



## Cities Visiting Other Cities A Revitalization Tool

*Bennett Gray Wilson*

City-to-city visits can energize urban initiatives, but more study is needed to understand the precise role of past trips in apparent outcomes.

Urban transformation takes many forms, and U.S. cities have much to gain from studying what their peers have done. A few years ago, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston organized city-to-city visits as part of its engagement with civic leaders in Springfield, Massachusetts. The idea was to study similar cities that had seen success in revitalization.

Now the Boston Fed is assessing whether such trips would be helpful for its Working Cities Challenge, an initiative advancing collaborative leadership in smaller cities and efforts that improve the lives of low-income people. Launched in 2013, Working Cities incentivized 20 postindustrial cities in Massachusetts to work across sectors on creating deep and lasting change. Boston Fed partners provided monetary awards for winners, and the bank's Regional & Community Outreach department orchestrated learning opportu-

nities for winners and nonwinners—just the beginning of a multi-year process.

To understand whether leaders from Working Cities might benefit from participating in a city-to-city visit, the Fed team asked, What considerations should go into the planning? How much staff time does it take? What have past participants said about the outcomes?

### **Planning for Success**

City-to-city trips provide an opportunity for leaders in one city to learn from similarly situated cities and build long-term relationships. The trips, which last two to three days, give visitors insights into what has worked and what hasn't in host cities. Potential topics include ways to invigorate workforce development or to enlist the private sector in solving problems. A typical itinerary includes tours and meetings with municipal leaders, heads of nonprofits, business leaders, and government representatives.

Participants get to explore beyond their comfort zones, bonding during coffee breaks, over dinner, on buses, even getting a little lost together. New ideas—or confirmation of ideas previously considered—often emerge. In a visit to Grand Rapids,

Michigan, for example, participants from Springfield’s Common Capital saw firsthand what tackling the silos between organizations could accomplish.<sup>1</sup>

The Fed team also made a list of best practices for city-to-city planning:

- creating a working group with participants to oversee program design,
- establishing specific issue areas and learning goals,
- selecting a destination that has demonstrated strength in similar circumstances,
- encouraging follow-up and lasting engagement, and
- keeping a record of outcomes.

Working groups should include community leaders with diverse areas of expertise and openness to making key decisions in tandem. Joint decision making is important both for developing the program and for seeking buy-in of other attendees and the destination city’s organizations.

Destination selection should include articulating a clear purpose for the trip and identifying learning goals. Cities should be chosen to match the needs and opportunities of the traveling city. The two cities should have similar population sizes, demographics, challenges, and assets. Host cities should have a strategy that all stakeholders there promote. In Winston-Salem, for example, the Fed found that leaders across sectors promoted workforce development (even using identical language to do so). In Grand Rapids, the focus was on developing a collective vision, executing on it with a wide variety of stakeholders, and using data to identify what worked.<sup>2</sup>

With an eye to the learning goals, the organizers should select several cities with the most relevance for participants. In making the final choice, the working group should give preference to destinations where it has been able to build a deep list of contacts.

The destinations for the Springfield trips were chosen because they had similar characteristics but were more “resurgent” (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Bethlehem/Allentown, Pennsylvania).<sup>3</sup> Each had leveraged an asset to jump-start revitalization—for example, the arts, an engaged philanthropic or business community, local colleges, or medical institutions.

Springfield was considering a casino and regarded Allentown and Bethlehem as a good match because those cities had been through the experience of bidding for a casino. The Bethlehem and Allentown leaders explained to Springfield visitors how the mayors, originally in competition, designed policies that would give the winning city 80 percent of the casino revenues due to the municipality and the losing city 20 percent. They also described the array of factors, apart from casino jobs, that boosted the area’s resurgence, and

the visitors returned home with new ideas.

### During and After the Trip

Among the useful activities for the visit itself, says the Boston Fed’s Anthony Poore, are “panel discussions, site visits, group dinners, and structured debrief sessions at the end of each day. Such activities allow participants to process what they saw and, in collaboration with their peers, identify any commonalities, trends, or best practices.”

After participants return home, a debrief that includes local leaders who did not participate—but might be instrumental in the adoption of new initiatives and policies—is critical. Collating participants’ comments to better understand the most influential aspects of the trip from different perspectives facilitates understanding. Creating trip records also can help garner local technical and financial support for similar projects in the local area.



