

Connecticut's Forgotten Corridor

Today, the I-84 corridor represents one of the most underutilized assets of the state. What went wrong? **By Michael Gallis**

Entering the state along its western boundary adjoining New York and exiting the state east of Hartford along its northern border with Massachusetts is Connecticut's "Forgotten Corridor."

As it crosses the state, Interstate 84 between Danbury and Waterbury connects 13 of Connecticut's inland cities into a continuous urban and economic corridor. Yet, despite the advantage of the access provided by the interstate highway, these cities along the western section of the corridor have languished and lost visibility in the regional and global marketplace. Today this corridor represents one of the most underutilized assets of the state. What went wrong?

THE EVOLVING PATTERN OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

While the debate continues over which is the oldest of its cities, the largest early cities of Connecticut were originally trade centers, located along its water edges formed by its seacoast and the extensive network of rivers. During the early 19th century, as New England became the center of industrialization, towns across New England prospered and developed identities related to the industries that sprang up in their town. It was as if each city had two names, the official name listed on maps and a second name given by the presence of a local industry.

During this period Danbury became known as the Hat City, while Waterbury was dubbed the Brass City. During the later half of the 19th century and into the 20th, this

pattern of city and industry continued across New England and characterized the region.

After WW II this pattern began to change dramatically. The War had brought with it enormous changes in technology that fueled a new period of economic development and the pattern of cities.

By 1956 the Interstate Highway Act began the process of restructuring the urban pattern of America and New England, while the introduction of the commercial jet made access to continental and world markets a reality and vastly increased the importance of international airports in the development of cities.

Electronics and communications were growing fields, with the introduction of the first computers and satellites, opening a new era in data processing and global communications that gave advantage to urban areas with large research universities.

Under the influence of these new forces, Boston and New York, already the largest cities flanking Connecticut, began to accelerate their urban and economic growth as the smaller cities began to stagnate.

POPULATION TRENDS

A comparison of population trends reveals the changes that took place over the 50 year period from 1950 to 2000.

After the War, Waterbury was a city of just over 102,000, while the city of Boston had a population of over 870,000. Over the 50 year period, the population of Waterbury increased slightly to over 104,000, while the city of Boston fell to about 670,000.

On the surface it would appear that Waterbury was a more successful city than Boston, as it did not suffer the same level of population loss. However, as the city of Boston was losing population, the metropolitan area was emerging as a massive three state metropolitan area encompassing hundreds of cities with a population of over 3.5 million and, by our count, over 4.5 million when including the Providence, RI and Manchester, NH MSAs.

THE NORTHEAST CORRIDOR

A second change, very specific to the Northeast, was also reshaping the pattern of New England — the development of the Northeast Corridor.

Designed as a transportation solution, it has had a profound effect on the pattern of urbanization and economic development.

The intent of the Northeast Corridor was to provide increased access to the major urban centers from Washington D.C. to Boston. Parallel with the new interstate I-95 was the Amtrak line, which reinforced the interstate and resulted in a corridor of higher accessibility than any of the other corridors in the Northeast. The alignment it followed was close to the older surface corridor Rte 1.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CORRIDOR

The development of the Northeast Corridor had a profound effect on the pattern of Connecticut. While the affects of the arterial grid were basically ubiquitous, the effects of the interstate system and the Northeast Corridor were not.



The cities were now linked by a continuous highway that shrank the time required to move between them, while dramatically increasing the visibility of the cities and towns along the corridor. Conversely, while it increased the time for those off the corridor, it dramatically decreased the visibility of those cities.

As other freeways, including I-84, I-91 and I-684, were built, the issue of access to the large metro markets was reduced, but the problem of visibility remained.

Today, the I-84 corridor is highly visible only as it passes through Hartford, where it forms a major influence on the pattern of urbanization. West of Hartford, the corridor becomes largely invisible as it transverses the mountainous terrain of western Connecticut, connecting Waterbury and Danbury.

POSITIONING THE I-84 CORRIDOR

Five years ago, the *Connecticut Sourcebook* was published and identified three main economic regions that dominated Connecticut.

