The Gateway School District’s member towns have struggled between eras of economic prosperity and hard times over the centuries of their existence. Our hilltowns have seen periods of economic vitality based upon mills, mining, and manufacturing. As far back as the mid-1800s, our hilltowns produced a wide range of items and were vibrant communities with populations often exceeding those of today. While it may be hard to believe, Massachusetts was once even a major provider of sheep and wool. Just 40 to 50 years ago, the mills on the rivers in several of our towns provided economic security and employment opportunities for residents.

However, these ‘boom’ times were always followed by some rather lean times which lasted until circumstances changed, and our towns and their residents pursued creative solutions and reinvented themselves. Until fairly recently we’ve faced some lean times that resulted in progressive town officials getting together to once again look for opportunities, obtain state grant money to develop some of those opportunities (including hiring an economic development advisor), and move forward on many different fronts.

We’ve seen some collaboration around updating IT services in the towns, working with the school district to enhance programming and a better understanding of the budget, and towns attracting growth in the renewable energy arena. And, while we’ve seen many businesses close, we’ve also seen some areas of growth and opportunity - some of which towns have taken advantage of and others that were passed over.

We’re also fortunate to be moving into the final stages of getting broadband throughout our towns which may help property values, attract younger professionals that can telecommute, and finally allow us to catch up to some degree with Eastern Massachusetts. However, for those who cannot telecommute (and never will be able to, i.e., the building trades) we are still lacking in access to Interstate 90 (our own Turnpike), although the MassDOT has completed a study of the potential to add an exit somewhere in Blandford.

The study can be found on the DOT website and does point out both positives and negatives that may result from installing such an exit. As the negatives have already been highly publicized by certain individuals, and the public comment period ends on February 3, I thought it may be interesting to look at some other aspects found in the study.

The group of hilltown officials that formed the Gateway Hilltown Collaborative developed an Economic Development Strategy in 2017, with input from the state, regional planning agencies, and professional consultants. That study noted the need for direct access to 90 to attract business, new residents, and opportunities for controlled and strategic economic growth in the hilltowns. The MassDOT report noted that, “access to wider markets and services may improve economic development potential should the Hilltown communities desire those opportunities” and, “the placement of a potential new interchange between I-90 Exits 2 and 3 provides the opportunity for multiple improvements in the hilltowns including park & ride or rideshare, intercity bus service, reductions in travel time, reductions in fuel costs, reductions in pollution, access to more markets and services, shorter travel time to health care and emergency care, and increased opportunities for employment.” The report actually puts the following numbers to their projections: “Blandford Maintenance
entrance would allow residents to reach an additional 361,000 people, 144,000 households, $10.7 million in income, 230,000 jobs, 22,000 business establishments, and $37.5 billion in business sales.” They indicate that “These economic benefits can enhance Hilltown residents’ prospects of finding jobs, increase their earning potential, reduce commuting time, and boost current and prospective Hilltown businesses allowing for improved employment, sales, market value, and tax contributions.”

Given that the report states that the “average travel time for Blandford residents is 36.3 minutes” and that opening up an exit would reduce fuel use and time spent traveling, they note that these changes would thereby reduce overall pollution in the area. While the report looks at overall traffic and truck traffic, it also notes that the current analysis of intersections shows they are well under capacity during both the morning and afternoon peak commuter times. While the report states that a new interchange would change traffic volume, it also noted that some local roadways would see little to no volume change and that “truck routes would change and overall truck traffic would increase but some roads would see a decrease in truck traffic.” Much of this reduction in truck traffic on certain roads is due to the potential new exit diverting existing truck traffic (roughly 750 trips a week to two businesses in the area) off local roads and onto the Turnpike.

Financially, the report states that while increased toll revenue would not pay for installing the exchange, it would more than cover the cost of operating and maintaining the interchange.

The economic growth of our towns is intertwined with the success of our schools, and the state funding of our schools is tied closely to student enrollment. The hope that’s been expressed by the Gateway Hilltown Collaborative is that a combination of ubiquitous broadband, increased collaboration between towns, and a Turnpike exit between Westfield and Lee would bring about another economic revival in our member towns. In working with this group and other town officials, I believe that such growth would stimulate our local economies and potentially increase the enrollment of students in the district, and that our towns can control such growth by effectively designing and using zoning bylaws.

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