

# Countrywide leadership needed to cure city ills

By Chester E. Smolski

The urban riots of the mid- and late-1960s in this nation were devastating: In the three years from 1964 through 1967, it is estimated that 142 persons were killed and 4700 wounded with property damage running into hundreds of millions of dollars. This sad part of our history brought to a focus the magnitude of our urban problems and the need to attack them at the national level.

Federal responses generated programs that ranged from housing rehabilitation to neighborhood development programs and from model cities to the development of new communities. Then came the new federalism of the 1980s, with its lack of federal direction and money, and thus a shift in responsibility to the state- and local city governments with their limited resources. And the urban problems continue.

A recent survey of the members of the National League of Cities identified their five major problems as: economic conditions, streets and sidewalks, fiscal conditions, solid waste and unemployment. Drugs, crime, cost of energy, homelessness and affordable housing were cited as the problems that had worsened the most. The problems remain, but the federal presence to address them is missing.

At a recent conference of the Urban Affairs Association held in St. Louis, many of these urban issues and problems were examined and discussed to consider what the future might bring regarding federal policy toward our cities. National administrations do change—and so do federal policies.

There is little question that urban needs are still there and still need to be addressed, but there is some doubt regarding the appropriate role of the various governments—local, state and federal—in providing the leadership and the wherewithal to work for their solution.

Professor Michael Brintnall of Mt. Vernon College in Washington, D.C., feels that none of the aforementioned urban issues “appear likely to dominate domestic policy or to set the terms by which urban policy will be discussed in the future except, perhaps, for the affordability of housing.”

Much attention has been given to the price of housing for purchase, but there is also a major problem associated with rental housing. Under present housing policy, the federal government has largely stopped producing new subsidized housing units and relied more on income subsidies and the housing voucher, which reduce governmental costs. A housing voucher costs about one-half the amount of a newly constructed unit in terms of annual outlays per unit.

This reliance on the private sector to provide multifamily housing necessary for the needy has run into another problem: the Tax Reform Act of 1986. A restrictive provision of the act discourages investment in equity funds that can be used for housing construction for low- and moderate-income persons. And, in addition, the Tax Act has reduced multifamily construction in the nation, from 666,000 units in 1985 to 474,000 units in 1987.

Prepayment of subsidized mortgages in the Section 8 program has also threatened to reduce the number of available multifamily units for low-income persons, but the 1987 Housing Act has established some incentives and barriers to cushion this potential blow. The result of this legislation thus delays such actions for approximately two years before this can happen, at which time the issue will again be addressed.

Future urban policies that will likely receive the greatest emphasis will be these subsidized housing issues and the problem of homelessness, a nationwide dilemma concentrated largely in cities. And because homelessness is affecting children and families to a greater degree, “homelessness appears indeed to be the only catalyst for strong public support for a broader agenda of attention to urban issues,” according to Brintnall.

Except for this one major societal problem that has reached epidemic proportions in cities throughout the country, Brintnall suggests that “the idea of a crisis of the cities is over,” and it is unlikely that cities will be perceived as needing any new general help, such as a return to general revenue sharing or major expansion of existing programs in community development and Urban Development Action Grants.

Economic development has been receiving considerable attention in cities over the past several years, with city agencies expanded or created to garner new jobs and to aid in the expansion of existing opportunities. Although this is likely to continue, the major focus of such development will probably move to the national level, for this is seen to be an issue that has international ramifications as America seeks to be, again, a leader in the world arena.

This shift to the national level has already been taken up by the Democratic Party's current presidential campaign as it now concentrates on “economic nationalism,” which emphasizes the need to restore this country's leadership to newer and higher levels of economic endeavors to make America first in the world.

Although Brintnall raises some thought-provoking questions about the future of federal policies toward cities, there are others who feel that the next president could again bring into focus the real needs of cities, including education, child care and economic development. William H. Hudnut, Republican mayor of Indianapolis, and the Democratic mayor of Seattle, Charles Royer, have been leading a campaign to make current presidential candidates aware of urban problems and to address them in the next term.

Not all mayors agree with their assessment. The outspoken and combative mayor of Milwaukee, Henry W. Meier who is stepping down after 28 years in that position, claims that current mindless policies of the White House are responsible for the dismal conditions of our cities. He also feels that of the Democratic presidential candidates, only Jesse Jackson and Paul Simon, whose campaign is currently on hold, are “speaking out for the cities.”

A new president with some understanding of the vital role that is played by our cities can again revive programs to alleviate the problems of urban America. It may not be easy because many people and jobs are located in our suburbs, along with a concentration of political power. With their own problems of traffic, sprawling development and growing needs in areas that cities have long experienced, the suburbs could themselves become the area of focused governmental help.

It is too soon to say whether the urban crisis is over or not. But there is no question that a new, urban-oriented president could make a major difference in attacking and resolving city problems. In any case, it appears unlikely that the new federal leadership could be any worse to our cities than what we have experienced over the past eight years.

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