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It's Everybody's Problem

Like It Not, Bondi's Island Isn't In SOMEBODY ELSE'S BACK YARD

John R. Mullin, Ph.D., AICP

Bondi's Island is so pungently smelly that it is a negative influence on where we live, work, play and invest. If we do not correct the problem quickly, the image of our region as a special place will erode dramatically. Further, this problem does not belong to Springfield alone. It is one that requires strong regional and state participation.

As a person who studies and loves cities, I have long been aware of the impact of first impressions as one enters a city. At times these impressions are positively formed by physical objects such as the view from the bow of a ship (the harbors of San Francisco or New York), from the air (flights over Washington, D.C. and Athens) or from a car (as one comes down Boston's Belmont Hill or Lisbon's Avenida de Libertade). At other times they are negative, such as smog over Los Angeles, derelict housing in Cleveland and Detroit and, perhaps the worst, an automobile ride through the South Bronx. Yet, in all cases, it has been the smell of a city that has made the strongest impression on me. Three examples will help to illustrate my perceptions. The first occurred when I returned to Boston after three years in the Army in Central Europe. Arriving at Logan Airport, I immediately caught the penetrating smell of salt and fish. Far more than the view of the skyline or the sound of people's accents, these positive odors announced to me that I was home. The second is a memory of family outings in the 1950s and '60s to central New Jersey. My siblings used to constantly ask my dad when we would get there. His answer was inevitably: when your nose tells you! He was right. Shortly after crossing the George Washington Bridge we would be overwhelmed by the acrid smell of sulfur and other chemicals. The memory of this smell has remained with me for more than thirty years and, to be frank, still colors my impressions of New Jersey. (Unfairly, I might add; the state has dramatically reduced the problem.) The third is a remembrance of burning stocks of sugar cane in Lisbon. I lived in the city in 1985, a time when the Portuguese had absorbed more than

700,000 refugees and placed them in subsistence shelters on the fringes of the city. These refugees would burn the stocks to cook and heat water. They gave off a rich, trenchant odor that, to me, then and now, indicated a sad state of poverty. In all three cases, the smell overpowered the views, sounds and touch of the city.

The Bondi's Island case is no different than that of Boston, central New Jersey or Lisbon. One can be greeted by Springfield's pleasant skyline, the sounds of the city at work or the crispness of a fall day. On the other hand, one can be greeted by Bondi's Island and its all-pervasive odor. I have become aware of it most frequently as I have traveled interstate 91. From the south, I have become aware of it shortly after crossing the Longmeadow/Springfield line and it stayed with me throughout the 52 "whumps" on the interstate as I move to the Pyramid Mall sign. Coming from the north, the acrid smell announces that the Columbus Avenue exit is approaching. In short, most of the journey through the city requires one to frequently close windows and remark about the overwhelming smell of rotting waste. This inevitably influences the attitude of people traveling through the city.

What should be done? Clearly, Mayor Markel is moving in the right direction. His task force to find a solution is strong and powerful and Sister Mary Caritas, chair of the commission, is one of the most organized and solutions-oriented people I have ever met! Yet, the responsibility for correcting the problem is not Springfield's. Just as clearly, it does not belong to the neighboring communities. This is a problem that belongs to the entire Valley and, in a final sense, the Commonwealth. My opinion is based on the following points:

First, Springfield is cash-strapped and will be forced to make hard choices for years to come. A mayor, given the choice of financing teachers, public safety people and sewer repairs, or financing the odor problem at Bondi's Island will be most apt to focus on the former. I hate posing such dichotomies but, unfortunately, this is how such problems are typically




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presented. If this issue becomes Springfield's, the chances of quickly fixing it will be dramatically diminished.

Second, despite increased recognition of the need for a sense of regionalism, the all powerful urge to maintain home rule privileges will ultimately become an issue. As a resident of a small Western Massachusetts town, I love the sense of democracy that comes with direct town meetings. On the other hand, from my planning research work, I know that these home rule powers inevitably weaken regional approaches to common problems. It is little wonder that the proposed legislative reforms governing local planning, sponsored by the 1000 Friends of Massachusetts and now under review by the Massachusetts General Court, include stronger powers for regional planning agencies. Ironically, the Mayor's effort may be a reinforcing measure in creating a climate for regionalism, provided that all of us, for once, can forget our town and city borders.

A few weeks ago (April 29, 1994), Tim Brennan, director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, released a report which described the state of the region's economy. What struck me about the report is how interconnected we are in an economic sense and how little we are tied together in terms of governmental responses to common issues. We talk regionally, we work regionally, we bank regionally, and we play regionally. Yet, we govern locally. Isn't it time to change how we govern?

The home rule tradition will not be easily changed. After all, it has been with us since the time of the Pilgrims, Puritans and Pynchons. We have taken refuge in our town walls to establish a sense of physical and financial security to the point that only people like ourselves live there. At times these walls might as well be fifty feet tall. Indeed, most of us are now familiar with the term NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard). It should not be surprising that a whole new additional set of cynically humorous acronyms have been established that all are connected to the need to protect turf. Among these are CAVES (Committees Against Virtually Everything), BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything) and NOPEs (Not On Planet Earth). With such mindsets, it is little wonder that finding fair, equitable and truly regional solutions, as with Bondi's Island, will be a difficult task.

Third, there must be a recognition that the failure to act regionally will impact the entire Valley. We at the Center for Economic Development have been involved with the city as it begins to revitalize its riverfront with museums, parks and commercial opportunities. As we have developed plans, we are constantly aware that, if we had the opportunity to invest in the waterfront area, we would not do so as long as the smell remains. In short, we would invest elsewhere. These investments, in turn, will influence job creation and tourism opportunities throughout the Valley. Stated alternatively, the failure to solve this issue will increasingly cause our region to have a weakened center.

Finally, I hope the Commonwealth becomes a key player in the resolution of the problem. In so much as Bondi's Island impacts how travelers, business people and families perceive the Commonwealth, it is an issue of state-wide magnitude. Further, given the inability of local municipalities to raise taxes, any cost solution is likely to be delayed.

Mayor Markel's Task Force represents a positive start toward finding a solution. It is broadly mixed with business people, community leaders and experts. Above all, it includes representatives from the surrounding towns and the planning commissions. I hope it moves quickly, gains state financial support and moves to correct the problems. This problem cannot remain unresolved.

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