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U.S. cities need a helping hand

Like suburbanites who commute to high-income jobs in downtown offices, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole treat cities as places to raise money, not as centers of commerce and culture with physical and human needs.

The same is true across the political spectrum. Both parties used cities to stage their conventions but failed to acknowledge the economic and social importance of cities in their party platforms. Neither party has a set of policies to deal with the impact of immigrants, to help schools, to pump private dollars into housing or to use the renewal of the infrastructure as a way to create jobs.

The Democrats' only strategy for cities is to create more empowerment zones. That's a supply-side idea stolen from Jack Kemp's playbook, but it is too unproven to warrant expansion into a national spending program. And congressional Democrats still support the entrenched interest groups that impede innovation at the community level.

As for the Republicans, it took Kemp, a former housing secretary, to remind them that cities are still part of the United States. In fact, the GOP platform virtually ignores cities while paying homage to the nation's agricultural heritage and calling for tax policies to preserve the family farm.

The GOP would shift most domestic programs to the states, putting cities at the mercy of suburban and rural-dominated legislatures that consistently shortchange urban schools and mass transit systems.

And both parties have joined in passing anti-urban welfare reform legislation. The targets of this law - poor people and legal immigrants - are disproportionately located in the nation's major cities. Moreover, welfare reform, when combined with the bi-partisan agreement to balance the budget without reducing entitlements, will force Washington to intensify its two-decade-old policy of urban disinvestment.

Ironically the federal government's abandonment of cities is occurring at the precise moment when central city office markets are rebounding, when business improvement districts are cleaning up streets and sidewalks and when church and community-based corporations have mastered the art of developing low-cost housing.

There is even a new cadre of mayors trying to do what was once considered impossible: Govern big cities. Giuliani in New York, Riordan in Los Angeles. Daley in Chicago, Rendell in Philadelphia and White in Cleveland are taking on the challenge of reducing high taxes, holding down municipal labor costs, stimulating tourism and improving public safety all without the help of their governors and legislatures.

So what can Washington do to help mayors and their cities? There are no quick fixes. But there are

priorities that warrant funds and attention: National immigration policy has caused overcrowding in big city schools - especially in New York and Los Angeles. The cost of educating the children of immigrants should be partially covered by the federal government and not just local taxpayers.

Washington should build on its successful use of tax incentives to attract private dollars to finance low-income housing and stimulate minority employment in the contracting and construction trades. Federal policy makers also should recognize the importance of religious-based organizations in housing and economic development

The federal government can help create jobs while improving urban infrastructures by fostering public and private investment in mass transit, intelligent highways and waterfront development. The federal government cannot cure the problems of cities, but voters must not let the presidential candidates run away from the cities, either.

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