

Why Conservatives Need Cities And Cities Need Conservatives

*America is a shining city upon a hill whose beacon light
guides freedom-loving people everywhere.*

Ronald Reagan

. . . from Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount

By: Rick Baker

The voters of San Diego elected Mayor Kevin Faulconer last February, making him the one Republican mayor among the nation's largest dozen cities.

One.

Before the San Diego election, conservative influence in City Hall had been on a downward slide. By late 2013, there were no Republican mayors governing the largest twelve cities in America, down from six in 2000.

As of February 2014, there were only nine Republican mayors among America's "big cities" – the largest one hundred of the 19,000 plus cities in our country.

The voting trends in legislative and presidential races are also revealing. Media and political pundits tend to focus on Red and Blue States because that is how Presidential electoral votes and U.S. Senate seats are determined. But a casual review of the county by county vote shows the real trend: *We have become a country of Blue Cities and Red Everyone Else.*

In 2012, twenty seven of the nation's largest thirty cities voted Democratic. Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio – the largest four cities in the largest Red State – all voted blue that year. If you break down the nation's electoral map on a county by county basis it becomes a sea of red interrupted by intensely populated blue metropolitan areas.

The policy and political implications of this seismic shift are clear and potentially determinative. For while the long term trend is not certain, cities may now be poised to outpace America's suburbs and rural areas in population growth.

As a conservative who served as mayor of St. Petersburg, Florida, one of those big cities, for two terms ending in 2010, I understand the demographic and political realities that tend to drive city voters away from candidates espousing conservative philosophies. But demographics *do not* dictate destiny.

In fact, political party does not necessarily dictate philosophy. While most conservatives tend to be Republicans, there are Democratic politicians, including mayors, who have successfully

implemented conservative policies.

For the best interests of our urban populations, there are compelling reasons why conservatives – whether they be Republicans, Democrats or Independents - can and should become a stronger voice in our nation's cities. By embracing this possibility, conservatives can not only substantively affect the fortunes of America's cities, but also alter the nation's political landscape.

- ***Cities are important to America's future.***

The history of America is reflected in the cumulative experiences of its cities. In the 1940s, in Boston, Kansas City, Portland, and Jacksonville young men packed up their clothes, kissed their parents good-bye, and left from train stops across America to save the world. The Great Depression, the suburbanization of our country after World War II, the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s, and the anxiety after September 11, were all personally felt in America's cities.

America is Broadway, South Beach, the French Quarter, and the Golden Gate Bridge. It is the St. Louis Gateway Arch and Chicago's State Street, the Mall in Washington D.C., Beale Street in Memphis, and the Pike Place Market in Seattle.

When you want to know how the country is doing, you don't go to Washington, D.C. You go to the cities and ask the bank tellers, teachers, small business owners, retirees, and moms and dads sitting on soccer field sidelines.

Cities, led by mayors, are responsible for keeping people safe, with police officers to fight crime, fire fighters to keep homes and businesses from burning down, and emergency medical rescue teams to save lives when someone has a heart attack or an auto accident.

Cities build the local roads and handle traffic control. They pick up trash, fix the sidewalks, provide drinking water, and treat sewer water.

Cities build and maintain playgrounds, athletic fields, swimming pools, skateboard parks, and gymnasiums for children. They provide dog parks, people parks, and bike paths. Cities trim trees in alleys and roads and manage storm water runoff. They build performing arts theaters, professional sports facilities, and downtown activity centers. Cities are home to our factories, colleges, hospitals, and museums. City governments provide most of the government services that the average citizen sees and uses on a regular basis.

Rural and suburban areas are vitally important to our nation. They represent the heart and bedrock of our values and our spirit.

Yet if our nation is to succeed and become stronger, our cities must also grow and prosper. And if America is to continue to embody Ronald Reagan's vision of the shining city on a hill, then *our great nation must have great cities!*

- ***Liberal policies have failed our big cities.***

While Detroit, a bankrupt city not known for conservative leadership, is the poster child for failed city policy, sadly it is not alone.

