

The One River Vision for the Blackstone Valley

A Proposal

Documents like the 2nd *Industrial Revolution* and the work of the Heritage Corridor Commission articulate a powerful One River Vision for the Blackstone Valley that embraces both the Rhode Island and Massachusetts portions of the one river that is variously called the Blackstone, the Pawtucket, the Seekonk and the Providence. More recently, the Pawcatuck Foundation's Tidewater Plan and RI DEM's Urban Design Manual both enhance the vision and translate it into potential projects. The Boston tsunami of growth is headed for the Blackstone Valley and the time is now to execute on the vision before generic market forces foreclose the opportunity. The tsunami brings higher market demand that will allow us to build projects that could only have been dreams ten years ago.

The institutions of higher education in the Blackstone Valley represent a tremendous resource for innovation. Our proposal is to convene the Presidents of RISD, Clark University, Bryant University, and Worcester Tech, along with key business leaders, to refine the One River Vision and implement three signature projects each designed to be a crystal clear execution of the vision and inspire imitation.

Students and faculty will produce the project designs and the business leaders will develop the financial partnerships for execution. RISD can take the lead on site design, Clark can take the lead on geographic analysis and community planning, and Bryant can lead the real estate and market analysis. Worcester Tech could explore ways that university technology research could help support the growth of more high tech businesses in the region.

The One River Vision calls for day-lighting rivers, environmental clean up, recreation, history and culture, economic growth, and enhancing river villages. All three of the signature projects will be mold breaking and demonstrate to the market ways to:

- Use vernacular design features of the Blackstone Valley combined with new design ideas while avoiding the architectural features of typical suburban housing and commercial development.
- Enhance the authentic fabric of the community defined by its rivers, villages, cities, and rural areas.
- Expose streams and natural features to improve their health and the ability of the community to appreciate them.
- Have a net positive impact on the environment and the economy, including the creation of attractive new sites for job creation.
- Improve the economic prospects of the communities through growing the tax base.

The Mill Village Reborn

The region and the Blackstone Valley are experiencing a tremendous shortage of housing that is sending prices skyward. This project will show how new development can be concentrated in historic centers like mill villages instead of in standard subdivisions.

Building on the outstanding work of the Heritage Corridor to date in the Fisherville Mill in Grafton and the Stanly Mill in Uxbridge, we argue for designing a plan for an existing mill village that:

- Accommodates a significant number of new housing units, including both single family and rental units.
- Reflects the needs and income of the people working or studying in the community in the size, features, and cost of the units.
- Enhances the experience of being in a mill village. The new housing should make the mill into a living, contemporary village while not feeling intrusive.
- Improves opportunities to appreciate the river, historic structures and heritage.
- Creates a village with structures designed by many architects, but sharing a common vision (possibly by creating an architectural design manual).

The Office Park in a Park

New office buildings have been a success story of the southern portion of the Blackstone Valley. Highland Corporate Park was part of the vision of the 2nd *Industrial Revolution*. It is the only professionally managed office park in the region. The Massachusetts portion of the Blackstone contains areas designated for office and industrial use, but in terms of aesthetics and infrastructure they are seriously deficient. Throughout the Blackstone Valley are older industrial / office areas that are no longer highly desirable in the regional commercial real estate market. Also a few highway corridors are becoming de facto suburban office parks.

Choose either an existing low to mid-grade industrial / business district or a developing business corridor and redesign the area to:

- Attract a higher value mix of uses.
- Improve the market value of the land through good design.
- Deliver on the suburban office park promise of a “park like setting.”
- Create a place that people experience as a place and identify with.
- Introduce multiple uses including work and play.

Candidate sites to consider: Route 116 George Washington Highway, the North Central Industrial Park, Route 7 near Fidelity, Slatersville Industrial Park

The Tidewater Waterfront

The Charles River in Boston is surrounded by high value institutional uses, businesses, and recreational amenities. The tidewater portion of the Blackstone (aka Seekonk or Providence) is similar in size to the tidewater portion of the Charles. It is tantalizing to think what the lower Blackstone could be if it were develop in a manner similar to the Charles, rather than low value uses that line it today, as envisioned in the Pawtucket Foundation's *Tidewater Plan* . This project will refine and execute on signature project from the *Tidewater Plan*.