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THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY GETS CONNECTED

Will the Route 146 — Massachusetts Turnpike intersection help the Blackstone Valley meet its economic potential?



Also see map on inside back cover.

JOHN R. MULLIN

The link between Route 146 and the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) is now operational, and further improvements will soon connect the highway to I-290 and Worcester. No longer isolated, the Blackstone Valley is taking on characteristics of a third semicircle around metropolitan Boston. Signs of improved job opportunities, rising property values, and established companies' interest in the region suggest that these developments are beginning to have significant beneficial effects on the Valley. The challenge at hand is to take advantage of the economic progress this new infrastructure provides without unleashing major negative impacts on the historical character of this beautiful region.

THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY,

between Worcester and Providence, has struggled for years to transform itself from the home of declining manufacturing companies to an area of modern, thriving businesses. Leaders of the eleven communities in the Massachusetts portion of the Valley have long bemoaned the lack of easy, direct, high-speed automobile and truck access to and around the region. Though towns within the Valley were connected by “The Great Road” from Providence and Mendon in 1683, the Blackstone Canal in 1828, railroad lines in 1847, and State Road 146 in the early 1900s, access to points beyond the Valley have been sorely lacking. This shortcoming is now a thing of the past.

To the south, there is finally direct access from Route 146 to Rhode Island’s I-295 and I-95. Perhaps more importantly, the link between Route 146 and the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) is now operational, and further improvements will soon connect the highway to I-290 and Worcester. No longer isolated, the Valley is becoming a third semicircle of development around metropolitan Boston.

Access Typically Spurs Development

It has long been an axiom of planning that the creation of major highway intersections typically stimulates development. Indeed, such has been the case with our emerging “edge cities”: Peabody, Burlington, Framingham and Braintree along Route 128 and the fast-growing communities near the intersection of I-495 and I-95. This has also been the case in the Rhode Island portion of the Valley, where Route 146 and I-295 have been joined for more than a decade. This region, consisting of eight communities with characteristics similar to the adjacent Massachusetts towns, is in the midst of a dramatic transformation from typical manufacturing to service industries.

Fueled by the decision of Fidelity Investments to locate in Smithfield, the emergence of CVS as a Fortune 500 company, and the move of AMICA Insurance from Providence, the region is substantially different than it was before completion of the intersection. When asked what caused this

change, Scott Gibbs, president of the Woonsocket Industrial Development Corporation, responded that the connection of Route 146 to I-295 was the single greatest factor: It enabled access to the area from Boston and Providence.

Can this transformation be replicated in Massachusetts? Signs of improved job opportunities, rising property values, and established companies’ interest in the region give reason for optimism. Some of these advancements are the result of the Commonwealth’s improved economy, some can be explained by the westward movement of jobs from Boston to I-495 and beyond, and some are due to the steady revitalization of Worcester and Providence.

Employment Numbers on the Rise

A comparison of the Valley’s unemployment rate with that of the Commonwealth in 1991 and 1998 reveals an interesting twist. In 1991, Valley communities had an unemployment rate of 9.9 percent, well above the state’s 9.1 percent. At the time that the 146/Pike intersection became operational in 1998, conditions were already changing. The Valley’s unemployment rate (3.1 percent) had dropped *below* the state’s rate (3.3 percent).

A look at growth in the labor force also shows some significant shifts. Between 1991 and 1998, the Blackstone Valley’s labor force expanded by 5.4 percent, while Central Massachusetts and the Commonwealth as a whole grew by 3.6 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively. And this workforce found jobs. Between 1991 and 1998, the Valley increased the number of workers employed by 13.4 percent, as compared to the Commonwealth’s rate of 10 percent. Thus, in terms of the expansion of the labor force, the number of workers employed and the decline of unemployment, the Valley consistently out-performed the state and the Central Massachusetts region as a whole. Though this growth is not due solely to the completion of the intersection, there is undoubtedly some correlation.

An examination of comparative data between 1985 and 1998 shows that, with the exception of manufacturing and service jobs, there have been only minimal shifts in employment types. Reflecting trends in the state overall, manufacturing jobs declined from 29 percent of all jobs in 1985

Labor Force Statistics Compared, 1991 and 1998

	Labor Force			Employment			Unemployment Rate	
	1991	1998	Percent change	1991	1998	Percent change	1991	1998
Massachusetts	3,161,800	3,273,400	3.5	2,875,500	3,164,300	10.0	9.1	3.3
Central Region	356,806	369,576	3.6	321,251	357,138	11.2	10.0	3.4
Blackstone Valley	46,406	48,890	5.4	41,796	47,376	13.4	9.9	3.1

to 22 percent in 1998. These were largely replaced by work in the service sectors, which grew from 14 percent to 24 percent of all jobs. (Due to DET methodology, this figure does not include government or education.) In spite of these trends, the Blackstone Valley and the Central Region continue to be distinguished by their large manufacturing bases, when compared to the state as a whole.

