

The Great Experiment

By Alexandra Dawson

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Massachusetts is engaged in a huge and hard-to-comprehend battle over land use. As it plays out on the ground, the battle focuses on individual conflicts. But in a larger sense, it poses a single question: Can a small state with slightly more population than acreage, and altogether too much access to cash, put everything its citizens want on 6,000,000 acres without distorting or destroying the values of these lands - and do so, what is more, with the consent of the governed from which our Declaration of Independence assures us all governments derive their just powers?

Here are just a few of the manifestations of this conflict: Can we permanently protect our farmland instead of treating it as a way station to building? Can we maintain our public and private forests and still cut and burn wood, and if so, how much wood? Can we supply our communities with the water they think they need without depleting the stream flow so that the fish die and the water does not run in summer? Must we dewater all our land with sewers to protect public health? Can we have clean air without coal plants? Fight climate change without nukes?

Can we satisfy our transportation needs without building more and larger roads? Can we supply reasonably affordable housing without the gross subsidies of the past? Can we encourage our big taxpaying stores without ruining local commerce? Should we enhance our revenue from taxes or from voluntary donations of gamblers?

Should we build solar arrays on good farmland? Are these arrays compatible with continuing farming? Can we put them on wetlands without degrading the wetlands' values, already challenged by poor quality drainage, highway improvements and incoming utilities?

Can we use our community open space for recreation and still allow it to home nonhuman creatures that cannot voice their needs? Should we let landowners build and rebuild houses right in the ocean because they can buy subsidized FEMA insurance? Can we permit access without 25-foot roads that slice large expanses of land (already rare) into incontinent parcels?

No one can answer all these questions. The important thing is, to see our individual arguments and actions in the broader context and to understand that we are all engaged in a great experiment for which we have little experience and even less preparation.