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FOREWORD

A NEW URBAN VISION FOR A NEW URBAN REALITY

ADOLFO CARRIÓN, JR.*

For the first time in history, more than half the world's population lives in cities.¹ The forces that led to this moment should be the subject of intense study in order for us to better prepare for a future that will continue on this trajectory. For purposes of introducing President Obama's vision of America's urban future, and due to the limits imposed by what should be a reasonably sized foreword, I will simply consider with broad brushstrokes what got us here, and dedicate the lion's share of this piece to presenting my boss's view.

Here in the United States, urbanization has been underway for more than two centuries, as people moved to cities for jobs, and then escaped to their suburbs in search of a better quality of life. This was largely driven by the coincidence of industrialization and immigration, by mobility innovations, and has to a great extent been aided by public policy. Today, our nation's metropolitan areas—the city/suburb/exurb complex—house 83% of our people, 85% of our jobs, and generate 90% of our economic output.² This trend will continue at an even more rapid pace over the next several decades, as we experience a 40% growth in population (120 million people) by 2050, requiring us to build another 200 billion square feet of residential and commercial space, and its commensurate infrastructure.³ This new metro-complex—encompassing city, suburb, exurb and the rural edge—is the new urban reality.

This growth of the new metro-complex occurs at a time of dramatic changes in land use in and around urban centers, shaped by a shift in

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1. U.N. POPULATION FUND, *STATE OF WORLD POPULATION 2007*, at 1 (2007).

2. U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS, *U.S. METRO ECONOMIES—PACE OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY: GMP AND JOBS*, at 1 (2010); The Brookings Institution, *About the Metropolitan Policy Program*, <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/About-Us.aspx> (last visited July 1, 2010).

3. Shaun Donovan, Secretary, U.S. Dep't Hous. & Urban Dev., *Foreign Press Center Briefing: U.S. Participation at the World Urban Forum V, to be held in Brazil, March 22–26* (Mar. 15, 2010).

where and how things are produced. The significant exportation of our manufacturing base, the emergence of China and Southeast Asia as a major manufacturing base, deepening globalization, technological advances, and the “tech/dot-com” boom and bust—each has played a significant role. This shift has created the new urban milieu far from the slums and ghettos of the early twentieth century that the working class fought so hard to escape. The new city/metro complex is driven by an economy built on information and service—technology and science, health and bio-medical service and research, education, and FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate).

All of this presents a set of challenges and opportunities we must embrace right away if we are to remain the global leader of open, free-market societies. This means crafting a set of policies built on a model that encourages balanced, sustainable, and equitable development, and growth for all types of communities. It requires a departure from the approach of the last half of the twentieth century, where federal housing and transportation policy encouraged new development into suburbs and exurbs, redirecting resources from the urban core, without factoring in the quality and efficiency of our lives. While we incentivized an escape from the challenges of the old urban center—over-crowded schools, poverty, crime, and pollution—we didn’t factor in that these challenges would continue to spread and create a new set of unsustainable conditions. Now we are faced with social and economic isolation and dislocation in communities ranging from urban to rural. As such, the aim of federal policy must be to increase economic and social integration across urban and rural regions of our country. This requires a new vision.

Anthony Downs argued in a 1998 paper on defining the phenomenon of urban sprawl that “Sprawl is not *any form* of suburban growth, but a *particular form*.”⁴ He identified ten such traits: (1) unlimited outward extension of development, (2) low-density residential and commercial settlements, (3) leapfrog development, (4) fragmentation of powers over land use among many small localities, (5) dominance of transportation by private automotive vehicles, (6) no centralized planning or control of land uses, (7) widespread strip commercial development, (8) great fiscal disparities among localities, (9) segregation of types of land uses in different zones, and (10) reliance mainly on the trickle-down or filtering process to provide housing to low-income households.⁵ Downs’ argument has become the generally accepted framework, moving beyond oversimplified analyses that only considered some of these traits. I agree.

Today’s metropolitan regions behave as one, and are linked through jobs, culture, and infrastructure, making it nearly impossible to defini-

4. Anthony Downs, *The Big Picture: How America’s Cities Are Growing*, 16 BROOKINGS REV. 8, 8 (1998).

5. *Id.*

tively say where city ends and suburb or exurb begins. Cities, suburbs and rural areas now share many of the same challenges of poverty, underperforming schools, crime, and to a great extent environmental degradation and traffic congestion. The Obama Administration is addressing these challenges with a new policy regime that recognizes the interdependence between urban and rural, and uses the assets of each and their interplay as the nexus for America's continued growth and prosperity. This regional approach to development ties metropolitan areas and their core cities to their rural counterparts, and coordinates investments in transportation, housing, economic development, and other critical areas. This asset- and place-driven approach aims to base our federal investment decisions on what's best for our national assets and human capital over the long run.

