

# The region must lift the city

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Eaton Corp. moves out of Cleveland. National City Bank dies. The Flats East Bank project stalls. And The Plain Dealer's response: "These are devastating hits, but Cleveland has survived worse. And it can survive these seismic setbacks" because "this city has much to recommend it: world-class universities, museums and medical facilities, Lake Erie and land ripe for development."

Then comes Mayor Frank Jackson's statement, made after the National City announcement: "Cleveland will still be here. We will survive."

I could scream: Cleveland is DYING! It was been dying for 50 years!

The city is dying in spite of all the efforts over decades to give it new life. Yes, there have been gains but not enough to offset the losses. Its world-class universities, museums and medical facilities, Lake Erie and land ripe for development are not saving it and won't save it without leadership that rises above "business as usual."

In another 50 years, Cleveland may not be here; it could be essentially gone. That is not an absurd statement in light of what has happened over the past 50 years, such as the city's population fall from 900,000 to 400,000 and its shrinkage as a center for corporate headquarters. Law offices could be next.

The great destabilizer, of course, was the technological and economic transformation that liberated companies from their pre-World War II fixed locations. Today, few employers must be in Cleveland or Northeast Ohio. Which ones do? Utilities, universities, museums, medical facilities, the port, government offices; that's about it. Virtually every other employer in the region could operate somewhere else. Across the nation (and around the world) employers have unprecedented mobility and unprecedented options for business relationships.

If the leadership of Northeast Ohio – from Cleveland to the region's most distant township – cannot accept the implications of that reality, then we are, indeed, on the road to an economic nightmare.

In this new world, the attractiveness of a place matters greatly, attractiveness in the eyes of mobile elements that spark economic growth: investment, entrepreneurs, skilled workers. The heart of attractiveness for many young, educated, skilled workers is The City. They want a lively urban milieu, which is rarely found in a suburb. And employers want to be where the employees they need want to be.

This is where we're stuck: Cleveland is not a competitive want-to-be place (as Chicago, for example, is). Downtown is heading in the right direction, as are a few neighborhoods, but overall the magnetic pull is weak.

Because Cleveland lacks sparkle, the region cannot grow. But Cleveland cannot gain sparkle without the region's support.

For 50 years, Cleveland has been trying to save itself (as our system of government, based on Home Rule, says it "must" do). It cannot succeed; its burden is too great and its tax base and governmental performance are inadequate.

Cleveland, on its own, cannot afford to produce a dynamo downtown, a "new" lakefront, a creative re-use of the Flats that features its treasure of old buildings and bridges. It cannot afford to demolish who knows how many thousands of obsolete buildings across the city and prepare the land under those buildings for productive re-use. Cleveland cannot afford those things, but they region can – gradually over the years ahead.

Clearly, attitudes cultivated by our systems of local government stand in the way. Suburban independence (again, Home Rule) is used to avoid engagement with Cleveland's condition and future: "I don't live there; their problems have nothing to do with me; I avoid the place whenever possible."

Suburbanites left the city with growing numbers of poor, distressed, maladjusted and dangerous people and then castigated it for not being like the bucolic suburbs. They left and watched abandoned buildings multiply like crab grass and wondered why the city allowed such a mess. State government enabled and celebrated suburban growth (based on businesses and residents moving from Cleveland) and then turned its back on the consequences. The deck was stacked ludicrously high against the city.

At the same time, City Hall became its own worst enemy. Over decades, an unconstructive, even deadening, culture took hold within City Hall's offices and chambers. Staff have scrambled in response to 22 mayors. There is no sense of urgency that one would expect from those serving a town that is possibly half-way to extinction. There is no dynamic openness to businesspeople and investors whose efforts and money are critical for survival. Instead, the private sector is treated with suspicion (if not hostility), lackadaisical staff and time-consuming maddening procedures. There are exceptions, but that is the rule.

With City Hall in such deplorable condition, the rest of the region is not likely to be interested in exploring partnerships with it. City Hall must first, in crisis mode, face the fundamental changes needed – including redefining roles and responsibilities of the mayor and council so that matters can be processed and accomplished efficiently. (Reducing the size of council accomplishes nothing.)

Then leaders across the multi-county regions must come together (in spite of Home Rule) and hammer out the way forward. What will it take, using the region's scarce resources, to accelerate the renewal of Cleveland – and, for that matter, the renewal of all the region's increasingly "old" and "obsolete" jurisdictions from Wickliffe to Akron to Parma to Lorain? Those places are in the same boat, unable to save themselves through their solitary efforts. The region is the sea that can lift them and itself. If the region refuses, we're finished.