



Seven Big Lessons For Local Governments

By Otis White

In early 2002, *Governing* asked if it could publish on its web site some columns I had been sending to friends, associates, clients and anyone else who requested them. Over the years, *Urban Notebook* grew in volume and, I hope, depth. It certainly benefited from being shared so widely among the *Governing* family, many of whom become faithful correspondents and critics.

I'm leaving *Urban Notebook* to work on a project to understand how communities make important decisions – and how they could make better ones. Before leaving, though, I need to make a confession: *Urban Notebook* was actually an exercise in self-education. That's right. It wasn't aimed at telling you how smart cities move forward and dumb ones fall flat. It was really about teaching me the difference. You, dear reader, were along for the ride.

So, in leaving this space, it's fair to ask what I've learned over the years. In the past week, I've read every column I've written since 2002 (not recommended for those with weak stomachs) and drawn 16 Big Lessons from them, seven of which apply directly to local governments. As a gift for my patient readers, then, I'd like to share my list of Seven Big Lessons for Local Governments – with a link to columns that illustrated them.

Will you be surprised by these lessons? Not if you've been reading this column regularly. I've been preaching all along about the need for public order, the wisdom of tying transportation to land use, the virtues of the property tax, the necessity for thrift and innovation in local government and so on. But please bear with me, as these lessons remain important to communities. And even if you disagree, I hope you'll allow me one last jog around the bases.



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Editorial note: As you'll see when you click through to the columns, the earlier Urban Notebook contributions were shorter – so short that they were published as single paragraphs. By March 2005, the columns had grown long enough that I began dividing them into conventional paragraphs. So please don't adjust your computer; the differences in form are intentional.

Innovate, save money, throw the bums out and use good sense. I'd like to propose this as a mission statement for every local government in America – heck, for every company and non-profit, too. It says that what your mother taught you was right: You should strive to be better and be thrifty (especially with others' money), tolerate no slackers or thieves and, before acting, ask how others might view what you're doing. Commonsense stuff, but it's surprising how often local governments fall short of mothers' wisdom.

The first of these, “innovate,” comes in two forms: continuous improvement and breakthrough innovations. Both are needed – and both are stoutly resisted by governments. Why? Because change is particularly difficult for organizations that live by rules and procedures, which of course describes bureaucracies. It takes an extraordinary leader to create a culture that rewards continuous improvement and breakthrough innovation in government. Fortunately, there is such a person out there, Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York.

I've written a lot about Bloomberg since he came to office in 2002, almost all of it admiring. In my estimation, he's done three big things in his years in office: He has focused attention on measuring and setting goals for city services (which drives innovation), created an ingenious system of measuring results (using the city's 311 phone system) and found a creative way of dealing with New York's tough municipal labor unions, by allowing them to create their own raises. The last one takes some explaining, so [click here](#) to learn more about this remarkable mayor's approach to labor negotiations.

The second, “save money,” should be self-evident. Governments have important work to do and must not waste a minute of time or a dime of taxpayer money doing it. If I were mayor, the principal aim of my continuous innovation programs would be to save money so we could shift resources to emerging needs or – hallelujah! – return the savings to taxpayers. Over the years, I've written a lot about wasteful governments, but here's a twist: an example of how government outperformed business. In 1999, Atlanta outsourced its entire water department to a private company. Four years later, it reclaimed it. Reason: Turns out, the company couldn't manage the water system as well as the city had. [This column](#) explains why.

“Throw the bums out” has two meanings. It means governments ought to identify and dismiss employees who don't work hard. As [this column](#) shows, few do. It also means that they must root out the corrupt. Why are local governments so prone to corruption? [This column](#) offers an explanation.

Finally, “use good sense.” Why are governments and other large organizations so prone to monumental errors of judgment? Several reasons: Insularity (managers who talk only to those who agree with them), lack of empathy (the inability to see things as others do) and a flaw that might be called the illogical extension. That is, governments start out by doing things that are logical enough – establishing building codes, say, or requesting citizen comment – but over time

Innovation comes in two forms: continuous improvement and breakthrough innovations.

extend these efforts to the point of absurdity. One of my favorite examples is the [bureaucratic house of horrors](#) Palo Alto, Calif., created for citizens foolish enough to want to build something there.

