Lowell joins campaign to revive 'Gateway Cities'

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BOSTON -- Reviving cities like Lowell that were once the cornerstones of the state economy will take a collaborative effort to reverse the trend of job growth and development centered around Boston, according to state and local officials.

Mayors of the 11 so-called "Gateway Cities" gathered at the old Statehouse yesterday to sign a pact uniting those once-thriving cities to push for a collective agenda that will benefit urban areas across the state.

"There is much work to do ahead of us, but these Gateway Cities have much to offer, and we ignore these cities at our peril," said John Schneider, interim president of MassInc.

Lowell Mayor Edward "Bud" Caulfield, City Manager Bernie Lynch and Assistant City Manager for Planning and Development Adam Baacke attended the signing of the agreement.

The alliance comes on the heels of a report last year from MassInc. and the Brookings Institute identifying 11 former industrial cities in Massachusetts that are struggling to rebuild after the decline of manufacturing in the state.

The report found that since 1970, these 11 cities lost more than 3 percent of their job base while Greater Boston experienced a 51 percent job growth buoyed by advances in the biomedical, education and finance industries.

Once a "gateway" for newcomers to this country, these 11 cities, including Lowell, Fitchburg and Pittsfield, are also now home to 30 percent of all Massachusetts residents living in poverty despite accounting for only 15 percent of the state's population.

The new alliance, according to officials, will help these once-thriving centers advocate for public policy that will help municipal officials put their cities back on track.

"Municipal officials don't work for the Patrick-Murray administration and the Legislature," Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray said. "You are partners in government and we take that very seriously. We want to promote gateway cities as smart places for economic growth."

Murray also announced a new initiative that will give cities access to state resources and technical planning and engineering expertise to clean contaminated brownfields so that the land can be redeveloped.

"What it really comes down to is giving us the ability to manage," Lynch said after the event.

Murray said the state and local partnership is about more than providing more money, but also more tools to help city leaders address problems in their specific cities.

Lynch said Lowell could benefit significantly from lifting the state cap on historic tax credits, enhancing the incremental tax-financing program, increased marketing and the expansion of other state-funded housing programs that help cities attract new business and residents.

"These communities were once the bedrock strength of the state, and they can hold that promise now,"
Lynch said.

Caulfield praised Murray and Gov. Deval Patrick for reaching out to cities across the state in what he sees as a genuine interest in partnering with local government to improve cities like Lowell.

"Gov. Patrick and Lt. Gov. Murray don't talk the talk, they walk the walk," Caulfield said. "They have been extremely helpful and everyone knows it."