

GLOBE EDITORIAL

...In red bricks and green grass

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Artie Noel of Methuen practiced at a new skateboarding park in Lawrence. (Essdras M. Suarez/Globe Staff)

First in a series

THE 200 children at the James F. Leonard School in Lawrence thought they were getting a new place to have fun when Mayor Michael Sullivan recently cut the ribbon on the Misserville Skate Park behind the school. But it's more far-reaching than that. The playground is the latest initiative in a campaign to combine public works, housing renovation, and park-building to foster economic development in the poorest city in Massachusetts.

Since the 1970s, Lawrence, with a population of about 72,000, has been hobbled by an inferiority complex with Lowell, its larger neighbor up the Merrimack River. With the help of

the late Senator Paul Tsongas, starting in the 1970s, Lowell made the transition from failing mill town to educational and commercial center that Lawrence is hoping for now. In 1970, household incomes for Lowell and Lawrence were about the same. By 2000, the median household income in Lowell was \$39,192, compared with \$27,983 in Lawrence.

But the prospects for Lawrence have been improving since its nadir in the recession of the early 1990s. The city is investing in improved services and infrastructure, including parks. The Misserville Skate Park is the second of three to open alongside the Spicket River, a tributary of the Merrimack, as part of a Lawrence greenway. This aging mill town is an example of how green space can be an engine of economic development.

At the playground dedication, Mayor Sullivan was talking about luring a women's professional softball team from Lowell to a playing field near the new high school. Developer Chester Sidell was taking a break from his effort to attract tenants to his Bell Tower Mill complex. Representatives of the Lawrence CommunityWorks development corporation were on hand to show support for the project, which enhances a neighborhood where CommunityWorks has transformed an abandoned parochial school into a community center.

What strikes a visitor to Lawrence is the degree of cooperation among diverse people intent on improving the city. A delegation of youthful skateboarders went before the City Council to seek a special place for their sport. The city government sought state help for the park, and the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs contributed \$378,000, three-quarters of the cost, with the rest coming from the city. Groundwork Lawrence, a nonprofit that uses environmental improvements to build neighborhoods, supervised the design and construction of the park.

The same pattern was followed elsewhere in the area. The city rebuilt the streets and sidewalks, part of a \$30 million initiative over the last five years to improve public infrastructure. CommunityWorks, with city help, built or renovated 185 units of affordable housing. Then Groundwork Lawrence converted an alleyway into a community garden. Public-private cooperation helped to produce livable neighborhoods.

And now the bad news: A plan to convert an old mill into the 600-condominium Monarch on the Merrimack development is on hold after the bank pulled its financing. And in less affluent parts of the city, mortgage lenders have initiated more than 500 foreclosure actions, many in the area north of Misserville Skate Park. Residents fear a return to the early 1990s, when a similar crisis led to housing abandonment and arson. "We've had a terrible time trying to get these people [the lenders] to restructure," said Kristen Harol, a housing consultant for CommunityWorks.

Governor Patrick visited Lawrence last month to inaugurate the community center. His administration needs to help CommunityWorks and other nonprofits work with lenders to keep people in their homes, and if that's not possible, to buy the property and rent it out. Housing abandonment is the enemy of progress in Lawrence, and on its own the city can only do so much.

Foreclosures are a short-term problem. For sustained growth, Lawrence requires a better educated population, difficult given that many of its residents are recent immigrants. The state

needs to keep supplying education aid and making sure the money is used wisely.

And public higher education needs to intervene more forcefully to promote development. Northern Essex Community College, based in Haverhill, plans to expand its health education programs in Lawrence. It ought to play the same important role in economic development that Middlesex Community College does in Lowell. Furthermore, while the University of Massachusetts at Lowell has a presence at Lawrence High School to encourage students to go to college, it needs to consider establishing full-fledged university programs in the city.

Fortunately, Lawrence residents of all stripes have already figured out the formula for moving their city forward.

"I learned persistence," said Jarrod Curtis, one of the skateboarders, who spoke at the dedication of his efforts to get the park built. Persistent cooperation - by the city, the nonprofits, the schools and colleges, and the state - will sustain Lawrence after the foreclosures are a distant memory. ■

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