

URBAN CHALLENGES TODAY

The near-paralysis of our federal government, because of political partisanship poses problems for our cities, states and regions. Faced with unsustainable deficits, our national government will be unable to maintain its contributions for local benefit; and those burdens will have to be borne locally. Courageous city and state leaders must extract higher revenues while getting a ‘bigger bang for the buck’ on expenditures and retrenching where necessary. Future-minded, pro-active mayors and governors will determine what urbanist Richard Florida calls “the boom towns and the ghost towns of the new economy.”

Those areas blessed by oil and gas reserves or critical masses of high tech innovators have advantages that declining industrial areas of the Rust Belt do not, but flexibility and resilience will be crucial for all.

Informed observers see the flashing yellow lights. Martin Wolf, of the *Financial Times*, sums them up in the question, “Will Americans pay for the government they have legislated?”

Our decaying infrastructure, unfunded government pensions, housing shortages for the poor and the young occur in a context of slow economic growth, sluggish employment, worsening socioeconomic inequality, poor student achievement levels by world standards, growing numbers of retirees and a diminishing number of tax-paying workers.

The ‘new normal’ with low economic demand resulting in low production and fewer jobs, raises fears of short term deflation and long term inflation.

How to live within our means yet maintain the quality of life Americans have come to expect is a challenge that must be met creatively. A 'sharing economy' in which fewer own cars but more use Uber, Zipcar and bike shares; micro-housing units with common facilities; high density, cheaper housing at suburban transit centers – all are becoming more common. 'Invest more for the future' and 'consume less in the present' must be the response.

What urban vision should we have for the future? In cities like New York and Washington it is a choice between 'growing the pie' and 'redistributing shares of the pie.' In cities with a dramatic loss of jobs and population, like Baltimore or Cleveland, it will be planned shrinkage or astute programs for abandoned housing and vacant lots, and energetic efforts to reduce crime and blight.

In all cities, our defective criminal justice system should be rethought. Incarcerating first offenders beside hardened criminals merely indoctrinates them. First offenders who cannot read, write or count should spend their prison time in classes. Those with high school equivalency should be given vocational training to help them earn a living to keep from becoming recidivists.

In facing the future, each locality must deal with the challenges of: economic sustainability; physical infrastructure; the built environment; employment; social services; education; cultural life; and quality of life.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Balancing long term income and outgo- to pay for municipal services and to cover debt service for future capital investment – should be our highest priority. Politicians can no longer be permitted to promise the undeliverable, to saddle our children with our expenses or to pander to special interest groups, whether municipal unions or protected businesses.

Political leaders and public intellectuals must be honest in explaining the economic facts of life to their constituents. Stimulating private sector job creation, encouraging business diversity and increasing

‘human capital’ are keys to the value-creation that helps everyone. The macro-economics of a city can change. Cities must adapt to new conditions, and those that are resilient will thrive.

Michael Bloomberg’s high tech programs for New York – first with upstate Cornell and Israel’s Technion on Roosevelt Island, next with Columbia and New York Universities on their campuses, then with Carnegie Mellon in Brooklyn - show pro-active leadership at its best.

PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

New York’s achievement in completing Water Tunnel No. 3 (the largest capital construction project ever undertaken in the five boroughs) went unnoticed, but such major projects call for long term statesmanship rather than short-term politics as usual. Improved utilities, improved public spaces, improved mass transit – local and regional – are imperatives for future municipal administrations, as are protection from rising sea levels and hurricane damage.

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

High densities provide the adrenalin that makes great cities special; effective internal transportation makes them “job friendly”, and a pedestrian-friendly atmosphere makes them fun. Congestion and sprawl are counter-productive.

EMPLOYMENT

Jobs – meaningful employment at appropriate compensation – should be the focus of our economic policy in an age when globalization, automation and exponential high tech growth diminish employment for our unskilled, semi-skilled and even some skilled workers. And almost all job growth comes from new business ‘start-ups.’

