

INFRASTRUCTURE LEADERSHIP IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, AND SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

Using Transit to Build a Bi-State “Knowledge Corridor”

The bi-state area of central Connecticut and western Massachusetts has a history of strong regional cooperation. Since 2000, the region’s public and private sector leaders have promoted the area as “New England’s Knowledge Corridor” and fostered a unified approach to economic, cultural, and civic development. Now, a new bus rapid-transit system, regional rail line, and federal planning grants are helping the region usher in a more sustainable, transit-oriented future.

The central Connecticut and western Massachusetts region is home to 1.6 million people, with 160,000 students at 32 universities and colleges. Anchored by Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts, and situated between New York and Boston, the area shares many assets and common interests.

Rather than competing for economic opportunities, local leaders have worked for over a decade to promote and develop the area as a whole. In 2000, Northeast Utilities convened a bi-state group of the chief business, economic development, planning, and educational organizations, creating the Hartford-Springfield Economic Partnership to begin working together to advance the region’s economy. The group developed the “Knowledge Corridor” brand as a way of describing and promoting the region as a whole and of emphasizing “the area’s rich history of innovation, invention and world-class education assets,” as the partnership’s website puts it.

Lyle D. Wray, executive director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments, explained the need for a common approach. “The state border between Connecticut and Massachusetts is political, but that’s not the way the economy works. People cross the state lines every day for work. We need to border bust: stop looking at the border as a barrier, and instead see it as an opportunity.”

LEVERAGING REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR FEDERAL FUNDING

Building on a decade of regional economic cooperation, the area’s three regional planning agencies were well positioned to apply for the new Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The three agencies partnered with nearly 40 regional, state, and city agencies and nonprofit organizations to put forward a proposal for a package of housing, education, transportation, employment, and nutrition activities advancing the “New England Sustainable Knowledge Corridor.” HUD recognized their achievement with a \$4.2 million, three-year grant awarded in 2011.

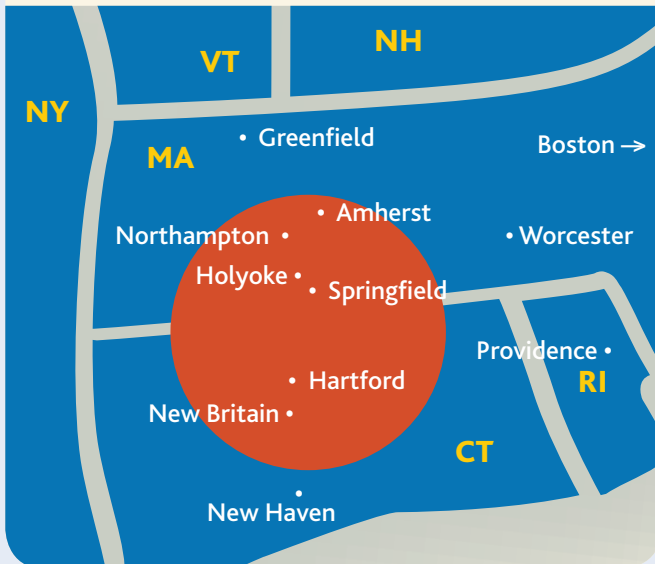
Over the course of the grant period, the partners will jointly implement projects, provide technical services, and match HUD dollars with additional funding. The consortium is pursuing a combination of “planning, doing, and measuring,” undertaking



Buses wait for passengers at the Holyoke Transportation Center in Holyoke, Massachusetts. A fire department headquarters was converted into the transportation hub in 2010. (Photo courtesy of Pioneer Valley Planning Council)

The Knowledge Corridor Spans Two States

Leaders are working together
to promote growth



public outreach and capacity-building exercises, conducting special planning studies, and developing metrics on sustainability.

An overarching goal of the consortium is to connect housing, employment, and education to good-quality transportation, and one of its key deliverables will be to update and integrate existing regional plans to help achieve this goal. The final Knowledge Corridor Detailed Execution Plan for a Sustainable Region includes the following:

- Strategies to leverage the land use potential of transportation assets—including BRT and rail corridors;
- Policies to support and encourage denser, more compact, mixed-use land uses; and
- New guidelines and codes for affordable housing.

Overall, 80 communities participate in the grant's strategic planning, market analysis, and code development activities. The grant is also working to advance transit, streetscape, and other physical improvement projects in six municipalities. For example, a new multimodal transportation center is being moved forward in one low-income community. "These on-the-ground projects are helping to show citizens that this is a not a superficial effort," explained Timothy Brennan, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

More generally, the members of the consortium are looking to the grant-funded work to generate new economic activity in the region. "We are hoping that the analyses conducted under the grant will stimulate interest by the private sector," noted Wray.

CREATING A TRANSIT-ORIENTED REGION

Several major transit projects, critical to the implementation of the Knowledge Corridor vision of an interconnected, sustainable, transit-oriented region, will advance over the next ten years. A ten-mile, \$567 million busway connecting New Britain and Hartford was awarded \$275 million in federal New Starts funding in 2011. The buses will use an abandoned railroad right-of-way, halving city-to-city travel times to 20 minutes. Local leaders hope that the high-frequency, well-equipped express buses will relieve congestion on Interstate 84 and be the first step toward a regional system of rapid-transit buses.

Rail links between New Haven, Hartford, and Springfield are also getting an upgrade. The project, which is receiving \$323 million in federal funding and \$162 million in state funding, will shorten trip time, improve reliability, and increase ridership by building 39 miles of new track, adding and renovating stations, and providing connections to the New Britain-to-Hartford busway. In addition, the region will receive \$70 million in federal funding for the design and construction of the "Knowledge Corridor Restore Vermonter Project," a plan for Amtrak's intercity train service. The line will create links between Knowledge Corridor cities and major northeastern metropolitan hubs.

"We've sought an emphasis on connections as a way of being competitive," said Tim Brennan, executive director of Pioneer Valley Planning Commission in the Springfield area. "The game changers are the intercity and commuter-rail proposals, which can connect the corridor with the New York City area." But land use has not been forgotten. The HUD sustainability grant funds work that is helping Knowledge Corridor partners maximize the land use and development potential of these transit investments.

TAKING THINGS TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Although the region has been a recent recipient of large federal grants, prospects for future federal funding are dimming, and local governments' ability to help is limited. State law in Massachusetts and Connecticut does not allow local-option sales taxes. As a result, the region may face challenges funding transportation projects. "There will be money problems based on the gap between what is available and what is needed," warned Brennan. "The backlog of projects—transit, highway, bridges, bike paths—has passed the billion-dollar mark." New ways of raising money will need to be explored.

Despite the funding concerns, leadership advocating regional cooperation is helping the area move forward with key transit investments and related long-term land use planning. Linking transportation improvements and land use development—as the Knowledge Corridor stakeholders are striving to do—will help maximize the value of the region's infrastructure investments.