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CITYSPACE

State of the State



The Right Stuff: This view is a metaphor for the region's future.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

A recipe for success.

by Bruce Andersen

Whenever I drive east on the Schuylkill Expressway, I am reminded of Philadelphia's once and future greatness. The buildings on Boathouse Row visually lead to the Waterworks, then to the museum on the hill and just past that, the skyline of Center City. That drive serves as a metaphor for the road the region must now take -- it must build upon its history to claim its future.

In December, the Brookings Institution released a report titled "Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania." The report details the state's bad economic shape with withering candor. The Brookings report, which covers all aspects of the Pennsylvania economy, offers critiques, comments and suggestions that can be broadly classed into four overlapping topics: suburban sprawl, slow growth, brain drain and neglect of the older cities and towns. The issues raised in the report are not all about infrastructure or about Philadelphia, but the interconnectedness of the issues makes infrastructure and development most important to the state's future economic health.

What is interesting about the issues raised by the Brookings Institution is that most of the problems are self-inflicted and self-sustaining, but not irreparable. The state has resources available to fix its root problems; it simply lacks the leadership to implement a long-term plan addressing them. Take, for example, the following details paraphrased from the report (the statistics cited throughout are drawn directly from its pages, found at www.brook.edu/pennsylvania):

Suburban sprawl: The lack of coordination of urban development created an incoherent direction in the state's economic development. Harrisburg has had the wrong priorities and has focused its resources and policies on the development of new communities, neglecting older and established communities. As a result, inner-city Philadelphia is declining while the outer townships grow rapidly. Jobs and economic opportunities are moving to the suburbs, where housing is expensive and is only accessible by car. Those who can't afford the move are left behind in decaying older communities. Meanwhile, the outer townships see an increase in their tax base, but also cope with increased costs to provide services to far-flung pockets of residents and businesses. Unchecked suburban growth also leads to more pollution and traffic.

Slow growth: From 1992 to 2002, the Philadelphia region's 13.3 percent employment growth led the state, but lagged behind the national rate of 20 percent. The state's tax structure weighs disproportionately on poor communities; its system of governance, with 2,566 municipalities and a fragmented state government, is parochial. Furthermore, it has not moved to replace the loss of its manufacturing base with "new economy" jobs.

Brain drain: The state has the fifth largest net out-migration of population between 1995 and 2000, and most of those leaving are young, educated workers. The Philadelphia region lost 8.3 percent of its 25- to 34-year-old residents between 1990 and 2000 -- the ninth largest loss of young workers. Despite the fact that the state ranks sixth in the nation in college students, in 2000, 29 percent of the Philadelphia region's residents possessed a college degree, a figure that pales when compared to cities like San Francisco (43.6 percent) or the Washington, D.C. region (41.8 percent).

Older cities and towns: Competing municipalities have made growth in the region a zero-sum gain -- a national problem not unique to Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania's population growth has been slow, but its land development from 1982 to 1997 is sixth in the nation. In the Philadelphia region, population growth was among the lowest in the state (3.2 percent versus 3.4 percent statewide), yet its outer townships grew by 18 percent, while older developed areas lost 2 percent of their population. This population shift magnifies the self-reinforcing tendency of economies. Struggling urban economies face depressed property values, which limit a city's ability to pay for services, which in turn makes the area less desirable.



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network of hospitals and health care offer important resources. Finally, its people are another resource: Pennsylvanians, especially Philadelphians, are loyal to their home state and the communities where they grow up.

Ultimately, the report is encouraging; it is a warning, not a postmortem. We did not get here by accident: Pennsylvania is in its current situation because of 50 years of bad decisions made by its state government. But the problems we face are not unknown, and solutions are not impossible. What we need now is a concerted effort by the state government to move beyond past mistakes and lead Pennsylvania into the future.

Bruce Andersen is a community activist and holds a master's in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.



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