A city, any city, is destined to deteriorate when its mayor fills the city management positions with political operatives, substantially increases the pay and pension benefits for public unions without a real plan to fund them, increases taxes and regulation on businesses and property owners, and fights against education reforms that students desperately need to compete in today's global marketplace.

The result of these failed policies is a downward cycle. Businesses and individuals flee the city in order to avoid the poor services provided by bad management and the high tax and regulatory burden. The result of the exodus is a smaller tax base and fewer jobs.

The urban free fall is intensified when public schools fail. Parents, who are denied school choice by union-dominated school boards, *respond by choosing in a different way – with their feet and mailing address.*

They move out of the cities to suburban districts with better schools; and the numbers from this exodus can take on staggering proportion. In a recent interview, St. Louis Mayor Frances Slay put it bluntly: “A lot of families are leaving the city for better education opportunities, especially public education opportunities.”

Indeed. From 1950 to 2010 St. Louis' population dropped from 857,000 to 319,000, a staggering exodus of over one half million people – 62% of the population left! During that same period Baltimore lost 330,000 people (35% decline), Cleveland lost 518,000 people (57% decline) and Detroit lost 1,136,000 people (61% decline).

A review of the 2000 to 2010 census data reveals that the population exodus for these cities, and many others, is continuing. The urban decay that results from tens of thousands of empty homes and apartments makes it very hard to reverse the downward slide.

Conservative leaders have two options. They can become part of the solution in our big cities or they can opt out under the premise that they have little political support in our urban centers and can better spend their time developing their natural constituencies in the suburbs and rural areas.

There is reason to believe that conservatives have chosen the latter option.

During the 2012 Convention, the Democratic Party's leadership showcased a series of big city mayors as their new wave of national leaders. Mayor Julian Castro of San Antonio was chosen to give the keynote address. His speech started with his experience as mayor working to provide access to pre-K and then quickly evolved to a defense of more “investment” (spending), more “fair share” (increased taxes on those who succeed), and the evils of Mitt Romney.

Other addresses and appearances came from Convention Chair Democratic Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles, along with Democratic mayors from Minneapolis, Newark, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and host city Charlotte. It was clearly an effort to consolidate the party's gains in the big cities and groom a new generation of national leaders.

Conversely, at the Republican National Convention in Tampa/St. Petersburg, the first mayor speaking was Democratic Mayor Bob Buckhorn of Tampa, a solid supporter of President Obama, who provided an opening welcome. Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett was given an afternoon, non-prime time speaking slot. Mia Love, the mayor of Saratoga Springs, Utah (population 21,000), who was running for Congress, was the only Republican mayor invited for a prime time speech. Even Republican Mayor Bill Foster across the bay in St. Petersburg was snubbed.

Really?

It made it appear as if the issues of our nation's big cities were not even on the GOP radar. One commentator summarized his view of the Republican approach: "Republicans tend to see big cities as corrupt and incompetent . . . Unfortunately improving quality of life in a city is not likely to be a fast path to promotion to the state or national level for Republicans."

To the extent this perception reflects reality, it is short sighted. Worse, it can be used by opponents to suggest that conservatives are not focused on the needs of constituencies beyond their normal base.

All of us – Democrats, Independents and Republicans – have a vested interest in making sure that America's cities are strong. The best policies for our cities will be revealed in the clash of ideas debated in the public square. Absent that debate, our cities will suffer from mismanagement and missed opportunities.

Cities could benefit greatly from the focused application of conservative principles on the challenges and issues confronting them.

Also, while many of our nation's big cities have been declining, there are signs that the country is beginning a move back to the urban centers – at least to some of the urban centers. Denver, Portland, Charlotte, and San Diego have seen significant growth. There is a chorus of authors and commentators pronouncing the trend back to the cities for young urbanites looking for gathering places, culture, dining, and the vibe of city life. This is manifest in the growing vibrancy of many of our nation's downtowns.

While trends can change, it would be a foolish to ignore these city voters. This is especially true when confronted with the reality of the "Blue Cities" versus "Red Everything Else" political map described above.

- ***The implementation of a conservative plan will make cities better.***

A city is a complex organism with interdependent parts. Developing strategies for reaching a city's goals requires a deep understand of the city's history, a grasp of its present diverse interests, and buy-in from the community. While every city is different and policies will vary, there are also many common themes.