Companies Spread Roots, Communities Gain Confidence

There has been a significant increase among commercial and industrial firms seeking Valley locations for new factories and plants. It is here that one finds dramatic change. Data collected by the Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD) show that between 1994 and 1999 there were 112 inquiries from companies looking for potential sites in Central Massachusetts. Of these, twenty specifically requested information on Blackstone Valley communities. What is most interesting is that the number of inquiries specific to the Valley increased from 6.9 percent for all years prior to the opening of the intersection (October 1998) to approximately 37.5 percent thereafter.

This is even more interesting when considering the number of inquiries from distribution companies. Prior to 1998, there were a total of twenty such inquiries for Central Massachusetts, none of which requested information on the Blackstone Valley. After October 1998, there were thirteen inquiries for Central Massachusetts, five of which requested Blackstone Valley information. Similar increases occurred in light manufacturing and assembly: Between 1994 and October 1998, there were only two inquiries; after October 1998, there were eight. While the sample size is small, it would appear that the completion of the interchange has had an impact.

The data also show that the companies looking at the Blackstone area are interested in the skills of its traditional workforce. They appear to value the region's blue-collar and semi-skilled workers and are not interested in creating centers of biotechnology, high technology, or knowledge-based activities. Indeed, the MOBD database shows only

one inquiry from a high-tech company since it began tracking inquiries in 1994.

The spread of companies and jobs from Boston to Route 128 and I-495 has created a great opportunity for the Valley. At its closest point to the Blackstone, I-495 is only three miles away. With the opening of the intersection, the distance—and the time to travel it—become even shorter. Moreover, companies that sell along the I-90, I-290 and I-495 corridors will be that much closer to markets, and workers employed along the westerly edge of Boston's metropolitan area will have more options when seeking desirable housing.

Data on traffic movement along Route 146 reveal significant growth. Between 1989 and 1998, traffic in Sutton increased by approximately 25 percent, while that in Uxbridge grew by 30 percent.

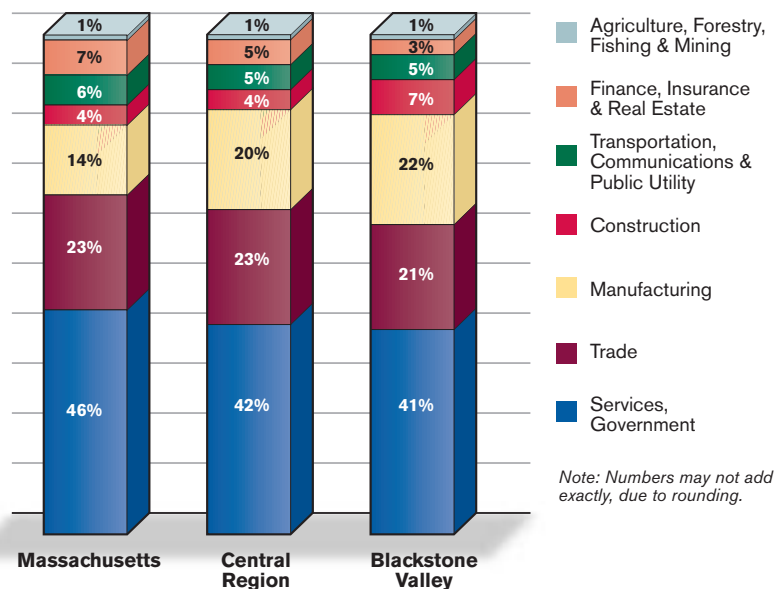
Improved access has also had an effect on real estate.

The Worcester *Telegram & Gazette* reported that 1998 home sales throughout Central Massachusetts set a three-year record, and showed the greatest increase of any Massachusetts region. If one compares house prices in Framingham with those in Millbury (at the northern edge of the Valley) and Uxbridge (at the Rhode Island border) over the past two years, the findings are quite surprising. While Framingham prices increased by approximately 12 percent, prices in Millbury and Uxbridge increased by 21 percent and 34 percent, respectively.

