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HOW LYNN'S COMMUTER RAIL STATION COULD UNLOCK NEW DEVELOPMENT

BY THOMAS GRILLO | April 24, 2018



The "Inbound to Boston" sign at Central Square Station in Lynn. (Spenser R. Hasak)

BOSTON — Just one investor could unlock 20 million square feet of underdeveloped real estate near Lynn's MBTA's commuter rail station.

That was one of the messages Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Jay Ash delivered Tuesday to hundreds of participants at “Exploring the Future of Transit-Oriented Development in Gateway Cities” at the University of Massachusetts Club, steps from the State House.

“I worked in Chelsea for years, right next to Boston, and I found myself jumping up and down to get developers’ attention,” he said. “I found one or two developers who were interested, while 100 others said ‘Chelsea?’ I rode those one or two developers to what turned out to be 33 projects. All it takes is one, two or three developers to get something going.”

Ash was joined by Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack, Mayor Thomas M. McGee, Chrystal Kornegay, MassHousing’s executive director, L. Duane Jackson, managing member of Alinea Capital Partners and James Rooney, CEO of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce.

The three-hour forum coincided with the release of an 80-page study by MassINC, an independent think tank, which revealed Lynn and other Gateway Cities – Massachusetts communities slated for targeted economic development – can accommodate thousands of apartments and jobs on vacant and underutilized land near commuter rail stations.

Ash said the power of what one developer can do to transform a community, cannot be underestimated.

“Lawrence Mayor Dan Rivera empowered businessman Sal Lupoli to do some remarkable things with the historic mill buildings,” he said. “Wouldn’t you have loved to have been in the Lupoli home when Sal told his wife he was planning to buy empty mills where the roofs had caved in? He told her the future of the city is based on how well those buildings do. Now, I can’t get a parking spot anywhere near them.”

Lupoli spent \$220 million to buy those collapsing mills and build 200 apartments and 2 million square feet of office, industrial, and retail uses across from an MBTA commuter rail station.

Pollack said the biggest barrier to construction of housing near Lynn’s transportation hubs is also the city’s biggest advantage: low prices. The property’s reasonable price tag is great for developers, but the resulting lower rents make it hard to finance a development.

While developers are keen to recreate the hot rental markets in Boston’s Seaport District or Cambridge’s Kendall Square, Ash urges them to look at Gateway Cities like Lynn.

Pollack cautioned that one solution does not fit all. Brockton has three commuter rail stations, she said, and it’s still struggling.

“If commuter rail solved all economic problems Brockton should be doing much better,” she said.

Still, one of the problems for building around commuter rail stations is the lack of riders. Pollack said commuter rail passengers constitute just 9 percent of the MBTA’s riders while it takes 30 percent of its operating costs.

But McGee said part of the reason for low ridership is the MBTA’s 19th century commuter rail system.

“On a visit to Tokyo, I was impressed with its high speed rail that traveled 220 miles in an hour and 40 minutes.

“It’s an amazing operation,” he said. “But in our commuter rail system, the diesel train pulls in, the conductor gets off and you walk up to the platform, that’s not what’s going on around the world.”



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Thomas Grillo is an award-winning business reporter who has worked at Boston's major newspapers covering real estate trends such as the emergence of Assembly Square in Somerville and chronicling the growth of Boston's Seaport District. In Lynn, Thomas covers City Hall and commercial real estate development including the transformation of Lynn's waterfront into a mixed-use neighborhood. Follow him on Twitter [@BosBizThomas](https://twitter.com/BosBizThomas).

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