

Development

Over the past decade, tens of millions of public dollars have been invested in New London. There is too little to show for all of this money. We believe that we need to re-examine the way the government attempts to re-develop the city. There should be less emphasis on large projects, less effort to micro-manage development, and fewer attempts to pick individual winners and shower favors on them in the hope that their success will lift the whole city. Instead, for reasons of both fairness and efficacy, the city should focus on making basic improvements to public infrastructure, which will lay the foundation for a broader and more secure prosperity.

Streets

We should begin with our streets. The integrity of the downtown street grid correlates with the city's economic fortunes. As the city grew in population and prosperity, its network of streets, what would in today's jargon be called complete streets, became increasingly intricate. This grid, which followed parameters used by city builders since Babylon, served the city well. So long as it was intact, the city grew and prospered while weathering all of the forces commonly blamed for urban decline: deindustrialization (whaling, our namesake industry had collapsed by the early 20th century), revolutions in communication and transportation (the advent of the railroad and the automobile), and an influx of immigrants, many of them poor, undocumented and speaking languages other than English, during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The city did not begin to decline until it began, in the name of urban renewal, to tear up its grid in the latter half of the 20th Century. Attempting to rebuild without first repairing the damage down to the urban grid is like drywalling a sagging house before rebuilding its foundation. The full repair of the grid, stretching from Garibaldi Square to Hodges Square, will take years. The first steps, perhaps by converting Bank Street and Eugene O'Neil to two-way between State and Tilley and by narrowing Bank from Tilley to Howard, could be taken by the next council.

Zoning Reform

A depressed city with an older building stock must rely on the creative and unimagined re-use of old spaces. Our current zoning process, with its traditional focus on managing uses, too often forces the entrepreneurial and the innovative, particular if they are small-time, to jump through too many hoops. The homeowner who wishes to raise chickens in her backyard, the small time mechanic who wishes to fix flats on a vacant lot, the church that wishes to provide health care find themselves stalled or stymied.

At the same time, the city allows large new construction in the downtown that are incompatible with an urban scale. The city will be saddled with these building after the uses it obsesses about are long gone. Zoning should focus more on the built environment, which after roads and other public infrastructure, are the most durable feature of a city and less on uses, which are relatively ephemeral.

Taxes

Our current tax code is both ineffective and at odds with our values.

While the city spends inordinate amounts of time and money to redevelop, it penalizes property owners who improve their property with a higher tax bill. Property owners who let their property decline are rewarded with a lower tax bill. For reasons of both fairness and efficacy, the method of calculating property taxes, especially downtown, should be adjusted to place greater emphasis on land and less on buildings.

In a tacit acknowledgement that the current tax code is at odds with the goal of redevelopment, the city often bestows tax breaks on developers of large new projects. There are two problems with this approach: it is unfair and it is ineffective. It is unfair to all of the other taxpayers, many of them longtime residents and business owners, who must shoulder a higher tax burden to make up for the newcomer's lighter load.

More importantly, this approach is an ineffective redevelopment strategy. It hitches the city's future to specific players and projects. In a vibrant, competitive economy, it is very difficult to predict who will succeed and who will fail in the long-term. If the city and state had taken all the money given in tax breaks and subsidies and spent a fraction of it on building public infrastructure, and built in accordance with longstanding principles of urban design, they could have built a foundation for the city's prosperity that would endure long after many of today's Fortune 500 companies have gone the way of Kodak.

Government Reform

The shift from a manager to an elected-mayor form of government has gone a long way to making the city government more accessible and accountable to the citizenry. But the process of charter reform remains unfinished and many of the structures and problems of the old form of government persist alongside the new. The following reforms would help.

Neighborhood Representation

Now that the mayor is directly elected, the system of electing at-large councilors makes even less sense than it did before. Does each councilor represent the city as whole, just as the mayor does? Are they each shadow mayors or do they have some distinct role? Much of the jostling this past year between the council and the mayor can be explained, not just by the inevitable growing pains of a new form of government, nor by the inevitable and often productive jockeying between the executive and legislative branches, but as a result of this nonsensical overlap of representation. Imagine how much greater the strife between the President and the Senate would be if each Senator was elected on a nationwide basis, considered herself in possession of a nationwide mandate as great as the President's with a equal scope of concern.

It makes sense to reform the charter so that councilors are elected on a neighborhood basis. This system would make for more competitive council elections, as candidates in each neighborhood district would be running against one another for a single seat. This process would encourage them to develop distinct visions for the

neighborhood they are seeking to represent. It would weaken the power of the parties and other interest groups who, under the current system, are able to drum up the 1,500 votes needed in most council elections to win a seat in exchange for the candidate's future loyalty. District representation would also ensure that each neighborhood in the city is represented, ending the current disproportionate concentration of councilors from the city's south end. Just as the shift to a directly elected mayor encourage a slew of new candidates, we believe that the shift to a district representation would encourage greater participation, by both voters and candidates, in the city's currently under-represented downtown and northern districts.

We further believe that, once in office, councilors elected by district would behave differently than councilors currently do. Each would represent a small area, home to about 4,000 people and fewer than 2,000 voters. They would be able to know this area and its inhabitants well, and because they owed their election to their support, rather than that of a party or another interest group, they, if only out of a politician's basic desire for self-preservation, would be responsive to their concerns.

District representation is the political correlate to the development strategy outline above. A fair and effective development strategy shifts the focus from a handful of big projects to a broader, more low-key investment in the public infrastructure throughout the city. District representation increases the likelihood that there is someone from each neighborhood who is knowledgeable and responsive to these pedestrian (in both senses of the word) concerns, concerns which may seem trivial on an individual basis but in aggregate spell the difference between the city's success or failure.

Boards & Commissions

The same argument leveled against the current council system of representation can be applied to the seemingly endless array of boards and commissions. A holdover of the old form of government, these boards and commissions are, like the council, disproportionately filled by the older, the whiter, the more affluent, and those from the south end. In some cases, the boards exert very little power and their only harm is that they waste the time of city staff who could otherwise be doing productive work. In other cases they exert very real power and can actually thwart the will of the city's elected officials. In this case they exert a profoundly undemocratic influence. For the vast majority of citizens, too busy earning a living to serve on one of these boards, the only opportunity to make their political preferences known is at the ballot box. To the degree that the power of the representatives they elect is diluted by these boards, their political power is diluted and the city's form of government becomes less fair and democratic.

Any reconsideration of charter reform should include an examination of all boards and commissions with an eye towards eliminating some, consolidating others, and ensuring that the representation on the remainder comes from all quarters of the city and rotates in accordance with meaningful term limits.

This reform of the boards, like the reform of district representation and the shift in focus on development strategy, can all be seen as part of the same broad effort to shift

power and focus to the neighborhoods, to devolve the power for making decisions to the people who know the area impacted and who will live with the consequences.