

ECONOMY / OPINION

Industrial land disappearing at an alarming pace

Preservation is key to avoid severe damage to the economy



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A STRONG INDUSTRIAL sector can help maintain the middle class, provide stable wages in a tumultuous economy, and seed technological innovations that attract workers and businesses to our region – yet Greater Boston is losing manufacturing jobs and industrial land at an alarming pace. What can planners and policy makers do to stem this trend and shore up our industrial base?

New research from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, which spans 101 cities and towns in Greater Boston, digs into this issue in a recently released report. This data analysis, the first to take a deep dive into the industrial sector in more than 20 years, shows a measurable loss of industrial land over the last decade. The report calls for preservation strategies so the region can keep attracting new businesses and retain the ones that are located here now, while preventing drastic industrial rent spikes that result when space is hard to come by.

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A deteriorating regional industrial base has the potential to damage our region's economic strength, pricing smaller companies out of the area and disproportionately impacting workers of color and those without college degrees. Economic studies tie healthy manufacturing employment and ecosystems to greater economic resilience and innovation, and the revitalization of American industry is key to building a middle class and addressing wage disparities. And yet, we are already facing a large-scale loss of space that could impact our state for many generations.

Between 2011 and 2021, the region lost 10.9 million square feet of built industrial space, equivalent in size to 190 football fields. Nearly 75 percent of the loss occurred in MAPC's inner core region, made up of 21 communities that radiate from Boston.

While industrial space in Greater Boston declined over the past decade, the utilization of that space actually increased in the same timeframe — and low vacancy rates mean no cushion for additional loss of square footage. Any increase in demand or continued loss of industrial space, unless offset with new construction, drives rent increases and threatens the survival of existing firms.

The pressure to convert industrial space to housing has also made it hard for existing firms to afford to stay, and for new companies to find industrial space. And yet, the need to create new housing in our region is dire. Therefore, we must find a way to preserve industrial areas strategically and encourage certain types of industry to co-locate with housing and retail. For example, food production, butchers, confectionery manufacturing, breweries, and wine and liquor wholesalers, as well as arts and crafts

manufacturing, are all businesses well suited to mixed-use development, which could be incentivized in light industrial areas. Limiting big-box retail and self-storage in core industrial areas can also help maintain affordable real estate.

Cities and towns have responded with proactive and creative solutions to protecting industry by using tools like updated zoning and new special permit requirements that retain and attract industrial tenants. Industrial land use planning should also be integrated into master planning and economic development planning processes locally, and cities and towns should establish a baseline inventory of local industrial land and businesses. Even with these steps, more coordinated efforts at the regional and state levels will be needed to bring strategies to scale.

Shoring up our industrial spaces is critical to creating a resilient regional economy, where good pay and benefits are available for workers with all different levels of education and language proficiency. When paired with investments in our transportation network and strategic creation of new workforce housing, a resilient industrial sector has the power to shape a regional economy that works for all residents, ensuring Massachusetts remains a place of opportunity and innovation for years to come.

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