

# **The Middle Child of Massachusetts Creates an Economic Future: The Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress**

*Amy Glynn*

The Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts is located in the midwestern section of the state. According to the last census, it is home to 602,878 residents and is the fourth largest metropolitan area in New England. The 43 communities of the region cover approximately 1,200 square miles, roughly the size of Rhode Island.

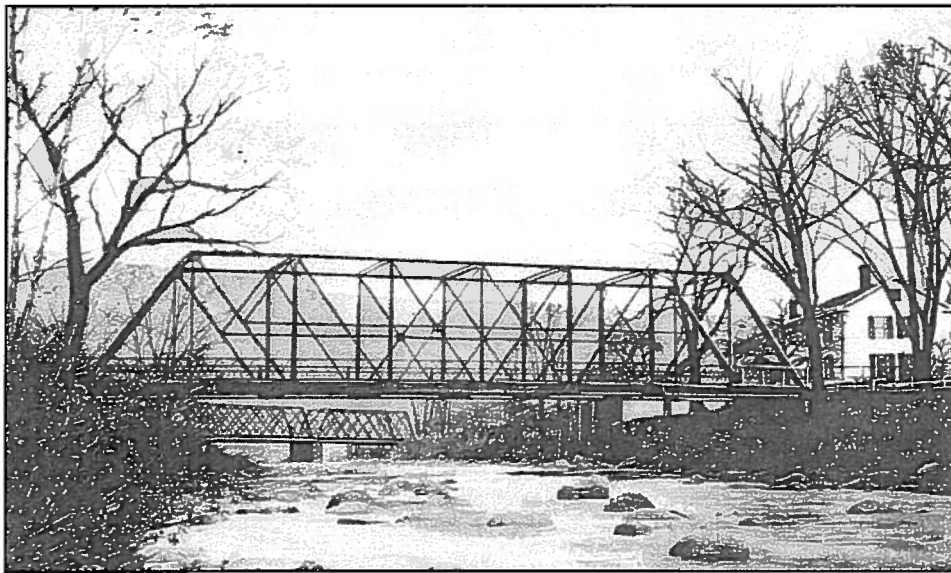
Historically, the economic vitality of the Pioneer Valley came from its deeply-rooted manufacturing base, including paper mills, the national armory, and an extensive machine tools industry. In 1980, more than 28 percent of the Pioneer Valley's workforce was employed in manufacturing. By 1991, as the recession settled in, manufacturing accounted for only 19 percent of total regional employment and the Valley's unemployment rate was 8.8 percent, significantly higher than the national average. Every day brought new stories of shutdowns and layoffs throughout the region. It was in the midst of this decline that the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission initiated the Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress, a plan designed actively to shape the region's next economic wave.

Stacks of literature in my office include phrases like open and participatory, free-flowing information, decisions by consensus, charettes, stakeholders (preliminary and secondary), and collaboration. This

material comes from regions throughout the country. Most of it is characterized by a basic Hollywoodesque success story: mid-to-large city is down and out after losing traditional economic base (manufacturing, defense, whatever), but through an unprecedented spirit of collaboration, which resulted from gathering all of their stakeholders into open and participatory charettes, the resulting free-flowing information produced ideas and strategies which, once adopted, could be considered decisions by consensus.

We used to envy those regions. Flipping through the glossy literature as it came in, we would see photographs of people, huddled around flip charts, smiling, changing their world. It seemed that, somehow, they had managed to speak to every individual in the region. And all those people had great ideas. And, if conflicts did exist, all these cities seemed to have some charismatic, civic-minded leader who gained everyone's trust and helped steer the group not just towards the strategy development, but (here's the clincher), into implementation.

And money. What about the money? These regions all seemed to have foundations—some very large philanthropic organism that was just waiting for the right regional cause, and then, benevolently, handed over an enormous lump sum.



**Chester, Mass.  
Maple Street  
and Railroad  
Bridge, c. 1900.**

Yes, we would look at these regions wistfully. Our region, the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts will never be a celebrity. With just over 600,000 people, we are just a blip on the Census Bureau radar screen. We're the middle child of Massachusetts. Although we're called western Massachusetts, the Berkshires actually provide the west border. (You know, Tanglewood, Stockbridge, Alice's Restaurant, Canyon Ranch.) And 90 miles to the east, we have the B-word/city. (You know, tea parties, Paul Revere, Sam Adams, Harvard, Faneuil Hall.) Like any middle child, we have suffered. We didn't chose to be here, it's just the way the old glacial ice melted. But, sandwiched in by our better known sibs, we have felt the occasional twinges of neglect and, perhaps more significantly, the malaise which comes with a lack of identity.

