



# City of Possibilities: Lawrence on the Merrimack

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A CASE FOR THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY OF LAWRENCE NOTES ITS GROWING INVESTMENT IN HEALTHCARE AND SOCIAL SERVICES, MANUFACTURING, EDUCATION, AND CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE. THE CITY'S HISTORY LENDS ITSELF TO A NARRATIVE OF URBAN VIBRANCY AND GROWTH, WITH RECENT SUBSTANTIAL PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES.

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## Introduction

In February 2012, *Boston Magazine* published “Lawrence, MA: City of the Damned.”<sup>1</sup> It touched off discussions and protests across Lawrence for its narrow and mean-spirited focus on a bad news story arc, the kind that predominates when most outside observers write about the city of 76,000, located 25 miles north of Boston on the Merrimack River. Easily accessible by Interstates 495 and 93 and commuter rail to Boston’s North Station, Lawrence has a history that lends itself to a narrative of a vibrant and growing city, one with recent public and private sector social and economic development initiatives reaching into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

## Early History

During the 1830s, Daniel Saunders, called the *Founder of Lawrence*, purchased strips of land on either side of the Merrimack River to gain control of waterpower rights. In 1843 he and others formed the Merrimack Water Power Association and accelerated land purchases along the Merrimack, including 7<sup>1/2</sup> square miles from Methuen and Andover, which would eventually become the city of Lawrence. Boston-based investors, the so-called Boston Associates, had already developed nearby Lowell as one of the nation’s first planned industrial cities. They sought to rep-

licate their success twenty miles downriver in Lawrence at the confluence of the Merrimack, Shawsheen, and Spicket rivers. Securing ample capital, in March of 1845, the Essex Company was chartered to build a dam and canals on the Merrimack River to provide waterpower for textile mills. The Great Stone Dam created the foundation for the city’s growth and from it two canals were constructed to the north and south of the Merrimack to carry water to the mills. The nearly mile-long North Canal provided greater space for manufacturers to position their mills parallel to the river. Historian Orra Stone said this about the city: “The influx of Boston capital created a mill city almost overnight and for nearly a mile on both banks of the stately Merrimack there tower the red brick walls of manufacturing establishment.”<sup>2</sup>

Lawrence eventually became powerful and highly profitable, graced by blocks of residential neighborhoods, vast expanses of industrial space, long commercial boulevards, and a meticulously planned park. Roadways out of the neighborhoods led workers over North Canal bridges and into the mills. Fewer than 40 years after the Essex Company’s incorporation, 338,100 spindles, 9,057 looms, and 10,200 employees wove two million yards of worsted wool a week. The Lawrence Machine Shop constructed most of the machinery used in the mills and for a

time also built railroad locomotives. In addition, “The city manufactures a wider variety of paper-making machinery than any other one center; a larger total volume than any other city in the United States.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1900, Lawrence produced nearly 25 percent of all the woolen cloth in the United States. The Pacific Mills had mechanical equipment capable of producing 800 miles of finished textile fabrics every working day of the year. Sixty-five percent of manufacturing output, 67 percent of all the capital invested in the city, and 52 percent of the city’s wages came from the woolen mills. After 75 years, the city led the world in the production of worsted wool cloth. In 1910, the Pacific Mills generated \$10 million in sales. Adjusted for inflation, and as a measure of 2010 purchasing power, this translates into \$237 million in sales. The phrase, “We Weave the World’s Worsteds,” was a source of pride for city residents.

Journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, in the city in 1912 to cover the Bread and Roses Strike, said this about the mills: “The mills are Lawrence; you cannot escape them; the smoke of them fills the sky. The great mills of Lawrence make the Lawrence skyline; they dominate and dwarf the churches. From Union Street to Broadway along the canal the mills stretch, a solid wall of brick and wide-paned glass, imposing by their vastness and almost beautiful, as is everything that without pretense is adapted absolutely to its own end.”<sup>4</sup>

### **A Bad Turn**

By the 1940s the city suffered as its woolen mills grappled with the rise of synthetic fiber and the steady migration of work—by 1950 some 20,000 jobs were gone. The city’s population dropped from a peak of nearly 100,000 at the end of the First World War to about 63,000 in 1980 (see Figure 1). However, since then there has been a steady population increase fueled by the growth of the city’s Latino population, primarily from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico (see Figure 2). Lawrence is now one of the youngest communities in the state.

