

ROLE OF THE SMALL CITY AS A GROWTH CENTER

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There is no panacea to make growth centers out of small cities!

Increasingly, however, in the past five years, Reports coming out of Washington and elsewhere have dwelt on the problems of urban-rural balance, and in the process have made mention of "growth centers" in the countryside as the focus of population redistribution.<sup>(1)</sup> Not since the Homestead Act of 1862 have we really had an explicit national settlement policy for the countryside. We have had piecemeal programs that were designed to help specific problems of---housing, sewage, credit, water conservation, health---in the rural areas, but no integrated and cohesive policy of population redistribution. Whether the Rural Redevelopment Act of 1972 becomes such a policy remains to be seen.

But certainly a case can be built for one. Seventy percent of our people are jammed onto 2 percent of the Nation's land. Rural areas have experienced a net out-migration of 30 million since World War II. The number of farms, each much larger it is true, are down numerically to about what it was in 1870. We can give statistics ad nauseum. The facts are, we are not using the countryside well, and ought to provide another option of living style for millions of people who now or prospectively may not enjoy living in our huge and growing metropoli. Almost all polls have shown a dissatisfaction with the large urban environment albeit a desire to live within traveling distance of one for jobs and amenities.<sup>(2)</sup> With respect to population redistribution there appears to be a coincidence of public interest and private preference if that is of interest to our policymakers. But in the absence of positive policy action by government there has been no significant exodus to non-metropolitan America over-all, though non-metropolitan cities and towns seem to be retaining and

(1) For instance, that of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, Vol. V, Population Distribution and Policy, (Washington, D.C., Gov't Printing Office 1972) pp. 603-615

(2) *ibid*, p. 629. The polls are reflecting the agrarian philosophy of Thomas Jefferson about big cities. "I view them," he said, "as pestilential to the morals, health and liberties of man." Yet even as late as 1850 less than 13 percent of the U.S. population lived in cities of any size. Only nine American cities had as many as 50,000 people.



even attracting population while the out-migration continues from small farms and hamlets in many sections of the country. (2)

What about "The Role of the Small City as a Growth Center?" What is a small city? Several allusions to the "Small city" are made in Congressional Hearing reports on revenue sharing, in the Rural Development Act and from other sources. Sometimes the figure of 50,000 population and under is used. It is a crucial part of the definition of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area and in this formal sense represents a dividing line between large and small. I would have no quarrel with going up or down fifty percent either way if you happen to come from that size community. Once we get down to 10,000 in size however, we do run into problems of economies of scale, adequately professionalized personnel, and inadequate public works infrastructures that create problems for growth, if that is the objective. Also, I will restrict my remarks to smaller cities outside major metropolitan areas, those in the countryside, since smaller cities which are suburbs of large ones represent a different set of considerations.

And what are growth centers? We can get technical about the definition. Simply, however, we could characterize them as cities that have shown greater than average increase in a number of indices, such as population, industrial and commercial employment, volume of wholesale or retail trade, etc.

What are the variables that generate growth in the countryside cities? Some of these factors are exogenous---that is, they are not due solely or perhaps even partially to efforts of the cities themselves. Sheer fate or fortune plays a role. Among these are the location of the city in relation to a larger metropolitan area---not too near, yet not too far. Every small city is part of a galaxy surrounding a single metropolitan area and falls within its sphere of influence. If you could select your location you would want to be far enough away to develop a semi-independent existence and be clear of the less savory aspects of large cities, but close enough



to be able to enjoy their amenities and job markets. Also, presence of too many small city trade centers within a single geographical area of the countryside may limit the respective shares of the trade, labor supply, and loyalties of the hinterland area.

Another mostly exogenous or outside influence on growth is the existence of state or national policies with reference to highway location, tax policies, Federal and state installations, state policies on home rule and local governmental structures, as well as the quality and nature of rural-urban balance policies, if any. Finally, and of crucial importance as an exogenous consideration, are the natural endowments of the region in which the city is located; the changing state of technology, particularly with reference to a change in the historical requisites for industrial location such as hydroelectric power; and the mix of gross national product between the service component and the goods component.

Changing production methods, for instance, requiring single story plants that absorb space may require more open countryside outside the congested, high priced areas of the large city; while the growing role of service industries in our national output may reduce transportation costs as a locational consideration. Finally, we should not ignore changing life style preferences, for these fuel the residential choices of the mobile part of our population and are increasingly entering into the locational decision-making of firms. Such firms seek to assure their attractiveness to executives and technicians who in an affluent and full employment situation can increasingly choose where they want to locate for employment.

