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Is a Car a House?

In the September feature “When Home Is a Car,” Mattie Quinn wrote about an explosion of “vehicular homelessness” in many West Coast cities. The issue is particularly bad there because rents have skyrocketed. As a result, “some cities have launched so-called safe parking programs to address the growing problem,” Quinn wrote. “Others are taking a different route and criminalizing [it].”

As a community transition specialist in Yakima, Wash., I assist homeless individuals with applications for temporary housing programs. One aspect of the qualifying factors that has always bewildered me is that shelters and group housing programs deny those living in vehicles because it is considered to be a residence. It is simply infuriating and unacceptable.

—Meagan Conner on Facebook

So, the new form of affordable housing is the kind that doesn’t actually include houses?
—jeff seadot on Reddit

Living in a vehicle should not be a form of “affordable housing,” and short-term Band-Aids are not long-term solutions to our country’s homelessness crisis.
—National Health Care for the Homeless Council on Facebook

Counts taken earlier this year show 168,000 homeless people in California, Oregon and Washington—20,000 more than were counted just two years ago. When “affordable housing” means living in your car, solutions that offer immediate relief for renters must be considered.

—SEIU Local 49 on Facebook

There’s a whole lot of [people] in Illinois doing the same thing, but no one is listening.
—governor_news on Twitter

THE ROAD TO 5G

Last month, Mike Maciag wrote in “The Battle of 5G” that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was expected to approve regulations that could upend local agreements and preempt states regarding 5G installation. It did, prompting immediate pushback from a wide range of public-sector association groups. The ruling is expected to face multiple legal challenges. The industry-backed declaratory ruling includes several preemption provisions aimed at accelerating deployment of 5G networks. One of the more controversial provisions establishes “shot clock” time limits for jurisdictions to process applications for installing 5G small-cell antennas on public infrastructure. Installations on existing infrastructure must be processed within 60 days, while requests to build new poles need to be processed within 90 days.

The FCC order also effectively limits what local governments can charge for the installations—fees that are considerably lower than what cities have charged in the past. Localities could still levy higher fees, but if a wireless provider sued, local officials would need to demonstrate the fees are a “reasonable approximation” of costs incurred. In larger jurisdictions where fees are higher, the FCC ruling could amount to seven-figure losses in unrealized revenues. Many larger localities, such as Austin, Texas, Boston and San Jose, Calif., have already entered into agreements with telecoms. While the ruling doesn’t explicitly exempt preexisting agreements or prohibit local governments from negotiating future agreements, it does significantly reduce cities’ leverage in making such deals.

ELECTIONS 2018

Be sure to follow our ratings and analysis on the 36 governors, the 30 attorneys general, the 26 secretaries of state and the 87 legislative chambers on the ballot. Oh, and the 164 ballot measures. Ongoing election coverage will continue throughout the month at governing.com/politics.

“Somebody had better notify my representative.”

Colleen Dawson on Twitter. She was responding to Alan Greenblatt’s September article “You Can’t Block Critics on Twitter,” which looked at a May court ruling that found access to public figures on social media is a constitutional right. Dawson was one of many Twitter users who retweeted the article at a public official who has blocked them.
Joan of Arc is a national hero of the French. Although historians regard Joan’s role as one of many factors in the winning of the complex 100 years war, her presence both as a warrior and spiritual visionary sparked the beginnings of France’s rise as a great European power.
France and several other European countries are far ahead of the U.S. in rail service.
It can be tough for voters to choose which person to support when elections feature multiple qualified candidates who are jockeying for the same position. Voters in Fargo, N.D., however, might soon be relieved of that burden of choice.

This month, Fargo voters will decide whether to adopt a ballot measure that would create a system known as “approval voting” for local elections. The idea is simple—everybody can vote for as many candidates as they’d like. If there are four candidates for the city commission, you could choose to vote for one of them, or for two, or for the whole lot. Unlike the other multiple-choice method used in some cities known as ranked-choice voting, each vote would count the same. The person who got the highest total would win.

Approval voting gives people more flexibility in making their selections, says Jed Limke, head of Reform Fargo, which is promoting the measure. They don’t have to worry about wasting votes on spoilers with little chance of winning, since they can also vote for candidates expected to be more popular. In theory, however, candidates with extreme viewpoints would have a harder time, since the winner would have to be broadly acceptable to most voters. Approval voting is actually an ancient system. It was used in medieval times to select popes and it’s been used by some associations and Dartmouth College to select board members. But in terms of electoral politics in the United States, it would be something entirely new. “It hasn’t been used in any actual governing system since at least World War I,” says Mark L. Johnson, a political scientist at Minnesota State Community and Technical College. Its novelty is not the problem, Johnson says. When approval voting is used, most people end up worrying that their top choice could lose, since votes are spread thin among many candidates.

The vast majority of voters at Dartmouth and elsewhere have ended up voting for a single candidate, even though they have the option of voting for several. The method also doesn’t solve the underlying issues Fargo wants to address. The referendum was recommended by a task force that had been convened to deal with issues in recent local elections, namely commissioners being elected by small pluralities from big fields. Approval voting will do nothing to give winning candidates a larger mandate, since they will be competing for more votes, even if there are the same number of voters casting ballots. The city would be better off if it extended early voting or encouraged absentee voting, says Commissioner Tony Gehrig. “Approval voting does not fix the problem of voter turnout,” he says. “It actually makes it more confusing.”

Gehrig and other critics like to point out that Reform Fargo has received the bulk of its funding from out-of-state sources that they say want to use Fargo as a petri dish for the latest voting experiment. But there is no organized opposition campaign opposing the measure. No one is confident of the outcome, especially since it will be at the bottom of a long ballot that also features an expensive U.S. Senate race and a statewide marijuana legalization initiative that have dominated the political discussion.

“It actually makes it more confusing.” —Alan Greenblatt

A polling place in North Dakota. Voters in the city of Fargo may soon be able to select as many candidates in an election as they’d like.
A movement to enshrine victims’ rights in state constitutions has momentum all across the country. That continues to be true despite the fact that the idea’s leading sponsor now faces criminal charges himself.

This month, voters in six states will decide whether to approve constitutional amendments known collectively as Marsy’s Law. They are named after Marsy Nicholas, a California woman who was murdered in 1983 by an ex-boyfriend who had been released on bail from a prior charge. The provisions of the law vary by state but share major principles in common. They offer a guarantee that victims or their families can speak at hearings and other proceedings, and ensure that victims are kept current about a defendant’s whereabouts at all points during the legal process. They also impose stricter requirements for parole.

The law was first passed in California a decade ago, and has since been approved by voters in five other states. Its primary driver has been Henry Nicholas, the billionaire co-founder of the semiconductor company Broadcom. Henry is Marsy’s brother and the founder of Marsy’s Law for All, a national group that promotes enshrining victims’ rights in state constitutions. He was arrested in August on suspicion of drug trafficking. A decade before, he had been charged with distributing illegal drugs, but those charges were later dismissed.

Despite the bad publicity this has brought, the work of promoting Marsy’s Law continues, says Henry Goodwin, a national communications adviser for the group. “The victims’ rights cause is bigger than any one man,” he says. “It’s about the group. “The victims’ rights cause is bigger than any one man,” he says. “It’s not going to interfere with the work of advocates. It’s not going to affect their hard work and dedication.”

The group’s ultimate goal is to enshrine Marsy’s Law in the U.S. Constitution. Versions of it appear on ballots this month in Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Nevada, North Carolina and Oklahoma. Meanwhile, the law failed to win approval this year in the Idaho and New Hampshire legislatures.

South Dakota lawmakers considered an effort to repeal Marsy’s Law after finding that it put a strain on county law enforcement. The law didn’t differentiate among levels of crime, so victims of petty theft or trespassing had to be accorded the same amount of attention as victims of rape. Lawmakers worked out a compromise with Marsy’s Law for All and a revised constitutional amendment was approved by voters in June.

Some members of the law enforcement and legal communities continue to oppose Marsy’s Law, arguing that even a revised version like South Dakota’s is a burden on courts and prosecutors. “We definitely think it will clog the system,” says Kate Miller, advocacy director for the ACLU of Kentucky. It would be better, she says, if more money was actually devoted to aiding victims than to campaigning for them. “The only victims who are going to have access,” Miller says, “are those with private attorneys to represent them.”

All told, 35 states currently enshrine some form of victims’ rights in their constitutions. Constitutional protections essentially put these rights on par with those of the defendant—something statutory protections can’t do, Goodwin says. That’s a problem, Miller argues. The reason rights are enshrined for the accused is to protect them from the powers of the state. Victims, presumably, need no such protection. But politicians and voters tend to be less concerned about the rights of those accused of crimes and more sympathetic to the victims. When voters are offered a ballot measure aimed at protecting victims’ rights, a comfortable majority nearly always supports it.

In past years, Henry Nicholas has spent an average of about $2 million backing the successful state campaigns. Despite his legal troubles, this year’s campaigns are still well-funded, while groups in opposition to Marsy’s Law barely have been able to muster a campaign against it. “We haven’t done a lot of education,” Miller says, “because we feel pretty hopeless about defeating it on the ballot.” —Alan Greenblatt

November 2018 | GOVERNING
Local governments are always concerned about Census undercounts. If all their residents don't show up in the official tallies, they can lose political power in legislatures and Congress and millions in federal funding grants. This year, there is a couple of reasons localities are more nervous than usual.

The first has gotten a lot of attention. A question about citizenship that the Trump administration wants to add to the Census form has communities worried that immigrants and refugees will be much less likely to participate.

That question is being challenged in court, but local governments are already thinking about ways to reassure residents that their citizenship response won't be shared with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Cities are also seeking clarity from the Census Bureau about whether forms on which the citizenship question is left blank will be counted anyway.

The other issue is manpower. The Census is a massive undertaking, with somewhere in the neighborhood of half a million people hired to help. Back in 2010, the Census Bureau had a hard time filling those slots. That was with an unemployment rate of nearly 10 percent. Now, it's under 4 percent. Cities and states are working with local institutions to figure out how they can assist the feds in their recruiting process.

At this early stage, it's all about getting prepared. The National League of Cities (NLC) is recommending that its members make sure their master address files are up to date. If a city has grown over the course of the decade, that includes adding the addresses of new buildings and residences to the right databases. Some cities are sending out teams with clipboards, writing down the addresses of backyard dwellings and other hard-to-spot housing units. “One of the easiest ways not to get counted is for the Census Bureau not to know where you live,” says Alex Jones, manager of NLC's local democracy initiative.

This will be the first true digital Census. Respondents will be able to fill out forms online by using a unique identifying number they'll receive in the mail. Cities and counties will be talking with managers of libraries, post offices and other public buildings about installing kiosks for filing internet responses.

Even now, not everyone has a computer or smartphone. There are always “hard-to-reach” communities which local governments have to work hardest to ensure accurate counts. Salt Lake City is used to that, with a majority of residences occupied by renters and 20 percent of the population living in poverty. The city is hiring a full-time coordinator to make sure agencies are working together when it comes to operations and outreach efforts.

Salt Lake and other cities in Utah always feel shortchanged, having found that Mormon missionaries living overseas at the time of the Census get overlooked. Today's more diverse population will present new challenges, especially if there's a citizenship question, but at root the goals remain the same: “From our standpoint, there's very little difference,” says Matthew Rojas, Salt Lake City's communications director. “Everyone should be counted, whether you're a missionary serving on a mission or an immigrant living in Salt Lake City.” —Alan Greenblatt
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GOVERNING  LIVING CITIES
Some of the suburbs south of Chicago have been struggling for years. Their populations are growing older and poorer, and many of their businesses are seeking greener pastures across the Indiana state line. A property tax giveaway enacted last year by the Illinois General Assembly has made their revenue problems much worse.

The suburbs have been victims of a series of unfortunate events. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has repeatedly raised the city’s property taxes to fund schools and buttress problematic pension funds. That led state legislators to come up with the idea of giving senior residents in the city a tax break. The way things worked out, however, they extended tax breaks to everyone in Cook County. That meant much less tax money going into suburban treasuries.

Given low property values in the southern suburbs, some people are now paying nothing in property taxes. The suburb of Harvey saw 700 homes come off its tax rolls, costing it 5.6 percent of its assessed value. “Some seniors are not paying taxes at all,” says Hazel Crest Village President Vernard Alsberry Jr. “It’s created a burden for our other taxpayers.”

The losers in this process include local commerce. In response to the state action, Cook County decided to do away with a 10 percent tax break for small businesses. As a result, some commercial property owners are seeing their rates go up for two different reasons: the decline in residential tax bills and the cancelation of the business tax incentive program. This “double whammy,” Alsberry says, has already brought some development programs in the south suburbs to a halt.

Taxes on some commercial properties in the area are now two or three times as high as their mortgage payments. Things are likely to get worse when new tax bills are issued in January. It’s simply a matter of the air having to go somewhere when the balloon gets squeezed. “You have a finite amount of property in a county,” says Laurence Msall, president of the Civic Federation, a public policy research group in Chicago. “If you remove properties from the tax roll, you’re going to be shifting the burden to the non-exempt properties.”

In the south suburbs of Chicago, that means some commercial properties can’t even be given away, because the projected tax burden is greater than their underlying value. Residents and businesses are faced with ever-higher tax bills while receiving declining services due to the fiscal mess. To bring that vicious circle to a halt, Alsberry and his neighbors are lobbying both county and state officials for some relief.

