

NEW ENGLAND: AT GROWTH'S CROSSROADS

By Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson

A near-miracle in New England town government occurred a dozen miles outside Boston last summer. By votes topping two thirds -- legally required but tough to muster -- the town meetings in Abington and Rockland, and the Weymouth town council, agreed on a single, path-breaking redevelopment plan for the now largely vacant South Weymouth Naval Station.

As a result, the massive 1,432-acre site will have a pedestrian-scaled Village Center with clusters of landscaped neighborhoods, offices and retail space, 2,855 homes, and no less than 1,000 acres preserved for open space and recreation -- a breakthrough model of environmental sustainability.

Could all this be true in a 21st century New England that's also plagued by flight of youth, by severe housing cost inflation and shortages, by slow- or no-growth population -- not to mention waves of generic, could-be-anywhere development devouring America's most prized town- and countryscapes?

The answer's yes, but only by dint of a remarkable

partnership and process. Earlier on, Weymouth, Abington and Rockland hadn't envisioned anything more for the site than a monster shopping mall and housing for seniors only (heaven forbid more children -- they equal schools and schools cost money!)

But then some local leaders began to have second thoughts. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's New England office took active interest because the base was also a federal "Superfund" site, with pockets of serious military-generated wastes. Initiating a series of gatherings, EPA officials briefed residents about "smart growth" development ideas -- housing at multiple income points, a new town center, and public transit (the Old Colony commuter rail line, with direct service to Boston, runs beside the property).

Concurrently, the state-sanctioned Tri-Town Development Commission wisely designated a master developer for the entire project -- Lennar Partners, a California-based firm that specializes in base recycling. Numerous state offices,



Read more about the plan for the South Weymouth Naval Air Station at www.thevillagecenterplan.com.

including Massachusetts' new Office of Commonwealth Development, stepped in to help. And as townspeople learned about development choices, commented and added their own ideas, the new model gained momentum.

Especially important: the message to the towns that if they really wanted new tax-producing jobs (a biotechnology park, for example), they'd need workforce housing -- and that smaller economy-minded homes on smaller lots can be

attractively designed and constructed. To overcome fears, the developer also offered to reimburse the towns for any added school costs.

The tragedy of New England, 2006, is that the South Weymouth formula -- a way to embrace historic New England values while protecting the environment and growing to meet the times -- is so rare. From Maine to Connecticut, it's easy to whip up opposition to any in-town infill development. The region has managed in the recent decades

to gobble up 1 million acres of open space and farmlands for development -- more than its total land consumption in all its prior recorded history. And for what? Faceless subdivisions chomping up New England's signature landscape? McMansions swallowing valued acres in suburban towns, or climbing up hillsides? Highways filled with tacky signs, strip malls, big chain boxes?

If New England loses its physical distinctiveness, what will draw or keep residents -- especially today's footloose young professionals? The weather?

The region does have an asset it didn't a decade ago. A network of "smart growth" organizations has sprung up. From Grow Smart Rhode Island to the Vermont Forum on Sprawl to the new 1,000 Friends of Connecticut, they're out to channel development so it both strengthens towns and protects the countryside. All favor reinvigorating the region's great old mill towns, including (where it's possible) commuter rail connections to larger urban centers. Increasingly, these public-spirited stewards of a sounder

New England future are connecting across the six states and working hand-in-hand with historic preservationists and advocates of expanded workforce housing.

On a parallel track, some faith communities (the Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford most visibly) are focusing on issues of equity in development.

But one agonizes -- how many town governments are listening? How many governors, how many state

legislators, how many influential business leaders recognize how critical it is to revamp laws and policies? How many are making a real effort to engage citizens and communities in constructive new ways, to make New England both more livable and more competitive in the 21st century?

Time's a-wasting. A glance at the Census figures, showing stagnant if not declining population in most New

England states, a region largely missing the spirit and vigor of youth, suggest troublesome complacency. Even New Hampshire, the fast-growth outlier, may be "committing slow economic suicide," cautions famed demographer (and Exeter resident) Peter Francese, warning income-generating young families will increasingly despair of finding affordable housing and leave.

Can New England's six states start learning from each other,

compare notes on best-practice development models, and especially, as South Weymouth illustrates, engage their citizens in envisioning the region's future? The answer will make all the difference.

Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson of the Citistates Group writer team have delved into New England's challenges and hopes as part of a New England Futures project, with findings at www.newenglandfutures.org.