When work disappeared, some twelve million square feet of massive red brick mill buildings remained, providing numerous challenges to a community struggling to create new jobs and provide economic opportunity for thousands of newcomers, just as the city had done in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Kate O’Brien and Heather McMann, the city’s poorest neighborhoods confronted a host of environmental justice issues including “vacant, contaminated, underutilized, derelict, and illegally dumped-upon land...”<sup>5</sup> Adding to the problems associated with several hundred vacant and underutilized lots, according to Lawrence Community Works’ Jess Andors, the city wrestled with many foreclosed or abandoned buildings.<sup>6</sup>

### **Today**

Lawrence was and is a city of immigrants. Three years after incorporation, the city’s population was 8,358. It more than doubled by 1860, with 42 percent of its residents foreign born, mostly the result of Irish immigration. In 1880 some 39,000 people lived in the growing city. Irish, Scots, and French Canadians accounted for 77 percent of the city’s foreign-born population. Reflecting the growth of woolen mills and numerous supporting industries and commercial establishments, the population approached 45,000 in 1890; 45 percent of its residents were foreign born, attracted by the possibilities of finding a mill job. In 1910, 85,892 people lived in Lawrence; 48 percent were foreign born. By the middle of the twentieth century, families from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic started arriving in the city just as those once easy-to-find mill jobs were heading south and overseas.

Today, the nearly 75 percent Latino city grapples with 15 percent unemployment and the lowest median household income in Massachusetts. That figure was \$31,631 in 2010, compared with Holyoke, \$31,948, Springfield, \$34,628, and Chelsea, \$40,487. But just as early twentieth century newcomers formed a variety of community organizations and churches and lived in vibrant neighborhoods, today’s newcomers have impressively regenerated the city’s economy and social fabric.

Referring to the Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, which was led largely by immigrant workers, *Rumbo* reporter Melvyn Colon noted that one hundred years later the city is still a gateway for immigrants and migrants. “The struggle is no longer to wrest from the mill owners’ concessions on hours, pay and an end to discrimination against foreign born workers. Ironically, the goal is to return the underutilized mills to productive use so that they contribute to the economic vitality of the city. The struggle for Bread and Roses is not waged by unions but by community activists, many of them women, who are organizing community members to press for affordable housing, jobs and improvements to open spaces and waterways that will raise the quality of life of Lawrence residents.”<sup>7</sup>

The North Canal, dug in the 1840s to help power the city’s mills, today offers an important green pick-me-up for a city intent on reclaiming its built environment. According to the Urban Land Institute, “Although in various states of disrepair, it maintains a real, if dilapidated beauty and serves as a reminder of the City’s storied past. The City and State have invested significant resources to improve the infrastructure that provides access across the canal. A significant cluster of established organizations, leased up buildings, and successful projects continues to take shape east of Union Street, maintaining the promise that a mix of people — workers and residents — will spend

**Figure 1. Lawrence and Massachusetts Population, 1850–2010**

Year	Lawrence	Percent Change	Massachusetts	Percent Change
1850	8,282		994,514	
1860	17,639	113%	1,231,066	24%
1870	28,921	64%	1,457,351	18%
1880	39,151	35%	1,783,085	22%
1890	44,654	14%	2,238,947	26%
1900	62,559	40%	2,805,346	25%
1910	85,892	37%	3,366,416	20%
1920	94,270	10%	3,852,356	14%
1930	85,068	-10%	4,249,614	10%
1940	84,323	-1%	4,316,721	2%
1950	80,536	-4%	4,690,514	9%
1960	70,933	-12%	5,148,578	10%
1970	66,915	-6%	5,689,170	10%
1980	63,175*	-6%	5,737,037	1%
1990	70,207	11%	6,016,425	5%
2000	72,062	3%	6,349,119	6%
2010	76,377	6%	6,547,629	3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

\* Parts of North Andover town were annexed and detached by the city of Lawrence.

large portions of their days in the vicinity of the Canal and could see it as an amenity.”<sup>8</sup>