For legislators, it was fun to pass a tax cut bill when the downside mattered only to a tiny share of constituents. But this “dissipation of responsibility,” as Msall calls it, makes it hard for the localities to remedy the situation. “The legislature is legally able to change the exemption levels and is not, at the end of the day, responsible for making up that reduction in local finances,” Msall says. “The full impact is on our local governments.” —Alan Greenblatt
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In the 1950s, while doing research for a book on political participation, the social scientist James Q. Wilson found himself attending a lot of citizen engagement meetings on urban planning. Eventually he reached a conclusion that seemed obvious to him, but that public officials, and especially political reformers, didn’t talk much about. Wilson’s insight was that most citizens don’t attend meetings to endorse a policy, to give their blessing to a new project, or to sit back and learn. They show up to complain—to say no to what’s being proposed.

It’s not hard for a local government to fill an assembly hall for a session on airplane noise or the need for a new four-lane road through town. But nine times out of 10, the people aren’t there to tell the government to keep up the good work. They’re there because they’re upset.

One reason most public officials don’t talk much about this is that it runs counter to the deeply held American belief that the broadest possible public participation is good for democracy. It’s true that a significant portion of the time, the ambitious plans of local government aren’t good policy. In those cases, somebody really does need to speak up against them.

The decade that followed Wilson’s research produced perhaps the most dramatic triumph for citizen participation in modern American history: the victory of Jane Jacobs and her band of citizen activists over New York City’s super-planner Robert Moses, and the abandonment of Moses’ scheme to bulldoze much of Lower Manhattan with gigantic expressways.

Jacobs’ crusade marked the beginning of a period in which public participation and civic activism became untouchable articles of faith in American local government. Candidates in every corner of the country began running on a platform of more civic engagement, more transparency, more chances for ordinary citizens to show up at meetings and make their feelings known. They are still doing it.

Virtualy no one runs for office these days saying what Wilson implied in the 1950s—that mass meetings and listening sessions make it more difficult for a local government to enact any complex instrument of public policy, good or bad. Boston’s Big Dig, the highway and tunnel project that ended up costing $24 billion and taking 25 years to complete, was made a good deal slower and more expensive than anyone expected because numerous cadres of citizen activists, environmentalists, preservationists, and others had to be consulted and mollified before work could proceed.

These days, it is almost impossible to find any local official willing to entertain Wilson’s insights—at least in public. One of the few current officeholders who will go on the record challenging the conventional wisdom is Christopher Cabaldon, the iconoclastic, provocative and often eloquent mayor of West Sacramento, Calif.

Several years ago, Cabaldon appeared on a Governing panel that asked a small group of mayors how they apportioned their time and how they wanted to spend it. Cabaldon was asked about the number of hours he spent at town halls and other mass meetings. Cabaldon isn’t a household name in Austin, but now would be a good time for that city’s leaders to consider what he has been saying. Austin just spent five meetings, he said, generate a warped sense of what the community is all about. They attract the affluent, the angry and the articulate. They do a poor job of expressing the views of the ordinary citizen. “When we generate instant opinion, we are empowering desires in the community that are not necessarily representative. … If we were responsive to every one of the citizen complaints, we would change from being one of the most progressive governments to one of the most regressive.”

Cabaldon isn’t a household name in Austin, but now would be a good time for that city’s leaders to consider what he has been saying. Austin just spent five
By 2017, the city had received some 4,000 comments and 60 position papers. “I think it was a bit overwhelming,” says Greg Guernsey, the city planner who was in charge of CodeNext at the time. But it soon became clear that the feel-good spirit of Imagine Austin, with its lofty rhetoric declaring the city “a beacon of sustainability, social equity and economic opportunity,” did not extend to ground-level decisions that had to be made in the new document. Virtually all of the city’s activists paid lip service to the idea of creating affordable housing, but differed on where it should go.

The more progressive housing activists were convinced that the number of affordable units the city needed—as many as 65,000 over the next decade, by one estimate—could be produced only through adding density to the city’s residential neighborhoods, mostly by creating more accessory dwelling units on single-family lots and allowing medium-sized apartment buildings to be built on blocks of one- or two-story homes. “The neighborhoods weren’t buying this,” explains Guernsey. “Homeowners imagined eight-story condo towers dwarfing their modest bungalows. The city, which had been assiduous in conducting more than 100 ‘listening sessions’ before it sat down to write, didn’t do a very good job of quieting peoples’ fears.”

The second version of CodeNext was finished in the fall of 2017. It moved most of the projected affordable housing to busy commercial corridors where tall apartment buildings wouldn’t offend homeowners. This placated the neighborhood associations, but it left the housing activists complaining that there simply wasn’t enough space on these corridors to give the city more than a fraction of the affordable units it needed.

So the planners went back one more time and produced CodeNext 3, an attempt to forge a compromise the two sides could each accept. It didn’t work. The neighborhoods remained wary, and the housing activists continued to argue that the number of affordable units likely to be created was much too small. “You just have this tiny narrow strip where they’re allowing development,” said a spokesman for AURA, a grassroots housing advocacy group. “They haven’t widened out the corridors at all.”

The only thing certain about CodeNext 3 was that it didn’t have enough votes on the city council to become law. On Aug. 1, Mayor Steve Adler admitted defeat. “It seems evident,” he wrote, “that we’re not going to get to a place of sufficient consensus.” He described the entire process as “divisive and poisoned … marked with misinformation.”

The mayor asked the city manager to come up with a new plan, but offered no specifics on what that might involve. It would be going too far to say that civic engagement killed CodeNext. But the more that mass meetings were held and the more that people morphed from passive citizens to activists, the harder it became to hammer out a deal. “This started out as a battle between diehard neighborhood activists and a couple hundred urban activists,” one participant recalled. “Then it grew to include hundreds, thousands of new people.”

It isn’t hard to imagine how something like this would have been handled in the 1960s. A select group of middle-aged white businessmen, led by the mayor and the chamber of commerce, would have spent a few weekends squirreled away in a country club and emerged with a master plan for the city’s future. This is literally what happened in Dallas in 1966.

No one is suggesting a return to that style of government. Cabaldon isn’t arguing for it. “Simply trusting the elected officials to make all the decisions,” he admitted, “is not the right answer either.”

But paying a little attention to the insights of Cabaldon and Wilson might not be a bad idea. Public policy doesn’t get better just because more people are show up to meetings. Often it gets worse. It improves when voters elect officials with a pragmatic sensibility and then give them some leeway to do the right thing and explain their decisions to the public. That’s called representative government. It’s a lovely thing when it works. ©

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Observer
Assessments

November 2018 | GOVERNING 15

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A couple of years ago, on a barge trip in France down the rivers and canals of Burgundy, my wife and I were surprised to find that the highlight of our excursion was the train ride south to get to the barge.

The high-speed train carrying us roughly 250 miles from Paris to Lyon took less than two hours, yet the ride was incredibly smooth and quiet. It was one of 33 such trains making that trip every day. It sure wasn’t Amtrak. It was SNCF, the French national rail company founded 80 years ago that now operates an extensive network of trains traveling at speeds that can reach 200 miles an hour and interconnecting with lines throughout Europe. France and several other European countries, as well as Japan and now China, are far ahead of the United States in rail service.

The reasons are numerous. Our lower population densities spread out over a much larger terrain, our extensive air traffic system serves even cities of modest size, and our rail lines generally are owned by private freight companies and not the public. But in the end, the overriding reason is our undying attachment to automobiles, which makes it hard for transportation planners to superimpose rail, bus, or even bike and pedestrian infrastructure along the roads and highways that serve cars.

Now, however, we are approaching a policy crossroads because of changing economics, environmental and safety concerns, new technologies, and diminished funding streams. If I were a public transportation executive at any level of government, I would be both perplexed and nervous. I would be especially worried about the federal help that seems to be drying up. The U.S. Department of Transportation has been reluctant to release funds for projects it endorsed months and even years ago.

Ridership on public transit is declining in most of the country. There is reason to believe that improved service can reverse this trend: Subway systems in Chicago, New York and Washington, D.C., are being substantially overhauled, both because they have been so poorly maintained and because they need to expand to meet needs. Bus systems are being carefully studied and restructured to try to make them more competitive. But all these efforts will take large amounts of money—something that local governments on their own do not have.

Meanwhile, technology threatens to disrupt the entire enterprise, allowing Uber and Lyft to supplant buses, thus contributing to the number of cars clogging the highways and roads. Even in Los Angeles, famously overrun by traffic congestion, ridership on public transit has declined in recent years and car commuting has picked up. According to Brian Taylor, a professor of urban planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, “the investment in new vehicles by new arrivals to Southern California is far greater than all of the investments in new public transit infrastructure by Metro and Metrolink. [The investment is] in personal vehicles through individual decisions.”

The only serious attempt at building a high-speed rail line is happening at the state level in California, where Gov. Jerry Brown has been tenacious in his effort to
construct a $100 billion, 800-mile bullet train system from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Twenty-one construction sites are now operational, employing some 2,000 workers, but completion is still far from certain. And the truth is that the project will be very difficult to finish without help from Washington. Republicans in the Trump administration and Congress are unsympathetic, making significant funding in the near future all but impossible.

The bottom line is that transportation planners throughout the country face a dilemma. Even as their research shows that improving transit service will increase ridership, it is looking like serious improvements in frequency and reliability could come with unsupportable cost burdens.

For evidence of how quality service can lead to more riders, city officials in L.A. and elsewhere need only look at Seattle, one of the fastest-growing cities in the country. The rapid increase in its population does not fully explain the expansion in ridership, most cities, including many that are fast-growing, are seeing declines. Rather, it has more to do with attitude. The Seattle area’s bus service takes an unapologetic “make room for the bus” approach, relying on an increasing number of dedicated bus lanes to ensure efficiency.

There may not be many Seattleites emerging anytime soon. But there are some encouraging factors that transportation planners can keep in mind. First, polls continue to show that the public strongly supports investment in public transit. Second, concerns about safety. The obvious chaos on urban streets with masses of young people biking and scooting around town, dodging both auto traffic and pedestrians, is taking a toll. No national data is yet available, but emergency rooms in large cities all over the country are reporting a spike in serious injuries from scooter accidents. It turns out that most scooter users don’t bother to wear helmets. One has to think that eventually this will all sort itself out. Ideally, the sorting will take place before driverless cars invade the highways en masse and disrupt the whole system yet again. 

Email pharkness@governing.com

How NAFTA 2.0 Would Impact States

After President Trump threatened for more than a year to withdraw from NAFTA, auto-manufacturing states breathed a sigh of relief when he announced a renegotiated trade agreement last month with Canada and Mexico.

The pending new pact, dubbed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, keeps the free trade zone intact while placing some new burdens on the auto industry, including a higher minimum-wage standard and upping the required share of auto parts and components from North America to 75 percent from 62.5 percent. Michigan stands to benefit the most: more than one-quarter of the state’s economy is subject to the NAFTA trade zone. Alabama, Indiana and Kentucky also rely heavily on auto manufacturing.

Still, some uncertainty remains. The new labor and parts restrictions are expected to cut into the industry’s bottom line. While that could encourage more auto jobs to move to the U.S., it could also discourage auto production overall in North America. “At this point we don’t anticipate that,” says Moody’s Investors Service analyst Ted Hampton, “but it certainly is a risk.” The pact still must be approved by all three national governments. — Liz Farmer

Is the White House Delaying Transit Funds?

Transit advocates are becoming increasingly alarmed that the Trump administration may be holding back money locally need to build light rail, streetcar and bus rapid transit projects.

The U.S. Department of Transportation is sitting on nearly $1.8 billion for projects that are ready or nearly ready for final federal approval, according to the advocacy group Transportation for America.

But the Federal Transit Administration says the reason the projects haven’t received funding is because they aren’t actually ready. One of the most common problems among the applicants, the agency says, is that they haven’t secured all of their non-federal funding.

A New Battle Over Online Sales Taxes

Five months after states successfully argued before the U.S. Supreme Court for the right to collect online sales taxes, Congress is getting involved.

A bill introduced in September includes an exemption for businesses that generate less than $10 million in annual U.S. e-commerce sales and prevents states from collecting sales taxes before Jan. 1 (even though some are already doing so).

The National Conference of State Legislatures and other groups say that sales tax implementation should be left to the states. “Congress’ proposal,” NCSL said in a statement, “would hinder state implementation efforts, preempt state authority and create more problems than solutions.”

But the bill’s sponsor, Wisconsin Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, is concerned about the administrative burden to small businesses and online mom and pops. The bipartisan legislation, he said in a statement, “reins in the taxation free-for-all” created by the Supreme Court. “Online sellers need clarity and stability in the sales tax arena.” — Liz Farmer

November 2018 | GOVERNING
Baltimore is suffering from a contradiction of sorts. On the one hand, the city is known for tough cops and citywide camera surveillance. On the other hand, it can seem at times like there are hardly any police around at all.

On a recent stay in Baltimore, I often saw people openly litter and urinate in such downtown tourist hot spots as Lexington Market and Shot Tower Park. At major intersections, there has been a return of so-called squeegee boys, who surround your car, clean your windows without permission and demand money. But beyond these popular neighborhoods, there are indeed large swaths of Baltimore that are still as dangerous as anything depicted in the TV series “The Wire.” Residents have complained that street prostitution and open-air drug deals go seemingly unchecked by police. Last year, Baltimore saw 343 homicides, more than 100 people, who suffered broken bones, head trauma and even death in altercations with the police, won settlements costing taxpayers $11.5 million. The problems continue today, including in August when an officer was caught on camera repeatedly punching a passive Dashawn McGrier.

