

## Obama, build a lasting urban legacy

**An ambitious proposal for the President's second term:  
Create a new federal Department of Cities**

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**President Barack Obama speaks at the 2012 National Urban League convention in New Orleans.**

[President Obama](#) has signaled that he will focus in a second term on immigration, gun control and climate change. All these issues are important, but none is as critical to his long-term legacy as helping chart a more livable, prosperous and creative course for the future of American cities.

Indeed, those other big policy goals are deeply intertwined with helping shape a brighter and more innovative urban future.

The product himself of cities from Honolulu to Los Angeles, Boston, New York and Chicago, Obama, probably more than any modern President, has been shaped and molded by our largest metropolises. It was urban voters in closely contested states who put him over the top in both elections.

But even with Rahm Emanuel (who would go on to become mayor of Chicago) as his chief of staff and a newly created Office of Urban Affairs, his first term produced not a single big, transformative urban idea.

The President needs to make cities a centerpiece of his remaining time in office. And what better way to do that than to establish a new cabinet-level Department of Cities?

It is seldom acknowledged by our political culture, which routinely and reflexively sees small-town America as the “real America,” but the well-being of the United States is increasingly determined by the well-being of its cities.

Cities and metros are the engines of our economy. America’s 50 largest metros house two-thirds of our population but produce three-quarters of our economic output. Just 20 of them generate almost two-thirds of our innovations. As dysfunctional Washington has faltered, our cities have become laboratories for pragmatic bipartisan policy innovation, pioneering new approaches on everything from schools, crime and gun control to economic development.

If the President takes the lead, the products of those urban laboratories can be harnessed, their progress accelerated.

Yes, we have the Department of Housing and Urban Development, but it’s woefully out of date. HUD was created to mitigate poverty at a time of wide-scale suburban flight. And the Office of Urban Affairs founded by Obama in 2009 — whose first director was former Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión — has been toothless, with little to show for its efforts.

The new Department of Cities would absorb pieces of HUD and the Departments of Energy, Transportation, Education, Commerce and Interior. Rather than bloating the federal bureaucracy, it would make it leaner, by directing federal investments strategically to the places where they can provide the most bang for the buck. With a simple mission of catalyzing and accelerating intelligent urban reforms, it could be the first department to embrace and act on the new mantra of more effective government: “cut to invest.”

Though it would likely be perceived as a sop to liberals, given D.C.’s battle-hardened political culture, a Department of Cities is just the opportunity the President needs to break with the old top-down Washington ways and forge a new, bipartisan approach to public policy. America’s

cities are led by Democrats and Republicans and Independents — leaders who understand they must be accountable to their citizens every day.

How would the Department be structured? It could take shape around a bipartisan panel of mayors, city-builders and experts, similar to the Council of Economic Advisors. Potential members: former mayors like Philadelphia's Ed Rendell and Milwaukee's John Norquist, who heads the Congress for New Urbanism; business leaders like Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh (who is redeveloping downtown Las Vegas); Rocco Landesman, the Broadway producer and former National Endowment for the Arts head, and academics like Harvard's Edward Glaeser.

Some would doubtless rush to criticize the very idea of a new Department of Cities, saying it will ultimately squelch the innovativeness of cities under the heavy hand of the federal government. It's better to keep Washington out entirely, they'd argue.

But the federal government makes massive investments in them across a wide range of programs, ranging from transportation and housing to education, crime and economic development — none of them coordinated in any meaningful way, many acting at cross purposes.

A new cabinet-level department would see to it that public policy is aligned to cities' best interests, not stacked against them. That could leverage and enhance the important urban innovations and initiatives already underway.

Take the case of our sagging infrastructure. Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy exposed the vulnerabilities of our coastal cities to the rising sea levels and intensified weather activities accompanying climate change. Current estimates indicate that a minimum of \$2 trillion dollars is needed just to bring vital urban infrastructure up to date.

These investments will redound not just to the benefit of the cities themselves, but to the wider economy. New infrastructure has always underpinned new eras of economic growth, from the rise of our great industrial cities in the late 19th century along railroad lines to the highway-building that underwrote suburbia and powered the great economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s.

Yet up until now, infrastructure improvements have been subsidized on a case-by-case basis, and in typical pork-barrel fashion. Current programs squander far too much money building highways that spread people apart, at the cost of the increased clustering and density that economists agree spurs everything from innovation and productivity to new jobs.

Densely-built urban areas are already greener, more efficient and more productive than their sprawling counterparts. With strategic direction, they can be made even more so. A new federal department can take the lead by rolling back existing policies that promote sprawl and car dependency and replacing them with new ones that encourage bike lanes, pedestrian zones and mass transit.

Creating more affordable housing in America's increasingly expensive cities is another area where a new cabinet-level agency could help — not through hit-or-miss efforts like subsidized housing projects, but by funding pilot projects that would permanently increase density, such as

the “micro-apartments” that are currently under construction in New York City, while working to spur needed revisions of zoning and building codes that will enable conversions of office and industrial space to housing.

Most of all a new Department of Cities could be a primary engine of job creation. As Felix Salmon recently pointed out, “jobs require cities.” But if cities excel at creating high-pay, high-skill work in technology, knowledge, professional and creative industries, they produce even more dead-end jobs that contribute to vast income inequality.

A Department of Cities could convene a national summit on how to help upgrade and elevate low-wage service work — one that would identify and spread the best-practices already being established by progressive companies and successful workforce development initiatives across the United States.

Inequality is not just a growing problem among individuals, but between cities and regions. Highly skilled, highly educated, and highly paid workers are increasingly concentrating in just a handful of very large or very knowledge-intensive cities while older manufacturing cities continue to fall behind.

While the political temptation is to promise to bring back manufacturing to those less-advantaged places, a new Department of Cities could help replace such backward-looking tendencies with genuinely forward-looking initiatives that build on their knowledge institutions and universities — as is already happening in cities like Pittsburgh and Cleveland — enabling them to better compete in the changing, global economy.

A Department of Cities would also help strengthen our nation abroad. As Patrick Doherty recently argued, urbanism and sustainability should underpin a new U.S. “grand strategy” for foreign affairs.

Worldwide, urban populations are projected to double over the next quarter century. By helping developing nations create dense, clean, safe, energy-efficient cities of their own, funneling aid and expertise directly to their mayors, the U.S. can effectively exert soft power, winning new friends while resuming its place at the vanguard of nations.

“We’re the level of government closest to the majority of the world’s people,” New York City’s Mayor Mike Bloomberg famously declared. “While nations talk, but too often drag their heels — cities act.” For too long, they have been left to act on their own.

Just imagine what a Mike Bloomberg could accomplish as America’s first Secretary of Cities.

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