

A proposal to the governor: 'Let's get together'

Americans have always had a dislike of cities. From the time of Thomas Jefferson who felt that the good life was to be found in rural areas to that of Frank Lloyd Wright who claimed that the cities were for banking and prostitution and little else, the American city has received little sympathy on the part of most Americans.

It always seems to amaze that these same city haters return from Europe and marvel at the glories of Rome, the beauty of Paris, the splendor of London, the excitement of Barcelona and on and on about the great cities on that continent from which most ancestors of these same Americans came.

By contrast, most Europeans love their cities and there is also great government involvement and financial help to ensure that these centers of civilizations retain their importance. In this country when New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy over two decades ago, there was little sympathy and help its problems and, in fact, statements were made to let it go broke.

This city aversion continues today with the still heavy movement of Americans to the suburbs, partly because of this dislike but also because of the promise of bucolic living that Jefferson espoused. People think by "escaping" the city they leave behind all of the problems of city living, e.g., crime, which today is increasing in suburbs or vice versa, then we can better work to address problems that plague all of society, not necessarily just those that occur with greater frequency in city, sub-

urb, or rural areas.

The truth of the matter is that we are in this together, and there are attractions in city, suburban and rural living, often dependent on

one's family situation, lifestyle, income level, education and a host of other factors.

If we recognize that cities are not the enemies of the suburbs or vice versa, then we can better work together to address problems that plague all of society, not necessarily just those that occur with greater frequency in city, suburb or rural areas.

Working together means that more of us must recognize that we live not just in a city or suburb but together in a metropolitan area, i.e., a major city or cities and its suburbs. Most Americans live in these large concentrations of people, of which the Census Bureau has identified over 300. The Providence-Pawtucket-Warwick Metropolitan area has over one-million residents, is 36th largest in the nation and covers most of the state, even spilling over into Massachusetts. And the economic health of these large population agglomerations is largely dependent on the health of these core cities.

Addressing problems on a metropolitan and regional basis means that a Providence water system that supplies 60 percent of state residents; a sewer system that reaches into

communities beyond city borders; and hospitals that provide services unavailable to smaller hospitals in the state.

Also, there are conditions that do not respect city and suburban boundaries. Air pollutants move, contaminated rivers flow, and in mining towns,

with tunnels that burrow under houses in all jurisdictions, there is a need for cooperation among cities and suburbs. In Rhode Island, with our small size, we have the advantage of the state taking on such regional functions and, in some cases, encompassing the entire state, such as providing public transportation through a single entity, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority.

There is one opportunity for this city and suburban cooperation that this small state still has not used, and that is the result of lack of leadership from the top. This suggestion has been made to previous governors, and it is made to our current top executive.

With only 39 cities and towns in Rhode Island, why cannot meetings of all political leaders from each of these jurisdictions meet with the Governor on a monthly or quarterly basis to talk, I repeat, to talk about common problems and to work together: to better understand the situation of a growing South Kingstown; the traffic in Warwick; the five acre lot size for housing in Foster; the grow-

ing immigrant school population in Providence; and a host of local problems that many communities face and with which they are frustrated because of the lack of sharing ideas, help and possible solutions.

It takes strong leadership to sit with 39 community executives, listen to problems, suggest what the state can do and cannot do to help, work to bring communities together, address common problems and work to provide solutions. If nothing else, the process opens the lines of communication between cities and towns and between the state and cities, suburbs and rural areas.

The success of much city revitalization is based upon private and public cooperation. Why couldn't such cooperation also be forthcoming from two different levels of government to address common problems. This small state, without a third level of government with which to contend, the county, common to most states, has a unique situation that provides opportunity to do things that others cannot do. And perhaps that includes working for the health of our metropolitan core cities.

With none of our cities and towns more than one hour's drive from the Governor's place of employment, why can't the Governor of this small state meet with the 39 communities on a regular basis to address problems faced by all?

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Commentary

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