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# Anti-sprawl ideas pitched in Greater Boston brainstorm session

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BOSTON — As it maps the future of greater Boston, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council is advocating smart-growth methods to encourage people to live and work in town centers, use public transportation, cut down on water use and live healthier lifestyles.

Those were among 65 sweeping goals included in its MetroFuture plan for development in the Boston region through 2030. The plan, approved on Wednesday, was unveiled a year ago.

But some local officials participating in strategy workshops, held at Omni Parker House, made it clear they have little power to actually make any of the changes.

Waltham Transportation Director Frank Ching, for one, expressed doubt that Beacon Hill leaders have the "intestinal fortitude" to act on MetroFuture recommendations, pointing to the recent retreat by Gov. Deval Patrick and legislative leaders from replacing costly police construction details with civilian flagmen.

"I have seen it over and over again," the Natick resident said. "I've seen all these great ideas being talked about, yet when push comes to shove, when special-interest groups and unions come toward legislators saying, 'This will affect your electability,' we always end up with a less than desirable result."

At 83 pages long, the MetroFuture plan is a layercake of strategies and goals for controlling growth in the 101 cities and towns that make up Greater Boston. It calls for residential development to be concentrated in downtowns and near transportation hubs - known as smart growth - to unclog roadways and boost use of public transportation. Such targeted development, the plan notes, will help towns avert water shortages and vanishing green space, two unwanted byproducts of suburban sprawl.

Big visions abound in the plan: polluted land would be converted to green parks, the region would have an abundance of smaller, more affordable homes, fewer segregated neighborhoods would exist, and homelessness would all but vanish. Even residents' health would improve, according to the plan, because interconnected bicycle paths and sidewalks would lead to more physical activity.

"No one could accuse us of making a small plan," Marc Draisen, executive director of the council, said. "Tinkering around the edges won't work."

Roughly 200 people gathered at the Boston hotel to brainstorm how best to reach these goals. Discussion was wide-ranging and there was an emphasis on the need for regional partnerships and planning.

For example, towns could save money by partnering to buy in bulk everything from office supplies to heavy machinery. Health departments could be combined and waste-hauling and emergency-dispatch services handled regionally.

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To meet the region's housing needs - 349,000 new units by 2030 - the plan encourages communities to make zoning changes to encourage developers to build smaller homes, clustered developments and more accessory apartments. Dennis Harrington, planning director for the city of Quincy, said the smart-growth principals make sense for the region.

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But he said the heavy emphasis on regional planning could make many communities bristle after decades of focusing only within their borders.

For the plan to work, local city and town boards must embrace it, Harrington said, adding that the onus is on the planning council to convincingly spread its message.

In addition to political support and money, Harrington said, time will be needed to reach many of the plan's goals.

"This is MetroFuture, not MetroTomorrow," he said.

Another hot topic was how to raise money to pay for needed roadway upkeep in the region. Participants debated everything from increasing the state gas tax and open-road tolling to hiking vehicle-registration fees based on fuel efficiency.

But even as the council plans to finalize its recommendations this fall, one refrain echoing through the different workshops was a need for stronger political support.

Only two lawmakers attended the morning session, state Rep. Denise Provost, D-Somerville, and state Sen. Pam Resor, D-Acton. A handful of other legislators sent aides, but most in the crowd were municipal planners, local elected officials and public policy lobbyists.

After the event, Resor said the goals were ambitious and admirable, but difficult to achieve - especially given lawmakers' reluctance to raise taxes.

Workshop moderator Eric Bourassa, a consumer advocate for public-interest group MassPIRG, said state leaders are "still feeling a hangover from the Big Dig."

When it comes to transportation improvement, the Legislature has taken little action on another study it paid for - the Transportation Finance Commission report, which listed reforms and new revenue recommendations to address the state's multi-billion dollar transportation funding gap.

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