

# The Wealth of Regions and the Challenge of Cities

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If we are to fully revitalize the cities, we must begin to look beyond the cities. This is not as paradoxical as it sounds. Even a cursory look at the new economy reveals that metropolitan regions have become the fundamental building blocks of national prosperity and improved quality of life. The dynamic industry networks that are driving economic growth operate regionally in all their facets—production, research, labor, supply, sales, and distribution. The fates of urban, suburban, and outlying communities are inextricably linked by the metropolis, which cuts across city and county boundaries and, in some cases, even state and national borders.

The future health of urban communities depends on regional thinking and action. We must act regionally because businesses do. When they make decisions to locate or expand a facility, they look at the entire metropolitan area—its transportation and infrastructure, its workforce, its educational and cultural institutions, its environment and amenities, and its existing industry networks. We must act regionally because workers and consumers do. People who commute to work and shop increasingly do so throughout their metropolitan regions. We must act regionally because all of our major institutions do. Universities, hospitals, museums, sports teams, print and broadcast media, performing arts groups, convention centers, churches and syna-

gogues, labor unions, civic groups, foundations, and charities—all serve a metropolitan population rather than hiding behind municipal neighborhood walls.

We also must act regionally because problems once confined to the inner city have spread to the suburbs. Unemployment, anemic tax bases, troubled schools and neighborhoods, deteriorating housing stock, crime, and environmental degradation are now part of our suburban legacy, particularly in older inner-ring suburbs. From south of Chicago, to north of Minneapolis-St. Paul, to east of our nation's capital, the revitalization of urban America must include suburban America.

Regions as diverse as Austin, Texas, and Akron, Ohio, are pointing the way to successful metropolitan economic renewal. During the past decade, Austin has transformed itself from a state capital and university town to one of the nation's fastest growing computer-technology centers. Akron, meanwhile, reacted to the demise of its tire manufacturers by becoming the world capital of science and engineering for polymer-based synthetic materials. In both cases, civic leaders from the public and private sectors and research and educational institutions worked in partnership to design and implement a winning regional strategy.

Efforts to expand economic prosperity and improve the quality of life throughout our metropolitan regions cannot succeed

without directly addressing the problems of the inner cities and inner-ring suburbs and the people who live there. We need a two-pronged approach that both invests in and connects people and places.

### **Connecting Urban Residents to Metropolitan Prosperity**

Nearly 90 percent of America's job growth is occurring in metropolitan regions, much of it outside central cities—near suburban airports and highways, warehousing districts, research parks, technology centers, and shopping malls. Many of these growing businesses are experiencing severe labor shortages. At the same time, large numbers of people in our cities and inner-ring suburbs are without jobs. Connecting urban residents to regional employment is one of the most important challenges of our time. The onset of work-based welfare reform underscores the urgency of this task. An effective agenda to make the vital connections must include: basic education and job skills training, employment networking and job placement, transportation and child care, plus additional supportive services.

Fortunately, there are many good models of how successfully to mobilize regional workforce development networks involving community-based organizations, educational institutions, private employers, and local governments. These include multi-city initiatives such as the Center for Employment Training, America Works, STRIVE, Public-Private Ventures, and the Bridges to Work program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). There are also many model networks centered in one metropolitan region, such as QUEST in San Antonio, New Community Corporation in Newark, Pioneer Human Services in Seattle, Job Links in Pittsburgh, and the Chicago Jobs Council.

The East-West Gateway Coordinating Council in St. Louis, a regional transportation planning agency, is working with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) plus financial support from private foundations to help train, place, and transport inner city workers to suburban jobs. It may indeed be the wave of the future that federal transportation funds that are now being used for building suburban highways that contribute to central city decline will also help urban prosperity by moving people from city homes to metropolitan businesses through transit expansion and workforce development networks.

