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Massachusetts gateway cities: Brownfields pilot sites

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On May 19th, eleven Mass. cities signed the "Gateway Cities Compact for Community and Economic Development." The compact establishes an informal alliance between the cities of Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield and Worcester, known as "Gateway Cities," to promote a united economic development strategy addressing the needs of regions outside of the greater Boston area. The compact grew out of a report issued jointly by MassINC and The Brookings Institution entitled Reconnecting Mass. Gateway Cities: Lessons Learned and an Agenda for Renewal, February 2007.

The Report examined eleven Mass. cities which were historically populated by foreign workers as their "gateway" into Mass. These cities were the traditional mill towns that once had thriving industrial economies, but which have struggled to establish a knowledge-based economy similar to that which has fueled much of the economic success of the greater Boston area. Among the key economic findings of the report are the following:

*Between 1970 and 2005, Greater Boston gained 467,000 jobs and the Gateway Cities lost 11,000 jobs.

*Greater Boston contains 40% of the state's population, 50% of the jobs, and 60% of the payroll. The Gateway Cities contain 15% of the state's population, 13% of the jobs, and 10% of the payroll.

*42% of residents of Greater Boston hold four-year college degrees, compared to 16.5% of residents of the Gateway Cities.

The report concluded that Mass. needs to "take advantage of the opportunities that these cities provide, and overcome the obstacles that hold them back." While the report made a series of recommendations involving many segments of city governance, the compact appears to have evolved out of the report's recommendation to "Establish a partnership between Gateway Cities, state government, and regional economic development organizations to expand private sector investment." The compact creates an association of municipalities to cooperatively work together to, among other things, enable the Gateway Cities to better compete for residents, jobs and economic growth.

Given the industrial history of the Gateway Cities it is not surprising that many of these cities have a high concentration of brownfield sites that have hampered their economic redevelopment. On the same day that the compact was signed, the governor's office announced the establishment of the Brownfields Support Team initiative bringing together staff of the Mass. Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP), the executive office of Housing and Economic Development (HED), and MassDevelopment to assist municipalities in resolving the problems that impede the redevelopment of their Brownfields sites. More than 713 Brownfields sites in 203 Massachusetts communities have received assistance since the Brownfields program was established in 1998. The Brownfields Support Team initiative is designed to expand upon that success by expediting the

process.

Subsequently, on July 30th, the governor's office named five pilot sites that will be the initial focus of the new Brownfields Support Team. Four of the sites are located within Gateway Cities and are located in state-designated environmental justice communities. According to the "Environmental Justice Policy of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs," October 9th, 2002, an environmental justice community is an area where the population is at risk of being unaware of or unable to participate in environmental decision-making or to gain access to state environmental resources based on demographic information such as income levels, minority status, being born outside of the U.S., or lacking English language proficiency. The remaining site has been designated as a Smart Growth Zoning District under G.L. c. 40R.

The governor announced the following five pilot projects:

*Chapman Valve/Crane Co. The former Chapman Valve/Crane Co. manufacturing facility and related parcels located in the city of Springfield are targeted for light industrial reuse. Historic site contaminants include metals, petroleum and PCBs in some areas of the soil and groundwater. The project area is within a state-designated environmental justice community.

*South Worcester Industrial Park. This site includes several vacant manufacturing facilities acquired by the city of Worcester for redevelopment as the South Worcester Industrial Park. The intent is to develop an 11-acre light industrial park with connections to I-290/90. The site contains petroleum and metals in the soil and asbestos in the remaining buildings. The project area is within a state-designated environmental justice community and is located adjacent to a freight rail corridor.

*City Pier. The city of Fall River intends to redevelop the four-acre City Pier Taunton River waterfront site for mixed-use, likely to include hotel, restaurant, marina and office uses. The site is located within a state-designated environmental justice community and is adjacent to a proposed commuter rail station that may provide service to Boston. The site contains PCBs in soil and sediments.

*Ted's for Tires. The former Ted's for Tires property is located in downtown Haverhill, which is a state-designated environmental justice community. The city, in conjunction with the Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority, intends to redevelop the site as a transit station and parking facility, combining commuter rail and local bus services. The site contains petroleum in soil and groundwater.

*Fisherville Mill. This property is a former 35-acre mill property situated on the Blackstone River in South Grafton which will be used for mixed-use redevelopment. This site has been designated as a Smart Growth Zoning District under G.L.c. 40R. The development will have access to the future Blackstone River Bikeway. Oil, volatile organic compounds and the solvent trichloroethylene (TCE) are present in soil, sediment and surface water on the site.

Brownfields Support Team will work with the pilot communities to identify site- and project-specific issues that are obstructing redevelopment of the target properties. Support from the Team may include expedited site inspections, reviews, and approvals by MassDEP; technical assistance on expedited permitting from HED; funding for assessment and cleanup from MassDevelopment; and coordination with the Attorney General's Office on liability issues. In partnership with the Brownfields Support Team, these pilot communities hope to redevelop key properties whose reuse has been stymied in the past by extensive contamination. On this anniversary of the establishment of the original Brownfields program, the Gateway Cities pilot projects represent a logical next step in the Brownfields chronicle.

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