

City needs new suit of economic armor

Posted by [dbshepar](#) March 08, 2009 07:00AM

When President George Washington and Secretary of Defense Henry Knox made the decision in 1794 to locate the U.S. Armory in Springfield, they launched what turned out to be one of the region's most important economic development engines.

Beyond its strategic importance to the young nation, the armory would play a major role in the economic vitality of the region for decades to come.

For the better part of the 20th century, the Springfield Armory was the region's largest employer, providing jobs for 15,000 workers during World War II and serving as an incubator for technological advances used by manufacturers throughout the region.

In the postwar years, the armory was like a suit of armor ensuring the city's prosperity for another generation of workers and their families. Good-paying jobs at the armory enabled people to buy and build homes, send their children to college and create a community where people wanted to live. But by the time the armory was closed in 1968, in the words of former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, as "an excess to the federal government," there were fewer than 100 workers there.

The skills that workers had acquired and developed at the armory would continue to fuel innovation and new enterprises in the Pioneer Valley for a time - and they still do to a degree. But the emergence of a new knowledge-based and service-oriented economy changed the economic dynamics in the region, leaving too many workers behind.

Middle-class families fled to the suburbs. And, like many older industrial cities, Springfield began to experience a broad-based decline as it grappled with crime and poverty. Beset with adverse social, economic and political trends, the city lost its ability to foster the innovations needed to keep pace in a new global economy.

There is no knight in shining armor - or a magic bullet - to cure these ills, but a research team assembled by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth, known as MassINC, is in the midst of a two-phase strategic plan it hopes will develop a new economic foundation that will enable the city to grow and prosper.

The team has set out to answer the question: "What's the next Springfield Armory?" Or, to put it another way, what strategies must the region employ to find an industry - or cluster of industries - that can replicate the innovation and resulting prosperity the armory brought to the region.

MassINC will present the initial findings of its report on Tuesday to the Springfield Finance Control Board.

The \$125,000 report, approved by the control board last May, compares Springfield on a number of benchmarks with 16 peer cities in the Northeast and Midwest. The report found that Springfield compared favorably on some measures and not so favorably on others.

The good news is that the city has maintained its dominance as both a population center and regional economic hub in recent decades. Economic strengths were notable in health, finance and education with Springfield ranking higher than most peer communities.

The bad news is that a large segment of the city's population is young and poor and ill-equipped to secure some of the higher-paying jobs the city offers. For example, more than 60 percent of families are headed by single parents and Springfield's teen birth rate is the second highest in Massachusetts.

Springfield does have assets, however, that can be tapped to help reverse economic decline, including a strategic location, a fine telecommunications infrastructure, the presence of higher education and health care institutions and the continued presence of a precision manufacturing cluster that is, in many ways, a legacy of the Springfield Armory.

Perhaps opportunities for the city may be found in so-called green-tech industries such as biofuels, the report said.

We look forward to the second phase of the MassINC report, which will outline strategies for the next 20 years and beyond. The second phase of the report will serve as an action plan that will help the city capitalize on its assets and maintain its role as the economic hub of the Pioneer Valley. Education will be a major component of a turnaround, researchers said.

MassINC has worked diligently to involve citizens, business leaders and elected officials in its planning process, recognizing that building a strong sense of community is a key to success.

Springfield is at a critical crossroads. What will be the city's next Springfield Armory? We must find one - or many - to replace it. Without new engines of economic growth, the future will be quite bleak.

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