While I was mayor of St. Petersburg, we developed a strategic plan for the city that started with a

mission statement: “To build the best city in America by working every day to improve the quality of life for our residents.”

The five core areas that we pursued are priorities that, I believe, should be the objectives of any successful city: (i) improving public safety; (ii) promoting economic development; (iii) supporting public schools; (iv) building strong neighborhoods; and (v) improving government operations.

The five goals are interconnected. The public schools must be strong for the sake of the students, and this in turn will encourage people to move into the city’s neighborhoods and bring businesses to the city. The community must be safe if neighborhoods and businesses are to thrive. Taxes cannot be too high, and government services like water, sewer and sanitation must be reasonably priced, dependable, and high quality. Cities need jobs so that people can live in the neighborhoods and provide the tax base that supports the public safety and school needs.

Advancing each of these goals must be the constant focus of the city’s leadership. Fortunately, there are examples of *conservative leaders* with proven success in each of these critical urban subject areas.

Improving Public Safety

Public safety is the number one job of a city government. If a city is unsafe then all other efforts collapse. Residents and businesses will leave and the tax base will deteriorate.

In the last two decades, no mayor has been more effective at reducing crime than New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. A former prosecutor, Mayor Giuliani, along with Bill Bratton as Police Commissioner in 1994, developed a series of policies that resulted in a significantly safer city.

Mayor Giuliani’s policies, based on the conservative principles of data-driven responsiveness and accountability, led to record reductions in crime rates and a renewed feeling of personal safety.

Saying that “the out-of-control crime rates . . . were holding the city hostage,” Mayor Giuliani adopted “*community/neighborhood policing*,” implemented the “*broken windows*” theory, applied the “*Compstat*,” data management and response program, and increased the number of *police officers* on the street.

These public safety policies in New York City continued beyond Mayor Giuliani’s terms. In fact, Mayor Giuliani’s Police Commissioner Bill Bratton was recently tapped by the city’s newest mayor – Bill de Blasio - to once again lead the Empire City’s public safety effort.

The long term impact of Giuliani’s reforms is significant, as summed up in 2012 by Manhattan Institute senior fellow Heather MacDonald: “Since the early 1990s, New York City has experienced the deepest and most prolonged crime drop in recorded history. Homicide, robbery, burglary, and auto theft have all fallen by four-fifths; the city’s murder rate is now lower than it was in 1961 . . . The drop in crime in New York is the greatest public policy success story of the last quarter of a century.”

It was a monumental, conservative-led, public safety turnaround.

Supporting Public Schools

Public schools should be a top priority of every mayor, even if the schools are not under the city's direct control, because they are critical to the city's success. If a city's public schools are not good then people will not move into the neighborhoods or build their businesses there.

The mayor must be all in.

In St. Petersburg, we developed a series of programs that supported our public schools and folded into the Florida A-Plus Plan, Governor Jeb Bush's school reform program. At the core level, Governor Bush's education reforms started by demanding that all kids be taught, regardless of a child's learning ability level. Secondly, they required that the system discourage failure and reward success.

To that end, Florida A-Plus mandated measurement of student achievement and accountability. As Governor Bush has said, "If you don't measure, you don't care." Measurement now means that Florida gives each public school a grade (A to F) based on the achievement level of the students and holds the system accountable for the results. The Florida A-Plus improvements have transformed public education in Florida and become the blueprint for education excellence in America.

The school support programs we created in St. Petersburg folded into Governor Bush's A-Plus Plan. Among others we: (i) raised private funds for 1000 four-year "Doorways" college scholarships for low income sixth graders in order to incentivize their progress; (ii) recruited and trained 1200 volunteer mentors for our students; (iii) recruited and supported business partners for every public school in the city to provide volunteers, financial help, and strategic planning advice; (iv) developed "Top Apple," a program that provided privately-funded rewards (dinners, weekends at the beach, cash bonuses, and others) for principals and assistant principals based on the A-Plus grade progress of their schools; and (v) used state housing assistance money to fund interest-free down payment loans for teachers who teach in a public school in the city and want to buy a home in the city.