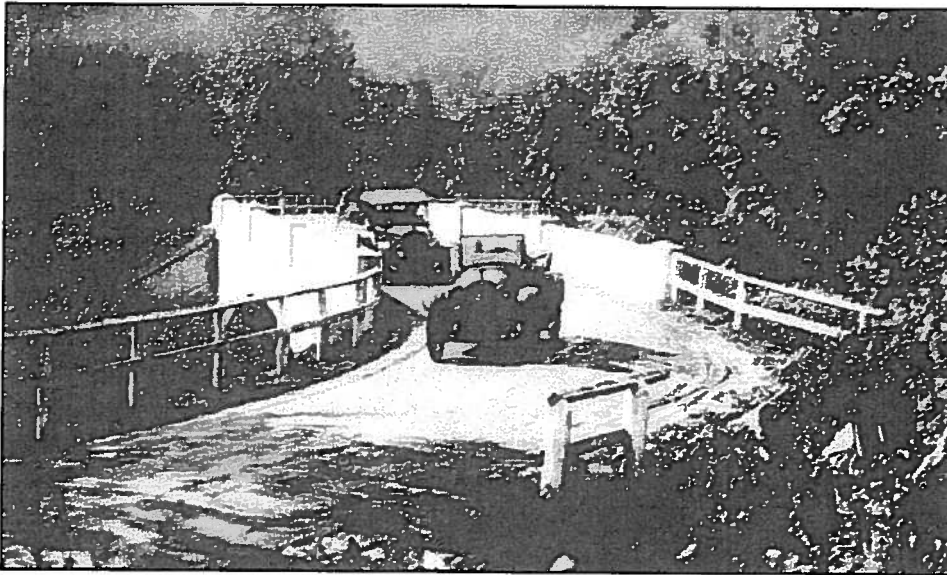
### **Indelible History**

We didn't always suffer from this malaise. The Pioneer Valley has an indelible history, one which contributed dramatically to the growth of this country. Much of it began in 1794, when President George

Washington chose Springfield, Massachusetts as the site of the United States Armory. It was a very early illustration of the cluster theory. With the Armory as the initial catalyst, Springfield became a flourishing city and a center for manufacturing.

Later, Springfield native Thomas Blanchard developed the lathe system, taking the revolutionary system of interchangeable parts, originally pioneered by Eli Whitney, one step farther. According to one story, Eli Whitney took the parts of 12 rifles, which had all been created using Blanchard's lathe machine, to Washington, D.C. to demonstrate the concept of interchangeable parts. He threw all the parts for all 12 rifles on the table and told the onlookers that he would assemble the guns within minutes.

Those present thought he was crazy. Based on manufacturing standards of the day, he would have to take each piece and try each one with all 12 possibilities, then continue doing this matching for each part and each gun. To everyone's surprise, Whitney merely began grabbing one of each type of piece and quickly assembled the first gun. He then continued for the other 11 guns, assembling them all within the given



**Chester, Mass.  
Jacob's Ladder  
Trail, c. 1925.**

time constraint. This concept of interchangeable parts changed the course of manufacturing.

Our cities of Chicopee and Holyoke were, along with Lowell, the first planned cities in the country, with Holyoke eventually becoming the paper-making capital. Traditionally, it was hard to sell Americans on fine papers made in this country: the preference was to buy the better quality stock from Europe. But, after the Civil War, Holyoke-based papers won the prizes at the Centennial Expositions held in Paris and, finally, in the early 1880s, Tiffany & Company placed their contract for wedding stationery with the Whiting Paper Company of Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Sojourner Truth and Emily Dickinson came from this region. We invented basketball and volleyball. Dr. Seuss grew up on Mulberry Street in this Springfield.

Over the past 200 years, we have accumulated a unique and wonderful history. But we are not huge. We are barely mid-sized. And when, like other regions throughout the country, our economic base changed dramatically after the boom of the 1980s, we took the hit. A hard hit. Much of our tradi-

tional manufacturing base shrunk, making it harder for us to remember our unique and wonderful history.

We didn't have that one charismatic leader to rally us together. We didn't have a foundation waiting with financial resources.

