
Come stay by Rte. 3

By John Laidler

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An effort by five area communities to jointly market their combined stretch of Route 3 to prospective businesses is picking up speed.

The partnering municipalities — Bedford, Billerica, Burlington, Chelmsford, and Lowell — have devised a brand name — Middlesex 3 — for their shared highway corridor, along with a logo.

The communities recently formed a nonprofit — The Middlesex 3 Coalition — to spearhead the initiative, and have begun recruiting businesses and other groups to join them.

“We expect this thing will grow,” said Billerica town manager John C. Curran, noting that a website for the coalition is coming and that the communities in the next several months will be discussing the hiring of a director for the group.

The effort grew out of discussions among Bedford, Billerica, and Burlington officials five years ago about marketing their shared region. At the suggestion of state officials, the talks were expanded to include Chelmsford and Lowell. The state then funded a study and the results, presented in 2010, formed the basis of the current initiative.

Curran said a common push to promote that section of Route 3 would benefit all five communities.

“One of the struggles we have is that when you hear about Route 3, a lot of people think of the South Shore,” he said. “This is Middlesex County, that whole Merrimack Valley area. So we’ve gone through this whole exercise to determine what’s the best way to identify the area. Ultimately, what we came up with was Middlesex 3.”

The logo, a rendering of a map of the five communities with a roadway running through it, was designed by a Shawsheen Valley Regional Technical High School student, Shelby Rivers of Billerica.

“The mission is to promote the region as an area for economic development,” Curran said.

A particular goal is to build on the progress the area already has seen in attracting life science and emerging technology companies, Curran said, citing as examples EMD Serono and E Inc. Corp., which have facilities in Billerica.

The region has much to offer prospective companies, Curran said.

“The whole Merrimack Valley area that encompasses these five communities is rich with diverse labor resources,” Curran said. “You’ve got high-end professionals in this area, and also other types of labor, such as the medium-level technicians that many life science companies are looking for, and just the general labor force as well.”

The region is also home to the University of Massachusetts Lowell, Middlesex Community College, and Shawsheen, all three of which have programs teaching the skills that employers are seeking, Curran said.

Bedford town manager Richard Reed said that a regional marketing approach makes sense because “companies that are coming to Massachusetts are thinking about the state and the region . . . where they want to be. I don’t think they are looking at it specifically as this community or that community.”

He said where they choose to locate within a region depends on the availability of sites.

But at least one local official is uneasy about the regional effort.

Burlington Selectman Ralph Patuto said that its location on the Middlesex Turnpike, Route 3, and Route 128 makes Burlington the most attractive community to developers of the five involved in the initiative.

"We are a highly visible area. My concern is if this is really going to be beneficial to Burlington to be with a group that we are competing with," Patuto said. "As far as I'm concerned, we are the economic engine out of that group of cities and towns.

"How do you sit down in a room with competitors and draw up common goals and objectives," he asked, when all five communities are concerned about their own tax and job bases?

Curran said joining forces to market the region does not mean the communities will cease to compete for a particular business.

"Each one of the communities hopes they are going to pick them," he said of companies seeking a location. "But at the end of the day, they are not going to pick any of us if we don't try to attract them to the region."

"It's really a great message to send to the business community that you have communities in the corridor coming together and putting on this type of effort going forward to provide jobs and other opportunities in this region," said Chelmsford town manager Paul E. Cohen.

"We think what we have out there is a great base, and we are looking to enhance the economic opportunities as well as to promote the quality of life in this corridor."

Bernard Lynch, Lowell city manager, also sees promise in the coalition. "This initiative reflects both the increased collaborative spirit among the communities along the Route 3 corridor as well as our collective recognition that our economies are highly integrated with one another already," he said in a prepared statement. "Lowell stands to bolster its reputation as a business address by joining the other Route 3 communities, many of whom have well-established reputations as great addresses for innovative companies."

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