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Is Omaha an Entrepreneurial City?

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Executive Summary

When a city thrives, one of the first things we look at is the policy decisions made at the federal, state, and local levels. These changes do not happen in isolation. Considering sets of policies is necessary in describing why a city grows. In 1968, President Nixon defined his governing approach as “new federalism,” which included reducing and reshaping federal assistance to cities by decentralizing urban policy. Cities enjoyed greater policy autonomy but became more dependent on local economic development to sustain their health.

This change, along with other changes, begins the era that scholars mark as the point in time where cities shifted from “managerial” governance to “entrepreneurial” governance. An entrepreneurial city is defined broadly as a city that uses a combination of competitive growth-oriented local economic-development strategies such as public-private partnerships, promotion of the city space, and risk sharing in development projects. Yet, to be truly entrepreneurial, local economic-development policy has to create value and not just redistribute wealth within the municipality.

The cities of Des Moines, IA, and Kansas City, MO, demonstrate two ways that a city can attempt to be entrepreneurial. They give insight into how Omaha can be a more entrepreneurial city. Des Moines focused on attracting young professionals through the construction of urban amenities such as farmers’ markets, dense neighborhoods, and trendy entertainment districts. It was following a theory popularized by Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*. The theory states that cities should focus on creating an urban environment attractive to the “creative class” made up of artists, technology workers, scientists, and other creative-industry workers.

Kansas City’s growth strategy is to use tax abatements to attract investment within its city limits. Nearly every city in the United States offers some form of tax reduction for firms willing to locate within their jurisdiction. However, the effectiveness of these incentives can often be offset when localities begin to engage in a destructive competition to attract outside business. Kansas City, MO, and Kansas City, KS, often end up in a race to the bottom, constantly shifting business back and forth.

Omaha uses tax-increment financing, or TIF, to spur local economic development. Is TIF leading Omaha to become a more entrepreneurial city? I answer no. TIF faces too many trade-offs in its use and is likely to be used in instances where the development would have occurred regardless of the use of TIF. Better oversight of TIF and an adoption of better, value-creating policies can move Omaha to become a more entrepreneurial city.

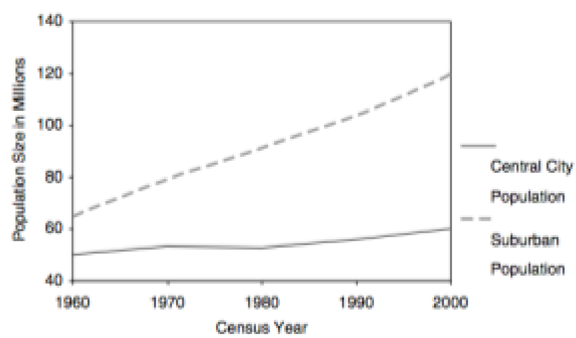
Introduction

When a city thrives, one of the first things we look at are the policy decisions made at the federal, state, and local levels. These changes do not happen in isolation, and we look to understand the set of policies that describe why a city either grows or stagnates. Changing relationships between the federal government and city governments and changing attitudes among Americans toward city life have created an opportunity for cities to be more entrepreneurial. After a long period of policies that favored the suburbs, urban development is back. In response to the Great Depression, the host of federal programs following Roosevelt's New Deal greatly changed the relationship between federal and metropolitan governments in the 1930s (Sutton 2008). Beginning in the mid-1930s, new legislation made available low-interest loans and mortgage insurance that subsidized the construction of new suburban developments. For example, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established in 1934, provided insurance to lenders in case of a mortgage default, incentivizing the construction of new homes. After the end of World War II, the FHA was paramount in the construction boom for returning soldiers.

This new construction along with the increased affordability of the car made living outside the central city attractive to many Americans. The suburban construction boom was further facilitated by the congressional authorization in 1947 of the construction of a 37,000-mile national highway network that provided access to these new communities. Suburbanization continued, resulting in the exponential growth of residents in suburban enclaves located outside the central city (see figure 1).[1]

The shifting of supply chains and transportation left many intercity areas struggling. It should be noted that FHA loans were not accessible to African Americans. This policy, in addition to other discriminatory practices in housing at the time, kept minority populations from moving to these new developments. Furthermore, the federal highway system was often constructed right through the heart of many existing African American neighborhoods, destroying their functionality.