But the biggest problem is corruption. The Baltimore Police Department was recently mired in an overtime scandal, where some cops were paid for days they didn’t work. The department spent nearly three times its $16 million overtime budget. Officers also have a history of planting drugs and guns on suspects. And this February, eight members of the Gun Trace Task Force—an elite special unit meant to find illegal guns—were indicted by the Drug Enforcement Agency for effectively operating like bandits in uniforms, robbing homes, harassing residents, reselling the guns and drugs they confiscated, and more.

The larger question is how such a dysfunctional department can be reformed. One Maryland state delegate, Bilal Ali, suggested disbanding it, an unlikely move. Even reforms that would bring more civilian oversight and accountability are difficult, since the department is state-controlled and union-backed. The best hope, says the University of Baltimore’s Ross, will likely come from the federal consent decree, which the city entered in 2017.

Perhaps a more organic reform is the gradual reduction of the department in size and relevance. The Baltimore Police Department employed about 41 officers per capita in 2016. That’s the fourth highest rate of any department with at least 500 officers, according to FBI data. Still, it has consistently seen attrition since 2002, and Baltimore’s wealthier neighborhoods are pursuing private security options. Johns Hopkins University recently tried to field its own force.

But the poorer neighborhoods that need public safety the most must continue relying on the police. It is a relationship wrought with tension, aggression and surveillance—and at street level, it seems, little actual policing.

Baltimore could be accused of policing too much and too little.
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The Geography of Longevity

Just how long many Americans will live is largely a reflection of where they were born.

**Monterey Park, Calif.**

While neighborhoods with exceptionally high life expectancy are predominantly wealthy, there are notable exceptions scattered throughout the country. One that stands out is in the northern part of Monterey Park, a small Los Angeles suburb with some of the highest concentrations of Chinese Americans of any U.S. city. Despite the tract’s median income of only $40,000 and high poverty, those born there were projected to live an estimated average of 93 years (+/-7). The neighborhood is close to a senior center, medical center and park. Several other Asian communities had similarly high estimates.

**Stilwell, Okla.**

At just 56 years (+/-2), Stilwell’s estimated life expectancy is the lowest of any Census tract in the nation. The community, traditionally dependent on agriculture and ranching, is home to a large contingent of Native Americans, and about half of all children there live in poverty.

**Dallas**

Dallas offers an example of the vast differences in life expectancy that can be found in close proximity. Six predominantly African-American tracts making up an area of southeast Dallas recorded life expectancies between 65 and 69 years. For mostly white neighborhoods on the other side of an interstate highway a few miles to the north, the numbers were in the low to mid-80s.
For the first time, neighborhood-level life expectancy data covering most of the country were published in September, revealing large disparities. The joint effort by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation utilized death records reported by 48 states.

Life expectancies generally mirror demographics. Babies born into neighborhoods with more white residents, or those with high incomes and college-educated populations, tend to live longer. Communities with poor access to food and health care have low life expectancies. Major gaps are present across neighborhoods in close proximity within the same cities. As a response, places such as Alameda County, Calif., and Kansas City, Mo., have launched initiatives aimed at advancing health equity.

We’ve identified several outlier neighborhoods, represented as Census tracts, where the normal assumptions about race, poverty and other demographic characteristics do not seem to apply. In these communities, other factors are influencing longevity.

**Shelby County, Ill.**

Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of a neighborhood’s life expectancy. But select areas with average or below-average levels of education still have exceptionally high estimated longevity. One is an area of rural Shelby County, made up of several small villages and farming communities. Census estimates suggest more than half the population has no education beyond high school, yet its life expectancy is nearly 90 years (+/-7).

**Chatham County, N.C.**

Most neighborhoods with the highest life expectancies tend to be communities of affluent residents with high levels of education. The tract with the nation’s highest estimated life expectancy is found in Chatham County. Its average life expectancy falls between 90 and 104 years, when the margin of error is considered. The area is a wealthy enclave with two large retirement communities: Fearrington Village and The Preserve at Jordan Lake.

**The Bronx, N.Y.**

Predominantly black communities typically have low life expectancies, according to the CDC. This isn’t true of a few African-American neighborhoods in New York, though, such as a tract in the Williamsbridge section of the Bronx. About 70 percent of its residents are black, and more than a quarter live in poverty. However, the neighborhood’s estimated life expectancy is 86 years (+/-8).

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Could offshore turbines be the next big breakthrough in renewable energy?

By Graham Vyse

Wind turbines off Block Island, R.I.
Rhode Island once had a lot of firsts to boast about. America’s smallest state was the first to embrace religious freedom, the first to declare independence from Britain and the first to build a successful textile mill, thus bringing the Industrial Revolution to America. But there haven’t been many such milestones lately. Decades of manufacturing job losses and the Great Recession left the state’s economy decimated, languishing in the shadow of neighboring Massachusetts without a clear path to 21st-century viability. In 2013, Rhode Island received a first-place designation that no state covets—the highest unemployment rate in the country.

All this was prologue to a summer day two years ago when Gov. Gina Raimondo arrived at the Port of Providence to tout the nation’s first offshore wind farm, then just months from operation off the Ocean State’s picturesque Block Island. Standing in front of massive turbine blades recently delivered to the port, Raimondo promised the farm would provide Rhode Islanders a cleaner source of energy, lower costs, a diversified fuel supply and lots of new jobs. “This is the way to rebuild our economy,” she said. “We cannot bring back old-fashioned manufacturing.”

Block Island was a significant milestone for the offshore wind industry, a foothold in the U.S. for a form of renewable energy that has thrived for years in Europe. It was the product of a decade of bipartisan work by state leaders—a marquee achievement that the
Democratic governor featured prominently in one of her reelection campaign ads this year. But the farm itself, with its five turbines and 30 megawatts, is ultimately a kind of test run, most significant for helping prompt a flurry of action on offshore wind in other states.

Earlier in 2016, Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker had signed legislation requiring utilities in the Bay State to procure a total of 1,600 megawatts from offshore wind by 2027. (That’s enough to power a third of all residential homes in the state.) It was an unprecedented commitment, followed by escalating competition among Northeastern states. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo released a master plan early this year for 2,400 megawatts of offshore wind by 2030. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy has set a goal of 3,650 megawatts by the same deadline. Now Massachusetts has increased its commitment to 3,200 megawatts by 2035.

But those are just promises. Rhode Island is already up and running. And it has hired Deepwater Wind, the Providence company that built the farm off Block Island, to construct another 400-megawatt project in federal waters. Connecticut has joined that project, adding 200 megawatts.

All of this action is being driven by a series of factors. Most important, the cost of wind power has come down significantly in the past five years, making states more willing to invest in it. Not only has Rhode Island proved that these projects can be built and brought into operation, but Democrats such as Raimondo, Cuomo and Murphy have found an unexpected ally in the Trump administration. “We’ve got tremendous market momentum,” says Stephanie McClellan, director of the University of Delaware’s Special Initiative on Offshore Wind, “with great backing from statehouses up and down the East Coast as well as in the White House and the Department of the Interior. This is really a moment for commercial liftoff for offshore wind.”

For most of the past two decades, it appeared that the first offshore wind farm in the United States would be Cape Wind, an ambitious 130-turbine, 468-megawatt project proposed in 2001 for the shallow waters of Nantucket Sound in Massachusetts. It would have powered 200,000 homes on Cape Cod. But after 17 years of conflict, this pioneering effort failed for good last year in the face of opposition from wealthy and powerful Cape residents, including members of the Kennedy and Koch families, who worried it would spoil their ocean views. Environmental critics also argued that the turbines would harm birds and whales, hinder tourism, and disrupt boating. “As an environmentalist, I support wind power,” attorney and activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. wrote in The New York Times in 2005, “including wind power on the high seas. … But I do believe that some
There is one other explanation for this enthusiasm: Offshore wind is a diversification opportunity for the oil and gas industry in the Gulf of Mexico. “The Block Island wind farm project,” McClellan says, “was built with major subsea structures—the foundations that are embedded into the sea bed to hold the turbines—that were fabricated in the Gulf of Mexico. They were barged up from Louisiana to Block Island.”

Local opposition to offshore wind remains potent in some areas. The Maryland Public Service Commission approved ratepayer subsidies last year for two projects, but blowback from the resort community of Ocean City has been fierce. As with Cape Wind, critics say turbines visible from the beaches are an eyesore that will diminish tourism. Ocean City even rejected an offer from developer U.S. Wind to provide free electricity in exchange for the town’s support. “I think we’ll have those objections,” Burdock says, “until there are more projects in the water and people can see for themselves that it doesn’t obstruct their view and it’s not a hindrance to tourism.”

Rhode Island, as bullish as it is on offshore wind and as proud as it is of being the pioneer, will still need to quell lingering criticism of the enterprise. As The Christian Science Monitor has reported, many of the state’s fishermen worry about how this new industry will affect their livelihoods. “We’re not saying no, we’re not trying to stop it,” a Rhode Island lobsterman told the publication. “We’re trying to have a reasonable outcome in this that allows fisheries to survive.”

Raimondo is sensitive to this issue. “The two can coexist,” she insisted at a press conference. “We can have a vibrant commercial fishing industry and a vibrant renewable wind industry.”

Raimondo is sensitive to this issue. “The two can coexist,” she insisted at a press conference. “We can have a vibrant commercial fishing industry and a vibrant renewable wind industry.”

The governor could be right. Offshore boosters point to Europe, where the scale of the industry has driven prices down significantly over the last decade. The technology required for turbines in the water has been refined and new wind producing techniques are being adopted. Alicia Barton, president and CEO of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, says coastal states have “a once-in-a-generation opportunity.” But she also says that offshore wind needs the federal government “to step up and advance that process for leasing if we’re going to be successful.”

This may already be happening. At the moment, offshore wind is benefiting from what the energy publication E&E News calls “an oddly cooperative dynamic between states and the federal government” under President Trump. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is casting offshore wind as part of Trump’s “America First” agenda. “When the president said energy dominance, it was made without reference to a type of energy,” Zinke told the Washington Examiner in June. “It was making sure as a country we are American energy first and that includes offshore wind. There is enormous opportunity, especially off the East Coast.”
Marauding white residents burned the Greenwood neighborhood to the ground in 1921.
Tulsa is struggling to make amends for a massacre it ignored for nearly a century.

BY LIZ FARMER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID KIDD
n weekday mornings, enticing whiffs of bacon and fried potatoes waft from Wanda J’s Next Generation restaurant in Tulsa’s Greenwood neighborhood. The smell of breakfast on the griddle offers a comforting contrast to the sound of big rigs and commuter traffic roaring by on the Interstate 244 overpass that cleaves the neighborhood in two.

At first glance, the Greenwood section of Tulsa doesn’t look much different from places in other cities where, in the name of urban renewal, new highways were erected in the 1960s, obliterating or dividing minority neighborhoods. Around the corner from Wanda J’s, there are signs of a revitalization effort—or of gentrification, depending on whom you ask. A sign on an empty lot promises a future mixed-use development; a two-story historic building nearby has already been renovated with retail on the ground floor that includes a combo coffee shop and yoga studio, a bookstore, and a Vietnamese sandwich shop.

But the sidewalks that line the streets of this neighborhood offer a grim reminder of Greenwood’s darker past. Every 20 or 30 feet, a plaque lists the name of a business—a restaurant, grocer, lawyer, doctor, clothing store—and below it, the words, “Destroyed in 1921.”

A hundred years ago, this 35-square-block section of Tulsa was home to one of the largest concentrations of African-American-owned enterprises and wealth in this country. It was so well-known at the time that Booker T. Washington nicknamed the area “Negro Wall Street.” At its peak, Greenwood was home to more than 300 businesses serving roughly 11,000 residents who, thanks to segregation, reinvested whatever they earned back into their community. By 1921, Black Wall Street, as it’s called today, boasted a three-story, chandeliered hotel as well as a public library, two newspapers, 23 churches and a high school that taught Latin, chemistry and physics.

That all changed on May 31 of that year when a black teenage boy was accused of assaulting a white female elevator operator. Within hours, marauding white residents swept into the district and burned it to the ground. Hundreds of black residents died; thousands were left homeless. City and state officials did nothing to stop the violence. Worse, they played a complicit role in the conflagration. Many of the invaders were deputized by local police; the state’s National Guard was deployed not to stop the riot but to move black residents into detention centers where some were forced to stay for weeks. Following the death and devastation, city officials continued on their hostile path. They tried to change zoning laws to make it difficult for Greenwood’s residents to rebuild—a move curtailed by the courts. But despite the lack of support from city hall, the Greenwood survivors did return, and they began to reconstruct their lives and their livelihoods. In fact, much of the neighborhood was rebuilt within a few years.

For decades, Tulsans—blacks and whites—dealt with the horrific event and its aftermath by ignoring it. “Shame, guilt, fear, PTSD—all those things worked to create a conspiracy of silence that kept this out of the public light,” says Hannibal Johnson, a Tulsa historian and author of several books about Greenwood.

