

## Why New England?

By Neal Peirce

Across a lifetime, New England has forever taunted my mind, perked my curiosity.

Maybe it started with magical summers beside a glacial lake -- a "great pond" of New Hampshire. Or my Bostonian grandfather showing me the swan boats on the Common and the Minute Man at Lexington. Perhaps it was flying over Narragansett Bay, or watching sea spray on the Maine coast, or basking in the brilliance of a Vermont October day. Or experiencing team building at a boys' school in Connecticut that always managed to put simplicity and directness of purpose first.

Whatever it was, it made me wonder, writing a book on the New England states in the '70s - - what *is it* that makes this corner of America so special?

Or most recently, the question of the future and how will it survive and prosper in the choppy, dangerous waters of the 21st century?

That's why a series called "New England: New Century- New Game" will be released starting next Sunday (October 2). It begins: "Are New England's best days behind it? Is it fated to be an old, blue, cold and complacent corner of a red-hot America?"

Newspapers all across New England will run the articles -- on topics ranging from energy to transportation to health -- from October to March.

How did this come about?

Some background explains. My colleague Curtis Johnson and I have been looking at the big issues facing metropolitan regions across America, writing newspaper series tailored to each, since 1986. Newspapers or community foundations from Phoenix to Seattle, Philadelphia to Charlotte to Dallas -- some 24 in all -- came to us asking us to write series about their areas. We spent time in each region listening hard, interviewing hundreds of people, identifying the most critical issues and ways to cope with them, then writing copy designed to raise peoples' sights, to stir the civic juices.

Our approach was working so well we believed we'd invented a valuable new form of American journalism. We even wrote a book about the process and the regions we'd covered, called *Citistates*.

But did New Englanders see the value in all this? Hardly. For years, while queries flooded in from elsewhere, there wasn't a whisper of New England interest in our work.

In 2002, it was time to "come home." We started a project with the New England Council to identify key issues. Then the Boston Foundation asked for a vigorous assessment of Greater Boston's special challenges. We did it, in what we thought was a lively report, "Boston Unbound," published last year.

But by now it was clear that the *entire* New England region, all six states, are so interdependent, share so many challenges both local and global, that to survive and prosper they must think and act in a far more unified way.

With intensive travel and interviews across the *six* states, we believed we could write a first-ever series of articles illuminating how an entire section of America prepares for a new century. The series could be offered cost-free, to every interested New England newspaper, and for use by public radio, New England Cable News and other broadcasters. It would be a distinct New England "first."

But how to proceed? There wasn't any New England Foundation, no single regional newspaper. And acting alone, the project would be well beyond our capacity -- or appropriate role -- as a journalist team. We needed partners -- people who shared the concerns of New England's 21<sup>st</sup> century fate, and could generate public debate and vision-setting after our work was done.

A partnership did emerge -- the Vermont-based Institute for Sustainable Communities (now our chief operating partner), our old friends the New England Council, the New England Initiative at UMass Lowell, Mt. Auburn Associates, the Orton Family Foundation and the New England Association of Regional Councils. The New England Futures Project was born.

Support came in from the major community foundations in all six states, the Bank of America Foundation and others. Funders all agreed to absolute editorial independence. A web site to engage citizens and leaders across the region -- [www.newenglandfutures.org](http://www.newenglandfutures.org) -- was mounted.

Our advisors counseled that New Englanders, with their obstinate "go-it-alone-ism" by town or state, college or corporation, sometimes lose bright opportunities virtually staring them in the eye. But they admonished us -- Don't tell New Englanders to change character. Instead listen to new and thoughtful voices from across the region, the networks of concern and connection forming at the grassroots, among concerned faculty and entrepreneurs and non-profits, even in the halls of government. Hint at images of the six gloriously different states learning to speak and act like one, when it truly makes sense. *That's* New England's bright future, if there is to be one.

We agreed. It is a daunting goal. But who's to say it's not worth the try?