



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development used to be radically simpler. In the 1960s and 1970s, a local strategy to promote economic development and job growth might mean securing a federal grant to build a full-service industrial park, hiring an agent to sell the parcels, using appropriate trade journals to advertise the site and promote the community's hardworking labor force and attractive quality of life—and then waiting for something to happen. In many cities and towns throughout Massachusetts, this was the basic approach taken for economic development. Today, with a new century on the horizon, the commonwealth's economic realities demand a more sophisticated, coordinated approach to encouraging economic development. No longer do simple formulas or strictly local initiatives determine whether businesses locate, expand, or remain in our cities and towns. Instead, the principal geographic unit relative to the economy has become the metropolitan region, in Massachusetts and throughout the nation. More than ever, businesses are looking closely at regional factors to help them make vital decisions.

Regional Planning Agencies Balance Economic Growth and Community Character

Massachusetts' regional planning agencies are vital to economic development in their areas, addressing issues that are important to businesses and municipalities: labor force, growth management, and regional marketing. A tight, skilled labor force, for instance, prompts businesses to focus on transportation (i.e., work force mobility) and housing costs (i.e., work force availability). In the growth management arena, Massachusetts' RPAs help communities develop bylaws and ordinances that promote industrial development without sacrificing environmental quality. Increased citizen resistance to new development coupled with a suburban and rural shift for new industrial development makes thoughtful planning crucial to achieve such a balance. Finally, the RPAs underscore the importance of regional thinking rather than a strictly local mindset. In times of scarce resources and legally constrained tax revenues, cities and towns must resist the urge to blindly compete against one another in order to prosper economically. Rather, communities must collaborate on a regional basis if they are to successfully compete in today's turbulent and ever-changing economy.

Regional Planning Agencies Ease the Region's Growing Pains

Traditionally, economic development efforts have focused on communities that have the staff, the labor force, and the infrastructure necessary to encourage and support new development. But in the last decade, most of Massachusetts' new growth happened outside the cities—along the Interstate 495 corridor west of Boston, for example—where there is more land and less severe traffic congestion. Consequently, new problems are being caused by reverse commuting to suburban and rural employment centers, as well as new pressures on towns unprepared to handle rapid growth and development within their borders.

Regional planning is needed to ensure that new economic centers prove assets rather than liabilities to their respective planning regions. Massachusetts' RPAs have provided regionally-oriented advice and assistance on access, zoning, environmental impact, infrastructure, and labor force availability issues—from forming transportation management associations with employers to deal with worker mobility, to helping small communities draft zoning ordinances that will make new development compatible with the area. The RPAs have also helped new businesses and municipalities negotiate needed infrastructure improvements and frequently work with their member cities and towns as well as the private business sector to develop strategic economic plans to guide their economic futures.

Regional Planning Agencies Save Money

Economic development is an investment, made with the expectation that it will be returned with interest in the future. Because federal and state funding assistance remains scarce, cities and towns must now help underwrite economic investments such as site development, infrastructure, and staffing. Moreover, today's business decisions turn on regional factors such as labor availability, transportation networks, housing costs, and quality of life. Whether making cooperative promotional efforts or regional infrastructure developments, individual communities can no longer afford to act alone. Massachusetts' RPAs help cities and towns work together to make economic development decisions that will yield regional-scale economies and a worthy return on their investments.

Regional Planning Agencies at Work: A Sampler of Economic Development

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and the *Franklin Regional Council of Governments* were instrumental in creating Berkshire Connect and Pioneer Valley Connect, both efforts to expand broadband availability in Western Massachusetts.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission collaborated with commercial and industrial real estate brokers and owners to create a region-wide computerized inventory of Pioneer Valley industrial sites and buildings.