Completing the Missing Link: The Economic Impact of I-495 on Southeastern Massachusetts

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The long-anticipated final link of Boston's outer beltway, I-495, was opened in southeastern Massachusetts in November of 1982. South Shore residents who watched enviously as Rt. 128 and the North Shore experienced rapid economic growth and all the benefits (and possible drawbacks) of "high-tech" development, can now anticipate some of those changes in the area between Brockton and New Bedford. The catalyst, according to a wide range of indicators, is the completion of Rt. 1-495.

It is generally accepted that access to a major highway provides the impetus for economic development and population growth. The full impact of circumferential beltways, however, due to their relative infancy, has yet to be felt. Only a few studies of the impact of circumferential beltways have been published to date, and they have focused on some of the earliest completed beltways: Boston's Rt. 128, Baltimore's I-695, Minneapolis' I-494 and Washington D.C.'s I-495. The circumferential superhighways were originally conceived as bypasses around major cities, but with the rapid development of suburbs following World War II these arteries began serving the large new population which had settled along their corridor.

The I-495 link was chosen for analysis because it is one of the most recently completed beltway linkages in the United States, and because it is an outer beltway. I am aware of only one geographic study that has looked at an outer beltway (i.e., the second beltway), and that was a brief and early description of an older section of I-495.

My study focused on the towns in southeastern Massachusetts that the newly-constructed link of I-495 passes through and on a few communities that are not bisected by I-495, but which nevertheless have been impacted by its completion (figure 1). The communities crossed by the new link of I-495 are Mansfield, Norton, Taunton, Raynham and Bridgewater. The other communities that have been significantly impacted by the new link are Easton and Middleborough. The final link of I-495 is 14.3 miles long, with three lanes in each direction and six interchanges, where most of the new development is occurring. The new highway link runs from the Foxborough/Mansfield town line to the Bridgewater/Raynham town line. The highway was built to complete the missing link in the Boston metropolitan area's outer circumferential expressway system, and thereby to facilitate movement between central Massachusetts and Cape Cod.

Access as a Locational Factor of Industrial Parks

The completion of I-495 has definitely had impetus on economic development in Southeastern Massachusetts. The growth of industrial parks along and near

Figure 1  
Southeastern Massachusetts

Study Area
I-495, particularly in Mansfield, Taunton, Bridgewater and Middleborough, has been dramatic in the years immediately preceding and following completion of the highway.

The City of Taunton has probably experienced the greatest amount of economic development as the result of I-495's completion. Taunton began efforts to develop an industrial park in the mid-1960s and acquired land for the proposed park from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health in 1974. Construction of what became known as Myles Standish Industrial Park started in 1976. This project was directly related to the extension of I-495, known as the "missing link," which was approved by Governor Dukakis in the same year that Myles Standish began construction. The interstate extension included an interchange with Bay Street in Taunton which abuts the northern boundary of the industrial park.

However, the park remained vacant until the interstate was completed in 1982. Its biggest public relations boost came after Taunton's unsuccessful efforts to attract a $40 million state and industry financed microelectronics center: several firms that learned of the park as a result of the battle among state officials and the high technology industrial leaders over the training center's location have since moved into the park (figure 2). The recent growth of Myles Standish has been so successful that Taunton city officials hope to win legislative approval to expand the park onto 250 adjoining acres, presently part of the state's Paul A. Dever School's 400 acre grounds.

The Flatley Company, one of New England's largest real estate developers, recently proposed a 180 acre industrial park to be located in the town of Norton, bordering on the Myles Standish Park in Taunton. Flatley envisions a 500-acre complex of high technology-related industry all along I-495.

Route I-495 has also directly influenced the construction of Commerce Park, a high-tech industrial facility and office park in Middleborough (figure 3). The first company that intended to build at Commerce Park was Advanced Dielectric Technologies, Inc., manufacturer of vapor depositions for the electronics industry. According to company President Glenn Walters, the Middleborough site was chosen over forty other communities within an hour's drive from Boston that are located on a major highway. He also cited the infrastructure, the crowding of Rt. 128, attractive tax rates and the large, available labor pool as additional reasons for choosing Commerce Park. Walters added, "I wanted to be far enough away from the congestion of Boston, yet at the same time close enough to the scientific and industrial communities near the Rte. 128 belt." Advanced Dielectric Technologies recently opted for a site in the Myles Standish Park, instead of Commerce Park, because of construction delays and a change in the ownership of Commerce Park.

The Southeast Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) in its 1983 Annual Report stated that the completion of I-495 has already made an impact on the economic vitality of the region. SRPEDD specifically mentions the industrial developments in Taunton and Middleborough and the fact that I-495 registered an 18 percent increase in traffic volumes from 1982 to 1983.

