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I have used the theme “the rise of urban Maine” a number of times in talks about the changing Maine economy over the past several years, and the reaction has been much the same each time: Something between amusement that one could use these two words together in the same sentence without some form negation between one or the other, and downright hostility at the thought that anything in Maine could be described as urban.

This reaction is by no means surprising. Since the arrival of the first “rusticators” in the post Civil War era, Maine has seen itself as the quintessential *anti*-urban society. That view intensified as we defined ourselves as “vacationland” in the 1930s, staking out our territory as the place to which weary urbanites from those benighted regions to the south should flee each summer for relaxation and restoration. It continues to this day in our invocation of the dreaded “sprawl” as the justification for stopping anything that looks like growth.

There is no doubt that Maine does not have the intensive urbanization- or suburbanization- of the rest of the Atlantic coast states and that much of the natural beauty of the state remains available for all. But finding the idea of “urban Maine” repulsive represents a misunderstanding of both urban areas and Maine, and that misunderstanding will do great harm to the state if it continues. My purpose therefore is to demonstrate how Maine is evolving into an urban society, and that we can and should embrace this idea, for doing so represents the only way that Maine can maintain a viable economy while still keeping what is special and unique about the state.

My basic premise is that, in geography as in other characteristics, Maine has become almost identical to the rest of the United States, and we must respond accordingly.

Any my most important conclusion is that, far from meaning that Maine is doomed to a future of urban squalor, the unimaginable horror of “New Jerseyization”, by acknowledging and understanding our urban nature we can preserve what is special about Maine.

To make these points, I want to first examine how Maine is becoming more of an urban society. I will then look at the explanations of why this is occurring, of which almost all the popular ones are for the most part wrong or at best incomplete. Finally, I will explore the implications and our possible responses.

First we need to trace the evolution of Maine’s urban areas, which we can do by examining the relative role played by the metropolitan areas of Maine in the economy. Maine has three metropolitan areas for federal statistical purposes: Portland, Lewiston-Auburn, and Bangor. Parts of southern York County are also included in the Portsmouth-Rochester-Dover metro area. Metropolitan areas are defined as central cities and their surrounding suburbs.

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From 1969 to 2001, the proportion of Maine's employment in metro areas increased from 45% to just under 50%, using the 1990 definitions of metro areas (as I will show in a minute, this underestimates the proportion of employment in urban areas). This increase of almost 5% compares with an increase of employment in metro areas of just over 1% in the U.S. over the same period.

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Over this same period, the proportion of Maine's total personal income earned in metro areas increased from 43% to 44%. More importantly, per capita personal income in Maine's metro areas rose from being 6.8% above the statewide average in 1969 to being 11.2% above in 2001, while average wages in the metro areas rose from being 3% above the state to nearly 7% above the state.

Over the past thirty years, much ink has been spilled on Maine's placement in the rank ordering of the states on per capita personal income. The fact that over the last decade we declined from 25<sup>th</sup> in the country to 37<sup>th</sup> (now 34<sup>th</sup>) has been a cause of much angst. But if you look not at our ranking but at the relative size of Maine's per capita personal income relative to the U.S., you see that Maine has risen from 81% of the U.S. average in 1969 to 88% of the average in 2001, and it was the metro areas that led the way, increasing to 92% of the U.S. per capita personal income.

Moreover, these long term trends have been accelerating significantly over the past decade. The proportion of Maine's personal income in the metro areas was actually 40% in 1990, rising to 44% in 2001. The proportion of employment in Maine's metro areas was fairly constant at 43% up to 1991; the surge to nearly 50% has occurred since 1992.

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Over the last decade, employment growth was even more concentrated in its metro areas than the U.S. Employment Maine's metro areas grew 29% than the nonmetro areas, while in the U.S. the differential between metro and nonmetro areas was only 15%. On the other hand, personal income grew much faster in the U.S. metro areas than the U.S. non metro areas compared with Maine.

The one statistic that is not consistent with these trends is population. The proportion of Maine's population in the metro areas actually declined from just over 41% to just over 40% between 1969 and 2001. Population growth was actually slower in Maine's metro areas over 1990-2000, while the reverse was true in the U.S. And therein, as they say, lies a tale. To understand that tale we need to consider the areas that comprise Maine's metropolitan areas.

