EDITOR'S MEMO

Tourist: Does it matter which road I take to Portland?
Maine Native: Not to me it don’t.

Down East accents and droll Yankee humor have been used to peddle so many products lately, they may reveal more about the culture of Madison Avenue than about the true nature of New Yorkers. But that particular exchange between the lost tourist and the Maine native does seem to symbolize an enduring — though hardly endearing — side of the New England character.

While New Yorkers may not be as fiercely independent, not as taciturn, not as frugal, not even as Yankee as legend has it, our sense of what matters to us sometimes is too limited for our own good — especially when state lines are involved.

Change the characters to residents of two New England states and the question to: “Does it matter which road we take to economic recovery ... which road to environmental protection ... which road to forward-looking public policy?” The answer is likely to be: Not to me it don’t.

And so the New England states are edging through one deep recession, clinging to at least six separate economic development plans, at least six separate environmental strategies and a myriad of conflicting public policies. All the while, New England jobs are disappearing and the region’s infrastructure is crumbling with no regard for state lines. Divided, we are failing.

A core of well-established New England regional agencies and voluntary organizations offers the promise of a united front on issues such as education, energy, environmental protection, tourism and transportation. When these interstate groups try to collect dues from struggling New England companies or secure appropriations from revenue-strapped states, they are asking constituents, in effect, if their work matters. And too often the answer is: Not to me it don’t.

Meanwhile, the region’s newspapers offer a running commentary on the progress of economic unification in Europe. The reports document the benefits of creating common interests from Belfast to Berlin. But good luck finding a thoughtful newspaper story on the common interests of, say, Belfast, Maine, and Berlin, N.H.

The “Cover Stories” in this issue of CONNECTION are intended to begin a dialogue about regionalism here in New England. It is a subject that has rested in our editorial subconscious. Whether our focus has been higher education financing or the future of environmental technology or international trade, CONNECTION has always operated on the assumption that what happens in one New England state matters to the other five.

The Massachusetts biotech company and the Vermont dairy farmer matter to each other. The prestigious liberal arts college in New Hampshire and the urban high school in southern Connecticut matter to each other. The Rhode Island marine researcher and the Maine lobsterman matter to each other. Labor markets do not respect New England state boundaries. Nor do natural resources. Nor ideas — this region’s specialties.

Nonetheless, like the proverbial lost tourist, New England regionalists often see their queries greeted with indifference. We trust that the following exclusive essays on regionalism will elicit a more spirited response.

Finally, readers will note that the interstate work of the New England Board of Higher Education figures prominently in our discussion of New England regionalism. To preserve our credibility, contributors’ praise for NERBHE generally winds up on the cutting room floor. In this issue, however, several essays clearly find NERBHE’s programs inextricable from any meaningful analysis of interstate cooperation in New England. Playing down NERBHE’s central role in this case, we determined, would have really stretched credibility.

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