

Creating a Rural Resource Reserve: Conserving the Green Heart of Southeastern Massachusetts

○ Akihiko HIGUCHI, Member, Kyushu University
Ned THOMAS, Kyushu University

1. INTRODUCTION

Situated in the southeastern corner of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts between the rapidly growing metropolitan areas of Boston, Providence and Cape Cod, the Green Heart is a quarter million acres of largely undeveloped open land dotted by historic small towns, fields, dense forests, and open vistas. This area represents the last undeveloped piece of North America's first colonial settlement and serves as both a reminder of the past as well as a portent of the future. Within its borders, unique natural systems, including globally significant pine barrens, coastal ponds, and cedar swamps, are home to an amazing variety of rare and endangered plants and wildlife. Special places include the scenic Taunton and Palmer Rivers, the Assawompset Pond complex, Myles Standish State Forest, and the red blaze or cranberry bogs at harvest.

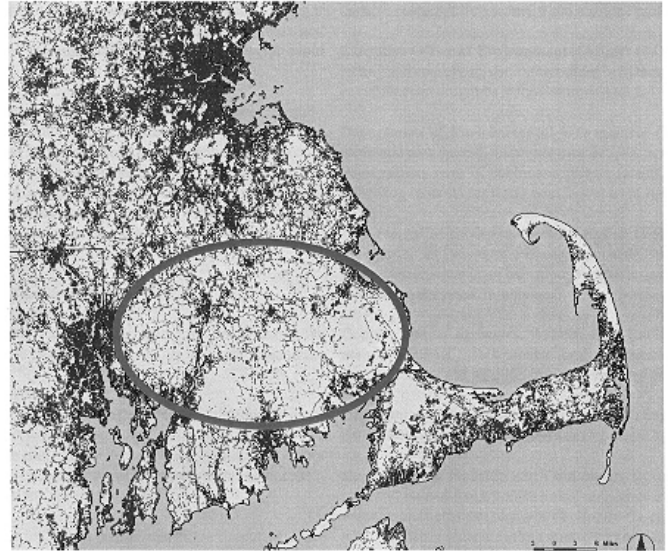


Figure 1: Southeastern Massachusetts

Over centuries, successive generations of residents have co-existed with this landscape, and their histories are revealed along Native American trails, in cities shaped by whaling and textiles, and by generations of families who have worked the land. The region exists today as a series of proud and independent communities stretching across a large expanse of otherwise unfragmented land – a “Green Heart” often bypassed by busy travelers on their way to somewhere else. Now, as in the past, the natural feature that draws the most attention is water, which connects the region in silvery rivers, abundant lakes and ponds, and immense but unseen groundwater resources. This paper presents a strategy for protecting the Green Heart's important natural and cultural resources through the creation of a regional framework of cooperation by the cities and towns in southeastern Massachusetts.

2. SCENARIO

A careful look at the historic towns and rural landscapes of southeastern Massachusetts reveals that the region is on the brink of changing forever. Rapid population growth and development pressures are pushing in from all directions, and the places most attractive to newcomers and developers are often those places considered most special to the region – the river corridors, bog uplands, and flat open land with good soils. Once developed, these open spaces and the resources they sustain may never be reclaimed.

Thousands of new residents are expected in the region over the next twenty years, and planning for state highway and transit projects is already underway to facilitate their arrival. Meanwhile, farms and forests are being gobbled up by sprawling residential expansion, and commercial development has begun to spread along highways and busy interchanges. This kind of bland, homogeneous development and reckless abandonment of responsible stewardship over the land ignores the need for conservation of valuable natural resources and threatens the rural character of the region.

Southeastern Massachusetts lags behind other areas in terms of employment, education, and economic development. The region also lacks the necessary tools to manage growth effectively. More than three-fourths of the towns have no planning staff or master plans, and the allowable development under existing zoning is unsustainable. This part of Massachusetts is at the bottom of the barrel in receiving state and local funds for land protection. But perhaps most critically, residents of these communities have little or no incentive to think or act as a region with mutual and shared goals. Without cooperation, the region flounders and important resources are squandered and lost.

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Kyushu University, Civil Engineering Dept., Fukuoka, Hakozaki. Phone: (092)641-3131(8677), Fax: (092)642-3306

3. RECOMMENDATION

The answer to this situation lies in thinking beyond town boundaries and recognizing regional interests. Together, towns can work toward a shared vision on a regional scale: a vision composed of strong distinct towns and cities, protected water resources, working and natural landscapes, and biological diversity. By creating a ‘rural resource reserve’ to protect vital elements of the Green Heart, communities will begin to think regionally and act locally, taking control over future growth and development in the area. Ten small towns comprise this proposed rural resource reserve, and they should be joined by the cities of Taunton, New Bedford, Plymouth, and Fall River. Each of these communities can share in the decisions and benefits of regional cooperation.

The rural concept of a resource reserve is based on five elements: strong communities, working landscapes, biodiversity, connections and corridors, and water. Together, these resources define the Green Heart of Southeastern Massachusetts.

- *Communities* are both the rural towns and the urbanized cities, which share a mutual interest in directing new growth to areas with existing infrastructure and away from valuable natural and working landscapes.
- *Working landscapes* are the farms and forests that establish the character of the region.
- *Biodiversity* represents the unique resources in this area – pine barrens, cedar swamps and coastal ponds, vernal pools and cranberry bogs, and a large concentration of rare and endangered species
- *Connections and corridors* include special places such as the Taunton river and Myles Standish State Forest as well as additional opportunities to connect open space and create water corridors.
- *Water* is the critical link that binds communities to each other, to the natural environment, and to other areas outside the region. Protecting and managing water quality and quantity is a key element to the region’s economic, environmental, and social well-being.

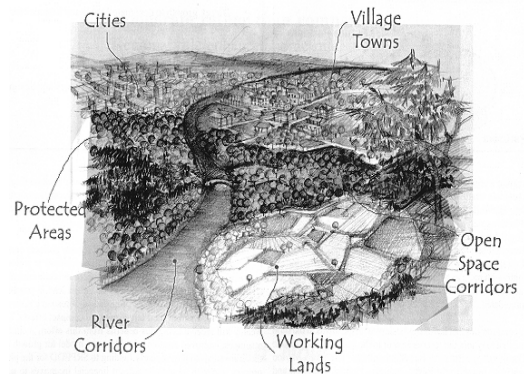


Figure 2: Elements of the Rural Resource Reserve

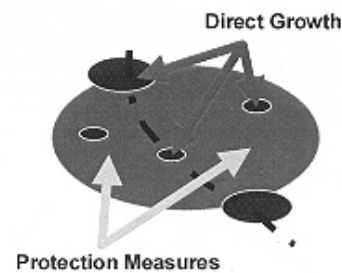


Figure 3: Proposed Strategy: direct, protect, connect

4. CONCLUSION

It is important that residents of southeastern Massachusetts recognize their shared interests and identity and realize that common fears and threats can be addressed most effectively by working together. This paper proposes that “regional rule” can be used to enhance traditional “home rule” as a new approach to old problems. The proposed framework would allow communities greater collective bargaining power, a shared vision of the future, coordinated protection of resources that don’t recognize political boundaries, and the necessary tools to manage growth effectively. It is hoped that this work support larger efforts toward regional cooperation among 51 communities throughout all of southeastern Massachusetts.

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