

WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR CITIES?

SUMMARY PREPARED BY MAYOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY FOR "AMERICA'S TOWN MEETING OF AIR"
Springfield, Ohio, May 25, 1948

I am one of the people who believe that we should start building a better world in our own home town. The highways of our democracy are the sum total of the Main Streets of our communities. Yes, - the world is in trouble, but so are our cities. People make a city, people suffer when city services break down. The American people, their homes, their schools, their streets, their health services - these are the substance out of which cities are made.

Eighty-four million Americans live in towns and cities. The traffic jam is our daily headache. Smoke and soot are our daily diet. Crime and juvenile delinquency are our daily heartbreaks. We are reared to the serenade of clanging streetcars and screeching of brakes. For landmarks, we have blighted areas and rows of tenement houses. Every year the city fathers huddle together to meet that ever-present problem - how to get enough money to keep the city running.

What's wrong with our cities? First, cities do not have the tools of government to solve their own problems. What power it has, it receives as a gift from the state government. Home rule authority is often limited by legislative restraints.

Fifty-nine percent of all Americans live in our cities and towns, but this 59 percent elects only 25 percent of our state legislators.

Frequently, state governments have used their power to handcuff the cities with restrictive legislation, or else they have turned a deaf ear to the problems of the city. Ninety percent of our taxes, federal, state and local - are paid by 59 percent of the people who live in the towns and cities. Yet, all of our cities are hard-put today to pay current expenses. They lack money for improvements, and almost all of them are heavily in debt with little prospect of getting out. Federal and state governments have taken over the major fields of

taxation and have left the crumbs of public revenue to the cities.

The lifeblood of any government is the flow of revenue needed for carrying out its program. No area of government gives more service and is more important to the citizen than local government. To those who are opposed to federal aid to our municipalities, I say to them - Give the cities the taxing power to pay their own expenses. Either the city must be given the power to govern itself and the power to raise its own revenue, or the city must expect generous assistance from the state and federal governments.

What is wrong with our American cities? - Insufficient revenue, yes - but also city governments need overhauling. The difficult problems facing a modern city cannot be met with machinery of government written and planned for a century long past. Consolidation of city and county government - unification of city and suburb services - these are needed.

All too often, the industrial, the commercial and the residential areas of our cities grew without plan. Every city needs to take a new look at its basic structure of community development. Every city needs to plan its course of development for the future and to retrace its steps by correcting through slum clearance, the mistakes of the past.

Slums, rotten broken down areas, are the ulcers which may develop into the cancer that will consume the physical and economic structure of the industrial city. Slum areas are extravagances which eat up our revenue and destroy our strength. Slum areas cost the taxpayer 10 to 15 times as much for fire, police, and health services as a decent residential or commercial area. Every American city in cooperation with the state and federal government must set itself to the task of ripping out its slums and rebuilding them into wholesome and productive communities.

Some people say this is too expensive. I say it is sound economy.

Unless it is done, the American city will rot from within. It is in the removal of our slums, the tearing down of our miserable tenements and the rebuilding into parks, playgrounds and homes where there must be cooperation between the federal, state and city government.

A majority of our people live in cities and they have the right to expect from their government assistance and cooperation in the saving of their property and the protection of their lives.

Make no mistake about it. Either we lick the slums or the slums will destroy the city.

An aroused public opinion, informed citizens - people interested in their homes, their jobs, their families - must take it upon themselves to redesign the cities of America. Searching as we are for a good future for our cities, we are going deep into the basic problem of our time - Can representative government survive in our civilization? The vanguard of our democracy has always been and must continue to be the local community. By taking care of our own blocks in our own cities we may be able to prevent block busters from taking care of them later on. Let us give to our local democracy the power to win!

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