

The Economically Vibrant Landscape of the South Shore

By George G. Schwartz

Imagine it's 8 a.m. on a sunny Friday morning in the summer of 1976. You're driving south on Route 3, past Hingham, down the quiet corridor through Norwell, Hanover, and the other South Shore communities. You've got the road to yourself, and chances are, you're making an early weekend getaway to the Cape. Why else would you be heading this way at this early hour? If not for the exit signs disbursed among the endless miles of trees, you might not know where you are.

How things have changed in 30 years. Imagine you're driving down this same highway today. You've got much more company on the road, and there are many more signs of commerce, from the first Hingham exits right on down to Plymouth. Chances are you're on your way to work. Commuting, not from "anywhere-to-Boston," as was the norm three decades ago, but perhaps from Hingham to Duxbury.

The past decade has seen a gradual yet decided shift in professional commercial activity away from downtown Boston—and the past few years have been particularly busy. All around Boston, one-time farming communities—from Burlington to Westborough to Hanover—have become attractive locations for corporate businesses. These suburban locales are especially appealing to entrepreneurial and other start-up endeavors. New communications technologies allow for small businesses and professional firms to set up shop anywhere they choose. Many more service firms including accounting, legal, investment, and sales operations are moving south from Boston and many professionals are starting their own businesses closer to home.

While these changes have generated enormous benefits for South Shore communities in the form of increased property values and development-related community contributions, one of the most significant by-products has been the increased need for business-to-business services to support small and mid-sized enterprises and the individuals who drive them.

This is the ripple effect that economists often speak of regarding regional growth, and in many ways, it represents the most significant and deepest reaching benefit of such activity. Not only does it increase local employment and drive revenue for communities, it makes communities more attractive to business owners. In addition, it creates new and more sophisticated resources that can be utilized by existing businesses and individuals.

So what are these support businesses? They span the breadth of services and provide specific benefits. For instance, law firms provide the tools for business structure and growth—from corporate documentation to intellectual property protection and comprehensive advice. Banking and financial services firms offer powerful options for financing business growth, purchasing

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property, and developing or improving facilities. They also provide expertise and other services to the growing community of small and mid-sized companies south of Boston.

Similarly, insurance providers, real estate brokers, architects, interior designers, and a variety of other businesses, are critical components of doing business in any location. Their relationships are truly symbiotic, with each benefiting the other and together creating a vibrant economic environment.

In many cases, the firms offering these services are new branches of established local or national corporations. Once a critical mass of new business is achieved in a region, companies are understandably attracted. One only needs to drive through areas of Hingham, Weymouth, and Norwell, and on south to see familiar business names that have followed the trail of commerce: Blue Cross and Federated Investors and even international companies like Serono, a worldwide biotech leader, occupy new office parks and large commercial buildings. These are joined by new businesses that have sprung up in response to their needs.

A number of factors have contributed to the South Shore's emergence as a business center. The cost of doing business in downtown Boston, where rents can easily top \$80 per square foot, is obviously a major factor. However, there's much more to the story.

Experts point to factors like the region's enhanced transportation infrastructure as a key attraction. As commuter boat service to and from Boston has become a mainstay, and the promise of new rail transportation via the Greenbush commuter line joins existing bus and train routes, it is possible for businesses to locate on the South Shore and draw qualified employees from other areas.

In addition, the towns along the South Shore offer an attractive quality of life, including access to the ocean and miles of beaches, quality schools, open space, and other amenities.

South Shore Chamber of Commerce Executive Director, Peter Forman agrees, citing a variety of additional growth factors including the new Route 44 connector to Route 495, access to Logan International Airport via the Ted Williams Tunnel, affordable land, and greater availability of single-family homes as a result of empty nesters taking advantage of the area's new retirement communities like Pine Hills and Linden Ponds. As proof of the allure of these advantages, Forman points to several recent proposals and projects, including the redevelopment of the Weymouth Naval Air Station and the transformation of the Hingham Shipyard.

"I see three major factors driving growth on the South Shore," notes Forman. "Easier access as a result of sweeping roadway improvements, ample housing stock at a range of prices, and a well-educated and skilled labor pool from which to draw." What could be a better recipe for economic success?

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The influx of new commerce can sometimes be a lightning rod for controversy for small communities concerned with density, traffic, public service burdens, and the impact on a town's character. One of the reasons that this transformation has been relatively easy for South Shore communities is the fact that they already possess well-defined commercial corridors that centralize and contain much of the development. Routes 3, 3A, and 53, for example, traditionally have been havens for businesses, and also include parcels of undeveloped commercial land that planners have specifically designated for economic development.

Under such circumstances, economic activity can flourish, creating tax advantages and other benefits for the area, while minimally impacting the quality of life in these communities.

Of course, the downside of this shared success will probably be a bit more company on the road when it does come time for that weekend drive to the Cape.

But carefully managed growth, such as the type experienced by South Shore communities in recent years, can create a perfect convergence of community and commercial benefits. In the business ecosystem that is being created, new companies that require support services to grow and thrive, provide ever-increasing opportunities and wealth, which in turn enrich the entire community.

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