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The Federal Impact



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Nearly ten times a day, every day, the U.S. General Services Administration makes a decision about where to lease or build space in one of the 1,600 cities it manages federal real estate. Nearly ten times a day, GSA makes a decision that can shape a community's development for years to come.

That's why it is critical for GSA's Public Buildings Service and local officials to understand the full range of impacts that federal locational decisions can have. With that information, GSA can work with localities to make decisions that best serve our client agencies, taxpayers and local communities alike.

Some impacts, such as the number of construction jobs that a new building will generate, or the number of office jobs that a new facility will bring, can be quantified easily. Though we don't yet have strong information on the economic impact that government employees and operations have on the local economy, we think this can be measured as well, and have asked several economic analysts to research this.

There are other impacts, less quantifiable, that might have a longer-lasting, more dramatic effect on a community. Consider, for example, the value of the commitment the federal government is making to a place when it constructs a new office building or courthouse, or when it enters into a long-term lease for private space. This can send a powerful signal to property owners, developers and local officials about the future prospects for an area. We already have anecdotal evidence of this effect.

In the late 1980s, Tacoma's historic Union Station was suffering from decades of neglect and facing demolition. GSA renovated the station and built a new structure alongside it to serve as a federal courthouse, which opened in 1993. The project has triggered the revival of downtown Tacoma; since then, the University of Washington has renovated numerous nearby warehouse buildings for its campus, and the Washington State

History Museum was built next to the courthouse.

Oakland's federal building, completed in 1997, had two important impacts. It came along during a local economic lull, creating confidence among private investors that downtown Oakland would survive the slowdown; numerous developers are now putting up housing and office space nearby. The building not only helped reinforce Oakland's transit-oriented core, reversing a trend toward development in an automobile-oriented section of downtown, but also set a new design standard, helping to extend downtown in a pedestrian-oriented manner.

In Galveston, the historic U.S. Customhouse was until recently a landmark property at risk: It no longer provided functional space for federal offices and would be costly for GSA to restore and maintain. GSA was able to enter a long-term lease with a local historical foundation, which raised private funds for restoring the building and could use it for offices. The Customhouse anchors one end of Galveston's Strand District, an area of nineteenth-century buildings, and restoring it was important to maintaining tourist activity and revenue.

The Center for Urban Development's mission is to support GSA's efforts to maximize the benefit federal investment decisions can have for urban communities. That may mean helping local GSA staff collaborate with a local mayor, planners and property owners. It may mean finding ways to apply the resources we are bringing in a manner that also addresses current community goals. It may mean recognizing the long-term value of the federal government's commitments and assets, and using them to help secure a community's long-term future.

All these efforts mean that GSA must engage the places where the federal government has business interests. We are constantly helping address new challenges in cities across the country, and constantly being surprised by the rewards we reap by working to be a good neighbor.