Gateway cities asking state for help

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Fall River and 10 other Massachusetts “gateway” cities will present their case to the state Monday for more help with workforce training, adult education and other needs.

The group of gateway cities — so named for their traditionally high immigrant populations — have signed a compact seeking the state’s attention as they get caught behind the economic trend away from industrial jobs to more knowledge-based positions. Other cities in the group include Brockton, Lawrence, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester.

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth’s Urban Initiative, headed by former Fall River mayor Edward M. Lambert Jr., began working with gateway city leaders last December to discuss challenges and opportunities the cities share. The partnership hopes to convince the state that cities outside greater Boston are deserving of aid, Lambert said.

Leaders from each city will gather at the Old Statehouse in Boston Monday to formally sign a pact. Fall River’s representative has not yet been announced.

A study released last year by think tanks MassINC and the Brookings Institution showed that since 1970, gateway cities lost 3 percent of their job base, while greater Boston saw a 51 percent bump in new jobs. The cities make up 15 percent of the state’s population, but are home to 30 percent of all Massachusetts residents living under the poverty line, the study also found.

The MassINC/Brookings study also noted gateway cities’ potential for middle-class housing, smart growth developments, and a growing and diverse work force. These cities, the report said, are falling further behind the rest of the state in job creation, income and educational attainment.

“On the upside, these cities hold out to Massachusetts’ realistic hopes of responding to some of the Commonwealth’s most pressing growth and development challenges,” the report said. It also mentioned fiscal problems and weak school systems as some impediments.

“These cities bear the burden of a lot of responsibility of the commonwealth,” Lambert said, “but without a lot of attention from the commonwealth.”

Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray will attend Monday, and Lambert said he hopes Murray might announce the Patrick administration’s recognition of the partnership. Economic growth in the gateway cities can also lift the surrounding towns, Lambert said. The partnership may push to remove a cap on a historic tax credit program meant to help develop old mills and other buildings, he added.

“Ultimately, the work is an outgrowth of leadership in these cities,” Lambert said. “Our job is to get it started.”

The MassINC/Brookings study gave a few recommendations on where to begin: improving city finances and basic services, improve school systems to build a strong middle class and create economic development partnerships.

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