North Atlantic Rail: Building a Just and Green Economy

North Atlantic Rail is a proposed high-performance rail network linking Boston with New York City and connecting all of the small and mid-sized urban centers across the 7-state New England - Downstate New York megaregion with these two global cities and with each other. High-performance rail provides fast, frequent, convenient, reliable and well-priced services for all users of the network. North Atlantic Rail will include a new 200-mph main trunk line, upgraded 120-mph regional rail lines, and upgraded 80-mph branch lines.

The fundamental idea that underlies the North Atlantic Rail initiative is the creation of a new economic geography, a megaregional NETWORK that connects Boston and New York, the smaller cities of New England, Long Island and Downstate New York, and all of their suburbs, small towns and villages. Every node is amplified by connection to the larger network, and has its agglomeration advantages, its critical mass and economies of scale. This is not just a physical rail network; it is a set of rail-enabled economic relationships, for both firms and individuals, across the whole megaregional geography rather than just one of its metros, that can serve as a platform for economic transformation, for the creation of a just and green economy.

The networked megaregion will make our personal networks larger and more dynamic, shaped by the churn of workers and firms across the whole economic geography. This churn of workers and firms is a primary way that work networks form. Here’s how it happens: A new work colleague will bring to a firm the relationships she had at her last firm at the other end of the megaregion. Those will be new potential collaborators for her co-workers in her new firm. Lee Fleming at Harvard Business School showed that the larger and more dynamic the network of collaborators, the more productive it is in terms of innovation. Collaboration among the same small group of people over time actually stifles innovation.

For example, a firm based in Hartford would be an hour from either New York City or Boston, with access to all of the talent in those cities and the cities between them. A Hartford resident would be within a one-hour commute of all of the jobs in the megaregion. Think of it this way: North Atlantic Rail would “shrink” the megaregion such that it takes the same time to travel by train across it as now takes to cross the Hartford metro by car. This is a major step change from the current state, where personal networks are concentrated at the metro, rather than megaregional scale.

North Atlantic Rail enables a rebalancing of the megaregion’s mobility system, shifting passenger movements to rail, thereby creating capacity on the highway system for freight and other uses like tradesmen who cannot practically use rail. And North Atlantic Rail enables a rebalancing of the economic relationships between the two global cities and the smaller cities between them.

In the seventies and early eighties, there was a flight from the actual and perceived lack of safety in New York City and Boston. This flight built the suburban office parks in places like Route 128 near Boston, High Ridge Road in Stamford, Route 110 on Long Island, and I-287 in Westchester. But New York and Boston came back. They became safer and saw decades of explosive growth. So much growth, in fact, that by the first decades of this century young people and young companies started to be priced out of them, some moving to Second Cities like Stamford and Providence.

So, we went from the Era of the Suburbs to the Era of the Big Cities to the Era of the Big Cities & Second Cities. North Atlantic Rail would create the Era of the Megaregion Network, where jobs and housing are distributed more evenly across the whole megaregion. New York City and Boston have become overconcentrated, too big, too costly and too congested to be sustainable on their own...fragile, single points of sensitivity to the certain disruptions of climate change, as well as other shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic. Engaging the small cities of New England and Downstate New York is what will reduce the overall cost and fragility of the megaregion, enabling it to accelerate its sluggish job and population growth. North Atlantic Rail creates the mobility system that the post-Covid-19 world demands. Many of us have discovered that we can do most of our work from home, connecting to other work partners for vital face-to-face interaction maybe once or twice a week rather than daily. If commuting is less frequent, we are willing to do it over longer distances and for longer times, made shorter by high-speed rail.