Similarly, the Portland Development Commission's JobNet is negotiating first-source hiring agreements with private employers. JobNet is training and placing inner-city workers with new electronics assembly plants that receive Oregon state tax incentives to expand in communities throughout the metropolitan area. Portland, like St. Louis, is using its new light-rail system to transport people from the inner city to these rapidly spreading job sites. What is novel about Portland's approach is that the city government works cooperatively with the suburbs to attract these technology-oriented employers to the region, with the explicit quid pro quo of creating thousands of new job opportunities for city residents at suburban locations.

Focus: HOPE, located near the epicenter of the 1967 Detroit riots, is replacing despair with opportunity. The organization's Center for Advanced Technology trains inner-city youth and young adults with state-of-the-art skills working with the most advanced machine technologies. Graduates of the program are able to land high-skilled, high-paying jobs with automobile manufacturers, defense contractors, and other major employers far from the city.

Inside Baltimore's federal Empowerment Zone, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition (HEBCAC) is using HUD funds to connect inner-city workers to suburban jobs near Baltimore-Washington International (BWI) Airport. Leaders of the BWI Business Partnership are actively supporting this program, which helps them fill many job vacancies. Now Baltimore's Bridges to Work program is expanding its scope, connecting urban residents with additional job centers in the rapidly growing Columbia area of suburban Howard County.

### **Investing in Our Cities and Inner-ring Suburbs**

Connecting urban residents to regional jobs is only half the task. We also must begin to rebuild our central cities: repair their crumbling infrastructure, expand their job bases, make their neighborhoods more livable and attractive to the middle class, improve their schools, and make their streets more safe and secure. In addition, we should be encouraging "smart growth" policies and planning to preserve the regional environment and promote reinvestment in already built-up areas of the cities and inner suburbs.

Even in the new world of metropolitan economies, cities remain their regions' most visible symbol and often their most underutilized asset. Cities serve vital economic functions, as centers of innovation and advanced services; transportation and trade; education, research, and health care; culture, conventions, sports, entertainment, and tourism; and labor and consumer markets.

Metropolitan Atlanta is one of America's fastest-growing regions. But Atlanta's business and civic leaders long ago recognized their region could not be "world class" without a vibrant city at its core. So, they used the 1996 Summer Olympic Games as an opportunity to rebuild the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods and make the

city more attractive to businesses, suburbanites, and tourists from around the world.

In Cleveland, regional business and civic leaders rallied after the city's 1981 bankruptcy to rebuild the downtown with \$4 billion of new investment. Now, they are focusing on rebuilding inner-city neighborhoods through homeownership, including the construction of more than 600 new homes in the HUD-financed Homeownership Zone.

Similarly, Detroit's reinvigorated automotive industry and its dynamic new mayor, Dennis Archer, have forged a partnership to reinvest in the downtown and revitalize the city's neighborhoods. The big three automakers have pledged to do more business with minority-owned parts suppliers in the city's federal empowerment zone, creating thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in new business opportunities. At the same time, public and private investment is flowing into the central areas of Detroit for office buildings, sports stadiums, casinos, performing-arts centers, hospitals, universities, and hundreds of new homes and condominiums for homeownership.

Connecting cities and the people who live there to metropolitan prosperity are key building blocks for ensuring economic competitiveness and quality of life in the 21st century. These approaches are most effective as part of a larger strategy to generate stronger regional economies by investing in education and workforce development, transportation and infrastructure, research and technology, innovative financing and trade promotion, and other actions to make industries more competitive in the global marketplace. Retooling older industries and expanding new ones in manufacturing and services will best be accomplished through a comprehensive metropolitan economic strategy.

There is a new spirit in urban regions across the country, invigorating public-pri-

vate partnerships that are making city streets cleaner and safer, expanding employment and homeownership, raising incomes, and improving schools. Families and institutions are proving they can work together on common strategies of regional prosperity and community empowerment. If cities and suburbs, business and labor, community and government all roll up their sleeves and actively cooperate, we can restore vitality to urban America and simultaneously help heal the many wounds that still divide our nation. That would be a most impressive legacy for our nation as it heads into the 21st century. As Benjamin Franklin said over two centuries ago: "we must all hang

together, or most assuredly we will all hang separately." This pearl of wisdom from the American Revolution holds important lessons for our cities and regions today. ■

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