It was a team effort with the state, county school system, administrators, teachers, parents, businesses, volunteers, and city. The results were team results: (i) 93% of the low income Doorways scholars graduated from high school; (ii) our number of "A" and "B" schools increased by 260 percent; (iii) our number of "A" elementary schools (out of a total of twenty-seven) went from zero to sixteen; and (iv) our high school graduation rates went from 53% to 81%. Working together, with the foundation of a strong state measurement and accountability system, a community can have a great and positive impact on school progress.

We lived it.

Promoting Economic Development

When I ran for mayor for my first term, I publicly confessed that I was unabashedly pro-business. As I further explained, I wanted our residents to have good jobs. I could never understand how anyone could be pro-jobs and anti-business . . . when businesses create the jobs!

To be attractive to businesses, a city must have a great quality of life, reasonable regulations and taxes, and a government that sends the message to employers that they are wanted, appreciated, and vital to our city's success!

In that regard, the mayor must be the number one business recruiter in the city and must see himself or herself as a partner to business – not an adversary.

As an example, the building department must protect the city's public safety and other interests without being seen as hostile or obstructing to development! During my terms as mayor, we held regular 7 a.m. meetings with me, the development department head, the permitting department head, and any contractor, developer, or citizen who had ideas or complaints.

This resulted in change, including new development code rules and permitting procedures. We worked to develop an attitude in City Hall where residents and contractors could get to "yes" faster while still ensuring that the city's fundamental interests were protected. As one architect told me: "You *helped us* follow the rules."

Consider the legacy of three-term Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett. He invested in infrastructure with the purpose of improving the quality of life, enhancing education, and creating a vibrant economy. He began a nationwide campaign of travelling and speaking on the benefits of moving businesses to Oklahoma City, understanding the need for partnerships with the private sector. Mayor Cornett also embraced the effort to develop a strong and vibrant downtown as the gathering place and heart of the city.

A self-described conservative, Mayor Cornett explains the reasons for the remarkable job improvement and economic success his city experienced during his tenure: "[I]f you can create a city where people want to live and if you can create a strong economy then you can develop a private sector that can afford a lot of the social spending that a large community needs. If you can be a partner in building a strong private sector, you're going to be able to take care of a lot of the social needs that most people equate with tax-and-spend government . . . Our experience is that it's investing and infrastructure that will allow the private sector to create jobs."

Building Strong Neighborhoods

John Delaney, former mayor of Jacksonville, understood that improving quality of life for people who live in the city's neighborhoods is critical to advancing a city. A very popular mayor, Delaney was not afraid to invest his political capital to make that happen.

Mayor Delaney campaigned for the *Better Jacksonville Plan*, a voter-approved one-half cent sales tax increase, that funded \$1.5 billion in road and infrastructure improvements and that – literally - moved the city forward. He understood that an important life quality component is the ability to travel to and from your neighborhood throughout the city without being stuck in gridlock.

More than a decade later, the *Jacksonville Business Journal* confirmed that Delaney's Plan made a big difference for the city and wistfully asked "Is there another John Delaney out there, somewhere?"

In St. Petersburg, our starting point for improving the city's neighborhoods was to develop and implement a strategic plan for improving each individual neighborhood.

Our second focus was to enhance the amenities that improve the quality of life for people who live in the city. To advance this effort, we: (i) set out to develop *CityTrails*, the largest bike path system in the Southeast United States – eventually St. Pete was named *one of the top ten bicycle cities in the country*; (ii) adopted the *Playing Close to Home* policy of building a neighborhood playground within a one half mile walk of every child in the city; (iii) developed dog parks throughout the city – so city dogs could run free without their owners being fined; (iv) planted 20,000 trees – including 6000 flowering trees; (v) built four *new libraries* and renovated the rest with extensive computer access; (vi) expanded and built *athletic fields and athletic centers* throughout the city to support our city recreation programs; (vii) built *kayak trails, skateboard parks*, and new and expanded *pools*; and (viii) put programs in place that resulted in St. Petersburg becoming *Florida's first designated Green City*.