BEYOND FUTURAMA

At the 1939 World's Fair in New York, General Motors unveiled "The Futurama" exhibit, a captivating model that displayed a vision for the not-so-distant "future" of 1960. Visitors to the exhibit, most of whom did not own cars, were left in awe of the "ideal city of tomorrow," imagining themselves riding in cars amidst breathtaking skyscrapers on concrete multi-lane highways, speeding toward a previously untouchable countryside with a sense of personal freedom, dignity, and pride.⁶ The exhibit proved prescient, perhaps inspirational, but with many unforeseen and unintended consequences for American life. Over the years, government programs worked to create the "cities of tomorrow" envisioned by Futurama. Specifically, transportation and housing policies transformed the urban landscape and created the sprawling regions we have today. This transformation, however, has proven to be unsustainable and we are now having to correct for the negative impacts of these patterns. No longer can we afford to live in disconnected regions where job centers and commercial districts are many miles from where we live. We can no longer continue to destroy our natural resources, and at the same time leave older, more centrally located neighborhoods to decay. It is time to usher in a new way of thinking about urban development, and to enlist the talents and creativity of a new generation of leaders in the public and private sectors to harness new technologies. It is time to chart a greener, more equitable path, and build a better tomorrow.

A NEW VISION

President Obama understands this new urban reality and believes government has a responsibility to make investments that encourage

6. See, e.g., Raymond A. Mohl, *Race and Space in the Modern City: Interstate-95 and the Black Community in Miami*, in *URBAN POLICY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA* 100, 105 (Arnold R. Hirsch & Raymond A. Mohl eds., 1993).

smart, collaborative planning in metropolitan regions. That's why on February 19, 2009, the President signed an Executive Order creating the White House Office of Urban Affairs.⁷ His goals in doing so were simple: to have a White House office focused entirely on coordinating federal policy and its impact on the new urban America; to have a White House office lead the engagement of stakeholders around a meaningful dialogue about crafting a smart federal investment strategy for urban America; and to promote smarter regional and local planning that incorporates the importance and heritage of rural America.

In just over a year since the creation of the White House Office of Urban Affairs, we have established broad national goals to guide the policy work of seventeen federal agencies that are part of the White House Interagency Working Group on Urban Policy. These broad goals are intended to encourage regional and local planning efforts around economic competitiveness, environmental responsibility, and opportunity. With this template, every community is invited to work with the federal government to build strong regional economies, build a responsible and sustainable infrastructure platform, and build opportunity-rich neighborhoods. The nexus of place and opportunity can be strengthened by creating metropolitan regions that are fertile places to do business, efficient and healthy living environments—aligning transportation with land use, for instance—and include local neighborhoods that celebrate the full promise and potential of every American.

President Obama and those of us who work in his administration believe that government does not hold all the answers. That's why the Office of Urban Affairs took to the road to shepherd a national conversation on the future of cities and metropolitan areas with civic and business leaders, non-profits and elected officials, and people in neighborhoods. From coast to coast we found that innovation is happening at the local level, that government has an opportunity to be a better partner with those on the ground, and that the answers to our most pressing issues may already exist in many communities around the country. We also learned that the fate of rural America is tied to that of urban America, and that leaders and community residents already understood this.

Local officials have taught us that in order to build a nation whose cities are strong and sustainable, our public policy regime must be built on an integrated approach promoting cross-cutting plans that take into account housing, transportation, energy, labor, education, economic and workforce development, and criminal justice policy as a comprehensive system rather than policy areas that are independent of each other. As such, the foundational steps we have taken to advance this approach include a regional innovation cluster strategy for economic development; a sustainable communities initiative to create more livable communities;

7. Exec. Order 13,503, 74 Fed. Reg. 8139 (Feb. 19, 2009).

and neighborhood-level interventions built around quality schools and housing. These foundational steps take into account the indispensable relationship between urban and rural, best expressed in a recently released Council of Economic Advisors' report on rural America—"Strengthening the Rural Economy."⁸

CONCLUSION

The long-term strategic advantage that cities can provide, simply measured by time, energy, and resource efficiency, is not made any less promising by past neglect and failure. We believe that a policy regime anchored in a strong urban America is indisputably our best hope for the future. This new city and metro-complex of the twenty-first century will be home to a robust middle class whose children will enjoy more opportunity and a richer quality of life, and will sustain the heritage and richness of rural America. The natural evolution of the American economy tacks toward higher-order activity, and will ultimately be anchored on creativity and design. Consequently, delaying a regime of positive, reflexive investment in cities and metropolitan areas will simply squelch our country's innovation and competitiveness.

We are at the dawn of a new era of urbanization and human progress, we must now only convince ourselves that a more efficient and livable future is possible. The rest will follow. Almost five decades ago President Kennedy said, "We will neglect our cities at our peril, for in neglecting them we neglect the nation."⁹ President Obama believes that strong cities make for strong regions, and strong regions make for a strong America.

8. COUNCIL OF ECON. ADVISERS, EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, STRENGTHENING THE RURAL ECONOMY (2010), *available at* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/Rural%20America%20final-v9.pdf>.

9. John F. Kennedy, Special Message to the Congress Transmitting Reorganization Plan 1 of 1962 (Jan. 30, 1962), *available at* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8699>.

