

Commentary: The future of Greater Portland

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“Greater Portland is on the cusp of the greatest era in its history”

“Greater Portland is a mess.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard Barringer is emeritus professor and **Joseph McDonnell** is professor in USM's Muskie School. **Frank O'Hara** is a Hallowell planning consultant. See the full report, “Greater Portland Tomorrow: Choices for Sustained Prosperity,” at <http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/muskie/8/>.



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Which is it? If you look at the food scene, arts and culture, tourism, job numbers and new residents, greatness is imminent. If you look at housing costs, the workforce shortage, traffic and parking, it's a mess and getting worse.

Which way will Greater Portland go? It's up to us. Greatness as a relatively small city-region is achievable if we face critical issues and act with imagination and courage. If we choose to ignore these challenges and muddle along mindlessly, a larger mess is predictable.

Portland's growth is part of a global trend. Cities and their metropolitan regions have achieved dominant and enduring influence over the entire world economy. Just 600 cities account for three-fifths of global gross domestic product. Harvard economist Edward Glaeser argues that successful cities and their surrounding regions are now powerful magnets, offering vast opportunity for employment and upward mobility, accommodating diverse peoples of all incomes and social classes and ensuring the availability of shelter that is affordable to all. They are the nodes that connect our increasingly globalized world.

Now and for the foreseeable future, Greater Portland is Maine's urban engine of economic prosperity, the state's indispensable economic node. Less than a thirtieth of the state's land area and a fifth of its population, the region accounts for more than a third of Maine's job growth since the Great Recession, and nearly a third of the state's General Fund revenues through sales and income tax payments.

Still, after recent examination of the regional economy, we conclude that unless we act to address critical challenges, the regional economy will suffer, and with it the entire state economy. The current prosperity cannot and must not be taken for granted. Will we tackle the issues that threaten prosperity in a purposeful way, or will we be reactive, driven solely by market forces and private profit, and forgo the opportunity to be intentional, strategic and responsive to long-standing public values?

Greater Portland does not have the workforce to replace retiring baby boomers; it needs to import more workers. Available rental properties that could serve these workers are scarce and costly in the city, and practically non-existent elsewhere in the region. Traffic congestion and parking scarcity are stresses to daily living, and obstacles to the development of new workforce housing.

In focus groups and interviews with public-, private- and third-sector leaders across the region, we have found cautious optimism and commitment to address challenges. At the same time, their worthwhile efforts remain partial and

fragmented. People recognize the need for better coordinated and publicly accountable regional leadership, but tiptoe around how to achieve this.

The rapid pace of change throughout Greater Portland, and the need for decisive action on a number of fronts, makes effective, regional initiative and governance a topic that may no longer be shunned.

Take just one example. The cover of our new report shows the extensive light rail system that Greater Portland enjoyed in at the turn of the last century. It allowed for development of affordable workforce housing, at generally high densities, in places accessible to employment and shopping. These trollies were abandoned when the automobile became the preferred mode of personal transportation.

As a result, we became dependent on cars, and land that once went to workforce housing now goes to parking lots, car garages and scattered single-family homes. We believe the era of automobile dominance is coming to an end, and it is time to re-imagine Greater Portland as a collection of walkable town centers and urban neighborhoods, connected by new forms of public transit.

This is a case where affordable housing, regional transportation and better land use policies all intersect. But right now, responsibility for each of these policy areas lies with separate governmental bodies. Further, there is no flexible source of infrastructure funding that will make integrated transportation and housing solutions possible.

“Business as usual” and continued fragmentation no longer suffice. It is time to take the region’s development to a new level. What is lacking is not caring, concern, and civic effort; but rather, effective authority and accountability at the regional level to move forward in purposeful and effective manner.

Here, we offer five strategic recommendations to address these challenges, to sustain and broaden the region’s prosperity:

1. Workforce development. Creation of a Workforce Development Center at the University of Southern Maine’s Muskie School to help address the workforce crisis. The center would serve as a convener, bringing together employers and education-training organizations to identify needs and shortcomings; create alignment between educational outcomes and employer needs; and offer needed workforce research, program evaluation, and assessment,
2. Good urban design. Establishment of a Center for Good Urban Design at USM in collaboration with the undergraduate architecture program at the University of Maine at Augusta and the Portland Society for Architecture, to assist local communities in urban design that will strengthen the region’s economy, quality of place and local neighborhoods.
3. Public revenues. Introduction of legislation in the Maine Legislature to enact a 0.5 percent local option sales tax in Cumberland County to be used exclusively for investment in regional infrastructure, including broadband service, public transit, affordable housing, trails development and utilities.
4. Regional authority. Establishment of adequate and effective regional authority to address the critical issues of economic and community development, workforce housing, transportation, broadband telecommunications, energy, brownfields and human services; and that the capacities of Greater Portland Council of Governments, the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System, the Greater Portland Economic Development Council, the Greater Portland Metro and Cumberland County be combined for this purpose.
5. Public communications. Development of an ambitious communications and public information strategy, funded by private and philanthropic sources and delivered by the Greater Portland Regional Chamber, to:
 - Raise awareness of the need for sustainable development that honors its economic, environmental and community foundations.
 - Identify quality of place as a critical asset to the region and attractant to new residents, workers and businesses.

- “Brand” Greater Portland as a whole, as “Portland Aspires.” Much as has been done by Saint John, New Brunswick, and its surrounding communities under the successful banner of Enterprise Saint John.

In the end, the challenge before us is not whether Greater Portland will grow, but how it will grow. Will it be recognizable as the region we know and love, for all its distinctive history, diverse culture, resilient economy, and civic virtue? For it to be so, private citizens, government leaders, and business leaders must be ready to embrace change and act with boldness and. Now is the time for Greater Portland to choose greatness.

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