Instead, we had 43 different communities with varying forms of government and divergent needs. We had an uneven record of working together regionally. And, although we had tremendous areas of strength and resources, earlier efforts to bring together the public, private, and civic sectors had stumbled.

### **An Understanding for Action**

As it turned out, we did have one thing. We had an understanding that something needed to happen. Leaders across the region, from the public, private, and civic sectors were independently all coming to the same realization. Something needed to happen. Fast.

About this time, in the early 1990s, two things did happen. First, Governor William Weld and his administration published a document called "Choosing to Compete:

A Statewide Strategy for Job Creation and Economic Growth.” The strategy outlined categories for action and examined each region in the commonwealth, including the Pioneer Valley. It addressed the need for new approaches:

This strategy is intended to serve as a blueprint for how the Massachusetts state government can do its job well—in partnership with business, labor, and the research and academic community—by helping create a business environment that is nothing short of the best in the nation for business growth and new job creation.

Through this document, the Pioneer Valley had an offer of support, an understanding from the state that in the new economy partnerships were needed to compete successfully.

The second pivotal element involved money. While a philanthropic organization did not materialize, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), after repeated attempts, did receive a 302(a) State and Urban Planning Assistance Grant from the Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration (EDA).

Tim Brennan, executive director at the PVPC, was aware that the valley was reaching collective critical mass concerning the regional economy. He began meeting with members of the public and private sector. With the commitment of EDA funding, and the blueprint presented in “Choosing to Compete,” he was able to leverage additional financial resources, and perhaps equally important, he secured a commitment to a begin a new endeavor: one which would address the *regional* economic crisis the Pioneer Valley was facing. Key business leaders committed time, energy, and money to an effort they realized was risky, but also imperative.

Returning to his office, Tim’s next step was to form an Economic Development Plan (EDP) Committee. This formation could take

two possible roads: 1) recruit those individuals who have traditionally been viewed as the most powerful and influential in the region, or 2) mix it up a little.

Going the first route was a guarantee that our efforts would be noticed. The region knew these leaders. The local press reported on them. But, by picking some new, lesser-known individuals (respected small business owners, a member of the select board from a rural community, a Latino activist), we would acknowledge that the Pioneer Valley had changed and that new approaches needed to be mixed in with more traditional ways. But we might not get noticed. Not at first, anyway.

Tim and an initial team opted for mixing it up a little. The final list consisted of 25 people from up and down the Pioneer Valley region. Much time was spent achieving the best balance possible: rural representation, women and minorities, big business, small business, public sector elected officials, and well-known members of the private sector, colleges, and the university.

With an understanding that competing successfully in the new world market required expanded definitions of our local economy, we also invited our neighboring region to the north, Franklin County, to join the effort. Franklin County did join us, bringing a cross-section of individuals to the effort. Their participation and commitment was an unprecedented model for the region and it enriched the process considerably.

When the final list was complete, all the names had a common denominator: an interest in the region’s economy.

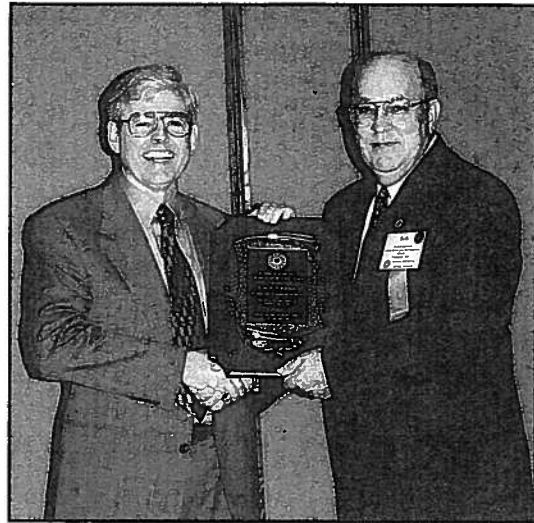
Next came recruiting the individuals. While the initial group Tim had spoken to agreed to support this effort, skepticism was plentiful. Many of the recruited EDP committee members had never sat down at the table together.

The first meeting was convened at the offices of the PVPC. Turnout was fairly good.