Springfield was facing challenges around the time that a city-to-city trip was undertaken.

But what about outcomes? In Springfield, the reenergizing of Develop Springfield and the city’s Institute for Healing Racism were outcomes related to the trips.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the Institute for Healing Racism had faded in Springfield, but it had inspired similar efforts in Grand Rapids. After the Grand Rapids trip, Springfield participants decided to restore the institute. Similarly, says Boston Fed senior vice president Richard Walker, the reconstitution of Develop Springfield involved city-to-city participants who “pushed for an independent and broader-based representation than had previously been the case.”

For additional insight, the Working Cities team investigated



new concepts and continue to stay in touch for years. An initiative with strong roots in a city-to-city trip may occur in time, but too often the knowledge of what got the ball rolling gets lost along the way.

\*\*\*

A city-to-city trip offers opportunities to improve communities through enhanced relationships, knowledge of best practices, and long-term engagement. The challenge is to prove their worth beyond anecdotes.

Conversations with numerous participants from diverse backgrounds and sectors suggest that the trips create the conditions for positive change. People continue to talk about their city-to-city experiences years later. But planning a trip does require resources and staff capacity. Any organization or city that wants to develop a program like this must weigh those costs. It can take one person months to plan and execute a good program. Deciding on the destination, corresponding with the working group, organizing ongoing engagement events, and scheduling the trip itself

whether other city-to-city efforts had systematically documented the outcomes.

In a recent interview, a member of the administration of the late Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino described how the administration learned from the mayor's 1997 visit to Atlanta that a large-scale, high-profile event (the Olympics) could boost a city's reputation as a world-class destination. At the time, Atlanta, like Boston, was more of a regional business capital, home to relatively few global corporations but a plethora of higher-education institutions.

"It was really about thinking big and doing something big," said the former official. Seven years after Mayor Menino's trip, Boston was hosting the Democratic National Convention, helping to focus attention on the city as destination for internationally recognized events.

The best-known example of outcomes, however, is the creation of the Boston Children's Chorus after the 2002 trip to Chicago exposed Boston leaders to Chicago Children's Choir and its ability to bring together youth from different backgrounds through the music making. The Boston Children's Chorus has been a recognized success. But founder Hubie Jones, an eminent civic leader, founder of other Boston nonprofits, and the organizer of many of Boston's city-to-city trips, acknowledges that there is a need to capture a broader and deeper picture of trip outcomes.

Of course, there are reasons that successful city-to-city outcomes are based mostly on anecdotal evidence. For one thing, the final result is probably the sum of many threads coming together. In addition, no organization involved in planning such trips has made a point of measuring the success over time. What is known is that a three-day trip takes place, and participants are exposed to

self can be a costly exercise, especially for smaller organizations. It is important to have enough staff capacity to allocate time to the effort. And until better metrics exist, the value will continue to be an intangible expressed by the enthusiasm of past participants.

---

**Bennett Gray Wilson** is a 2015 Global MBA candidate at the George Washington University School of Business in Washington, DC. She conducted this research as an intern at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Contact her at [bennettgraywilson@gwmail.gwu.edu](mailto:bennettgraywilson@gwmail.gwu.edu).

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The website "City to City Pioneer Valley" has tracked lessons learned from the Springfield trips, [www.city2cityspringfield.org](http://www.city2cityspringfield.org).
- <sup>2</sup> See [http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Planning-Department/Documents/10714\\_Flint%20Presentation.pdf](http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Planning-Department/Documents/10714_Flint%20Presentation.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> See Yolanda K. Kodrzycki and Ana Patricia Muñoz, "Economic Distress and Resurgence in U.S. Central Cities: Concepts, Causes, and Policy Levers" (Public Policy Discussion Paper No. 13-3, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston), <http://www.bostonfed.org/economic/ppdp/2013/ppdp1303.htm>.
- <sup>4</sup> See <http://developspringfield.com/> and <http://sbj.net/main.asp?SectionID=48&SubSectionID=108&ArticleID=87186>.

This Communities & Banking article is copyrighted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Bank or the Federal Reserve System. Copies of articles may be downloaded without cost at [www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b](http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b).