### Private Investment and Employment Growth

The industry mix in Lawrence differs starkly from that of the state in ways that are both a legacy of its past and an indicator of its present. The largest sector in the city, as measured by employment, is Health and Social Assistance, comprising nearly 30% of all the city’s jobs (see Figure 3). In a city characterized by high unemployment and poverty, this sector supplies obvious demand. The second

largest sector, Manufacturing, reflects Lawrence’s history as one of the earliest centers of textile production. One marker of the impact of the recession is the decline since 2005 of Professional and Technical Services employment. This bellwether sector for high technology and higher-paying jobs declined by 16.1% from 2005 to 2011, resulting in 2.1% of all jobs in the City compared to 8.2% statewide. And the small size of the Information as well as the Finance and Insurance sectors provides further commentary on the dramatic differences between Lawrence and the state as a whole.

Lawrence’s 2011 and 2012 *Economic Development Reports* highlight several private sector initiatives. These include: JSB Muffin Town’s opening of a \$12 million bakery; continued investment by Lupoli Companies, including a new \$65

million mill renovation project; and New Balance’s outlet store, sneaker manufacturing plant, and Sports Research Lab in a renovated Lawrence mill building. The Lab’s 3,000 square foot facility includes state-of-the-art biomechanics equipment, office space, and a 120-foot running track. New Balance maintains a research relationship with the University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Kinesiology.<sup>9</sup>

WinnDevelopment purchased two properties on the 29-acre site of the Malden Mills complex last year for \$3.15 million. Winn turned Malden Mills’ burned-

**Figure 2. Lawrence and Massachusetts Nativity, Citizenship and Place of Birth, 2007–2011**

	Lawrence		Massachusetts	
	Estimate	Percent of Total	Estimate	Percent of Total
Total:	75,761	100.0%	6,512,227	100.0%
Native:	48,381	63.9%	5,554,813	85.3%
Born in Massachusetts	32,159	42.4%	4,105,546	63.0%
Born in other state in the U.S.	7,413	9.8%	1,289,804	19.8%
Born in U.S. Territories or Abroad:	8,809	11.6%	159,463	2.4%
Puerto Rico	7,860	10.4%	106,074	1.6%
U.S. Island Areas	50	0.1%	1,706	0.0%
Born Abroad of American parent(s)	899	1.2%	51,683	0.8%
Foreign born:*	27,380	36.1%	957,414	14.7%
Dominican Republic	19,826	26.2%	64,850	1.0%
Guatemala	1,775	2.3%	25,896	0.4%
Cambodia	704	0.9%	15,612	0.2%
Naturalized U.S. citizen	11,871	15.7%	470,913	7.2%
Not a U.S. citizen	15,509	20.5%	486,501	7.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, 2007–2011

\* Top three foreign-born nationalities for Lawrence

Data are based on a sample and have some associated error.

out buildings, vacant for ten years, into loft-style, low- and moderate-income apartments. The \$30 million Loft Five50 project was funded with a mix of public and private dollars, including \$9.7 million of state and federal historic tax credits and \$4.8 million of state and federal low-income housing tax credits. The rest came from private financing and equity investments.

For Lawrence Curtis, president of WinnDevelopment, “It is almost sport to criticize Gateway Cities, but the highway access and existing historic buildings, coupled with welcoming city administrations, makes these attractive places to work for a developer.” Loft Five50 took a decade of planning. “All cities want to snap their fingers and see vacant mills rehabilitated,” he said. “But Lawrence recognizes that cities do not develop overnight.” The company has an agreement to buy two more buildings at a cost of about \$1 million where another 55 units could be built.<sup>10</sup>

Gary Sidell of Bell Tower Management LLC has been in Lawrence since the early 1990s, first running an apparel firm with his dad and, since 2001, in real estate. According to Sidell, close to 1,850,000 square feet of mill space have been brought back into use for nearly 400 dwelling units, artist and film maker working spaces, classrooms and offices for Cambridge College, offices for social service agencies, and light manufacturing. One large building his firm handles has seventy-five organizations and companies in it and has been over 90 percent occupied since 2007. Additionally, an 80,000 square foot space envisioned as a

medical building is rapidly filling up with doctors’ offices, a large pharmacy, and an oncology laboratory.

