

## **To our next Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts:**

We need your help.

### **A State in Crisis**

As the 2006 gubernatorial election approaches, the Commonwealth fundamentally needs to change the way it does business before entire segments of our population can no longer afford to call the Bay State home.

- Seventy-nine percent of Boston residents cannot afford to purchase a home, average rents have climbed 60 percent since 1998, and affordable suburban production is not keeping pace with demand.
- Income disparities have worsened in the last decade as the contingent workforce has exploded, creating the reality for many that their real wages have declined since 1989 – and many of these workers are now uninsured.
- After narrowing briefly in the 1980s, the educational attainment gap is widening once more, along lines of race and income.

Two Massachusetts are emerging – one a remarkable place to live for those with considerable means and existing access to political and social networks, and another for those of lesser income with more modest assets, who disconnect from the political process, work more hours for less pay, and face an uncertain future for their children.

The character of our state is at a crossroads. Will this be a statewide community that embraces the diversity of its residents, creates opportunities for quality education for its youth and meaningful employment for its adults, and provides an efficient and equitable transportation system that connects its people to reasonably-priced housing that is accessible to anyone regardless of race? Or will it be a series of isolated jurisdictions concerned only with building their tax base with little regard for the social and economic impacts on the rest of the region, where environmental injustices are concentrated in communities of low-income and people of color who constantly struggle to provide a healthy future for their young? The candidate who is guided by the vision of the former will command the attention of Action! and its allies, and capture the hearts and minds of thousands of voters statewide.

### **How to Achieve the Vision**

We believe the answers are found in a simple but profound concept called regional equity. In essence, regional equity recognizes that:

- complex issues such as housing, transportation, environmental quality, and the economy are linked.
- communities need to share in both benefits and burdens from proposed developments.
- solutions must work across community and economic boundaries.
- all segments of society—regardless of race, income, or national origin—need to participate in and benefit from economic growth before we can begin to build an inclusive region that has a viable future.

Regional equity can be realized through the use of innovative policy initiatives that can reposition Massachusetts as a progressive, visionary state. Below are the issues of particular

importance to the creation of the vision followed by recommendations for equitably addressing them.

**Affordable Housing.** We need housing policies that recognize that merely building more units of housing that primarily serve the middle class will not address the continuing housing crisis. It is time to alleviate the extreme burden on renters and homeowners earning at 65, 50, even 30 percent of the median income. These are the working class Massachusetts residents to whom the press gives little coverage. Going forward, housing policies must reach deep levels of affordability, protect affordable housing in perpetuity, put greater emphasis on preserving units that already exist (often at a lower cost than new construction), and promote the accumulation of more housing in nonprofit and community control. Currently nonprofit developers who seek to create long-term affordable housing must compete with private developers, including speculators, to acquire properties that have the potential to become long-term affordable housing. Residents of private housing are frequently displaced as the highest bidder snaps up their homes and converts the property to luxury housing. Furthermore, anyone who thinks that housing discrimination is a scourge that was eliminated in the 1970s needs to take another look. The fair distribution of affordable housing across regions is essential for connecting people to educational and economic opportunities that can expand their productivity in the economy.

***Recommendations:***

**Fully fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.** In addition to the \$20 million annual authorization from bond funds, the state should contribute \$30 million in new resources from the operating budget.

**Restore MRVP to levels that address the rental housing crisis.** Sixty organizations across the Commonwealth united to request \$10 million in restored funding for MRVP (Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program). Their call fell on deaf ears in the 2006 Legislative Session. This restoration could stabilize existing MRVP project based developments, fund the existing 4,500 leased vouchers, and assist 1,200 new households in obtaining secure housing.

**Facilitate the addition of housing into nonprofit and community control.** Action! has been identifying strategies to increase the amount of housing in community control. Setting aside funding for affordable housing preservation and giving priority for state funding to developers of community controlled housing will go a long way towards building the stock of long-term affordable housing.

**Mandate data collection for affordable housing.** Since last April, Action! and other advocacy groups have been trying to advance S.800, which will require that DHCD (Department of Housing and Community Development) collect data that reveal the ultimate beneficiaries of the state's investment into affordable housing. DHCD has resisted, and the bill is now at the mercy of the conference committee. This law is an important first step in undoing decades of housing segregation and making the most of Massachusetts' commitment to housing.

**Transportation.** We need to acknowledge that our transportation system is in disarray. Massachusetts suffers from crowded roadways and poor air quality. Underinvestment in our transit infrastructure is resulting in poor quality service—decaying train cars, bridges in need of repair, and even dirty stations all make transit less appealing to residents. The Executive

Office of Transportation advances its long range plans absent collaboration with the regional entities empowered to move federal funding into communities. There is plain disregard of the considered experience of community advocates who work closely with residents to express their transit needs. Those same regional entities (the Metropolitan Planning Organizations) engage advocates in lengthy processes that yield no discernable changes in their proposed actions and are then mystified by why no one wants to participate in their planning. The MBTA operates with a systemic deficit and no foreseeable mechanism to address it, with each successive fare increase suppressing ridership and worsening its long-term viability as a mass transit system. As a consequence, the transit dependent in urban communities complain of unreliable service that underserves particular communities, while the transit dependent in suburban communities get virtually no service at all. Transit investment needs to be greatly increased, more effectively utilized, and incorporate an integrated approach to considerations of housing affordability, economic development, and environmental impact.

***Recommendations:***

**Invest in equitable transit oriented development.** Transit oriented development integrates housing, employment, and environmental considerations into transportation planning, but done poorly it could displace the very residents who need it most. Two policies that could prevent displacement: 1) Ensure that at least 30 percent of all housing developed or redeveloped as a consequence of any transit oriented development is protected to remain permanently affordable to the entry level salary of a child care provider from that community; and 2) Prioritize transit oriented development that increases ridership both for urban and suburban communities that rely heavily on existing public transit and those that have a clear need for greater transit access. We are also releasing a report on this issue shortly.

