

In Our Opinion: New England Futures

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New England is a unique collection of states that share a common history, setting us apart from the Far West, the Deep South and the Midwest. Yet the six New England states have seldom worked in concert with one another, which diminishes our economic and political power as a region.

Combining that with declining populations, a drain of talent to other regions and a high cost of living paints a picture of a region in trouble. The time has come for New England states to wake up and work together.

The Partnership for New England is a group of seven regional organizations committed to regional solutions to our challenges. They are jump-starting an attack on New England's common problems by commissioning a series of six well-researched articles by nationally known journalists Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson.

Since December 2004, the two have been interviewing sources across New England to provide material for the series. Each article highlights a strategic issue and provides material to start discussion of how to best to work on that issue.

Over the next five months, the Gazette will publish articles on the first weekend of each month exploring the major issues facing the region from education to health, energy and youth. Our own staff will add a local perspective to the reports.

The research will appear in newspapers and other media throughout New England. It is meant to promote discussion and build support for rebuilding New England's economy and attracting people from other regions to live and work here.

The series started in our Weekend paper and continues today with a look at the "creative economy," focusing on the role the arts play in revitalizing Massachusetts and its neighboring states.

This discussion is especially appropriate to our area, where nineteenth-century manufacturing buildings have been transformed into thriving artists' studios, and where a growing number of art galleries enhance our communities' lifestyles and their attraction to tourists. While Providence has its Rhode Island School of Design and the Berkshires boast Tanglewood and Mass MoCA, the Pioneer Valley offers its own unique mix of the arts.

The Quadrangle in Springfield holds a group of unsung museum gems, while Smith, Mount Holyoke and Amherst colleges have an outstanding array of small museums.

With "Museums 10" organized last spring, the Pioneer Valley has already begun to collaborate in attracting visitors through "cultural tourism," featuring the academic museums along with the Emily Dickinson Museum, Historic Deerfield, the National Yiddish Book Center and the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

The Pioneer Valley is also home to the "Knowledge Corridor," an alliance of 26 institutions of higher education stretching from Greenfield Community College in Franklin County to the University of Hartford in Connecticut, along with businesses who use their research and creative talents.

In many ways, our area, with its creative collaboration among artists, educators and business people, can be a model for New England to become a truly coherent and thriving region.

The New England Futures Project series will run the first of each month through March. We encourage readers to follow its progress in print and on GazetteNET, where more information and Web links are available. But above all, we ask you to get involved, join the discussion, and support this project to build for our future.