Along with private sector investment, there are notable positives in the labor market. Lawrence’s average annual employment fell 7.2 percent in 2002, made a slow recovery between 2003 and 2008, fell in 2008 and 2009, but recovered in 2010 with 5.2 percent growth. There’s been modest growth since. Over the same period, Holyoke, Springfield, Lowell, and New Bedford haven’t matched Lawrence’s average annual employment growth. Average annual percentage growth in employment in Lawrence has exceeded the state’s average since 2008. Even as Lawrence shows signs of economic recovery, its unemployment rate has consistently exceeded the state’s. During 2012, Lawrence experienced a rate over 14%, while the state rate was less than 7%.

Business establishments in the city totaled 1,184 in 2001 and climbed to nearly 2000 at the start of 2013. Total compensation paid out in 2001 was \$794 million. In 2010 this figure reached nearly \$1.1 billion, including outlays in the fast-growing Health Care and Social Assistance category, which accounted for 5,215 jobs in 2001 and nearly 7,000 by the start of 2013.

### Northern Essex Community College’s Urban Commitment

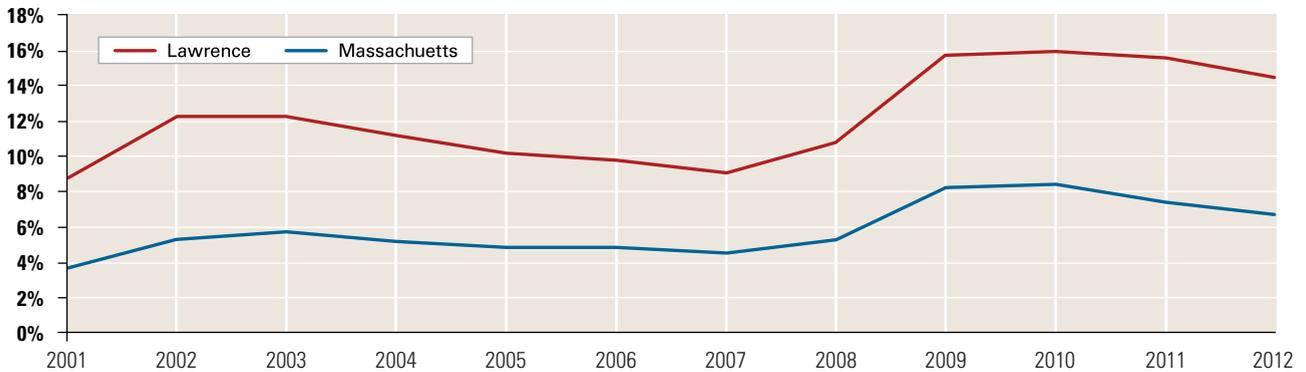
Some 1,200 new jobs in what can be described as nascent business clusters in food preparation, medicine, and geriatric care were created in the last five years. Adding to the

**Figure 3. Lawrence and Massachusetts Employment by Industry, 2005–2011**

Industry	Percent Change, 2005–2011 Lawrence	Share of 2011 Employment Lawrence	Share of 2011 Employment Massachusetts
Health Care and Social Assistance	27.7%	29.7%	16.7%
Manufacturing	-3.4%	20.1%	8.0%
Administrative and Waste Services	43.3%	10.9%	5.1%
Other Services, Excluding Public Admin	57.2%	8.0%	4.3%
Retail Trade	-5.2%	6.6%	10.8%
Public Administration	3.7%	6.2%	4.2%
Accommodation and Food Services	23.9%	4.2%	8.3%
Wholesale Trade	-22.3%	2.9%	3.9%
Construction	-4.5%	2.6%	3.8%
Transportation and Warehousing	5.5%	2.3%	3.0%
Professional and Technical Services	-16.1%	2.1%	8.2%
Information	-4.5%	1.4%	2.8%
Finance and Insurance	11.8%	1.2%	5.3%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	2.3%	1.0%	1.3%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	-4.9%	0.9%	1.8%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	-57.1%	0.1%	1.7%
Educational Services	n/a	0.0%	10.2%
Utilities	n/a	0.0%	0.4%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	n/a	0.0%	0.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: MA Labor and Workforce Development, Labor Market Information, ES-202

\* Mining sector (zero percent share in Lawrence and Massachusetts) was excluded from this table.

