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The State of Organizing in Midwestern First Suburbs

Commentary

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Abstract

This commentary discusses recent efforts to establish and sustain coalitions of first suburbs in the Midwest. These places, it is argued, exist in a kind of policy blind spot between center cities and newer suburbs on the suburban fringe. Organized coalitions are the best way to help these places share information about a range of relevant local reforms, and also push for reforms regionally and in the state capital.

It highlights the issues they are engaged in most directly, and what kind of activities they undertake to operate more as a formal network of local governments than as a fragmented collection of parochial jurisdictions. It also highlights a few similar municipal coalitions that exist throughout the country and argues for the establishment of a super-regional entity that could represent first suburban interests nationally.

Introduction

In the pursuit of substantive metropolitan policy reforms over the past several years, the recent efforts to organize and build coalitions among America's older, inner-ring "first" suburbs represents one of the bright spots.

Beginning with Myron Orfield's *Metropolitics* (1997), a slow but steady stream of research has begun to highlight these places and clearly established the notion that the first suburbs – particularly those in the Midwest – are separate and distinct from the center cities they surround and

the newer suburbs that surround them.¹ Orfield shined a bright light on these places through compelling maps and analyses illustrating how many metropolitan reform efforts – from transportation to housing to local tax issues – hinge on support from the first suburbs. He further articulated how together first suburbs in metropolitan areas make up a significant and powerful political bloc (2002).

Some recent policy innovations have emerged that provide even more attention and tangible help for first suburbs. In

¹ See also Lucy and Phillips (2000) and Hudnut (2003).

May 2005, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton introduced legislation to provide economic and tax incentives to revitalize first suburbs across the nation.² The bill promotes investment in existing places with established infrastructure (including access to transit) by providing incentives to local governments to improve substandard, distressed, or underutilized real estate and reinforce the physical fabric of suburban neighborhoods. The keystone is a \$250 million Reinvestment Fund designed to provide grants to first suburbs for smart growth-type initiatives.

But despite this important attention, first suburbs remain mired in what Puentes and Orfield (2002) referred to as a “policy blind spot.” Metropolitan growth remains a principal issue in most metropolitan areas, and decentralization – often facilitated by state and federal policies – remains the dominant trend. Even though many suburbs are among the most stable and affluent communities in the country, they are being slowly weakened and destabilized by these enormous pressures. It is through state policy reforms – related to transportation, land use, and governance – that the most systemic changes in growth patterns are likely to be achieved.

To date, the interests of first suburbs appear underrepresented at the state level. First suburbs often remain absent from large coalitions that represent the broad interests of municipalities or, if they are represented, they are lumped in with larger “suburban” interests. This lumping together of inner and outer suburbs fails to recognize their diversity, their variable assets, and the different challenges they face. The special interests of small, first suburban jurisdictions rarely receive a fair hearing from state legislators and agencies. The lack of inner-suburban representation

drove a series of meetings convened by the Brookings Institution in 2000 and 2002. The gatherings of first suburban leaders from seven metropolitan areas in the Midwest – Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Detroit, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and St. Louis – and Philadelphia in the Northeast, focused on the common market and demographic challenges facing these jurisdictions. They also proposed key changes in federal, state, and local policies and practices that could support revitalization efforts and stem the tide of decentralization.

But at the time, the eight metropolitan areas generally lacked political coalitions set up to represent the interests of first suburbs. In fact, some elected officials from neighboring jurisdictions were meeting each other for the first time at these events.

The convenings featured the efforts of the Cleveland metropolitan areas First Suburbs Consortium, an alliance of older suburbs in Cuyahoga County that organized around reforming transportation, economic development, and land use policies at the local, regional, and statewide levels. The intention was to draw attention to this group as a model, and provide practical guidance for other first suburban leaders on how to replicate the consortium throughout the country.

Of course, first suburbs are represented on a variety of regional coalitions and councils. Major metropolitan areas in the Midwest all have regional/metropolitan planning organizations or councils of government established to collaborate on transportation decision making. Many also cooperate on other regional issues such as water supply, park and open space, environmental issues, housing, and economic development. And every state has a League of Cities or Municipal League that represent the

² Suburban Core Opportunity, Restoration and Enhancement (SCORE) Act of 2005; companion legislation was introduced in the House by Reps. King and McCarthy (bill numbers S. 1024 and H.R. 2357).

interests of all municipalities in matters before the state legislature.

