

How to Brand a Region

The Merrimack Valley looks for its identity

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VALLEY PATRIOT COLUMNISTS

Like simmering water before the boil, recent events in the Merrimack Valley illustrate escalating interest for the region to cast off its tired trappings and find a new identity that it can leverage for the future. Increasingly it is clear that this identity needs to be focused around innovation – an innovation that is broad and robust and that can fuel sustainable economic development.

One particular vision emerging to meet this objective is that of making the region a nexus for green technologies – from nontoxic chemicals, to self-powered homes, to solar cells and turbine controllers.

It is a growing industry that this region is well equipped to pounce on. Whatever happens, it's obvious that a sultry stew is brewing. In this column we will look at what's going on locally, what is exemplary outside of the region, what we believe are smart steps forward.

What's Happening Locally?

One of the important recent events has been the Merrimack Valley's Planning Commissions' Economic Vision process. This vision is provided to the state and used as a basis for state investments in the region.

The vision calls for the region to provide "an environment of innovation" that will encourage start-ups. It also calls for a "regional branding program" that would "reinforce the image of the Merrimack Valley as a cluster for technology investment".

Specific action items identified are: 1) Increase coordination between economic and community development groups, 2) Expand the "Means Business" website, and 3) Explore best practices from around the country on regional branding efforts and interagency cooperation. To all of these we say, Hurrah!

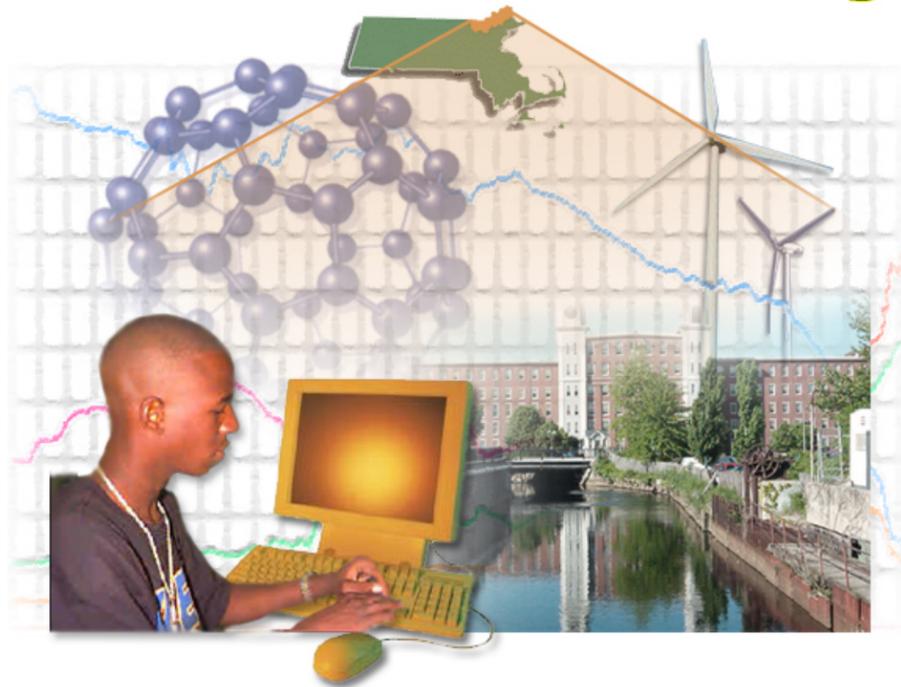
A second key event was the recent Team Haverhill "Possible Dream" meeting, held January 28th at the NECC Technology Center. Team Haverhill is a campaign to get citizens involved in determining the future of the city. It is now in its third year of existence, and has been extraordinarily effective in helping to craft visions and action plans for Haverhill. Although all their meetings are engaging and fruitful, the last "Possible Dream" meeting seemed to have a particular punch.

Over 120 people showed up on a cold January night to explore themes for 2008 and innovation was a clarion call: innovation in quality of life, innovation in education, and innovation in economic development. Is this a theme that's time has come?

What is exciting about Team Haverhill is not only that they talk about the city's future, but that they are inventing a new way of getting citizens involved. They are innovative in their approach. Discussions that were once delegated to planning boards and city councils are now lively and productive public events.

Also, unlike traditional town meetings that tend to focus on the moment, Team Haverhill events are far more conducive to long range planning and collaboration. They are like the way we imagine town meetings should be, but within a city, and further more, they can be templates for something larger.

Innovation Valley



What about, for example, Team Merrimack? How about a multi-city team that meets regularly, with the broad purview of the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, but with the citizen engagement of a Team Haverhill?

To see something like that, look inside the Route 128 belt at the MetroFuture initiative.