Efforts to improve a city's neighborhoods should be strategic, plan-based, ground up, results-driven, inclusive of neighborhood leadership, and measured by one simple yardstick: Have we improved the quality of life in our neighborhoods?

Improving Government Operations

While city elected leaders support many efforts, from economic development to arts, they must never forget that they are responsible for the basic services that people in the community depend on every day – water, sewer, garbage, roads, storm water, parks, recreation, police, fire, emergency medical, and many others.

The best run cities will focus on the following priorities while providing these services:

First, hire and retain qualified professional management for the key city leadership roles.

One of the worst things a new mayor can do is to bring political operatives into key professional positions in the city. A mayor can bring new energy and direction to a city government without politicizing the key service providers.

This is not to say that the mayor should not bring new leadership into the government or replace staff he or she inherits. There is no substitute for highly trained people in key leadership positions who are committed to the city. But putting political operatives into patronage positions is not only demoralizing to current staff; it also sends the wrong message to the public.

Second, provide efficient, effective service, and measure progress.

The best way to ensure improved service levels of a city is to put a system in place that *measures*

progress.

In St. Petersburg we developed the *City Scorecard*, an online program with about 160 metrics, designed to measure and evaluate how we were doing at the job of improving our city. We then publicly communicated that evaluation in a format that was both accessible and understandable.

Residents (and everyone else) could go to the *City Scorecard* website and see how long it was taking the police department to respond to a priority one call; how many reports of graffiti were filed, what our crime rates were on all major levels; and even how long it took for our departments to respond to a permit application, fix a sidewalk, or fill a pothole.

Not surprisingly, service levels improved across the board.

Third, focus on ways to operate the government in a fiscally sound and efficient manner.

There is a false choice presented by those who advocate for an ever expanding bureaucracy. They believe that *government and tax rates* must grow if a city is to prosper.

In fact, the opposite is true. A bloated, inefficiently run government that imposes high taxes and burdensome regulation will chase away jobs and homeowners, leading to urban decline.

In St. Petersburg, during our two terms, we *reduced property tax rates* by almost 20%, more than *tripled emergency reserves*, and *reduced total city staffing* by 10%.

Yet, at the same time, we increased *the number of uniformed police officers on the street*, *lowered violent crime* rates – the murder rate fell to the lowest level in decades, saw high school graduation rates and *student achievement rates* rise dramatically, *revitalized our downtown* center, led a *renaissance in the arts*, dramatically improved our most economically depressed area, and implemented the many neighborhood quality of life improvements discussed above.

One approach adopted by some conservative mayors to improve city fiscal efficiency is to develop methods of applying competitive forces into the delivery of public services. Stephen Goldsmith, former mayor of Indianapolis, is perhaps the nation's leading voice for sound fiscal management of cities. Inspired by the classic *Reinventing Government*, by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, Goldsmith developed a detailed process of applying the competitive model to city services.

Mayor Goldsmith put competitive bidding into place for swimming pool management, snow plowing, street maintenance, waster treatment management, golf course management, trash collection, and other public services. The system allowed the existing city departments to bid for the work – in the case of fleet management the Indianapolis Fleet Service won the contract. The goal was not privatization, but rather *marketization*, the process of applying competitive forces to save taxpayers money. Over a five year period the efforts to move city services into the competitive marketplace saved the taxpayers of Indianapolis \$230 million.

Goldsmith is now a professor of government at the Harvard Kennedy School and has worked with *Governing Magazine* to launch *Better, Faster, Cheaper*, a site that provides assistance to

those in municipal governance, by capturing and communicating the latest in cutting-edge technology, innovative policy approaches, and creative partnerships between government and the private sector.

- *Conservatives can succeed politically in cities if they get things done . . . and work to lift the entire city.*

In St. Petersburg, in addition to our central mission statement, we adopted a second goal: *To create a seamless city.*

In a seamless city, when you go from one part of town to another, you never cross a seam, whether a street, interstate overpass, or railroad track, and enter a place where you do not want to be . . . where you feel the need to reach over and lock your car door; an area with boarded-up buildings, broken windows, and large tracts of urban blight, with drug dealers on the street corner.