Protect the order of public spaces. There are times in our past when you look back and wonder, “What *were* we thinking?” The early 1960s to the 1990s – when we lost control of our streets, parks and urban plazas – was one of those head-shaking eras. In the 1990s, some courageous mayors and police chiefs began reclaiming our urban spaces. Most notable was Rudolph Giuliani, who started by busting the squeegee men and ended up making New York safe again for decent people. For an appreciation of Giuliani the mayor (and not the 9/11 hero), [click here](#).

Dealing humanely with the homeless is far less expensive than surrendering our public spaces to them.

We still face challenges in preserving public order. One is keeping the crime rate down (it’s creeping up in most cities); another is dealing effectively with the homeless – who, while not criminals, disrupt public spaces. As [this column](#) says, cities have tried coddling the homeless and criminalizing them, only to watch the problem grow worse. But there are approaches that work, and they begin by getting homeless people out of our parks and off our sidewalks and into housing. This new approach is humane, effective and, in the long run, far less expensive than surrendering our urban spaces.

Get dense: It’s how you make residents and housing affordable. There’s an iron law of public finance: People – or, at least, residents – don’t pay for themselves. When you add up the costs of providing services – police, fire, parks, libraries, streets, senior centers, etc. – and throw in the cost of educating children, what we pay in taxes to cities and school districts rarely approaches what we cost them. Localities make up the difference, of course, by taxing businesses. To learn more about the high cost of human habitation, [click here](#).

There are things that can lower the cost of serving residents. It helps, for instance, if we live closer together. Good news: It’s not impossible to increase density in cities. To learn about a metro area that has mastered the art of proximity, [click here](#). But there’s another reason to reward density: It’s one way we’re going to bring down the cost of housing. And it’s critical that we do so if we want to keep working-class families – those who work in restaurants, clean our buildings, protect us as police officers and fire fighters and teach our children in schools – in our cities. So what’s my five-point plan for lowering housing costs in cities? Sorry, I don’t have one. (OK, I’m working on it.) But I do know that housing costs more than it should and that politics is a major reason. (I also know increasing density is part of the solution.) As [this column](#) explains, we made the price of housing go up and, presumably, we could make it come down.

Save the property tax. Al Gore has global warming; I have the property tax. Turns out, Gore was right about climate change, and I think time will prove me right about the value of taxing property – including owner-occupied housing.

As you know, though, we are marching in the wrong direction. From coast to coast, state governments are restricting localities’ ability to tax homesteads, with disastrous consequences.

The three greatest: These simple-minded “tax limitation” laws punish newcomers or those improving their property, as [this column](#) explains. They encourage governments to restrict owner-occupied housing, as [this column](#) explains, fanning our affordable-housing crisis. And they reward governments that pursue land uses that make up the shortfall. One of my favorite illustrations of what some call “cash-box zoning” is from Phoenix, where a suburban mayor said that the way cities in his region battled over retailers reminded him of “two fat kids fighting over a single piece of chocolate cake.” To learn what the fat kids of Phoenix were fighting over, [click here](#).

From coast to coast, states are restricting localities’ ability to tax homesteads. This is a disaster in the making.

Tie transportation to land use. This is one of those “what *were* we thinking?” situations. From the end of World War II until today, we’ve put traffic engineers in charge of our cities. They told us the secret to healthy communities was to increase traffic flow. We believed them and let them carve up our downtowns, waterfronts and neighborhoods with multi-lane highways. In other words, we’ve put land use at the service of transportation.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Transportation can be put at the service of land use. As an example, we can decide that a city’s waterfront should be a major recreational asset, figure out the best ways of bringing people to it and create the transportation we need to do the job. Sounds simple and it is. But we were snowed for so long by state highway departments, it never occurred to us that land use could be the goal and transportation the means – and not the other way around. Even today, the realization doesn’t come easily. It took an earthquake – literally, an earthquake – for San Francisco’s leaders to learn this new way of thinking. To see what they’ve learned, [click here](#).

