston's Dr. Evil

"I am now Dr. Evil," said Barry Mills after it was reported that he planned to shut down the daycare center at the University of Massachusetts Boston as part of an effort to rein in costs at the campus.

Brought in to right the university's finances, Mills made the comment in an email to the school's provost on July 7, shortly after the *Boston Globe* disclosed the daycare center was on the chopping block. The email and others obtained under the Public Records Law illustrate how the former Bowdoin College president navigated the controversy over the daycare center, which was shuttered in December.

Mills expressed confidence his approach on the daycare center would prevail in a July 6 email to UMass spokesman Robert Connolly, in part because he thought no one would overrule him. "Marty [Meehan, the UMass president], he is fine; trustees, they will be fine; governor, he will keep his head down," he wrote.

A few days later, Mills acknowledged the tradeoffs he was facing. "I am thinking about more brutal, less strategic approaches to put this budget issue behind us—across the board layoffs of some percent. I doubt I will get there," he wrote to Connolly on July 15.

Connolly suggested to Mills on July 16 that he praise the chancellors of the other UMass schools at an upcoming meeting of the board of trustees. "No interest in stroking other chancellors," he responds. "They run breakeven and raise no money."

Mills is scheduled to step down as interim chancellor in June.

► COLMAN M. HERMAN

## Puerto Ricans struggle to rebuild lives in Mass.

► LINDA ENERSON

**ON A CRISP** morning in November, Veronica Perez and Limarie Rivera, both self-evacuees from Puerto Rico, borrow a car from Rivera's cousin and make their way to the New North Citizens' Council in Springfield. New North is one of nearly two dozen welcome centers around the state designated as a first stop for people coming in from US territories and states pummeled by Hurricane Maria.

Finding an affordable apartment is their most pressing concern that day, but jobs, child care, better nutrition, and transportation are all pieces of the puzzle they must assemble to rebuild their lives on the mainland, a task that at times seems out of reach. "It isn't easy," Perez says, over and over. She and Rivera share gnawing concerns about what will happen to their families if they can't secure jobs and housing before their emergency aid runs out.

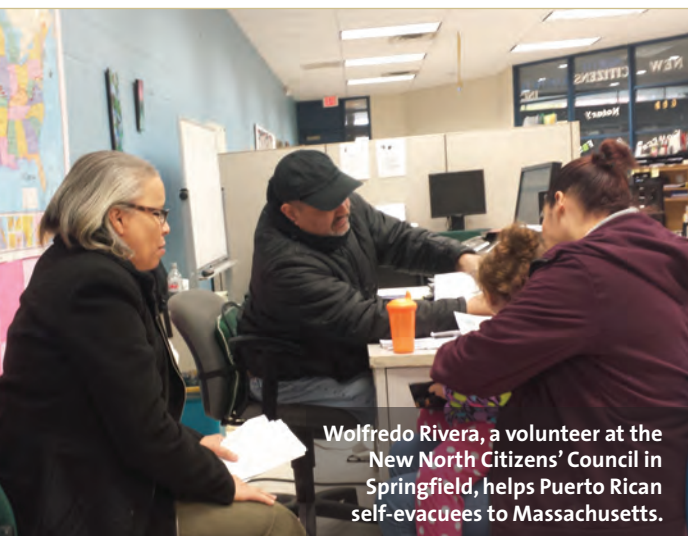
While some evacuees are staying with relatives with the means to help them, many others, including Perez and Rivera, have arrived with little more than their suitcase and a good measure of grit. After toughing it out without power or schools in Puerto Rico, they fled their homes for a healthier environment and better opportunities for their children.

By mid-December, 4,300 hurricane survivors had registered at the state's welcome centers. About half of them registered in western Massachusetts at New North and the two other welcome centers in Springfield and Holyoke. Others have headed to Boston, Lawrence, and other cities with sizeable Puerto Rican communities.

In the immediate aftermath of Maria, almost all public and private relief initiatives were directed at Puerto Rico. But as efforts to restore power faltered, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and state governments scrambled to respond to the vast migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland. The coordination of resources is still being worked out, but in general FEMA pays for shelter (emergency, transitional, or rental) while the state provides food stamps for those who are eligible. Private and state resources as well as volunteers support the work of the welcome centers. The children of Perez and Rivera are enrolled in the Springfield schools.

On any given weekday, the New North Welcome Center bustles with new arrivals who want to register for FEMA and access health care, public schools, career services, and English classes. On the day in November, the boiler at New North was not working. Like everyone else, Perez and Rivera kept their coats on.

Like many evacuees, the two women chose Massachusetts because they have



**Wolfredo Rivera, a volunteer at the New North Citizens' Council in Springfield, helps Puerto Rican self-evacuees to Massachusetts.**

relatives here. Rivera and her two sons came up from Moca, a town in the northwest corner of Puerto Rico, in October and stayed at her cousin's house for a week before getting approved for transitional assistance at a nearby hotel contracted by FEMA. Last month, more than 700 families were approved for transitional assistance in Massachusetts.

Perez and her three children came up a few weeks later. Her home in Dorado had been without power for 50 days. Schools were closed. Grocery shoppers were limited to 15 minutes inside the store to curb lines that snaked out the door. People waited up to 12 hours to get propane for home generators. In late October, her twin girls got sick from breathing generator fumes and were hospitalized for 10 days. "After that, my husband said, 'You can't stay here no more, you've got to take the kids and get out,'" Perez says. He stayed behind because he isn't bilingual and was concerned the language barrier would keep him from finding work in Massachusetts.

Perez was immediately approved for transitional assistance and moved into a hotel room near Rivera's. They quickly struck up a friendship, helping each other navigate the complex web of available services and benefits. Rivera has access to a car but speaks no English. Perez, who is bilingual, translates for Rivera.

While every evacuee's story is different, the obstacles Perez and Rivera face each day to find some semblance of stability since the storm upended their lives mirrors those facing many others in the same boat.

"We're very thankful we have a home, but right now it's very difficult in the hotels. We don't have kitchens," says Perez. "We have a refrigerator, but it's real small. We can only buy juices and milk, so we don't really have food. My kids, they are used to my food—rice, beans, and stuff like that. They're not eating a lot. My kids and her kids, we're having that same struggle."

Many displaced Puerto Ricans are eligible for food stamps. But Rosa Espinoza, the welcome center program director, says "you can only buy cold food with food stamps. You can't go out to a restaurant and buy hot food." Those not eligible for food stamps are draining their limited resources to dine out.

The lack of nutritious food has taken a toll on Rivera's health. "Right now, she's having some problems with sugar with her liver so she needs to have a better diet and right now that's hard," Perez says. The perilousness of their situation also takes a psychological toll. "She is real depressed," says Perez of Rivera, as both women start crying. "I could say the same thing, right? It's not easy leaving your home, everything, so we are struggling with that. You have to be strong for your kids, but sometimes it's hard to just stay strong."

"I thank God every single day my kids sleep warm," Perez says. But FEMA's emergency shelter program is temporary. It is scheduled to expire in mid-January, although it could be extended another month or so. Either way, time is running short for Perez and Rivera to find more permanent housing, which is no easy task.

"The shelters are full. And Section 8 vouchers are a rare bird. The last voucher we gave out was to someone who had been on the list since 2003," says Lauren Voyer, senior vice president of housing support services at Way Finders in Springfield.

Both women see employment as the key to rebuilding their lives. "From the beginning" says Perez, "I always say, I just want a job, I don't want to live like just give me, give me. I want to work. The access to do that is just hard. Where do we go? How do we just do it? Every day, we ask the same questions."

Barriers to employment include the lack of reciprocity with Puerto Rico on professional licensures, limited bus schedules, and a lack of affordable child care. Perez, who taught English in an elementary school, has interviewed for some positions in local schools, but so far has received no job offers.

Rivera owns a nail salon back home. "She does beautiful work," Perez says. Rivera smiles as she scrolls through some photos on her phone. She holds up a shot of her handiwork, elaborately decorated, super-long nails.

Language is a barrier for Rivera in both getting a job or relocating her business here. Espinoza says the welcome center offers English classes at 6 p.m. "How is she going to get here at 6 p.m.?" Perez asks. "Who is going to take care of her children. You solve one problem, and it just opens a box to another one."

*CommonWealth plans to follow the progress of Perez and Rivera. Watch for future stories online.*





The milking cows and large anaerobic digester tanks at Bar-Way Farm in Deerfield.

## How now cow power?

► CHRIS BERDIK

**IN A RURAL** valley south of Deerfield, power lines strung on new poles run along a stretch of muddy gravel between the main road and the interior of Bar-Way Farm, where hundreds of cows provide electricity along with their milk.

Manure from the cows is pumped into a massive, red, airtight tank that acts like a giant stomach where microbes consume the waste and create biogas (mostly methane) to power a one-megawatt generator—a process called anaerobic digestion. There aren't enough cows here, or at any Massachusetts dairy, to power a system this size with manure alone, so it's supercharged with a slurry of food waste delivered by tanker trucks a few times every day.

When the state banned commercial food waste from landfills in October 2014, anaerobic digestion advocates predicted a win, win, win—a much-needed destination for food waste, an economic lifeline to endangered dairy farms, and a new source of clean energy. But only two new digesters have started up on farms since then. (Two were in place before the organics ban and three non-farm digesters have started taking food waste since 2014.)

Several snags have held back biogas—from the piles of cash needed to get started to the challenge of cracking into a crowded energy market. Still, proponents argue that better food waste processing and a little help from Beacon Hill could spark the promised cow-power boom.

"We are on the edge, trying to squeeze every dollar we can out of this farm," says Dan Woodger, whose family owns Rockwood Farm in Granville, a tiny town of 1,500 about 25 miles west of Springfield. In addition to

milk from about 350 cows, the Woodgers also sell mulch, composted manure, and potting soil. By springtime this year, they plan to add renewable energy with a 500-kilowatt anaerobic digestion system now under construction. "We're crossing our fingers and banking on it working," says Woodger.

Rockwood is hardly alone in its struggles. Years of low milk prices and recent droughts have sped a longer-term decline of Massachusetts dairy farms, whose ranks have plummeted 90 percent since 1970, with only 133 farms in operation today, according to the state Department of Agricultural Resources.

Anaerobic digesters make or save money in several ways. They collect tipping fees from waste haulers for accepting food waste and turn that waste (and cow manure) into renewable energy that qualifies for special state subsidies. The byproducts of the process, from the fibrous bits in the slurry which can be used for cow bedding, to the nutrient-rich "gray water" leftovers, which can be spread across fields of hay and corn as a replacement for chemical fertilizer, cut down on other costs. The handful of existing digesters took in more than 20 percent of Massachusetts' diverted food waste in 2016, and they help the state meet its ambitious goal of cutting carbon emissions 25 percent from 1990 levels by 2020. So, why aren't there more of them?

Partly, it's a problem of scale. The upfront cost for a digester's tanks, pumps, generator, controls, and grid connection can stretch into the millions of dollars.

"The farmers can't do it on their own," says Gerald Palano, alternative energy specialist at the Department of Agricultural Resources. The dairies need to partner with companies that specialize in financing, building,

## GAS FROM COWS

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and operating farm-based digesters, such as Wellesley-based Vanguard Renewables and Ag-Grid Energy, based in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

But the small dairy farms that predominate in Massachusetts—the majority own fewer than 100 milking cows—are hamstrung by investors' preference for larger systems that promise more reliable returns.

Another hurdle is a digesters' need for uncontaminated food waste that is liquid enough to be pumped from tanker trucks into the digesters. That type of liquid food waste generally comes from food manufacturers such as Kraft Foods and Cape Cod Potato Chips, and the supply is limited.

There's far more growth potential in food discarded from grocery stores and big institutions such as hospitals and universities. But that waste needs to be de-packaged, cleared of non-food contamination, and churned into a slurry. State grants have recently helped start up a handful of processors for this waste, and Vanguard also plans to invest in such facilities.

Finally, digesters must contend with the state's net-metering cap—the amount of power a utility is legally obligated to “buy” from customers generating their own electricity. According to Vanguard's executive chairman, John Hanselman, cap space is routinely “gobbled up by wind and solar projects” that have much faster permitting than anaerobic digestion.

Multiple bills are pending on Beacon Hill to exempt anaerobic digestion from net-metering caps, as is the case for other small generators, such as rooftop solar on homes. The justification would be that anaerobic digestion is tiny compared to wind and solar, and has far less growth potential. Even if every Massachusetts dairy farm miraculously installed a one-megawatt digester, the total power output would still lag the state's current solar capacity by a factor of 10.

Even with the money to get an anaerobic digester started, the food waste to sustain it, and the market for its energy, getting to the finish line is not automatic, as evidenced by Bar-Way Farm. The digester started making gas in early March of last year, but Eversource didn't make the final connection to the grid until December. So, for nine months, about half the gas was burned off by two large, open-air flares. The remaining gas went to the generator, but nearly all of the electricity was simply fed into a machine that dead-ended it to ground, except for a small fraction used to power the farm.

Still, there are signs that farm-based biogas may be nearing a tipping point. For starters, the state aims to divert 450,000 tons of food waste annually by 2020, a target that would be a 70-percent increase from 2016.



“We see most of the growth in capacity coming from anaerobic digestion,” says John Fischer, chief of commercial waste reduction and waste planning at the Department of Environmental Protection. In addition to Rockwood Farm, two other Massachusetts dairies are now installing digesters, and Fischer says DEP has held pre-permit meetings with several others.

Also promising is that anaerobic digester businesses are spreading into regional and national markets. In 2017, for instance, Vanguard partnered with Dairy Farmers of America, an 8,000-farm cooperative, to invest in more food waste and manure digesters across the country.

Since becoming the state’s first farm to co-digest food and manure in 2011, Jordan Dairy Farms in Rutland has been successful enough to up its generator size from 300 kilowatts to 500 kilowatts, and will soon boost it again to 800 kilowatts. Randy Jordan, who runs the fifth-generation family farm with his brother Brian, plans to add a one-megawatt system on another farm they own in nearby Spencer.

“People ask if we’re successful. And the way I describe success is that the doors are still open,” says Jordan. “We’re still making milk and we’re still making electricity.”

*Chris Berdik is a freelance writer living in Milton.*

## DAs have different approaches on expenses

► COLMAN M. HERMAN

**AS A GROUP**, the 11 district attorneys in Massachusetts are not big spenders when it comes to dining out or traveling on the state’s dime. But within the group, there are some wide variations.

Overall, the district attorneys spent \$67,012 over the course of a year on trips, meals, and related expenses, according to records covering mid-2016 to mid-2017 obtained under the state Public Records Law. That works out to an average of \$6,092 per district attorney, who make \$171,560 a year.

“All the DA’s offices are strapped for cash, and so every little bit counts,” says David Capeless, the district attorney of Berkshire County, who spent \$4,561.

At the top of the district attorney spending spectrum

is Timothy Cruz, the DA of Plymouth County. Cruz spent \$18,881, including \$5,734 on airfare, \$5,548 on hotels, \$2,144 on limousines, and \$900 on meeting registration fees.

Cruz traveled at least eight times out of state, one time to a three-day conference on Waikiki Beach in Hawaii and another time to New Orleans, also for a three-day event.

Cruz declined comment, but his spokeswoman issued a prepared statement saying that, as a vice president of the National District Attorneys Association, Cruz has had many requests to attend and present at conferences.

At the low end of the spending spectrum is Marian Ryan, the DA of Middlesex County. She listed one expense of \$575 for airfare to a conference in New York City. She billed for nothing else—not for a hotel, not for meals, and not for ground transportation.

### BIG BUCKS MEALS

“Our spending is a balance of the expenditures needed for our cases and investigations and the cost of operating our 13 offices against the relatively limited resources available to us,” Ryan said in a prepared statement.

Based on the number of cases prosecuted (nearly 40,000 a year), Ryan runs the largest operation of all the DAs, and has the second-largest budget at \$16.8 million. Cruz’s office operates on a budget of \$9.3 million,

Jonathan Blodgett, the Essex County district attorney, is the second-biggest spender of the 11 DAs, topping off at \$12,350. His list of expenses is the most interesting, a curious mix of the big and small.

On the lower end, Blodgett sought reimbursement for toenail clippers (\$4.49), a bottle of Tylenol (\$6.99), a bag of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups (\$3.49), and a bag of potato chips (\$1.99).

On the higher end, Blodgett, who is president-elect of the National District Attorneys Association, often uses a limousine service when he travels from Peabody to Boston and back. His expense records show \$1,547 in spending on limousines to Boston, including one \$414 roundtrip limo ride where the driver was required to wait for him while he attended a meeting. Blodgett also spent \$625 on out-of-state limousine rides.

Blodgett traveled at least eight times out of state to such places as New Orleans and Washington, DC. In April, he took an unusual trip to Guantanamo in Cuba to watch a military tribunal as a representative of the National District Attorneys Association, according to the *Eagle-Tribune* newspaper. The federal government picked up a portion of Blodgett’s expenses, with his office paying the remaining \$816, according to records.

Asked if his office will pay for his travel when he

becomes president of the National District Attorneys Association this year, Blodgett's spokesman says it's not clear yet. "It has not been definitively determined... whether and to what extent his expenses related to the NDAA presidency will be covered by the NDAA," the spokesman says in a prepared statement.

On one trip to Boston, Blodgett submitted a \$58.85 expense for dinner at Moono on Beacon Street near the State House. The charge exceeded the \$16 allowed under his official reimbursement policy. Blodgett declined an interview request.

In Boston, Suffolk County District Attorney Daniel Conley ranks as the third-highest spender at \$9,950. Much of his expenses were for trips to conferences in New Orleans, Orlando, and Palm Springs and Newport Beach in California.

The veteran prosecutor and unsuccessful candidate for Boston mayor declined an interview request. But his spokesman issued a statement saying that Conley's expenses are incurred "almost exclusively" for outside pursuits "in his official capacity as a member" of various national DA groups. The statement says the conferences "provide insight into policies that have been effective in other jurisdictions."

Joseph Early, the district attorney of Worcester County, has an official expense limit for lunch (\$12) and dinner (\$20), but his receipts indicate he often exceeds that amount. During a trip to Atlanta, he took three guests out to a high-end steakhouse, paying \$256 for filet mignon and ribeye. Early was also reimbursed for a \$135

### SOME SPEND LESS

tab for him and his guest for dinner at McCormick & Schmick's, \$103 for Early and another guest to have dinner at a pizza restaurant, and \$91 for him to buy lunch at a brew pub for him and the DA from the Massachusetts Northwestern District. Early declined to comment.

The DA of Bristol County, Thomas Quinn, whose expenses amounted to \$1,274, says he does his best to "conserve funds."

"When I need to go to Boston for a meeting or something, for example, I often drive around to see if I can find a place to park on the street," he says. "I don't use limos."

Northwestern District DA David Sullivan also did not drop a lot of money (\$3,265) on his own activities. "I'm frugal in my personal life," he says in an interview. "So why shouldn't I be frugal in my public life? It's just the way I am. And I make a good salary." **CW**

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# Treating addiction as a chronic illness

For Michael Botticelli of Boston Medical Center's Grayken Center, personal experience informs his policy approach

BY BRUCE MOHL | PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANK CURRAN

You've shaped drug policy at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, at the White House, and now as executive director of the Grayken Center at Boston Medical Center. But it seems like the most important item on your resume is the fact that you're in recovery from substance abuse yourself. That's not an uncommon trajectory. It's an acknowledgement that in many respects you're one of the fortunate few who found their path through recovery. For me, it comes from a deep sense that I have an obligation to give back and to try to recreate what I had for everybody else. I'm doing that in a professional capacity, but there are a lot of people who do this on a day-in-day-out basis—not as part of their job but as part of their sense of obligation.

**You dealt with your alcohol problem through a 12-step program, right?** With a little court help, yeah. I was arrested for drunk driving after a car accident. I went before a judge who said to get my license back I needed to attend a group counseling program for people who have driven under the influence.

