

Regionalism Picks Up

Speed



New England States Find Common Ground

by Chuck Morgan, Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission

Northern New England has benefited from regional collaboration for centuries, and recent cross-border initiatives suggest that regional economic activity is more important than ever.

Long ago, when settlers traded with one another, with the Algonquins, and with other countries, efforts to increase trade were not focused on boosting individual states. The states as we now know them did not exist. Not until the Missouri Compromise of 1820 were the boundaries of Maine established, for example. Before that it was part of Massachusetts. When the lines were drawn on a map in 1820, they cut through an already thriving region. Business activity, social interaction, and family relationships had long fostered interdependence.

Transportation and Regionalism

The year 1822 saw the opening of a bridge connecting Maine and New Hampshire and giving residents their first non-water-dependent method of crossing the Piscataqua River. Interpersonal connections and economic activity increased between the states. Nearly 200 years later another important transportation system linked Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts—the Downeaster.

In 1995 Maine's legislature created the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA), and in 2001 the Downeaster opened for business, ending a 30-year dearth of passenger service. Since then, the total number of passengers has

products industry has been decreasing and businesses have shut their doors. Now a multistate organization, the Northern Forest Center, is tackling issues common to forestry-dependent communities.

The center was founded in 1997 with the idea of using existing networks and partnerships to build a sustainable economy, revitalize communities, and conserve the landscape of the northern forest of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York.

The center and the North Country Council of New Hampshire have tapped U.S. Economic Development Administration funds and are combining those funds with private money to pursue economic initiatives. For example, they are developing a strategic blueprint for sustainable

The goal is to reinvigorate the rural economies of the Northern Forest by the following efforts: delivering a regional strategy and action plan; providing a framework for new public and private investment in Northern Forest communities; and leveraging the competitive advantages of the region's forest products, recreation, tourism, energy, and the creative economy.

Shipbuilding

Another industry that has changed over the years is shipbuilding. The region's strong seafaring history has encompassed both the hand-built wooden ships of yore and today's nuclear submarines.

Currently, the largest shipbuilding employer in the border region of Maine and

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exceeded 1.4 million. In fiscal year 2006, the Downeaster was Amtrak's fastest-growing service, with overall ridership up 23 percent from the previous year. The Downeaster has made it easier to live in Maine while working in Greater Boston or attending one of its world-class educational institutions. Additionally, downtowns hosting the new depots have become more desirable, which has boosted revitalization.

Industries Across Borders

For centuries, two industries drove the Maine and New Hampshire economies—wood products and marine-dependent businesses (fishing and shipbuilding). Today, although other industries have pulled ahead, particularly in New Hampshire, the old industries are still providing significant numbers of jobs in smaller towns and border regions.

Forestry

Employment in the forestry and woods

economic development in the Northern Forest region—a project that flowed directly from findings presented at the Northern Forest Council 10th Anniversary in 2004.

A forum on that occasion made four recommendations: 1) invest public and private resources to develop and implement community and economic development strategies across the region to reinvigorate the rural economies of the Northern Forest; 2) continue public and private investment in the conservation and forest stewardship efforts catalyzed by the work of the original Northern Forest Land Council; 3) support private forest landowners in practicing sustainable forest management and good stewardship while encouraging public access to private property for recreational purposes; and 4) create a collaborative regional effort to follow through and ensure the implementation of the initiatives in the report. In a letter dated May 27, 2005, all four governors pledged to implement the fourth recommendation first.

New Hampshire is the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. The facility is responsible for the maintenance and refurbishing of nuclear submarines for the United States Navy. It accounts for 10,000 direct and indirect jobs. More than 80 percent of the jobs are in York County, Maine; 10 percent are in Rockingham County, New Hampshire; the remainder are based in other parts of the two states.

The shipyard is vital to the region, but on a Friday the 13th in 2005, the future did not look rosy. On that day the Pentagon announced that the Base Realignment and Closure Commission was placing the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard on the closure list. Area communities were alarmed. Not only were the 10,000 jobs a significant percentage of the economic base, but they included some of the best-paying jobs in the region.

The threatened closure galvanized people and led to a highly cohesive effort to have the shipyard taken off the list. Led by the governors of both Maine and New

Hampshire, the push involved Congressional delegations, local officials, labor unions, and the business community.

Among the many benefits of their successful efforts was tangible proof that cooperation across state borders is effective. Today the states are looking for additional ways to build relationships.

Collaboration Grows

After the naval base effort, economic development professionals, chamber of commerce directors, and business professionals formed the Bi-State Coordinating Committee, meeting with professors Charlie Colgan of the University of Southern Maine and Ross Gittell of the University of New Hampshire about expanding multistate economic collaboration.

The professors reviewed the existing economic data and the studies that each had previously conducted on York County and coastal New Hampshire. They then identified several possibilities for fruitful multistate projects, including a regional incuba-

tor for technology businesses.

In September 2006, with funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration and the Maine Department of Labor, the group held a Bi-State Summit. The keynote address focused on the professors' report. Speakers included the current governors of Maine and New Hampshire, a former governor of Maine, and columnist Neal Pearce of the nonprofit New England Futures (an organization that promotes regionalism). As many as 200 people attended.

At a December 2006 follow-up session, participants in small group sessions narrowed the collaborative opportunities to: supporting small business development; expanding and improving the tourism economy; supporting and building the region's high-tech clusters (biotechnology, life sciences); maximizing the impact and benefits of the region's Baby Boomer economy; looking at ways to support the development of affordable housing options; and improving and enhancing the region's transportation systems.

More people are recognizing that collaboration is the key to future success. Increases in domestic and international competition, combined with shrinking markets, have forced industries to become more innovative and efficient. Regions, states, and communities are cooperating to maintain and strengthen their economic base.

As the Maine-New Hampshire experience shows, cooperation improves efficiency—especially needful in an environment of scarce fiscal resources. Further, economic activity does not stop at borders. And lastly, the significance of geographic boundaries is likely to decrease in this era of rapid technological change and globalization. If we are to be successful in growing our economy and creating jobs for residents, we need to cooperate beyond our borders.

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Our Piece of the Pie

See the article on page 26, "Capacity Building for Nonprofits: A Hartford Example," by Anna Sherman, TCC Group



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