All parts of the city are not the same, and that will always be true; but all neighborhoods in a seamless city should have certain things in common. They should be safe and clean and have the services, retail, and public infrastructure that adequately accommodate the people who live there. There should be libraries, parks, athletic fields, banks, shopping centers, and grocery stores; and be places where every child can share in the pride and success of the entire city.

At first blush, this type of talk sounds liberal – but it is not. *There is nothing liberal or conservative about creating a better future for our kids in the toughest neighborhoods of our city.* It is simply the right thing to do. How you do it becomes the point. In St. Petersburg, I governed as a conservative fiscally and socially – and I have the scars to prove it. But we also placed a priority on Midtown, the most economically depressed part of our city – an area primarily populated by African Americans, most of whom are Democrats.

We focused like a laser beam on improving the quality of life for the people who lived in Midtown.

At the end of the day we ushered in a *remarkable renaissance* citywide. Our downtown became the most vibrant in Florida, at nighttime and on the weekends; our public schools improved significantly; we brought high tech employers to town; our tax rates went down and our service levels improved while our violent crime fell; we became a national cultural center and built a major bike path system; we became a “Green City”; and we did something else. *We led a comeback in Midtown that was, simply put, one of the most successful inner city turnarounds in America during that time.*

The voters were paying attention. In 2005, after serving for four years, we ran for reelection against the county chair of the Democratic Party, in a city where less than 30 percent of the population was registered Republicans. Needless to say, my opponent stressed his partisan roots during the campaign. But when the final online returns appeared on the computer screen, they revealed a stunning victory. *We won the every single precinct in the city with a 70 percent overall victory margin.*

Remarkably, we also *won over 90 percent of the vote in the core Midtown precincts*, where an overwhelming number of voters were African American Democrats. Over 90 percent of the Midtown voters chose a conservative. By comparison, *in my 2001 mayoral primary election, these same core Midtown precincts had been won by the chairman of the African People's Socialist Party.*

It is a good lesson for any mayor to remember . . . that the best roadmap to political victory is working every day to get things done for the entire city.

Conclusion

It is not possible to discuss all of the issues and policies impacting cities in a short article. But there are elements of a successful conservative approach to city governance and mayoral leadership that move the city forward and empower political success.

Here are my top 6:

First, develop, communicate, and execute a strategic plan for improving the quality of life for people who live in the city, wherever they live.

Second, the public benefit, not political expediency, must come first.

Third, there should be measurement of activities performed and services provided, along with accountability for those responsible for performing the services – with a goal of improving the city and providing excellent services.

Fourth, the fees, regulations, and taxes imposed on the taxpayer should be the minimum amount required to appropriately manage and fund an efficient government organization. This will also send the right message to those in the private sector who create jobs and economic prosperity.

Fifth, never forget that one of our jobs is to provide better opportunities for all of our children, including those children living in the toughest part of the city. It is a civic necessity and a moral obligation. By doing this we create a “seamless city” that lifts everyone.

Sixth, keep listening and communicating – and remain accessible.

There are examples of conservative mayors in America who have successfully governed with the above priorities at the center of their approach. Our cities – and our nation - would benefit greatly if we were to elect more of them.

And as history has shown, voters throughout the city will follow those who lead and get things done, no matter what their party affiliation.

Rick Baker was Mayor of St. Petersburg, the 4th largest of Florida's 400 cities, from 2001 to 2010, where he led an unprecedented renaissance while governing as a fiscal and social conservative. In 2008 *Governing Magazine* named him Public Official of the Year. In a 2011 *Daily Beast/Newsweek column*, John Avlon called Mayor Baker "America's best mayor of the past decade." He is an Adjunct Fellow of Manhattan Institute's Center for State and Local Leadership and was the "Senior Advisor on Urban Policy" for Governor Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. He is the author of *The Seamless City – A Conservative Mayor's Approach to Urban Revitalization That Can Work Anywhere*, published by Regnery Publishing in 2011. He earned his B.S., MBA, and J.D. (with honors) degrees from The Florida State University.