Something to keep in mind in the years ahead: We’re approaching a huge decision about transportation. Simply put, we’ve exhausted the highway-construction solution. We don’t have enough money to build all the highways that state DOTs say we need, citizens won’t allow these roads to be built anyway, and the highways wouldn’t do the job if they were built. Like it or not, we have to find other ways of increasing mobility, particularly at rush hours.

Thankfully, there is a solution: rail transit, which is a high-capacity mode of transportation. But trains are not a magic bullet. They require different living, working and shopping patterns to succeed – and that requires local governments’ cooperation and profits for developers, employers and retailers. To understand why it’s critical that local governments work with transit authorities (and why so few do), [click here](#). To learn what we’ll need from the private sector, [click here](#).

As this decision draws near for your city, you’ll hear a lot of nonsense about transit – how expensive it is and how little it is used. (And if governments don’t work together and private businesses don’t join them, transit will be a flop.) So here’s [a good column](#) to send to the naysayers. It’s about the true cost of driving vs. the true cost of transit.

Don’t act helpless: Why local leadership is important. As my children will attest, I’m not the world’s smartest guy, but I do have an appreciation for human ingenuity. I can’t solve my city’s problems, but I believe if we could get the right people in the room, armed with the right information and aided by the right process, they could. In fact, I’ve seen it. Take [this example](#) from Atlanta, which is about how the chamber of commerce has pioneered ways of solving tough regional problems.

Depending on your personality and people skills, the most infuriating – or rewarding – part of civic work is the need for collaboration. We call the results “public-private partnerships,” but as [this column](#) explains, that’s actually an understatement, since most successful urban improvements are a web of collaborations, with many publics and many privates involved.

Alas, leaders are not as easily identified in cities as they once were. Time was, we could depend on a handful of businessmen (and, yes, they were nearly always men) to chair the United Way, run the school bond drive, back the right candidates for public office and generally help guide our cities. Those days are gone. Fortunately, there are other, less obvious people taking their place. [This column](#) identifies one new source of leadership, urban philanthropists, and [this one](#) identifies another, tireless civic workers.

The old sources of civic leadership are drying up, but there are new ones taking their place.

Point is, we have all the leadership we need in our cities. What we lack from time to time are the right mechanisms for mobilizing these talents. If I were mayor, chamber of commerce president or community foundation director, I’d spend a lot of time thinking about who I could get together to think about our city’s problems, what information I could provide them and what decision-making processes we could use.

Have fun: Cities are funny, funny places. Samuel Johnson, the famous know-it-all of 18th century England, marveled that anyone could find London tiresome. “When a man is tired of London,” he exclaimed, “he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.” With apologies to Dr. Johnson, I’ve found the same to be true of other big cities. Los Angeles, Cleveland, New York, Dallas, Chicago, Seattle, Atlanta and Miami are, in their own ways, fascinating, quirky, delightful – and, yes, funny, funny places.

Over the years, I’ve pointed out how funny (and sometimes just plain weird) these cities are. I told you about the misbehaving politicians. Examples: [the “naked guy”](#) who was elected mayor of a New York suburb, the mayor of a Los Angeles suburb who [slugged an opponent](#) on her last day in office (yes, the mayor was a woman and she apparently knew how to use her fists), the [behavior problems](#) in the Pittsburgh school system (hey, it’s just a school board meeting).

But politicians weren’t all that was funny about cities. I told you about the latest problem to plague New York: [Tourists who don’t know how to walk](#). Also from New York, there’s the [pizza slice-subway fare connection](#). Miamians are, I learned, sometimes awakened by [exploding toilets](#). Another bedtime tale: In San Francisco, the regional subway system is so peaceful, [people fall asleep on it](#) and wake up far, far from home. And the big problem in St. Petersburg, Fla.? The troubling [shortage of beach bums](#).

My favorite? It’s the [diary of a Los Angeles city council member](#) published online a few years ago. If Eric Garcetti’s rambling thoughts about his multiethnic district – and his own zoom-zoom place in it – don’t leave you amused, then, as Dr. Johnson might say, you’ve grown tired of life itself.

So, enjoy the city you live in. Revel in its quirks and customs. Laugh at its oddities but resist the temptation to apologize for them. Above all, remember that what makes your city different is what makes it great. And don’t forget to vote for the naked guy.

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