But first suburbs should build their own separate political coalitions for state reform that reflect their unique issues and challenges. These coalitions will, by necessity, reach across geographical, partisan, and ideological lines. They will be difficult to build and sustain. Yet, if created, coalitions of first suburbs can wield enormous influence – aligning on some issues with the central city, on other issues with rapidly growing suburbs and rural areas. To be most effective, these coalitions should be well funded and staffed. Special relationships should be forged with university and other research partners to provide independent analysis to support policy positions.

There have been some successes, but there remains much to do. First suburban organizing has taken hold in some Midwestern metropolitan areas and occasionally in other areas of the country. Several of these coalitions have, in turn, impacted the discussions about metropolitan growth and development in their region.

First suburban coalitions in the Midwest

First suburban coalitions are found almost exclusively in the Midwest for two main reasons. First, the metropolitan areas there have the most fragmented governance structures anywhere in the country. Eight of the top ten metropolitan areas ranked by municipal fragmentation are found in the Midwest (Orfield 2002).³ The fragmentation suggests the need for coalition building, especially among small municipalities like first suburbs. Indeed, seven of the ten most fragmented metropolitan areas in the country have first suburban coalitions.

Secondly, midwestern first suburbs are often considerably more stressed than first suburbs in other metropolitan areas. Forthcoming analysis by the Brookings Institution shows that while stressed first suburbs can be found throughout the nation, they are concentrated around the Great Lakes (Puentes and Warren 2006). The fact that these places are stressed also suggests the need for coalition building since they are in greater need of policies to respond to their challenges than newer suburbs or places in the “favored quarter” of the metropolitan area (Fishman 2000). These quarters consistently receive a disproportionate share of jobs and wealth-creating investments – like infrastructure – and pull economic activity away from places that need it: like first suburbs (Orfield 1997).

A survey of midwestern metropolitan areas identified active first suburban coalitions in eight metro areas: Chicago; Cincinnati; Cleveland; Columbus, OH; Detroit; Kansas City, KS–MO; Minneapolis; and Wisconsin (entire state). Two others in the Dayton, OH and Toledo, OH metropolitan areas are in the embryonic stage. These coalitions (see Table 1 for a list and more details) differ from each other in how they are staffed, funded, and organized, but there is a similar set of core issues around which they are engaged.

Redevelopment and reinvestment. All eight of the first suburban coalitions we surveyed consider redevelopment and reinvestment both a primary goal and their greatest challenge. This makes sense. Given where they are situated in the metropolitan area, the time they developed, and the structures that exist within their borders, first suburbs are finding themselves – rightly or wrongly – bypassed by metropolitan growth that has shifted the focus of investment farther

³ Ranking is of the total number of local governments per capita in the 25 largest metropolitan areas. The other two metropolitan areas – Pittsburgh and Philadelphia – share many of the same characteristics of the other eight and are often considered “Midwestern” when examining first suburban issues (Puentes and Orfield 2002).

Table 1: First Suburban Coalitions in the Midwest

Metro Area	First Suburban Coalition	Year Formed	Number of Municipalities Represented	Population Represented	Website
Chicago	South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association	1978	42	650,000	www.ssmma.org
Cincinnati	First Suburbs Consortium of Southwest Ohio	2003	13	113,000	www.firstsuburbs.org/southwestohio/index.htm
Cleveland	Northeast Ohio First Suburbs Consortium	1996	16	475,000	www.firstsuburbs.org/neoohio/index.htm
Columbus	Central Ohio First Suburbs Consortium	1999	5	87,000	www.firstsuburbs.org/centralohio/index.htm
Dayton	Dayton Ohio First Suburbs Consortium	2005	12	255,000	www.firstsuburbs.org/southern/index.htm
Detroit	Michigan Suburbs Alliance	2002	23	893,000	www.michigansuburbsalliance.org
Kansas City	First Suburbs Coalition	2002	19	995,000 ^a	www.marc.org/firstsuburbs
Minneapolis	North Metro Mayors Association	1987	22	842,000 ^b	None
Toledo	Toledo First Suburbs Consortium	forming	4	60,000	None
Wisconsin	Wisconsin Alliance of Cities	1969	38	2.1 million ^c	www.wiscities.org

a - 406,000 w/o Kansas City, KS or Kansas City, MO

b - 460,000 w/o Minneapolis

c - 1.1 million w/o Milwaukee and Madison

out to the suburban fringe. Left behind are older housing stock, commercial buildings, and other infrastructure.