What's Happening Elsewhere?

MetroFuture is an initiative of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to engage citizens in establishing a vision for the Boston region through the year 2030. They host workshop-like meetings in large halls with upwards of 500 people at a time.

At a recent meeting, they created a massive simulation exercise. Each table of about 10 people had a team leader with a laptop and spreadsheet with all their tracked variables, from housing density to traffic, to tax rates, to open space.

After a directed discussion on priorities, each table could then adjust the worksheet data of their choice and see the outcomes. It was a crude simulation, but it worked, and it was a brilliant way to make regional planners of 500 citizens. Each group then reported on the variables they changed and the outcomes.

As the tools for simulation advance, this type of exercise can only become more meaningful. Of course, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council cannot pull off these exercises independently.

It takes the generous support of The Boston Foundation, The Boston College Citizen Seminars, and the University of Massachusetts at Boston. The lesson to the Merrimack Valley is that strong regional planning requires a coordinated effort of academia, philanthropy, citizens, planning councils and industry. Neither alone is sufficient.

If MetroFuture is exemplary of citizen engaged regional planning, then equally impressive is the Genetown branding campaign for Boston and surrounding area, embarked upon by The Massachusetts Biotechnology Council and Biospace.com. The Genetown campaign, first initiated in 1993, is a collaborative branding effort to promote the regional biotech industries and investment opportunities.

The campaign is part of a larger effort organized by Biospace.com to help brand "Hotbed" regions in the U.S. and Canada where biotech industries are strong. Other Hotbed regions include Biotech Bay, centered in San Francisco; BioCapital, centered in Washington D.C.; and BioForest, that includes Seattle and Southwest Canada. As explained on the Biospace website:

"As regions compete for resources, these marketing and branding campaigns help to attract capital, talent and other resources to specific geographic areas".

Each Hotbed branding campaign has extensive industry support and, through dedicated pages on Biospace.com, a wealth of regularly updated information and resources. For starters, there is of course the list of Hotbed Participants. In Genetown this includes Abbot Bioresearch Center, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Computer Life Sciences, Pfizer Research Technology, and about 40 others.

Additionally, there is the Hotbed News, and the Hotbed Events. In short, everything pertaining to the biotech industry and companies around Boston is all in one place. And, for added flair, there is a stylized map of the region with logos of represented companies. This map is the visual brand for the region. What can the Merrimack Valley learn from this?

That regional branding requires collaboration around a theme, free information sharing of news and events, and, we might add, a strong web presence

that is able to compile and disseminate pertinent and timely information.

What's Next?

Moving forward, we have several suggestions. First, we are happy to nominate "Innovation Valley" as a theme for the regional branding campaign. We believe this captures the spirit of the region, its legacy, and its hopeful future. We operate the ivalley.org website to help capture and promote the innovative potential.

Additionally, we are trying to create the Merrimack Valley Regional Innovation Network (MVRIN). This could be its own entity, or an outgrowth of ivalley.org. In its simplest form, it would be similar to a Biospace Hotbed site, but in a fuller and fashion, it would integrate the Open Innovation "online marketplace for ideas" model exemplified by local companies like Innocentive and Yet2.com, so that the region will have greater facility for startups and investment.

This is exactly what the MVPC Economic Vision calls for. Second, we recommend the creation of large-scale planning exercises in the spirit of what is happening at the city level, such as with Team Haverhill and the Lawrence Revivendo efforts, and modeled, in part, on the example of the MetroFuture projects.

This will allow all Merrimack Valley citizens to be engaged as planners for the region's future. And third, we recommend a breakdown of the "silo" behavior of many regional stakeholder agencies and adoption of greater information and resource sharing practices.

As an example, the regional chambers could subscribe to feeds or each other's events and announcements. Similarly, online forums for regional discussion could be jointly managed and promoted. Last October we hosted the Green Chemistry Business Summit and needed to take multiple approaches to get it adequately promoted.

What if one publication to a trusted source, such as a regional chamber, was enough to automatically get the message to all the others?

When there is collaboration to make the region innovative, that type of information sharing will happen naturally. Our suggestions are meant to start the conversation – do you have an idea for a theme to help brand our region?

The question to ask is, what does it look like to be exemplary?



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Recently, Mr. Itzkan helped The Boston Foundation to conceptualize and implement its Hub of Innovations tool. You can email him at seth.itzkan@gmail.com

The Innovation Valley initiative seeks to help stimulate economic growth and quality-of-life enhancements in the Merrimack Valley. Every month we will report on innovative businesses, practices, and ideas that are helping to make Merrimack Valley the place to be. Look for our article in print media and online at www.ivalley.org.