

Is this what we want for our small urban state?

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The big advantage of a small state is that it is comprehensible, and some might say manageable. Certainly, it is easier to work with the 39 cities and towns of this state rather than the 351 cities and towns of nearby Massachusetts. And yet one wonders if this is really true.

Consider, for example, this smallest state which only through historical circumstances became a state rather than a county (the more than 3,000 counties in this country, on average, are as large as Rhode Island). For all practical purposes ours is a city-state with the majority of the population highly concentrated in and around the capital city and 60 percent of all state residents living in our eight cities. And we are an urban people, with 87 percent of us so classified by the Bureau of the Census, ranking us third in the nation in this category.

Yet even with this high degree of urbanization and heavy concentration of people in our cities, the state, through lack of leadership or awareness or both, does little if anything to aid cities desperately in need of help. With problems ranging from inadequate services for the poor, elderly and minorities to declining tax bases, our cities are searching for answers to seemingly insurmountable problems brought on by population decline. Five of our eight cities have lost population between the last two censuses while

every other community in the state increased its population.

Will this trend continue, with cities losing population and getting poorer and suburbs getting more populous and wealthier? Is this what we want for our urban state?

A valuable lesson for Rhode Island is to be found in neighboring Massachusetts, similarly urbanized and with comparable problems of city and suburban change. Having identified their problems, that state is making the commitment and providing the leadership to do something about them.

Simply stated, communities in Massachusetts do not like the changes taking place: villages do not want to become suburbs; suburbs do not want to become cities; cities do not want to become wastelands.

Abandoned cities mean not only vacant houses but also underutilized infrastructure, i.e., in-place facilities such as water and sewerage systems, while burgeoning suburbs and growing villages require

heavy public expenditures for new roads, water and sewerage systems. The result is a terrible waste of money and resources; all of this coming at a time of high costs and shortages of energy. Is there not a better way? Can cities be revitalized and can suburban and village growth be slowed?

At a recent trade meeting of bankers, builders and realtors held in Boston, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis explained why old cities need to be brought back and what his state is doing to make this happen. City revitalization, he said, accomplishes the following: (1) Preserves a unique character, such as a Boston, Salem and Newburyport, that cannot be duplicated in suburban malls. People need a sense of tradition, place and identification that is not to be found in a cinder block structure floating on a sea of asphalt. (2) Provides jobs where they are most needed, in cities, where high unemployment and underemployment are common. (3) Relieves pressures for development in the suburbs and villages as well as conserv-

ing open space there. Suburbs have expressed their unhappiness with growth while cities are receptive to development. (4) Utilizes existing city infrastructures, buildings, services and systems: a better use of tax dollars and a savings for the taxpayer. (5) Saves energy through public transportation improvements and greater use. Through such measures Brockton public transportation use went from 400,000 passengers four years ago to the current two million. (6) Provides more jobs through labor-intensive rehabilitation.

Dukakis established the first state planning office in the country directly responsible to the governor. This gave him immediate access to development changes in the state. Most important, his "urban coalition" of labor, business and civic leaders helped him pass enabling legislation for implementing an urban policy designed to favor cities over suburbs.

While the period of the late 40's to the 70's favored suburban growth today eco-

nomic forces are moving to support revitalization of cities. This "unfinished business" of revitalized communities can only be accomplished, in the words of Dukakis, "through state programs and an enthusiastic and involved private sector." Federal dollars help, but a state urban policy is a requisite for success.

Massachusetts could very well be the model for revitalized cities, and that state with its 351 cities and towns is moving in that direction. A state of 39 cities and towns, supposedly of more manageable size, also could provide the necessary leadership for such a change. But an urban policy at the state level will not happen unless there is a commitment to cities by the state, a concerted policy effort by public and private leaders, and a practical program to implement it.

The advantage of a manageable state size is only good if put to use.

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