Transportation. Most coalitions, too, are focused on transportation policy and projects in their metropolitan areas. They typically clamor for more attention to their needs – often seeking more funding for specific transit projects that directly benefit them, such as light rail. Conversely, first suburbs also demand less attention to new roadway projects in newer suburbs – which, research has found, harm existing places by shifting economic activity to the edge of metropolitan areas (Boarnet and Houghwout 2000).

Municipal revenues. Closely related to issues of redevelopment and reinvestment is the fiscal health of first suburbs. Considering the challenges they face, many first suburbs have stressed municipal budgets. Orfield's (1997, 2002) work has shown that many midwestern first suburbs have much lower tax bases and revenue capacity than the rest of their metropolitan area, including central cities, yet first suburbs often have higher social, economic, and other expenditure needs (Orfield 2002). Thus, many first suburban coalitions fixate on state fiscal decisions around revenue cuts, local government funding assistance, and school funding mechanisms.

Outreach. First suburban coalitions spend considerable time on outreach in three main areas. First is increasing attention to the particular needs and challenges of first suburbs. Many first suburban coalitions produce written material highlighting their issues, and each maintains a web site to disseminate information. These groups commonly produce short videos, op-eds, and white papers. Second is outreach to state legislatures. Because the coalitions' primary goal is reform on the state level, they work closely with their local delegation and

others. Third, first suburb coalitions reach out to similar suburbs in other metropolitan areas in their state. Recognizing the benefit of multiple organizations representing the first suburban interests, several coalitions advise other localities and assist them in developing similar coalitions.

Eminent domain for redevelopment. Of unique concern to first suburbs is the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Kelo v. City of New London (CT)* in which the court declared that economic development is a valid public use for the purpose of condemnation. The controversy that followed this decision is well-known (Bradley 2005). Several first suburban coalitions are now working to encourage their states not to undermine the decision by making it more difficult for local governments to use their condemnation power.

In contrast to central cities that often have a variety of tools at their disposal and newer suburbs that still have large undeveloped parcels, first suburbs have few options for growth. Redevelopment is often the only way for them to reach or maintain fiscal solvency. However, many of these places are characterized as having small, disjointed parcels of land that are costly and time consuming for private developers to assemble themselves. First suburbs, therefore, understand that they would be disproportionately impacted by reductions or moratoria on their ability to use eminent domain in order to redevelop.

In addition to these similar areas of focus, first suburbs are also engaged in a range of other efforts including brownfield remediation and metropolitan fair share housing. But despite the similarities, each coalition uniquely responds to the interests and needs of their local members. The next section briefly describes the Midwestern first suburban coalitions listed in Table 1.

Descriptions: Midwest coalitions

The **Northeast Ohio First Suburbs Consortium** in the Cleveland metropolitan area is the leading case example – not necessarily in terms of chronology, but in its accomplishments and the role it plays as a model for other coalitions.⁴ This well-known group, formed in 1996 and established as a council of governments in 2000, now consists of 16 member jurisdictions representing more than half the population of Cuyahoga County (see Map 1). The consortium is funded by member dues.

Recently, the group undertook initiatives on housing and economic revitalization with a set of universities designed to bolster the attractiveness of the housing stock and retail storefronts and older commercial districts in first suburbs by strengthening their marketability and competitiveness. Cuyahoga County's Housing Enhancement Loan Program, which makes loans to homeowners to rehabilitate older homes in first suburbs, also began as a consortium initiative. In 2002, the consortium spun off a separate nonprofit organization – the First Suburbs Development Council (FSDC) – to enhance the redevelopment efforts so critical to those places. The FSDC

provides technical assistance to economic development officials and other staff to help them pursue redevelopment projects.

Another reason that Ohio stands out for first suburban organizing is that in 1998 a statewide group, the **Ohio First Suburbs Consortium**, was established as an umbrella organization for the metropolitan area consortia in the state's biggest metro areas: Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. Two other groups now are forming in the Dayton and Toledo metropolitan areas. The statewide group is described as the largest organization in the country working on first suburban issues (Kleismit 2003).

The **Michigan Suburbs Alliance (MSA)** in the Detroit region was established in the summer of 2002. The MSA now has 24 charter members drawn almost entirely from first suburbs in the three counties that immediately border Detroit (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb) (see Map 2). Funds to support the alliance's activities come from philanthropic sources and from dues paid by member cities.

