



## The Commonwealth's industrial land dilemma: Lessons from the Route 146 Corridor

ZENIA KOTVAL AND JOHN MULLIN

---

A RECENT STUDY OF THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY'S ROUTE 146 CORRIDOR HIGHLIGHTS SOME OF THE CHALLENGES FACING MASSACHUSETTS AS A RESULT OF A LACK OF INDUSTRIAL LAND.

---

Retrofitting older buildings, reclaiming brown-field sites and creating suitable space for modern industrial facilities are all needed for office/industrial activities that are essential to any balanced economy. But increasingly, planners and developers are facing a mismatch between land zoned for industry and land that is suitable for industrial development. Older areas, for example, are constrained by issues of compatibility, access, parking and environmental and flood plain issues. Greenfield sites are constrained by physical site characteristics, such as wetlands and slope, access and transportation networks, development pressures from other land uses and public perceptions and concerns surrounding industrial uses. Unless such issues are addressed — unless steps are taken to increase both the quantity and quality of industrial land — the Commonwealth will face a shortage of developable office/industrial sites.

Communities need to do more than just designate or zone land for industrial purposes. They need to study the suitability of this land for industrial uses. A recent study we conducted of the Route 146 Corridor in the Black-

stone Valley highlights some of the challenges facing Massachusetts as a result of a lack of industrial land.

The Route 146 Corridor is a well-constructed, divided highway that serves as a direct connector between Worcester and Providence through the Blackstone Valley. Upgraded in the 1980s, the highway was connected to I-90 (the Massachusetts Turnpike) in the 1990s. A final high-speed link to Worcester from the Pike is now under construction. The Valley is in the midst of a renaissance, with extensive investment stimulated by the expansion of the highway, the creation of the Chafee National Heritage Corridor and the westerly spread of jobs and people outward from Boston. While people once referred to the Blackstone as the “Lost Valley,” this is no longer the case.

The Corridor is still largely home to traditional industries. In this region's communities, people still make things, from abrasives to high-precision medical instruments. While the number of residents employed by these industries has been in decline, the majority of remaining firms are still profitable. Along with manufacturing, the Corridor is attracting warehousing, biotechnology and a sprinkling of

growth industries. We expect that it will become increasingly diverse over the next decade, as companies move out from core cities and into our smaller towns.

With the completion of the I-90 — Route 146 Connector, the entire Corridor will soon have an impressive array of transportation infrastructure. With four interstates and three major state highways, truck traffic has quick, efficient access in all four directions. With fast passenger and increasingly efficient freight rail service, the Corridor is well on its way to serving distant points. And with three increasingly popular commercial airports within 60 miles of each other, it is one of the best served regions in the nation. If there are transportation problems, they relate to “regional” east-west options. The Valley also offers a wide range of properties that have the potential for industrial development.

Yet it has been slow to create spaces that would be attractive to high-end users, such as technology and research and development based industries. In a larger, two-state Blackstone Corridor study conducted for the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council in 2001, we found that, in Massachusetts, 23 percent of the land zoned for industry has already been developed. Perhaps more significantly, we discovered that 32 percent of the land zoned for industry has significant physical constraints, such as steep slopes, wetlands and ledge that make it practically unusable for industrial purposes. This leaves a mere 45 percent of the zoned land available for new industrial growth, representing approximately 2,500 acres. Few communities offer more than 200 acres of developable land and even fewer have large contiguous tracts of land. All of this significantly limits the Valley’s industrial development potential.

This mismatch between industrial need and industrial land faces many other communities and regions across Massachusetts. Given the resistance to industrial development in many parts of the state, those large parcels currently designated for industrial use must be jealously guarded. In other words, if we are serious about promoting industrial development and preserving the Commonwealth’s manufacturing base, every effort must be taken to insure that our municipalities plan more carefully for such development and resist the temptation to permit the first commercial development opportunity that comes along. To this end, land that is both zoned and suitable for industrial development should have primacy in terms of state grants or capital improvement projects that provide or expand infrastructure improvements in the service of economic development.

The importance of protecting and properly utilizing such industrial lands cannot be overstated: If the Blackstone Valley and the rest of the Commonwealth are to attract first-class industries, the few remaining large industrial parcels these industries consider must themselves to be first class.

Massachusetts, like the Blackstone Valley and the Route 146 Corridor, is literally at a crossroads. It can continue to not address the industrial land problem and miss opportunities to compete for industrial development and the quality jobs that it brings. Or, it can change. Through careful planning, infrastructure investment, improved amenities, and patience, we can help lead a new industrial revolution in the 21st century. ◀

---

*ZENIA KOTVAL is associate professor of urban and regional planning and co-director of urban planning partnerships at Michigan State University.*

*JOHN R. MULLIN is dean of the graduate school, professor of urban and regional planning and director of the Center for Economic Development at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.*

