

Lessons For Hanscom

By Jeffrey A. Simon
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SOMETIMES looking back is a valuable tool in looking forward.

In 1991, Massachusetts was at the same point with Fort Devens that we are today with Hanscom Air Force Base. The closure list had not yet come out. Rumors were rampant. There was a deeply held conviction that Fort Devens would not close, could not close, because its mission was so vital. After all, the headquarters for the Army Intelligence School was there.

Then Fort Devens closed.

The state agency that had experience with base closures since 1975 was asked by Governor Bill Weld to put together a plan. The Government Land Bank had been created in the aftermath of the 1975 closings which had left Massachusetts reeling with the loss of five major military installations and 15,000 jobs. The Department of Defense made plans to close Devens and transfer all of those critical functions to places as far flung as Fort Huachuca in Arizona.

Everyone in Massachusetts hopes that Hanscom survives. The fact that it has come close to closing several times in the past does not bode well for it now. There are many good points that argue for its remaining open, and the activities of the governor and Senator Edward Kennedy can only help.

However, just as the Hanscom Area Towns Selectmen have considered "Plan B," it is worth taking a look at the Devens experience. Just as the Fort Devens towns of Harvard, Shirley, Ayer, and Lancaster formed the Joint Boards of Selectmen, the Hanscom towns have taken that first important step.

Here is what we did right:

We had strong leadership starting with Weld and Lieutenant Governor Paul Cellucci.

We provided lots of forums for the public to vent.

No one spent time trying to reverse the decision.

We approached this as an opportunity to define the future.

We created the Devens Enterprise Commission, a new form of municipal government that recognized that the only chance for economic recovery lay in recognizing the limitations and overcoming them.

The state worked closely with the towns in a partnership unique in Massachusetts.

Here is what we did wrong:

Out of fear of the impact on municipal budgets we brushed aside nearly all of the strongest market and the quickest path to economic recovery -- residential development.

We took too long getting this property back in productive use.

We allowed a federal prison on the property, which compromised the quality of other

development.

So what does all of this mean going forward? I can't suggest answers specific to Hanscom but I can suggest a series of questions that should be asked, including:

Who is running the show? No successful base redevelopment has happened without strong leadership at the state level. Is the governor willing to step up to the plate? If you want to see the difference that strong leadership makes look at what's at Devens (a lot) and what's at the South Weymouth Naval Air Station (not much). Guess which one had the governor's personal involvement?

Are we willing to endure short term pain for long term gain? The selectmen collectively need to look beyond their two-year terms to a true legacy. And the people in the towns around Hanscom need to put aside traditional rivalries to work together.

Are we willing to look at the dreaded "h" word: housing? Everyone complains about the high cost of housing, and here is a chance to increase the supply. What are we telling our children when we keep reading that no one wants residential development because no one wants to have to educate the kids?

Where is the political leadership at all levels? Congressman Marty Meehan and Governor Weld put aside ideological and party differences to work together on Devens. Will that kind of leadership take place at Hanscom?

Devens is a thriving place today, the result of lots of debate, cooperation, and leadership. There is a lively discussion taking place about whether it should be the 352d town. But like most 10-year-olds, it is just beginning to feel its independence, just beginning to imagine the future.

If Hanscom closes, the people of those towns, the region, and the state will need to forge a new bond of understanding and cooperation. It's up to all elected officials -- federal, state, and local -- to show leadership, confidence, and competence in determining this future.

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