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Frederick Rubin, the executive vice president of Commerce Park, argues that I-495 will ease the pressure on the Rte. 128 area. Agreeing with Rubin, The Bank of Boston recently reported that Southeastern Massachusetts is the next big growth area for the state. At the Massachusetts Office of Commerce and Development, a plan is being assembled which will enable the 128-495 industries already established to expand in the southeastern part of the state by building satellite plants in the area to utilize the large labor pool in Plymouth County. Rubin cites the large, available and skilled labor force and easy access to major land, sea and air routes as the major attractive locational factors of Commerce Park. The wage differential in the area is 20-25 percent lower than in the Route 128 area. The workers are especially skilled in hand dexterity due to the presence of occupations in the needle trades, fish net making and increasing high tech assembly positions. Rubin also cites the quality of life in Southeastern Massachusetts as an important locational factor; the area is within easy access of both the social and cultural attractions of Boston and the seaside resorts of Cape Cod.

The town of Easton, particularly the section known as "Five Corners," is one of the fastest growing areas in Massachusetts. Since the final link of I-495 near Easton was completed, commercial, residential and industrial growth has been phenomenal. In the past two years three new condominum projects of over 200 units each and 200 private homes have been built. Several grocery store chains, including Stop & Shop, Brockton Public Markets and Fernandes, considered the Five Corners area in the 1970s for a new store location but passed up the site. Shaw's grocery stores, anticipating the positive impact that the completion of I-495 would have in terms of residential growth, selected the Five Corners site and has done well there. John Kelliher, the Shaw's official in charge of the development of the plaza, said, "My guess is we would not have built the store in Five Corners if Rte. 1-495 had not been completed. We feel I-495 not only loosened up some congestion, making the area more attractive for local traffic, but we feel it will open up the area to more people and contribute greatly to the growth of the Easton-Norton-Mansfield area."

Obviously not every commercial establishment in the Easton area was aided by the completion of I-495. Until I-495 was completed, Route 106, which passes through Easton, carried a large proportion of the through traffic from central Massachusetts to Cape Cod. The traffic volume on Route 106 dropped from 22,300 cars per day in 1980 (after 1-495 opened). Gas stations, in particular, along Route 106 were hurt by I-495's opening. The completion of I-495 has also helped spur development in Raynham. The town's Industrial and Development Commission noted that 1983 was a most active year, as they received many inquiries about parcels of land in the area of I-495. The largest new employer since the completion of I-495 is the E.T. Ryan Ironworks. The only nonlimited access interchange that Raynham has with I-495 is Route 138. Since I-495's completion this interchange has attracted to its northeast corner Healthway, a health maintenance organization. In addition, the developer would like to construct two or more office buildings on the site, and possibly a hotel. Overall, according to business owners along Route 138, the recently completed link of I-495 in Raynham has dramatically helped their businesses. Raynham, however, lacks suitable land in large enough parcels to attract much more industry. It is also probably
too close to the well-established Myles Standish Park in Taunton to compete head-on as an attractive location for industry.

The town of Bridgewater, although without direct access to I-495, has also benefited from its completion. Bridgewater's two existing industrial parks have recently attracted new industries. The Bridgewater Industrial Park is located one-quarter mile from the I-495/Route 24 interchange, while the Scotland Industrial Park, one mile east of the Bridgewater Industrial Park, is also close to I-495.

Bridgewater also contains a parcel of land in a planned development district that is bordered by I-495, Route 24 and Route 104. This triangular area has been called the best site in Southeastern Massachusetts for industrial development, and in 1983 Pilgrim Properties, a Boston development firm, proposed a 110-acre industrial park. Due to reasons to be mentioned later, the town's zoning board of appeals, in late 1984, voted to deny the petitioner the special permit that is required before any development is permitted in the planned development district. It is not likely that the developer will appeal this decision, as the park project is not a current priority for him. The developer, however, still has the options on the land.

Mansfield, located at the western end of the recently completed I-495 link, has just about reached the maximum capacity in its major industrial park. Mansfield had the advantage of being the southernmost point on the older section of I-495, which was completed years earlier, where it formerly terminated at its intersection with I-95 south of Boston. Without actually surveying the corporate leaders who decided to locate in this industrial park known as Cabot, Cabot and Forbes, it is impossible to sort out which companies, in particular, moved to the park because of the completion of the last link of I-495. It is safe to say, though, that the recently established transportation link of I-495 from Mansfield to Cape Cod influenced some companies to choose the park as their home.

Other Locational Factors

In addition to highway access, other factors have contributed to the economic development of southeastern Massachusetts. These include the availability of reasonably priced land, acceptable property taxes, affordable and skilled labor, quality of life and receptive attitudes of the local residents and town officials.