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In 1950, there was one metro area in Maine: Portland. It consisted of five towns: Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, Falmouth and Westbrook. This was unchanged in 1960. In 1970, the towns of Cumberland, Yarmouth, Scarborough and Gorham were added to Portland, and the Lewiston-Auburn area was also created with those two cities plus the town of Lisbon.

In 1980, Freeport, Windham, and Saco and Old Orchard Beach were added to Portland. Lewiston-Auburn remained unchanged, but the Bangor metro area was created, extending from Old Town to Orrington and from Hamden to Eddington.

In 1990, all of the metro areas grew again. Portland added towns to the west like Standish, Hollis and Buxton. Lewiston-Auburn added Mechanic Falls, Poland, and Greene, while Bangor extended further down river to Winterport. Kittery and Eliot were added to the Portsmouth-Dover metro area in New Hampshire.

In the most recent revision, the Portland metro area was defined as comprising 37 towns in Cumberland and York counties, extending as far west as Porter and Parsonsfield, as far south as Kennebunkport, and as far north as New Gloucester. The Portland and Lewiston Auburn areas now abut one another, with Lewiston-Auburn extending as far north as Livermore Falls. The Bangor area has also expanded, now including towns from Frankfort in Waldo County at the southern end to Enfield in Penobscot county at the north, and from Plymouth in the west or Aurora in Hancock County to the east.

In addition to the metro areas, the Census Bureau has begun to define “micropolitan areas”, which have many of the same characteristics as metro areas but with smaller central cities. Based on the 2000 Census, Maine has micropolitan areas around Sanford, Waterville, Augusta, Bath-Brunswick, and Rockland.

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As a result, all or most of York, Cumberland, Kennebec, Sagadahoc, Penobscot, and Knox counties are defined as being part of an urban centered region today. The urban region in Maine stretches from Sanford in the south to Howland in the North, with only that spot on I-95 between Waterville and Bangor where you think you will never reach your destination left out. There is also an increasingly urban outpost in the western Penobscot Bay region.

How does this explain the drop in metro population? The figures I noted earlier are based on the 1990 definitions of metro areas, and so do not reflect the expanding growth of population into towns further and further from the central cities. With the expansions of the metro areas following the 2000 Census, which were only released in June of this year, a more accurate picture of the role of urban areas becomes clear, and the actual proportion of population in metro areas is seen to have grown, not declined.

The expansion of the metro areas in Maine can be attributed in part to changing definitions of what comprises a metro area, but the primary driving factor has been the expansion of the urban areas as more and more people move further out from the central city. This brings us to the issue of sprawl.

Sprawl is a term with numerous definitions. One is disproportionate growth outside the central city of a metro area. Another is low density residential growth. A third is “any growth I don’t like”. There is no doubt that by the first and second definitions Maine has been afflicted by sprawl. Nor is there much doubt that the third definition has become the most popular.

The explanations for sprawl are also numerous. In Maine debates, fingers are pointed in all directions. Among the usual suspects rounded up in any discussion of sprawl include property taxes, the school funding formula, local planning, lack of local planning, building codes, the lack of building codes, and, of course, transportation policy.

If there are not enough explanations here in Maine, we can turn to federal policies, including the construction of the interstate highway system, urban renewal policies of the 1960s, the mortgage interest tax deduction, and other federal housing policies.

The problem with all of these “explanations” is that they make it seem like sprawl is somehow unique to Maine, or even to the U.S. To listen to many people attribute sprawl to the imperfections in Maine’s tax system, real as they may be, is to fall into the trap of the hammer and nail. If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. That is, tax policy is something we might be able to fix (though we have been singularly unsuccessful so far), so tax policy must be the key.

