



How Mayor Dave C's It - March 3, 2005

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OPINION/CITIZEN

The Promise of Cities

By Dave Cieslewicz

Cities are good. Whether the issue is providing quality public services, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels, providing affordable housing or creating family-supporting jobs, cities offer policies that can work for America.

That was the conclusion from the first meeting of the New Cities Project, a national conference I initiated with the help of UW-Madison professor Joel Rogers and his Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS). Ten mayors from industrial cities like Camden, N.J., and Scranton, Penn., fast-growing cities like Minneapolis and Salt Lake City and college towns like Madison and Berkeley came together with national experts like former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros and Brookings Institution researcher Bruce Katz for two days of intense discussions about emerging issues that cities face.

Rogers and I brought them together because we believe it's time to start thinking differently about urban communities. For too long, as former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist noted at the conference, cities have been thought of as "a list of pathologies" - features like crime, unemployment and urban blight.

It's time we took stock of the positive things they offer. Cities have tremendous resources and opportunities. They have well-developed transportation networks, concentrations of skilled workers in a wide variety of fields, concentrated buying power in their citizens and, in the case of the older industrial cities, inexpensive land waiting for redevelopment. One goal of the New Cities Project is to unearth the promise in our cities and to reverse the outmoded paradigm of urban decay. As Jane Jacobs has written, "Cities don't attract the middle class, they create it."

Among the most fascinating ideas we talked about was Joel Rogers' concept of the "high road" economy, the idea that we can have a very highly profitable capitalism that also respects workers, the environment, and social stewardship and democracy. That requires investment in people and place, two things American politics has neglected in recent years, but it's certainly possible, and he's got the numbers to prove it.

Rogers' ideas fit nicely with those of Scott Bernstein from the Center on Neighborhood Technologies in Chicago. Bernstein demonstrated, again with real world examples, how working with poor families to reduce their reliance on cars for transportation and practicing energy conservation could allow them to save enough to buy their first home and start accumulating wealth.

His eco-friendly household budgeting combined with Rogers' high road job creation present exciting possibilities to turn large numbers of the poor into the middle class. And it is cities, with their density and efficiency of resource use, that mix it all up and make it all possible. To all of that we can add my concept for Madison of the Healthy City. This is the idea, introduced as my economic development plan, that cities can be centers of all kinds of health, from the personal well-being of individuals to the health of our local economy to the health sciences to state-of-the-art health care facilities to clean air and water.

In contrast to what has been the prevailing myth, born in a very different time of smoke stacks and before the Environmental Pollution Agency, the Healthy City model sees modern cities for what they really are: places to raise families, go to school, start a business, have a career and enjoy retirement.

The next meeting of the New Cities Project will be in Chicago on June 9th. We plan to grow our small group modestly and our ideas robustly. My hope for New Cities is that it will become an ideas factory for all kinds of policies that offer solutions beyond just urban areas. In this ambition, the New Cities Project is very much in the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea. That was about bringing bold and informed democratic experiment to social problems, uniting the best scientific minds with the best moral and political impulses to find practical solution to real problems people face in their daily lives.