HOW TO MAKE THE WHOLE CITY
HEALTHY

By Walter Rybeck, Kensington, MD

Economists, journalists and other analysts have been pro-
claiming "what the trouble is" with American cities for so long
that they—and we—have inadvertently given cities a bad rap.
"City problems" has almost become a single word.

Mention almost any city and people visualize a vast ghetto
or crime-ridden slum. This constant focus on the negatives al-
most implies that cities deserve to be guillotined. More than a
few urbanologists actually say cities have outlived their usef-
lessness. They advise people to compute, not commute.

So people across the U.S. are abandoning fine old cities and
towns. Their exodus despoils farmland and open spaces that
are essential to our spiritual as well as our material well being.

We have little chance to reverse sprawl if all people hear,
like a constant drum beat, is that cities are horrible places.

On the contrary, communities are remarkable institutions.
Cities gave birth to civilization and continue to nourish it.
Commerce and production flourish in cities. Some years ago
Mason Gaffney, describing synergies, pointed to the fat classi-
filed directory as testimony to the fantastic array of skills, prod-
ucts, services, activities and facilities that are possible only
with large aggregations of people living and working together.
The extensive division of labor this demonstrates gives rise con-
 tinuously to more material advances and conveniences than
each succeeding generation could have imagined.

This unleashing of inventiveness and energy is not confined
to economic activity. Cities generate a flowering of science,
literature, and the arts—giving us museums, zoos, symphonies,
jazz bands, folk festivals, public gardens, libraries, universi-
ties...the list goes on and on.

An ancient but unfinished business of cities is the melding
of diverse philosophies and cultures. To the extent communi-
ties pursue this enterprise, they create cosmopolitans—citizens
who feel connected to and concerned for the whole human fam-
ily. This is no small contribution that cities make.

To cite specifics, as I think of cities I have lived in—
Wheeling and Fairmont, West Virginia, and Columbus and
Dayton, Ohio—all have proud histories, community spirit, and a
wide range of opportunities for individual growth and expres-
sion. And in metropolitan Washington, despite our capital's
spotty reputation, it is a beautiful and eminently livable com-
munity. Its Georgetown homes and shops are jewels of 18th
and early 19th century architecture. Even in some of Washing-
ton's blighted neighborhoods, it is easy to see that with
minimal cleaning up and renovations, they have potential
for considerable charm.

America's cities, as we know, are ailing with declining popu-
lations, shortages of decent housing that low and moderate-
income families can afford, and chaotic land use patterns.
The Council of Georgist Organizations, to its great credit, is
addressing one of the least publicized but most insidious
causes of these problems. I speak of a revenue system that
over-taxes people who improve their homes or business es-

tablishments, and that under-taxes those who waste valuable
urban sites or create eyesores that corrode neighborhoods.

Considering these destructive upside down incentives, the
wonder isn't that there are "big knots" in the urban mecha-
nism, but rather that cities survive at all.

How do they manage to do so?

My hunch is that the glue that holds communities together is
the basic decency of the mass of citizens. Their honesty
and mutual trust prevents commerce from collapsing. Their
care for children and old folks keeps education and health
care issues on the front burner. Their humanity rushes to the
fore when victims of natural or human disasters require aid
and comfort.

We fall into a trap of labeling as "bad people" those who
do not share our perceptions of socio-economic inequities.
They, for the most part, share our own general sense of val-
ues. But apparently they have not yet seen the issues in the
same light.

Our idea is that more rational land use and healthier cities
will result from shifting taxes off wages, production and
property improvements, and from capturing more of the com-
munity-created land values to meet revenue needs. This
seems validated from evaluation of actual applications to
date. Perhaps a barrier to acceptance of this remedy is the
competition from different explanations of the causes of
sprawl and urban decay. Let me comment on a few widely
held theories that strike me as inadequate.

A favorite villain is the automobile. Granted, cars facili-
tate much longer commutes. But do cars or real estate inter-
ests create the pressures for extending roads, utilities, schools
and other new infrastructure far into the hinterland? And was
it cars or public officials that provided the billions of dollars
worth of federal, state and local subsidies for facilities that
literally pave the way to urban dispersal?

A number of "experts" actually endorse sprawl, calling it
fulfillment of the American Dream. To me, each

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family seeking its own mini-ranch is the American nightmare. These "experts", who call cities obsolete, disregard the environmental, fiscal and traffic congestion consequences of sprawl. And they ignore the erosion of community which, to emphasize what I said before, is a precious and vital social organism.

Some environmental friends are quick to blame developers—which is understandable because their bulldozers are seen chewing up cornfields and wood lots. Yet to a degree I see developers as refugees, pushed out by economic forces from sites in the heart of the market where they could be more productive and where their projects would be more socially constructive. I also know of start-up builders who saw much of their initial profits siphoned off by land speculators. To insulate and defend themselves, they sort of became speculators themselves. That is, they bought up and "banked" land far in advance of their current needs.

My favorite false explanations for this set of problems if that central city land values are excessive. This calls to mind the old joke that "nobody goes to Ye Olde Restaurant any more—because it's too crowded." Clearly people consider these high-priced city locations highly desirable and potentially productive. Ironically, people who say urban land values are too high also insist, often in the same breath, that cities have lost their tax base. Our challenge is to show them that high land values, far from being the problem, can be the solution—IF they are properly tapped.

Finally, use what I call the Douglas Formula to heal our cities. When I was privileged to work with the late Illinois Senator, Paul H. Douglas, known as the "winner of lost causes," I asked him his secret. It was simple and straightforward: Search for the right cause. Do your homework. Don't give up. Keep on course as long as it may take.

Walter Rybeck, Director of the Center for Public Dialogue, presented the above speech Sept. 22, 2000, in Des Moines, IA at the Council of Georgist Organizations conference. He may be written to at 10615 Brunswick Ave., Kensington, MD 20895, or emailed at walybeck@aol.com

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Walter Rybeck started his journalism career in his native Wheeling, WV. He is a former Washington Bureau Chief for Cox Newspapers. He was the Asst. Director of the National Commission on Urban Problems, and was Asst. to Congressman Henry Reuss (D-WI) on the House Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee. Rybeck also served as Policy Asst. to U.S. Rep. Wm. Coyne (D-Pittsburgh).