The MSA recognized that a primary challenge to redevelopment in first suburbs is the perception of difficulties between



localities and developers. To deal with that issue, the MSA created a Redevelopment Ready Communities Certification Program. The program facilitates infill projects in first suburbs by certifying municipalities that are amendable to such proposals. To be certified, localities must pass a resolution supporting a list of best practices, such as engaging in community

⁴ This group coined the term *first suburbs*, which now is widely used.

Map 2. Members of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance



planning organization (MPO), with support from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The coalition is open to all local officials in the metropolitan area that straddles the Kansas–Missouri border, recognizing that many high-growth communities have older areas and thus share issues of concern with other first suburbs. However, the emphasis is on engaging leaders of communities and neighborhoods established largely in the early post–World War II decades (see

outreach, prioritizing proper site plan review, and adapting zoning amendments if necessary. The point is to demonstrate to private developers that first suburbs are ready for redevelopment. Six first suburbs have been chosen to pilot this initiative.

Over the long term, the MSA considers it critical to build relationships with members of the term-limited Michigan legislature. The group also wants to establish a metropolitan caucus to provide a legislative forum for discussing the policy agenda being put forward by the MSA and its allies. The MSA works with community leaders and public officials interested in forming an alliance of first suburbs in other metropolitan areas throughout the state (e.g., Grand Rapids, Flint, Saginaw, and Kalamazoo).

The **First Suburbs Coalition** in the Kansas City metropolitan area organized in 2002 under the auspices of the Mid-America Regional Council, the region’s metropolitan

Map 3).

The Kansas City coalition has produced outreach publications with reports on redevelopment, building regulations, and case studies on development tools for first suburbs. In 2005, the coalition released its *Idea Book*, which promotes rehabilitation of four common housing types in the Kansas City area first suburbs: ranch, split-level, two-story, and Cape Cod. According to

Map 3. Members of the Kansas City First Suburbs Coalition



the National League of Cities, the Idea Book has brought a considerable amount of positive attention to the first suburbs (National League of Cities 2005).

The **North Metro Mayors Association (NMMA)** in Minnesota is comprised of 22 cities ranging from fully developed (Minneapolis and first suburbs) to developing communities. NMMA, established in 1987, has become an umbrella organization for a number of subregional coalitions that were formed to achieve specific objectives, mostly around transportation projects. Orfield (2002) cited the NMMA for its key role in supporting regional fair share housing reforms, among other things.

The **South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association (SSMMA)** in the Chicago region represents an older model of a first suburban coalition. Formed in 1978, the SSMMA now boasts 42 members representing 650,000 people. In addition to its work around transportation, economic development, open space preservation, and stormwater issues, the SSMMA worked to create a regional web-based geographic information systems (GIS) database to provide sophisticated a mapping tool for its members. Very few SSMMA communities could afford such a necessary system on their own. Working collaboratively with the other eight suburban municipal associations around Chicago, the SSMMA joined Mayor Richard Daley’s Metropolitan Mayors Caucus in 1997.

The final type of first suburban coalition can be found on the statewide level in Wisconsin. The **Wisconsin Alliance of Cities** represents 38 municipalities throughout the state – including the largest cities of Milwaukee, Madison, and Racine. But the group is largely made up of first suburbs and is focused mainly on lobbying efforts to advance state legislation.

Table 2: Websites of Other Coalitions

Name	Geography	Website
Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission	Philadelphia metropolitan area	www.dvrpc.org
Metro Mayors Caucus	Metropolitan Denver	www.metroamayors.org
Suburban Cities Association	Suburban King County	www.suburbancities.org
Virginia First Cities Coalition	Stressed cities statewide	www.vafirstcities.com
Gateway Cities Council of Governments	Industrial Los Angeles County	www.gatewaycog.org
National League of Cities' First Tier Suburbs Council	National network	www.nlc.org/inside_nlc/committees___councils/465.cfm

A branch of the alliance, Wisconsin Sustainable Cities, Inc. conducts education and research activities.

Descriptions: coalitions outside the midwest

Because of wide variations in metropolitan areas and first suburbs throughout the nation, many coalitions are different from those in the Midwest.

