



Inclusive Growth and Mobility

Where and how our region grows and how we get around it are the result of choices – choices with long-term implications on travel patterns, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and overall quality of life.¹ Our decisions today will affect future economic opportunity and ease of making social connections and physical activity. Where we build new housing and where we locate new jobs will impact municipal tax revenues. The shape of our growth will determine who benefits and who does not.

To meet the region’s goals, we’ll need to focus most of our growth in places where homes, jobs, and infrastructure already exist, and especially in places that are easily connected by reliable and affordable public transportation. These locations include city and town centers, village centers in more distant suburbs, and urban and suburban neighborhoods that are served – or that could be easily be served – by transit. It also includes previously developed but currently underutilized sites that already have water and wastewater infrastructure.

Such smart-growth locations exist throughout the region. The amount and type of development may differ from place to place – but there are ways “to grow smart” in cities, suburbs, and even in more rural locations.

As we focus development in these smart-growth locations, we must also preserve our cultural and historic assets, as well as the natural resources that provide habitat, farms, wetlands, and stormwater infiltration. We must ensure that growth does not provide opportunity for some, while displacing others. The development and retention of affordable homes is a key to growth that is both sustainable and equitable. The presence of well-paid jobs and transportation affordable to all are critical elements of making all communities welcoming to all the people of our diverse region.

Vision

- **In 2050**, the ways we get around are reliable, adequately funded, and well maintained. Travel is safe, efficient, pleasant, and affordable to all households, regardless of income. New transportation technologies and services operate on our roads, underground, and on the water. These new travel options help alleviate congestion and pollution, rather than adding to it. Public transit and shared trips are often more convenient and affordable than solo trips. Auto congestion still exists, but it is predictable and avoidable.

People with mobility limitations and those without a car can get around easily and can afford to do so. Low-income residents and residents of color enjoy high quality transit to more parts of the region, improving access to opportunity. People of all ages walk or bike more frequently for short trips

¹ <https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/vehicle-miles-traveled-emissions/>

because conditions make that option safe and enjoyable. The transportation system has a minimal impact on the local and global environment, with reduced pollution and runoff, drastically reduced GHG, and less land set aside for roadways and parking.

- ▶ **In 2050**, our air is pure, indoors and out. Our cities and towns are healthy, with beautiful parks and natural areas accessible to all. Our cities and neighborhoods are quieter, with less polluting and more efficient transportation technologies. Contaminated sites are cleaned up and turned to new uses. There is less waste overall, but unavoidable waste produces energy, fertilizes soil, or is reprocessed. We have enough fresh water from our wells, streams, and reservoirs to meet the needs of people and wildlife. Our farms and fisheries produce plentiful and healthy yields, and are sustainable. Habitats, forests, wetlands, and other natural resources are protected and enhanced.
- ▶ **In 2050**, residents and visitors of all backgrounds enjoy a wide variety of historical, cultural, recreational, and artistic experiences. Public art, cultural institutions, and social activities reflect our region's diversity and an accurate reflection of history. Residents of all ages, abilities, and incomes have opportunities for creative expression and art education. Public and private funding makes art more accessible to a broader audience. Public programming and urban design encourage opportunities for social and cultural experiences and walkability. This builds social connections and cohesion. New development complements and enhances existing city and town centers. Historic buildings and cultural landscapes that are important for understanding our region's people and cultures are protected or adapted to contemporary needs.

How we got here

From our earliest cow paths to the streetcar suburbs of the late 19th and early 20th century, Greater Boston's urbanization radiated out from the core cities in the hub and spoke pattern we see even now on our transit and road maps. With the advent of the automobile and the post-war boom, Metropolitan Boston rapidly suburbanized, continuing the development pattern that defines our region to this day.²

Part of that boom was driven by white flight from the central cities, facilitated by the construction of highways and federal policies that opened up access to suburban homeownership to many, but not all. Richard Rothstein and others have demonstrated the racist bias of many of the federal and local housing policies that intentionally excluded Black and other BIPOC communities from benefiting from these programs and from having equal access to all neighborhoods. We live today with the results of this intentional exclusion, demonstrated by ongoing disparities in wealth and homeownership between Black and White households and the highly segregated regional distribution by race.^{3,4}

2 O'Connell, James. *The Hub's Metropolis: Greater Boston's Development from Railroad Suburbs to Smart Growth*. MIT Press. 2013.