Figure 1: Trend in central versus suburban population, 1960–2000



Source: Guest and Brown 2005

New Federalism

In response to the increasing importance of suburbs, in 1968, President Nixon decentralized federal assistance to cities that supported suburban development. This approach, labeled "new federalism," was an abandonment of urban density in favor of the new suburbs. Cities were considered a failed

[1] Figure 1 displays the rapid expansion of suburban population on the dotted line and the stagnating population of the central city on the solid line. The figure was compiled by Guest and Brown (2005) and used census-designated metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) with total populations of at least 250,000 in 2000.

experiment as events like public workers' strikes disabled their function. For example, on February 2, 1968, New York City sanitation workers went on strike after rejecting then mayor Lindsey's latest contract proposal. The strike lasted nine days, and reportedly 100 tons of garbage accumulated on the streets of New York City (Poster and Mallon 1969).

The Nixon administration consolidated major urban programs into the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The program consolidated multiple categorical federal funding programs into a single, more flexible grant. The purpose of the grant was to allow increased autonomy for cities to determine local spending on revitalization projects for the benefit of low- to moderate-income residents (Keating and LeGates 1978). All cities with a population of at least 50,000 residents or containing a "central city" in a metropolitan statistical area received automatic funding. The amount of funding was based on an algorithm that was widely perceived as having defects resulting in a misallocation of funds.

Compared to the prior categorical grants, funds dramatically decreased in the New England and mid-Atlantic regions, where many central cities were under the worst physical conditions, and increased in cities in the South (Deleon and LeGates 1978). Local officials enjoyed the flexibility of the block grants; however, the overall level of federal funds dropped in central cities with high rates of poverty (Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2004). The CDBG also increased the proportion of funding going to nonmetropolitan areas. The share of total federal funding to metro areas declined from 87.4 percent under the categorical system to 80 percent under the CDBG (Deleon and LeGates 1978).

A *New York Times* article from 1973 notes concerns among mayors regarding the shift in funding. The article states: "The nation's Mayors generally favor the change to broader grants but have expressed fears that they would lose money in the transition. Mr. Lynn said today that he was working on a day-to-day basis with city officials to make certain that no city would suffer a loss" (Herbers 1973). Federal funds to localities continued to decline in the following years. A report from the US Conference of Mayors estimated that declining funds cost cities $20 billion in funding between 1981 and 1990. The report also noted that these cutbacks placed a greater burden on local leaders to generate revenue through economic development (Sutton 2008).

In light of this history, scholars mark the 1970s as the point where cities shifted from "managerial" governance to an "entrepreneurial" government (Harvey 1989). Now largely independent to facilitate growth, entrepreneurial cities actively pursue innovative strategies intended to maintain or enhance economic competitiveness in relation to other cities and economic spaces coupled with the active marketing of the city as entrepreneurial (Jessop and Sum 2000). This led to many cities in the United States adopting tax incentives, starting public-private partnerships, engaging in risk sharing, actively marketing their cities, and competing with one another. Similar to entrepreneurship in the market, a new innovative policy will be adopted by other cities as a best practice (Jessop 1998).

What Is an Entrepreneurial City?

All cities in the United States are entrepreneurial to a greater or lesser extent. They each advertise unique advantages of geography, industry, weather, and culture that would get employers and employees to come to the city and make the most use of community investments. To understand how we might evaluate cities relative to some entrepreneurial ideal, we need an explicit objective. City entrepreneurial activity is defined broadly as a combination of competitive growth-oriented local economic-development strategies, public-private partnerships, promotion of the city space, and risk sharing in development projects (Hall and Hubbard 1998). Moreover, an entrepreneurial city entails the active pursuing of innovative strategies intended to maintain or enhance economic competitiveness in relation to other cities and economic spaces coupled with an active marketing of the city as entrepreneurial (Jessop and Sum 2000). The city ultimately rises or falls depending on whether it attracts good workers and good employers who interact in a way that make the city a great place to live and build a community.

Kansas City and Des Moines offer differing entrepreneurial strategies for accelerating city growth. Kansas City used a plethora of incentives to lure business to its jurisdiction. Des Moines invested in urban amenities attractive to young professionals. Both models can be evaluated and shed light on what city policy in Omaha should and should not do.

