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The Challenges and Possibilities for Progressive Cities

In June primaries Buffalo, New York selected the country's first openly socialist mayor of a major American city since Frank Zeidler was mayor of Milwaukee in the 1950s, and New York City's city council moved decidedly to the left (these are Democratic cities where a primary victory largely assures election in November). In this column Harvey Jacobs, Professor and Visiting Professor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin and Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands reflects on the challenges and possibilities for progressive cities.

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By Harvey M. Jacobs

This is an era of increased partisanship and polarization in the United States. Attacks on progressives and their ideas (ideas both real and imagined) are part of daily discourse in the media and in legislatures.

One part of this phenomenon is the often increasing distance between the social and political views held by the citizens in a state's major city and the state itself. Think Madison in Wisconsin, Austin in Texas, Portland in Oregon, Seattle in Washington, and even New York City.

The tension this engenders can lead some of these city's leaders to want more freedom

for their city in all aspects of municipal affairs. While this sentiment is understandable, it encounters several challenges.

The first is constitutional and political.

The U.S. Constitution only recognizes two levels of government – the nation and the state. *All* subdivisions below the state – counties, towns, villages, and cities – are created by the state to serve state purposes. They are, literally, 'creatures of the state' (a term long used by political scientists and legal scholars). So all sub-state units only get to do what the state says

they can do, and this grant of authority can be changed by the state at any time (though there are, of course, political constraints to initiating any changes).

Even in those states with so-called home rule authority (a broad brush devolution of responsibilities granted in ten states) it is the states which decide what is included and excluded from home rule.

The challenge – progressive local action can be contingent on permission from state legislatures, which often are more conservative than selected localities within the state,

A second challenge is fiscal.

Cities do things – lots of things. They provide police, fire, transportation, health care, and sanitation services, they provide libraries, parks, schools, and, depending on the city, museums, homeless services, and more. And progressive cities often want to do what they do better, and then even do more. The problem — all the things cities do cost money. In the U.S. a city's primary and most reliable source of revenue is property taxes.

To pay for an increase in the quality of services already provided and to add new services cities have only two choices – increase taxes paid by existing residents, or generate new (real estate) value that can be taxed. Even in progressive cities, progressive citizens will often balk at paying evermore taxes. So the easy solution is to generate new development (residential and commercial).

Political sociologist Harvey Molotch coined the phrase 'the city as a growth machine' to describe this particular challenge. He argued that cities have to continually grow (income wise) even if they stand still in the services they provide, as the cost of existing services continues to rise each year (since the primary cost of services is people, and municipal employees expect increasing wages).

But by continually encouraging growing property value in a city the process of gentrification sets in. An attractive city causes housing to become more expensive, affordable housing becomes evermore scarce, and private sector service businesses change (the caricature is that yoga studios and coffee shops proliferate at the expense of corner groceries, local restaurants, family stores, etc.).

So given these challenges can progressive cities actually be progressive? Yes!

To use the example of housing and land use as one domain of municipal activity, progressive cities have many creative paths for progressive policy and action. Rent control has longed been used to help local tenants keep rent affordable, allow resident to stay in place, and thus stabilize a community. Inclusionary zoning is an approach to require the provision of affordable housing units whenever market rate housing is developed. Affordable housing can also be facilitated by zoning changes that allow for so-called granny flats and small houses. Transfer of development rights (TDRs) has successfully provided for long-term protection of critical ecological lands. A land value tax can be used to bring inactive land into active use. Community gardens and urban agriculture can provide

access to fresh food, as well as building neighborhood cohesion. And citizen advocacy organizations – for housing, for community development, for environmental

protection, for tax reform – can be encouraged and facilitated. None of these policies are perfect, all can fail, but they can also work.





• Rent control and added density, like “granny flats” (right) are two strategies cities can use to keep housing prices affordable.

Progressive cities will endlessly be in a cat and mouse game with state legislatures, and with the contradictions about their funding. Progressive cities need to be continuously creative – about policy initiatives and the quandaries of raising and spending money. What progressive cities need to do is keep the core challenges in mind as they work bringing about the world their citizens envision. But these challenges are not new – they have always been the

reality for progressive cities in the U.S., yet in progressive cities progressive policy, progressive action, and progressive outcomes can be successful.

Harvey M. Jacobs is a retired professor from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where for over 30 years he taught in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. More information about him and his work is available at harveymjacobs.com.