3 <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/color-of-wealth.aspx>

4 http://www.regionalindicators.org/topic_areas/7#home-ownership-rate

Our transportation system developed in response to the demands driven by land-use location decisions. Just before the 20th century, Boston launched the nation's first subway (barely beating New York City). There were subways, trolleys, buses, and regional rail, and many people walked to jobs and elsewhere.

During the suburbanization of the past century, private vehicle ownership skyrocketed to serve the dispersed homes across the region. Taxpayer dollars built highways and often expanded parking lots, while a slow disinvestment from public transportation began. Ring development along Route 128, then 495, and the construction of the Turnpike and I-93 facilitated the movement away from the Inner Core cities. While the personal auto provided convenience and privacy, it also resulted in air pollution, congestion, and the need to convert thousands of acres to roads, parking lots, and other infrastructure needed to support this travel preference. Road and bridge construction and maintenance took precedence over investments in public transportation, walking, and biking.

Our development patterns have also converted thousands of acres of habitat, farm, and wetlands to building sites, roads, and parking. Mass Audubon has documented that 1.1 million acres are now developed, 21% of the state's land. And we are converting 13.5 acres a day of natural land to new development.⁵ We've built some neighborhoods with no publicly accessible open or recreational space. Historic and cultural spaces and buildings have been lost or have been encroached on by new, incompatible development.

In the last few decades, Metro Boston's downtowns have experienced a resurgence. People returned to cities like Boston, Somerville, and Salem, seeking the benefits of urban living, and in so doing, have reversed decades of population loss. The cities in the Inner Core, particularly, have experienced strong population and employment growth.^{6,7}

Some cities in the Inner Core have tried to get ahead of this growth with an influx of new housing development, while others have resisted growth. Without a balanced effort, it hasn't been possible to add enough housing to meet demand. The urban renaissance has stabilized some cities' finances and reinvigorated neighborhoods and business districts, but neither the benefits nor the burdens have been evenly shared.⁸

Once-affordable neighborhoods and towns are out of reach even for middle class buyers. As rents and home prices reach historic highs, many long-term residents, immigrants, and artists are priced out. This is hitting low-income and many BIPOC communities especially hard. Seniors on fixed incomes are also increasingly vulnerable to housing instability. For many renters, homeownership in a growing number of communities is simply impossible.

5 Mass Audubon. Losing Ground 2020 Report.

6 <https://www.mapc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/01JanJobGrowth.pdf>

7 <https://housing-submarkets.mapc.org/submarkets/1>

8 https://ma-smartgrowth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/03/FINAL_Multi-Family_Housing_Report.pdf

Challenges

This is a uniquely challenging time to assess the state of our transportation system as we come out of a devastating pandemic that bottomed out ridership (and fares) on public transportation, generated record unemployment, and saw huge numbers of employees and students working from home. Exactly when the transportation system will achieve a "new normal," and what that will look like, will take some time to ascertain.

Even before the pandemic, emerging innovations in technology, such as hybrid and electric vehicles; transportation network companies like Uber and Lyft; micromobility offerings such as bike and scooter share; and the prospect of automated vehicles were actively reshaping the future of transportation. The pandemic hit pause on some of these trends, but they are showing signs of restarting.

Building back our public transportation system, aligning transportation investments with changing land-use patterns, and planning on how to incorporate new transportation technologies into our region are just some of the major challenges ahead.

Another challenge is overcoming the inequities of our current transportation/housing system. Some people “move until they qualify” – that is, go to live in a community they can afford. Many of these communities, however, are inaccessible to jobs and services, and living in them involves high transportation costs and long commutes. Those who remain in high-cost urban and suburban communities find themselves financially squeezed by high rents and costly transportation.

