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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Struggling Towns Must Evolve or Die

By MITCHELL MOSS

When Buffalo hosted the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, it was the eighth-largest city in the United States and rightly called itself a “city of the future.” But for the past half-century, it and other upstate industrial cities have been losing jobs and people. Today, nearly two-thirds of the state’s population has concentrated in just 12 downstate counties.

The entire state cannot survive if we continue to act as if all 62 counties can flourish. Yet that’s how our political and fiscal systems work — as upstate shrinks, it commands a higher and higher per capita chunk of the state budget. New York City taxpayers send billions of dollars upstate for unnecessary shopping malls, transportation projects and prisons, giving new meaning to the phrase “welfare state.” Meanwhile, vital upgrades to transportation and public services essential to accommodate the expanding New York City area are deferred.

Instead, Albany needs to make a strategic decision to invest in a handful of places upstate that are willing to do the serious work of revitalizing their own economies and that have the right mix of educational institutions, skilled labor and entrepreneurial know-how to compete in the 21st century.

For the rest, we must accept the inevitable. Across the Midwest and Great Plains, state governments have allowed towns with a proud past but no discernible future to fade away. New York must do the same.

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