**Reform transportation planning and investment in Massachusetts.** Our current investment, pricing, and planning structure actually encourages people to drive more. We need to build long overdue transit projects that will provide residents with an attractive alternative to driving. These include the Central Artery transit commitments and the Fairmount/Indigo Line. To maximize the benefit of these investments we need to require land use planning to precede transportation investments.

**Invest greater resources in public transit.** To allow the MBTA and other transit services across the state to provide high quality service at a reasonable price, the state needs to relieve some of the MBTA's three billion dollar debt load or substantially increase the agency's annual revenue. There must be a commitment to treat all riders equally and provide modern rapid transit to residents in urban and suburban communities.

**Land Use.** We need a new generation of land use planning that recognizes the reality of the global economy in which Massachusetts operates and how the health of the region determines the local and international competitiveness of communities. Our zoning code and the absolute commitment to "home rule" is archaic, cumbersome, and riddled with modifications intended to serve selected interests over the common good. It is time for a change. The good news is that reasonable, talented people have been working together for several years to conceive a superior alternative. The bad news is that well-entrenched interests will not give up this broken system without a fight.

***Recommendations:***

**Implement comprehensive land use reform through the revision of Chapter 40A.** The Governor's office should take the lead in directing state agencies, regional planning entities, and local communities in meaningful planning for future growth, and an improved 40A is a crucial first step.

**Improve coordination between state agencies that can encourage equitable land use.** Stakeholders need incentives for planning and equitable development that balance economic development and natural resource preservation, and acknowledge regional solutions to alleviate consequences of growth.

**Environment.** We need to realize that improved environmental outcomes are not just a matter of open space protection in the suburbs, but are complex products of all of the aforementioned policy initiatives put into play in urban and suburban communities. The history of environmental injustice in low-income communities and against people of color has to be acknowledged and addressed. Without doing so, we are doomed to perpetuate a cycle of development that manifests itself in the poor health outcomes of these communities as evidenced by higher incidences of illnesses and conditions such as asthma, cancer, and obesity. Concentrating undesirable uses in the communities least able to defend themselves must stop. We must reclaim abandoned and underutilized brownfield sites with smart economic reinvestment that can revitalize neighborhoods and regions. We must simultaneously ensure that the residents who suffered through the worst that these locations had to offer are not displaced by rising land values at the very moment communities begin their transformation. Residential and small business displacement is a wholly preventable phenomenon, and in Massachusetts we have the opportunity to demonstrate that there is a better way.

Looking ahead to future causes of environmental injustice, we must heed the warning of Hurricane Katrina, whose devastation fell most heavily on poor communities of color. If Massachusetts is to play its part in combating global warming, we must work to give all citizens real transit alternatives to driving. The transportation sector is the biggest and fastest growing source of global warming pollution in our state, and the way our development choices force us to use cars is as much a part of the problem as is the kinds of cars we buy.

***Recommendations:***

**Establish progressive guidelines for brownfields reclamation.** Legislation providing needed resources for brownfields reclamation passed the legislature just last week, and now heads to the desk of the current Governor. Presuming it is enacted, we will need your commitment to ensure that the guidelines for the expenditure of this limited resource meet equity criteria.

**Address climate change through project evaluation.** Evaluate potential developments for their contributions to soot, smog, and global warming pollutants.

**Revisit the regional greenhouse pact.** Massachusetts had assumed a leadership position in this crucial step in the battle against global warming until Governor Romney abdicated from the deal. This is an imminently reversible misstep that the new administration must address.

**Issue an executive order on environmental justice.** The current environmental justice policy applies only to the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and its departments

and programs. It needs to be extended so that all state agencies and departments prioritize the environment and dedicate resources to solving the problem.

**Education and Workforce Development.** Our economy is inextricably linked to our education system, from the earliest head start toddler to the most advanced postdoctoral candidate. The state has made significant progress in educational reform, much of it mandated by the courts. Much work remains. No excuse exists for any school district in the Commonwealth to be unequipped to prepare its young for the workforce and for citizenship. To do this, we must achieve educational equity. Once that future workforce is prepared, we do not need to mortgage future resources in order to attract businesses to our state to employ them. And we certainly do not need to encourage the cutthroat competition that persists between individual jurisdictions for business enterprises. We need economic development strategies that invest in our state's greatest assets—its people, particularly its young people. They will only stay if the housing is affordable and accessible, if the environment is healthy, and the transportation system connects their employees to the places where they choose to live.

**Remove impediments to full participation in the workforce.** Several steps could facilitate this, including completely funding affordable child care for working families under 30 percent of area median income; to implement Mass Inc.'s proposal to end ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) wait lists; and to provide access to job training as a way to address household earning power to compensate for escalating real estate values due to public investment.

### **Leadership for Policy Change**

For your convenience, we have described several specific policy initiatives that we think advance a regional equity agenda. The work ahead is challenging, at times daunting. Your leadership is pivotal to achieving regional equity, to creating economically competitive and socially desirable regions, and for building the kinds of communities that are the envy of other states. Your commitment to the vision described in this letter will ensure that all Massachusetts residents are beneficiaries of the state's common wealth.

During the next 180 days, you will try to convince the electorate that you are the best choice to govern this state for the next four (or eight) years. A simple test will answer this for thousands of disenfranchised Massachusetts residents: are you the one to lead the charge? Show us. We can join you in realizing that change.

With appreciation for your consideration,  
Action for Regional Equity