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## PHILADELPHIA'S FUTURE

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by Ed Dodson, Cherry Hill, NJ

Understanding too much is dangerous. Eils Lotozo's current attempt to raise the level of understanding by Philadelphians is an important contribution that will, I fear, be largely ignored. The painful truth is that too few communities galvanize except when in crisis.

A very large portion of the City of Philadelphia is largely unseen, except for the nightly reports of whatever serious crimes have been committed in those neighborhoods. The focus of attention is almost always on Center City and the preservation of the historic housing stock and other buildings. Out beyond Center City how many neighborhoods were really designed for residents to live, work and play? Only the once-affluent neighborhoods retain some of that character. Most others were built as housing for factory workers with little concern for the amenities that actually make communities communities.

As Eils observes, Philadelphia is not alone in the failure of its civic leaders to rebuild the city as a network of interconnected communities. There is no silver bullet, and virtually every element mentioned by Eils is worthy of adoption for Philadelphia.

When Eils once again asks: "...how about trying out the land tax, which would take some of the property-tax burden off people who maintain their properties and put more of it on speculators," she hints at the powerful influence of tax policy -- good and bad -- on the life cycle of cities. Removing taxes off of things and activities we want more of, while discouraging (even preventing) speculation in land, will not happen because the Mayor suddenly wakes up one day and realizes this is the way to go. Absentee land owners hire influential law firms to represent their interests. Wealthy lawyers and their clients contribute to political campaigns. Overcoming these forces is not an easy task.

If it is true that real change occurs only when there is a crisis, then Baltimoreans must know they are in a crisis. I understand that civic leaders in Baltimore are giving serious consideration to movement to a land-based property tax as a centerpiece of an effort to turn the city around.

Philadelphia could learn something by looking at Harrisburg, which has achieved something of a dramatic turnaround over the last decade. Among the things that Harrisburg has done is (you guessed it) continually shifted property taxes off of houses and buildings and onto land. The results: redevelopment of the downtown with private sector investment, near-elimination of the city's vacant housing stock, rehabilitation of many older homes, an expansion of jobs and other signals that Harrisburg is healthy and thriving. My suggestion to Mayor Rendell and to Jeremy Nowak is: take a ride up the Pa. turnpike and visit with the Mayor of Harrisburg. Or, is the acceptance of real solutions too dangerous for Philadelphia? Thank you, Eils, for another on-the-money analysis!