The problem here is that what we call “sprawl” is actually characteristic of almost all of the U.S., major parts of Canada, and most of Western Europe. If I could blindfold each of you and drop you off in the suburbs of Paris or Bordeaux or Copenhagen or Amsterdam, and then remove the blindfold, I guarantee that until you saw the language of the signs, you could not tell whether you were in Maine, or another American town. The subdivisions are there. So are the strip malls, the office complexes, the interstates (autoroutes) running through the farm land, the single family houses on dead end streets, and the traffic jams.

There are some important differences, which I will come to later, but the basic point is that a phenomenon which can be observed in so many different places at the same time cannot reasonably be attributed to the particular quirks of any one localities transportation or tax systems. Something larger is going on here.

That something larger is the evolution of what urban theorists have come to call the polycentric urban region. This concept has two critical implications. The first is that the idea of “urban” no longer applies to a single political jurisdiction called a “city” but to an entire region whose shape is determined by the interaction of the living-working-shopping patterns of people who live there. And that region will have not a single central city but multiple centers of employment, commerce, and residence. While the largest of these centers may be the historic central city, this is not by any means inevitable.

Does this concept of the polycentric urban region fit Maine? Quite well actually. We have already seen how the metro areas of the state have expanded from a small core of towns around Portland to cover large areas of the state. Consider also the commuting patterns.

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A few years ago we conducted a study of commuting patterns in the Portland area in preparation for the recently released regional transportation plan. In that study of residents of Portland, South Portland, Falmouth, Cape Elizabeth, Scarborough, Westbrook, and Gorham we found that only 10% of the respondents live and work in the same town, while more than four fifths work in one of those towns, but live in another town. Many of these are people who live in a suburb and commute to Portland, but many of the Portland residents commute outside of Portland to South Portland or Scarborough to work.

In fact, employment opportunities are widely spread throughout the urban regions. If we think of cities as places where people come to work, as concentrations of employment, then one measure of “urban-ness” could be the ratio of total employment to residents in a community. One would expect a place like Portland to have more employees than residents.

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But Portland is not the only place where this occurs in the metro area. It is also true of South Portland, Scarborough, and Freeport, with Westbrook, Falmouth, and Yarmouth having about equal numbers. In terms of the ratio of employment to residents, Freeport is the most urban area in the Portland region.

There are numerous reasons why the polycentric urban region has developed as the dominant urban form here and elsewhere. To be sure the various explanations that have been offered for sprawl have their elements of truth. Federal, state, and local policies have played their roles, but as exacerbators of more fundamental forces rather than as causes in their own right. Those fundamental forces are primarily related to the evolution in the economy, and can be grouped into three categories:

- Relative land prices
- Rising incomes
- Transportation
- Changes in the composition of economic output

The first and simplest reason for a spreading out of urban areas is that as population and the demand for housing grows, the tendency is to seek the cheapest land to develop, and land tends to be cheaper the farther from the city. This was shown nearly 200 years ago by a German named von Thunen, who developed a “bulls eye” model of urban land use based on land prices. In the city, where high demand meets very limited supply, the price of housing rises quickly. On the fringes of the city, where farmland predominated, there was abundant land, meaning housing prices would be lower.

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This basic pattern of land prices met two other trends. One was transportation. While much has been made, and rightly so, of the rise of the automobile and its associated infrastructure in shaping the large urban region, the pattern was actually fixed in the in the

early 20th century with the first major public transportation system- the electric street car. The inner suburbs around Boston such as Newton, Malden, and Melrose which became known as the “streetcar suburbs” all grew as the progenitors of sprawl.

In Maine, a similar pattern emerged, though it did not last long, with such towns as Turner functioning as streetcar suburbs to Lewiston. Ironically, the automobile killed the streetcar and returned Turner to a predominantly rural character until more recent decades. The remnants of this system still exist today at the Seashore Trolley Museum in Kennebunkport, which operates its historic streetcars on the old lines connecting southern Maine towns.

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The other major trend was rising incomes which created both an increase in desire for more and more housing space and the means to pay for it. Factors such as the G.I. bill and the mortgage interest deduction increased the resources available for expanded housing. Rising incomes and demand looked for the lowest price housing, and improved transportation, particularly the automobile (which was subject to the same trends) made it very unlikely that housing would demand would be met by building up in cities but by building out away from the cities.

