

The Urban Ring and the Future of Greater Boston

Business View

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What transportation project being studied by the Executive Office of Transportation compelled more than 30 business and institutional leaders to partner towards its advancement? The answer is the Urban Ring.

In 2005, A Better City established an Urban Ring Institutional and Business Committee, co-chaired by Tom Glynn of Partners HealthCare and Paul Levy of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, to advance transit improvements in the Urban Ring corridor -- a "ring" around Boston's core, stretching from Logan Airport, Chelsea, Everett and Somerville through Kendall Square and MIT, Harvard's new campus in Allston, the Longwood Medical and Academic Area, the South End and South Boston.

Mobility between these communities at present is difficult. The existing MBTA transit system consists of rapid transit and commuter rail lines that make it easy to get to downtown Boston from neighboring cities and suburbs. However, moving between communities in the Urban Ring corridor often involves unreasonable transfers, time and trouble. The Urban Ring would transform the MBTA system by enabling transit riders to reach key destinations in the corridor more directly by traveling between radial lines -- while freeing up critical capacity in the system's crowded core by diverting passengers from downtown stations.

This corridor holds much of Greater Boston region's economic and job growth potential. By 2025, the corridor is projected to see a 15 percent increase in the number of residents and a 45 percent increase in the number of jobs. Improving linkages between residential communities and job-rich areas in the corridor would support mobility and position the region for economic growth.

For example, transit infrastructure is a much-needed lifeline for the region's growing life sciences industry, which is concentrated in a "life sciences necklace" -- an area congruent with the Urban Ring corridor. Collaboration among institutions is highly desired by those working in the life sciences and is an increasingly important criteria in determining federal funding awards.

The idea of the Urban Ring has been a long time in becoming reality. But with the renewed commitment from the institutional and business community, and continuing support from elected officials, significant progress has been made. By later this year, the Executive Office of Transportation will complete a key study defining the station locations, routes and services. Efforts to define a set of "early start" investments are also in the works. These early investments will enable the state to make incremental progress towards a completed Urban Ring.

The Urban Ring is an idea whose time has finally come.

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