As the century reached middle age, desegregation and urban renewal helped repress those memories even further and caused additional wounds: Much of Greenwood’s once-thriving commercial center was torn down, its buildings and history erased; a highway was built through the center of the area. Kids born in Greenwood...
Residents are trying to reclaim Greenwood’s storied past.

A RACIAL REAWAKENING

In the ’70s never learned about their neighborhood’s rich heritage—about the heyday of Black Wall Street and the vibrancy of the people who lived there. Nor could they quite believe it when the true story of what happened in 1921 began emerging in the 1990s.

Now, as the 100th anniversary of the massacre approaches, the city and state are grappling not just with the past and its direct role in Greenwood’s deterioration, but also with what kind of progress has been made in race relations. In Tulsa, as elsewhere in the country, there are long-simmering resentments over police shootings of unarmed black men and of statues and buildings honoring Confederate soldiers who owned slaves and fought against the United States. Many blacks throughout the country feel their experience has been left out of history books and popular media coverage. Or if it is included, it is viewed through someone else’s lens.

In Tulsa, the city is struggling to address its deep racial divide—most of the black population still lives in the north end—and its own true history: “It’s still an open wound,” says Mechelle Brown, program coordinator of the Greenwood Cultural Center who spent years interviewing and researching survivors of the massacre. “The city still has a great deal of work to do to acknowledge what happened.”

For some, the fits and starts over the years to make things right have only added to their frustration. “It’s one thing to say an apology,” says Brown. “It’s something else to put money on the table. [Survivors and their families] feel completely disregarded and left out of the conversation.”

At the time, the commission’s report offered a lot of hope for healing the racial divisions. But in the years since, city and state government have taken what many see as a half-measure approach. The state legislature established committees for a memorial museum, as well as a scholarship and a community development fund for North Tulsa, as recommended by the report. But little money was appropriated to maintain those entities. In the meantime, a reparations lawsuit filed by victims was dismissed by federal courts on the grounds that the statute of limitations had expired.

The commission’s recommendation to establish a museum about the 1921 massacre evolved over time into the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, which opened in 2010. The following year, the legislature mandated that the Tulsa massacre be taught in public schools, but offered no financial assistance to help develop a curriculum for it.

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To date, most of the effort to promote Black Wall Street’s history has been backed by private money, with the exception of a few state and federal grants. The mostly privately funded John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation, for instance, is largely responsible for the curriculum that Oklahoma school teachers who choose to teach about the massacre use in their history lessons.
The city has also bungled some opportunities to make amends. In one of the most egregious examples, the city’s Brady Arts District was named for Wyatt Tate Brady, a figure prominent in Tulsa’s founding. But in 2011, documents came to light showing that Brady had ties to the Ku Klux Klan and was involved in the 1921 massacre in Greenwood. Powerless to change the name of the Brady Arts District, the city council, after weeks of heated debate, changed the namesake of the district’s main thoroughfare, Brady Street, to Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, who has no ties to Tulsa.

What many view as a Band-Aid approach is just one more slight in a long list of insults that black Tulsans say they have lived with for generations. “Part of reconciliation is what do you give up,” says Dewayne Dickson, a Tulsa Community College professor and a member of the reconciliation center’s board of directors. “The reason for that is so everyone can have a sense of moving forward from what’s wrong. There must be some kind of measurable action to make right what’s wrong.”

Today, there are signs of progress, or at least of a closer understanding of the deeper implications of the assault a century ago. When G.T. Bynum ran for mayor of Tulsa in 2016, the divisions within the city were a central part of his campaign. A former city council member, Bynum says he was motivated to run for mayor after reading a report by the George Kaiser Family Foundation that found that a child born in North Tulsa has a lifespan 11 years shorter than a child born elsewhere in the city. In the modern era, North Tulsa, which includes Greenwood, has always been the poorer part of town. “Reading that while sitting in my home with my family,” says Bynum, who is white, “that really changed things for me.”

After getting elected, Bynum created the Office of Resilience and Equity aimed at eliminating equity gaps in Tulsa’s schools, transportation systems and the economy. This summer, the office, which is funded through the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities initiative, unveiled its strategy. The plan includes both tangible and intangible goals such as eliminating the racial life expectancy gap by 2024 and “amplifying the voice of historically marginalized communities” by 2021.

Still, many people think the city’s current efforts and its future plans don’t go nearly far enough. Tulsa civil rights attorney Damario Solomon-Simmons is one of them. He says the city and state should make amends for the past, that Tulsa and the state should make direct reparations to the victims. Economic prosperity, Solomon-Simmons observes, isn’t as attainable for North Tulsaans as is their likelihood of being locked up. Meanwhile, many public officials have talked about healing, but most of the money that has gone toward that goal has been from private donations.

As Solomon-Simmons sees it, the message to black Tulsans, many of them related to the original residents and business owners of Black Wall Street, is, “You don’t matter.”

Now, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the assault, there’s been renewed pressure to produce tangible results. A 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Centennial Commission, chaired by Kevin Matthews, an Oklahoma state senator and North Tulsa native, is pushing a number of economic and cultural initiatives in and around Greenwood. This fall, Tulsa Public Schools officially adopted a curriculum for the massacre. The goal is to launch the curriculum statewide.
Matthews also authored a bill that creates a revolving fund for the Oklahoma Historical Society with the aim of promoting cultural tourism opportunities in Greenwood. The commission is seeking private donations to establish a business development program in North Tulsa.

Bynum thinks a key part of the overall remedy will be creating new prosperity in North Tulsa using the tools of economic development. He hopes to build on the city’s investment in a minor league ballpark, which was built in the area in 2010. The city’s development authority inked a deal this summer to bring USA BMX’s new arena and headquarters facility to Greenwood. The arena could host the 2020 U.S. Olympic trials for the dirt track bike race.

The city has also spent $2 million, including grant money, to clean up an industrial site within view of the Greenwood Cultural Center.

But with those developments, which could bring in money and clientele from all over Tulsa, the specter of gentrification looms large. It’s already creating yet another divide in Tulsa over Black Wall Street.

Back at Wanda J’s restaurant on North Greenwood Avenue, the breakfast aromas have long receded and now a crowd and some local news reporters are gathering in front of the restaurant. For 40 some-odd years, Wanda J Armstrong and her family have been in the restaurant business in Tulsa, serving up not just breakfast but also Southern staples like fried catfish, okra and peach cobbler. Armstrong left Greenwood in 1996 and returned in 2016. Due to a dispute over her lease with the Greenwood Chamber of Commerce, she’s being told to leave. On this September afternoon, a handful of friends with bright hand-painted signs are protesting the eviction and accusing the chamber of “pushing out” black businesses.

Down the street, art gallery owner Ricco Wright watches the news vans going by with a mix of bemusement and frustration. “They think I’m part of the gentrifiers,” he says. Wright is a Tulsa native who lived in New York City for a decade and earned his doctorate degree before returning here in 2014. His new gallery, Black Wall Street Arts, is one of several creative ventures he has started as a way to promote the history of the neighborhood. His gallery’s opening showcase features pieces from two local artists—one black, one white. His hope is that the exhibit will facilitate the community’s larger conversation about race relations. He calls the series “Conciliation.” “I don’t think what we’re doing is ‘reconciliation,’” he says. “That implies we’re restoring relations, and I can’t think of when there were good relations here between blacks and whites.”

That ingrained lack of trust is perhaps the biggest challenge for Greenwood’s revival. There’s a suspicion regarding the renewed interest and development in the neighborhood. As the centennial draws near, there’s a genuine concern that the story of Greenwood will be whitewashed if these new folks—the gentrifiers—have a hand in promoting its history. African-American money built, and then rebuilt, Black Wall Street. But there’s a catch. That proud history of the black entrepreneurial spirit and wealth was linked inextricably to the fact that the residents were segregated from white businesses. In the modern era, to expect that only African-Americans should be a part of the neighborhood’s revival not only perpetuates the separation, but is not realistic. There simply aren’t enough wealthy African-American benefactors in Oklahoma, let alone Tulsa, to help.

But there are benefactors. The George Kaiser Family Foundation, for one, is arguably Tulsa’s most prominent philanthropy. It recently launched Dream Tulsa to grow local talent and recruit black entrepreneurs from around the nation to reinvigorate Black Wall Street. Believing that new money like Kaiser’s will truly honor the district’s history and spirit requires a leap of faith. Maybe this time it will be different; there are still divides, but at least there seem to be more efforts to acknowledge a wrong and work toward righting it. “We have to go slow to go fast because there’s such a lack of trust in these outside influences,” says state Sen. Matthews. “In many cases we’re asking the people that looked like the people who burned down the area to help.”
FORD HYBRID POLICE VEHICLES

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MOST POLITICIANS ARE SHORT-TERM THINKERS.

Their desire to cut ribbons and get programs up and running means that few of them spend much time thinking about anything beyond the next campaign. Right now, however, there is at least one exception. Jerry Brown, as he completes his final term running California at age 80, is looking far into the future, governing in the belief that many of the state’s most important problems are ones that may not ripen for 20 or 30 years.

Much of Brown’s final year in office has been dedicated to projects that will come to fruition long after he leaves Sacramento. The question of moving water to thirsty Southern California has been a matter of political dispute throughout Brown’s six decades in public life, and indeed well before. His plan to reengineer the system with a pair of 35-mile-long tunnels, at a cost of $15 billion or more, won approval from the state’s water agency in April. When the work is done, many years from now, it will have the effect of extending Southern California’s water claims and contracts for an additional half-century.

Construction began this summer in multiple counties on Brown’s $100 billion bullet train between Los Angeles and San Francisco, a project that is at the very least more than a decade from its opening.

But the centerpiece of the governor’s final term is his crusade against climate change—perhaps the issue with the longest time...
able to win legislators over to his point of view. He may quote Latin in his spare time, but on the job he does his homework. “He’s this combination of a cigar-chomping politician and a philosopher king,” says Leonor Ehling, director of the Center for California Studies at Sacramento State University.

Thad Kousser, who chairs the political science department at the University of California, San Diego, describes Brown’s uniqueness a little differently: “I can’t see anyone patterning themselves on his persona.” Kousser describes that persona as “be grouchy and supercheap, quote obscure philosophers, avoid social media and never make a public presentation without a doomsday-predicting graph.”

Perhaps the most telling example of Brown’s forward-looking stewardship has been his handling of the state budget. Throughout his last eight years in office, he’s worked with a legislature thoroughly dominated by his fellow Democrats. But he’s never given them everything they wanted. He signaled his intention to act as a brake on the legislature right away, vetoing the first budget it sent him in 2011 because it didn’t include enough spending cuts. As the state’s economy has boomed during his tenure, he has resisted his party’s impulse to spend whatever was available. “In the last four or five years, there were plenty of chances for
him to spend, and he chose to save," says state Sen. Steve Glazer, who once served as a political adviser to Brown. "This is the key to good executive leadership, thinking not only about what it will cost this year but the projection of the out-years going forward."

While exercising restraint on the spending side, Brown has helped increase the state's revenue intake. California has a highly progressive tax code that relies heavily on taxing income and capital gains earned in more affluent places like Palo Alto and Beverly Hills. But Brown showed no hesitation in asking voters in 2012 to further raise taxes on those with personal incomes over $250,000 as part of a package that also raised the sales tax. In 2016, voters gave him a 12-year extension of the income tax increase.

All these factors together—Brown's fiscal constraints, his willingness to raise taxes and the overall health of the state's economy—have turned California's finances around. Before he took office, it was common to hear that California, which faced chronic budget shortfalls larger than most other states' budgets, was going to be the next Greece. The state was unable to pay its bills, often resorting to IOUs. California led the nation in municipal bankruptcies. Kevin Starr, a celebrated California historian, wrote that it was on the verge of becoming America's "first failed state."

You don’t hear that kind of talk anymore. Brown inherited a shortfall of $27 billion, but he's leaving with $18 billion stashed away in the state's rainy day fund. He paid down much of the short-term debt his predecessors had taken on, as they dug their way temporarily out of holes while leaving bigger messes behind. Now, the state has its highest bond rating in two decades. At one point this year, it was sitting on $31 billion worth of voter-approved but unsold bonds.

Every American governor elected in the large Class of 2010 is leaving his or her state in better financial shape in 2018, thanks to the long recovery that followed the last recession. But none has accomplished as dramatic a turnaround as Brown, who is leaving plenty of money in the bank for his successor (almost certainly Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom) to play with. "He held the line single-handedly," says state Sen. Bob Hertzberg. "He made a lot of tough choices. The credit goes to him 100 percent. Not 96 percent, 100 percent."

With Republicans dominating Washington and a majority of states, California has been a beacon for progressives and a target of scorn from conservatives. The state is an incubator for liberal legislation on matters such as the minimum wage, paid sick leave requirements, automatic voter registration, immigration protections and LGBT rights. This fall, Brown signed a law that requires women on the boards of public companies. Opening an environmental summit he hosted in September, Brown was asked how he thought President Trump would be remembered on the climate issue. "I think he’ll be remembered on the path he’s on now—liar, criminal, fool," Brown said. "Pick your choice."

Simply by virtue of his age, Brown is not among the many Democrats plotting a 2020 campaign against Trump. (He has run three times before, in 1976, 1980 and 1992.) Brown has kept a low profile in Washington, makes relatively few national television appearances and—most of the time—makes less noise about "resisting" the president than California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, who sues the administration practically on a weekly basis.