**What's the lesson you've taken away from your own personal experience?** I am the classic case of things going wrong. I had a family history of addiction and we know genetics has about a 50 percent role in the disease. I started exhibiting symptoms of the disease from a young age. No one ever intervened with me. I don't remember a pediatrician saying to me, Michael, you have a strong

family history of this so it might be a good idea if you don't drink. It's often not until people reach their most acute stage that they get treatment.

**How many people with substance abuse disorders do get treatment?** About 14 percent. The treatment rate for diabetes is 75 percent. Why is that? Well, because we identify people who are at risk and we pay very close attention to them over the course of their life to try to reduce all the costs associated with emergency care. I'm sure you've heard the phrase hitting bottom. We don't need to let people hit bottom before we motivate them to seek care. We don't let people with hypertension progress to the point where they have cardiac arrest before we do interventions.

**You obviously view addiction as a disease. How widely shared is that view?** There's still quite a few people that feel it's some sort of moral failure. Let me give you an example. During the summer, I was leaving the building out on Albany Street [where many addicts hang out]. This truck was driving by and I heard the guy say, we should just line them up and shoot them.

**How does that sort of attitude impact people with addictions?** We know that stigma plays a huge role in people not seeking care. I was really afraid to admit that I had a problem because I was afraid of what people would think. Would they think I was stupid or weak-willed?



**What's the attitude in government?** Historically, we've spent much more on supply reduction and law enforcement strategies and spent comparatively little on health approaches. It wasn't until the end of the Obama administration when federal spending for health approaches equaled supply reduction strategies. We hoped this trajectory was going to continue, but it appears like it's not

**What's the best treatment?** For people with opiate use disorder, the evidence is crystal clear that treating addictions with a medication is far better than treatment without medications.

**How long should treatment last?** It's a chronic illness. Length and time of treatment are significant predictors of long-term outcomes. Historically, people received very short-term treatment. They'd say I'm going to detox for 30 days. But the relapse rates are pretty staggering with that. If you can get people to one year [on treatment], the relapse rate significantly drops off.

**How do most people enter treatment?** The biggest percentage comes from the criminal justice system—36 percent. Only 8 percent are coming from our health care system. People with substance abuse disorders intersect with the

health care system all the time. Given those percentages, we clearly need to do a better job of diagnosing.

**Aside from family history, is there anything else to look out for?** One of the most significant predictors about whether or not people will become addicted is under-age use. The unholy trinity is alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. If you start using [any of these] at a young age, it sets a trajectory for you to develop a significant addiction later in life. It also basically predicts that you will move to other substances beyond alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana, and usually within three years. Does that mean every person who smokes marijuana goes on to develop an addiction? No, but early use is a significant predictor.

**So when Massachusetts pols, sounding like they came straight from a showing of *Reefer Madness*, warned against legalizing recreational marijuana, they were right?** It's supported by the science. I don't think we have paid enough attention to the role that substances play in priming people for more significant addiction later on in life. Kids have developing brains, so it appears like it is priming the brain for significant drug use. Your brain starts becoming used to the fact that you're taking a substance, which leads you to do more of a substance to have that same effect. **CW**



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## Economic development, co-op style

### Wellspring gives workers opportunity to be owners

BY LINDA ENERSON

**WELLSPRING COOPERATIVE IS** preparing to launch its third business in Springfield, a greenhouse that will grow fresh greens and herbs and sell them to supermarkets and institutions in the area.

The greenhouse, built on a brownfield in the eastern part of the city, will use hydroponic gardening (think plants growing in mineral nutrient solutions rather than soil) to grow a wide variety of produce, including lettuce, cucumbers, and tomatoes.

Like the other two Wellspring businesses, Wellspring Harvest will be owned by the employees who run it. The Wellspring approach is a blend of economic development and worker empowerment. The goal is to marry the buying power of local institutions with small businesses providing products and services those institutions need. By giving the employees the reins of the company, Wellspring hopes to spur economic development and wealth creation in low-income areas.

“Wellspring is a model across the nation in not only hiring underemployed and unemployed workers, but giving them full power in managing their business,” says Gerardo Espinoza, who directs the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund, a Brookline-based organization that provided a portion of the funding for Wellspring Harvest.

Wellspring Cooperatives was founded and is operated by Fred Rose and Emily Kawano. Rose, a public policy lecturer at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, previously worked as a community organizer in Springfield. Kawano directed the Center for Popular Economics (its slogan: “economics for people, not profits”) in Amherst for nearly a decade before leaving in 2013. Their board is sprinkled with people from powerful nearby institutions with buying power, including the University of Massachusetts, Western New England University, and Bay State Medical Center.

The formula is fairly simple. Come up with a product or service that local institutions need,

raise the money to launch a business, hire employees to do the work, rely on local institutions to provide a steady stream of orders, and over time convert the employees into owners. The approach builds businesses, creates jobs, and keeps more of the estimated \$1.5 billion that local institutions spend each year in the community.

The \$1.4 million greenhouse project is funded largely by loans and private investments that will have to be repaid out of revenues; less than \$100,000 of the total capital and start-up costs is in the form of grants. Sales for the first year are forecast at \$350,000, largely to the Big Y supermarket chain, Baystate Health, Mercy Hospital, and public school departments in Springfield and Worcester.

The greenhouse will have five employees initially. All of them will work at the facility, but one of them will also serve as manager, while one will oversee sales, deliveries, and customer relations.

The first two Wellspring cooperatives—the Wellspring Upholstery Coop and the Old Window Workshop—have been successful at pulling in work and developing a cadre of loyal worker-owners.

The two businesses focus on repairing items to help reduce the amount of old furniture and building materials that normally end up in landfills. The firms are located across town from the greenhouse in an old industrial building on the south end of Springfield.

On a visit to the Old Window Workshop, Pam Howland describes how windows past their prime can be remade to be as energy efficient as new ones by replacing the glass, paying careful attention to air sealing, and inserting a removable storm window in each pane. Howland has calculated that the cooperative has prevented 10 tons of building materials from going into landfills just through its work replacing the large, multi-paned windows on a Holyoke factory building.

“Every time I drive by I look up and see those windows,” says Nannette Bowie, who also works at



the Old Window Workshop. “I’ve touched every one of those windows.”

Bowie says that working in the Old Window Workshop was something she fell into after she lost her job as a counselor in a residential treatment center for teenagers. Joining the cooperative has helped stabilize her finances and draw out talents she didn’t know she had, she says.

Upstairs, in the Wellspring Upholstery Cooperative, Gary Roby tacks new material onto an old couch from one of the waiting rooms at the UMass Medical School in Worcester. His prior work experiences were, like Bowie’s, a little tenuous. Though he had some experience as an upholsterer, he had not found stable employment. After recovering from an injury, he bounced around in a couple of low-wage jobs until the opportunity came up at Wellspring.

“I was both unemployed and underemployed,” he says. “When I learned that by working here I could be doing something to help build my own community at the same time, the decision was a no-brainer.”

Roby recently completed his first year at the upholstery company, and was voted in by the other employees as a worker-owner. “This is 100 percent like being self-employed. I am self-employed,” he says. “I have to think about what we’re doing every day and plan how we’re going to get it done. If you’ve been working for the man your whole life, this is completely different.”

Entry level jobs at Wellspring start out at \$12 an hour, not wildly different than the minimum wage offered to entry level employees in most other businesses. But workers at Wellspring Cooperatives receive health insurance, vacation, and sick time, benefits that are sometimes lacking in entry-level jobs.

Jobs with more responsibility pay more, but a general rule of thumb for worker-owned cooperatives is that the highest salary should not be more than two to three times the lowest salary.

After a year of employment, workers at Wellspring businesses can opt to become a worker-owner if the other worker-owners agree it’s a good fit. New worker-owners invest \$1,000 in the business, and then share in any profits.

According to Rose, the profit trajectory of Wellspring businesses is similar to most small businesses. “It takes about five years for most start-ups to make a profit,” he says. His projections indicate the greenhouse operation may be on a faster track, showing modest profits over the next few years (aside from the first year, which will be a loss) and \$100,000 in profits over the course of a decade.



**Gary Roby says he’s building community at Wellspring Upholstery Cooperative.**

Current plans call for expanding the greenhouse in the third year to double output. The number of employees is expected to grow from five to nine.

Wellspring provides training and assistance in managing all aspects of the cooperative. As cooperatives mature, they will be expected to pay for that assistance, and help worker-owners of newer cooperatives learn the ropes.

The network of cooperatives is a hallmark of Wellspring and an essential ingredient to the ultimate success of each cooperative. “There is an ecosystem that all needs to be in place for cooperatives to thrive,” says Espinoza, the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund director. “You need to have cooperative developers, people like Fred [Rose] who know how to support them, financing, and a network of cooperatives, so they learn from each other.”

The model for Wellspring Cooperatives was inspired by a much larger network of cooperatives operating in Cleveland, called Evergreen. While there are many similarities between the two models, Wellspring allows worker owners to run their own cooperative board without influence by the anchor institutions, the Wellspring Cooperatives board, or other interests.

True to the bottom-up ideals of the Wellspring model, there are few guidelines for how the cooperatives are to be managed. To keep each of the collaboratives in alignment with the Wellspring mission, however, they must commit to staying in Springfield and continuing as a cooperative.

“We try to create companies that are owned and controlled in the city,” says Rose. “Attracting large employers, like MGM, [the company building a casino in Springfield] is appealing as an economic development strategy. But the risk is that they are owned and controlled by outside companies and can be very fickle. This city has seen a lot of loss of jobs and manufacturing over the years when local companies find it’s more profitable to be somewhere else. Our coops will not do that. It’s a different design.” **CW**





## Trump takes control of Warren's baby

Senator now on outside looking in at CFPB

BY SHAWN ZELLER

**THE TUSSLE OVER** Richard Cordray's successor as director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau underscored a new reality for Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren.

The agency she created, which was by a quirk of her design the final holdout in a Washington regulatory apparatus that President Donald Trump has bent to his deregulatory will, is now in Trump's hands. And here's the hard reality: There's little she can do about it.

In 2007, Warren, then a Harvard Law School professor, first proposed an agency to protect consumers from financial predation in an article for *Democracy*. After the financial crisis of 2008, she lobbied Congress, and most prominently then-Massachusetts Rep. Barney Frank, to include the agency in the 2010 Dodd-Frank law that bolstered Wall Street regulation.

She wanted to be the agency's first director, but when Senate Republicans made it clear they would never confirm her, she took a job with President Barack Obama to help set up the agency. Obama picked Cordray, the attorney general of Ohio, for the job.

The agency design on which Warren, Frank, and former Connecticut Sen. Chris Dodd agreed provided for an independent director, appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate, but with a five-year term unaligned with the president's.

Cordray, confirmed in July 2013, plugged away through most of 2017. He finalized rules barring companies from requiring customers to go to arbitration rather than court to resolve disputes. He also upended the way the short-term, high-interest, payday lending industry does business. He could have served until this summer, but

stepped down at the end of November to mount a gubernatorial bid in Ohio this year.

Cordray made a last-ditch effort to appoint a successor to fill out his term, while Trump put forward as a temporary replacement former South Carolina representative Mick Mulvaney, who was a member of the ultraconservative House Freedom Caucus and now serves as Trump's budget director. A court fight ensued. In late November, a federal district court judge sided with Trump and installed Mulvaney.

So now Warren, who helped design the agency, staff it, and cheered Cordray on, finds herself out of the loop. It hasn't been easy. When Trump signaled he would appoint Mulvaney, Warren called it a "giant middle finger to consumers."

But Warren says in an interview that she holds out hope that the bureau will continue to go after financial predators and write rules to protect consumers. "This is a big test for Donald Trump," she says. "During his campaign, he said he wouldn't let Wall Street get away with murder. The best way is to let the cop on the beat do its job."

Still, there's little reason to hope Trump will grant the consumer bureau a reprieve from his anti-regulatory approach. Days after taking office, Trump ordered executive branch agencies to rescind two rules for every new one they write. He decried bureaucracy: "Instead of rebuilding our country, Washington has spent decades building a dense thicket of rules, regulations, and red tape," he said.

Since then, Trump's administration has delayed, rewritten, and rescinded more of his predecessor's regulations than any previous president. From Obama's rules to curtail power plant pollution to his push to expand eligibility for overtime pay,

Trump has replaced Obama's prescriptions with ones more to the regulated industries' liking.

On November 1, Trump signed a congressional resolution rescinding Cordray's arbitration rule, not only removing it from the books but also barring the agency from ever pursuing a substantially similar regulation without approval from Congress.

Mulvaney has frozen hiring at the bureau, as well as new regulations.

Warren admits she's "worried about the future of the agency under Republican control. A poor director could cause the agency to bring fewer enforcement cases and ease off on supervisory responsibilities, undermining the agency and its mission."

Rick Manning of the group Americans for Limited Government makes clear a diminished agency is his goal. "Now that Richard Cordray is gone, it's time to undo his work," he says.

Trump can curtail enforcement actions that the consumer bureau has taken against lenders and others, resulting in nearly \$12 billion in settlements, debt cancellations, principal reductions, and other forms of financial

relief since 2011.

But there's only so much Trump can do to wipe existing regulations off the books. Ones in the works, or recently finalized, are vulnerable. The regulation Cordray finalized in October to limit how many loans payday lenders can make to debt-strapped consumers is probably kaput. But to rescind older regulations, the agency would have to embark anew on a laborious rulemaking process and fend off legal challenges from consumer advocacy groups.

## Rescinding old regulations won't be easy.

That means a plethora of Consumer Financial Protection Bureau rules tightening the standards governing mortgage-lending and protecting credit card users and bank customers will likely remain.

Consumer advocates are readying for legal battle if a new appointee isn't enforcing existing rules, or moves to rescind them. "It's not a forgone conclusion that the CFPB will not take action to protect consumers," says Amit Narang, regulatory policy advocate at Public Citizen. "To the extent that they don't, there's a greater

"I went over to my mentee's house on Father's Day and he gave me a card. It said, 'Happy Mike's Day' on it. That was awesome."



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likelihood of litigation than not.”

Warren plans to use her role on the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee to hold the agency accountable. “I will hold the new director’s feet to the fire,” she says.

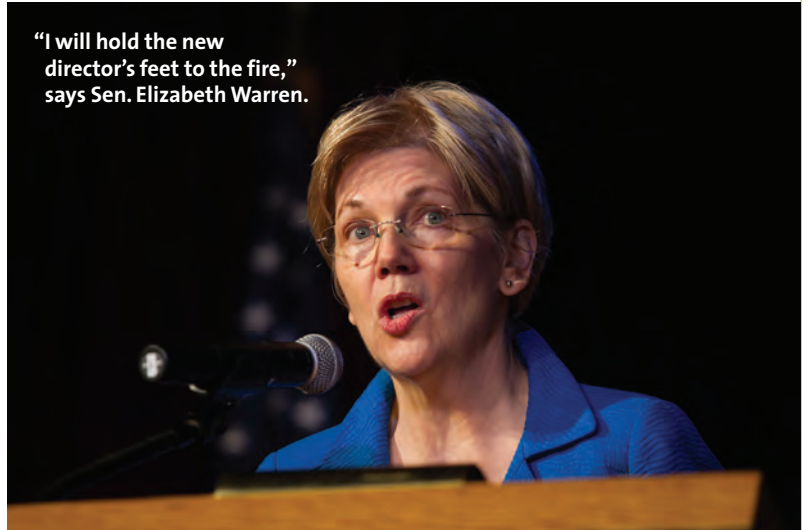
Warren and other backers of the agency also expect that a new director inclined to curtail its ambitions will have to face a career staff assembled by Warren and Cordray who want to do the opposite.

“Much of the CFPB’s core—its mission, vision, values, strategy—is institutionalized and thus will carry forward from leader to leader,” says Ethan Bernstein, a Harvard Business School professor who worked at the agency in high level posts from 2011 to 2013.

Still, political appointees tend to eventually win those battles. Witness the spate of high-profile retirements from the Environmental Protection Agency and the State Department, two agencies that have undergone big changes during the Trump administration.

And Barney Frank says not to expect anything differ-

“I will hold the new director’s feet to the fire,” says Sen. Elizabeth Warren.



ent at the CFPB until the Democrats regain control of the White House. He expects a “very serious diminution of activity” at the agency.

“You can’t force people to administer,” he says. “It’s crushing in many ways [for existing employees.] They won’t be forced to say swindling consumers is good, but they’ll have to go on internal vacations for a couple years.” **CW**

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# The Airbnb gold rush is on

Whole buildings, like this one in Chinatown, are being converted into hotels

BY JACK SULLIVAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN RICHARDSON

**AIRBNB, LIKE THE** draw of ride-hailing apps to car owners, started with the premise that your home can make you a little extra money by renting out rooms to travelers looking to save a few dollars. Empty-nesters, they said, could rent out junior's bedroom now that he's moved out and put a couple extra bucks into the retirement account or help pay down the mortgage. Young professionals who want to travel could find a cheap place in another country and rent out their home to a similar globetrotter through the app in a win-win situation.

That quaint notion, though, has gone awry as big investors have muscled their way into the market, buying up individual units and even entire buildings in all of Boston's neighborhoods and using Airbnb as a booking agent to create ersatz hotels in the middle of residential streets. The rentals each bring in hundreds of dollars a night to the "hosts," while taking long-term housing off the rolls and in some cases pushing existing tenants out into an ever-tightening market for affordable housing.

"This flies in the face of the city's goal of bringing rents down," says Richard Giordano, policy and community planning director for Fenway Community Development Corporation. Giordano says a "conservative" estimate is that 4,000 housing units in Boston have been removed from the housing inventory and turned into short-term rental units, an industry that is dominated in Boston by Airbnb with 75 percent of the listing market.

City officials agree the growing shift is putting pressure on the housing stock, though they estimate the number of units lost so far at about 1,500 to 2,000. Airbnb insists only about 300 units listed on its website have been removed from the housing stock, but an examination of the listings suggest the company is grossly underestimating the number.

All of this real estate churn is occurring right under the noses of city and state officials who have been slow to respond even though Airbnb has practically begged lawmakers to regulate the industry and start collecting taxes on the rentals. It's another case where technology—as well as the entrepreneurs who seek to make a buck off of it—is moving much faster than lawmakers on Beacon Hill and policymakers at Boston City Hall.

Larry Post, a retired financial services executive, is one of those entrepreneurs. He owns 80 apartments and condominiums in Boston, many in the Back Bay, where he lives, and some in the North End and on the waterfront. About 20 of the units are listed on Airbnb, including at least three he purchased in the last year specifically to rent out on the site. He says he has never kicked out a tenant to pave the way for a short-term rental on Airbnb.

"Most of these Airbnbs, I own the whole building," says Post, whose son and five other people run the short-term rental part of his business.

Post says his short-term rental business is not affecting the city's supply of housing. He insists the units he is renting on Airbnb could not be easily leased to tenants because of their location at ground level or in basements. He also disputes the argument that Boston is struggling with a shrinking housing market, citing data from the real estate industry indicating there is a 16 percent vacancy rate in the Back Bay rental market and claiming the city

overall mirrors that trend. With hotel occupancy at its peak, says Post, he and others are accommodating those who want to come to Boston and spend their money.

"These bring huge incremental revenue to the city," he says of his short-term rentals. "Call a realtor in the Back Bay and North End. If there was zero supply on MLS [Multiple Listings Service], then rents would go higher. Rents are actually coming down."

Several studies earlier this year indicate rents in Boston are dropping ever so slightly, though the city remains in the top five most expensive rental markets in the country. While MLS did show in mid-November about 16 percent of Back Bay's 1,100 units available for rent, a 2017 third-quarter report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development labeled the Boston rental market "tight," pegging the citywide vacancy rate at 2.7 percent, down slightly from the same period in 2016 when it was 2.9 percent.

Some officials who were formerly resistant to short-term rentals, while remaining concerned about their impact, are beginning to accept the idea that, just as drivers use their cars for ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft, homeowners should be able to cash in on their property and that investors have the right to turn a profit.

