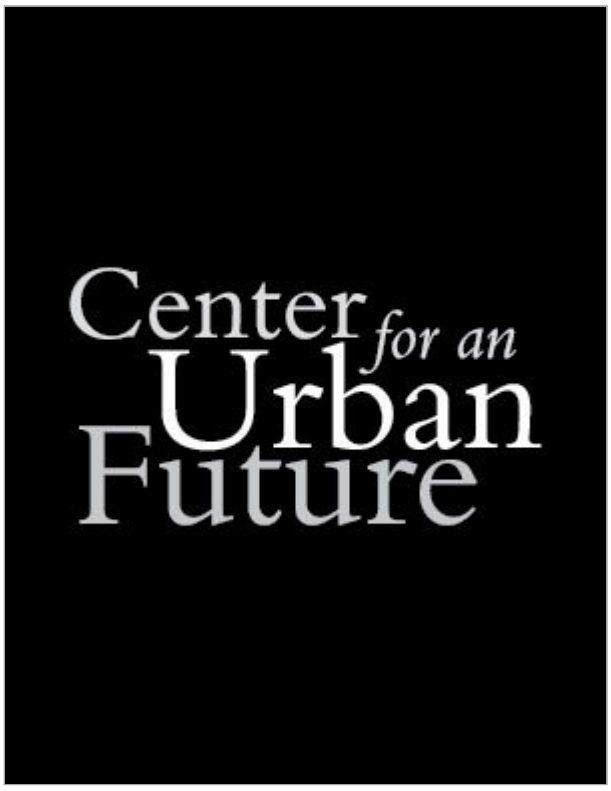


Commentary/Op-Ed - January 2009

Paying Attention to Cities

After years of federal policies neglecting urban areas, Barack Obama has sent some encouraging signals that he understands their importance. Certainly, New York could use a helping hand. In this commentary for *Gotham Gazette*, CUF director Jonathan Bowles lays out some ideas for what the president could do to aid New York. Bowles and CUF deputy director Tara Colton also appeared on *WNYC's* The Brian Lehrer Show to discuss these ideas.

by Jonathan Bowles and Tara Colton

Barack Obama's early pronouncements, from creating a White House Office of Urban Policy to promising bold new investments in infrastructure, education and alternative energy, suggest that the new president understands something that many of his recent predecessors clearly did not: what's good for cities is good for America.

New York, the nation's biggest city by population and economic activity, could greatly benefit from a president who is committed to ending years, if not decades, when the federal government all but turned its back on the needs of urban communities. Even before the current economic downturn, the city lacked the resources to adequately address mounting problems of aging public infrastructure, housing shortages, traffic congestion, environmental pollution and growing economic inequality. While these problems can't all be placed at the feet of officials in Washington, the federal government has long underfunded programs that primarily benefit city dwellers. In the last eight years, things got even worse for New York.

Federal support for mass transit stayed roughly flat since the start of the decade, even as ridership in numerous cities - including New York - surged to record levels. The Bush administration drastically reduced funding for public housing, contributing to rent hikes, service cutbacks and a nearly $6 billion backlog in capital work at the New York City Housing Authority, whose buildings are home to more than 400,000 low-income New Yorkers. The administration also underfunded the project-based Section 8 program by nearly $3 billion, dealing a profound blow to one of the nation's most critical affordable housing programs at a time when demand for low-income housing in New York far outstrips supply. And it cut funding for the nation's workforce development system by roughly $2 billion, with New York City's job training and youth employment services taking a disproportionately large hit. Perhaps most galling, New York was consistently shortchanged in homeland security funding.

Washington's disdain for the priorities of cities like New York was not limited to traditional areas of concern to urban

advocates. The absence of federal leadership on issues such as immigration, health care, energy policy, scientific research and access to higher education also adversely affected the five boroughs in countless ways.

Reciprocal Relations

New York could use a helping hand from Washington, especially in these tough economic times. While the Bloomberg administration has made progress in several areas, only the federal government can provide the resources and leadership needed to help the city accomplish its housing development goals, expand the transit system or make the city more energy efficient.

But, more than ever, the country also needs New York. In today's global economy, the nation's singular international city is inextricably linked to that of the country.

Obama, himself a lifelong resident of cities, has sent some encouraging signals that he understands this dynamic and plans to free up more resources to strengthen urban areas. But just what should he do to help New York?

A Plan for the City

Last week, the Center for an Urban Future published a report that laid out 51 specific recommendations for what the Obama administration and the 111th Congress could do to help New York.

Our recommendations started with the premise that one of the most critical jobs of the federal government today is keeping New York safe. This means allocating anti-terror funds to localities based on risk they face rather than politics, moving aggressively to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, passing legislation to get illegal guns off the street and enacting bills already proposed in Congress that would pay for thousands of additional cops in New York and other cities.

Another critical priority is helping New York and other cities maintain and upgrade their existing transportation infrastructure. Specifically, the Obama administration should dramatically increase the share of federal transportation funding that goes to mass transit, fund Amtrak at a level that enables vast improvement to intercity rail service, accelerate plans to develop and implement a more technologically advanced air traffic control system that would reduce flight delays and include more ferry projects in federal transportation infrastructure packages.

On economic development, Obama could help New York by increasing federal investment in microlending programs as a way to support the smallest entrepreneurs. A renewed federal commitment to scientific research would also go a long way given that New York is home to one of the world's largest concentrations of academic research institutions.

On housing, the president should restore funding for public housing, meet federal commitments to the project-based Section 8 program and help spur the creation of new supportive housing for the mentally ill.

There are many other things the new president could do, from taking immediate steps to ensure that the 2010 Census does not undercount New York and creating a large-scale nationwide effort to retrofit buildings to be more energy efficient, to expanding the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and streamlining the visa process to make it easier for artists to enter the country.

Others will undoubtedly have different ideas. The important thing is for New Yorkers to realize that having a friendlier audience in Washington is only the first step. Rather than simply waiting for Obama-or Adolfo Carrion, the Bronx borough president, who will reportedly head the new Office of Urban Policy-to set an agenda, New York's policymakers and champions should be helping to frame the national debate about what a more enlightened urban policy should look like and crafting a set of policy recommendations that federal officials could run with from the get-go.

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