One reason for Myles Standish’s recent growth, in addition to improved access is its relatively inexpensive land. Taunton is selling industrial park lots at Myles Standish at $32,000 per acre, while some competing projects are asking $75,000 per acre. Taunton wants to keep its land costs low because the primary emphasis is on attracting new jobs to the community. According to one estimate, of the 10,000 industrially zoned acres in Southeastern Massachusetts, only 2,000 acres have adequate sewer, water and road systems to attract industry, of which 800 acres are in Taunton’s Myles Standish Park. The Mayor of Taunton, Richard Johnson, calls Taunton “the best buy in Massachusetts,” and he claims, real estate developers feel coming into Taunton like a “kid in a candy store, they can’t believe the opportunities we have here.”

The Mansfield park, although costlier than Myles Standish at $62,000 per acre compared to $32,000 per acre, is still cheaper than most downtown Boston and Route 128 sites. Flatley, who wants to build in Norton, claims his company can offer spec buildings at $.75 to $1.00 a square foot less than the rates charged along Route 128. According to Mayor Johnson of Taunton, many new firms may want to start out by renting space in Flatley’s park and later buy land at the Myles Standish Park. He says that many high-tech firms begin by leasing space, then purchasing land and constructing their own buildings. Flatley is convinced that southeastern Massachusetts will develop in the next few years because of the strong work ethic of the people there, and because of the growing number of professionals who don’t want to commute to Boston or Lexington.

The taxes in southeastern Massachusetts are relatively low compared to those in much of the rest of the state. As men-
tioned earlier, one of the reasons Advanced Dielectric Technologies, Inc. initially chose the Middleborough site was because of relatively low taxes. The labor force, in terms of size, availability and skill, was also mentioned as a key factor by several firms for choosing the recently finished I-495 corridor in southeastern Massachusetts.

Quality of life, as measured by socio-economic and environmental factors is important in locational decisions. The cost of living in Plymouth County is generally lower than in the rest of the state and the New England region. The southeastern Massachusetts region offers swimming, sailing, camping and hiking, has easy access to Boston and Cape Cod and contains numerous colleges, the largest being Bridgewater State College and Southeastern Massachusetts University.

However, access and other locational factors will not guarantee economic development. The degree of community receptiveness along the I-495 corridor is also a major factor in luring a company to a particular town or city. Bridgewater, whose desirability as a potential home for industry was increased by the completion of I-495 has a long history of turning down industry requests to locate there. The industrial park proposed by Pilgrim Properties, as mentioned earlier, will probably not be built because the zoning board of appeals denied the developer a special permit. Many town officials expressed shock at the board of appeals' decision and took issue with the reasons given for the board's denial of the special permit. One of the town's selectmen, outraged by the decision, said "We've managed to put a stockade fence around Bridgewater to the detriment of the taxpayers." He added "We might as well put up a sign on Route 24 (where it intersects I-495): 'Don't stop here'."

Second Generation Economic Decentralization

A n important centripetal economic force affecting the increased demand for developable land along I-495 is the lack of available land along Boston's innermost beltway, Route 128. Large tracts of land along Route 128 have become scarce and expensive: it is not uncommon to find tracts selling for $500,000 per acre, and sites greater than one hundred acres in area are no longer available. Additionally, the rents along Route 128 have escalated rapidly and approach downtown Boston levels. The term "second-generation economic decentralization (SECGEDEC)" has been coined to describe the process of choosing an outer beltway site (or some other distant site) after being previously located at an inner beltway or inner suburban site. This has been the case with many Route 128 companies which have moved to Route I-495 sites.

Underscoring the growth of industry along I-495 and the movement of corporations from Route 128 are population figures for the 1980s that show that Route 128 communities are losing population for the first time in decades, whereas I-495 area communities continue to grow significantly. So far in this decade, 20 of 25 communities along Route 128 have lost population. Although the losses in most towns are only 2 or 3 percent, they are persistent. High housing costs are a major reason for the decline in population of Route 128 communities. Baby boomers who grew up in those suburbs can no longer afford to buy houses in their hometowns. Compared to Route 128 communities, the I-495 communities are a relative bargain when it comes to housing costs.

Conclusion

M any factors influence whether or not an area is a likely prospect for industrial development. The availability of reasonably priced land, acceptable property taxes, affordable and skilled labor, quality of life and receptive attitudes of the local residents and town officials are all important. Southeastern Massachusetts has possessed these qualities for some time now, but the key to triggering the recent impressive growth of industry in the area was the completion of I-495. It truly was the "missing link." For the foreseeable future it appears that the I-495 region will be the growth area in the Commonwealth.

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