The Airbnb website currently has about 5,000 listings in Boston, at an average price of \$173 a night. Critics

## HUD classified the Boston rental market as "tight," pegging the citywide vacancy rate at 2.7 percent in 2017.

say the rentals are making neighborhoods a mecca for luggage-wheeling visitors who bring little more than a sense of impermanence to once-tight knit communities.

"These guys more and more are functioning like a hotel without being permitted as one," says Giordano. "On the other hand, the city isn't getting any revenue out of them like they do in other hotels."

### HOTEL AIRBNB

The four-story apartment building with the friendly city park and playground next to it in Boston's Chinatown neighborhood is indistinguishable from most of the others along narrow Tyler Street save for one thing—it is essentially a hotel.



Housing advocate Karen Chen says investors are buying up entire buildings in her neighborhood and converting them to Airbnb rentals, squeezing families out of the market.

The building at 106 Tyler Street was once home to a dozen families, mostly immigrants with limited English skills, according to Karen Chen, executive director of the Chinese Progressive Association, a neighborhood advocacy group. The tenants either moved out or were forced out

over the last year, she says, to make way for Airbnb renters. The owner of the building is listed as Tyler Realty LLC of Weston, according to Suffolk County Registry of Deeds records. On the Airbnb site, a woman named Haiying Ji is identified as the host of the units in the building. Ji did not



return a call for comment.

Chen ticked off six buildings in about a three-block radius around Tufts Medical Center and near the Theater District that she says her group has identified as fully converted to Airbnb listings. She says her association is not able to block the conversions so it has focused on winning more time before the tenants have to move out to make way for short-term renters.

“We noticed it probably about a year-and-a-half, two years ago,” says Chen. “The problem was not as severe then, but now we have seen whole buildings being purchased and turned into Airbnb.”

According to the Airbnb site, there were 12 units available for short-term rental in the Tyler Street building just before Christmas, with prices ranging from \$91 a night for a one-bedroom to \$216 a night for a three-bedroom, two-bath unit that sleeps up to 10 people.

The full price, factoring in cleaning fees, is higher. For the one-bedroom, the building owner then adds on an \$80 cleaning fee and Airbnb charges a \$23 service fee for a total of \$194 for one person for one night. For the three-bedroom, the cost is \$239 for four people for one night, plus a \$140 cleaning fee and the Airbnb service fee of \$50 for a total of \$429. That’s still lower than most hotel rooms in the city, but not the super-bargain the list price would indicate.

Interviews with residents, advocates, state and city officials, and even Airbnb representatives indicate the conversions are not limited to Chinatown. They are happening in the North End, Bay Village, and the Fenway. Triple-deckers in Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan are increasingly being rented short-term out to visitors rather than long-term to families. Students are getting squeezed out of Allston, Brighton, and Mission Hill.

Airbnb’s footprint is growing quickly in the North End. One of the telltale signs of a short-term rental is the sprouting of keypads in doorways and lock boxes attached to entrances, fence grates, and posts where owners store keys for renters to gain access. Walk down any street off Hanover, Commercial, or Salem streets in the neighborhood and you’ll run out of fingers and toes counting the devices.

Another indicator is the number of people dragging luggage along the streets while looking at their phones for directions. Another is the seven-day a week presence of trash bags at the curb in a neighborhood that has pick-ups twice a week.

“The systemic issue is that it’s removing rental properties from stable residents,” says Mary McGee, president of the North End Waterfront Residents Association. “It is just bringing more transients into the neighborhood. They don’t put their garbage out on garbage day. They put their

garbage out whenever they leave. They are coming and going at all hours.”

There’s nothing to prevent owners or buyers from converting their property into Hotel Airbnb because of the lack of regulations but even officials with the technology company want to change that. Will Burns, director of policy for Airbnb, says the company has been working with state and city officials to cap the number of commercial listings and reduce the number of buildings being changed wholesale into short-term rentals.

“We want to work with the city to help them regulate that, how many short-term rentals you can have in the city,” says Burns, a Chicago native whose mother is an Airbnb “superhost.” “There should be limits. I’m saying it’s not right for someone to convert an entire apartment building.”

#### THE HOSTS WITH THE MOST

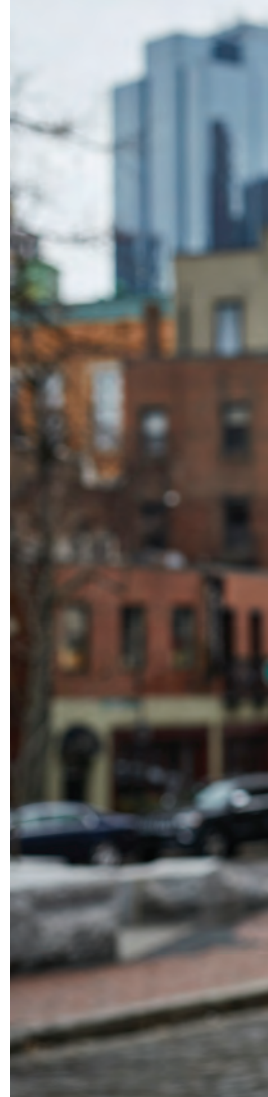
Larry Post travels a lot so he appreciates all that a first-class hotel offers. “I have never, ever stayed in an Airbnb,” says the 65-year-old Back Bay resident. “I am not an Airbnb person. It brings in the opposite kind of person than me.”

But Post was successful in financial services because he also knows a good investment venture when he sees one. Post says his Airbnb rentals have directly created jobs for his son, who runs the short-term rental part of the business, and five other people. He says the people

## One telltale sign of short-term rentals is keypads and lock boxes where owners store keys for renters to gain access.

who stay in his units, in turn, spend a lot of money in the city.

Though Airbnb officials insist the small homeowner or apartment dweller with a room available is their average purveyor, a breakdown of the site’s data shows more than 62 percent of the available listings in Boston are







Ford Cavallari, chairman of a civic umbrella group and a North End resident, says regulations are needed for transparency and accountability.

entire units or homes. Private rooms make up about 37 percent of the listings while shared rooms account for a little more than 1 percent.

Airbnb officials – who claim there are only 300 Boston units on its site that are fully removed from the city’s housing stock—define any unit rented out for more than 117 days a year as a commercial venture. According to a review of data, however, more than 2,500 of the 4,870 Boston listings in December were available more than 117 days a year, with more than half of those available for 300 days or more.

According to data on the website InsideAirbnb.com, acknowledged by many to be an accurate repository of information on the app, nearly 56 percent of Boston listings on the site come from people or companies with multiple listings, indicating they are renting either several rooms in their house or other units they own.

The number of Post’s Airbnb listings, all made under his son’s name and picture, puts him in the top 20 in Boston, but only number 17 on the list. The top lister in Boston goes by the name of “Kara” and has at least 181 units available on Airbnb. Attempts to contact Kara and others in the top 10 were futile as communication is limited to the Airbnb site and the app appears to automati-

cally remove phone numbers when they are included in an inquiry, and responses appear to be automated with no further way to contact the hosts.

Many of the commercial Airbnb listings double as corporate short-stay units, which are regulated under a city ordinance overseeing what is termed “executive suites.” The units are restricted as to where they can be located and how long—or short—someone can stay in them. But listing them on Airbnb allows the corporate owners to bypass those regulations as well as fill them up for extra money while they’re not being leased conventionally.

Until a reservation is made on its site, Airbnb will not give the exact location of a unit, instead identifying the region it’s in with a shaded circle roughly a quarter-mile in diameter. Company officials say this is for security reasons, but shielding the exact location of units frustrates neighborhood residents and officials concerned about the proliferation of Airbnb units.

“We’re trying to create a transparent process,” says state Rep. Aaron Michlewitz of the North End. “Right now, you have no concrete evidence your neighbor has an Airbnb. There’s privacy issues that we’re trying to balance but it’s important to create a transparent process. We want people to know who’s renting these out.”

# Everyone knows Anthony in the North End—just not this one

► JACK SULLIVAN

**ANTHONY WAS A** popular Airbnb host. His 88 units in Boston, including about half in the North End, drew more than 2,000 mostly positive reviews over a 15-month period.

"We had a fantastic stay in Anthony's place," wrote Carol from Killarney, Ireland, who stayed there in October. "It is in a great location in the heart of the North End. Probably one of the comfiest beds I have slept in!"

Anthony, whose clean, handsome face adorned the listings in a picture with, presumably, his pretty blonde wife or girlfriend lovingly draping her arms around him, loves to travel, he says in his bio. "Entrepreneur by day, international traveler in my spare time," he writes. "Living the busy startup life. Would love to host you!"

Very inviting and warm except one thing—this Anthony isn't real, unless he has a second job as a model. The picture on the Airbnb listing appears to be a stock photo from Getty images. The photo also appears on webpages for a Canadian church, a Florida payday loan company, a Washington state dental practice, and a California bail bondsman. Anthony, as people of a certain age might recall, was the name of the kid in the old Prince Spaghetti ads.

In November, after the Alliance of Downtown Civic Organizations began asking around about who Anthony is following complaints by residents near some of his units, Anthony's face suddenly disappeared from the listings and the new host was listed simply as Domio. It appears that Domio is a New York-based, short-term rental management company that, for a 20 percent cut, acts as host for thousands of listings around the globe on Airbnb. Company officials did not return a request for comment.

Airbnb officials dismiss the "Anthony" listing as an outlier, even though it appears many of the commercial listings

1 2 3 ... 9

This host has 2069 reviews for other properties.

[View other reviews](#)

### Hosted by Anthony

Boston, Massachusetts, United States · Joined in August 2016

**2127** Reviews

Entrepreneur by day, international traveler in my spare time. Favorite places I've been are Greece, India, Italy, London, Paris, Monaco, Hong Kong, Seoul, Bali, Taiwan, Mexico, Dubai. So many other places I want to visit! Enjoy dining out, trying new things, and exploring different cultures. Living the busy startup life. Would love to host you!

[Contact host](#)

Languages: English

have false names and bios. Crystal Davis, a spokeswoman for Airbnb, insists those aren't indicative of the company's average host. "They have their own websites," Davis says of the commercial offerings. "Airbnb isn't their only channel."

It's clearly a marketing practice, an action to maintain the perception that Airbnb hosts are just folks like us

looking to share their homes. "A lot of these names are fake on Airbnb," says Ford Cavallari, chairman of the Alliance of Downtown Civic Organizations. "This is a great example of one of the things that I think is really rotten about what's going on here."

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It's a business for him, Post says, no less deserving or onerous than any of the other businesses in a neighborhood and one that is not illegal—or evil—despite what opponents say.

"If I go back to short-term furnished rentals, six people lose their jobs," says Post. "I don't think it does anything to the character of the neighborhood. I think we have a huge benefit for the city. The [neighborhood] meetings I've been on, you'd think you're opening up a nuclear waste site next door."

But Michlewitz says there is a discernible change in his old neighborhood and others when long-term tenants are shut out of the market.

"I think it does change the fabric of the neighborhood in that you have a full-time resident who wants to be invested in the community if they live there long-term," says Michlewitz, who has been trying to pass regulations on the short-term rental industry for three years. "If you had a neighborhood full completely of short term rentals, I don't think that's a neighborhood, that's a tourist industry."

#### CHECKING IN ON REGULATIONS

As with the emergence of Uber and the transportation network industry, city and state officials appear to have been caught off guard by the proliferation of short-term rentals. "The technology moves at a quicker pace than the legislative process," says Michlewitz. "We're trying to keep up with that. It's like having to put the cat back in the bag with Uber. We're trying to accomplish the same goals with this piece as well," he says of Airbnb.

Both the city and state have been inexplicably slow

**'You'd think you're opening up a nuclear waste site next door,' says one commercial Airbnb host.**

in responding to the unfettered growth of the industry. In fact, the city put a freeze on any ordinances and inspections that would hinder the short-term rental market despite some officials' concerns over the impact of removing units from the long-term housing inventory.

In June of 2014, as short-term rentals began to sprout up around the city, William "Buddy" Christopher, commissioner of Boston Inspectional Services, issued a

**Housing advocates in Chinatown say this building on Oak Street and one next to it have been quietly turned into total Airbnb rentals.**



memo instructing his workers to give short-term rentals a pass on applicable city ordinances.

"The city is currently examining how these services fit within our existing zoning and permitting definitions and whether new or amended regulations are warranted to address these specific arrangements," Christopher wrote. "During this interim period so long as there are no other code violations observed and the premise remains owner-occupied, it is the initial recommendation that inspectors stay the issuance or enforcement of violations based solely on the failure of a homeowner using these services to change the dwelling's occupancy to include bed and breakfast use."

More than three-and-a-half years later, that memo still stands as the city's governing policy and it doesn't appear officials are enforcing the "owner-occupied" standard of allowable use, opening the door to commercial ventures with multiple listings.

Christopher English, policy analyst and special projects manager for Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, says the administration expects to have regulations issued early this year, in late January or early February. He acknowledges the city's delay in drafting regulations has created a growing problem and concedes that without regulations, whole building conversion cannot be stopped.



“We have been taking a bit of time in our approach at the risk of allowing this proliferation of short-term rentals across the city,” he says. “We need to put something on paper to really be able to target that. If it’s purchased, there are still private property rights people have so until we put something into place, we do face some challenges there.”

Among the expected city regulations will be a three-tier registration approach. The lowest tier, with the least oversight, will be those homeowners who were the foundation of Airbnb, the ones with a room in the back of the house or the basement, followed by tighter restrictions on people who rent out their entire apartment or house while they vacate it. That level will have some restrictions as to how many days out of the year it can be offered for short-term rental. The most clamps will be placed on units rented out commercially, with restrictions likely being placed on how many that one entity or individual can offer as well as restrictions on how many units in a building can be used for short-term rental before it is classified a hotel.

Few people want the short-term regulations to go hard at those who have a spare bed or room to offer to tran-

sients, a longtime fixture in the Boston housing scene.

“We have a dearth of rooming houses now,” says Ford Cavallari, chairman of the Alliance of Downtown Civic Organizations, the umbrella group for many of the neighborhood organizations. “There used to be rooming houses all over the place and for a variety of reasons the

## A 2014 memo from Inspectional Services put a freeze on enforcing laws that could affect short-term rentals.

whole market is sort of dried up. We think it has a totally different dynamic to it. It has different people renting. It really does help people make the rent. In fact, our associations are unified in believing that in renting out your room, there’s no problem there, you don’t even have to touch that.”

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English says the rules the city eventually issues will take into consideration the economic boost that Airbnb provides.

"The number of units we see is a testament that people want to come and visit Boston and want to stay," says English. "We're cognizant of that. Anybody that's coming to stay in the city is likely to spend money here. It's generating economic benefit to the city and the region."

Officials at the state level are also eyeing the economic benefit more than the perceived social ills in shaping policy and regulations. Michlewitz has filed several versions of his bill over the last three years, though they've never gotten out of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Financial Services, despite the fact he is the House chair.

Michlewitz's current measure mandates safety and health inspections before allowing a short-term rental. In addition, the bill would levy a tax of 4 percent to 8 percent depending on whether it's an owner-occupied unit, leased by a professional management company, or operated by a commercial venture. The rest of the measure leaves regulations largely to communities, allowing them also to adopt a local option tax of 6 percent, with Boston allowed to set a 6.5 percent tax. The bill requires communities to use half the revenue they collect from

commercial hosts toward low- and moderate-income housing programs.

One of the things the delay in drafting regulations has done is convince people like Michlewitz and Walsh that there's a place for Airbnb in the city's landscape.

"There's a lot more nuances, more than meets the eye," says Michlewitz. "I was of the initial impression Airbnb is awful, let's get rid of it, it's destroying my neighborhoods. There are some positives, it's not all negatives."

Neighborhood advocates say that may be the case, but allowing the listings to grow without reasonable oversight is harming densely populated neighborhoods as well as putting the visiting public at risk.

"They just left this non-enforcement policy in place and that's why Boston is in the shape that we're in," says Cavallari, who noted the Coconut Grove fire 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in December spotlighted the issues of allowing unchecked commercial operations. "What we're saying is, if it's a public accommodation, we've got to take seriously the safety of public accommodations. There should be inspections at the same frequency levels as hotels. Otherwise, we're going to have one of those accidents and that's the last thing we should allow to happen. If we know we can prevent that, we should be doing just that." **CW**



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# The big worry

The MBTA and transit agencies across the country are watching their ridership decline as ride-hailing apps gain steam. What should they do?

BY BRUCE MOHL | ILLUSTRATION BY PETER HORJUS

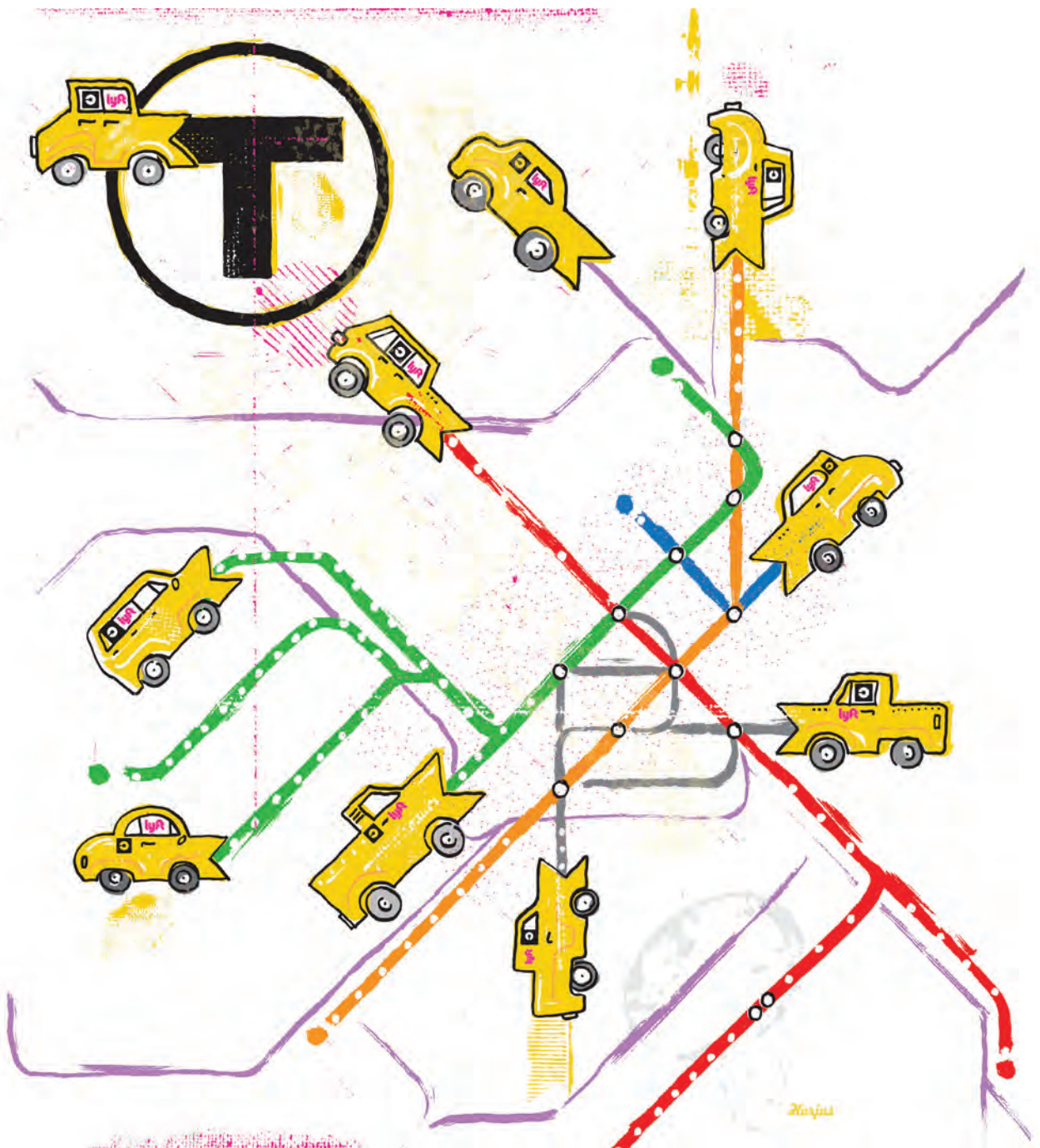
**ONCE A MONTH**, the MBTA's Laurel Paget-Seekins jumps on a conference call with her counterparts at half a dozen transit agencies in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, New York City, and Washington, DC. They are all worried about the same thing. Why are fewer people boarding their buses and trains at a time when the twin barometers of ridership—population and economic growth—are rising?

