



City, state team up in push to revitalize Lynn



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Lynn's underutilized waterfront is about 10 miles from Boston.

By Jon Chesto | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 22, 2015

Most of us see just auto dealerships and chain stores when we drive down the Lynnway. But Jay Ash sees something else: the opportunity to revive a city.

The state's economic development secretary is playing a key role on behalf of his boss, Governor Charlie Baker, in shepherding a newly formed task force whose sole purpose is sparking development in this North Shore city.

The task force is unusual, possibly unprecedented, in its focus on the fortunes of a particular municipality. But Lynn's potential — with its proximity to Boston, public transit, and oft-overlooked waterfront — has convinced Baker, Ash, and their team to make this place a priority.

“This is Lynn's time,” Ash said. “We think there's a great opportunity to do something that can be special here.”

Baker, of course, is quite familiar with the Lynnway: He lives next door, in Swampscott. Ash lives in Danvers, and visited frequently during his previous job as city manager in nearby Chelsea, a down-on-its-luck city that he is credited with having revitalized.

Ash acknowledged that he and Baker have spent enough time driving through Lynn to know there's potential, but hard work ahead, too. Along this stretch, the ocean is obscured amid a thicket of discount stores and drab industrial sites, including a sewage treatment plant and a liquefied natural gas storage tank.

The issue isn't just one of aesthetics. General Electric Co.'s manufacturing workforce in Lynn is a fraction of what it once was, the city's median income is two-thirds of the state median, and its poverty rate is twice as high as the state's.

Unlocking the waterfront's potential, officials say, could be a game-changer for a city only 10 miles from Boston.

To get the job done, the task force involves people from all levels of government, including several of the Republican governor's top aides: Ash, transportation secretary Stephanie Pollack, and environmental secretary Matthew A. Beaton. Lynn's legislative delegation and city officials are also

involved. And Democratic US Representative Seth Moulton recently hired a staffer who will focus primarily on improving Lynn's fortunes.

Moulton — who, like Baker, is in his first year in office — called improving Lynn's economy his top priority for the district.

“Lynn is a 15-minute train ride from downtown Boston and yet it has a [significant amount] of vacant land,” Moulton said. “Few businesses going out of Boston and Cambridge look to Lynn, and I think they should.”

Ash said Boston's red-hot real estate market is pushing some developers to seek less-expensive properties in outer-ring cities to build on and commuters to look farther from Boston for cheaper places to live. Ash wants to strike now, to take advantage of that momentum. And not just because it's down the road from the governor's house.

So he has been quietly meeting with Lynn developers to learn what can be done to expedite permits for projects or jump-start plans for long-vacant properties. The state can help with grant money in some cases. But more importantly, Baker's top aides can be facilitators who bring together the right people to get projects done, one at a time, until the landscape changes.

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A development on the site of a former Chevrolet dealership, near the Clock Tower Business Center (seen in the distance), would offer more than 300 apartments and quick access to downtown Lynn.

“My experience is you get a few people on base before you start swinging for the fences,” Ash said.

Several key steps have already taken place. The city got a glimpse of the waterfront’s future back in 2007, when the architectural firm Sasaki Associates issued a pedestrian-friendly master plan for the area at the request of city officials. In 2010, National Grid relocated power lines that had impeded development along much of the harbor.

Then there was the launch in 2014 of the seasonal commuter ferry to Boston. In the first year, there were more than 13,000 passengers; this year, nearly 16,000. The future of this subsidized transit service remains uncertain. But the right people are paying attention: Lynn’s Senator Thomas McGee is cochairman of the Legislature’s transportation committee, and Pollack oversees the MBTA.

As far as Lynn economic development chief Jim Cowdell is concerned, having Baker and Ash in state government and Moulton in Washington will be critical to Lynn’s renaissance. They all recognize, Cowdell said, the untapped potential of 150 moribund acres on the waterfront, just waiting to be developed.