## Scheiber Award to Brennan

Timothy W. Brennan, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) executive director, accepts the 1997 Scheiber Award from Robert Howard (r), National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) president. The award is named after Walter A. Scheiber, NARC's first president and is given to an executive director in recognition of his outstanding leadership and his professional excellence. The Pioneer Valley Regional Planning Commission in Massachusetts is the convening organization for the Plan for Progress. Tim has 22 years at PVPC, assuming the directorship in 1980.

He currently also is adjunct faculty at the University of Massachusetts, Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning. During April 1994, he was a visiting lecturer/advisor to the City of Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. He guest lectures at American International College, Mount Holyoke College, and Westfield State College. He received his B.A. in 1970 from the State University of New York at Buffalo, his Master of Regional Planning in 1973 from the University of Massachusetts, and an Advanced Diploma in Urban Transportation from the U.S. Department of Transportation in 1976.



Tim presently has many civic and professional commitments. He is co-chair of the Board of Trustees for The Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress, a member of the Pioneer Valley Recycling Association, member of the National Civic League, member of the World Future Society, member of the American Planning Association, board member of the Massachusetts Low Level Radioactive Waste Management Board (appointed by the governor), and president of the Board of Directors of the Frank A. Waugh Alumni Association, University of Massachusetts.

The group began talking about what was needed. People were cautious, but at the same time, surprisingly honest. The group made a major commitment of time. They decided to start meeting from 8 to 10 a.m. every other Wednesday morning. It was decided that within six months the group would develop a set of economic strategies specific to the Pioneer Valley region.

Eventually, a core group of 18 devoted EDP Committee members emerged. They showed up for every meeting. They got to know each other. This group became our brain trust. We gave the endeavor a name, The Plan for Progress. We gave the committee members the title of trustees. Eighteen people was not what you would call overwhelming involvement, but it was definitely

a cross-section of people and they were definitely committed.

Using the resources from the EDA grant, a couple of PVPC staff members were assigned to The Plan for Progress. Tim Brennan co-chaired the group with a member from the private sector, Dr. William Roberts. The trustees contributed their knowledge. They responded to the staff's work and shaped its direction. Since we had chosen the "mix it up" route, the trustees brought different experiences to the table. At the same time, because the point of discussion always remained the economy, eventually a single vision emerged. People came at it from different directions, but the center, the economy, was the common meeting place.

The first step was to ascertain where our economy had been and where it was now. Using the data available, a white paper was developed. This paper analyzed the region's economic situation by examining its composition, strengths, weaknesses, and available physical and human resources. The paper included a regional report card which compared the region to other parts of the nation in the major categories of economic competition. A couple of months later, the final paper, an "Economic Assessment of the Pioneer Valley" was published.

### **An Economic Summit**

The trustees planned an economic summit to present the findings of the white paper, to let the region know about their mission and to solicit ideas. By now, this group had met every other week for over three months. They were working together. The Latino activist joked with the CEO of the largest employer. They knew each other and where they wanted to go—and it was not into an auditorium to present some data.

At the suggestion of the trustees, the PVPC staff recruited a small task force of

advisors to help develop the event. This new group of advisors consisted of a theater person, a production manager from a local television affiliate, the owner of an advertising agency, and a few others. These people came together, *pro bono* to help brainstorm some ideas about the summit.

It worked. The first summit was held a few months later, in April of 1994. "An Economic Genealogy of the Pioneer Valley Region: Past, Present and Future" used varying media to get the trustee's message across. The invitation list was a compilation of area chambers of commerce membership lists, elected officials, planning departments and anyone else who wanted to come. Over 300 people showed up.

### **A Musical Theater with a Message**

The summit was held in the region's professional theater. After the usual welcoming remarks, the lights dimmed and a troupe of teenagers performed a musical revue celebrating the unique and wonderful history of the Pioneer Valley region. Bringing us up to the present, two local news anchors gave a mock newscast which presented the somber findings of the white paper. The message of the future was delivered in a keynote address given by the president of one of our area colleges.

The musical troupe of teenagers received a standing ovation from a wildly enthusiastic community audience. The newscasters' satire was well received, but the seriousness of their message was undeniably heard. As the college president spoke, the audience sat up and contemplated the different directions the region might go—the path with intervention or the path without immediate action.

As a final presentation, a short video was shown examining five current-day Pioneer Valley entrepreneurs: a Puerto Rican former welfare mother who successfully sells her

own specialty food line, a 20-year old woman who manufactures her own lip balm, a university professor from Nigeria who developed a computer aided design system for manufacturing, a couple who harnessed laser light for manufacturing uses, and a family-owned business that makes wired harnesses and circuits for use around the country.