Evaluating Two Entrepreneurial Cities: Des Moines and Kansas City

There are many different ways that city governments attempt to accelerate economic development. Some focus on attracting young professionals, the "creative class," through the construction of urban amenities such as farmers' markets, dense neighborhoods, and trendy entertainment districts. Other cities prioritize attracting businesses to their city using tax incentives. Kansas City used a variety of tax incentives to attract outside business, while Des Moines focused on attracting the "creative class."

Popularized by Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the theory states that cities should focus on creating an urban environment attractive to the "creative class" made up of artists, technology workers, writers, and other creative-industry workers (Florida 1992). The creative class would then come and spur economic growth in the city. Essentially the mantra was "If you build it, they will come." This strategy became the go-to for a huge number of cities.

Des Moines generally followed the creative-class theory. Its entrepreneurial strategy focused on using public-partnerships to create urban amenities attractive to young professionals. The plan succeeded. A flurry of articles over the past couple years have taken notice of the city's growth. In January 2016, *Politico* declared, "Des Moines, Iowa: How America's City Got Cool." In October 2014 and October 2015, the *Atlantic Magazine* ran headlines stating "Do the Most Hipster Thing Possible—Move to Des Moines, Iowa" and "Why Des Moines Is a Millennial Paradise Right Now." The articles focus on the influx of the "creative class" as one of the key drivers of Des Moines's growth.

Yet, the theory has encountered a couple of issues. The creative class is likely to move to cities experiencing economic growth rather than be the cause of it. A study using Florida's own data from 1990 to 2004 by two social scientists found that "the measurement of the creative class that Florida uses in his book does not correlate with any known measure of economic growth and development" (Hoyman and Faricy 2009). Florida is not totally wrong, and a focus on attracting young professionals can be a successful strategy. If you package Florida's "creative class" with "human capital," then his theory is no different than standard economic theory. Having lots of educated people with disposable income in a knowledge economy generally produces growth and increases consumption.

If the Des Moines story is retold as urban amenities attracting professionals with high rates of human capital, then the economic story is more coherent. In a review of Florida's work, Edward Glaeser (2003) wrote, "Highly skilled people in high skilled industries may come up with new ideas." These ideas create the type of growth that Florida is predicting. But it is important to not conflate Florida's twenty-three-year-old "creative" barista with Glaeser's high-human-capital forty-one-year-old engineer.

Another growth strategy for many cities is to use tax abatements to attract investment within their city limits. Nearly every city in the United States offers some form of tax reductions for firms willing to locate within their jurisdiction. However, the effectiveness of these incentives can often be offset when localities begin to engage in a destructive competition to attract outside businesses.

The constant bidding for business among localities can run amok, resulting in two cities attempting to be entrepreneurial but only participating in zero-sum employment trading. For example, the Greater Kansas City area "border war" entails the use of incentives by Kansas City, KS, and Kansas City, MO, to lure business across the border. The magazine *Governing* reports that since 2009, about 5,700 jobs in the Greater Kansas City area have moved from Missouri to Kansas, and nearly 4,000 jobs have moved from Kansas to Missouri, all due to tax incentives (Farmer 2016). If the cost of tax incentives offered to businesses exceeds the businesses' positive spillovers or if the business would have located in the area regardless, then the tax incentives create no real value for the city.

An ideal city policy should focus on maximizing growth within the city in a way that is beneficial to all residents in the area. City policy that invests heavily in urban amenities to attract young professionals but fails to serve current residents is an inequitable, exclusive growth. If the costs to taxpayers in subsidizing the urban amenities intended to attract these young professionals is greater than the positive spillovers produced by the influx of these new residents, then the policy is more a transfer of wealth from current residents to new young professionals than truly entrepreneurial.

Regarding tax incentives, if the cost of the tax subsidies offered to businesses exceeds the positive spillovers of their locating in the area or if the business would have located in the area regardless, then the tax incentives create no real value for the city.

Growing from Within

Prioritizing luring business and residents from outside a locality has too many problems, from destructive competition between cities to transferring wealth from one group of residents to another. A more promising form of city policy is focused on growing from within. The Brookings Institution's Global Cities Initiative prioritizes this type of economic development, which depends on existing businesses and community stakeholders, rather than attracting outside businesses. Focusing on business and other institutions with a stake in the community increases cooperation since all parties, whether they are companies, universities, or other institutions, are tied to the long-term health of the community.

