

# BANKER & TRADESMAN

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## Tackling Public Policy At Northeastern University

In Just A Few Months, Dukakis Center Sees Itself As 'Major Public Policy' School

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Northeastern University's Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy, which has become a player in the commonwealth's housing and economic development scenes, has reached critical mass.

After attracting top economists and policy specialists from around the country for a decade, the faculty drawn from several departments will be tenured in the university's School of Urban Affairs and Public policy.

"Very rapidly, in the matter of months, we have become one of the major public policy schools, not just in New England, or in Boston, but nationwide, given our track record of research in so many of these critical urban issues, from housing, to economic development, to transportation, to workforce development," said Barry Bluestone, the school's dean.

This year Alan Clayton Matthews, one of the region's foremost economic forecasters and a member of Gov. Deval Patrick's council of economic advisers, has joined the school. Matthews previously taught at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. The school also now boasts Bill Dickens as a full professor. Dickens is an internationally recognized labor market and macroeconomics specialist who advised former President Bill Clinton.

"You want people to sort of bang together in a space to think about things," said Christopher Basso, association dean of the school. "You would think they would do that already; you want people at a university to interact with each other. The creation of the school is one of those catalytic events, we're hoping."

The seeds for the school's growth were planted in 1999 when Richard Freeland, who is now the commonwealth's commissioner of higher education but was then the president of Northeastern, recruited Bluestone from UMass-Boston to the school to start the Center for Urban and Regional Policy.

"I was eager to get Northeastern University

more involved with the city, and eager to get the university more involved with policy questions instead of just academic questions," said Freeland.

### A 'Do Tank'

Bluestone agreed to come to Northeastern, but he had a condition: the Center for Urban and Regional Policy couldn't be just another research center.

"[I wanted] to create a center that was not just a think tank, but a do tank – a think and do tank – one that was not only interested in doing state-of-the-art research, but then found ways to apply it, that's what I [wanted] to do," Bluestone said.



Barry Bluestone

Shortly after the center was founded, Bluestone said he was asked to meet with Cardinal Law of the Archdiocese of Boston, and Paul Guzzi, executive director of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. They both had the same concern – housing – but for different reasons. The church felt the city had a moral imperative to create more affordable housing, and the chamber was concerned that the city was pricing young professionals – and all their retail purchasing power – out and driving them away.

The center did some economic modeling and research – they found 38,000 units needed to be created to stabilize housing prices in Boston. The center joined forces with The Boston Foundation, the Citizens Housing and Planning Association, and The Warren Group, publisher of Banker & Tradesman, to craft "The Housing Report Card," an annual statistical look at housing in Greater Boston.

And after all that research, the center wanted to do something.

"What became very clear, based on the reports that we'd been doing and some other studies, that we needed somehow to deal with the zoning problem," Bluestone said. "Ultimately

we helped craft chapter 40r [the smart growth overlay zoning law] and 40s [school cost insurance] and got it passed. I'm very very proud of that, because that's not what a university usually does. It may do the background research, but to carry that all the way through to get actual legislation written is quite unique."

The center next waded into economic development, specifically in Massachusetts' more industrial cities. Bluestone and the staff surveyed 240 members of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties (NAIOP) to see what made different cities and towns attractive to developers.

"What was interesting was that things like tax abatements, all kinds of subsidies, ranked very low," Bluestone said. "What ranked very high in their answers were things that had to do with the speed with which they could get a permit to build. What we learned in this new global economy is that speed to market is the catchword."

The result was the Economic Development Self Assessment Tool (EDSAT), software that extensively grades municipalities on attractiveness to development, and offers solutions for improvement.

"The whole idea is to help mayors and other town officials to become CEOs for economic development," Bluestone said. "That's the goal: making them much more adept at overcoming the deal breakers and instilling deal makers to bring investment and jobs to their town."

Bluestone said 60 municipalities in the region have used the EDSAT, and each one that signs on enriches the data. In November, Bluestone is taking the tool to a national council of cities conference in Chicago.

Last fall, the research center elected to rename itself after former Gov. Michael Dukakis, who is now a professor at Northeastern, and his wife, Kitty. ■

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