

Planning Around Constraints: A Snapshot of Greenway Developments in Massachusetts

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In Massachusetts, we have done a great job convincing the public that they will benefit from the economic, recreational and open space benefits of greenways. Volunteers have coordinated and lobbied hard to make visionary greenway concepts realities. But our abilities to pro-actively expand and execute the subsequent chapters of our greenway visions are being choked by **archaic zoning laws and regulations, short-sighted legislators and inter-agency bickering, and budgets that pit human services against our quality of life.** Without belaboring the point, **unsympathetic changes in elected government at all levels and a state-wide fiscal crisis** are the most trying constraints to accomplishing our greenway development objectives.

Cross boundary/coordination issues: The Blackstone River Bikeway

The area that I live and work in is in Massachusetts, in the Blackstone River Valley. In 1986, Congress designated the valley a "national heritage corridor" because it is, in fact, the birthplace of America's Industrial Revolution. The Blackstone River runs from north of Worcester, MA to Pawtucket, RI before emptying into Narragansett Bay. One of the most significant greenways we are working on there includes the development of the **Blackstone River Bikeway**. While only 46 miles in length, this bikeway, like the river, traverses the political boundary drawn between the two states.

In Rhode Island, seven contiguous miles of bikeway are in near-constant use and the remaining segments are projected to be complete within the next two years. But the 24 miles between the border and Worcester present a very different story. A recent report recommends the need to acquire 242 acres along the bikeway path. But the state agency that will manage the bikeway (Massachusetts Highway Department – MHD) is not able to acquire more property than the bikeway needs thereby necessitating that land trusts and others work together to procure the easements and outright acquisitions to not only make the bikeway project possible, but to ensure that a greenway truly hugs this river. Under its mandate, the Corridor itself cannot acquire property or easements, but it provides the much needed clout and energy that will make this greenway happen. Nevertheless, we have a long way to go.

The Pressure of Sprawl

Our work developing greenways also highlights the pressure of "sprawl" on the Massachusetts landscape. Worcester County, where the upper Blackstone River is located, has experienced

some of the hottest housing prices in the nation. A mere twenty years ago the area was considered a sleepy valley in economic decline. Today, its combination of open land and its proximity to Worcester, Providence and Boston all offer housing developers easy profits and consumers clamoring for more. But overlay each community's archaic zoning regulations and no public transportation to speak of and you have a petri dish of sprawl blooming throughout the state. According to the figures released in Mass Audubon's 2003 report: **Losing Ground: At What Cost?**, Massachusetts *continues to lose between 40 and 78 acres of land per day* to development. Nine out of every ten acres was consumed for residential development where low density, large lot construction was the norm.

Working Beyond Constraints

It can also be argued that these very constraints might also prompt us to talk to each other just a little more, to be just a bit more creative, and to engage and ask government to actually work.

In the city of Boston, the Big Dig – the most expensive public works project in the history of the nation – is nearing completion. Its mind-boggling \$46 billion price tag grossly overshadows two significant aspects of the project that are important to us. 1) *People* live in the city and the roads were redeveloped *underground* to help enrich the quality of life for the people who live and work there. 2) Greenways are *so very important* to our quality of life that they were reinvented and remade as a significant component of this project.

Yet even in these final days, problems abound and late last month, jurisdiction raised its ugly head once again. Governor Romney insists on retaining state ownership of the **Rose Kennedy Greenway** that will reach from **North Station to Chinatown**. But the Mass Turnpike Authority asserts that ownership will be transferred to that agency just like any other turnpike property. Wait. The funds used on this greenway come from us, the taxpayers, and they are public *green* lands. We own this greenway and this conflict serves to highlight the status we now give to it. The fact that agencies are bickering over it is a good thing! The greenway's health and welfare should not be driven by transportation or by partisan politics. It is so important to the urban living experience that it needs a new kind of ownership and oversight as well. Let's hope that a trust or conservancy will ultimately, and effectively, manage the space.

Greenways in Massachusetts are a part of the landscape that our citizens – young and old – have come to appreciate and expect. We look forward to finding paths around and through the constraints mentioned here to enhance the quality of life Massachusetts can offer its residents in the decades to come.

For more information, please visit these sites:

Metacomet Land Trust (MLT)	www.metacometlandtrust.org
Blackstone River Conservation Alliance (BRCA)	www.blackstoneconservation.org
John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (JHCBRVNHC)	www.nps.gov/blac

For a summary of the report: **Losing Ground: At What Cost?** visit
www.massaudubon.org/losingground