Prioritizing business retention and expansion over luring mobile business to a jurisdiction enables more long-term growth. The report by Brookings states, "By 'growing from within,' rather than solely chasing firms from the outside, metro areas can make strategic investments and forge collaborations in applied research, innovation, skills development, and modern infrastructure that together create the inputs for long-term success" (Barker, Liu, and Gootman 2016). Focusing on institutions such as universities and other "sticky" stakeholders within the area, the city hopes to foster a more sustainable economy in the area.

The broader goal of the Global Cities Initiative is to focus on business retention and growth. Through accessing foreign markets, midsize firms within the city can grow and expand, tapping into the local workforce. Furthermore, the information gap is less present in endogenous-growth strategies. The firms targeted for Brookings's Global Cities Initiative are stakeholders within the community and cannot as easily exploit local governments for incentives as mobile firms can.

Cities leverage industries already present in their communities and grow them by tapping into the global market, rather than competing with other firms for growth. An interview with San Antonio mayor Ivy Taylor illustrates this switch in priority:

> *For many years, our primary economic development strategy was to recruit new domestic companies, with a secondary emphasis on local retention and expansion. However, we realized that this strategy was not leading to sustainable growth—for our city, our businesses, or our residents. Companies that were expanding—and even our existing employers—needed a skilled workforce, better logistics, and improved infrastructure. So we knew that we needed to take stock of our assets and then be intentional about growing our economy from within. We identified industries where we had strengths and then sought to fill in around them, to support them and create even more specialization. (Liu 2016)*

Cities can be entrepreneurial by doing this in a number of ways.

Kansas City, MO, and Des Moines both have engaged in the Brookings Institution's Global Cities Initiative. Their aim has been to increase exports within their respective cities and increase foreign direct investment. For example, Kansas City created an export "concierge service" that identifies and consults firms with export potential. Des Moines held a Global Insurance Symposium focused on bringing global insurance agencies to Des Moines. These strategies focused on tapping into key assets already located within the city. By focusing on assets already located within the city, local governments lower the risk both of favoring one class of citizens over another and oversubsidizing outside business and development.

Omaha History

Omaha has experienced many of the same problems that many of America's cities have faced. A shift away from the hub-and-spoke centralized supply chain, which made Omaha's location in the country very desirable, toward a direct-to-store delivery supply chain rattled the local economy. Along with these supply-chain changes, population also began to decrease in the downtown area. Like many cities, Omaha lost population during the period between 1970 and 1980. When population growth did take place within the city, it occurred far west of the city center. Coinciding with the shift from managerial to entrepreneurial governance happening in cities across the United States in the mid- to late 1970sxw

Resurgence

As development moved westward from the central city, real estate neighboring the downtown area was left vacant and undervalued. Over time, developers realized they could revitalize the area and benefit from the higher density and being located next to the central business district. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Omaha had experienced a rapid increase in investment in the central business district.

As the downtown experienced renewed growth, the value of neighboring areas of the city became more attractive for development, increasing the “rent gap.” The rent gap is the difference between the rent collected under land’s current usage and the rent that could be collected under a better use (Smith 1979).

To help incentivize the closing of rent gaps within the city, Omaha often used tax-increment financing (TIF). TIF is a public-financing tool that allows a city to issue a bond to a developer who is looking to repurpose a parcel of land in a designated TIF district that would not happen but for the use of TIF. A city helps finance a project and then is paid back using the “increment” between the property taxes before the development and the property taxes after the development. The property tax before the development, or base tax, continues to go to the previous taxing authorities. Once the bond has been paid off, the full property tax, both the increment and the base tax, will be available to all taxing authorities.

In the eyes of Omaha’s public officials and city planners, TIF is an entrepreneurial policy tool. It partners the city with local developers and ensures that development that would normally not take place can occur because of the use of TIF. TIF, in theory, allows development that would not otherwise happen and in turn increases property values in the area over time. Whether TIF is a necessity in most projects, meaning that a development would not have occurred but for its use, remains an unknown.