The internal requisites for creating a growth situation, those over which community leaders may have some control are common knowledge.<sup>(3)</sup> These include local

(3) Edward L. Henry, et al, Micropolis in Transition: A Small City Study (Center for the Study of Local Government, St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1971) for empirical study of a small city growth center and policies that brought it into competition as an All-American City.



and overt policies designed to attract industry such as industrial parks, favored tax treatment, subsidized credit, and a complete infrastructure of public services and utilities. The city should also be well equipped with normal social service, health and educational services including a college and/or post secondary vocational school. Facilities for generating a cohesive "community of interest" within the hinterlands surrounding it should be at hand, such as area-wide media and regional offices of state and Federal government. Job creation, of course, is a prime function of a growth center. But one gets into the "chicken or the egg" problem over whether people follow jobs or jobs follow people. The answer lies somewhere inbetween.

Most of the preceding are necessary but not sufficient conditions for growth. The exogenous factors, if unfavorable, might well negate the best of internal management depending on where one sets his sights. But granted a favorable set of external conditions the internal ones are not likely to materialize in the case of small cities without that elusive ingredient of "leadership." Somebody or some group in the community has to display vision, courage, group facilitation skills, political sagacity, and whatever else the situation calls for as a constellation of attributes that characterizes "leadership." While large, metropolitan centers have an inbuilt dynamic of economic growth that can survive poor leadership, small cities are not so fortunate.

If the private power structure does not assume a leadership stance the political leadership must. For someone has to put the package together and sell it to the citizenry. This key factor is an imponderable that most coldly statistical analyses of growth rationales ignore; but it is one that practitioners and perhaps sociologists and political scientists know well. Timid and/or myopic business leaders may have to be given reassurance by an aggressive mayor who pushes hard for public investment and provides a context of optimism and infrastructure of public services without which private investment spending may not respond. Like underdeveloped nations, small cities



without external infusion of capital must tighten the belts on consumer goods in order to produce capital goods. It takes rare political courage and substantial risk taking to accomplish public works without heavy outside subventions, for this means a rising tax burden that in itself represents a negative factor for industrial location, although one that may be offset with a proper mix of public services. Given the reluctance of most local leadership in small cities to expose themselves to the possible wrath of taxpayers, it seems imperative that outside infusions of capital provide, at least partially, for the creation of a public infrastructure of facilities.

History can still be shaped by human hands, however; the quality of life and the rate of growth of small cities are at least partially malleable by the wise decision-making and eternal optimism of local leadership. I wonder whether this is what Plato was talking about in his Republic when he said that "constitutions (read cities) grow not from stone to stone but from the character of the men in the communities who preponderate and draw the rest of the City after them."

But once we have answered the technical questions of what constitutes growth for small cities and what factors favor such growth we are faced with a question that five years ago probably would not have been asked by very many communities: do we want growth? Most Chambers of Commerce will answer that question affirmatively, I think. Most City Halls may answer that question affirmatively. But there is a growing disenchantment on the part of citizenry about growth and the problems it brings with it, disenchantment that has been exacerbated by the public dialogue on pollution and crime. People today are far more sophisticated about the trade-offs on growth; and in an age of affluence and full employment are putting an increasingly high premium on life style rather than on better employment opportunities. The irony is that those communities which may be best administered may progressively develop trade-offs unacceptable to its inhabitants. Boca Raton by city charter has indirectly restricted its population growth



to 100,000; Carson City, Nevada, at 55,000; Fairfax County, Virginia, is carefully orchestrating its growth; Ramapo, New York, has placed tight controls on new developments subject to controlled expansion of municipal services; the State of Oregon has discouraged in-migration.<sup>(4)</sup> These may be only random specks on the horizon; they may also be portents of things to come.

It appears that a policy question of whether we want growth is more open to smaller cities than larger metropolitan areas, since there seems to be an internal demographic and economic dynamic in big cities that will be difficult or impossible to stop. Even many countryside growth centers such as the 123 in Report on the Commission on Population Growth may have problems controlling the quality of their expansion unless new kinds of governing structures, such as regions, special districts, or COG's are created to contain spillover.<sup>(5)</sup>

But regardless of the micro or worm's eye view regarding growth of any individual city, one must take into account the growing national dialogue about the macro view on growth. We know the population of the United States will grow another sixty or more million between now and the end of the century. Given present trends most of this addition will end up in the largest metropolitan centers. This does not seem to accord with conventional wisdom. Should the nation develop a national growth strategy rather than the reaction strategy it has fallen back on the past several decades? Will this be the panacea that will revive the countryside cities and revive the population growth?