These factors explained why residences moved away from the city and thus created the expanded urban region. These factors are present in all regions of the U.S., such that over the past decade population growth in central cities was more than three times faster in the portions of metro areas outside the central cities. In New England, all of the population growth in metro areas occurred outside the central cities. But they do not explain the polycentric nature of the urban region, with multiple centers of employment. Two factors were critical to this development. The first is the shift of the economy from manufacturing to services.

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This has become a familiar story about the Maine economy, but it is worth a quick review. From 1969 to 2001 the proportion of employment in services in the U.S. rose from 43% to 63%. In Maine, the proportion rose from 40% to 63%. From 1977 (the earliest year for which data is available), the proportion of output (Gross State Product) rose from 53% in the U.S. to 66% in the U.S. and from 52% to 65% in Maine. These figures show both the transition to services and the extent to which the Maine economy has become essentially identical to that of the U.S. in structural terms.

This change in the composition of the economy also explains why it was necessary for the service economy to expand outwards from the city. First, jobs followed people. As the residential areas grew outside the cities, companies providing personal and retail services followed the population to be near their customers. Then firms in other service industries followed both to be nearer their employees and to expand on the same cheap land that home owners looked for.

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This is particularly important issue because firms in service industries need a much larger land base from which to work. This is partly because of the need for office space, but also because of the need for parking lots, roads, etc. Service industries have also always tended to be clustered in cities because of the need for interactions among the industries, like banks, lawyers, etc.

Moreover, while manufacturing companies were able to expand output while using fewer employees through the application of more efficient capital equipment, firms in the service industries have generally been able to expand only by adding more employees because the ratio of output to employee has remained constant. The additional 250,000 employees in Maine over the past thirty years thus need a great deal of land from which to operate.

These economic forces explain the origins of the polycentric urban region, the reasons why it is so widespread across industrial (or more properly post-industrial) societies, and also indicate that there really is no policy response that will reverse these trends.

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Nor am I sure we would want to. If we hypothetically stuck all the population growth in the Portland metro area back into Portland, South Portland, and Westbrook, the population of each of those cities would be more than double its current population, with Portland having more than 120,000 people in it. Would Portland, which just recently had a major revolt over a modest apartment complex on Munjoy Hill be enthusiastic about such a result? The question answers itself.

The bottom line, then, is that if the Maine economy is to remain competitive in a global economy, it will only do so in ways that are consistent with further growth in its urban areas and, just as importantly, further decentralization of those regions.

It is easy to imagine the reaction to this idea that Maine's destiny lies in becoming more urban. In northern and eastern Maine, it will be seen as one more example of how the people in Portland are willing to let rural Maine wither on the vine. In southern Maine it will be seen as a prediction that Maine's future lies in becoming at best Boston, and at worst, New Jersey.

But this is far from the case. First, as I have argued, the trends influencing the increasing concentration of the economy in urban areas do not speak to the question of how development will occur within those areas. While more and more of Maine may become part of urban regions, this does not mean that all of Maine will be comprised of cities. In fact, Maine has an extraordinary opportunity: to develop an urban society for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is built on and preserves the best features of an extraordinary natural environment.

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Maine is a very, very long way from being either Boston or New Jersey. While the metropolitan areas have greatly expanded, the proportion of Maine that is actually settled at

a high density (more than 500 people per square mile) is much smaller than the metro areas as a whole, and is easily the smallest proportion in the northeast.

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This means that most of Maine's urban life lies in the future, and that we still have choices to make about what to do with our urban areas that have been largely foreclosed in other states. Those choices fall into several categories.

**Patterns of residential growth** Maine has pretty much followed the path of every other major urban region in the U.S. by encouraging, indeed insisting on, low density residential growth separated from commercial areas. Abundant evidence accumulated in Maine and elsewhere over the past 20 years makes clear that this pattern is death by a thousand house lots.

The only alternative is increasing patterns of residential density, combined in some instances, with mixed use development. Such growth is resolutely resisted in Maine, proving that when it comes to patterns of growth Mainers, like Americans elsewhere, know what they hate: sprawl and density.

