




COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE INSIGHT & NEWS

The Bowditch & Dewey Real Estate Blog

Planning Regionally, Failing Parochially

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Paul C. Bauer – While the economy in Massachusetts continues to improve, sustainable economic development continues to be a priority for the Commonwealth. Last month, the [Metropolitan Area Planning Council](#) (MAPC) issued the [Metro North Land Use Priority Plan](#). According to the Massachusetts Housing and Economic Development website, “the [Metro North Land Use Priority Plan](#) is a regional-level planning study created as a collaboration between the [Metropolitan Area Planning Council](#) (MAPC), the [Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development](#), the [Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs](#), municipal officials, local planners, as well as various local and regional stakeholders.” This Plan does a great job of comprehensively identifying priority development sites and priority preservation areas across a region with relatively granular detail of the opportunities and challenges for development.

 But is it just another planning document to be filed away and never seen again? All planning documents are aspirational, but this Plan will likely see some implementation and there are some instructive points to be gleaned from it. Let’s start with the interagency and intergovernmental collaboration listed above. Why is it that almost the only place we see such collaboration is in the planning process (as an example, see the fine work done by regional planning agencies)? Perhaps it has a lot to do with the fact that regional planning does not meaningfully impact local control and decision making. A regional plan that says that an area in community x should be rezoned does not make the area rezoned; the community must initiate and approve rezoning. Without greater collaboration in the implementation of regional plans, we will never see the full realization of these planning priorities. [As quoted in the Chelsea Record](#), Secretary Bialecki said “the Metro North leaders have come together in a way that others haven’t. ‘These areas are working together in a way that the governor and I don’t see in other places in this state.’” Whether that cooperation continues when one community must compete with another for State resources, potential developers, or growing companies remains to be seen.

The Plan also describes challenges to the redevelopment of priority sites. These include environmental issues, antiquated infrastructure, the need for new housing in balance with new commercial development, the need for open space, the need to design with resiliency to account for climate change, as well the need to address regulatory (zoning and permitting) hurdles. Each of these has challenges in the context of local as opposed to regional or state-wide

action. For example, encouraging municipalities to develop housing in order to create a solid base for commercial expansion is great, but as long as communities run the numbers and conclude that more residential development means higher costs and higher taxes, each individual municipality acting in its own perceived best interest will not take the actions necessary to encourage residential development. Across a region, this effect is even more pronounced where one community could bear the brunt of costs related to residential development in creating housing for individuals that may work in the gleaming new commercial spaces in the town next door.

Only through State action, either by new, streamlined permitting processes or even more dramatically, new regional implementation processes, that are consistent with planning goals can these hurdles be overcome. It seems self-evident that major opportunities to remake the Commonwealth will require new initiatives that assist cash-strapped communities while demanding new levels of responsiveness and efficiency from our governments.