

An American population shift shows an alarming trend

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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I read a very troubling article published by the *New York Times* this month. *Blighted Cities Prefer Razing to Rebuilding* was about the growing trend of vacant and abandoned homes and other properties in depopulating cities.

Most of have heard of the destruction of thousands of homes in the city of Detroit, Michigan. For years Detroit has been depopulating as hundreds of businesses and manufacturers left the city for the suburbs or overseas, leaving thousands of homes and commercial property to decay.

Detroit has been trying desperately to save their city. After nearly a century of “smart growth” planning, they hired a “star” urban planner and approved a bond issue for a \$125 million light rail project. Investors made a valiant attempt to revive the city by building large-scale civic projects, including two new stadiums, at least five refurbished theaters and numerous skyscraper office buildings and a new park. All their efforts had little effect on Detroit’s fate. It declared bankruptcy, saddled with so much debt and unfunded liabilities that it could not recover.

Now other cities are beginning to suffer the same fate – abandoned properties as population flee their cities for a better life with less crime, lower taxes, and more job opportunities. Among them are Baltimore, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Buffalo and St. Louis.

According to the *New York Times* article, “more than half of the nation’s largest cities in 1950 have lost at least one-third of their populations. And since 2000, a number of cities, including Baltimore, St. Louis, Pittsburg, Cincinnati and Buffalo, have lost around 10 percent. Cleveland has lost more than 17 percent and more than 25 percent of residents have left Detroit, whose bankruptcy declaration this summer has heightened anxiety in other postindustrial cities.”

In other cities, the situation has become even worse. The article points to a Brookings Institute study that shows that 130 cities have dissolved themselves over the past 15 years.

The answer for many cities is to scale down their infrastructure by razing abandoned buildings or blighted neighborhoods, converting them to urban farmlands or allowing nature to return the land

to woodlands. The hope is that by reducing the blight they can reduce crime, and by reducing the number of buildings and homes they can push up property values. Others look for a solution in high-rise “affordable” (subsidized) housing, as Obama’s Department of Housing and Urban Development propose. But they are apparently not addressing the real issue – high taxes, low incomes, and high cost of living.

Urban planners point to studies that show that the urban core of cities are experiencing more growth than the suburbs, just the opposite condition of these cities. Yet even when growth in certain cities can be shown, their growth has not been at the same rate as national population growth, nor is it even close to growth in cities in areas with low taxes and low housing costs.

Michael Barone of the *Washington Examiner* wrote, “Between 1970 and 2010 the population of New York state increased from 18 million to 19 million. In that same period, the population of Texas increased from 11 million to 25 million. The picture is even starker if you look at major metro areas. The New York metropolitan area, including counties in New Jersey and Connecticut, increased from 17.8 million in 1970 to 19.2 million in 2010 – up 8 percent. During that same time the nation grew 52 percent. In the same period, the four big metro areas in Texas – Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Austin - grew from 6 million to 15.6 million, a 160 percent increase.”

And with all of the population growth, the growth of new infrastructure – roads, homes and businesses – has grown as well. This is evident in the study that I have recently been writing about, *Enterprising Cities – A force for American Prosperity*, which states that cities that are succeeding are those with low taxes, fewer regulations, better education and a general pro-business attitude.

However, any of these succeeding cities could suffer the same fate as those whose urban planning includes the destruction of thousands of properties, costing millions. All they need to do is raise taxes, tolerate onerous and heavy regulations, and overfund public unions.

As Tulsa begins another term with Mayor Dewey Bartlett, I hope that he and our other city leaders and planners have made themselves keenly aware of what makes a city prosperous and successful. The evidence is easy to find, abundantly available, and the answers are the more than obvious.

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