If Brown does not cut as sharp a profile on the national stage as he did earlier in his career, he’s certainly had an outsized

MAN OF TOMORROW

Much of Brown's final year has been dedicated to projects that will come to fruition long after he's gone, including a $100 billion bullet train and a $15 billion water tunnels project.
impact on his own state, which is home to one out of every eight Americans. “Jerry 2.0 has been one of the most successful governors in California history, and also far better than Jerry 1.0,” says Ethan Rarick, associate director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of a biography of Pat Brown, Jerry’s father. “Jerry 2.0, in my opinion, deserves to be up there with his father and Hiram Johnson and Earl Warren as among the most consequential governors in the state’s history.”

During his early career, Brown rose like a rocket. He won his first election, for a seat on the Los Angeles Community College Board of Trustees, in 1968. He used that position as an unlikely launching pad to statewide election as secretary of state the following year. In both jobs, he showed a knack for earning publicity. He used the issues of campaign finance and lobbying restrictions as a platform for his first successful run as governor. In the post-Watergate year of 1974, Brown succeeded Ronald Reagan, who had unseated his father eight years earlier.

To win the Democratic nomination that year, Brown defeated the state assembly speaker and a senior member of Congress. He clearly benefitted from his father’s name. (His formal name is Edmund G. Brown Jr.) But Jerry Brown rejected much of what Pat Brown stood for, sharing Reagan’s sense that state government had grown too big and unwieldy. “I almost lost because of Pat Brown stood for, sharing Reagan’s sense that state government had grown too big and unwieldy. “I almost lost because of you,” Brown told his dad during an Ojai wedding night moment caught by stage microphones. “People remembered you as such a big spender.”

Frustration has always been a Brown characteristic. He was Mr. Era of Limits in the 1970s, believing the state couldn’t afford the type of spending that typified his father’s tenure. State spending did go up by 8 percent during Brown’s first year in office, but that was a much slower pace than the 12 percent average growth seen under Reagan. He became known for his “small is beautiful” approach, cutting his own office budget and creating the nation’s first energy efficiency standards. The showier side of Brown’s asceticism—he ditched the state limousine in favor of a Plymouth and refused to move into the governor’s mansion, sleeping instead on a mattress on the floor of a $250-a-month apartment—helped earn him national attention. So did his relationship with singer Linda Ronstadt.

Just two years after being elected as governor, Brown ran for president. He got into the race late, announcing his candidacy in March 1976, but he won five out of the six primaries he entered, finishing second to Jimmy Carter in the overall Democratic primary vote. “If he came in a month earlier, he probably would have become president,” Hertzberg says.

Back home, thanks to Brown’s refusal to sign off on many new initiatives, the state ran up a $4 billion surplus, worth about $14.5 billion in today’s dollars. That rankled voters chafing at property tax bills that were rising fast, along with home values. They wanted to see some of that money returned to them in the form of tax cuts. But Brown, in one of his biggest career failures, was unable to shepherd a tax relief bill through the legislature. That led to the passage in June 1978 of the ballot measure known as Proposition 13, reducing taxes for homeowners by 57 percent and imposing a requirement for two-thirds votes in the legislature to approve future tax increases. Prop. 13 set off a tax revolt across the country and severely constricted state and local finances in California. “A lot of historians attribute the passage of Prop. 13 to his inability to come up with a reform package in time,” says Olmsted, the UC Davis history professor. “It was an opportunity to pass property tax reform that was not nearly as draconian, and he muffed it.”

Running as a self-described “born-again tax cutter,” Brown easily won reelection as governor in the fall of 1978. But, passing up a campaign for a third consecutive term as governor, he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1982 and lost. Having failed in all his attempts to get a tax relief bill through the legislature, Brown started over, reinventing himself as a local politician. As mayor of Oakland from 1999 to 2007, he was an early rider on the downtown revival bandwagon, seeking to lure 10,000 residents to a city center that was then mostly derelict. (As mayor, Brown himself was sleeping on the floor again, this time on a futon.) He left the Oakland mayoralty to become state attorney general, and immediately began planning for his gubernatorial comeback in 2010.
Brown may never have been a quasi-hippie, as he was portrayed during his first stint as governor, but he clearly brought more discipline to the job upon his return in 2011. He’d learned both from his earlier terms in Sacramento and from the other jobs he held along the way. With his national ambitions curbed, he’s lost the interest he showed early in his career in trying to drive headlines all the time. “By all accounts, back then he was not a very good manager of the state executive branch,” says UC Berkeley’s Rarick. “The second time, there’s been a much more focused, disciplined, ordered administrative role.”

Rather than dating a rock star, Brown is now married to Anne Gust, a lawyer and business executive who has been widely credited with helping to keep him focused and on schedule. She’s an indispensable adviser, part of a “troika” formed along with the governor and Nancy McFadden, his chief of staff, who died in March. “Anne was just perfect in terms of the relationship and her strategic skills,” Sen. Hertzberg says. “Jerry Brown is not really a gracious guy who picks up the phone and says thank you. That’s what his chief of staff did, Nancy McFadden.”

Brown runs a lean staff and has been disciplined about his policy proposals. His State of the State addresses are not run-on affairs. Instead, every year he has picked two or three major initiatives that he’s wanted to see happen. You’d be hard-pressed to come up with a list of big proposals he wanted and didn’t get. “In moments of celebration, people will talk about the next thing,” says Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon. “What I remember about those moments is how argumentative he could get. In his office talking about cap and trade, he’d lean over and say, ‘Well, we’re not going to do anything about fracking like you want to.’”

Brown wants other politicians to know that celebratory moments don’t last, and that it’s necessary just to keep governing. He’s also “fearful of nostalgia,” as Rendon says, reluctant to talk about what he’s already done. Brown has certainly spurned any talk this year about his legacy. Having said that, he’ll often tell legislators why they shouldn’t do something that was tried and failed during his 1.0 days, or that he wants to undo mistakes he made during his first governorship. Notably, he changed from being a public safety hard-liner back then to questioning mass incarceration of nonviolent criminals.

But there are some challenges Brown hasn’t taken on. He never expended his political capital to try to roll back aspects of Prop. 13, which has led to decades of complaints about inadequate financing of the state’s schools and infrastructure. Setting aside Brown’s high-profile rail and water tunnel projects, the infrastructure problem will grow markedly worse if voters approve a proposition this month rolling back a gas tax hike that was enacted last year. And, despite the billions that Brown has socked away in the state treasury, California remains highly sensitive to boom-and-bust economic cycles because of its progressive tax code. The tax on top earners that he convinced voters to approve and extend has made that problem worse.

There’s also debate about what sort of overall shape the state itself is in as Brown prepares to leave office. California has plenty of strengths, aside from its enviable climate and natural beauty. Its tech and innovation economy remains the envy of the world.
If California were a nation, as is frequently pointed out, its economy would be the fifth-largest in the world. The state is home to more billionaires than anywhere other than the rest of the U.S. and China. California’s unemployment rate fell to record lows this year.

But lots of people are not sharing in the wealth. The state’s housing prices continue to spiral out of control. A package of 15 housing bills Brown signed last year has yet to result in a single dwelling being built. In large part due to exorbitant housing costs, California has the highest poverty rate in the nation, with one out of five residents living below the poverty line. If the 75 million poor Californians constituted their own state, it would be the 13th-largest in the country. Adding in the millions who live in near-poverty, or those who receive Medicaid assistance, California’s low-income residents would be the fifth-largest state in the nation.

Brown has been skeptical about expanding some traditional safety-net programs, but it would be wrong to say he hasn’t addressed income inequality. He helped enact the state’s earned income tax credit and expanded it twice. Funded by labor unions and community groups, Brown approved a $15 per hour minimum wage. He changed the state’s education funding formula to give more aid to districts with concentrations of low-income children.

His last budget similarly increased funding for community colleges serving low-income students. It also boosted funding for early childhood education, with most of the new dollars dedicated to day care slots for poor kids.

One sign of Brown’s pragmatism is his willingness to work with just about anyone who can help him get a deal done, whether it is organized labor on the minimum wage or the Chamber of Commerce on the gas tax hike. He’s always subscribed to the “caucuses of politics,” that you chart a straight course by paddling a little bit left and then a little bit right. “Others would do well to steal some of his tactics: run to the center, make transparent cuts that don’t cripple services or anger unions, use the credibility that buys you to sell a tax increase,” says Kuoossier, the UC San Diego political scientist. “Be loud when you are in the zeitgeist of public opinion—taking on Trump and climate change—and quiet when you are not.”

During his early years in office, Brown sometimes had to bring along traditionalists in his own party who were dismissive of his forward-looking ideas. Over the past few years, he’s been the clear leader of a party that has grown more progressive than he is. “He’s gone from being a young renegade to being the senior person of a party that sometimes he has to rein in a bit,” says Raphael Sonenshein, who directs the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles.

After Brown finally leaves the political scene, the younger politicians who follow will benefit from his insistence on planning ahead. “While the economy is booming, he’s constantly reminding you that it’s not always going to boom,” says Rendon, the Assembly Speaker. “When we’re in the midst of the next economic crisis, when Jerry is out on his ranch, we’ll have him to thank for the cuts not being as draconian as they’ve always been.”

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### Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

**Publication Information:**
- **Title:** GOVERNING
- **Publication No.:** 1501
- **Date of Filing:** October 1, 2018
- **Frequency of Issue:** Monthly
- **No. of Issues Published Annually:** 12
- **Publication Date:** Monthly

**Extent and Nature of Circulation**

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</tbody>
</table>

**Editorial:** Zach Patton, 1100 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 1300, Washington, DC 20036. **Managing Editor:** Elizabeth Daigneau, 1100 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 1300, Washington, DC 20036.

**Known Circulation:**
- **Total No. of copies (Net Press Run):** 72,043
- **Total Legitimate paid and/or requested copies:** 81,566
- **Total copies not distributed:** 1,178
- **Total nonrequested distribution:** 4,961
- **Total distribution:** 70,685

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Elizabeth Daigneau, Managing Editor
Solving the Home Affordability Crisis

A GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS & LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERS

COMPLIMENTARY HANDBOOK AVAILABLE SOON FOR DOWNLOAD AT WWW.GOVERNING.COM/PAPERS
Sabrina Bland stands outside her “forever home,” which she purchased from the city of Baltimore for just $15,000. She’ll spend another $100,000 to make it livable.
Fixer Uppers

Empty and dilapidated houses are a problem for most cities. Baltimore is trying some innovative ways to deal with it.

Story and photos by David Kidd
Nikki Moore is holding an open house in East Baltimore, in an old rowhouse that’s up for sale on Asquith Street. The place dates from the 1920s; it is one of two dozen similar homes on the same side of the block. But instead of arranging the furniture and baking cookies in the kitchen, she is removing a warped and weathered sheet of plywood that covers the front door. The house is empty, as it has been for decades. The asking price is $10,000, but there’s room to bargain.

On this rainy Tuesday evening, water is coming through a second-floor skylight and a broken window in the back bedroom. The whole place is dark and dirty and dank. Besides trash, the only things to be found in the house are an old railroad lantern and a pile of newspapers from 1991. A headline reads: “Dow surges again, closes above 2800.” None of this deterrs the one and only prospective buyer, who stops by to take a quick look inside, and seems unfazed by what he sees. He’s had his eye on this property for a couple of years, waiting for it to come on the market. Moore doesn’t join him inside; she won’t go through the door or even up the front steps.

For 10 minutes, Moore and the potential buyer huddle under a red umbrella on the sidewalk outside. “He’s going to buy it,” she says, watching him walk away.

The house is owned by the city of Baltimore, and Moore is not a real estate agent. She works for the Department of Housing & Community Development. The run-down house is being offered for sale by Vacants to Value, a program Baltimore has created to get people back into some of the many thousands of abandoned homes that plague the city. Targeting streets and neighborhoods that seem to offer the best chance of recovery, the program offers city-owned vacant homes at low prices to developers and individuals alike. Buyers must prove they can afford to purchase a property. They also have to secure funding to rehabilitate it, which costs much more than buying it. And they must do this within a prescribed amount of time, usually one year. Help is available in submitting bids and applying for an array of financial incentives and tax credits offered by the city and state of Maryland. If a property lacks a roof—a common occurrence—the city will often install a new one at no cost to the buyer.

In 1950, Baltimore was the sixth most populous city in America, with nearly 1 million residents. As the suburbs beckoned and industrial jobs left the city, so too did the people. Last year, the population was down to 611,648 and dropping at an accelerating pace. But while the people have departed, the homes they occupied are still there. The list of 16,000 vacant houses has remained constant for the last decade. Of those, the city owns about 2,500, plus 7,000 empty lots. With no one to live in them, fix the roof and cut the grass, they slowly succumb to the ravages of time and weather. Entire blocks are left empty and neighborhoods are decimated.