This view of density is, of course, laden with irony. Here are New Englanders who adopted what many consider to be the most harmonious and attractive form of settlement, the New England village, turning their back on the past and rushing to gobble up the countryside. Equally ironic is that by refusing denser development because it looks "urban", the result will not change. Maine will still have urban regions; just ones choked with traffic and spread out over more and more of the landscape that we are so keen to preserve.

One of the opponents to the mixed used development in Scarborough said defeating it was essential to preserving the "small town character" of Scarborough. The problem is Scarborough is already a major urban center, and is likely to become Maine's 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> largest city this decade whether or not that development was approved.

**Patterns of commercial growth** Everybody hates strip malls, except when it comes time to build them. Some concentrations of retail and consumer service establishments is essential to the very nature of these industries. We want shopping to be in concentrated areas to maximize our choices and minimize the costs of time and travel. But we have so rigorously separated commercial from residential that we have virtually guaranteed massive traffic jams as every purchase requires a car trip.

We need to reintegrate some commercial development with residential areas, while making sure that other commercial development is properly cited and transportation managed the way Falmouth has done along Route 1, where a secondary road was built behind the shopping venues to reduce traffic on Route 1.

**Commitment to design** Overarching everything we do with commercial and residential development should be a commitment to better design. Mainers are terrified that someone else will tell them what their house should look like, preferring it seems to retain the option to keep at least one snowmobile in the front yard year round. But the

consequence of this steadfast preservation of the right to be ugly is the virtual guaranteeing of a lot of really ugly development.

Some years back the citizens of Manchester turned down a design ordinance for commercial development along route 202. When Irving Oil proposed building a new Mainway store and service station using its standard concrete box design, some of the citizens tried to persuade Irving to build a more attractive building. Irving's response, which was quite proper, was that were building according to the town's codes and did not see the need to do anything different.

Of course there are exceptions. Falmouth was able to improve somewhat the appearance of their Wal-Mart by judicious use of design codes, and the McDonalds in Freeport has been a national example for nearly two decades of how commercial and community interests can be made to work together.

But Mainers by and large are far more passionate about the natural environment and care little if anything for the built environment. Nothing will more surely guarantee the failure of Maine's urban growth than this attitude. A strong commitment to developing a Maine sense of design for the built environment, as architects such as John Calvin Stephens did, will make all the difference in Maine's urban society.

**Transportation** If one of Maine's great opportunities lies in the relatively small areas that currently densely urban, this also presents one of our major challenges. For we do not really have the density, and will not likely have in the next several decades, to warrant major investments in public transportation. Our existing public transportation systems will continue, and may grow modestly, but our urban society is going to be far more dependent on the auto than other areas.

This means that more and more attention will have to be paid to the transportation-land use connection. It also means that we are going to build more roads, and existing roads are going to be expanded. Some transportation problems cannot simply be handled any other way.

But we will not be able to build highways alone as the way out of our way out of our transportation problems. Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, public transportation such as light or heavy rail systems are not likely to play a major role in Maine in the foreseeable future. We simply do not have the population densities for these enormously expensive systems.

It may be that such systems as BRT or Bus Rapid Transit, which provide many of the advantages of rail systems at a fraction of the cost will play a role in the next few decades. One Portland company has already won a national design award for a concept called "RoadRail" to be implemented in Portland.

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New capacity will also have to be supplemented by better use of existing capacity. Intelligent transportation systems, such as varying the synchronization of traffic signals to improve the flow of traffic, will have to play a major role. The network of traveler

information signs installed by the Maine Turnpike will have to be expanded to major non-Turnpike roads to keep people informed about optimal travel routes.

**Land conservation choices** The most frequently cited example of Maine's commitment to preserving its special natural environment is Baxter State Park. Unfortunately, this example actually proves the wrong point. Percival Baxter was unable to get the State to make the investment in preserving Katahdin, so he did it himself. Mainers long had a real reluctance to set aside areas from development.

But this has already begun to change substantially. Mainers have approved quite large bond issues for the Land for Maine's Future Board, which has already purchased over 50 separate parcels of exceptional land. Many local governments have raised money through bonding and taxing to purchase land. The private non-profit land trusts flourish in Maine, like the Nature Conservancy and the Maine Coast Heritage Trust.

