

Residency law could stabilize local economic base

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Should city employes be required to live in the community which employs them? This is the question which more and more cities are seriously considering as they seek ways to stem the unabated flow of their residents to the suburbs and to raise needed tax dollars.

The Committee on Ordinances of the Providence City Council feels strongly that city employes should be required to live in Providence, and has recommended this position to the full council (which returned it for further study) in order that it foster the necessary General Assembly approval for local residency requirements.

There was a time when all city employes were expected to be residents of their employing communities, but strong lobbying efforts by police and firemen throughout the state convinced the General Assembly in 1970 to override the residency requirements. Since that time there has been a general movement of city employes to outlying areas. Although detailed figures are difficult to obtain, in the case of Providence school teachers and administrators, three out of five of the nearly 1,400 employed live outside the city.

There can be no question that certain employes must live in the city, for instance, the mayor, school superintendent, police chief and public housing director. But is this true of all employes? Is it

necessary that teachers, policemen, firemen, secretaries, filing clerks and truck drivers live in Providence if they work for the city? The answer is not a simple one.

If Providence were to hire residents only, then the choice of qualified employes might be severely limited; especially is this true as more and more specialized and technical personnel are needed to fulfill more sophisticated tasks. The pool of talent living within the city limits is naturally

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smaller than that available throughout the region, so it is quite possible that the best qualified people would not be available under a local residency hiring rule.

Hiring practices, that required residency within a stated period of time after being employed would be against our democratic traditions of free and easy movement. Also, such hiring would deny free choice of housing and services throughout a person's career as a municipal employe.

Yet these arguments must be counterbalanced by the advantages of local residency requirements. There would be more houses occupied, there would be an increased tax base and, more importantly,

the flow of middle-class America to the suburbs could be slowed.

If there is any single explanation for the plight of our cities, it would undoubtedly be the migration to the suburbs of that upwardly mobile, and often maligned, segment of the population called the middle class. This home-buying, better-educated, money saving, employed (often including the wife) group of people that works for an improved community has taken its energies from the city. These people include the city-employed teachers, policemen, firemen, secretaries, filing clerks and truck drivers. A residency requirement would encourage these persons to add their energies for city improvement to those already being made by present city residents.

A tight job market can work for the benefit of the city. There are currently more than ten applicants for each position open for the Providence police training school. One would wonder why Providence residents do not have a priority in cases such as this, with an excess of qualified people available.

Providence employes have a major advantage that most other employes do not have: policemen and firemen are eligible for retirement at the end of twenty years of service while all other municipal employes, except teachers, are eligible at the end of twenty-five years of service. Considering other benefits provided, including job security and competitive wages, is it too much to expect local residency for Providence employes?

The local residency requirement has

been challenged in the courts. The State Supreme Courts of Rhode Island and Pennsylvania have ruled in favor of the municipalities. And in 1976 the United States Supreme Court upheld the rights of cities to require their employes to reside within the city boundaries. Cities do have a right to require local residency for city employment.

Implementation of such a residency policy is not easy. Should openings for city jobs be limited just to residents? Should current job holders be required to return to the city if they live in a different community?

Allowing city employes to live outside the boundaries of Providence has been a practice for seven years. It would impose an unnecessary hardship to require a family that has invested in a home on an acre of land in Lincoln, has their children in local schools and has established community ties to return to the city. City residency should be utilized only as positions are filled with new employes or as current employes change their jobs within the city.

At a time when minorities continue their movement to cities and whites continue their exodus to the suburbs with the result an increasing growth of minorities in cities and whites in the suburbs, a local residency requirement could change this pattern and also help build up the small middle-class structure of our cities.

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