A succession of plans to repair and repopulate Baltimore’s abandoned housing goes back to the early 1970s. The first and most famous of these was the “Dollar House” program. At that time, the city had purchased a number of properties to make room for an anticipated highway that never materialized. The small, historic homes were offered to anyone willing to fix them up. The program was successful enough to continue into the 1980s, although the prices paid were often considerably more than one dollar. But despite favorable national publicity and the initial enthusiasm that surrounded getting a home for nearly nothing, Dollar House gradually fell apart. Buyers were often unable to see a project to completion, especially after federal construction loan programs ended in the early 1980s. By 1982, buyers were responsible for obtaining financing and hiring contractors. Far less than a third of that year’s 300 buyers ever completed their renovations.
a grip on the problem, but with limited success. As recently as a year ago, there was talk in the Baltimore City Council of reviving the Dollar House idea. But changes in the city in the last 40 years would make that a difficult proposition. Not the least of those changes is the presence of many more vacant homes and many fewer people with any interest in owning them.

Vacants to Value is different from earlier efforts in two important ways: The homes offered for sale are strategically located in places that seem to have at least some chance for a comeback. And no one is allowed to take possession without full financing in place.

Baltimore has a housing problem that many cities have; it’s just worse there than in most of them. But not all: Cleveland, Detroit and Philadelphia, among others, are saddled with similarly vast expanses of unused, dilapidated housing. Nationally, the number of unoccupied homes rose 26 percent between 2005 and 2010. Attempts to reduce the glut of vacant houses in most cities fell far short in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The economic recovery that followed has seen a decline, but the number of vacants across the country is still greater than a decade ago.

In 2001, then-Philadelphia Mayor John Street launched what he called the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative and promised to spend $300 million. But the results were underwhelming: At the time the program launched, there were an estimated 57,000 vacant properties in the city. Street pledged to demolish 14,000, but was able to tear down just half of those. Recently resurrecting a twist on the Dollar House idea, Philadelphia now allows homeowners to purchase one of the city’s 40,000 empty lots for $1. But the lot must adjoin the homeowner’s property and cannot be worth more than $75,000.

In Cleveland, which was hit particularly hard by the foreclosure crisis of 2007, a study in 2015 by the Thriving Communities Institute found nearly 9 percent of the city’s residential structures to be vacant. A recent report from the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy stated that the number of vacant in Cleveland is at an “epidemic level.” But it’s trying, just as Baltimore and Philadelphia are. With a collaborative alliance between lenders, for-profit and nonprofit groups, Cleveland’s Slavic Village Recovery Project is completely rebuilding blighted but structurally sound homes within a 530-acre area in the city. The move-in-ready homes sell for $50,000 to $69,000. Whether this targeted project can achieve enough success to create a positive spillover effect remains to be seen.

The vacant housing problem vexes smaller cities too. Gary, Ind., and Flint, Mich., have a proportionally worse problem than Baltimore, Cleveland or Philadelphia. According to a recent study by Alan Mallach of the Center for Community Progress, an urban policy think tank, some small towns and rural communities suffer vacancy rates twice those of metropolitan areas.

Mike Braverman, Baltimore’s commissioner of housing and community development, looks out over his city through an expansive window on the 13th floor of his downtown headquarters. Rattling off names of city employees, developers, contractors and even individual homeowners, he seems to know everyone who has ever had anything to do with the city’s housing. Before he was named commissioner last year, Braverman’s 30-year career with the city included stints as the legal director of the code enforcement department and as deputy commissioner of permits and code enforcement.

As a result of a reorganization by Mayor Catherine Pugh in 2017, Baltimore now has two separate housing agencies. One of them administers federally funded housing programs, and the other
focuses on community development. The latter is Braverman’s territory, and Vacants to Value is part of it. “The mayor is committed to a big vision for neighborhoods,” Braverman says, adding that the division of authority allows him to “take Vacants to Value up to an entirely new level to focus on neighborhood transformation.”

Braverman believes his agency can revitalize depressed neighborhoods without dispossessing or ignoring the people who already live there. “There should be a mixed-income community,” he says. “People with higher incomes need to move there, but not at the cost of displacing existing residents.”

Last year, the city of Baltimore commissioned a report on its work by the Center for Community Progress. “We have found,” the center concluded, “that the Vacants to Value program has been highly successful in certain respects, but less so in others.” The program was given high marks for targeting areas of the city where strong market conditions made housing renewal feasible. Vacants to Value falls short, the report says, when it comes to addressing crime, drugs, foreclosures and other factors that contribute to the decline of neighborhoods.

Six seasons of the TV series “The Wire” depicted the city as a dangerous and drug-infested place. The show regularly filmed in the Greenmount West neighborhood, where resident Steve Solomon recalls that the fictitious series often seemed more like a documentary. “They always filmed at night,” he says, nodding to a spot on nearby Barclay Street. “That was where all the drug dealers hung out.”

Fifteen years later, in the same spot, he is watching as a group of young kids and their moms splash in a small water park. The neighborhood, Solomon says, is “night and day from what it used to be.” Barclay Street is at the center of the changes that have come to Greenmount West. Five years ago, Adam Kutcher and his wife Becky Eisen were looking to move there from Washington. Their enthusiasm was such that they tried to recruit some of their D.C. friends to buy on the same street so they could all raise their children together and share in Baltimore’s urban revival. “We pitched everybody that we knew,” Kutcher says, but nobody was interested. Undaunted, Kutcher and Eisen pushed on alone, buying a pair of houses on a block rife with vacant buildings for $3,000 each. It was more difficult than they had anticipated to get, join, finance and rebuild the two deteriorating houses.

But if their move to Greenmount West was a gamble, it seems to be paying off. Taking advantage of all the financial incentives available through the city, Kutcher and Eisen had originally calculated it would be five years before their house would be worth the amount they invested in it. “Honestly,” Kutcher says now, “we’re getting real close to that a year in.” Back when they submitted bids for the two houses, there were no other potential buyers. Two recent sales on the same block each had eight offers.

Around the corner from Kutcher and Eisen, a half dozen tiny rowhouses sit at the end of a short alley. Neglected for years, the houses had collapsed roofs and one had a tree growing through it. The city didn’t see any value in repaving the short street in front that was deeply cratered and nearly impossible to drive on. But SAA-EVI Development, a firm with ties to the neighborhood, did. It stepped in, buying and rebuilding several of the small homes. Just behind them sits an old warehouse that the firm hopes to purchase and replace with multifamily affordable housing. “This is our neighborhood and we like to do everything we can to help it out,” says Aleksandr Saurna, senior director of finance at the firm. SAA-EVI has committed to the community by putting its offices in a nearby building purchased from the city, one that had been vacant for 40 years. Besides being home base for the developer,
the repurposed building has apartments, retail and a restaurant. “Now it’s a cornerstone of the neighborhood,” says Suurna. 

The last vacant house on Barclay Street was recently sold to a young couple who had been renting nearby. The neighborhood's transformation, if not complete, is well on its way.

It is unrealistic to think that every abandoned house in Baltimore can be rehabbed and reoccupied. There are just too many of them. Demolishing some of the unused housing stock is sometimes the only way to save a neighborhood. Often that means taking down entire blocks. That’s a dire situation, but when done right it can benefit redevelopment, attract investors and stabilize existing communities. After all, it’s difficult for a developer to sell building materials from homes slated for demolition. They hire former inmates, people recovering from drug addictions and other individuals who have difficulty finding employment. Workers remove every piece of salvageable wood and brick from the century-old houses. The cleaned bricks and milled beams and boards are then sold to builders, architects and furniture makers in Baltimore and around the country. “The idea is to hire and train the next generation of carpenters, millworkers, skilled craftsmen, and do all that work right here in Baltimore,” says Brick+Board Director Max Pollock.

For now, the organization benefits from foundation money to rent space and buy the necessary machinery.

Thirty-year-old Sabrina Bland is standing in front of the house she just purchased in Baltimore’s Reservoir Hill neighborhood. Someone has stenciled “FORGIVE US” in big letters on the sheet of discolored plywood that covers the front door. Clutching a small pile of pictures of the forlorn kitchen and bedrooms, she talks excitedly about the upcoming renovation and move-in date. Nodding toward a neighbor’s house, she says, “I told him it looks nice, but wait until you see what I do with mine.”

Bland works for the state of Maryland and is studying urban planning in grad school with hopes of getting her degree in December. She’s been looking in the area for two years and was outbid more than once before landing this property for $35,000. Compared to many of the vacant houses for sale, her new place is in fairly good shape, but Bland expects to spend another $100,000 to make it livable. “This is my forever home,” she says, looking out from the top of her marble front steps.

Four miles to the north, Mayor Pugh is participating in a ribbon-cutting at a newly refurbished and enlarged public school. New school construction throughout the city is being undertaken with an eye toward neighborhood revitalization. Directly across the street from the school is a row of houses, each with a new colorful tile roof. Two of them, with balconies and banners tied to the front porches, are for sale and open for inspection.

One of the two homes is being offered by Vacants to Value completely rebuit and move-in ready. The house has been tastefully staged with new furniture. A big jar of cookies, a platter of croissants and a pot of coffee are arrayed on the kitchen counter to entice would-be buyers. The place gets a lot of traffic from curious neighbors and people who have just watched the ribbon-cutting.

After the ceremony, the mayor makes her way across the street to admire the new homes. She stops to shake hands and talk with a neighbor’s concern. Sporting a rotted tree stump in someone’s front yard, she says, “That shouldn’t be left like that. Let’s get someone over here to take care of this.”

The woman sitting on the steps next door is clutching a Vacants to Value flyer. “Homeownership may be closer than you think,” it reads. With Commissioner Braverman at her side, Pugh steps up and asks, “Are you renting? Have you thought about buying one of these places? You really should consider it. It’s a great deal.”

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GOVERNING
Eight years ago, Greg Moody got a call in his car from John Kasich, who would soon be elected governor of Ohio. Moody had worked on health policy with Kasich during his congressional tenure in the 1980s and '90s. “Greg, we’re getting the band back together,” Kasich told Moody.

Kasich laid out his vision for a special department to focus on reimagining health care in the state. The way he saw it, even the most well-meaning health reform efforts too often get derailed because of bureaucratic confines. Siloed agencies either don’t want to work together or can’t share information with one another. Government can’t always get private providers to play along. Competing interests of the public, private and nonprofit sectors often muddle overarching health goals.

Moody, who was working as a health-care consultant, wasn’t sure he wanted to come on board. “I said, ‘With all due respect, sir, you were a little tough to work with,’” Moody recalls. But Kasich told him, “Oh, I’ve mellowed out since then.” So Moody accepted the offer to lead the new department. And in January 2011, almost as soon as Kasich sat down in the governor’s chair, Ohio’s Office of Health Transformation was born.

The idea was to empower a small cadre of decisionmakers to re-vamp what health care looked like from an operational standpoint, to reimagine how residents interfaced with the health-care system and to control costs. Initially, the office consisted of just nine people. “There’s a saying that ‘too many cooks spoil the broth,’” Kasich says today. “There were too many people trying to manage this sector, and you’d get nothing but confusion and inefficiency.”

One thing the governor expressly wanted to avoid was a massive reorganization of agencies. “What was going wrong in the health-care space was all of this fragmented organization. Some states have tried to solve that with a superagency,” Moody says. He had worked in one previous administration in Ohio, for instance, that had consolidated its jobs and family services departments, and “for four years we just fought the organization, and we didn’t actually do anything to improve services.”

Instead, the two decided to keep agencies largely as they were, “but draw a line around the group that we think could get the most
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BY MATTIE QUINN

CHOICES

formed the way health care is delivered in the state.

value out of working together,” Moody says. So the new office would work largely as a convening force, bringing together the heads of all agencies that touch health care—including Health, Medicaid, Mental Health and Addiction Services, Jobs and Family Services, Veterans Affairs, Administrative Services, as well as representatives of the private insurance market—to dedicate some time to reforms and long-term health improvement.

The office was initially only meant to be a temporary solution to kick off Kasich’s health agenda. “We were only supposed to be an 18-month strike team, get the right people working together, and then get out,” Moody says. But eight years later, the office is still alive. To be sure, it faces an uncertain future: Kasich will step down in January, thanks to term limits, and Moody left for a job at Ohio State University in August. The office itself is down to only two employees. But as Kasich’s administration comes to a close, it’s clear that the office he created has lived up to its name as a truly transformational force in health care. “The work of department heads is incredibly complex. It’s hard to get your head above the day-to-day,” says Trish Riley, executive director of the National Academy for State Health Policy. “When you have an office like this that respects and supports them to think big, it’s incredible—especially as health care continues to cut across so many sectors.”

Lots of states have aspired to the same kinds of health reform goals as Ohio: reduce the number of uninsured citizens, connect people with better health care, and shift from a payment model based on the number of services provided to one based on the value and quality of care. Part of Ohio’s success is the result of Kasich’s push to expand Medicaid. Since the 2010 Affordable Care Act allowed states to expand Medicaid coverage to include people up to 138 percent of the federal poverty line, 33 states have done so, bringing the national number of uninsured patients to an all-time low. Most of the Medicaid expansion states have been run by Democrats. When running as the Republican candidate for governor, Kasich had largely stayed mum on the topic of Medicaid expansion. But once he was in office, he began pushing the state to expand the
coverage. He repeatedly called on the legislature to approve expansion, but his fellow Republican lawmakers refused. So Kasich took an unconventional tack. He bypassed the legislature and asked the state Controlling Board, a bipartisan seven-member committee that oversees certain issues of the budget, for its approval. In 2013, the board voted 5-2 in favor.

