

Bridging the gap: Thomas Bier

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Plain Dealer guest columnist

By Thomas Bier

The core of Cuyahoga County is being abandoned as sub urban residents move outward -- increasingly to neighboring counties -- and Cleveland residents move to "old" inner suburbs. This pattern cannot change without substantial renewal of the core to accommodate the tastes and preferences of middle-class households.

Yet our home-rule system of government makes aging communities singularly responsible for their condition. On their own, they lack fiscal and staff resources sufficient to produce much renewal. That's the heart of the problem.

So, what's the solution?

Tax growth sharing

Most old communities cannot save themselves, whether big cities nor small suburbs. But with help from newer ones with growing tax bases, it becomes possible.

Our future brightens when we, as a multicounty region, jointly become engaged in furthering the well-being of all our communities -- not just the one where we live. Since most of us work in a place that is not our residence, concern for its condition would be more than prudent.

We don't have to give up home rule to do that. But newer places have to be willing to invest in the older ones -- not just Cleveland, but also Parma, Garfield Heights, Lorain, Elyria, Akron, Canton, Barberton, Youngstown, Painesville, Willowick and more (the number grows with time).

With support, wobbly old places can gradually renew themselves and attract private investment that sparks more renewal. They can spiral up, eventually becoming a tax-sharing contributor instead of a recipient. But it takes time, a bit each year.

The Northeast Ohio Mayors and City Managers Association is advocating, through its Regional Prosperity Initiative, the establishment of regional tax growth sharing (designed to promote cooperative action for land-use planning and economic development).

If endorsed by the region's communities, it would be a major commitment to collective support for places other than where we live -- and a dramatic turning point in the advancement of our region.

Immigration

Cleveland's population keeps falling because more people move out than move in. For decades, Cleveland's housing market has been dominated by young, first-time buyers (many from the suburbs -- who, 10 years later, move up and out). But there aren't enough of them.

The situation would be less serious if the region's economic growth were strong enough to draw thousands of new residents annually, including many who would live in old places (until they could afford to move up). But we don't yet have such growth.

Other than immigrants, I don't see where the needed "starter" population will come from. There is no other way to occupy the amount of housing that exists. It's a simple equation: The fewer the immigrants, the more Cleveland housing is abandoned.

(It should be noted that abandonment has been concentrated mostly in Cleveland to date. But as the county's population shifts outward, so, too, does abandonment -- gradually toward Cleveland's outer neighborhoods and inner suburbs.)

Property inspection and code enforcement

This may seem like an odd piece of the solution, but it is major. The lack of effective property-code enforcement in communities vulnerable to decline results in deterioration and weakened property values -- red flags that drive middle-income and responsible households away. The most self-defeating thing a community can do is to reject inspection and enforcement (as the residents of South Euclid did).

It is not easy for vulnerable communities to recognize that the deck is heavily stacked against them, undermining them, draining economic vitality. But their situation is nothing short of life-or-death. The city hall of each vulnerable place, along with street after street, should radiate determination to survive and thrive. The ones that do probably will. The ones that don't face steady descent into the quagmire of decay.

Reoriented public policy

This is ultracritical. State policy plays a commanding role in shaping the region. For example, the planned Interstate 90 interchange in Avon will facilitate access to hundreds of

acres of open space for development, most of which will draw from western Cuyahoga County. Policy is not structured to strengthen Lakewood, Fairview Park, Bay Village, Cleveland and other cities, to counter the outward pull.

Another example: Townships do not levy income taxes, yet townships comprise 70 percent of the land in Lorain County, 90 percent in Medina County, 97 percent in Geauga and 2 percent in Cuyahoga. How's that for opportunity to move out of "high-tax" Cuyahoga County?

State government must reorient policies to give more support to maintenance and redevelopment and less to new development.

If the state does not comprehensively recast policy, I see no hope for most old places. Decline will be unstoppable.

There are more effective ways to alter the situation, but our culture will not allow them. For example, in England, where preservation of old places is highly valued, regional governments plan and control the location and amount of new housing and redevelopment. Renewal is assured while new development is contained. The result is community stability -- and cities, towns and countryside that American tourists love to visit and admire.

Our deeply rooted, societal commitment to free enterprise and property rights will not allow government to have such a strong hand. However, given what is at stake, we must go as far as we can in structuring state and local roles that will best enable us to right our listing ship.

If we establish regional tax growth sharing, if we attain greater economic growth, if more immigrants choose us, if deterioration is confronted through code enforcement, if we reorient public policies -- then we will have the prospect of a much more dynamic, attractive, 21st century Northeast Ohio.

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ONLINE: Find out more about the Northeast Ohio Mayors and City Managers Association's Regional Prosperity Initiative and read the group's June report at: neo-rpi.org