In recent years, the MPO in the Philadelphia metropolitan area, the **Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission**, funded and organized a series of meetings targeted to the elected and appointed officials of first suburbs. The meetings provided opportunities for information sharing among elected officials; dialogues between home builders, developers, and elected officials; and efforts to begin to organize these communities. Activities focused initially on building a coalition of first suburban leaders and identifying potential issues for state legislators. The MPO in the Hartford, Connecticut area also convenes officials around first suburban issues.

In the Denver metropolitan area, 32 mayors formed the **Metro Mayors Caucus** in 1993. While they do not focus exclusively on issues related to first suburbs, they do tackle complex regional issues. The Seattle area's 37-member **Suburban Cities Association** also focuses on regional issues such as jurisdictional equity, housing, and transportation.

The **Virginia First Cities Coalition** is a statewide organization focused on the needs of 15 of the most fiscally stressed older cities in Virginia. While not technically "suburbs," these jurisdictions are much smaller than the independent counties that surround them and share many of the redevelopment and reinvestment challenges as first suburbs. The group

is squarely focused on statewide policy reform related to transportation, housing, and reinvestment.

In the industrial heartland of Los Angeles County, the **Gateway Cities Council of Governments** – representing 27 cities – focuses on transportation planning issues on the subregional level, especially as they relate to access to the area's major ports. The group has undertaken activities beyond the scope of most other first suburban coalitions – facilitating major highway investment studies and securing more than \$100 million in grant money for the region (Gateway Cities Council of Governments 2004).

Other efforts have spouted, with much less success, in Rust Belt places like Buffalo, NY, and Rochester, NY, and even in metropolitan Atlanta. Elected leaders, such as Nassau County, NY, Executive Tom Suozzi, also have championed first suburb issues on the county level and have played the role of advocate and convener around certain issues.

Other communities throughout the nation are represented by the **National League of Cities' First-Tier Suburbs Council**. This group, established in 2002, provides an opportunity for municipalities' elected leaders to share information and network with each other about common issues.

The case for a superregional entity

While the coalitions described here are necessary and valuable on the local, regional, and state levels, there also is an excellent opportunity to create a superregional entity that could represent first suburban interests broadly. In fact, one key recommendation resulting from the Brookings Institution's work with first suburban leaders and articulated by Orfield

(2002) was to create a formal network that could represent first suburbs' interests in regional, state, and national debates on growth and other issues. Such a network would work chiefly to develop a first suburban agenda and help guide research and policy development to help first suburbs clearly articulate their needs.

An alternative would be for such an entity to represent first suburban areas on a regional rather than national basis. The focus could be only on the Midwest and/or Mid-Atlantic for several reasons. First, those regions have a common fragmented governance structure – that is, a central city surrounded by sometimes hundreds of independent cities. Second, the first suburban organizing that has already begun in Detroit and Kansas City can be leveraged, as in Ohio, to establish coalitions in smaller metropolitan areas statewide. Third, the importance of certain midwestern states in national elections suggests that there may be a bigger stage for first suburbs and their particular issues.⁵

A small, dedicated staff consisting primarily of an executive director could administer such a group. Leaders from the represented first suburbs and coalitions would serve as an active advisory board to provide counsel and guidance regarding the organization's activities. Such an entity could provide the kind of practical technical assistance that first suburban leaders say they need: to assist in the development of local revitalization strategies, to help form regional coalitions, to pursue statewide reforms, and to heighten awareness on the national level.

Conclusion

In many metropolitan areas, first suburbs now may be uniquely positioned to exert a positive influence on future growth and

development. Interest in reinvestment and redevelopment in existing communities is picking up speed in many parts of the country.

At this stage, the political support for these reforms comes principally from constituencies most visibly affected by current growth patterns: namely, those living in rapidly developing suburbs or constituencies dedicated to a specific agenda (e.g., farm preservation, environmental protection, land conservation) that is undermined by rapid suburbanization. The involvement of first suburban leaders in statewide and region-wide growth efforts ensures that policy reforms focus not only on curbing sprawl but also on promoting a broader agenda of urban reinvestment and regional equity.

With metropolitan strategies on the mind of many legislators, other political leaders, and key constituencies, leaders of first suburbs have an opportunity to come together and build a policy agenda – and the right coalitions – to ensure that the next level of reforms includes comprehensive approaches that respond to their communities' needs. The futures of first suburbs are completely intertwined, and their health is linked formally. They will need to act in alignment to achieve broad change.

Author

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⁵ See Lang and Dhavale's related work on megapolitan areas (2005).

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