When deciding to give TIF grants, local governments like Omaha City Hall face an asymmetric-information problem. Firms are the only party in the deal that really knows whether the development would occur but for the use of TIF. To solve this problem, cities issue TIF grants to ensure the development. Yet it can be difficult for cities to know which projects require TIF and which do not. In some instances, a development will take place where TIF was granted but not required. Both Kansas City and Des Moines have implemented policies to lower the risk of giving TIF funds to projects that would already occur.

Kansas City has a full-time TIF oversight committee that gathers information on potential TIF projects. Of the proposed TIFs in 1997, 43 percent were discouraged, 24 percent were, and 33 percent were approved (Funkhauser 1998). The oversight committee in Kansas City is able to lessen the impact of asymmetric information and determine whether the development would really happen but for TIF. In Iowa, the original TIF law originally allowed for it to be used for anything considered “substandard” or “blighted.” In 1985, the criteria for TIF were expanded to cover anything that would facilitate economic development. In 2012, Iowa amended the TIF law to require increased oversight and the consideration of alternative development options (Girardi 2013).

TIF is often used in Omaha for big development projects. Yet it does not help Omaha become a more entrepreneurial city. As a result of the rent gap manifesting itself in different areas of the city, Omaha has begun to rely heavily on TIF grants. Recently, TIF has been used in a number of big projects in Omaha. In October 2016, the city council voted 7–0 to approve $15 million of TIF funding for the headquarters of an architectural and engineering firm (Moring 2016). In May 2016, the planning board approved four new TIF projects, collectively totaling $8.2 million (Burbach 2016).

Effectiveness of Tax-Increment Financing

Whether incentives, particularly TIF, produce a benefit depends on the case. There are stories of both success and failure of TIF projects. TIF is sometimes used in successful projects, yet whether the development would have occurred without it is impossible to know. Analyzing the use of TIF on a larger scale, the academic literature does not offer any conclusive evidence that TIF spurs local economic growth. An analysis of the use of tax-increment financing in northeastern Illinois found that cities that adopt TIF grow slower than those that do not. The researchers hypothesized that TIF trades off higher growth in the TIF district for lower growth in nearby non-TIF districts (Dye and Merrimam 2000). This hypothesis is particularly important to the evaluation of TIF as an entrepreneurial tool. While it might be true that growth in one area is better than growth in another, an entrepreneurial city should be focused on creating real growth and not shifting development from one area of the city to another. For example, on a citywide basis, other researchers have found that the use of TIF has no general impact of city employment (Bryne 2010). If TIF is to be an entrepreneurial policy, it has to do more than simply shift development and employment within the city.

The argument for TIF is that development creates positive externalities, benefits that are not captured by the developers and ripple through the city. If the cost to the taxpayer, along with the opportunity costs to overlapping taxing jurisdictions, is less than these positive externalities, then the TIF was successful in creating a positive surplus of value.

Ultimately, most entrepreneurial strategies taken by cities are engaging in speculation about the benefits of development. Strategies that develop from within, focusing on “sticky” institutions and residents within the city limits, lower the potential for negative outcomes of incentive use. Strategies such as tax-increment financing that focus on spurring development often incentivize projects that would have occurred regardless, make the risk borne by the city too large, and create too many opportunity costs to overlapping taxing jurisdictions in the area. Due to these issues, it can be said that TIF does not move Omaha closer to becoming a more entrepreneurial city.

A Better Way

Entrepreneurial policies that Omaha could adopt include easing any zoning restrictions that restrict the closing of rent gaps in the city. Ensuring that city policy eases, rather than impedes, the closing of rent gaps within the city will lower costs for developers and weaken the claim that TIF is needed to offset development costs. Omaha should also follow the actions of Kansas City and Des Moines and create TIF commissions that evaluate the actual need in TIF for a specific project. This will allow Omaha to better assess the “but for” provision in TIF and guard against using TIF on projects that would happen regardless.

Embracing strategies that focus on growing the city from within by partnering with businesses and residents already in the city are better ways for the city to create value through their policies. Lastly, Omaha should focus on keeping housing prices low, fostering high rates of human-capital formation among current residents through education and innovation workshops, and transforming the city into an attractive “consumer city” for the highly skilled, high-human-capital residents who are the true drivers of local growth (Glaeser et al. 2001).

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