North Atlantic Rail creates transformational opportunity for the small cities of New England and Downstate New York. How might they exploit this opportunity? How can small cities play their better hand, their advantages in cost and their advantages in size, while using high-performance rail to overcome their disadvantages? The disadvantage of size is that a small city lacks a critical mass of firms and talent. North Atlantic Rail fixes that, giving every small city access to all of the megaregion’s firms and talent. The advantage of small size is that an
individual can have greater impact. Besides lower cost, that is why young talent downshifts from a big city to a small city. They want to have impact; to help make the place. How do we enable them to do that?

**Could we evolve the small cities of New England and Downstate New York into the next version of a city, as largely self-built maker communities that are engines of innovation and upward mobility?**

For example, many of the small cities between New York City and Boston have large areas of surface parking lots within walking distance of their rail stations. How could they serve as the canvass for a creative habitat made by self-builders and small cap developers among a combination of in-bound young talent and start-ups, immigrants and existing, mostly non-white neighborhood residents? As demonstrated by the work of the Incremental Development Alliance, this is an opportunity for local wealth creation and for closing the wealth gap between whites and non-whites.

And could these self-built creative habitats also be the location of another innovation: micro-manufacturing? Additive manufacturing processes have the potential to eliminate economies of scale for certain kinds of products, meaning that manufacturing could return to urban neighborhoods, where it was located for most of history. How can some of the “work” in live/work developments be about making things, small manufacturing shops, rather than just studios or lofts? Could this expand the middle rungs of the job ladder—the middle-wage jobs, now mostly public servants like police and firemen and teachers?

As dramatically revealed during the Covid-19 quarantine, our current economy is out of balance, at one end mostly low-paid “essential” jobs in healthcare and food production and distribution that require you to show up, and at the other end higher-paying “nonessential” jobs that can mostly be done at home. Typically, a higher paying job requires a college degree, whether or not the college degree is really necessary to do the actual work. Without the ability to move from low wage work to the middle wage work that enables a family to finance their children’s college education, these higher paying jobs are largely out of reach for many. **HOW CAN WE CREATE MORE MIDDLE WAGE JOBS?** And how might some of the higher wage jobs become accessible without a college degree, as they are redefined in new business models that revitalize apprenticeship and other on-the-job learning?

The opportunity to create middle wage jobs, to create maker communities that are engines of innovation and upward mobility, could come from breakthrough ideas that exploit the opportunities in crises. As a region and as a nation, we now face five simultaneous crises: the pandemic, a deep economic recession, a demand to end racial and economic injustice, the climate emergency, all while our fundamental democratic institutions and norms are under attack, from within and abroad. Yet in all of these crises there are opportunities, if we have the boldness to seize them, and to think of them as an inter-related whole. In the spirit of FDR, who faced a similarly daunting set challenges and opportunities in the 1930’s, can we follow his model of rigorous experimentation as embodied in the New Deal?

Can we think laterally, rather than in silos, as if the five crises are intertwined? Can we unleash the energies of entrepreneurs that have integrative, whole system business models that help us decarbonize and relocate? Can we overcome a system where wealth and power are over-concentrated, stifling entrepreneurship and innovation and suppressing democracy? Can we shorten supply chains that are precariously over-globalized? Can we change the basic carbon-intensive business model in many sectors that results in over-production and waste, in part because environmental degradation is treated as an externality rather than a cost? Can we do all this while confronting and dismantling a system of institutional racism and misogyny that extracts and concentrates capital, blocking minorities and women from becoming forces of economic transformation?

The opportunity to reduce our carbon footprint, while simultaneously reducing income inequality, lies in relocating and shortening the chains of supply and distribution; and in building local wealth and redistributing it in a circular rather than extractive business model. The focus of relocализation is logically the megaregion, rather than the state or the city or the metro, because megaregions have the scale of population and land to operate as largely self-contained ecological and economic systems, with long job ladders and local wealth creation. Megaregions have sufficient sources of local supply, large enough local demand, a local critical mass of firms and talent, and vast local reservoirs of ideas and capital. North Atlantic Rail will create the New England - Down State New York Megaregion, the platform for this economic transformation.