In the past we have approached the problem of the countryside in piecemeal fashion. There are dozens of programs to help rural areas and farmers---some of them working at cross purposes. Why not fashion them into a cohesive strategy with a single purpose

(4) Time , October 1, 1973, pp. 95-97

(5) Edward Murray and Ned Hege, "Growth Center Population Redistribution, 1980-2000" in V. 5 Report, Commission on Population Growth and the American Future (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1972) pp. 187-195.



in mind---repopulation of the countryside? The Report of the President's Task Force on Rural Development (March, 1970) recommended that rural development efforts be organized around present or potential growth centers.<sup>(6)</sup> The Rural Development Act of 1972 is an attempt to pull together a number of government programs to provide healthier growth of the countryside and it promises more credit and some grant and loan assistance for cities under 50,000. But as a report of a segment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture itself points out, it leaves the larger questions of national direction unanswered.<sup>(7)</sup>

If you are a mayor of a static or declining small city or even one of modest growth, and if you are counting on national urban-rural balance policy to do something for you within the foreseeable future---don't hold your breath. The closer we look at the requirements of a national population redistribution program to repopulate the countryside significantly enough to affect the distribution of population, the more complicated, risky, and expensive it becomes. The rhetoric of the politicians sounds compelling; but the appraisal of the economists and demographers is sobering. Analysis of the implications of a national growth policy is a separate subject for another time and place. But in passing, and before we jump on the bandwagon as a quick solution---and by "quick" I mean within a decade or two---let me make the following points and then go on:

- (1) The financial magnitudes alone of a redistribution policy stagger the imagination and could make such better known and expensive projects as the space program, a national health care system or repurification of the nation's water supply seem nominal in cost.
- (2) The political power base for such a broad program of spending seems insufficient even if all 65 million of our people outside the large metropolitan areas favored it less than one in three voters.

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(6) The President's Task Force on Rural Development, Report, A New Life for the Country (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970)

(7) Young Executives' Committee, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Report, Community Improvement, The Rural Component (Washington, D.C., 1973)



- (3) There is the question of whether the United States political system, one without discipline or programmatic abilities, can put together a cohesive plan that would necessarily exclude many rural areas of the United States where economics, at least, would dictate encouragement of out-migration to cities. Will those congressmen support a redistribution policy that might cost them their seats?
- (4) Our fragmented administrative structure has not been able to develop and administer a cooperative and cohesive package to rehabilitate our major cities after two decades of trying. In desperation the Nixon Administration has developed revenue sharing in an effort to decentralize decision-making. The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental relations concludes that the "federalism of balkanized bureaucracies, segmented legislative committees and fragmented program administration has lost its capacity to respond to the most urgent needs of our society."<sup>(8)</sup>
- (5) There is a woeful inadequacy of data upon which to base appraisal of any such policy. Certainly some of the proposals made to provide equity in the distribution of national income for rural areas may actually aggravate the flight from the countryside.

Indeed, were none of the above considerations adverse it remains to be seen whether small, growth centers in the countryside would themselves welcome the demographic projections that a national population distribution policy might require. One such projection for the year 2,000 contends that if we were to hold the very large cities to "their 1980 population of 129.4 million, it would be necessary to relocate approximately 64 million people."<sup>(9)</sup> This would double the present non-metro population of the U.S. and would necessitate a 415 percent increase in the base size of the 123 countryside growth centers selected by the authors for their current performance. "The average size of such centers would increase from 117,000 to 488,000." Even a modest redistribution of 15.4 million people would require a 50 percent growth rate each decade for the 123 growth centers.<sup>(10)</sup> One can imagine the problems facing city fathers even with that kind of growth. Under these circumstances it is difficult to imagine the citizenry of these growth centers politically supporting a policy whose ramifications can only be dimly seen but in any event who would probably have to carry the burden of helping the

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(8) Tenth Annual Report, p. 10

(9) Edward Murray and Ned Hege, "Growth Center Population Redistribution, 1980-2000, in Vol. 5, Report, Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Printing Office, 1972) pp. 187-195.