"This is something that everyone is noticing," says Paget-Seekins, the director of research and analysis at the

T. "It's particularly concerning because it's a lot different than what we've seen in the industry before. Generally, the models have always said that as population goes up and the economy improves, ridership goes up. Now there's been a couple years where that hasn't been the case."

T bus ridership is off about 6 percent and subway traffic is down 2 percent; so far, commuter rail is holding steady. Most of the dropoff is coming during off-peak hours and on weekends. On their monthly calls, the transit agency executives are comparing numbers, exploring





theories, and preparing to launch a research initiative. “Part of what we’re focusing on is what is different. What has changed?” Paget-Seekins says.

There are a lot of potential variables that could affect transit ridership. The price of gasoline is relatively low. More and more people are working from home. And the reliability of T service, particularly buses, leaves a lot to be desired. But Paget-Seekins and her colleagues at the other transit agencies think the downturn in riders has a lot to do with the rapid expansion of Uber and Lyft. When these ride-hailing

apps first came along, the focus was on their impact on taxis. But it is slowly dawning on everyone that they are a disruptive force in the world of transportation, and hold the potential to cause a lot more disruption with autonomous vehicles looming on the horizon.

Uber and Lyft say loudly and clearly that they are not the enemy. The ride-hailing apps say they are partners with public transit agencies, shuttling passengers between their homes and transit stations, getting people out of their cars, nudging them into ride-sharing options, and

helping to reduce congestion on the roads. Once autonomous vehicles take over (Lyft thinks private vehicle ownership will be all but dead by 2025), they say the world will change forever.

John Zimmer, the president of Lyft, calls it the third transportation revolution. “Since autonomous networks will be much more efficient than individual ownership, a large number of cars will come off the road – freeing up an enormous amount of space to devote to anything but cars,” he says. “Eventually, we’ll be able to turn parking lots back into parks. We’ll be able to shrink streets, expand sidewalks, and make room for more pedestrians. This translates to better cities—and better lives—for people all over the world.”

But there is growing evidence that the ride-hailing apps, at least for now, are not solving the world’s problems. The research indicates that significant numbers of people are calling an Uber rather than walking, biking, or riding public transit. The result is more congestion, not less, and fewer riders on public transit.

The situation raises confounding problems for policymakers. At a recent meeting of the MBTA’s Fiscal and Management Control Board, directors circled warily around the problem. They regularly greenlight transportation investments expected to last 30 to 40 years, but is that wise when a columnist for the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* is suggesting that trains and trolleys will soon go the way of horses and buggies? Should the MBTA compete against Uber and Lyft (the LA Metro recently went looking for a private contractor to help it develop an on-demand, mini-bus system) or should the T cooperate with the ride-hailing apps (as it did by farming out a big chunk of its high-cost paratransit service to the two companies)?

Making matters worse, no one really knows what impact the ride-hailing apps are having on public transit, and Uber and Lyft act as if what they are doing is nobody’s business. The Baker administration and state lawmakers, after passing a weak law regulating the ride-sharing apps last year, have shown no interest in compelling the companies to step forward with information.

Karl Quackenbush, executive director of the Central Transportation Planning Staff, an agency whose job is to analyze ridership data to help inform policymaking in Massachusetts, says he is extremely frustrated.

“We’re pretty damn sure that a lot of the trips that are being made by Lyft and Uber are coming off the transit system,” he says. “I think there’s a lot of cynicism among people in the planning world. They think the public sector blew it, blew it big time, by not foreseeing what was going to happen and putting mechanisms in place from the get-go that would compel these companies to work more cooperatively to provide information. It’s a

touchy subject. These are businesses. They’re in a competitive situation. We get that they are loathe to part with information that could put them at a competitive disadvantage. But you know public sector organizations like ourselves have entered into agreements in the past with various private operators. We were able to use the information without putting the companies at a competitive disadvantage. Unfortunately, what you’re seeing now is these companies are so damned powerful, they fight back big-time with legions of lawyers.”

### **BOSTON INFORMATION SCARCE**

It’s shocking how little we know about the operations of Uber and Lyft.

In August 2016, Gov. Charlie Baker signed into law a bill regulating so-called transportation network companies, or TNCs. (I use the term ride-hailing apps because that seems more descriptive of what they are.) The legislation required transparent pricing, properly marked vehicles, and state background checks of drivers. It also gave the ride-hailing apps the green light to operate out of Logan Airport and the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

## **Uber and Lyft say transit agencies are their partners and have nothing to fear from them.**

But the legislation said nothing about information. As a result, we know how many drivers have had their backgrounds checked (120,111 as of November 1), but we don’t know how many drivers are actually out on the streets. We don’t know where they drive, when they drive, or how many passengers they carry.

Uber and Lyft say the information is proprietary and, if released, could violate the confidentiality of their customers. Both companies say transit agencies have nothing to fear from them.

“We’ve always viewed ourselves as a partner of transit,” says Corey Ershow, Lyft’s transportation policy manager. “We really believe that as people have more options, they’re going to use all of them more often and so if we can get them out of cars they will get on to transit more often and more frequently.”

An Uber spokeswoman, Alix Anfang, says much the same. “Uber’s long-term goal is to end the reliance on

personal car ownership and instead allow a mix of public transportation and services like Uber,” she says. “Uber helps fill service gaps in communities across Boston that lack convenient access to the T, helping people affordably and reliably move around the city.”

Uber, Anfang says, is currently growing the fastest in Boston neighborhoods that lack good access to public transit, including Mattapan, Hyde Park, Roslindale, Dorchester, and West Roxbury.

Asked for data that would back up her claim, Anfang says the company selected 100 users at random who took an Uber ride in Boston between November 29 and December 5. The dataset ended up being 151 trips. Of the total, 38 percent were roundtrips or to the airport. Another 5 percent were loops, where the user took a trip from point A to point B and then another trip on to C before heading back to A. All of these trips most likely didn’t involve another transportation mode, such as public transit.

The rest of the trips, or more than half, were either one-way (38 percent) or some form of travel that didn’t end up back where the passenger started. Uber admits some subjective judgments are used in its analysis, but officials there say the data indicate most customers are using the ride-hailing app in conjunction with some other mode of travel, such as transit, walking, or biking.

One place in Boston where information on use of ride-sharing apps is available is Logan International Airport, and the impact there is astounding. According to data collected by the Massachusetts Port Authority, ride-hailing apps handled 12.5 percent of the arriving and departing passengers in February, the first month the apps were allowed to operate legally at the airport. Nine months later the percentage has grown to 25 percent, even as overall passenger traffic at the airport grew 6 percent this year compared to the previous year.

Massport declined to provide percentages for other travel modes, but the data the agency made available suggests taxis took a slight hit initially but have since held their own. Logan Express and private buses are holding their own as well. MBTA officials say they believe transit is handling about the same number of passengers at the airport as it did last year. If the ride-sharing apps are growing fast and other modes of transport are holding steady, the likely conclusion is that fewer people are driving themselves or having a friend or family member drive them to the airport. That could create less need for the new, 5,000-car garage Massport is looking to build at Logan.

Jennifer Mehigan, a Massport spokeswoman, says the numbers require more scrutiny. “Talking with airports across the country, TNCs are having a much greater impact than forecasted,” she says. “The same is true at Logan and we are interested in studying a full year of data.”

## WHAT THE LIMITED DATA INDICATE

When it comes to data, the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission treats ride-hailing apps like taxis, and requires them to provide detailed trip information. Bruce Schaller, a transportation analyst in New York, crunched the data and issued a report in February 2017 that raised alarms about what is going on in the city.

After adjusting for declines in yellow cab and personal vehicles, Schaller estimated the ride-hailing apps added 600 million vehicle miles to the city’s roadway network between 2013 and 2016. He said taxi and other for-hire vehicles are now growing faster than transit, and ride-sharing options, such as UberPool and LyftLine, aren’t having much impact in reducing total vehicle miles traveled.

“TNC mileage nevertheless continues to grow rapidly because exclusive-ride trips still predominate, and because most TNC customers are coming from transit, walking, and biking,” his report said. “Migration from public transit translates to increased mileage even if the trips are shared.”

In an update issued in December, Schaller said congestion is increasing in the city’s central business district, with the number of taxi and ride-hailing vehicles on the road rising to 10,000 during the afternoon peak, more than double the number in 2013.

Schaller, in a telephone interview, says cities need to be paying attention to what’s happening before congestion cripples them. “This is like any new thing—Microsoft, Facebook, Google. It’s like a puppy,” he says. “The puppy is wonderful, but when the puppy grows into a big dog then you have second thoughts and mixed feelings.”

Several other research initiatives have also raised concerns about the impact of ride-hailing apps. A team at the University of California Davis Institute of Transportation Studies surveyed 2,000 people in seven metro areas, including Boston, about their travel choices over a two-year period between 2014 and 2016. The answers suggest ride-hailing users are cutting back on their use of bus and light-rail service while slightly increasing their use of subways. Overall, the October survey found, between 49 percent and 62 percent of ride-hailing trips added to vehicle miles traveled because, absent the apps, they wouldn’t have been made at all or would have been made on transit or by walking and biking.

“This mode substitution data suggests that directionally ride-hailing is likely contributing more vehicle miles traveled than it reduces in major cities,” the report said. The researchers recommended that policymakers explore ways to reduce congestion by assessing fees on drivers and giving priority to buses on roadways. They also urged transit authorities to tap the massive amount of data ride-sharing apps are gathering about how people move around in cities.

“Limited data in the public sector perpetuates less-



informed decision-making, which in turn results in transportation systems that do not meet the public's needs. We need a solution to this growing problem," the research report said.

For his doctoral dissertation at the University of Colorado in Denver, Alejandro Henao worked as a driver for Uber and Lyft and conducted surveys of his passengers as he transported them to their destination. He provided 416 rides and collected 311 surveys, which indicated 22 percent of his passengers were tapping his services instead of using transit and 12 percent were riding with him instead of biking or walking.

Only 5 percent of Henao's passengers were connecting to another mode of travel during their trip and 80 percent said they never had connected to another mode. He estimated vehicle miles traveled on the trips he provided was 185 percent of what it would have been in the absence of the two ride-hailing apps. He said his gross earnings were \$15.69 an hour—\$7.94 an hour after expenses.

The San Francisco County Transportation Authority, the congestion management agency for the Bay area, analyzed ride-hailing trips made entirely within the city from mid-November to mid-December of 2016. The data indicate between 5,700 and 6,500 vehicles affiliated with the ride-hailing apps were out on city streets at peak times. The vehicles handled 170,000 trips on a typical weekday and generated 570,000 vehicle miles traveled, or about 20 percent of the city's total. The report indicated 20 percent of the miles traveled by vehicles affiliated with ride-hailing apps were out-of-service miles, meaning the vehicle was just circling waiting for a rider.

Joe Castiglione, deputy director for technology, data, and analysis at the authority, says the agency plans to start surveying customers of the ride-hailing apps this spring to find out more about how they are using them and what impact their usage patterns are having on the city's transportation system.

The data used in the San Francisco study came from a group of researchers at Northeastern University in Boston who opened a series of Uber and Lyft accounts across the city and used them to track when the nearest available vehicles accepted or completed ride requests. "The Northeastern researchers collected information on vehicle locations every five seconds for approximately six weeks. The data collection methodology has no impacts on either drivers or riders," the San Francisco study said.

Christo Wilson, a computer science professor at Northeastern, turned cryptic when asked to discuss his research. "Normally I would be happy to chat, but, unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond my control, I'm not in a position to talk about this topic at the moment," he said in an email.

Asked whether some sort of legal action has been

taken against him, he replied: "There's nothing public. We are proceeding this way out of an abundance of caution."

Asked if he thought states should require Uber and Lyft to disclose ridership information, he said he did, as long as the privacy of riders and drivers is protected. "Given the growth of ridesharing services, it's critical for cities to understand their impact on things like congestion, public transit, curb access, etc. This is the only way for municipal planners to make informed decisions about future infrastructure."

#### COOPERATION OR COMPETITION?

The top transportation officials in Boston and the Baker administration don't seem inclined to press for legislation requiring the ride-sharing apps to turn over data. The Boston officials indicated in an interview that they are more interested in cooperating with the apps and state Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack is not convinced the apps are undercutting the MBTA.

Boston officials say they are working with Lyft to identify congested pickup and dropoff areas around the city where they could clear the curb area so the ride-sharing

## Researchers from Northeastern provided data for a study of ride-hailing apps in San Francisco.

app's vehicles won't have to double-park and disrupt parking and bicycle lanes. The city and Lyft officials are looking at areas in Downtown Crossing, Back Bay, the South Boston waterfront, near Symphony Hall, and North Station.

Chris Osgood, Boston's chief of streets, says Lyft and the city have a mutual interest in sharing data on the congested pickup and dropoff spots—to speed rides up for Lyft and to enhance safety for Boston residents.

"We think we're going to be able to work well with these companies, at least on the curb management stuff," he says. He acknowledged the ride-sharing apps have been less forthcoming with information that would indicate whether their drivers are increasing congestion in the city.

Gina Fiandaca, commissioner of the Boston Transportation Department, says "public transit is the foundation for mobility," but she makes clear that the city doesn't view ride-sharing apps as a threat to public transit.

“We want to sit at the table with the TNCs, knowing that this business model is here to stay,” she says. “It’s something that citizens want, that they’ve identified a need for, and [the apps] do fill some gaps in the transit network. How do we in the regulatory environment support that in a positive way that’s consistent with the mobility goals we’ve set out in Boston 2030 (the city’s visioning study)? Clearly, we don’t want TNCs stopping to pick people up in the traffic lane on Congress Street or operating in a disruptive way. They want to be successful; we want success in our city. We want to provide the mobility options that we know people want, so how do we work together?”

Pollack says she always wants more data, but she seems in no hurry to press Uber and Lyft for information. She raises privacy concerns with the data and acts as if no one in her shop is really clamoring for the information, even though her own strategist is working with other transit agencies around the country to figure out the impact of Uber and Lyft.

Pollack says people have a lot of transportation choices today, so instead of riding the Red Line to work and back five times a week, four weeks a month, an individual may take an Uber when it rains, ride a bike when it’s sunny, or work from home occasionally. Over the course of a month, she says, that person may take 36 trips on the Red Line rather than 40, a 10 percent reduction. That shows up as a decline in ridership, but Pollack says it’s less concerning because the customer benefits by having more choices.

“We don’t know if we’re losing trips or riders,” she says. “I would be worried if we were losing riders.”

The secretary says the lack of data isn’t really preventing the T from planning for the future. She says the T’s best option is to build a variety of possible scenarios for every major investment and then figure out how many futures any given investment will work in.

“In most futures, the Red, Orange, and Green Lines are going to matter,” she says. “I don’t think autonomous vehicles can move 50,000 people in a half hour. They may be autonomous, but they still take up a lot of room.”

Ride-sharing apps have already cut into bus ridership, and could have an even bigger impact down the road, Pollack says. But she isn’t too worried because buses are relatively inexpensive compared to rail systems and they have a useful life of 12 years, so the T can adjust to any dramatic shift in ridership fairly quickly.



“We don’t know if we’re losing trips or we’re losing riders,” says Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack.

Pollack says commuter rail is the one service that’s hard to figure, largely because the purchase of a locomotive is a 50-year investment. Will ride-sharing apps spur commuter rail ridership by providing first and last-mile service, or will passenger traffic crater as customers opt for the convenience of door-to-door service provided by ride-sharing apps? Autonomous vehicles may make parking obsolete, so it’s possible the T could open more commuter rail stations at far less cost, Pollack says.

Although some members of the T’s Fiscal and Management Control Board are trying to decide whether to cooperate or compete against the ride-hailing apps, Pollack takes a different tack. “I always think in terms of what’s the no-regret strategy. What’s the smart thing to do when you’re not sure. Running a great service is the smart thing to do when you’re not sure,” she says.

The secretary says better, more reliable service puts the T in a good position if competition turns out to be the best approach or if cooperation ends up being the way to go. That’s why the T is investing in new Red and Orange Line cars, working with municipalities to create dedicated lanes for buses, and thinking long and hard about the future of commuter rail.

“We’re not smart enough to know what the future is going to look like because it’s a moment of real disruption in transportation,” Pollack says. “The disruption of the last five years has been TNCs. The disruption of the next 10 years may well be autonomous vehicles or something else we don’t even know about yet.” **CW**

# A birthday reckoning

The state's landmark Education Reform Act turns 25 this year. It has made Massachusetts the national leader in student achievement, but come nowhere close to making schools the 'great equalizer.' Is it time to rethink what it would actually take to give all kids a real shot at success?

BY MICHAEL JONAS | ILLUSTRATION BY KYLE WEBSTER





**T**his year marks a significant milestone in the state's rich history of leadership in education. It was 25 years ago that Massachusetts officials came together to pass the landmark Education Reform Act of 1993. With a huge infusion of new funding, much of it directed at districts educating lots of students from low-income homes, combined with rigorous new curriculum standards and regular assessments to hold schools accountable for having students meet them, Massachusetts aimed to give all schools a solid foundation to educate every student.

Nearly 150 years earlier, in 1848, the first Massachusetts secretary of education, Horace Mann, regarded as one of the founders of modern public education, put forward the idea that education is "the great equalizer of the conditions of men." The view that universal access to quality schooling could put everyone, regardless of station, on an even footing was an inspiring notion. By the late 1980s, however, it was clear that our public schools weren't living up to that ideal. There were no common standards for schools or expectations of them when it came to student outcomes. Funding differed widely and was largely dependent on the wealth of communities. What's more, it was becoming clear that students' fortunes would be increasingly dependent on education and higher-order skills in an ever more knowledge-based economy.

Those were driving forces behind the 1993 law. The ensuing years have been, by many measures, a tremendous education success story. Massachusetts has gone from ranking in the top third of states on national achievement assessments to regularly occupying the No. 1 spot in both reading and math scores. The statewide high school graduation rate went from 79.9 percent in 2006 to 87.5 percent a decade later in 2016.

But when it comes to the idea that we might finally make good on Horace Mann's noble vision, it's a very different tale. "With respect to this audacious aspiration to educate all children to high levels, we have to say we pretty well failed," says Paul Reville, who served as education secretary for five years under Gov. Deval Patrick. "We haven't come nearly as far as we'd hoped."

Massachusetts has among the widest gaps in achieve-

ment between students from well-off homes and those living in poverty. On the most recent MCAS math exam, for example, 8th-grade proficiency rates were 83 percent in Wayland and 25 percent in Worcester. For reading, proficiency rates in the two communities were 81 percent and 33 percent, respectively. A third of all Massachusetts high school graduates who enroll in the state's public higher education system, largely students from low-income households, are not capable of doing college-level work in math or English and require remedial coursework before they can begin to earn credits. It's all evidence of what Reville calls "an iron-law correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement."

That sober assessment comes from someone who not only oversaw the system in his recent stint as education secretary, but who was deeply involved in the 1993 effort to pass the reform law. At that time, Reville was executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, one of the leading groups responsible for mobilizing support for the law.

Reville does not endorse backing down from the high standards and accountability we put in place. If anything, he says, students need to aim even higher today to keep up with the changing demands of 21st century work. That was also the clear message from state officials last

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**With respect to the  
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fall when they released the first results from the state's so-called "next generation" MCAS exam, which set a far higher bar for proficiency.