Environmental hazards, including pollution and noise caused by transportation, unfairly burden BIPOC and low-income communities, with significant health impacts.⁹ And overall, people of color continue to spend more time commuting to and from work than White residents. We have found that Black bus riders spend 64 more hours per year commuting than White riders.¹⁰ This pattern may only worsen as predominantly White workers in high-paying jobs spend more time working from home, while so-called “essential” workers must still travel to and from a job in a physical location.

Local zoning requirements, such as large minimum lot sizes, off-street parking requirements, and other regulations reinforcing the centrality of the personal auto have spurred an auto-oriented growth pattern over the past half century. Free and convenient parking, public subsidies for road construction and maintenance, and low fuel prices and taxes facilitate the choice to drive. However, we know that this sprawling pattern of growth, even if it is less pronounced than in many other parts of the country, augments inequity and spurs reliance on fossil fuels. Relying on these fuels to power cars, trucks, trains, and buses will not allow us to reduce GHG emissions to state-mandated levels. We also know that relying on personal vehicles cannot be the long-term solution, as there is simply not room on our roadways for everyone to drive.

Fortunately, our public transportation system in Greater Boston has “good bones.” In recent years, the MBTA has focused on improving management practices and the “state of good repair” rates of its fleets. Yet still, the current operations of the MBTA and nearby Regional Transit Authorities are insufficient to meeting the goals of a reliable, affordable, and equitable transportation system. Infrequent service, limited hours of operation, service disruptions, and steady fare hikes are common challenges to creating a more robust and appealing public transportation system. The “hub and spoke” model serves those commuting to and from Boston, but makes for long or impossible journeys to destinations between the “spokes.” Some neighborhoods are underserved by transit options, especially some of those that are home to large BIPOC communities. Good public transit options in lower-

⁹ <https://www.mapc.org/pollution-disparities-covid19/>

¹⁰ http://www.regionalindicators.org/topic_areas/2#affordable-commutes

density suburbs, and more frequent and affordable service for seniors and those with mobility issues, remain elusive. These shortcomings also contribute to people deciding to drive when that is a viable option.

With limited exceptions, land-use planning and regulation is divorced from transportation planning and investments in Metro Boston. Transit agencies do transit, and municipalities oversee zoning and the other regulations. This disconnect results in new development being located in places that cannot be served by public transportation and, in some cases, new development located next to transit service that is either already at capacity or too infrequent to support ridership.

The type and design of development located close to transit also determines if the new residents or workers will actually use the transit that is available. We have found that residents of higher-price apartments and condos with ample parking are more likely to drive than to take transit, while incorporating less parking into these developments could encourage residents without (or with fewer) cars to move in and use the transit that is provided.¹¹

On the positive side, over the past decade, we have seen many more developments built close to transit, a practice known as transit-oriented development (TOD). The new Housing Choice law, which requires multifamily housing districts close to station areas for most of the municipalities in Eastern Massachusetts, should provide an opportunity to integrate land use and transportation more effectively, but all stakeholders need to be part of that conversation in order to deliver on the promise of more integrated and successful development.

How can we raise the funds necessary to invest in the public amenities and goods that our region needs to thrive? Public transportation and art, affordable housing, and open space all have significant funding needs, but exactions on private developments can only be asked up to a certain level before a development proposal no longer makes financial sense. On the public revenue side, tax increases are rarely popular. Each of the identified needs for greater investment has its own constituents and movement behind it. Is it possible to forge a broad-based coalition out of these often-competing interests?

Where and how we grow and travel will, in large part, determine if we can meet our goals for climate, public health, and equity. The challenges we confront are many and include political, financial, legal, and cultural obstacles that have to be overcome, but they are not beyond our grasp to address.

Recommendations

The recommendations focus on investing and expanding our public and active transportation systems in order to support more affordable, reliable, and safer connections to jobs and homes. Reinforcing this direction is the need to use both requirements and incentives to steer new development to places with access to public transportation and the infrastructure to support new growth, and away from critical natural and cultural resources that cannot be replaced. Our recommendations also call for greater attention to the public realm in both new and existing neighborhoods. This includes better access to parks and open space, support for public art, artists, and historic preservation, and human-scaled design.

¹¹ <https://perfectfitparking.mapc.org/>