As the house lights came up, the audience had a lot to think about: we did have a great history; we were facing demographic and economic changes; we still had a pioneering spirit; and we could shape our future.

### **Vacant Stores As Conference Rooms**

The jazzed up audience was then sent off into strategy sessions, complete with flip charts and facilitators. But these groups did not meet in shining, carpeted conference rooms. Each session was held in a vacant store front in downtown Springfield, within walking distance of the theater. As these groups discussed issues about labor force quality, capital availability, natural and physical resources, and the regional business climate, they were surrounded by four walls which gave evidence of our economic recession. (Not to mention that it was a lot cheaper than renting conference space.)

### **A Second Summit**

The summit was well received. The strategy sessions generated some great ideas. Now the trustees needed to map an economic future. They began looking for some role models, some success stories. Tim Brennan told the other trustees about people of Chattanooga, Tennessee and the success they had in turning their region around.

A second summit was held two months later at the University of Massachusetts,

Amherst, at the other end of our region. Using satellite conferencing, and a huge screen, the leaders of Chattanooga "arrived" on-stage to answer questions about their efforts. The Pioneer Valley region shared some strong similarities with Chattanooga: similar size, evaporating manufacturing base, the untapped resources of a river, and the need to shape their own economic future. Participants at the second summit got the message. Chattanooga did it. We can do it.

Over the next couple of months, smaller meetings were held throughout the region. Efforts were made to speak with select board members, planning department representatives, and economic development groups.

Realizing that a central theme of export industries was emerging, the trustees were asked to convene focus groups which consisted of leaders in our local exporting industry clusters: paper and printing; machine tools; toys, games and sporting goods; insurance; crafts and artisans; and higher education.

The six-month time frame to publish a set of strategies was running out. Taking information from the first two summits, the meetings, the focus groups, and the trustees' own experience, the next couple of months were spent drafting a plan. It was a hectic time.

### **A Third Summit and Final Plan**

In September 1994, the trustees held the third economic summit to present the final plan to the region and to Governor Weld. (This summit was held in the middle of the region, in the City of Holyoke at the Children's Museum.) Five hundred people showed up. The trustees spoke about their efforts and then presented the plan to the governor. As it turned out, the Pioneer Valley region, the middle child of Massachusetts, was the first region to respond to the

challenges presented in “Choosing to Compete.”

It has been almost three years since the 19 strategies of The Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress were first introduced. Since that time, we have moved from planning into implementation. We now have 50 Plan for Progress Trustees. (Most of the original 18 are still around the table.)

We have numerous spinoff teams, including a new organization to foster international trade in the region. The Pioneer Valley now has a venture fund capitalized well into the millions of dollars. We’ve addressed our major permitting issues and streamlined many of the processes. The new corporation devoted to marketing our telecommunications strength has brought in hundreds of jobs.

Of course, not all the strategies are moving ahead smoothly. Some seem forever stalled. Sometimes we just need to tweak the strategy team, sometimes we need to rethink the entire strategy.

And it’s very difficult to keep the overall implementation momentum going. As the trustee group gets larger, we run the risk of dissipating our energies. Keeping ourselves focused on the original vision becomes more of a challenge.

We report annually to the region on our progress. These reports are usually a summary of each strategy and its progress, but

we are looking at possible benchmarking measures. We would like to start tracking our efforts more quantitatively.

Overall, we’re moving ahead.

Still, we don’t show up in any glossy literature. Most of the time even we forget to take pictures. We could probably call our trustees stakeholders and our breakout sessions charettes. And the Plan for Progress is the result of free-flowing dialogue. But we don’t feel Hollywoodesque. Our trustees are too busy to pose. They come to meetings and work, then they run to their jobs. We have been fortunate to receive continued EDA support, and we make that money stretch. We pulled off the summits because of the unbelievable generosity of hundreds of people who have given us in-kind gifts over the past five years. We’re pulling off the plan because we didn’t have any choice.

So no, maybe we still don’t belong in the glossies, but you know, we’re kind of enjoying being the middle child. ■

**Amy Glynn** is project manager for *The Plan for Progress* and manager of communications, publications, and outreach for the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. Effective July 21, she assumed her new post as project manager for the newly developed Massachusetts Benchmarks Initiative, a joint venture of the University of Massachusetts and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.