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But which land do we conserve? Some areas, like Baxter, are easy to spot. Others are less clear. Often in recent years the desire for land conservation has become another excuse to stop or limit development rather than a strategic choice about what kinds of landscape and habitat most need protection.

As Maine's urban regions grow, nothing will be more critical to the state's ability to retain what is uniquely Maine than good choices about where to invest the scarce resources available for land conservation. The desire to conserve land is certainly there; whether there is sufficient wisdom to do it right remains an open question.

**Governance** Finally, there is the question of who gets to make what decisions about how Maine's urban regions grow. Obviously the key decisions will be made by the towns, which raises a number of questions about "regional" v. "local" perspectives. While the traditions and structures of local government in Maine are strong, inevitably frustrating attempts to plan from a regional perspective, these are not unique issues to Maine.

Urban regions around the world struggle with the same issues. You can hear many of the same concerns- in virtually the same language- in the very archetype of the polycentric metropolis, Los Angeles. The problem of regional v. local decision making is so much a part of the urban region, that sometimes drastic changes are undertaken. Some regions such as Toronto have attempted to solve the problem by simply creating consolidated governments made up of the central city and its suburbs, as was done five years ago when five towns and the City of Toronto were consolidated.

What is interesting about the Toronto example is that this is the second consolidation of governments in Toronto. The first one in the 1960s was hailed as the very model of metropolitan governance. But that model could not contain the forces of decentralization, and thirty years later yet another major change in governance, this time encompassing an even larger area, was needed. The urban region waits on no single political boundary.

The point is that there is not likely to be a single solution to the problems of regional governance in the urban region. Matching political boundaries with economic and natural boundaries is one possible approach, but it is not the only one. All of Maine's metro areas, especially Portland, have been able to look at one of the key features knitting the urban region together- transportation from an increasingly regional perspective.

Such a regional perspective is widely supported by the public. A survey we conducted showed that Portland area residents preferred transportation improvements that benefited the region to those in their own town by 4 to 1.

It will be possible to address many regional concerns within current governance structures, though we should be open to the idea that changes may be needed for some issues.

In each of these, Maine has already begun to make changes in response to the forces of urbanization and decentralization, and it is the choices that will be made in the next few years that will determine whether Maine evolves into an urban society that is both economically vibrant while retaining a high degree of livability. Or, alternatively, Maine becomes like so many urban regions with a growing economy in a region that fewer and fewer people want to call home.

And what of rural Maine? Is this argument about the central importance of Maine's urban areas simply another way of consigning rural Maine to stagnation and poverty? Not at all, for two reasons:

First, the development of Maine's cities does not change the fundamental balance between Maine's urban and rural regions. Maine's rural areas have relied on the growth and development of urban areas for more than a century. Maine's agriculture, forest products, and marine resources have prospered only to the extent they found urban markets. As Maine's rural areas diversified into tourism and recreation, they became even more dependent on people- and the incomes earned- in cities.

Just as important, there are numerous development opportunities for Maine's smaller cities- what the State Planning Office defines as the service centers. The economies of Maine's rural regions are highly dependent on the success of the economies of the smaller cities. Washington county depends on Machias and Calais; Somerset County on Skowhegan, Aroostook County on Presque Isle-Caribou. Clearly such communities face different challenges than a Portland or a Bangor; they could probably use a little sprawl. But the differences should not obscure the fact that Maine's rural regions will depend on the economic health of their urban centers as much as the state as a whole.

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This whole notion of "urban Maine" is unsettling, in part because it so conflicts with the mental images we all carry around about what it means to be in Maine and not in Massachusetts or some place else. We are a state where the vast majority of us work in cities, live in cities or suburbs, but everyone thinks they're in the middle of the country.

It is also unsettling because the basic implication of these economic growth patterns is a paradox:

To retain its special character as a place that feels closely connected with the natural environment it will have to pay substantially more attention to the built environment. Put another way, to stay rural, Maine will have to decide how **best** to become more urban.

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