

What are the practices that make some cities successful?

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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My article last week was about a recently published report prepared by the Praxis Strategy Group and Joel Kotkin entitled *Enterprising Cities – A Force for American Prosperity*. The report was a study of seven successful American cities – Dayton, Ohio; Irving, Texas; Memphis, Tennessee; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Salt Lake City, Utah; San Antonio, Texas; and Sioux Falls, South Dakota – that outlined why each one had attained economic growth during a period of time where most cities in America are in some kind of decline.

The report spoke about the basic policies and practices that these successful cities had in common.

The first two of those are closely related, that was to “allow businesses to grow and thrive” and to “free businesses from excessive taxes, unnecessary regulations, and onerous local government processes.”

I can speak from experience about the difference between the cities and towns where my projects have been located. Typically, the larger the town, the more government they have and the more regulations they have. Some smaller towns have virtually the same set of zoning codes and building codes that larger cities started with, but as they grew, the regulations grew with them. Not only that, the attitude among government changes.

Smaller towns welcome projects to their city, and they are willing to grant building permits much more quickly than big cities.

Part of this is attitude. As the city grows, the servant mentality that its government began with begins to diminish and transforms into one that is less one of serving and more of one of an authoritarian. This is not to say that all people in the city government are authoritarians; it is just that the system becomes more mechanical and robotic. As a result, permits that might have taken a few days to issue begin taking weeks or months, or are simply rejected.

For example, I can think of one of my projects which involved an older building that did not meet building code. I suggested to the building official a way in which we could make the

building much safer, even though my suggestion didn't meet the letter of the code. That was in a large city, and my suggestion was rejected (so the unsafe condition remained). In another instance, a code requirement actually created an unsafe condition, so I suggested to the building official that he waive that requirement. He agreed. The difference? That was in a smaller town and the official could exercise good judgment and common sense.

In addition, as cities grow, so do their regulation. This is most evident in the adoption of new zoning codes that place more requirements, most of them expensive, on builders and developers. These codes favor those who follow the established rules and discourage those who are innovators or are attempting to build their businesses to meet market forces and budgets.

The third item was “focus government on the critical tasks that are the foundation of economic opportunity, such as infrastructure and protective services.”

There are things that individuals and businesses cannot do that promote the economy and that is where local government must play a role. Those include schools, roads, highways, water and sewer services, and airports. It also includes those buildings and facilities that support them, as well as fire and police. Beyond those, the less local government does, the better off that community is going to be. Creating opportunity for freedom of mobility (walking, biking and automobiles, not mass transit) is a vital service of government. As for mass transit, buses have proven to be the only viable solution for those without cars, but this is a service best operated privately.

The last item was “Help educate, cultivate and equip the next generation of young entrepreneurs and the workforce of the future.”

There is no doubt that we are seeing a generation of people that are not ready for today's work force, and there are several reasons. The rapid pace of technology changes, entitlement attitudes (let's call that what it is, laziness), and lack of interest in entering professions that are becoming highly regulated (such as architects and physicians), all contribute to this problem. Education is important, but it needs to be the right kind, and one that is centered on basics – reading, science and math – and on helping people achieve their dreams, not simply meeting quotas for the kind of workers the government thinks we need.

More on this report next week.

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