These rising home prices, increasing traffic, and new building permits have inspired confidence for a better future. When communities feel positive about their future (and given rising tax revenues and reasonable bond ratings), they are more apt to invest in capital improvements. Communities including Millbury, Upton, Mendon, Uxbridge, Grafton, Northbridge, Hopedale and Douglas have all recently completed or have plans for major municipal projects. Millbury, where the interchange is located, recently approved funding for a new library (\$3.5 million), a new school (\$23 million) and an expansion of its sewer system (\$20 million). According to Millbury town planner Steven Bishop, the interchange was the venture that stimulated the town's approval of these other projects.

1998 Employment Compared

Blackstone Valley and the Central Region are distinguished by a larger base of manufacturing employment.



Source: Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training

Note: Numbers may not add exactly, due to rounding.

Success Story or Lost Opportunity?

It is quite clear from the data that the intersection is providing an opportunity for the Valley to improve its regional economy. But is this enough? Is the region really prepared for economic change? Maybe, but maybe not.

The region's political and civic leadership has been outstanding. Bankers, chambers of commerce, and state political leaders have been working to create a regional agenda for improvements that range from workforce development to the creation of industrial parks, the establishment of a community college, and even improved zoning. With the exception of Millbury, however, municipal leaders have been slow to react to the potential of a new economic climate.

Sutton, a 32-square-mile town with a population of approximately 7,500, flashes across the nation's television screens each time the Professional Golf Association holds a

Should other communities follow suit, the corridor will evolve to resemble Framingham's Route 9, the Cape's Route 6, and Saugus's Route 1, and the Valley will lose much of its character. Several of the communities, with this in mind, have recently contracted with the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission to determine if there are means and methods to protect the highway's aesthetic qualities.

There will be new development. The question is: Where should it take place? The Valley is sprinkled with red brick and granite mill complexes that date from the very start of America's Industrial Revolution. While several of these (i.e., the Whitinsville, Linwood, Bernat, and Felter mills) are functioning nicely, many are outmoded, poorly maintained, and full of environmental contamination problems. Only one available site in the Valley offers the typical attributes of a successful office park. Unfortunately, Valley towns have not chosen to create such places. This represents a lost opportunity.

Optimal Site Attributes for a High-End Industrial/Office Park

- The land is for sale.
- The site has at least 100 acres of unoccupied land.
- Water, sewer, gas, phone, and fiber optic systems are on or adjacent to the site.
- The site is appropriately zoned (by-right).
- There are no wetland or aquifer issues.
- The site is environmentally clean.
- The site can be re-parceled.
- The site is within 15 minutes of an interstate and 45 minutes of an airport.
- Direct access to the site does not require traveling through residential areas.
- Protective covenants regulate site design elements.
- Building permits can be issued within 90 days.

tournament at the famed Pleasant Valley Country Club. The network's "set up" shots focus on the town's beautiful landscape. Indeed, the open fields, forests, and stone walls epitomize New England. And yet, off the television screen, the picture is different. Sutton's piece of the Route 146 corridor has shifted from a highway gently placed in the countryside to one defined by pizza parlors, gas stations, convenience stores, car dealerships, and small service centers. Moreover, its zoning invites still more commercial development.

Comprehensive Planning Needed

This struggle over forward-looking planning, market forces and community character will only intensify in the coming years. With easier access to major centers of employment and still comparatively low-cost housing, there is danger that this will become a region of residential suburbs. Indeed, it is likely that residential growth will occur much more rapidly than commercial, service, or industrial activities.

Moreover, as commuters move to the Valley, there will be increased pressure to place industrial activity elsewhere. At the same time, some residents who have experienced the distress of economic decline appear to be too willing to accept immediate development without questioning its long-term impacts. In either case, the coming of the highway shows a clear need for progressive, comprehensive local planning.

The full impact of the intersection is still unknown. Employment is up, population growth and commuter traffic are up. Property values and house prices are increasing, as are industrial and commercial interests in Valley locations. The Valley is no longer in decline, no longer isolated, and no longer economically quiescent. On the other hand, the coming of the interchange has not yet stimulated the Valley's towns to assess their futures and take advantage of potential growth while protecting their character. This is unfortunate and worrisome, but there is still time. If these communities move quickly, the Valley can develop into the highly prosperous and valued place it deserves to be—and is capable of becoming.

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Central Region