Ohio’s expansion has had an especially big impact relative to other states. According to a recent report from the Government Resource Center at Ohio State University, more than 650,000 Ohio residents gained insurance, 96 percent of people who needed opioid treatment received it and 67 percent of smokers who quit cited Medicaid as a reason for their cessation. The cost to the state: $21 per person. To put that into perspective, Ohio also did an extensive study on the impact of Medicaid expansion back in 2013—it

At the direction of Moody’s office, federal Medicaid expansion dollars went toward expanding behavioral health options and community health services throughout the state, to ensure that the costliest residents were not just getting care, but getting care that served them well.

The first step was to start paying behavioral health providers a better rate. The office restructured Medicaid rates so the level of reimbursement matches a provider’s qualifications (previously all providers received the same amount based on the service they provided, not on their training or skill). It expanded the offerings of more comprehensive mental health care, so the Office of Health Transformation went even further. To prevent providers from declining to see the patients with the biggest mental health needs, and to help those patients avoid having to hunt down doctors who would see them, the state identified the 5 percent of patients that were the costliest in behavioral health and matched them with a provider who could treat them. That expanded access seems to have made a difference: The Government Resource Center’s recent study found that, among Medicaid enrollees who had been screened for depression or anxiety, 86 percent reported not to have had a problem finding mental health care.

But the real muscle of the Office of Health Transformation is its convening power. Moody began assembling different teams of leaders around each problem the state wanted to tackle. For example, one of the office’s goals was to expand community-based care for people with long-term health problems, so Moody brought together leaders from Medicaid and the Department of Aging, behavioral health professionals, and lawyers. These teams would work together intensely for a few months, and often included subgroups tasked with developing, say, new standards for background checks or more efficient methods of reimbursement. There was one rule: You couldn’t leave the room to get permission. “That way, people really sent the person in charge of making decisions for their office. And if that person wasn’t there, then a decision would be made for them,” Moody says. “That’s why I always envisioned us as a strike team. ‘Here’s a problem: Convene, disband and repeat.’”

“Since the beginning, the Office of Health Transformation has clarified their measurement targets, their policy targets and what needs to come out of it. That’s been an efficiency boon,” says Timmy Sahr, director of research and analytics at the Government Resource Center.

Perhaps the biggest shift in Ohio has been the move to pay health-care providers based on quality of care rather than the amount of services and tests they provide, which began statewide in 2014. That’s something that a few states, including California, New York and Oregon, have already done as well. But the National Academy of State Health Policy notes that Ohio has seen the most dramatic early results. Among the Medicaid population, costs for patients with chronic lung disease, for example, decreased by 18 percent; costs for asthma patients decreased by 20 percent. More health outcomes will be assessed as they become available, but

offered a version of Medicaid expansion before the Affordable Care Act—and found health outcomes largely unchanged.

The results in Ohio—and Kasich’s dogged support—have made Medicaid expansion a somewhat more bipartisan issue there than in many other states. “Medicaid works,” says Barbara Sears, Ohio’s Medicaid director, who previously served as a Republican state legislator for eight years. “The number of people I could line up for you who said, ‘I got that surgery,’ ‘My diabetes is under control,’ ‘My high blood pressure is under control,’ ‘I can now work 20 hours a week,’ ‘I can now go back to school’—there are endless stories.”

But what really set Ohio apart was how the Office of Health Transformation worked to make sure that Medicaid enrollees were getting the most out of their benefits. The office helped develop an integrated eligibility system so beneficiaries could see whether they also qualified for food assistance, child care, child welfare and cash assistance. Ohio’s Department of Administrative Services, which worked directly with the Office of Health Transformation to build the system, received an award for its work earlier this year from the American Public Human Services Association.

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Ohio's health transformation hasn't all been smooth sailing. Legislators and residents were roiled when a 2018 audit found that pharmacy benefit managers—third-party middlemen who administer drug benefits—had billed Medicaid $223 million more than they reimbursed pharmacies. After a series of stories in The Columbus Dispatch about the snafu, the state legislature demanded to know what had gone wrong. State Medicaid officials blamed the managed care plans, which directly handle pharmaceutical benefits. "That was just not a sufficient response," says Amy Rohling McGee, president of the Government Resource Center. "It's a testament to the Office of Health Transformation. They were capable of getting it done."

Greg Moody says he's always envisioned the Office of Health Transformation "as a strike team. 'Here's a problem: Convene, diagnose, disrupt, and repeat.'"

Although nearly 90 percent of Ohio's Medicaid patients are covered by this pay-for-value model of care, In order to make that pay-for-value model more sustainable, the Office of Health Transformation again convened stakeholders to agree on which population health goals were the most urgent. They settled on three: mental health and addiction, chronic diseases, and maternal and infant health. So providers now get bonuses for meeting improvement goals in those areas, as well as "enhanced payments" on administrative changes that are known to help keep people well: offering same-day appointments, providing some form of 24/7 care and prioritizing office visits based on risk.

That has transformed Medicaid reimbursers, but Kasich wanted to standardize those goals for private insurers as well. He invited the CEO of every major health insurance company in the state to a roundtable, where he asked if they would follow the state's new model of primary care that offers incentives based on the health goals outlined. Every CEO said yes, although not everyone has followed through so far. "I've been involved in just about every health reform strategy since 1978, and this is the first governor who has been able to move the private sector to really participate in health-care reform," says Lorin Ranbom, director of the Government Resource Center. "It's a testament to the Office of Health Transformation. They were capable of getting it done."

Ohio's health transformation includes Ohio, where neither Mike DeWine, the Republican candidate, nor Richard Cordray, the Democrat, has said whether he plans to keep the health transformation office in place. Nonetheless, Moody and Kasich hope that the new administrations will see the Office of Health Transformation as a model. When he ran for president in 2016, Kasich took heat from his Republican primary opponents for his health-care decisions. He was assailed for expanding Medicaid, which many Republicans see as an unsustainable financial proposition that merely increases the size of government. These days, Kasich says he's not interested in pleading his case to other Republicans about why he believes expanding and transforming health care works. He says he's convinced history will show he made the right decision. "Tell me how [else] you're going to go about meeting the needs of people. Tell me what you're going to do to help the drug addicted and mentally ill. I haven't heard of a better solution," he says. Everything else "is all smoke and mirrors."
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www.governing.com/govtransformation
Representatives from 19 U.S. cities and counties have agreed to reduce carbon emissions from vehicles by pledging to incorporate electric cars into their municipal fleets.

It’s a small but symbolic step in the efforts to address climate change. Cutting carbon dioxide pollution from transportation has proven to be one of the hardest parts of that campaign. In fact, emissions from cars and trucks became the biggest source of CO2 pollution in the U.S. in 2016.

The cities that have promised to buy electric vehicles include Cleveland, Fayetteville, N.C., Houston, Los Angeles, Phoenix and Pittsburgh. Los Angeles County and Ohio’s Cuyahoga County also joined the program. All told, the collective has committed to buying 376 vehicles in its first year, with the expectation that participation will grow in future years from light-duty sedans to include electric buses, trucks and other heavy-duty vehicles.

For the cities involved, the real hurdle was setting up a system that could capture the cost savings of buying items in bulk while also abiding by different cities’ procurement rules. Fleet managers will get technical expertise from the Electrification Coalition, which will help them consider things like how many chargers they need to install, what type of telematics to put in the vehicles to monitor them and what range their vehicles can travel between charges, among other things. – Daniel C. Vock

Electric cars, primarily used by civilian officers, sit atop the Los Angeles Police Department’s parking garage.
What’s Your Hurry?

State and local projects—whether setting up a new child care program or building a bridge—often go overtime or over budget. Or they come in on time and on budget, but fail to deliver the promised outcomes. Do we have governments full of inept project managers? Not by a long shot, but it’s relatively common to find those who haven’t been trained effectively for the job. “Based on our research,” says Murat Bicak, senior vice president of strategy for the Project Management Institute, “a lot of project managers are accidental project managers.”

In a number of cases, employees come up through the ranks as engineers or technicians, and when a new project comes along, they are suddenly elevated—sometimes with little additional pay—to the role of project manager. There’s no training provided.

Making sure there is the right amount of experience at the project director level is crucial. This is true for both big and small projects. “You could have 10 small projects,” says Stephanie Dedmon, deputy CIO of Tennessee, “and if they are not managed well, you could still lose a lot of money.” But even the best-trained project managers frequently come up against challenges that are out of their hands. Corrie Stokes, Austin’s city auditor, says that “even if we had an army of the best project managers, the city often skips design reviews.”

According to Kinton’s team, “If Public Works bypasses its quality management process, the city may pay for the decision in avoidable project cost increases.” In this case, many of the change estimates, and accompanying cost increases, reviewed for the construction of a new central library stemmed from missing, unclear or conflicting items in the designs that a review might have caught.

One of the most important elements in a project’s design comes at the very outset, when careful review and deliberation make it less likely that project managers will run into snags. According to Amy Delcomyn, deputy chief operating officer with the Illinois Department of Central Management Services, her state, which has little fiscal wiggle room, can’t afford surprises. So Illinois is making efforts to involve all the participants in a project from its genesis. “That makes for less scope creep,” she says. “It shortens timelines. It reduces overspend. And it lowers the number of defects.”

Projects come up short for the most human of managerial reasons.
The Business of Government

BY MARK FUNKHOUSER

On Leadership

The Quality You Can’t Learn

Anyone can learn to lead. Not everyone has the courage to do it.

When I hear or read an invocation of the term “leadership” or, even worse, a call for “bold leadership,” I tend to roll my eyes. The words are often used in ways that are so vague as to be virtually meaningless, a kind of wishful, magical thinking. When someone writes that what is needed in a given situation is a list of attributes, the first item on the list is usually bold leadership. Right, that and world peace and an end to poverty.

Most of what is taught and written about leadership focuses on the private sector. I believe that leading in government is far more difficult. Government has to solve problems that industry cannot solve. No one makes a profit trying to fix the opioid crisis or homelessness. Getting things done in government involves managing powerful, often conflicting interests.

So where does government go to get some bold leadership? Many believe that it is some sort of inherent quality that people either do or do not have. I disagree. In my view, leadership is mostly learned. We can find the fundamentals within ourselves. Over time, we can strengthen our ability to lead, just as we can strengthen our muscles. Leadership isn’t mystical. At its core, leadership is enabling a group of people to achieve a goal that none of them could accomplish on their own.

The primary tool real leaders need is communication. I’m not talking simply about making speeches or giving direction, but about listening and speaking in ways that make others feel heard, understood and valued. It starts with learning. Martin Luther King Jr. spent an enormous amount of time studying philosophy and theology; he also listened closely to the sermons of the leading preachers of the day. King was an accomplished communicator by the time he was thrust into the leadership role of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

There is one inherent quality that is fundamental to leadership: courage. We value and even admire people who work hard and play by the rules, but leadership requires something different. Leaders take on the problems of others and are willing to risk ridicule, derision and the loss of position or reputation to overcome those problems. That generally means disrupting a system; some current winners may become losers. There will be pushback by people who benefit from the existing order and have the power to inflict pain. In guiding Rhode Island through two rounds of badly needed pension reform, first as treasurer and now as governor, Gina Raimondo endured plenty of pushback and pain, but she pressed on relentlessly.

It is this test of moral courage that separates real leaders from those who merely hold positions of authority. Somebody needs to be in charge of every organization, of course, but power and leadership are not the same things. My shorthand for all this is to talk about love, hope and mission. People have to know that you care about them. They have to have hope that if they stick together and stick with you, their circumstances will get better. And they have to believe in the mission—not only that you are competent, but also that you have a plan and the plan is going to work.

The world is filled with serious challenges, most of which threaten in some way those we love. These challenges can be overcome only by effective collective action. You can’t have that without leadership, however you define it.

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The Business of Government

Public Money

Land of Opportunity

The new tax law could lure fresh investment to distressed communities.

Twenty years ago, the rural hamlet of South Boston, Va., was a thriving blue-collar, middle-class community. Most of its residents were employed in manufacturing, such as at the nearby Burlington Industries textile plant and Russell Stover candy factory, or out in the tobacco fields.

Today, the once vast tobacco industry is largely derelict (China is now the world’s leading producer), and the Burlington plant and Russell Stover factory are closed. “We lost about $100 million in payroll out of this community over four years,” says South Boston Town Manager Tom Raab.

This is a familiar story for the nation’s rural areas, but Raab is optimistic about a turnaround. He is pinning his hopes, in part, on the new “opportunity zones” program passed in last December’s federal tax overhaul. It could generate billions in economic development for distressed communities like South Boston—provided they get the help they need.

Opportunity zones represent a breakthrough approach to community development. The program relies on an ingenious mechanism for spurring investment: Instead of tax credits or other traditional subsidies, investors are offered a temporary tax deferral for capital gains reinvested in designated opportunity zones. For investments held longer than 10 years, that deferral becomes forgiveness—a huge boon.

Unlike under past tax credits, there’s no cap on the amount that can be invested. What’s more, the process is simple. Instead of purchasing tax credits through a secondary market, investors simply create a “qualified opportunity fund” as a vehicle for making investments. The Economic Innovation Group (EIG), which developed the opportunity zone concept, estimates that as much as $6.1 trillion in unrealized gains held by both corporations and households might be waiting to be tapped.

Figures like these, as well as the benefit’s structural advantages, are why states are hopeful. “We’ve already had a number of inquiries and meetings with potential investors,” says Virginia Secretary of Commerce and Trade Brian Ball. “A lot of businesses are looking for opportunities to reinvest.”