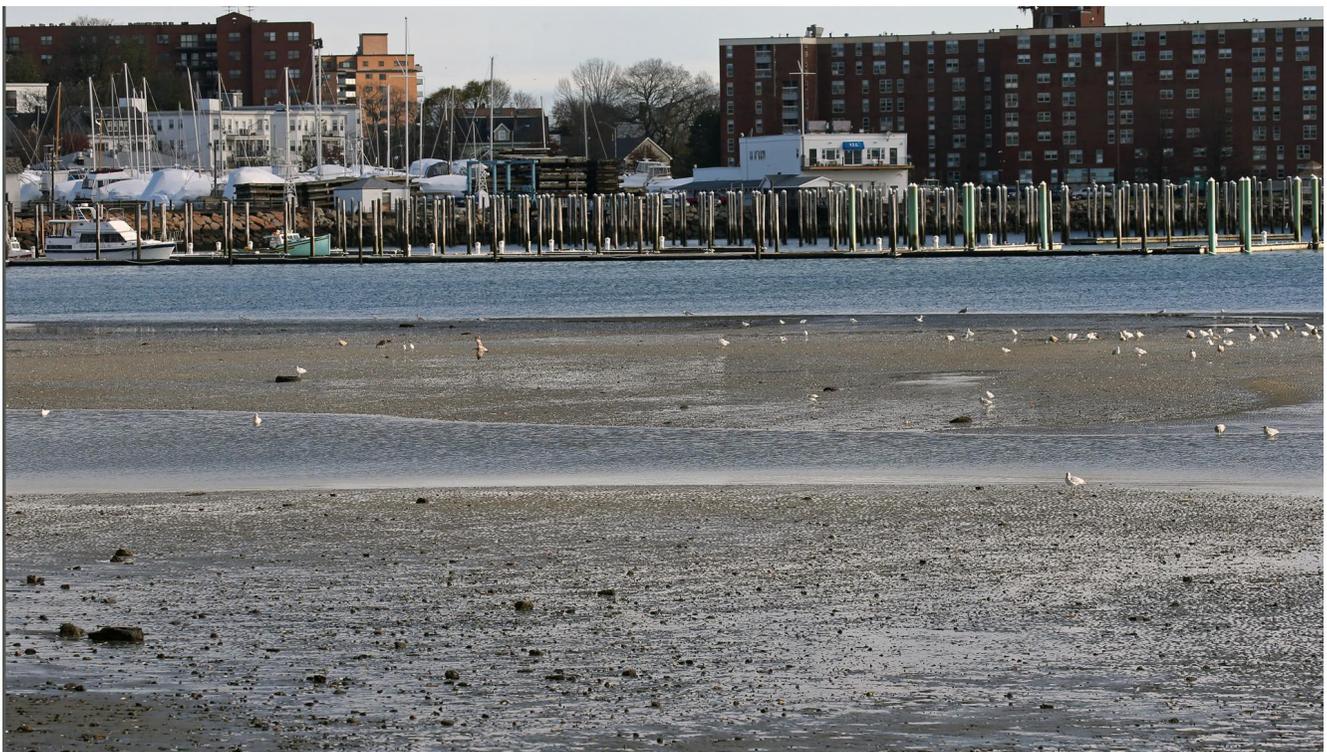
“I’ve met more with the secretary in the last eight or nine months than all of the other [economic] secretaries combined,” Cowdell said. “I think there were some people at the state level, and I’m talking past tense, that had trouble figuring out where Lynn fit in.”

Arthur Pappathanasi, whose family owns the Clock Tower Business Center on the Lynnway, said the ferry should help spur development of a long-vacant site known as the Beacon Chevrolet property, near the Clock Tower. He’s part of that project’s development team, with plans for more than 300 apartments offering killer views and a short walk to downtown Lynn.

Farther toward Boston on the Lynnway, developer Charles Patsios wants to build 1,200 residential units on a former GE site, Cowdell said. That could open up the River Works train station to the public; the station is currently accessible to GE employees only.

Joe O'Donnell has been waiting for this turning point for 25 years. That's how long the Boston Culinary Group founder has owned 17 waterfront acres on the southern edge of Lynn.

In particular, he's hopeful that the River Works station, across the Lynnway, can be reopened. The station, O'Donnell said, could prime that portion of the strip for an economic revival, mirroring what eventually happened in Somerville after the MBTA's Red Line was extended through Davis Square in the 1980s. "The climate was never right for any development," O'Donnell said of his site, "so we just sat with it — until this year."



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“This is Lynn’s time,” says Jay Ash, the state’s economic development secretary.

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