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Expert Voices 2016: Urban Policy and the Presidential Election

BY: PENN IUR FACULTY FELLOWS AND SCHOLARS



With all eyes focused on the presidential race, now is the time to discuss the great challenges that our nation faces. The candidates have a unique opportunity to address the issues that affect the lives of their fellow Americans, but what are those issues and how should they think about them? **What major urban policy issues should the candidates address?** We posed this question to our Penn IUR Faculty Fellows and Scholars. In the following eleven essays, they explore the urban policies that deserve the candidates' attention. From their insights, it is clear that no city is alone. Local governments share common challenges, and national politicians can make a difference in urban lives, from their health and

environment to their housing and transportation to their safety and wealth. By putting a spotlight on these priorities, we hope Americans get the debate they deserve -- and the leadership informed by rigorous policy discussion they need -- in 2016. Further, the U.S. is not alone in the world in being a majority urban nation. Today there is a global conversation on sustainable urban development at Habitat III, the UN's conference held once every twenty years. It will be held in Quito, Ecuador next October—maybe some of the ideas proffered below will have application among many nations and their cities. (— *Engenie Birch and Susan Wachter, Penn IUR Co-Directors*)

A Century of Cities Requires Urban Policy

Richard Florida, Penn IUR Faculty Fellow, Director, [Martin Prosperity Institute](#), University of Toronto, Global Research Professor, NYU, and Co-Founder and Editor-at-Large of The Atlantic's [CityLab](#)

Let's cut to the chase: When was the last time you heard a national politician even utter the word "cities" or "urban policy?" They've barely been a footnote in the current Presidential debates.

The disconnect could not be more troubling. Cities are the fundamental social and economic organizing units of our time. They are our premier platforms for economic innovation and wealth creation the laboratories in which their solutions are devised and tested. But the ongoing urban revival also generates deep challenges. "Cities are the contradictions of capitalism, spelled out in crowds," wrote Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*. "They are engines of prosperity and inequality in equal measure, and when the inequality tips poor they look unsavable; when it tips rich, they look unjust."

It's time for a new national urban policy that sees cities as centers of innovation and wealth creation and gives them power to cope with the challenges they face. This new urban policy would focus its activities around five key areas that are essential for future urban and overall economic growth.

- Help cities increase density and clustering by reforming outmoded zoning and building codes and replacing the property tax with a land value tax to encourage denser development.
- Invest in transit to better connect cities and suburbs, and in high-speed rail to connect cities and metros to one another, while enabling the development of denser neighborhoods around transit hubs.
- Redirect the enormous federal subsidies that accrue to wealthy homeowners and encourage sprawl to more centrally located rental housing, while relieving the extraordinary financial burdens faced by less advantaged renters.
- Turn 70 million low-wage service jobs into family-supporting middle-class jobs by instituting higher local minimum wages, shortening the work week, and helping companies see better paid workers as sources of innovation and productivity improvement.
- Tackle persistent poverty through people-based approaches which invest in skills and encourage mobility and comprehensive place-based approaches that rebuild distressed neighborhoods.

As urban policy regains steam in the UK, Canada, Australia and elsewhere across the globe, it has not even registered in the United States. Our long-run economic growth, our ability to generate good jobs and restore our middle-class and rekindle the American Dream depend upon it.