

## CAN AMERICA'S MAYORS BE WORLD PLAYERS?

By Neal Peirce

Are America's mayors, in a threatening century, ready to look outside our borders to learn from other cities around the globe? Are they positioning themselves to think and act internationally — for example to visit abroad, not just on trade missions but to witness how many cities across the world are gaining a jump on us in environmentally-sensitive new technologies and approaches?

The signals are not all positive. World-conscious and curious American mayors often fall victim to the Luddite assertions of local newspapers suggesting their foreign trips are simply “junkets.” Even the supposedly globally-savvy *Washington Post* used a lot of ink nit-picking minor expense items on foreign trips by former Mayor Anthony Williams — even though, as mayor of the United States' capital city, Williams was a receiver and transmitter of ideas, served a term as president of the National League of Cities, and received special attention from mayors and cities worldwide.

Either intimidated or disinterested, only a handful of American cities sent representatives to the World Congress of the premier organization of international cities — United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) — which met in October in Jeju, Korea.

The issue of global climate change has, to be sure, awakened many American cities to the century's challenging environmental issues. Indeed, while the federal government explicitly rejected the Kyoto Protocol targets, the U.S. Conference of Mayors took up Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels' “Kyoto Challenge” to meet the accord's targets in their own cities. Last May Tulsa Mayor Kathy Taylor made her city the 500th to sign on.

In addition, the International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) has worked with more than 170 U.S. governments on steps to cut back their greenhouse gas emissions and improve environmental stability. The U.S. Conference of Mayors has created a Mayors Climate Protection Center and organized a Mayors Climate Summit in Seattle this November at which both former President Bill Clinton and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg spoke.

Bloomberg's PlaNYC, announced last spring, may be American cities' most ambitious program yet to cut back carbon emissions. Such cities as Portland, Ore. (an early pioneer), Seattle, Denver, Chicago, Boston and Austin are also considered leaders.

But the harsh fact, notes Donald Borut, executive director of the National League of Cities, is that “there are cities around the world doing so much more than we are” in the areas of sustainability and green initiatives. Borut names Stockholm and Stuttgart as prime examples,

but notes there are many more. One Chinese city, located on the ocean, has employed a variety of new technologies including individual windmills on street lights.

What many international cities seem to “get” is that climate protection measures can — in the words of Marc Weiss of Global Urban Development — “improve prospects for prosperity, productivity, competitiveness, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness.”

“Green” technologies promise to create multiple new business and job opportunities. Energy efficiency can lead to huge long-term savings. Reduced traffic congestion through higher city densities and better public transportation lowers risk of “oil shocks” and climate disruptions. And green planning, including more pedestrian-friendly environments, is crucial in attracting and retaining skilled workforces.

The League of Cities is trying to infuse all its committee work with an international focus, breaking the “silos” of individual groups working on such issues as housing and transportation — an idea advanced by its chair for international issues, Mayor Ted Ellis of Bluffton, Ind.

When a mayor attends an international conference, notes James Hunt, former NLC president and mayor of Clarksburg, W.Va., practical issues and the rising green agendas dominate. The conversations are often about issues common to everyone, “even though we’re talking with people of different religions and ideologies.”

There’s even a practical peace imperative among mayors that might restrain power-wielding national governments. Responsible for constituents’ everyday safety and welfare, mayors speak a practical language and instinctively recoil at warring ideologies. The associations of mayors of Israel and the Palestinian territories, for example, have worked together to create a joint vision of principles for Middle East peace.

And while resolutions of international bodies can be rambling and bland, some sparkling exceptions are emerging — perhaps because of the pressing issues that all world cities now face jointly. The declaration of some 2,000 world mayors and regional leaders at the UCLG Congress in Korea was an example of the new mix of idealism and practicality.

Prepare for climate change, the world’s mayors said, by increasing urban density. Use clean and renewable energy. Expand public transport systems. Safeguard cultural diversity and affirm the full rights of women; build “inclusive cities for an inclusive world.”

Shouldn’t American cities be co-authors — and respondents — to those ideas?