But Reville is part of a growing chorus of education leaders who say we need to confront two big realities if we want to live up to the ideal of equal opportunity for all. First, we need to dramatically rethink how we structure and operate schools—particularly for disadvantaged kids who enter school already behind their better-off peers—from the length of the school day to the role of teachers.

Second, they say, we must also be willing to address the many factors beyond the school walls that greatly disadvantage kids growing up in poverty.

Getting there will mean finding a lot of common ground among reform advocates, district officials, teachers unions, and political leaders. The climate in the education world in recent years, however, has been characterized by anything but cooperation and comity. From a backlash against standardized testing to the bitter ballot question fight in 2016 over charter schools, the education wars raging across the country have landed in Massachusetts, too. It can make it hard to see a clear way forward, though the need for bold steps seems no less urgent than it was 25 years ago.

### EMPOWERING SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

If the state's education law has not been able to break the correlation between family background and achievement, reform efforts in Lawrence represent the most ambitious attempt to upend that stubborn reality across an entire district. Legislation passed in 2010, the broadest update to the education law since it was enacted in 1993, gave the state new authority to intervene in chronically low-performing schools and districts.

In 2011, after years of abysmally low school performance in Lawrence, one of the poorest communities in Massachusetts, state officials used those powers to put the city's entire school district in receivership. Jeff Riley, a veteran Boston school principal and administrator, was named receiver for the district and given sweeping authority over everything from staffing decisions to curriculum and the structure and length of the school day.

Over the first four years of Riley's leadership, the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the 10th grade MCAS test increased by 18 points in math and 24 points in English language arts. Lawrence math scores for grades 3-8 now top those in Boston. Meanwhile, the district's graduation rate has improved by 19 percentage points, while the annual dropout rate fell by more than half.

"Nobody's claiming victory, but we've had some strong results," says Riley. "We had a plan we wanted to put in place. I felt like we executed on that."

That plan represented a radical departure from previous state takeover efforts here and nationally. Rather than imposing a prescriptive top-down plan for the struggling

district, Riley gave individual schools latitude to chart their own path when it came to budgeting, curriculum, and the structure of the school day. He cut the budget of the district's central office by 30 percent and redeployed that money into schools, extended the school day for all K-8 students, and set up intensive tutoring services for high school students. Riley also brought in the leaders of a high-performing Lawrence charter school and another outside education organization to operate two of the district's most troubled schools. A firm believer that students need both rigorous academics and a more rounded curriculum, Riley boosted theater, art, and other subjects.

When it came to staffing Lawrence classrooms, Riley says, "there were people who said we should fire all the teachers." He kept about 90 percent of them, but replaced about half of all principals, concluding that many of the district's schools suffered from "a failure of leadership."

The biggest change he made to the district operation was to give school principals and teachers much more control over how they ran their schools. "I think you have to push the authority down to the school level, trust your leaders, teachers, students, and parents to make good decisions for their community," says Riley. "It doesn't mean it's completely unbounded authority. It's not a free-for-all," he says of the need to hold schools accountable for results. "But you get more out of people if they feel like they have a true voice and they're invested in the process versus—what's that saying?—'the beatings will continue until the morale improves.' People don't respond well to that."

The idea that those working closest with students understand best how to shape a school to meet their needs seems like common sense. And the 1993 education reform law even recognized this, promoting the idea of "school-based management" in Massachusetts districts. But that has largely not been how the law has played out.

The approach Lawrence has employed is now being tried in Springfield, too. A swath of schools educating about 5,000 of the district's 25,000 students are part of a new entity called the Springfield Empowerment Zone. It operates under a separate governing board and has nearly complete independence from the district system, though its teachers remain part of the district union.

The plan emerged in 2014, when the state was poised to use its power under the 2010 reform law to take over three chronically low-performing Springfield middle schools. Rather than let the schools fall into state-run receivership,





**Jeff Riley:** “You get more out of people if they feel like they have a true voice and they’re invested in the process.”

state and local leaders hatched a plan to carve out a separate mini-district that would remain part of the Springfield schools but operate independent of its central office. In a sign that they thought the idea was not simply punitive but promising, district officials and the city’s teachers union agreed to include in the zone three additional middle schools that were not facing imminent state takeover, but which had been struggling for some time.

The empowerment zone operates with much of the same freedom as the Lawrence receivership has over curriculum, the school day structure, and staffing. Teachers receive an added stipend for the longer school day in zone schools. The zone is overseen by a board that has four outside members appointed by the state education commissioner and three Springfield officials – the mayor, school superintendent, and the vice chairman of the school committee.

The schools all operate with a “teacher leadership team,” instructors elected by the school teaching staff who share decision-making with the principal on curriculum and other issues. “It’s the real core of what we mean when we say empowerment at the school level,” says Julie Swerdlow Albino, co-executive director of the empowerment zone.

Sara Macon is in her 14th year as an English teacher at Forest Park Middle Schools, one of the schools in the Springfield zone. Prior to the new initiative, she says morale was dismal as the school struggled with low achievement and heavy-handed directives from the district’s central office. “It got a little crazy—to the point where we were handed daily lessons plans from downtown,” she says. “It just took the life out of teachers.”

Macon says the significant role given to teachers under the zone structure has made a huge difference. “I think everyone has sort of upped their game,” she says.

The city’s teachers union didn’t exactly welcome the empowerment zone. “We had a gun to our head,” union president Tim Collins said two years ago about the state takeover that loomed as the only alternative. At the same time, union leaders say the principle of giving teachers more say is one they’ve been pushing for years.

“The worst thing in the world is top-down command control,” says Collins, “because you give people the excuse not to feel bad about their failures—I did exactly

what you said, don’t blame me if it didn’t work.”

It’s too early to say whether the zone structure will make a sustained difference, although its schools showed big improvement on the most recent MCAS results. “The fact that we’re seeing progress, I think, should be encouraging,” says Albino.

A similar embrace of school-level autonomy now guides Boston’s Mildred Avenue K-8 School. It opened in 2003 in a gleaming new building in Mattapan, but struggled for years, with achievement scores that put it in the bottom 1 percent of all schools statewide. Facing potential state intervention, the district and the Boston Teachers Union employed a rarely used provision of the teachers contract to let the union and school department jointly craft a turnaround plan that gave the school leeway from the district contract. They hired a new principal and agreed to add 30 minutes to the school day.

Andrew Rollins, the principal brought on in 2014, had authority to dismiss teachers as he worked to get the school on track. Like Jeff Riley in Lawrence, he only exercised those powers with a small number of staff members. “Our experts are in our classrooms,” Rollins says of the confidence he has in the majority of the school’s teachers.

The school has a long way to go to raise achievement levels, but in 2016 it had among the highest growth in math and English scores among all K-8 schools in the state, and its suspension rate fell from 16 percent in 2013 to 3 percent in 2016.

The school has been successful because Rollins “values teacher leadership and teacher voice,” says Jessica Tang, president of the Boston Teachers Union. “That is crucial for any school.”

In November, EdVestors, a Boston education non-profit, awarded the Mildred Avenue school the annual prize it gives to a Boston school showing strong gains. In the 15 years that EdVestors has given out the award, “we have not seen a rapidly improving school where you don’t walk into that school building and get a palpable feeling of teacher ownership, teacher leadership, and teacher agency, in that they are both responsible and empowered to improve that school,” says Laura Perille, the organization’s president.

Greater school-level autonomy and longer school days are hallmarks of high-achieving charter schools. Some advocated broad expansion of charters as the best hope

## **‘It’s a big culture shift. Teachers are used to being beaten down and blamed.’**

for students in low-performing districts, but the lopsided defeat two years ago of the ballot question lifting the cap on charters ended that conversation, at least for now. That has put more attention on the question of whether these features of successful charter schools could be more widely incorporated into district schools.

Everyone agrees there is no guarantee of success. It all depends on whether more time or autonomy are used well by educators with the capacity to take advantage of them. A union-management agreement using the same contract provision employed at the Mildred Avenue School to take over operation of Boston’s long struggling

vocational high school floundered badly under poor school leadership there.

The approach also represents a huge change in the role of teachers. “It’s a big culture shift. Teachers are used to being beaten down and blamed,” says Maureen Colgan Posner, who took over from Collins as president of the Springfield teachers union. “When you say, OK, you’re professionals, make decisions, people say, whoa, wait a minute. That’s part of my job?”

School-level autonomy is an example of just how polarized education debates have become. Even though all sides see value in moving away from highly centralized district systems, they can’t seem to agree on how to get there. Teachers often bristle over central office dictates in school districts, but Reville says unions have been slow to seize opportunities for teachers to have more responsibility and authority in schools. The 2010 reform law authorized formation of “innovation schools,” which would operate within districts but with more autonomy, but he says few applications for such schools have been initiated by teachers.

Legislation filed last year on Beacon Hill would create a mechanism for the state education department to carve out empowerment zones like the one in Springfield in districts that have schools at the bottom of the state accountability ranking system. Posner says the empowerment zone in Springfield has been promising but, like other union leaders in the state, she opposes a move to give the state education department unilateral power to set up such systems. She objects in particular to the lack of any provision in the bill requiring the collaborative structure in place in Springfield that includes teacher leadership teams.

Gov. Charlie Baker touted the empowerment zone bill in his State of the State speech a year ago. His education secretary, Jim Peyser, says it’s not “a silver bullet,” but he thinks it “creates a framework that is necessary although maybe not sufficient to really turn around or change the performance levels in urban schools that have been historically low-performing.”

“We’ve been, in theory, turning around low-performing schools for well over a decade, maybe even two. And it sure feels like we haven’t made a whole lot of progress,” Peyser said in 2015 shortly after taking office. “For me, it’s pretty clear we can’t just kind of work harder and better within the same constraints and expect significantly different results.”

### **BY ALL MEANS**

Kim Driscoll has been mayor of Salem since 2006. The city’s rich history and picturesque cobblestoned downtown belie the challenges its schools face with a large

population of English language learners and significant pockets of poverty. Driscoll says she has tried to stay out of the divisive education wars and has been open to any approach that might help boost student achievement. The city has been willing to “throw everything up against the wall to see what would stick,” she says.

That has made Salem home to a smorgasbord of non-traditional school offerings, including four district schools with longer days, an in-district charter school, an independently run charter school, and one in-district Innovation School. Despite some successes with the various schools, Salem remains home to “a pretty wide achievement gap,” says Driscoll.

That made her very receptive to a new effort, launched two years ago, based on a belief that it will take more than great work by schools to close the achievement gap. The By All Means project, based at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and directed by Reville—the former education secretary who now teaches there—has enlisted mayors in six communities across the country who are committed to an all-out effort to even the playing field for disadvantaged students. It has meant marshalling resources and coordinating community organizations to provide everything from better mental health services to tutoring and mentoring programs for those who don’t have access through their families to the rich network of professionals that can give a leg up to students from better-off homes.

“We know we need to harness the resources that exist in Salem to provide more for kids,” says Driscoll. “This takes into account the enormous number of things that happen in the 80 percent of the time a child is not at school. It needs to be more than a schools effort.”

Lawrence, though not part of the initiative, has embraced the same idea, drawing in community partners such as the YMCA in a deliberate effort to extend the umbrella of opportunities for children beyond just its schools.

One organization that believes strongly in the idea that demography is not academic destiny is the network of KIPP charter schools. KIPP, an acronym for Knowledge is Power Program, is perhaps best known for its “no excuses” model that enforces a strict behavior code and pushes kids to excel academically.

KIPP operates 200 schools across the country. Its students consistently score much higher on standardized tests than their peers in district schools, and KIPP schools often boast of 100 percent of graduates being accepted to four-year colleges. To its credit, KIPP has not rested on the laurels of its success getting kids into college, but has instead tracked their progress once there.

In 2011, it released findings from its first compre-

hensive look at how KIPP graduates did. It found that just 33 percent of those in the early cohorts of KIPP middle schools had received a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling in college. That was four times the rate of other students in the low-income communities where KIPP schools are located, and slightly above the rate for all students nationally, but it fell well short of the target the organization had established of 75 percent.

“The road to success is way harder and more challenging than we thought, and we’ve found that by tracking our alumni,” says Caleb Dolan, who oversees KIPP’s five Massachusetts schools.

A year ago, KIPP released results of a survey of some 3,000 alumni nationwide. To Dolan, one of the most troubling findings was that less than 30 percent of KIPP graduates said they had a job or internship the previous summer that was aligned with their career aspirations. “If you contrast that with an upper middle-class kid in Newton, they are likely doing some summer internship in college that is directly aligned with their aspiration,” he says.

Dolan says those kind of opportunities, and not just strong academic skills alone, are crucial to KIPP graduates having a shot at truly excelling and becoming leaders in a field. KIPP has started an “alumni accelerator” initiative, matching its graduates with people in their field “who are willing to give tough feedback,”

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**‘The road to success is way harder and more challenging than we thought,’ says KIPP’s Caleb Dolan.**

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says Dolan, “but also willing to open some doors” in a way that happens every day through informal networks for “a kid in Marblehead whose mom and dad work downtown.”

Figuring out ways to more equitably spread “social capital access,” says Dolan, is important if we really want our education system to operate as a meritocracy. For KIPP, whose simple motto has been, “Work hard. Be nice,” it’s been an education in the complexity of charting a strong path out of poverty. “Kids can’t just leave with good scores and wanting to go to college,” says Dolan. “That’s insufficient if they’re going to lead lives of independence and impact.”



## THE 'RADICAL CENTER'

The education reform debate across the country often seems to boil down to a tussle between two views of what's needed to give disadvantaged students the opportunities of their better-off peers. One side views school reform—testing, accountability, and how schools are structured and operated—as the key to unlocking student potential, while the other says we need to address the many injuries associated with poverty that hold children back.

It's the wrong way to look at the challenge, says John King, the US education secretary in the last year of the Obama administration, who co-founded the Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Boston nearly 20 years ago. "People set it up as a false choice: We can either strengthen schools or we can address the out-of-school factors that affect kids," says King, who now leads the Education Trust, a Washington-based organization focused on educational equity for low-income and minority students. "We've got to have an urgency about both."

"I believe in my heart poverty is something that matters, and we need to try to make up ground and figure out ways to get around that," says Riley, the Lawrence schools receiver. "On the other hand, I've seen my children in Lawrence are capable of doing amazing things. How can you have it be a 'both-and' and stop having it be so polarized on either side," he says, echoing King's viewpoint on the debate over fixing schools versus fixing poverty.

"Are people willing to put down their swords? I don't know," Riley says of the toxic tenor of education debates. "I think we are at a huge crossroads. We used to say what we were doing in Lawrence meant we were either in the sweet spot or the cross hairs, because we drew from a wide variety of people with very divergent views on how to educate kids." He calls it "the radical center," and says "we need to get back into that collaborative spirit where there is room at the table for everybody."

"We are famous for our disagreements," Reville says of the education battles in recent years. He thinks we have a "moment of pause" to think about ways to harness the good elements of the education reform law that set high standards and a system of accountability for results, while



**Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll:**  
"It needs to be more than a schools effort."

not being afraid to dramatically rethink how schools are structured and run. "It gives an opportunity, particularly for those in the field, to have more of a voice in shaping a vision for how we go forward," he says. Reville isn't overly sanguine, however, about the short-term prospects for finding common ground.

As the state prepares to mark the 25th anniversary of the education reform law, Reville says it should be "a short celebration." Reflecting on the ambitious goals at the time of its passage, he says, "I hate to be the skunk at the party, but I feel like I've got some ownership so this is self-criticism as much as anything else. Look, we didn't get this completely right. We ought to be rethinking it now and taking a different look. But the sense of urgency ought to be at least great as it was then, if not greater." **CW**



Mercantile Center, a mixed-use property undergoing renovation as part of a building boom in downtown Worcester.





# Worcester comeback seems for real

Pent-up demand is finally being realized in state's second-largest city

BY JOHN DYER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK MORELLI

**MARS IS THE** limit for robotics engineer Kevin Harrington. Harrington, 32, wants to build a machine that would harvest the sun, soil, and atmosphere of the Red Planet to produce food, building supplies, and robots for human colonies in the future. “Let’s say we want to go to Mars and we want to survive on Mars with no supply chain. What do we need?” he asked. “We need a machine that can take in the raw materials in the environment.”

There’s good reason to take Harrington seriously. He is the robotics lab manager at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, where he’s following in the footsteps of

Robert Goddard, inventor of modern rocketry and the so-called father of the space age. Goddard studied and worked at WPI and nearby Clark University.

Changing the world was on the mind of Harrington and his friends when they graduated from WPI in 2009. Foreseeing a wave of automation, they launched a startup to design software and tech for robots in education. They could have decamped for Boston or Silicon Valley. But they determined the smartest, most affordable move was to stay put.

“We literally considered moving to Thailand for a couple years because it’s cheap,” he says. “Worcester is





Kevin Harrington at the Technocopia workshop. For \$125 a month, members get unlimited access to its tools and equipment.



proximate to everything we need, an hour from Boston and three hours from New York.”

The startup didn’t work out. But the team stuck around. In 2013, they repurposed their workshop into Technocopia, a hangout for nearly 100 artisans, hobbyists, and others near the city center. Technocopia members operate 3D printers, lathes, grinders, and soldering stations in the nonprofit’s makerspace. For 24-7 access to the group’s cavernous workshop, members pay \$125 a month.

“We have all these tools. But the tools aren’t the product. The people are. We are essentially forming an intentional community,” Harrington says.

The same could be said of Worcester residents in general as a building boom downtown and growing neighborhoods have sparked what many hope is a renaissance in New England’s second-largest city.

Developers and nonprofit institutions have spent more than \$2.6 billion in construction in Worcester in recent years, according to city officials. Another \$375 million is in the pipeline. The biggest chunk of that investment is the \$565 million CitySquare project now underway on the former site of the Galleria Mall downtown. Including around \$90 million in public funding, the project’s 22 acres include new city streets, apartments, offices, and more. Marriott is now completing a new hotel in the project. New Jersey-based Roseland Residential Trust, a subsidiary of Mack-Cali Realty Corporation, is on track to open 365 luxury apartments and to lease space to a restaurant, spa, and bank in CitySquare early next year. A park over an underground parking garage has footings for a tower in the future.

New housing is going up all around downtown. Quincy-based MG2 Group is renovating more than 500 apartments in a collection of buildings that the firm has owned for more than 10 years. Rebranded as The Grid District, the group’s properties include new restaurants, a coffee shop, and other street-level amenities. Boston-based Trinity Financial is planning to renovate the historic courthouse on Main Street into apartments. New restaurants and other development are planned for

the district around the Hanover Theater, a renovated vaudeville hall that’s become a successful performing arts center.

The growth isn’t confined to downtown. In the Canal District, a former industrial zone along the old route of the Blackstone Canal that inaugurated the city’s 19th Century glory days, a thriving neighborhood of offices, apartments, bars, and restaurants has taken root in red-brick ex-factories.

Worcester has ballyhooed renaissances before only to see them wither and die. (See “Urban ReRenewal,” CW, Growth & Development Extra 2006.)

City officials demolished much of the eastern side of downtown in the late 1960s to build the 1 million-square-foot Galleria Mall, hoping it would spur a return to the days when folks from throughout Central Massachusetts descended on Main Street to shop at Denholm’s and other

stores. The Galleria's heyday lasted for a decade. An effort to reinvent it with discount outlets fizzled. In 2006, the mall closed for good amid suburban competition and the rise of online shopping.

In 2007, when the first redevelopment plan for the mall was stalling and the Great Recession was around the corner, the then-owner of the site, developer Young Park of Berkeley Investments in Boston, was blunt about the skepticism towards urban renewal in the city. "What is unique in Worcester is the general pervasive feeling of cynicism and negativity," Park told the *Telegram & Gazette*.

This time feels different, say Worcester leaders and residents.

