

Together, towns see a future

Jan 21, 2008

[By David Ortiz](#)

PBN Staff Writer

A coalition of groups is working to form a regional planning and economic-development strategy for Pawtucket, Central Falls and Cumberland.

The Northern Rhode Island Tri-Communities Coalition, a partnership of 10 public agencies, foundations and stakeholders from the business community, wants to create a coordinated program to manage regional issues for three communities with similar demographic, educational and fiscal challenges, said Ramon Martinez, president and CEO of Progresso Latino Inc., a nonprofit organization in Central Falls that provides education, training and business-support services.

"Look, when we talk about Pawtucket, [Cumberland] and Central Falls, these are arbitrary lines. If you're going to look at the future of Pawtucket, it's tied to Central Falls," Martinez said. "This is the first time we'll get these three cities together to start thinking in an aligned fashion."

Aside from Progresso Latino, the cities of Pawtucket and Central Falls and the Town of Cumberland, the coalition includes the Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce, the Pawtucket Citizens Development Corp., the Pawtucket Foundation, the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, Navigant Credit Union, The Rhode Island Foundation and the R.I. Division of Planning.



Martinez – a retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel and a former Homeland Security consultant – said he conceived the idea of coordinating planning and economic development efforts in Pawtucket, Central Falls and Cumberland soon after he took his current job running Progresso Latino last year. (PBN subscribers can [READ MORE](#) about Martinez's initial plans for the nonprofit.)

At the time, Pawtucket was engaged in its own effort to develop an economic development plan for the city, and Martinez saw an opportunity to include two neighboring communities with contiguous shopping districts and similar work force demographics.

Pawtucket, Central Falls and Cumberland are all former industrial communities that are shedding traditional factory and labor jobs, have underperforming schools and all are increasingly isolated geographically from the rest of the state by a lack of public transit options and increasing gas prices, he said.

To reverse such daunting trends and make them "resilient communities," the activities of the public, private and nonprofit sectors in all three municipalities need to be harmonized. Regional plans also must be adopted that address every aspect of their future, including emergency management, public transit and regional growth.

In particular, the Tri-Communities Coalition wants to identify particular industries that promise to flourish in coming decades, Martinez said. Once that work is accomplished, the coalition will devise strategies for attracting businesses in those industries to Pawtucket, Central Falls and Cumberland, with the goal of eventually making the communities a regional hub for those industries, he said.

At the same time, the coalition is putting a heavy emphasis on overhauling public school systems in the communities, which Martinez said are failing to prepare students to compete in the types of industries powering the global economy.

Tri-Communities is already in preliminary discussions about the possibility of creating a regional school that would implement an innovative curriculum and draw students from all three communities, he said.

The coalition is putting the finishing touches on a comprehensive "conditions analysis" of all three communities, which will identify the economic, ecological, social, educational, government, technological and health care challenges facing them, Martinez said.

When the report is published later this month, the core partners in the coalition will work to identify ways to begin addressing the challenges holistically, he said. The coalition also will reach out to stakeholders in the three communities to solicit feedback and bring them into action plans as the work moves forward, he said. •