All strategies should focus on creative, innovative ventures. Widespread unemployment undermines civic life and must be fought with all tools, including wage supplements for the working poor where necessary.

SOCIAL SERVICES

Social services should help recipients develop the skills and values for productive lives. Poor children, the handicapped, etc. must, of course, be helped appropriately, while means testing should guarantee that public aid goes where it is most needed. Transparency and accountability would assure the public that its funds are well spent. We can no longer assume that government can do everything for everybody at all stages of life.

EDUCATION

Effective public education is a key civil rights issue and the best investment a society can make. What's best for students, not teachers or parents, is the mark of a successful school.

We need higher standards for entering teachers; a longer time frame before granting tenure; greater opportunities for teacher training and professional growth; merit pay for excellence or for service in difficult areas; reasonable procedures for eliminating the worst teachers.

Effective pre-schooling (not the glorified baby-sitting now prevalent) should be available for everyone. Reading preparation, vocabulary building, socialization and inculcation of self-discipline are crucial preliminary steps in early education. Although ideally taught at home, first-rate pre-schooling can be a worthwhile substitute and is cost effective.

Vocational training and apprenticeship are programs whose time has come again. They should be optional for all high school students and mandatory for first offenders in prisons.

The high cost of a college education is a national scandal. More effective use of on-line teaching; the elimination of inter-collegiate athletics and mandatory retirement ages for regular faculty would lower costs and make college more widely accessible. More resources and higher standards for community colleges and greater availability of adult education programs are also overdue.

Financial aid for college should focus on poor but qualified students whose college enrollment percentages have been plummeting.

The lowest feasible interest rates for student loans and longest repayment terms are in the national interest.

CULTURAL LIFE

Intellectual, artistic and musical stimuli provide the satisfactions a civilized public needs; and should be readily available. New York shows the way in its role as the nation's leading showcase for culture as well as its key incubator of culture.

Broadway and off-Broadway theater, Lincoln Center and B.A.M. concerts and our world class museums and libraries delight residents, transients and tourists alike. The 50 million tourists who visit New York each year pay us handsomely for the privilege. Government aid and encouragement of philanthropic cultural assistance have been successful. Over six million tourists visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art this year, and over 40 million cited Central Park as a prime destination.

Thirty years ago, Central Park was an unsafe, garbage-strewn mess, with Belvedere Castle graffiti-covered and the Great Lawn a dust bowl. Today, the private non-profit Central Park Conservancy spends \$60 million a year keeping Central Park the city's crown jewel. Incoming Mayor de Blasio's plan to tax the Conservancy to help other parks may prove a disaster. More, rather than less, effective private philanthropy should be encouraged in all areas of public life, not to replicate government services but to stimulate innovation and creativity.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Personal safety is a key aspect of this. New York's murder rate, lowest in half a century and the lowest of any major city in the nation was not achieved by accident. Use of modern technology to analyze, anticipate and prevent crime was responsible. Good policing can be fair and effective, and is even more important in trouble neighborhoods than elsewhere.

Ease of movement is another goal. Density without congestion and first-rate mass transit and innovation like "light rail lines" and

“congestion pricing” which have worked well in London, Singapore, Copenhagen and elsewhere are acknowledged techniques for achieving it.

Place creation, such as New York’s High Line, DUMBO, revitalized waterfronts, cultural and high tech enclaves, etc. give a city character and individuality. In troubled Detroit, the TechTown District plan is leading the way toward municipal rejuvenation.

Competent public service supervised by talented, well-selected officials, is often a forlorn hope. The Bloomberg administration set a high standard for personnel that should be followed.

CONCLUSION:

Safe, beautiful, livable cities – where the public has access to appropriate employment, housing, medical care, safety, recreation and, above all, good education – are what we all want. Such cities are achievable, if we will it and are willing to pay for it.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Aristotle wrote, “We come to cities to live; we stay to lead the good life.”

No one has said it better.

M.I.T.

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