### THINGS ARE HUMMING

Nearly everywhere one looks in the heart of the Commonwealth, things are on the upswing. Worcester's population, now at 184,000, is on track to increase to levels not seen since the 1950s, according to University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute and US Census figures. Property values are \$18.5 billion, an all-time high that surpasses the last record from 2008, according to city assessor figures. More than half of city residents are middle-class, earning between \$35,000 and \$150,000 a year, the research bureau says. City

## More than \$2.6 billion has been pumped into construction in Worcester in recent years.

Hall's bond ratings are stable at historic highs, too.

Commerce is humming. CSX built a state-of-the-art train yard in the city. The Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences is expanding their campus. MBTA commuter rail service has improved. WPI's Gateway Park has become a startup incubator. JetBlue is flying from Worcester Airport to JFK in New York City starting in May. The University of Massachusetts medical school and hospital have been expanding and attracting biotech firms. Last year, city officials sold off the last parcel in the 11-acre South Worcester Industrial Park, which includes a new Table Talk Pies factory. Locally owned Polar Beverages has seen sales climb.

Worcester failed to fully enjoy the prosperity that was flowing from Boston to its western suburbs before the financial crisis. That's no longer the case. "What you are

seeing is a lot of pent-up demand finally getting realized here in town," says Robert Baumann, an economist at the College of the Holy Cross.

In the past 10 years, as Boston has grown prohibitively expensive and the good news has persisted, many Worcesterites have sloughed off the cynicism Park described.

"The entire city is coming together," says Dino Lorusso, an Italian-born, ex-plumbing contractor who owns Crompton Place, a renovated 1860 loom works on Green Street in the Canal District that includes 15 apartments, a bakery restaurant, barber, and other shops.

"I don't want to be a big city," says Lorusso. "I want to be a great city. A great city to me means that its citizens, people that live here and work here, are proud to say, 'I live in Worcester, I work in Worcester, I love Worcester.' That's what I'm feeling right now. I really am proud of where the city is going."

That optimism has fueled Worcester's bids to lure the Pawtucket Red Sox, the Red Sox top minor league affiliate, away from Rhode Island and the city's application for Amazon's HQ2.

The PawSox are considering vacant land in the Canal District for a proposed new \$83 million ballpark. The team's owners, ex-Red Sox president Larry Lucchino and his partners, want to move to a new stadium when the lease at their current 75-year-old park runs out in 2020. Rhode Island lawmakers have been reluctant to put up public money for the project. Worcester leaders have not yet released their package of incentives, but they've made public moves to attract the team, like hiring Smith College economist and sports expert Andrew Zimbalist and former Massachusetts transportation secretary Jeffrey Mullan as consultants in the effort.

"The PawSox thinking of coming here, it's the culmination of the hard work we've done over the last several years," says Mayor Joseph Petty, who like other members of the City Council holds a nonpartisan office in a weak mayor/strong city manager form of government. "I'd love to have the Sox here in the city of Worcester. Oh, I'd love it. And that's a brownfields lot. Imagine taking care of that, too?" he says of the contaminated site the team is eyeing.

Worcester officials also swung for the fences when they identified 98 acres and offered \$500 million in property tax breaks for Amazon's new headquarters.

### WHITE PAPER

City boosters aren't banking on Triple-A baseball or Silicon Valley East to create utopia. The Canal District will grow with or without the PawSox, says Lorusso. When he started renovating Crompton Place 12 years ago, the neighborhood had little foot traffic. Now it's busy with workers by





A mural on Pleasant Street  
touts Worcester's downtown.



day and a popular destination for diners and drinkers at night. Local businessman Allen Fletcher is preparing to break ground on a public market and 48 apartments next to Crompton. Other landlords are adding apartments nearby. To Lorusso, the momentum is clear.

"I don't know if they've had a blueprint for this or who might have had a blueprint for this," he says. "I do believe the blueprint right now is almost perfect."

There was no blueprint. But there was a white paper—one that other Gateway Cities such as Springfield, Lawrence, and others might consider perusing.

In the late 1990s, urban planners suggested that "eds and meds" would turn out to be the greatest assets of older cities—like Gateway Cities in Massachusetts—grappling with the decline of manufacturing, the high cost of services and other negative trends. Universities and hospitals, coupled with mixed-use developments, mass transit, street life, 18-hour neighborhoods, and other revived urban traditions, could rescue downtrodden cities, the planners argued.

Those visions appealed to Worcester residents who were living with an empty mall that was sucking the vitality out of the city. Citing their nine colleges and universities, two hospitals, and affordable location vis-à-vis Boston, locals began calling for the mall's demolition and a new community downtown. Former Worcester mayor Tim Murray championed the idea, publishing a whitepaper in 2003 that called for the city to use eminent domain to take down the mall.

"We had a dead mall in the heart of our downtown. What did we need to do to get rid of it?" asks Murray, a former lieutenant governor who is now head of the Worcester

Chamber of Commerce. "It was a financial anchor. It was a psychological anchor. We had to take action."

After fits and starts, Worcester-based Hanover Insurance acquired the dead Galleria in 2010 from Berkeley Investments and partnered with Boston-based Leggat McCall to develop CitySquare. UNUM insurance agreed that same year to move into new office space on the property, triggering \$55 million in public funding to bring the mall down and other improvements.

Now that the mall is gone and CitySquare is nearly done, the question is whether the vision that Murray and others envisioned will be a success. Despite the good news about Worcester, some indicators suggest their predictions might be too rosy. The eds and meds theory, so easily applied to wealthy cities such as Boston, might not apply so readily to medium-sized Gateway cities, in other words.

"The idea that Worcester will be a pedestrian-oriented, transit-oriented, urban, walkable downtown is not yet real," says Timothy McGourthy, executive director of the Worcester Regional Research Bureau, a non-partisan think tank. "What we do have, though, are the elements and the investor interest to get us there."

Roseland, for example, expects to charge \$1,400 for a studio and \$2,600 for three-bedroom apartments, says Ivan Baron, the company's chief legal officer. Its building will include a doorman, pool, gym, and other amenities. But those numbers are still pricey. The average rent for a one-bedroom in Worcester is around \$1,000, according to figures provided by the city's economic development officials. Trulia and Zillow estimate the median monthly rental price of Worcester apartments at around \$1,500.

"If those numbers are correct, it's destined to fail," says





Nader Djafari, who owns more than 124 apartments in Worcester, referring to Roseland's rents.

Djafari loves Wootown. A Wayland resident, he started buying, fixing up, and renting apartments in the city in 2008. He worries Roseland is being too ambitious. He charges \$1,350 for a three-bedroom in a renovated three-decker. "They are not going to fill those apartments and, when they get to 50 percent empty, they will cut the budget and cut corners and then the buildings will turn out to be a disaster," he says.

That's arguably what's happened to the city's ornate Union Station. Built in 1911, it closed in the 1970s as rail travel withered. After a \$32 million restoration, the beautiful landmark reopened in 2000 as a terminal for MBTA, Amtrak, and bus lines. But despite commercial tenants, including a restaurant and architectural firm, the city has consistently needed to subsidize Union Station – to the tune of around \$450,000 this year. What's more, belying visions of Worcester becoming a bedroom community for Boston, only around 1,300 commuters take the MBTA commuter rail to Boston on weekdays, according to a 2013 audit.

Baron admits Roseland's rents would be a new high. "We're taking a sizeable risk here. This is an unproven market," he says. "It's a big gamble."

But he and other developers believe professionals and students are looking for higher-end housing. Rents in other new downtown apartments aren't too far behind, either. The Grid is due for 95 percent occupancy at prices that are close to Roseland's, says MG2 vice president Joe Donovan, adding that the MBTA commuter rail is an undeniable asset even if hordes of workers weren't head-

ing east every morning.

"I don't know that a noticeable number of our residents do a commute," says Donovan. "But it's the idea of access, the idea that if you wanted to go to the city, you are a walk away from a train ride to go to Boston."

### 'THEY WANT GUCCI STORES'

Landlords in Worcester have grouched that the city is pressuring them to invest more in their buildings than property values merit. They have a point. In August, MassDevelopment purchased a two-story pawn shop and café at 526 Main Street for \$800,000. The public agency says the building needs \$2.5 million of renovations. But the building is assessed at \$1.1 million. MassDevelopment also purchased and cleaned up the pollution at the old Telegram & Gazette building on the Common for \$40 million. Now housing Quinsigamond Community College facilities, it's assessed at \$2.75 million.

The previous owner of 526 Main Street, Richard Rizzo, owns another property across from City Hall that is designated for possible eminent domain taking. He bought the building in 2011 for \$60,000 but pays taxes on an assessment of \$540,000. Today, three tenants on the first floor generate \$6,000 a month that he says is his retirement income. The top floor is a dilapidated 1890s-era theater that he can't lease, he says. City officials want him to improve the property, but he can't find tenants who would pay more to merit the investment.

"They want Gucci stores, chi chi stores," says Rizzo. "That's not going to happen, not when they still have on a weekly basis people lying on the street...that the police have to come and pick up because they have been lying there for hours on drugs."

MassDevelopment's role exemplifies how public funds have been crucial to Worcester's objectives. The city currently has 18 tax increment financing deals, or TIFs, with businesses—including UNUM, St. Vincent's Cancer Center, and the AC Hotel by Marriot in CitySquare – that the Worcester Regional Research Bureau and city officials estimated were worth around \$44.6 million. Lasting for as long as 20 years, tax increment financing is an incentive that lets municipalities exempt new investments in a property when calculating real estate taxes. CitySquare receives district improvement financing, which uses taxes generated in the area to pay for public improvements there, too. Developers are also working fast to claim historic tax credits that might disappear under proposed reforms in Congress.

Some of the city's moves also rankle folks such as Steve Teasdale, the executive director of Main South Community Development Corporation, which has built around \$35 million of affordable housing in the past

10 years, helping to transform the largely low-income neighborhood as crime rates have dropped and Clark University has expanded.

As the push to redevelop downtown revved up, city officials, for example, steered \$2.8 million in federal housing funds to companies rehabbing old downtown properties that would include affordable units, according to figures provided by the city.

“There was a sort of direct reduction of resources available in neighborhood development in order to move them into downtown,” says Teasdale, who says in recent years City Manager Ed Augustus has sought to make sure outlying districts aren’t forgotten.

Aspects of CitySquare have also been controversial, including the expected demolition of the neo-Romanesque Notre Dame des Canadiens Church on the Common to make way for more apartments. Buildings in CitySquare are not architecturally unique or bold. The church, says Deborah Packard, executive director of the nonprofit Preservation Worcester, added some flair and was a reminder of the communities who once live there.

“The downtown revitalization is a little bit of a double-edged sword,” says Packard, who is calling for the city to establish a design-review process. “Some people really

feel that tearing down a building is progress.”

## MACHINE POLITICS

City Councilor Konstantina Lukes thought Augustus and other Worcester officials should have worked harder to force the City Square developers to build grander buildings. But they were hell bent on attracting whatever construction they could, says Lukes. Nobody could do much to alter their course, she added, because a political machine led by US Rep. Jim McGovern, a Worcester Democrat, runs the city. Augustus is McGovern’s former chief of staff and an ex-state senator. Murray and Petty are in the group, too.

“We could say, ‘Is this a team or is it a gang?’ It depends on what your point of view is,” says Lukes, a Democrat and former mayor who is often a foil to the city’s power structure. “It’s clear we have a one-party system in this state and this city.”

Petty defended the city leadership. “Look what the machine has done,” he says of the new vitality taking hold in Worcester.

Symbolizing the inner circle-like style of City Hall is the Economic Development Coordinating Council, an informal group that includes Augustus and city economic

A dark, solid-colored rectangular area containing the word "Commonwealth" in a large, light-colored, serif font. The word is partially obscured by the text "Independence drives democracy." which is centered over it in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom left of the rectangle, the text "Support Commonwealth magazine." is written in a white, sans-serif font.

Commonwealth

Independence drives democracy.

Support *Commonwealth* magazine.

development officials; Murray; representatives of the non-profit Worcester Business Development Corporation; and Kevin O'Sullivan, a former Democratic state representative who is president of Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives, a startup incubator. Sometimes others, like Petty, join. The council meets every Friday in Augustus's office, but it is not officially a public body, and its meetings are closed.

"I guess they can do anything they want," says Lukes. "That could have its bad and good consequences."

Augustus says the council is not a "star chamber," but argued that keeping it private allows for more open, productive discussions.

"We literally bird-dog every important economic development project. It could be pursuing additional commuter rail or airport service, etcetera," says Augustus. "In some places, it can be like going to the Balkans where the chamber has one set of priorities and the city has a different set and these legislative folks over here have a different set. We speak with one voice."

Importantly—and here other Gateway Cities might want to prick up their ears—every developer interviewed for this story echoed those remarks. They all said one reason they came to Worcester was because the city administration and civic groups like the chamber responded quickly to inquiries,

expedited hearings, issued permits promptly, and quickly sought out state and federal help when it was needed.

"It was very easy to do business in Worcester," says Charles Monahan, who is president of the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health, which opened a campus in the city in 2000. "They can't do enough for you."

Building the equivalent new buildings in Boston, if the school could find land, would have added a few years and a couple million dollars in consulting fees during negotiations with the Boston Planning & Development Agency and others, says Monahan. It wasn't just cost that drew the school to Worcester, however. His students needed hospitals and medical facilities for rotations. Union Station, the Hanover Theater, and the promise of more attractions were selling points, too.

Born and raised in Worcester, the 77-year-old Monahan remembers the days when downtown was bustling. Today, his students in white lab coats are walking the same streets. He's planning to bring more as he opens new programs in the city, too. Naysayers who didn't believe in the renaissance need to think again, he says.

"You've got to look five years down the road," says Monahan. "What's Worcester going to look like? You are going to see a big difference." **CW**

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**CW**





# Pot politics divide

Is legal marijuana a blight or boon for poor communities?

BY TED SIEFER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MANNING

**THE CHAIRMAN OF** the Lawrence City Council had already issued a stern warning against booing. City resident Steven Gil was at the podium, struggling mightily to make the case at the hearing in early October that allowing marijuana businesses in the city would be a good thing. “Please don’t shut the door on something that can create jobs,” he implored. Loud boos rang out, and the chairman pounded his gavel.

Gil was a minority of one that night in speaking against a ban on marijuana establishments in Lawrence. The gallery was filled to capacity with ban supporters, and with several pastors among the speakers, the mood at times felt like a religious revival. “I’m sure once again you will vote in favor of our values,” Rev. Victor Jarvis of the Ebenezer Christian Church told the council. “And I’m sure again you will say no to marijuana in Lawrence.”

He paused before repeating the line, his voice rising with each syllable: “No to marijuana in Lawrence.” Cheers erupted.

The council went on to vote unanimously for a complete ban on marijuana-related businesses in the city.

Lawrence’s opposition to marijuana is rooted in the sense that that pot shops will only add another unsavory influence to a city already awash in them. The city is one of the poorest cities in the state, and crime and overdose statistics have been especially grim this year.

While Lawrence has been especially strident in its anti-marijuana stance—it was one of the few communities in the state to vote against legalizing medical marijuana in 2012, and it voted against the 2016 recreational marijuana referendum, Question 4, by one of the largest margins

in the state—misgivings are evident in other Gateway Cities and minority communities. Methuen also voted to ban recreational marijuana facilities; Springfield passed a temporary moratorium.

These developments would seem to run counter to one of the core principles of the marijuana legalization movement in Massachusetts. From its inception, the campaign was predicated on ending the prohibition on a drug that has led to a vastly disproportionate number of people of color being arrested, jailed, and saddled with criminal records. And activists and sympathetic lawmakers have gone to great lengths to try to ensure that communities of color benefit from the industry. Equity is codified in the law, with provisions designed to help minorities (as well as women and veterans) get a leg up in the industry, and it explicitly allows those with marijuana-related convictions to participate, as employees or owners.

And yet, what happened in Lawrence, a city with a population that is around 70 percent Latino, suggests that these assurances either aren't being heard or they're falling on deaf ears. The sense among many is that marijuana will be another exploitive industry, causing harm to the vulnerable and young while siphoning money from residents' pockets to faraway owners. Judging by the experience of states farther along the legalization path, not all of these concerns can be easily dismissed as "reefer madness."

### DRUG-FREE PLEA

Not long ago, Andy Delacruz had to bring his young daughters home from the park in Lawrence where they normally play and keep them cooped up at home. "They were crying. It's so hard to be a kid 24 hours a day in the home," he says. The reason: the park stunk of marijuana smoke. There's already too much weed in the city, Delacruz says—and if pot shops are allowed, it'd be even worse.

"I believe that one of the biggest problem is all these kids are going to be smoking and we're not going to be able make them stop doing it," he says. "We need to make good changes to our community. One of the most important things a community should be able to do is create opportunities for those people with nothing to do."

It may not be surprising that legalizing the sale of marijuana is a tough sell in a city that is known as a hub for the regional heroin and opioid trade, one that already struggles with more than its share of poverty, addiction, and crime. As was evident at the city council meeting in October, churches, which are well-attended in Lawrence, have certainly helped amplify the anti-marijuana message.

In this sense, Lawrence has been especially receptive

to the anti-pot position staked out by church leaders in the state. Ahead of the 2016 state election, the Boston Archdiocese assembled a group of some 40 religious leaders to speak out against Question 4. The group included representatives of the Black Ministerial Alliance and Episcopal, Evangelical, Greek Orthodox, and Hispanic Evangelical communities.

(Calls to Jarvis, the pastor who spoke at the October council meeting, and other church leaders in Lawrence were not returned.)

Some observers have suggested that, in the case of Lawrence's large immigrant community, residents may retain the strong anti-marijuana views of their homelands. While attitudes are shifting in parts of Latin America in favor of legalization, in the Dominican Republic, where much of Lawrence's Latino population hails from, marijuana laws are especially harsh. A first time charge of simple possession carries a minimum sentence of six months in prison.

### A CALL FOR EQUITY

Kamani Jefferson keeps a running spreadsheet of communities that are considering restricting marijuana businesses, and he often shows up at town meetings to make the case against doing so. Jefferson heads a small group, the Massachusetts Recreational Consumer Council, which has pushed for a social justice and locally-oriented marijuana law, and, more recently, fought at the municipal level against bans and other restrictions on the cannabis business. With the opposing side aided by religious leaders and the Massachusetts Municipal Association, Jefferson's group hasn't always been successful.

Lawrence was especially tough. "It was political war-

## Activists and lawmakers have gone to great lengths to ensure that communities of color can benefit from the pot industry.

fare," says Jefferson, who is black. Arguments about the jobs and revenues that could be generated from the marijuana industry seemed to carry little weight. "They kept saying it's drug money, no matter how much it is. And the religious folks, they were very against it and a lot of minority groups, especially older ones," he says.

Still, it was hard not to notice that only one person—Steven Gil—spoke out against the marijuana ban at the





**Boston City Councilor Ayanna Pressley has taken the lead in pushing for a social justice-oriented marijuana law.**

empowerment in communities disproportionately impacted by high rates of arrest and incarceration” for marijuana-related offenses. Under the law, a conviction for a marijuana-related offense—unless it’s for selling to a minor—cannot disqualify a person from obtaining a license or working in the industry.

In December, the commission approved draft regulations that, among other things, set no minimum capital requirement for obtaining a recreational license and set the application fee for a retail license at only \$300, which would be waived for “equity applicants.” The annual license fee would be \$5,000. (By contrast, in Colorado the initial fee for a new store is \$4,500, and the renewal fee is \$1,800.)

“No state in the country has gotten equity right, and I want Massachusetts to be the blueprint,” says Boston City Councilor Ayanna Pressley, who has taken the lead in pushing for a social justice-oriented marijuana law. “This is an opportunity to right the injustice in the past and right the disproportionate impact the war on drugs has had

on low-income communities and people of color.”

Pressley has zeroed in on a disturbing pattern to emerge in the existing marijuana industry: It’s dominated by white people. A 2016 report by BuzzFeed estimated that no more than 1 percent of licensed dispensaries in states with legal recreational and medical marijuana were owned by black people.

