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Middlesex 3 – A Creative Public/Private Experiment

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SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN

While Washington is stymied by partisanship – resulting in an inability to move forward – Massachusetts, through recent initiatives, has embarked on a unique experiment of municipal collaboration and cooperation to achieve economic development.



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Through an initiative of the Patrick-Murray Administration's Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development, a number of communities have formed an operating entity to encourage economic development and capitalize on recent infrastructure improvements by the commonwealth. These improvements include the \$300

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million-plus investment in the improvement of Route 3 from Burlington to the New Hampshire border.

Recognizing the abundance of technical talent that resides along the Route 3 corridor; the commonality of economic development interests of a number of municipalities; and the diverse resources of the communities along this corridor, an initiative was undertaken by five communities to collaborate to reap the economic benefits that can be achieved when communities cooperate rather than function independently.

With the encouragement and technical assistance of the commonwealth, the towns of Burlington, Bedford, Chelmsford, Billerica and the city of Lowell have formed a new entity called "Middlesex 3."

A Broad Spectrum

The group's stated purposes are to: Strengthen and grow economic development; create and retain jobs; increase and diversify the tax base; and improve the quality of life of their residents. The chief operating officers of the member communities all serve on the board. In addition, a number of representatives of the private and academic community along this corridor also serve on the board.

This effort is consistent with the Patrick-Murray Administration's long-term economic development plan, "Choosing to Compete in the 21st Century." One of the five main goals of the plan is to encourage local and regional development, and Middlesex 3 is consistent with that mission.

But while the communities have banded together, they have not lost their identities.

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Middlesex 3 has attracted members from the broad spectrum of employers, academic institutions and public service agencies who call the corridor their home. Through joint discussion with the decision makers from the public realm and the private sector, it is hoped that logical, well-thought-out solutions can be achieved to common problems and barriers to economic activity. Infrastructure limitations can be identified and addressed on a unified, regional basis. Through such concerted actions, the overall well-being of the residents of this corridor will hopefully be advanced.

Finding Balance

A critical component of this experiment is to make sure

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that the businesses calling the Route 3 corridor home will have the qualified personnel to maintain and grow their businesses. To this end, the participation and involvement of academic institutions, including Middlesex Community College and the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, will be critical to the overall success of Middlesex 3. A forum for the development of responsive curriculum will be fostered.

In the few formal meetings that have occurred since the formation, a number of interesting themes have begun to emerge. The communities are talking together about how each can contribute to the overall success of the corridor. While one community may be able to entertain the expansion of a commercial facility, another community has housing stock that can satisfy the demands of the employees of the expanded operation. Still other communities will be able to assist with recreational and cultural amenities.

As Middlesex 3 grows and matures, it is hoped that the integration and coordination of this cooperative effort will only be enhanced and lead to further initiatives that will ultimately translate into sustained economic development.

While we have all suffered through the gridlock that occurs when parties fail to cooperate, it is a refreshing and encouraging moment to see how communities, all with diverse internal needs and orientations, can nonetheless work together to achieve public benefit for all. This experiment is being watched with anticipation at both the state and local levels to see if it can provide the template for other communities to band together for a common objective when circumstances present the opportunity.

Let us hope that Middlesex 3 succeeds in providing this template and that it serves as an example of what can happen when parties opt for cooperation as opposed to partisanship. ■

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