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INNER-CITY PUBLIC POLICY

Empower Local Citizens

By Rev. Larry Gregan

Executive Summary

- Although the inner city is intimately involved with the public sector, this fact may inhibit the ability of its residents to lead dynamic, self-directed lives.
- Reversing the decline of the inner-city housing stock requires direct involvement by residents in maintenance and enforcement policies.
- Widening the pool of affordable low-income housing is a necessary condition of eliminating rent control.
- Reforms to welfare policy should include the removal of financial restrictions that discourage the growth of self-directed family units.
- Zoning processes have become politicized, and marginalize the interests and concerns of residents.
- Public health efforts that focus on prevention through peer-based activity are more likely to succeed.
- The process for enabling non-profit community initiatives is hopelessly inappropriate. Several changes in law are needed to harness this vehicle for inner-city revival.
- The City needs to change its tax policies to stop inner-city subsidization of the suburbs.
- Allowing residents a voice in the deployment of police resources is the key to safer streets.
- High-performing public schools are vital to the reversal of poverty and decline.

In the inner city, there is more involvement in the lives of citizens by civic bureaucrats, social service professionals, law enforcement personnel, health care workers, and politically active agencies than in any other segment of our society.

The responses of these professionals to the challenges of these highly dynamic neighborhoods tend to be static: program and agency based. The effect is not unlike colonization in the third world.

Private sector opportunists also make a good living here and invest in maintaining the status quo. The well being of the resident population is not their primary concern.

Yet, the goal of good public policy should be the same here as anywhere else:

- the freedom of citizens to participate in personal and public life.
- consistency of treatment with other jurisdictions.
- high value/high performance service.

The key is to implement policies that allow and encourage the ongoing self-directed involvement of citizens.

Housing Maintenance

The most visible sign of inner-city problems is the deterioration of the housing stock. This discourages ongoing maintenance, let alone *increased* investment. As housing becomes scarce and less desirable for families, school enrollments decline. This, in turn decreases enrollment-based funding for attractive school programs, and that further discourages family residence. The coupling of low rents and poor living conditions is usually tolerated only by persons unable or unwilling to participate in ongoing self-maintenance. This leads to further decline. The public, commercial, and professional life of the neighborhood then increasingly seems to center on its concentration of poverty, addiction, abuse, ill health, and family instability.

The means to prevent, and even reverse, the concentration promoted by such decline are at hand in by-laws already on the books. Standards regarding property maintenance, health, and safety already exist to address these concerns on an ongoing basis. Application of these policies breaks down because of inadequate staffing and funding for inspections, laxity on the part of inspectors, and the requirement of community complaints before proceeding.

This could be effectively addressed by removing professional and union barriers to citizen participation. If mandatory community inspection teams regularly accompanied inspectors they would be well informed, preceded by, assisted, and accountable to those most affected by their work.

Revenue Property Income

There are many legal requirements for investment in property maintenance affecting value, health, and safety. On the other hand, there is the reality of declining real-dollar revenues from controlled rents and artificially low welfare rates on the other.

But rent control has the same emotional resonance for the poor as tax relief does for the rich. And, just as bringing government deficits under control is a prerequisite to reducing taxes, increasing the ability of low-income tenants to pay uncontrolled rents is a prerequisite for removing rent control.

It is possible for a commitment to pay market rents for qualified welfare recipients to accompany a robust policy of reducing long-term welfare dependence by employable persons.

Welfare Reform

The goal of welfare reform should be to increase the ability of willing people to provide for themselves and direct their own lives.

The disincentive to moving up to the next rung of the economic ladder can be removed by continuing to provide dental, vision and other such benefits based on income rather than an unrealistically brief time limit.

Like third world colonies, hundreds of millions of dollars flow through inner city neighborhoods but little remains there.

Non-resident landlords build up equity from welfare rents but welfare recipients who choose to spend their payments wisely are prevented from saving, either in the form of home equity or, more ironically, in the form of registered education savings programs. If a concerned non-parent opens an RESP, he/she does not receive the matching federal government contribution of up to \$400/year available to parents. This works against the well-founded belief that education is key to overcoming poverty.

Zoning

A pet peeve of inner city residents is that non-resident helpers do not have to live with the investment and land-use consequences of their solutions.

Rightly applied, zoning returns authority to those affected by planning and land use decisions which, in turn, will actually encourage rather than encumber investors.