Pressley says minority participation in the marijuana industry—not potentially negative community impacts—is the main concern she’s heard from constituents. “I don’t want to be dismissive of that reality, that we have been stringent and responsible on regulation, but my focus has been equity and making sure we hold ourselves accountable,” she says. “No neighborhood is served by density and concentration of any one industry; how we get at that is through zoning.”

Still, Pressley concedes that some people she’s heard from are doubtful that minority communities will see much benefit from the marijuana industry. “I’d say they’re

Lawrence City Council meeting in October.

Jefferson has reached out to a pro-legalization religious group, Clergy for a New Drug Policy, in hopes of countering the church-based opposition he’s encountered in Lawrence and elsewhere. And Jefferson concedes that Lawrence is not the only heavily minority community where there are elevated concerns about retail marijuana.

“In Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, Question 4 didn’t do very well in those neighborhoods,” he says. Prospective marijuana dispensaries will need “community support, and I think it could be rough. A minority business owner could have opposition from the very people he wants to help.”

This is no small irony considering that one of the defining features of Massachusetts’ incipient marijuana program is its emphasis on minority participation and empowerment. The Cannabis Control Commission is required to prioritize the awarding of licenses to those with previous medical marijuana experience or those that “demonstrate experience in or business practices that promote economic

encouraged by the prospect but skeptical it will happen,” she says. “Again, that’s because the industry has such a spotty track record when it comes to equity. The industry has been dominated by the same profile of entrepreneur.”

## POT ZONING

The marijuana industry, as it has developed in the pioneer states of Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, benefits from a certain buzzy aura. Many pot shops play up the wellness theme—there’s LivWell and Levity Wellness in Colorado—and are clean, minimalist affairs with boutique vibes.

But there is concern this upscale veneer may conceal some disturbing trends. As outlets have proliferated in Colorado, where legal sales began in 2014, they’ve tended to concentrate in areas that are more racially and ethnically diverse, according to a 2016 study published by the *Journal of Addiction*. The study also found that census tracts with pot shops tend to have lower household income and higher unemployment and crime rates.

A 2016 analysis by the *Denver Post* found a similar pattern in the city, which it attributed to the fact that industrial areas with pot-friendly zoning tend to be located in or near low-income areas and that such neighborhoods typically offer cheaper rent.

In California, where medical marijuana has been legal since 1996, a 2015 study found that dispensaries in the Los Angeles area were more often located in areas that were poorer, and had larger Latino populations and concentrations of liquor stores, a phenomenon researchers linked to zoning restrictions.

It’s possible to discern a similar pattern already emerging in Massachusetts, a state not generally known for its *laissez-faire* attitude toward businesses that might be regarded as unsavory. More than 100 communities have voted for restrictions on marijuana businesses, from moratoriums to outright bans, making themselves off-limits to retail marijuana well before the state is expected to issue the first recreational sale license this summer. In Milford, a narrow majority of voters supported Question 4, only to vote in September by a considerably larger margin to ban marijuana businesses from town. This phenomenon has raised the hackles of Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, a staunch opponent of marijuana legalization. He lamented in an interview with the *Boston Herald* in May that the suburban bans could lead to an influx of pot-seekers to the city and “a pot shop on every corner.”

For public health experts, the possibility that pot shops



**Pro-marijuana advocate Kamani Jefferson fears marijuana dispensaries in minority communities could face resistance from the “very people” they seek to help.**

might end up concentrated in lower income areas is worrying because it may increase the likelihood that the drug will end up in the hands of vulnerable populations, including juveniles. Research has shown a connection between the use of tobacco and alcohol—and the associated health ills—and proximity to purveyors of these products.

“Right now marijuana benefits from a certain positive vibe, and I share that to some extent,” says Vaughan Rees, the director of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health’s Center for Global Tobacco Control. “But I’m concerned over time we’ll see the presence of some predatory features among marijuana retailers like we’ve seen with tobacco, where we see a preponderance of ads, low-price ads, or ads targeted to kids.”

While the early generation of pot shops may cater to connoisseurs, with prized strains priced accordingly, a down-market version could emerge down the line. And, as Rees points out, those at the lower end of the income spectrum, as well as young people, tend to be more “price sensitive.”

As marijuana advocates will point out, pot has not been linked to adverse health effects the way tobacco and alcohol have, nor is it considered physically addictive. However, there is emerging scientific consensus that marijuana can be harmful to adolescents.

“Even though people perceive marijuana as not that bad for you, the adolescent brain around puberty undergoes





Tufts University health professor Margie Skeer says there is growing evidence marijuana has detrimental effects on developing adolescent brains.

large restructuring as it transitions to adulthood,” says Margie Skeer, an assistant professor of public health at Tufts University School of Medicine. “If teens are spending their time using marijuana and alcohol over and over again, those pathways are going to get solidified in their brains.”

And then there is the profusion of cannabis-infused products, from edibles such as gummy worms, granola bars, and caramels to lotion and lip balm. Skeer recalled a recent visit to a pot shop in Denver—“for research purposes,” she says—that was like “a concession stand at a movie theater.”

“Research shows teens like using [edibles] because they can be used covertly, and they don’t smell like pot,” she says. “It’s also dangerous because people don’t understand the dosing.”

Of course, Massachusetts law bars anyone under 21 from buying pot or pot products. The concern is that the products will find their way onto the street, that they will be “diverted,” in the industry parlance. And states with legal recreational marijuana have seen a decline—sometimes dramatic—in pot prices on the black market, which, if precedent is any guide, will survive in Massachusetts in some form.

Still, research offers a mixed picture on whether legalization leads more teens to take up marijuana. A study in *JAMA Pediatrics* in 2016 found pot use among teens in Colorado mostly unchanged in the years since full legalization. And federal survey data found that pot use

among teens nationwide in 2016 had dropped to its lowest level in 20 years. However, another study found that teens in Colorado were admitted to emergency rooms high on pot at more than twice the rate in 2015 that they were in 2009.

### GREEN OPENING?

For all the anxieties that have surfaced in Lawrence around marijuana, some minority communities have come to recognize the promise of the industry; but it’s taken a measure of persuasion. Holyoke Mayor Alex Morse has made a name for himself by welcoming the marijuana industry as a way to bring jobs and development to the struggling city. Last year, a national medical marijuana company, GTI, drew up plans for a grow facility and dispensary in the central city, where a large share of the population is lower-income and Latino. At a community meeting, GTI’s chief executive, who is white, was grilled by residents over the site’s proximity to a school, and they expressed doubts that the business would put much money in their pockets.

The CEO, Peter Kadens, responded: “It is a fact that the war on drugs and the war on marijuana has disproportionately affected communities of color. People like yourselves deserve the right to profit from this. You deserve the right to be employed by this industry—that’s why we came to Holyoke.”

In the case of Holyoke, this argument appeared to hold sway. The facility was ultimately approved unanimously by the city council, thanks in no small measure from commitments by GTI to hire locally and fund community organizations.

The notion that legal marijuana could be an economic engine rather than a blight is also gaining currency in other Gateway Cities. Chelsea City Councilor Yamir Rodriguez says most of the constituents he’s heard from were cautiously optimistic about a legal marijuana industry. “People are curious where it could lead to, but there’s hope that it can stop the selling in the street and the violence,” he says.

Beneath the anti-marijuana din, such sentiments can be heard in Lawrence as well. “More than just bringing pot shops, I was really supporting being able to cultivate in Lawrence,” says city resident Franallen Acosta, a lanky 24-year-old with a thatch of dreadlocks, who waged an unsuccessful bid for city council last year. “We have space. They could be good high-paying jobs. All of these things we’ll be missing out on, but it will keep happening in the underworld.” **CW**





# Mayor of firsts

Yvonne Spicer says she gets energized, not daunted, by new challenges on unfamiliar ground—good traits for the first person to serve as mayor of the newly-minted city of Framingham.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK CURRAN

**YVONNE SPICER, LIKE** a lot of her fellow Framingham residents, freely admits that she voted against the charter question to make the state's biggest town a mid-sized city. But once the measure passed by the thinnest of margins, the former teacher and vice president of the Museum of Science did what most of her friends expected her to do: She ran for mayor. And, with the sum of her prior elected experience consisting of a little over a year as one of 240 representatives to Town Meeting, she won by a wide margin.

When voters handily elected Spicer over political veteran John Stefanini, a former selectman and state representative who was one of the forces behind the charter change, they got a lot of firsts out of the way. She is not only Framingham's first mayor, but also the first black woman to be popularly elected mayor of any city in Massachusetts.

"I've been the first in a number of things and it warms my heart," says the 55-year-old Brooklyn native. "I was the first African-American woman to graduate from the college I went to. To be the first elected mayor and an African-American and a woman speaks volumes about my community and how embracing my community can be, not only to me but other people in other groups."

In 1985, after Spicer had just graduated from State University of New York in Oswego with a master's degree in technical education, she came to Boston to visit a friend the week before Labor Day before heading to Albany to interview for a teaching job. She heard about a teaching opening in a town out west called Framingham and tossed her name and resume in while she was in the area.

To her surprise, not only did school officials immediately ask her to come in for an interview, they wanted



her to do it the day after Labor Day, the same day as her interview in Albany, which she had planned to drive to from Boston.

“I said, ‘OK sure,’” she says, recalling her conversation 32 years ago. “I went wearing the same clothes I had because I really didn’t have any others with me. I was just here for the weekend having fun with my friend and I had the interview. And I actually had two interviews that day, one in Albany and then one here in Framingham. I actually went to Albany in the morning and then drove back here.”

The Framingham job, though, wasn’t exactly in her wheelhouse. The district was looking for a woodworking teacher in the middle schools. She took it.

“Most people go to their first job doing what they’re very good at,” she says. “I went to a job that I was least good at. I’ve always done that—looked to work with my Achilles’ heel. And I still do that to this day, where I will be assigned to an area that I know a little something about and learn something new.”

What Spicer lacks in government experience is more than offset by her self-confidence.

“The unique thing about me is that I was a classroom teacher so I know education, which is a huge part of our budget,” Spicer says. “Even in my job at the museum, I work very closely with educators and administrators. I had to know about educational policy and law. So I have studied that and I’ve had a real good, strong sense of how education is funded. In most communities, the bulk of the budget is spent on education so it’s good to have a mayor that really has a good handle on how that’s spent.”

But Spicer, who has a doctorate in education from University of Massachusetts Boston, insists her administration will be about much more than schools. Transportation, traffic, economic growth, affordable housing, income inequality—all issues she says the former town is facing that won’t go away with the wave of a mayor’s magic wand.

Spicer spent 16 years rising through the ranks of Framingham’s schools from her initial woodworking class before leaving for an administrative post in the Newton schools. She later left for the Museum of Science, where she became vice president for advocacy and educational partnerships. She worked with educators and administrators to develop programs. She was appointed by then-Gov. Deval Patrick to the state STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) Advisory Council



and reappointed by Gov. Charlie Baker.

Spicer, who is divorced and has no children, says she’s learned a lot since the campaign and her election about what Framingham residents need, want, and expect. Some issues she knew, such as the constant traffic jams into downtown Framingham from all approaches, and some she was taken aback by.

Until she started talking with some citizens who rely on public transportation, she had no idea the buses don’t run on Sundays and end their runs too early for retail workers to get home when the stores close. Though the buses are run by a regional transit authority, she’s already met with officials there as well as Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack to see if the service can be expanded. Spicer said the town could be willing to contribute some money for service expansion, but the bigger issue is making people aware that there is a system they can access, which many don’t realize.

Spicer wants to revitalize downtown Framingham, bringing “consistency” to the buildings in both look and offerings. With a train station in the heart of downtown, she says transit-focused housing is big on her wish list. She talks of chasing federal funding that is available to cities that towns aren’t able to access.



When it comes to affordable housing, Framingham has already met the 10 percent state mandate for Chapter 40B, the statute that allows developers to circumvent zoning laws if a community is not in compliance. But Spicer wants the new city to aim higher, perhaps toward getting 15 to 20 percent of housing stock in the affordable category as a way to draw young families and professionals. But she also says part of the goal has to be to create mid-level “reasonably priced” housing to complement the affordable housing.

Spicer said she doesn’t think the move from a town form of government to a city will lead a sea change in how things are run. That said, Spicer herself represents the biggest shift, as Framingham moves from having a hired town manager as its chief executive to an elected mayor, someone who will be a much more publicly visible face of the community. On January 1, she was inaugurated, the same day that Framingham officially became the Commonwealth’s newest city. When we sat down to talk in mid-December, she was still working out of a sparse small office in the back of the selectmen’s administrative office, gearing up for the big day. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

— JACK SULLIVAN

**COMMONWEALTH:** Usually when somebody takes over as a mayor there are past mayors they can rely on. Who are you talking to about this job?

**YVONNE SPICER:** Setti Warren in Newton has been helpful. Lisa Wong, the former mayor in Fitchburg. Kim Driscoll [in Salem]. They’re offering advice. And recently I went to a mayor’s boot camp, which was hosted by Harvard, and there were all of these new mayors and mayors-elect from across the country. A number of veteran mayors were there to offer presentations and workshops on different issues, whether it be infrastructure, budgeting, staffing, or dealing with a crisis in your com-

## Spicer’s only previous elected post came as a result of writing in her name for Town Meeting representative.

munity. The mayor from Orlando talked about the shootings at Pulse [nightclub] and how he relied on his other fellow mayors. There were mayors of cities that have had hurricanes, flooding, and other mayors who have reached out to send support and help to each other. I thought it was wonderful, and what I got out of there was a list of

numbers of mayors from all over the country that have dealt with so many different issues who said ‘call me, call me, call me if you need me’ and so I have. We’re getting ready to have our very first inauguration and I know the planning team has reached out to cities that have gone through this transition from town to city like Braintree, like Weymouth, to find out protocol, what did they do for a ceremony and everything.

**CW:** What was the most surprising thing that you’ve heard from other mayors, things you didn’t know?

**SPICER:** There isn’t anything that is tremendously surprising. I mean they all say, when there’s a snowstorm, make sure the streets are plowed. Trash day. Make sure the trash is getting picked up. Those basic fundamental things. I, quite frankly, think our services have been wonderful. One thing that has been terrific is our current town manager. He’s here with us, with me, to advise me. The Board of Selectmen ensured that he will stay on to advise me as need be.

**CW:** In what capacity? What will be his job title?

**SPICER:** As a senior adviser to the mayor, that’s pretty much how the Board of Selectmen viewed his role going forward. His contract technically does not end.

**CW:** Your only elective experience was as a town meeting member.

**SPICER:** Interesting story how that happened. I was involved in politics in the late ‘80s on the Democratic Town Committee. I was a delegate to the state convention. I worked very hard on Mike Dukakis’s campaign for governor. Then, of course, life gets in the way and school and everything else. So last year, I go to vote and I looked on the ballot and I saw all these empty spaces. Then I said to the woman that works at the poll, can I just write myself in? And she said yes, so I wrote myself in. Then I took to Facebook and I said if you haven’t voted, would you please write me in if you live in my precinct? I won by a whopping one vote.

**CW:** You weren’t in favor of becoming a city, were you?

**SPICER:** I’m very candid about it. I didn’t vote for the charter question and the reason I didn’t was because I felt that it was too much too soon. And so when the vote happened and it only won probably by about 110 votes, you basically had a community that was sharply divided. When that vote happened, some friends had suggested to me, would you ever consider running for office? And I thought about

it long and hard. I talked about it with a few of my close confidants and mentors and I just kept trying to find a reason not to do it. And I couldn't find one. Because the reality is, I felt like I had a tremendous amount of skill sets that I brought to the job. I felt like I brought ingenuity, new ideas. Being in STEM, I work with policy makers, I sit on a number of statewide boards. I work internationally, I made relationships on the global front. I've built programs from nothing. I work in a startup division in the Museum of Science, so I know what it's like to grow something that doesn't exist and I'm not afraid to take chances.

**CW:** Creating an entire government infrastructure was not enough of a reason to say no?

**SPICER:** We had some really good bones here already in Framingham. It's not like we don't have an infrastructure, we have that. But what we're building as a city is a way to think very differently about how we operate, how to be much more nimble. We can access other resources that we weren't able to access.

**CW:** Do you have the flexibility as a city that you didn't have as a town? To blend departments, to blend jobs?

**SPICER:** We're doing that as we speak. We're talking about it. The school superintendent is having those kinds of conversations and looking back and forth at where can we share some resources, where we can combine our efforts in a way that we can save our community a little bit of money. The other thing that is wonderful is that our superintendent is relatively new. He joined us in April and he's very open and receptive to thinking outside the box on the ways in which we deliver our services and trying to think smartly about how we move our schools where we need them to be.

**CW:** Where do you need them to be?

**SPICER:** We have a couple of schools that are currently Level 3 [the bottom 20 percent of all schools statewide] and part of thinking about our school department is looking at analyzing where their struggles are. Looking at the data, our MCAS data and thinking are these resources where they are needed in these buildings.

**CW:** The schools were a big part of your campaign, understandably, given your background. What is it that you want to do with the schools?

**SPICER:** First when I think about the goals that I laid out, coming closer to the top of the list is really economic development. I strongly believe our community thrives when

we are growing businesses, residents are employed, and we have services for them. How do we grow business in downtown? What do we need to do for business in terms of education? You're right, teaching, that's my strong suit so therefore going back to the beginning of this conversation, I'm going to the Achilles heel first and my Achilles heel is economic development.

**CW:** Framingham has been built out for years. There's not a lot of room for growth here. So anything that you do has to be economic growth, can't be physical growth. Are you looking for more permanence or are you looking to attract a certain type of business like tech companies?

**SPICER:** I am particularly looking at attracting more STEM-related tech companies, businesses that don't require a large carbon footprint in downtown because there are some buildings and spaces that could be repurposed. And as you look at downtown Framingham, it is pretty compact. But there's also some great opportunity right near town hall, at the intersection of Howard Street and Concord Street that has been designated for some new housing development. And the hope is that it will be what they call transit-oriented development. There's a train right

**We had some really  
good bones here  
already in Framingham.  
It's not like we don't  
have an infrastructure.**

there. So we could attract people to come into southern Framingham and live and work in southern Framingham.

**CW:** You said you went to the Gateway Cities conference, but I don't believe Framingham qualifies as a Gateway City, either by the educational standards or by income standards. So where is some of this extra money going to come from that you might need for these programs?

**SPICER:** In my current work I have worked with other





states and as they think about education and growth in communities, they have federal programs, Neighborhood Empowerment grants and community block grants to look at. Are we eligible for more? Also, we need to look at our state. What have we been able to tap into? What haven't we been able to tap into because we were a town versus being a city?

**CW:** Have you identified anything?

**SPICER:** I haven't identified anything just yet. We do get community block grants for some of our funding and projects like downtown renaissance but there may be some pockets that have been underutilized. I had a really good meeting yesterday with Jay Ash, the secretary of economic development. I did attend the Gateway Cities conference in Lawrence and it was a mission to learn what things they did and to really try to look and see are there ways in which Framingham can learn from other people's experiences, especially as we think about developing downtown.

**CW:** You have about 16 percent of the population below the poverty line, the bulk of it under 18 and over 65. What is it that you can do to improve that? You're talking about bringing economic development and talking about bringing in growth but the people under 18 and the people over 65 aren't necessarily going to benefit from that.

**SPICER:** I have spent a lot of time with our seniors dur-

ing this campaign, listening to them. Affordable housing people are very concerned that they're not going to be able to stay in their homes or buy homes. I know the state development law requires 10 percent to be affordable but...

**CW:** Framingham actually has already achieved that, though. You wouldn't be bound to [Chapter] 40 B.

**SPICER:** I know but some communities have 15, 20 percent affordable housing and it would be nice to achieve that same level and, really working closely with the developers, to consider that because there are other communities that have achieved that goal in diverse housing. So that's the kind of thing I will be looking closely at for our young people in the community. So that they can live here, they can stay here.