(10) Edward Murray and Ned Hege, *ibid.*



rest of the nation achieve better population balance.

In short, a concrete and cohesive national growth policy for the countryside-- its population cores, the small cities---seems at best many years off. The nation has got to adjust itself to the implications of such a policy and the experts have yet to sort out the complicated effects of alternate strategies. But national growth policies aside, the prognosis looks far better today for enterprising small cities than even a decade ago. Agriculture is experiencing a renaissance. Technological developments which historically made victims of the countryside may now become its benefactor. Transportation, communication, educational options, changing life styles and affluence changes are beginning to make countryside or small city living look attractive. Add to this the growing bank of "know-how" on renovating cities and there is reason for hoping to make modern day Athens out of timeworn "podunks."

What is a reasonably defensible program for accomplishing this? Where should we place our sights for a growth that is manageable and liveable? If we discard the possibility of a panacea, what do we have to do to achieve reasonable health and modest growth?

I think the first requisite for the type of city we are talking about is to revise its concept of "community." Almost all governments today are obsolescent. Small cities with plenty of attractive space around them will find the "community" encompasses more than the city and that the "community" is really an area of extended low density beyond city boundry lines. This will call for innovative governmental structures and a reshuffling of functions and responsibilities. Failure to do this will result in all the ills of controlled spillover. Regional planning with rural hub cities at the Center as is contemplated in Minnesota; county-city or county-county consolidation; or cogs; may be among the answers. Hub cities will have to think of themselves some-



what like the old Greek Cities where the major city was surrounded with its own hinterland of hamlets and farms. These cities will develop their own galaxies. If we assess the resources within a fifty mile radius of small growth centers we will be surprised at what we find. Cooperative arrangements within such an area through regional organizations can produce wondrous improvements and even, perhaps, a critical mass for modest but healthy growth.

Planning will assume a larger role, but we have to break a bottleneck in the availability of planners who understand the problems of the countryside. Liaison of local governments with neighboring colleges to tap the reservoir of skilled manpower therein could be highly productive if we overcome some of the hangups that have characterized town-gown teamwork in the past. The Rural Development Act of 1972 calls for special training of administrative, professional, and technical personnel for unique public and private roles in rural development processes and advocates "inservice" training opportunities for students and others. Perhaps the "urban observatory" concept spoken about freely a few years ago ought to have its counterpart in "rurban observatories." Such centers of data gathering ideas and research do not necessarily require new, federal programs. They might be funded by state government through revenue sharing or by local governments. Existing programs such as the Title I grants of the Higher Education Act of 1965 might be hypothecated for this purpose. There is very pressing need for such services, particularly about specific geographical sections as a prelude to government structural change or programmatic planning. We don't have enough of a data base right now, and there does not seem to be many significant signs on the horizon that we will develop the facilities very soon except for the poorly funded allusions to this in the 1972 Rural Development Act or the underfunded regional structures in states like Minnesota.



Finally, state governments must realize fully the implications of keeping cities in servitude under existing state constitutional and statutory law. This is another lengthy subject for which we do not have time. But the cities, and small cities particularly, operate under the constraints of state policies. These must be made constructive and positive in a way that unleashes local creativity and self-direction.

Fortunately, individual civic leaders do not have to await the resolution of national policies on urban-rural balance or demographic relocation to take action. There are still a lot of red apples waiting to be plucked by enterprising leadership in existing grant and loan programs. Frequently, local revenue raising opportunities have not been fully exploited. And a creativity potential that is far from exhausted exists in every community. The matter of a will to do something and the setting of priorities are paramount.

There is room for optimism. The future of small cities is still manageable in terms that are not true of the largest cities. And it is an exciting challenge to try to create a new Athens out of an old Podunk. Aristotle, one of the great urbanologists of all time, makes a moral judgment about the smaller city in his Politics. "People came together in the city to survive, but they stayed on to live the good life", he says, the proper function of the city historically has been to humanize man. The very word "city" comes from the Latin root "civis" which is also the root for "citizen" and "civilization." Smaller communities in the country can still realize this purpose when properly planned and managed. If they are favored by both exogenous factors and internal efficiencies they can become growth centers. Then the admonition to keep them as humanizing rather than dehumanizing influences will become all the more important in avoiding the trade-offs that growth brings with it.