A couple of potential hazards, however, could derail the ability of places like South Boston to reap the program’s benefits. One is federal regulations on implementing the program, which the Treasury Department has yet to issue and finalize. Speed is of the essence here. Opportunity zones expire in 2026, and certain benefits are not available for investments made after 2019. Final regulations are expected early next year, but the current administration has proven anything but predictable.

A more significant hazard, however, is that both investors and opportunity zones will need extensive matchmaking to find each other. “A governor’s job doesn’t end with the zone selections—it begins,” says EIG co-founder John Lettieri. “You may not get a single dollar of investment if you don’t work for it.”

Therefore, states will need strategies for marketing and promoting their zones, as well as identifying promising investors and steering them toward the best opportunities. This kind of support will be vital for places like South Boston, which is competing against roughly 8,700 other opportunity zones for investment dollars.

As a community of under 8,000 people in rural south central Virginia, the town has no budget for slick promotional materials to court wealthy potential investors. Town leaders don’t rub elbows with Silicon Valley venture capitalists, either. Identifying investors, Raab says, is “one more ball to juggle” along with understanding the mechanics of the new program and dreaming up opportunities investors may find attractive.

All of these challenges are eminently fixable if states step up to the plate. In the meantime, places like South Boston are waiting for the opportunities that could and should be their due.

Email akim@ppionline.org
The Business of Government

Transportation + Infrastructure

BY NICOLE GELINAS

Private Works, Public Woes

A government’s responsibilities don’t end when a private company takes over.

While President Trump’s infrastructure proposal released in February promised $1.5 trillion over a decade, it called for just $200 billion in federal spending. Much of the rest would come from the private sector. Already, several investment groups—Blackstone, Brookfield, I Squared and KKR, among them—have put together billions in possible funding for such projects. And as it is, private capital is playing a larger and larger role in public works. But as a recent disaster illustrates, government can never abdicate its responsibility to provide reliable infrastructure.

America’s Interstate Highway System is a key target for private investment. Crucial parts of the network, including Interstate 95 in Connecticut and I-65 in Indiana, have fallen into disrepair, and tax dollars haven’t been sufficient to keep up with the wear and tear on a system that’s more than half a century old and seeing record use.

In a recent book, Rethinking America’s Highways, the Reason Foundation’s Robert W. Poole Jr. suggests that America do what much of Europe and Asia are doing: invite private capital to take over more of the responsibility of building, maintaining and operating major highways in exchange for toll revenues. In some circumstances—particularly for the new high-toll express lanes in affluent, rapidly expanding areas—this model can work well.

Ironically, though, the broader success of such a financial model depends just as much on government competence and honesty as the traditional, publicly funded model does.

Consider this summer’s calamity in Italy. In August, 43 people died when a highway bridge in Genoa collapsed onto the neighborhood below. To Americans, it was a familiar tale. The Morandi Bridge opened in 1967, just like the I-35 bridge that collapsed in Minneapolis 11 years ago. In both cases, decades of wear and tear, overseer and deferred maintenance exacerbated the effect of a design flaw.

But there is a twist here: A private company, not a government, was in charge of the Genoa bridge. A group controlled by the Benetton family (yes, that Benetton family, famous for its ‘80s-era T-shirts) owns Autostrade per l’Italia, the Italian highway operator that was privatized nearly two decades ago. Back then, the group purchased what the Financial Times called a “natural monopoly,” with the right to raise tolls by more than the rate of inflation to maintain and operate key routes.

That doesn’t necessarily mean that Autostrade is to blame for the bridge collapse. A key point of dispute now is whether Autostrade adequately warned the government about maintenance deficiencies and whether, in turn, the government delayed approving a nearby road to relieve pressure on the bridge.

The Morandi collapse may be a rare tragedy, but it points to some more common pitfalls. It should have been a warning sign, for example, that back in the late ’90s Autostrade was the only bidder for the road assets, suggesting not true market competition but crony capitalism.

Then there is the issue of who is to blame when infrastructure fails. It’s a bigger problem for aging infrastructure. A bidder who purchases a 50-year-old highway is going to pay a much lower price to account for unknown risks, such as hidden corrosion that may have contributed to the Morandi collapse.

On new construction, though, another set of questions arises: What, and where, to build? These questions should remain more in the political and policy planning arena than in the market. A community, not a company in pursuit of revenue, must decide, for example, whether it wants dense apartments served by a transit system or single-family sprawl served by ever-expanding highways. In a healthy democracy, the private sector doesn’t lead these public decisions. It follows them.

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The privately owned Morandi Bridge in Genoa, Italy, collapsed in August in part because of deferred maintenance.
Q: Why is Medicaid an essential government program?

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson reaffirmed our nation’s commitment to treat all people equally when he signed Medicaid legislation into law. And with that simple stroke of a pen, he changed our country, if not the world, forever. Medicaid is a commitment to helping our most vulnerable citizens at a time of need, and that commitment is grounded in the founding principle of our nation — that all people have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

With the enactment of Medicaid — part of President Johnson’s war on poverty — our leaders sought to honor this unique American value by seeking to eradicate the scourge and despair of poverty and give every American, regardless of race, income, or standing, the same chance to be healthy.

Q. Why do we hear arguments against Medicaid?

Unfortunately, the word “entitlement” has become part of our lexicon to describe programs such as Medicaid rather than words like “compassion” and “empowerment.” We hear debates about its cost and see finger-pointing at recipients who are often stereotyped. These misconceptions, unfortunately, often overshadow the facts.

Q. Can you clarify some of the misconceptions around Medicaid?

Medicaid serves low-income families and individuals who have no other means for health care, including the elderly, blind, disabled, chronically ill, and children.
Today, with Medicaid’s expansion in 32 states following an optional provision in the Affordable Care Act, an estimated one in five Americans are covered by Medicaid. According to the Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services, that’s around 75.1 million people who are enrolled in Medicaid programs nationwide; nearly 40 percent of them are children and another 22 percent are elderly or disabled. And the 6 million recipients who are senior citizens use a disproportionate percentage of resources, as compared to the larger population, at nearly 40 percent.¹ The reality is, the faces of Medicaid are the faces of America. They’re our neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family members. For many of them, Medicaid serves as an engine for their American Dream — a dream to live a healthy life that puts them on the pathway to independence and prosperity.

Q. What are the results of Medicaid?

Since it started over 53 years ago, Medicaid has served and improved the lives of hundreds of millions of Americans by giving them access to health care. People have gone on to become teachers, first responders, athletes, and, yes, legislators.

The idea that healthy people who are capable of self-sufficiency are on Medicaid for life is a fallacy — studies have proven that Medicaid can actually be a pathway out of poverty for many. One of the more recent studies said Medicaid “is among the most effective anti-poverty programs.” Researchers found that it reduced child poverty by as much as 5.3 percent, and in Hispanic and African American households without disabilities, Medicaid reduced poverty by 6.1 and 4.9 percent, respectively. This is what we should focus on — how to leverage Medicaid even more to help people overcome poverty.

Q. How do we reconcile the issue of Medicaid’s cost versus its benefits?

There are no easy answers because approximately 14 percent of Americans still live in poverty and we can’t stop providing our most vulnerable citizens with health care. So, maybe we should actually reframe the Medicaid debate and ask ourselves instead, “What if we didn’t need Medicaid anymore?” In other words, what if we could finally and truly eliminate poverty? Some may find this an absurd question. But is it really any more absurd than asking 50 years ago, “What if we could send a man to the moon and bring him safely back to Earth?” And when talking about poverty, we already know the answer to this “what if” scenario. We know that eliminating poverty would be one of the most important achievements in our nation’s history. The challenging part is figuring out the “how.” But I am confident the solution is in our midst.

Q. With all the good Medicaid has done, why do we hear more debate in Congress about its future?

That’s a great question, because the debate playing out in both Washington, DC, and in states and courtrooms across the country has pushed many to pick a side: Either shrink Medicaid’s burden on the taxpayers who fund it or expand access to health care and improve health outcomes for our neighbors in need. It’s a false choice. We are America. We can and must do both.

¹. “Estimating the Effects of Health Insurance and Other Social Programs on Poverty under the Affordable Care Act.” Research supported by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as part of their joint program on the social, economic, and political effects of the Affordable Care Act.
When Children Are Traumatized

There’s a lot that’s indisputable about childhood trauma. Emotional or physical abuse early in life impacts health outcomes as children grow up. Community- and family-based approaches to dealing with trauma are better than institutional settings. And children of color are more likely to face traumatizing childhood experiences.

Those events can include something as common as divorce, but also encompass circumstances such as having an incarcerated parent, living with someone with a substance abuse disorder or being exposed to domestic violence. Traumatized children, experts know, are not only more likely to develop mental health problems but also to suffer from physical health challenges such as diabetes or heart disease later in life.

But despite what experts know, there’s still a lot they don’t, and in the past year or so there’s been a groundswell in the research and advocacy communities to understand more about what causes trauma in childhood and what are effective ways to address it. “The science is clear, but what we don’t know is how to apply it at the policy and practice level,” says Jennifer Jones, director of child and family systems innovation at the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities.

Last year, Wisconsin first lady Tonette Walker convened 11 governors’ spouses to learn from specialists about the science of childhood trauma and explore promising community approaches. This summer, “untreated trauma is the underbelly of violence” was the tagline for a public awareness campaign in New Orleans highlighting the need for people to talk to the “difficult” children in their neighborhoods. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy completed an in-depth cost-benefit analysis of all of the state’s trauma care programs. And there’s been a push around reshaping how to speak to traumatized children, such as asking, “What happened to you?” rather than the more traditional—and loaded—question, “What’s wrong with you?”

Complicating the situation is federal legislation affecting how states will treat children needing foster care, who disproportionately have traumatic childhood experiences. Under the Family First Prevention Services Act passed in February, the feds will stop reimbursing states for children who stay for more than two weeks in group homes that aren’t certified to serve youngsters with severe mental health needs. The federal government will, however, offer financial incentives for states to try evidence-based programs that keep families together.

While child welfare advocates applaud upstream efforts like family preservation, the move away from group homes will be difficult for states to achieve before the October 2019 deadline, given how hard it already is to find foster families. From 2012 to 2017, half of the states saw decreases in their rolls of foster families, according to The Chronicle of Social Change.

The new federal rules “would be like if the Affordable Care Act said it wasn’t going to cover hospital stays,” says Matthew Stagner, vice president and director of human services at Mathematica Policy Research. “Of course we want to move away from residential housing, just like we want to reduce hospital stays. But this is a pretty blunt instrument.”

For now, those who research and deal with childhood trauma and its lifelong aftermath hope Washington will allow states to be creative. “We have to ensure that these promising practices are science-aligned and using the latest advances in neural science,” says Jones of the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities. “We also want to make sure we’re leaving room for innovative solutions, since we are still learning what works.”

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Three years after Hawaii became the first state to establish a goal of 100 percent renewable electricity sources by 2045, California has followed suit. In September, the state announced that it too was seeking to rely on zero-emission energy sources by the same year.

Both California and Hawaii already get a hefty portion of their electricity from renewable sources. Roughly 33 percent of Hawaii’s electricity comes from rooftop solar and another 20-25 percent from wind, hydroelectric and other renewable sources. California, meanwhile, estimates that 32 percent of its retail energy sales were powered by renewables last year.

According to a report this spring by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, the U.S. is moving toward renewable energy faster than many experts anticipated. In January, for instance, the Energy Information Administration announced that almost half of the utility-scale power generation capacity installed last year involved renewable energy. It also predicted that wind power will surpass hydroelectric power this year as the nation’s largest source of renewable energy. Already, renewable sources are responsible for providing more than 17 percent of U.S. electricity—that’s almost the amount of power produced by the country’s nuclear power plants.

This fast pace, in part, is emboldening more and more governments to commit to 100 percent clean energy. Across the U.S., two states and 93 localities—84 cities and nine counties—have adopted ambitious 100 percent clean energy goals. An additional six cities—Aspen, Colo.; Burlington, Vt.; Georgetown, Texas; Greensburg, Kan.; Rock Port, Mo.; and Kodiak Island, Alaska—now generate 100 percent of their energy from clean and renewable sources.

The Sierra Club’s Ready for 100 Campaign tracks the number of entities committing to 100 percent clean energy. They count a place if its “leadership has established a goal to transition to 100 percent clean, renewable energy […] through a standalone resolution or proclamation, or integrated into a community’s climate action plan.”

In all, a total of approximately 48.7 million Americans are covered by these commitments, accounting for roughly 15 percent of the population in 2017. California alone accounts for about 39.5 million people.
The Whalers, a high school football team in Barrow, Alaska, won their first Division III state title last year. They hope to repeat this season. The team plays above the Arctic Circle, in the northernmost community in the United States. Their nearest opponent is 500 miles away. It costs $20,000 to either fly the Whalers to an away game or bring a visiting team to Barrow, which is paid for with help from the state. When the program started a dozen years ago, the boys practiced on a patch of dirt. That changed after a Florida football fan heard about the fledgling team and raised more than $500,000 to pay for new blue and yellow turf—the Whalers’ colors. Snow is routinely cleared before games, and players and spectators alike are subjected to the wind and cold from the frigid Chukchi Sea, just 100 yards away and where actual whalers can be seen bringing in their catch. —David Kidd
IF YOUR CITY USES THESE

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