**Figure 4. Lawrence & Massachusetts Unemployment Rates, 2001–2012**

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS)

growth, Northern Essex Community College has begun construction in downtown Lawrence to expand its Criminal Justice, Ophthalmic Assistant, and Medical Laboratory Technology programs.

The Registry of Deeds Building in Lawrence — owned by the Northern Essex Community College Foundation — was recently demolished, making room for green space connecting two of the college’s downtown Lawrence buildings. The site provides a vital connection between the college’s Dr. Ibrahim El Hefni Allied Health & Technology Center on Common Street — scheduled to open in the fall of 2013 — and the Louise Haffner Education Center on Amesbury Street. When the redeveloped site is completed, said Lane Glenn, president of Northern Essex, and the Allied Health & Technology Center opens, “we will be closer to accomplishing the college’s goal of a complete urban campus in downtown Lawrence. This will be a great advantage for the city, providing additional educational opportunities for local residents and a larger pool of workers for area employers.”<sup>11</sup> When President Glenn was asked about the *Boston Magazine* article, he replied: “It’s not that the article wasn’t true; they are also only part of the story. Lawrence is not a City of the Damned, and clearly it is not a Garden of Eden. It is a community of people with challenges and with tremendous strengths.”<sup>12</sup>

### Land Use, Community, and Cultural Initiatives

Considering all that is taking place across Lawrence, it is difficult to state that any single aspect of development is more critical than any other. The private and public sector efforts discussed here are reinforcing; their momentum points to sustainable positive change.

### Groundwork Lawrence and the Spicket River Greenway

A string of parks, some on reclaimed brownfields, is reconnecting Lawrence’s poorest neighborhoods to its riverfront. Through Groundwork Lawrence’s (GWL) environ-

mental and open space improvements, healthy food access programs, youth education, employment initiatives, community programming and events, GWL creates the building blocks of a healthy community and empowers Lawrence residents to improve their quality of life. Today, the city’s burgeoning green movement includes public gardens, greenways and parks, and solar panels on historic mill building roofs.

For years the Spicket River, which runs through the city’s poorest neighborhoods, suffered from neglect and dumping and was bordered by vacant lots and brownfield sites. In 2000, Lawrence CommunityWorks and Groundwork Lawrence launched a neighborhood planning process that became the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative. With help from neighborhood residents, a former industrial laundry site was converted into a riverfront park. Next, Groundwork Lawrence, along with residents and the city, developed a vision for a greenway across the city of parks and trees along the river, linked by recreational trails. Funding from the state’s Urban Self-Help Fund helped bring about new parks along the Spicket, including a skate park that local youth helped create. A \$2.6 million Commonwealth Gateway City Parks grant made possible the final design and construction of the three-mile greenway. The multi-year effort involved a diverse group of stakeholders who championed reclamation of the river with direct action, including thousands of residents who have cleared over 115 tons of debris and tires from the river’s banks since 2002.<sup>13</sup>

### Lawrence Community Works

Founded in the mid-1980s, Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW) has a membership of thousands of Lawrence families and has generated over \$70 million in new neighborhood investment. Its real estate development mission is to “improve the physical condition of Lawrence neighborhoods by transforming derelict, contaminated or underutilized real property into the positive, valuable and beautiful

community assets called for by residents.” Over the past ten years hundreds of units of rental and home ownership housing, almost three acres of open space on over 30 vacant and abandoned properties, a new community center, three new playgrounds and a range of family asset building and youth development efforts have been completed.

LCW is nearly finished with the development of over 400,000 square feet of historic mill space called Union Crossing. The nearly \$70 million project includes family and workforce housing, a daycare facility, commercial office, retail, and community facilities, as well as new green space and public access to the Merrimack River. Union Crossing is a partnership between LCW — a non-profit Development Corporation — and two of Lawrence’s most successful commercial developers, the Yezpe brothers and the Sidell family. The project utilizes innovative green building techniques, asset-building strategies for residents, educational and entrepreneurship opportunities for local businesses, and creative partnerships. The commercial portion of the project will include business incubator space with a focus on clean technology, incentives for university partnerships, and a commitment to supporting local businesses.

