

Inequity and Moving Forward in Legacy and Post-Industrial Cities

USDN members learn that focusing on downtowns, committing to community equity, and leveraging a unique sense of place are all important to progress in legacy cities and non-legacy cities alike.

Call them post-industrial, rust belt, shrinking, weak-market, or legacy cities. Regardless of title, they all share a common crisis: they leaned on one sector of the economy (typically industrial) that was once a primary economic engine but isn't anymore. Seven USDN Members who identify with this description – Albany, Burlington, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Northampton, and St. Louis – met in Cleveland for two days to learn about their commonalities, challenges, and critical paths to rebuilding strong, resilient communities. The fascinating insights from this convening not only illuminate paths for legacy cities, but also contain ideas for all communities.

Common Challenges

Each community that participated in this convening has some very successful neighborhoods that attract new investment and have urban vibrancy. The hearts of these communities are still beating. They also share challenges, such as a disruptive economic change or a recent span of time where growth was no longer the dominant paradigm. Each has a lost a major part of their industrial sector – manufacturing, shipping, or mineral extraction and processing – and each have infrastructure that was designed to serve uses that no longer exist. Additionally, the convening participants:

- Suffer from public and private underinvestment in crucial areas;
- Struggle with their functionally obsolete infrastructure;
- Recognize that they must address deep, pervasive social inequities;
- Have comprehensive workforce training needs; and
- Understand that they cannot rely solely on market-driven growth to rebuild.

The commonality of social inequity was explored in-depth during this convening. Legacy cities tend to have far more than their share of poverty and typically have a higher ratio of people of color. They also have access to less national and state resources than can meet the needs. Unfortunately, the national commitment to valuing human capital, locational benefits, and infrastructure in these cities is very small, harming not only those cities but also their regions. Situations like these can weaken the overall national economy.

Lessons to Move Forward

While every community may not identify with the challenges of a legacy community, the lessons learned from these communities about addressing social inequities and inconsistencies apply to all urban areas. During the convening, members discussed and identified six critical issues, and some ways to address them:

- **Downtowns:** No community can be healthy without vibrant downtowns and commercial centers. Communities need to attract new investors and residents into downtown areas.
- **Community Equity:** No community can be healthy if success only exists in a few isolated commercial and residential neighborhoods. All of the participating legacy communities are searching for ways to spread benefits equitably throughout their communities, and have already built enormous institutional commitment to equity.
- **Place Making and History:** Legacy communities have rich histories, cultures, architectural and built resources, access to natural resources, and access to human capital. These things strengthen any community. These unique resources can be leveraged together to create attractive neighborhoods and destinations, instead of sterile development and investment that does not reflect community identity.

Inequity and Moving Forward in Legacy and Post-Industrial Cities

Lessons to Move Forward (cont.)

- **Vision:** Whether the communities are growing slowly or shrinking, their success will come from proactively working with community members to create shared aspirational and achievable visions, instead of just reactively responding to a series of external events.
- **Creative Approaches and Capacity Building:** Although lack of resources is a common community cry, legacy communities have fewer than average resources. This challenge can help ignite passion and encourage scrappiness, creativity, and entrepreneurialism. Legacy cities need to continue to build strong and lean institutions to move forward with a new vision for the future.
- **Collaboration:** Collaboration across different sectors (non-profits, for-profits, grant-makers, universities, institutions, for example) is important in any community, but especially so in communities with limited resources and major transformative needs.

Highlights from the Literature Scan

USDN member Wayne Feiden (Northampton MA) prepared a literature scan, with support from the German Marshall Fund, for this convening. Below are excerpts from the scan that influenced the exchange.

For all their uniqueness, post-industrial cities large (Mallach & Brachman, 2013) and small (Mallach, 2012A) share a need to achieve economic and social stability and health by:

1. Regenerating the vibrancy of downtowns and city centers.
2. Revitalizing neighborhoods throughout cities.
3. Repurposing vacant land for development, parks, or other uses.
4. Making cities competitive and the center of economic activity and rebuilding economic, social, and cultural ties within their metropolitan areas.
5. Rebuilding the middle class, with a more economically diverse, skilled, and competitive workforce, developed through education and communities of choice that people want to live in (rather than simply being stranded in them).
6. Integrating new immigrant and migrant populations to address racial and ethnic disparities. Newcomers bring diversity and new energy, but may add to the racial and ethnic divides and add new strains to already severely stressed communities, unless active integration is encouraged.
7. Leveraging private investment with city assets, public resources, and partnerships. Partnerships must provide some real benefits to those with the greatest needs.
8. Nurturing and sustaining leadership and partnerships at all levels of political, social, economic, and cultural life to take control of the narrative and move the community forward.
9. Reforming state and federal policies to help address the structural imbalances and market failures. Post-industrial cities cannot possibly fund all the investments needed, but they can and are using public investments to build momentum and catalyze private investment. Private investment may have less immediate trickle-down benefits for the most socially marginalized populations, but none of the cities can recover without huge private investments. All of the cities are still struggling, but less so than at the time of industrial collapse.

Sources:

- Mallach, A., & Brachman, L. (2013). In McKeigue E. (Ed.), *Regenerating America's legacy cities*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- Mallach, A. (2012A). In *Philadelphia's shadow: Small cities in the Third Federal Reserve District*. Philadelphia: Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.