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A second chance for cities?

NEAL PEIRCE

Does the fall and decline of old manufacturing cities have to be so brutal? Must so many jobs be lost to new plants built on suburban greenfields?

New reports suggest that with smarter state policy-making and a dose of ingenuity, much more *could* be done to defend and redevelop older cities.

Pennsylvania, once America's industrial linchpin, has many such cities. But, reports the Brookings Institution's Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, the state has been busy abandoning them. Pennsylvania's population grew an anemic 2.5 percent between 1982 and 1997, but its footprint of settled area grew 47 percent. In fact, Pennsylvania was consuming more farmland and natural space per added resident than any state but Wyoming.

Result: sagging urban tax bases, decline of long-vibrant neighborhoods, jobs continuing "to relocate to the greenfields, leaving deserted factories and abandoned commercial blocks behind."

One could argue this is just economics — the draw of less expensive rural labor and land, plus space to build large single-story plants. But a companion to the Brookings study, from the Harrisburg-based Keystone Research Center, suggests that state government itself has been pushing the sprawl wave.

Pennsylvania invests close to the most dollars per capita of any state on job creation and business expansion — about \$200 million a year.

But to reinforce its historic cities? Hardly. The Keystone Center discovered that state agencies hardly lift a finger to determine whether the job locations they subsidize actually produce the jobs promised, whether they're close to pools of unemployed or underemployed people, or whether they simply compound city job loss and the loss of Pennsylvania's open space.

State government agencies handing out subsidies for business expansion are notoriously reluctant to provide public information. But the Keystone researchers got to the data, compiling and analyzing 1,333 subsidy deals, worth \$720 million. They also opened a pioneering Web site (www.keystoneresearchmap.org) where the information is available for public inspection, town by

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town, subsidy by subsidy, company by company.

It's a delicious example of computer-armed reform advocates not only tracking down closely held data, but making it transparent and accessible by new digital technology.

The patterns the Keystone group turned up are unmistakable. There's no area of Pennsylvania in which state subsidies are targeted to the struggling older cities. In the five-county Philadelphia area, four affluent suburban counties receive two and a half times as much state development subsidy as Philadelphia proper. On a statewide per capita basis, outer townships get 2.2 times as much in subsidies for industrial parks as do older areas of Pennsylvania.

Brookings suggests Pennsylvania's only real hope is a dramatic about-face — encouraging wholesale land reclamation and development in its historic, culturally rich cities and suburbs. Such a strategy is the best hope, it says, to hold and attract the young and creative people who've been fleeing the state.

But will businesses be willing to locate in older cities that often have a reputation — justified or not — for neighborhood blight, crime and disorder, polluted brownfields, poor schools?

Yes, it appears, from a just-released Northeastern University survey of business leaders and commercial real estate professionals who have an established presence in five Massachusetts cities — Boston, Chelsea, Holyoke, Lawrence and New Bedford.

The key to older cities' success, the report suggests, is to focus on overcoming the "deal breakers" that so easily frighten off companies looking for fresh locations — fears of higher costs, fragmented land ownership, thickets of local regulations or painfully extended public hearings. Clear those obstacles, says David Soule, lead author of the Northeastern report, and the survey indicates older cities can compete successfully for a significant share of new business locations.

A raft of strategies is suggested. City leaders should sit down with teams of private developers to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in how they present themselves to prospects. The cities should identify market-ready, prepermitted sites and create a "one-stop" presentation and permitting process to make them more competitive with rural sites.

And they need to get "Web savvy." Many companies shop the Internet in search of locations. Cities should tap all the talent they can to create attractive, easy-to-navigate Web sites that even provide information on specific sites, zoning and incentives. Plus, they can offer testimonials from firms already in business there.

Can research-based advocacy, plus the ingenuity the Northeastern study suggests, turn things around for older cities?

I think there's at least a chance. Why? Hard economic times. Incredibly tight state budgets. Worry about competition. Even older suburbs in increasing trouble. And "smart growth" debates focusing state leaders — finally — on the irrationality of subsidizing rural expansion while the cities that first built their economies are left gasping for air.

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