LCW established creative programs to help newcomers to the city create small businesses and families figure out ways to save for their children’s college education. The new United Way Lawrence Financial Stability Center will adapt and develop the United Way model to the city’s pressing needs; LCW’s Lawrence Saves, a resident-driven awareness campaign to foster financial literacy, preceded it. The Center will cultivate partnerships across various community service organizations, financial and other institutions and leverage resources to create the greatest impact. And the recently launched Lawrence Financial Stability Center at 50 Island Street will likewise serve residents of Greater Lawrence.

### **United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley**

United Way has committed \$600,000 to Community-Works over the next three years to run the center. Officials anticipate that the center in its first year will bring assistance to more than 500 people. “We’ve done asset and financial education work for a long time, but we’ve only been able to help between 500 to 1,000 people,” observed Jessica Anders, Co-Executive Director of LCW. “This will help expand our services and help more families.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Lawrence’s Cultural Economy**

Lawrence’s numerous arts and cultural organizations are important contributors in creating a sense of place and identity for residents and visitors. Organizations such as the Lawrence Heritage State Park, the Lawrence Public Library, the Lawrence History Center, and Essex Art

Center highlight the community’s strengths, vitality and unique history. Since the early 1990s, the Essex Art Center has occupied nearly 14,000 square feet of galleries and classrooms in the Mill District.

Throughout 2012, the Lawrence History Center, along with the Lawrence Heritage State Park, the Lawrence Public Library, and the University of Massachusetts Lowell led a citywide effort to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the Bread and Roses Strike of 1912. From January through September, the center hosted 71 meetings, school groups, and events (e.g., theatrical performances, a vintage fashion show and exhibit, and an academic symposium) in the exhibit space and engaged over 5,000 people from 28 states.

Everett Mills Real Estate owner Marianne Paley Nadel has since offered the 6th floor to the Lawrence History Center as permanent exhibit, educational, and event space for cultural opportunities to her tenants and the greater community. Capitalizing on local assets often strengthens economic outcomes. Local assets, in this case, are Paley Nadel’s historic mill building and the History Center’s ability to tell the story of the history and heritage of Lawrence and its people. Overall, arts and cultural activities help to improve the community’s competitive edge, attract visitors to the city and, in turn, stimulate the local economy when visitors attend events, dine, and shop at businesses. These opportunities strengthen the downtown core and help improve external perceptions of the city.

### **What Lies Ahead?**

Remembering what workers sought during the 1912 mill strike is useful when considering where Lawrence stands a century later. What mattered then to the largely immigrant city was employment and opportunity. Lawrence’s built environment, its vast mill spaces and wool-producing technology, its rivers and canals offered hope. That combination, minus the old machinery, provides the possibility of moving ahead for today’s residents. Just as innovation and environment sparked one of the richest cities in the country, those very factors, marshaled by a growing number of public and private sector partners, are crafting a new kind of city on the Merrimack. As *Rumbo’s* Melvyn Colon summarized: “Smart growth is particularly important to the Latino community because it promotes the importance of creating employment opportunities that are accessible to community residents. For Latinos in Lawrence, the Bread issues are affordable housing and accessible jobs; two things that remain in critically short supply. The Roses are equally important to the Latino community as they are closely associated with the health, well-being and vitality of our community.”<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the city’s future is closely tied to its housing market and the creation of well-paying jobs. The slow,

steady turnaround of the public education system is essential to attracting first-time home buyers and employers looking for the mill spaces. The example of New Balance is indicative here. And, started in early 2010 when a small group of college graduates returned to the area, members of The Greater Lawrence Young Professionals Network are investing their time and energy in their home town by mentoring school children, buying and fixing up houses and apartment blocks and starting new businesses. Considering what is occurring now in Lawrence, research by Yolanda Kodrzycki and Ana Muñoz into how distressed cities can begin to turn around is encouraging. They found “Having a strong civic infrastructure, leadership, and cross-sector collaboration” are important ingredients as former industrial cities remake themselves. Far from being the city of the damned, Lawrence is in fact a city of possibilities.<sup>16</sup> 

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#### Endnotes

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