**CW:** Is that a goal, 15 to 20 percent affordable housing in Framingham?

**SPICER:** Well, it would be one I'd be thinking about. The law says 10 percent so we can see what we can do with increasing it slightly. There are people on waiting lists to get into affordable housing. When I think about affordable housing, I also think about a young couple starting out making a fairly decent salary. And so that's something that I would like to see—to be able to offer homes so that young people will stay. We have Framingham State [University] right here. I would love to be able to say, hey, there's a job, you can make a decent wage and afford to live here in Framingham.

But as I look at families, not that I want to use just the term affordable, but I want to use the term reasonably priced housing and sometimes that's really challenging because the prices of houses have gone up as the inventory is down. You have more growth in building, but I'm also looking at where do we build? Because we're pretty dense, unless we are taking away green spaces, and then you have the argument that we're losing our green spaces and if we lose that, we don't have an opportunity to get those back. We want to look at repurposing underutilized property. And we've done some of that and there's opportunity to do more of that with properties downtown. It's going to require a willingness to think how we design this in a way that makes us a destination, that makes downtown Framingham like Moody Street in Waltham. Look at our neighbor in Hudson. They're revitalizing



their downtown. That's where I see potential growth area.

**CW:** Do you see a population drain? There seems to be a good concentration of people 45 and over here and under 21. But between 21 and 45, young families, the young professionals, the numbers aren't there.

**SPICER:** Yes, we know some people aren't choosing to stay in Framingham but we need to really get a sense of why. We have 8,900 children in our school system. So you think that number of children and you try to factor in parents in a one- to two- parent household. There is not that proportionality in terms of our total population, which is close to 70,000. During this campaign, I tried to listen closely to what are those factors that make a difference for you to stay in this community. What are the services here, what is there that is enjoyable for us to do in the community? We have farms, we have opportunities that are right here in Framingham.

**CW:** Do you have good schools?

**SPICER:** We have very good schools, even though we have some schools that are Level 3. We need to delve deeper, do a deep dive to really understand, what does that mean? Some of our most fragile learners are concentrated in those three schools as opposed to some of our other schools.

**CW:** Economic growth, building up the downtown, repurposing buildings, attracting more young families, building affordable housing. The elephant in the room is traffic. It's probably the biggest complaint in Framingham, beyond schools, beyond economic growth, beyond anything.

**SPICER:** Yes.

**CW:** And if I recall, the charter even specifically created a traffic commission. You don't see that a lot in charters.

**SPICER:** That is a very important piece of the charter.

**CW:** So how is that going to impact your view? What do you see as the solution to the traffic problems?

**SPICER:** Some of the challenge is that we don't have bus service on Sunday. Say, for example, you work on Route 9 somewhere and you don't have a car. You can't get to work unless you get an Uber or take a taxi, so the hours that you've just worked, you're paying it in cab fare. I would love to be able to see our bus service expanded—it's not a municipal service but a regional transit authority—what is it going to take? As a matter of fact, I just had a meeting with Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack yesterday

about this very topic and she kind of put me in touch with someone else in her office to be able to further that conversation. I would love to see that, encourage different alternatives, see if we can encourage people biking. There's a whole commission that looks at biking, particularly around downtown. We recently put in bike lanes along [Route] 135 to encourage biking as a means of getting around.

**CW:** I'm still stuck on no Sunday bus service. Framingham may be the 12th biggest city now, but it was the biggest town in the state, maybe the country. There's Shopper's World, there is Framingham center. There's all this activity coming in and out and there's no bus service. I never realized that.

**SPICER:** Quite frankly, I have to say until I was on this campaign trail and talking to residents that rely on public transportation, they'd say I have to get my shopping done Saturday because if I don't, there's no bus on Sunday. Also, the bus stops running early so that if you're working the malls and the malls don't close until 9:00 or later and you get out of work, there are no modes of public transportation. Also, the wait times in between buses, that is also a challenge. If you've got to wait 30 minutes for a bus, it's very difficult to stand out in the cold for 30 minutes. So we have to improve the schedule but also expand the hours and also alert the public about it when we do it. We have to do a branding or PR kind of exposure around a service—save the environment, ride the bus. When I hear I didn't even know I had a bus stop. Where's the bus? You have to make it much more visible.

**CW:** When all of this happens, when everything switches over, what's the biggest change people are going to see?

**SPICER:** You know one of the things that has been very important to me is the smooth transition of government. And my hope is that it will be seamless. My hope is that they won't see obstacles, they will still come and pay their tax bill where they've always paid it. If anything I want them to see City Hall as a welcoming environment. There will be much more available online so people can see what things we're working on and what things we're getting done. You know, where's Mayor Spicer? What is she doing?

**CW:** Are you getting used to that yet, Mayor Spicer?

**SPICER:** Someone asked me what should I call you? Should I call you Dr. Spicer or do you want me to call you Dr. Mayor Spicer and such? I've been used to Dr. Spicer a long time. Maybe I'll try on Mayor Spicer for a while. **CW**



## Diversity lessons

A well-integrated Massachusetts public school is a rare commodity. We're making a virtue of that for our students and families **BY SHANNAH VARÓN**

**IN A CITY** with a difficult history of race relations, one of the most important strengths schools can give our students is the ability to communicate across racial lines. Boston Collegiate Charter School, located in Dorchester and with a student body that mirrors the demographics of a changing city, has had to navigate difficult conversations around race, diversity, and immigration. For all the progress that has been made on these issues, these conversations seem as important today as they've ever been—maybe more so. They are critical if we are going to overcome systemic issues and ingrained biases in our city.

Our road to racial diversity was partly serendipitous and partly deliberate. When we first opened our doors in 1998 as South Boston Harbor Academy, our student body was 95 percent white. As one of the first charter schools to open in Boston, we often received attention for our lack of integration, especially against the backdrop of the neighborhood that was then our home, with its controversial history around busing and desegregation.

In 2004, in pursuit of additional space for our growing student body, we moved to a new campus in Dorchester. There, we began to organically attract a more diverse student population through our public lottery admission process. By 2010, the school was 55 percent white, 44 percent African-American, Latino, or multiracial, and 1 percent Asian. Today, we are 48 percent white, 50 percent African-American, Latino, or multiracial, and 2 percent Asian.

As a point of comparison, demographics of the population of the City of Boston are 45 percent white, 45 percent African-American, Latino, and multiracial, and 9 percent Asian. Only nine

other public schools in the city have enrollment of white students exceeding 40 percent, and eight of them are in predominantly white neighborhoods—West Roxbury, South Boston, Charlestown, and the North End. Besides Boston Latin School (which is an anomaly in our city for many reasons), none are high schools. At BCCS, we've realized the unique diversity of our school presents an opportunity to take a more holistic approach to our mission, which is to prepare each student for college. Along with having strong academic skills, being prepared for college, in part, means being able to talk to people who don't look like you when you get there.



At BCCS, we have white Irish Catholics from West Roxbury and Somali families from Roxbury, Cape Verdean families from Dorchester and Latino families from Hyde Park. More to the point, we have parents of BCCS students who were on opposite sides of Boston's busing crisis in the 1970s—white people who were bused to Roxbury from South Boston, and African-American people who were bused to South Boston. Over the years, we've taught the students about the history of busing in the 1970s. We've discussed the gentrification of certain city neighborhoods and students' anxieties about not being able to afford to stay in their homes.

The diversity of our school means that we cannot only focus on academic rigor and a college preparatory curriculum. We also need for faculty and staff to work with each other and with students to challenge stereotypes and implicit biases. For example, our Multicultural Club stu-

Club students created an #ItoomBCCS campaign, modeled on #Itoomharvard, in which students of all backgrounds share prejudices that others held about them and debunked them. We also hold class retreats, including overnight trips for the junior and senior classes – with bonfires, ropes courses, and personal storytelling to bridge differences. Most recently, one of our teachers launched a course, “Democracy in America,” which allows the students to dig into issues of democracy in a diverse society. Students know that respect and appreciation of other cultures, races, and religions is embedded in our school culture.

In order to establish real dialogue about what is happening in our own school in the context of an increasingly fragmented country, we realized the conversation would have to extend beyond our students to include their families. We created a Family Advisory Council on Diversity to bring families of students together to talk about cultural differences and share their experiences in today’s Boston, which is diverse at the city level, but insular at the neighborhood level. We talk about the racial issues that emerge at BCCS, and how the school handles

them. For example, we discussed how the school handled excusing absences for a student walkout in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, a move that was lauded by many of our families of color but that caused great concern among some of our white families who work in law enforcement. We talked about the experience of our Muslim students at a school like BCCS, and visited the Islamic Cultural Center in Roxbury to learn first-hand about the challenges of being Muslim in Boston.

## Exposure to all sides of the human experience takes time.

Sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we don’t, but the conversations about how to handle the issues that emerge in our diverse community strengthen the school.

While many families fled Boston following desegregation in the 1970s for fear the quality of education would plummet, at BCCS we have found that academic performance has improved as our school became more integrated. In 2000, 74 percent of our eighth grade students scored proficient/advanced on the English MCAS, while only 18 percent scored proficient/advanced in math. By



The advertisement features a dark, textured background. In the center, the word "Commonwealth" is written in a large, light-colored, serif font, with the "C" and "W" being significantly larger than the other letters. Below the word, the phrase "Free news isn't free." is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the advertisement, the text "Support Commonwealth magazine." is written in a white, sans-serif font.



2014, 96 percent of our 8th grade students scored proficient/advanced on the English MCAS, while 77 percent scored proficient/advanced in math. In 2016, *US News & World Report* ranked BCCS number 13 among all public high schools in Massachusetts, outscoring a number of well-regarded suburban schools. Since the first graduating class of 2004, 100 percent of our graduates have been accepted to four-year colleges.

Our unique challenge and opportunity became even more obvious when the 2016 presidential election sparked nationwide incidents of hatred and bullying around race, immigration, and religion. On the day after the election, our Muslim students in their hijabs entered the building while a white student walked in wearing “Make America Great Again” socks. We are in a national moment in which what bubbled beneath the surface is now front and center. And in this context, we strive to assure that our school’s inclusive culture can prevail through toxic times.

We’ve found that the best way to build bridges is to simply inhabit the same space, and to work alongside one another on a common mission. A performance of BCCS students at the nearby Strand Theatre has as diverse a crowd as one can find in Boston, and our graduation, on

that same stage, showcases the accomplishments of families from each part of the city. It turns out that celebrating the achievements of a group of 65 seniors from all over Boston who are headed off to college is just the kind of thing that brings people together.

Exposure to all sides of the human experience takes time, but hearing from all sides is an important component of critical thinking, which all students will need once they’re in college. More importantly, exposure to others’ experiences builds a habit of empathy that students will need to be good people in life beyond college. It’s hard to vilify the race or ethnicity of someone with whom you have to do a group project, or who is your co-lead in a musical production, or who is responsible for coding your team’s robot.

We see diversity as a source of our strength. But our diverse student population is a rarity among urban public schools, which are overwhelmingly minority-majority. Meanwhile, racial isolation of minority families in the suburbs is even more stark.

A 2016 report by the US Government Accountability Office found that between the 2000-2001 and 2013-2014 school years, the percentage of racially and economically concentrated K-12 public schools grew from 9 percent to

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CW

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16 percent. GAO defined this “concentration” as 75 to 100 percent African-American, Latino, and low income. GAO found that “compared with other schools, these schools offered disproportionately fewer math, science, and college preparatory courses and had disproportionately higher rates of students who were held back in 9th grade, suspended, or expelled.”

One need only look to our nation’s urban centers to see precisely where these schools are.

To be clear, schools that are predominantly high poverty and serving students of color and that are achieving excellent student outcomes and closing achievement gaps should be celebrated for their successes. It takes hard work to surmount systemic obstacles, and schools that have figured this out are beacons for others that haven’t. Diversity, without corresponding achievement, is not what we’re after. At the same time, black and brown children growing up—and being educated—in a racial vacuum are not prepared well for the college campuses they will hopefully set foot upon, or the workforce they

## The best way to build bridges is to inhabit the same space.

will enter upon graduation. White suburban children are equally denied diverse perspectives when they are sheltered from the challenges faced by, and the rich experiences of, children of different races and ethnic backgrounds from their own.

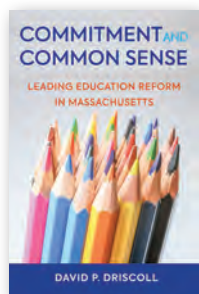
The factors that contribute to isolation are far beyond the control of school districts. Recent studies have shown that America is becoming a more segregated place to live, and the link between housing and education is undeniable. This is true even in Boston, a city that has invested in trying to provide access to quality schools across zip codes by not relying exclusively on a neighborhood school model.

There’s a lot to balance in schooling: quality and proximity to home being just two of the many values that are important to parents of school-aged children. The case for diversity, though, is also worth making, and doesn’t get made nearly enough. Embracing diversity and providing opportunities for children of different backgrounds to learn about—and from—each other will challenge prejudices head on. That’s our best hope for a more harmonious, connected future, and a real democracy.

*Shannah Varón is the executive director of Boston Collegiate Charter School in Dorchester, which serves 700 students in grades 5-12.*

# The real art of the deal

Former education commissioner David Driscoll offers sound lessons in leadership



## **Commitment and Commonsense: Leading Education Reform in Massachusetts**

By David P. Driscoll

Cambridge: Harvard Education Press

256 pages

REVIEWED BY JOHN SCHNEIDER

**BOOKS ABOUT THE** ins and outs about how laws are implemented do not tend to keep you up reading late into the night. That's a shame, because what happens at the ground level once a law is passed is ultimately what matters.

David Driscoll knows that as well as anyone. He was the state education commissioner charged with implementing the state's landmark 1993 Education Reform Act, and he has taken up the challenge of turning what could be an eye-glazing account of regulatory twists and turns into engaging storytelling and advice to would-be public administrators. For the most part, he succeeds.

That may be because the book he has authored, *Commitment and Commonsense*, is also part memoir. But it's also because Driscoll manages to make lively some of the policy challenges whose telling could easily turn dry as toast. (As a disclosure, he and I have worked together on several projects over the years.)

The book is a firsthand account of how Driscoll and his colleagues at the state Department of Education took on the massive job of implementing a law that made a \$2 billion investment in schools, while establishing a new system of standards and assessments that has helped Massachusetts become a national leader in K-12 education.

Driscoll started in the department as deputy commissioner to commissioner Bob Antonucci, and took over as commissioner just as the high-stakes MCAS assessments were kicking in. His book is a case study of how a state agency looks to advance a law successfully by finding middle ground between a bottom-up and top-

down approach to implementation, balancing, in Driscoll's words, "the policy of the law with the realities on the ground."

"Reform needs to be about sameness and difference," writes Driscoll, his way of looking at education reform that embraces standards and accountability while accommodating the unique needs of students. Driscoll's charge was to implement the law during a highly charged political era filled with larger-than-life characters—Bill Weld, John Silber, William Bulger, Charlie Flaherty, Tom Finneran, Tom Birmingham, and my old boss, Mark Roosevelt—while finding that path between "sameness and difference."

Driscoll was reluctant to serve as deputy commissioner. But having great respect for then-commissioner Bob Antonucci, he saw a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity when forces converged to pass the 1993 law. Driscoll and I first met in 1993. I was research director to the Legislature's Joint Committee on Education at the time and, after all the slaps on the back by the politicians on a job well done, soon realized that implementation was a very big deal that required constant communication with the state education department. Driscoll would be our go-to guy. He writes that implementing the law "was to be our work, and often our nightmare, over at least the next decade."

We forget just what a huge and complex job implementing the law really was. "Over the next couple of years," Driscoll writes, "we would need to create curriculum frameworks, develop a student testing system to include a graduation score, monitor the complex funding formula, open new charter schools, define learning time in the daily school



schedule, test new teachers, recertify veteran teachers, and create a measurable accountability system for both schools and districts.”

Yet, with so much money on the line, policymakers expected to see results fast. When my boss at the time, Mark Roosevelt, decided to challenge Bill Weld for governor in 1994 (he lost!), Roosevelt argued that the Weld administration was not moving fast enough to implement the law. One approach might have been to dictate to the field what to do. Antonucci and Driscoll took a different approach, what Driscoll calls “sorting out our bosses and customers.” The pair worked the field, the State House, business community, and the governor’s office to keep stakeholders engaged and informed through an inclusive process that moved things forward. And for a while, it worked.

Then along came John Silber.

We forget what a polarizing force the longtime president of Boston University was. Silber was a volcano and tsunami wrapped up into one. With his cutting put-downs he was a walking tweetstorm before there was Twitter.

Brilliant, yet impatient, and always the smartest guy in the room, he was named chairman of the state Board of Education by Weld following his reelection in 1994. As Driscoll notes, Silber had little understanding of K-12 education. That, combined with a “dictatorial approach,” threw the department in chaos. It was a wild ride.

Silber advocated for the GED test to serve as an interim MCAS assessment and overreacted to the poor results of the state’s first teachers test. By this time, Driscoll was acting commissioner, taking the job after Antonucci moved on to the private sector, bringing much-needed continuity to the massive amount of work that remained to implement the law, including the rollout of MCAS.

With the field being rocked daily by Silber’s shoot-from-the-hip governance style—“I began to realize that John Silber has stampeded us into crisis,” writes Driscoll—he decided to throw his hat into the ring to become the next commissioner. But Driscoll was not Silber’s first choice for the post, and for weeks he failed to get the six votes needed on the state education board to get the job. During that time, he says, he learned two valuable lessons: “Be true to yourself amidst major changes” and “piece together a way forward.”

Driscoll eventually became commissioner, with the help of then-board member Charlie Baker. Looking to protect his boss, Gov. Paul Cellucci, who was getting killed by the media over the impasse, Baker devised a compromise that brought another vote for Driscoll while maintaining the board’s strong reform orientation, but under decidedly more congenial leadership. It involved moving Silber out and inserting Jim Peyser (who is now Baker’s education secretary) as education board chair.

For those who like the inside story of state politics, the chapters about the Silber years are juicy and fun reading. But they don’t really offer the lessons in leadership that punctuate the other chapters in the book. Driscoll also says little in his book about charter schools, a key element of the reform law and an initiative that Massachusetts has excelled in implementing. That’s a missed opportunity, especially given the polarizing nature of the charter school ballot question during the 2016 election.

Raised in Melrose, Driscoll started out as a math teacher in 1964 in Somerville. Teaching was not his first career choice—he wanted to make more money—but he was recruited to teach CCD in the local Catholic parish. There he learned an important lesson: “Classrooms do not have to become three-ring circuses, but some thought about how to engage students with the subject matter is a must.”

Engaging others is a strategy Driscoll used throughout his career. It’s one of several “Driscoll truisms” he offers in the book, insights from various lessons learned during a particular period of his professional life.

These truisms, expanded upon in lessons learned at the end of each chapter, make this book a much more interesting read than just a biography of a life well lived. They offer insight into leadership from the classroom level all the way to the top of the state education bureaucracy. For example, while a math teacher in Somerville, Driscoll says he learned that “you are expected to get used to the status quo of the system.” But Driscoll saw schools as “the place that gave kids a shot” at a better future, a view that meant sometimes defying the status quo. He carried that approach with him as he rose up the ranks. Years later, as the guy in charge during the rollout of the controversial high-stakes consequences of MCAS, his approach was status quo be damned.

Driscoll has never been involved in politics, formally speaking, but he was a master at the trade. “You cannot avoid politics if you want positive change,” he writes. Education is “dependent on the political process,” he writes, and “those of us who serve as leaders inside the system need to be active and vigilant,” an important lesson, especially for leaders who want to shrink away from the politics during these challenging partisan times.

Driscoll is a master teacher, and *Commitment and Common Sense* is his seminar on leadership and practical advice to public leaders who want to master the fine art of balancing “the policy of the law with the realities on the ground.” **CW**

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*John Schneider is director of external affairs at Mass Insight Education. He was research director for the Joint Committee on Education during passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act in 1993.*

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