Most appeals of the zoning and licensing decisions made by the civic Board of Adjustment are not true appeals based on inconsistent application of policy or inclusion of previously unknown relevant information; they are simply attempts to do an end run around public policy at the political level where leverage is perceived to be greater.

Investors may perceive zoning to be the problem when city planners oppose allowing residential use in a potentially vital downtown business district. Few business owners located there would oppose more residential housing. Zoning per se is not the problem; the problem is a decision making process which marginalizes the community most affected by the land use. Community self-interest and support for licensing and land use decisions form a predictable commitment that increases the confidence for profitable investment.

Public Health

The, by definition, top-down activity of disease *treatment* is not only inevitably more expensive than *prevention*, it is less effective in promoting public health. By necessity, third world communities have shown that low cost, community driven, peer based activities are what actually work in promoting health and reducing disease such as HIV.

This should not come as a surprise and should provoke wonder that this approach is not pursued in all areas of public policy.

Non-Profit Participation

Even when poverty, addiction, abuse, ill health, and family instability are not concentrated in one area, a compassionate response could be much more effective.

Proposed solutions to inner-city problems usually have an all-too-common trajectory. First, agencies with broad goals identify the specific activity currently receiving political and bureaucratic support and lobby for a proposal centered on that.

One or more levels of government then approve funding for a program and its administrative personnel. Then a local presence is established. A small polling of the population and/or a few hands raised at a public meeting are then cited as community support and democratic legitimacy. The program runs its course. Then, because the problem still exists and the service deliverers are set up to remain employed, programs are expanded, or more created, and funding found.

In the muddle of good intentions, limited ability, and mixed motives, the colonizers rightly perceive that the key to any present or ongoing solution is the "empowerment" of people. Yet their inability to effect "empowerment" for citizens is revealed by the fact that the greatest "empowerment" always seems to rest with the "helpers".

Community residents already have many associations among themselves and with others.

Groupings of residents in non-profits, faith based organizations, and charitable foundations often work through issues in a leaner and more responsive manner.

A few catalysts to this source of self-renewing activity would help the inner city greatly:

- Allowing tax receipts to be given for services (not just "real property").
- A tax regime that is more favorable to the success of charitable foundations than government bureaucracies.
- Allowing public purchase of services from faith-based deliverers.

The modern understanding of a secular society prevented enforcement of any *one* faith by disallowing *any* faith in the public sphere. The post-modern understanding allows permission for each person or group to participate in our common values and goals according to their own story and tradition. This theoretically more respectful approach could be more consistently applied in practice.

Taxation

The solution often proposed to curtail costly suburban development and force more cost-effective high-density development is to simply not allow it. A consistent, less restrictive, and more effective solution would be to simply stop subsidizing it.

We only get more of whatever we subsidize. If living in a service delivery area with lower per unit cost provided a more substantial tax benefit and people obtaining housing in areas where public service and infrastructure cost more paid the *full* cost through taxation, the appropriate level of each would be reached by choice rather than intervention.

Safety

The outrage of inner city residents is often used by police departments to obtain more funding but these communities rarely get to have substantial input into either the deployment of these additional resources or collective agreements that govern deployment.

Education

Education is only the way out of poverty if children actually learn. What we take into our minds through education is as important and intimate a choice as what we eat. All aspects of education policy must therefore be built on parental involvement, measured performance, and choice.

Assumptions regarding the limitations of inner city children's capabilities must not be used as excuses to not achieve their education. The key questions are, what do you want for yourself, do you want it for others, and what are you willing to do to achieve it for us all.

About the author



Rev. LARRY GREGAN arrived from the Miramichi River, New Brunswick, in 1986 and Winnipeg is now very much his home. After completing a Master of Divinity degree at Providence Seminary in 1993, he moved to the inner city to intern with Rev. Harry Lehotsky at New Life Ministries. He was ordained in 1997 and continues as an associate pastor there. With the help of Lazarus Housing, he and his wife are now well settled in a recently renovated house on Maryland Street. Larry is involved daily in the effects of public policy on the lives of Winnipeg's poorest and most vulnerable citizens. As a fellow neighbour, he too lives with the consequences of new policy solutions and speaks about urban renewal from the perspective of an inner city resident.

Frontier Community Pulse - is a forum for the views of local community leaders who live and work in communities most affected by public policy. The views expressed are their own, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the members or board of the Frontier Centre for Public Policy.

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