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COLUMN: Janet Milkman

The Brookings report, Pennsylvania edition

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As Mainers sort through their own Brookings report, "Charting Maine's Future," they might wonder what comes next. In 2003, our own glossy Brookings report -- "Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania" -- hit Pennsylvania like a wave, landing on front pages and editorial pages in every major newspaper in the state. The media repeatedly referred to the report over the next two years. It was a "best-seller" among decision-makers, civic and business leaders.

While we have our hands full in Pennsylvania and can't predict the outcome in Maine, I can relate some of the dramatic changes in Pennsylvania since the release of "Back to Prosperity."

A policy reform package will be introduced in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, our state's legislative body, next spring. Support for these reforms emanates with dozens of regional efforts sparked by the Brookings Institution's 2003 report. Like the Maine report, "Back to Prosperity" framed the issues of growth and governance in an economic context. The report resonated like no other in recent years. Why? Because it crystallized what Pennsylvanians already knew in their hearts. I suspect the same is true in Maine.

From Erie to Scranton, Johnstown to Harrisburg, Philadelphia to York, Brookings' Bruce Katz and his staff gathered data and feedback from business and civic leaders and citizens. The report found that:

n Pennsylvania ranks low on demographic and economic performance and high on sprawl and property abandonment.

n These patterns undermine the state's competitiveness and are fiscally wasteful.

n These patterns are not inevitable; state and local policies facilitate sprawl and promote abandonment.

n Pennsylvania can build a competitive future.

Building on the momentum of the report's release, we gathered our friends and new partners from the business community, higher education, labor and government. We held two statewide retreats to determine how best to create a Pennsylvania response.

We launched the Campaign to Renew Pennsylvania (<http://www.renew.pa.org>). It's a statewide communications and issues campaign focused on systemic reforms to improve the competitiveness of our regional economies and the quality of life of our communities.

Our strategy has two tracks. The first one is to promote regional activities such as Metro York, a countywide group of business and civic leaders that's looking for regional solutions to the consequences of fragmented government, tax-base and educational disparities, and an intensifying concentration of poverty.

We've catalogued nearly 100 similar regional efforts -- in every part of the state -- that are exploring everything from sharing services (police, fire, water and sewer) to sharing tax base.

Clearly, policy reforms are needed to address state laws that stand in the way of entrepreneurial efforts to provide better government services. If any of Pennsylvania's 2,565 local governments are interested in consolidation, state law requires them to go through a cumbersome process that often is beyond their capacity. These examples form the basis of our second track: state-level systemic reforms that empower

Pennsylvania's communities to choose their future.

We're building a statewide leadership council of business and civic leaders to raise the visibility of the campaign. We're engaging regional, community and national foundations to raise funds for the campaign and regional efforts. We're building bridges with local officials, builders and real estate agents, many of whom were initially cool to "Back to Prosperity."

As this paper's editors noted, we've taken the Brookings advice to heart and are building a consensus around the hard changes we need to bring Pennsylvania back to prosperity. Clearly, the same potential exists in Maine. In terms of the organizing that must follow the research, Maine is ahead of where we were when "Back to Prosperity" came out.

We're in this for the long haul. We hope and expect that Maine will be there to keep us company.

Janet Milkman is president and CEO of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, a statewide alliance committed to land-use policies and actions that strengthen communities and reduce sprawl.