Each of the three economic regions crossed a state line. Both the western portion of I-95 and I-84 were included as corridors within the New York economic region in competition with the other radial corridors that extended out from the city of New York. The *Sourcebook* identified nine total corridors — three in New York, four in New Jersey, and two in Connecticut. Of the two in Connecticut, one was shared by both New York and Connecticut — the I-684/84 corridor. It is worth noting that all of the four New Jersey corridors have exhibited a higher rate of growth than the two Connecticut corridors.

While the Connecticut portion of the I-95 Coastal Corridor was described as extending from the New York line to New Haven, the Connecticut portion of the I-684/84 corridor was depicted as extending an active economic and urban corridor from the New York state line only to Danbury.

Waterbury was identified as a stand-alone economic center that would have to go it alone in the competition for economic activity.

But cities with just over 104,000 and 74,000 are too small to develop independent visibility in a global marketplace. Only by acting in concert can they develop enough “mass” and momentum to position themselves in the global economy.

THE NEW COMPETITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

New research on the changing pattern of urbanization and economic activity in the region reveal that the I-84 Corridor should not be positioned as a component of the Coastal Corridor, but as a unique sub-market unto itself.

Several factors have led us to this conclusion. The first and most important was discussed in a previous issue of *CT Business Magazine*: the rise of the inland corridors across the entire Northeast, as Harrisburg, Allentown-Bethlehem and Scranton-Wilkesboro form new NAFTA trade hubs.

Each of these locations is rising as a surface transportation hub and distribution center. Strategically located along the I-81 corridor, these hubs are having a powerful effect on the trade and distribution patterns of the Northeast. Most importantly, they are increasing the importance of the I-84 corridor as the principal access corridor from the new NAFTA hubs and the continental economy to New England.

I-84 RISING IN IMPORTANCE

While the I-95 Coastal Corridor directly links New York and Boston, the I-84 Corridor, once considered a secondary corridor, is now rising in importance as it can provide inland access to New York, Boston and the NAFTA hubs. As the I-95 corridor becomes more impacted and congested, the I-84 corridor will increase in importance.

LONG-TERM GROWTH POSSIBLE

The I-84 Corridor is well positioned for long-term growth within the New York region, if it can successfully define itself and market its total assets as a single unit.

While Danbury and Waterbury have strong regional identities, they cannot go it



About the Author

Michael Gallis is widely considered the country's leading expert in large-scale metropolitan regional development strategies. He has pioneered a specialty in building frameworks through which public, private and institutional leaders can work effectively to create globally competitive regions. Through the frameworks, Gallis has mobilized leaders across the country to understand and develop new ways of responding to challenges and opportunities of states and regions in the 21st century.

In the Connecticut Sourcebook, three macro economic regions were defined that formed the basic competitive subdivisions of the state. Each had very different structure, economy, assets and competitive relationships. In this and future articles, Michael Gallis discusses how and where they are being implemented to build the future of Connecticut.

alone among the 3,300 municipalities that make up the New York region; they are simply too small and there are too many other cities. Only by aggregating resources and positioning the corridor as one of the nine choices within the New York region can the corridor develop the visibility necessary to compete.

A COMPETITIVE STRATEGY

In developing an economic development strategy, a city or region can either market what it is or what it plans to be. Without a strategy in place to say what it wants to be, the Corridor must begin by defining what it is today.

Certainly new and significant investments have been made in Waterbury—and many of the surrounding cities are already among the most desirable in Connecticut,—but the public and private sectors have yet to agree on a definition of the corridor. They have not as yet begun the process of developing an economic strategy.

Is it absolutely necessary for the corridor to have a strategy in order to succeed?

Without a strategy and framework in place, many cities have succeeded, while just as many have declined. If the “invisible hand” of the market was enough, cities and states would have no need to make policy, plan or invest in themselves — the market

would decide.

History has clearly taught that those who make strategic moves at key points in time have an advantage over those that wait and try to catch up.

The time is now for the I-84 Corridor, as global and continental patterns create new importance to the inland corridors. Certainly the Connecticut economy would benefit from a second economically active corridor. ■