

The New Majority: YES WE CAN!

Carl Anthony, Editorial Advisor

In the wake of the landslide victory of Barack Obama as President, progressive forces are challenged to develop a larger vision of what is possible. President-elect Obama ran a brilliant campaign. The executive branch of government now has a mandate to bring the troops home, restore good will toward the United States among people around the world, lay the groundwork for a healthy economy, and accelerate the fight against greenhouse gas emissions. Now the hard work must begin. To be effective in the coming era, progressive advocates will need to develop a positive vision for American prosperity and a unifying strategy for how it might be realized. We will have to find ways to overcome fragmentation and to integrate a mosaic of separate issues and separate constituencies into a dynamic and proactive agenda for transformation.

Changes will be needed on many fronts. Not the least of these will be transformation of the ways we live in our cities, suburbs, and rural communities. Metropolitan patterns that developed after World War II have provided a framework for prosperity for well over half a century. On an individual level, that prosperity has proven robust for a great many in the United States. Many working-class families bought houses in growing suburbs, following a promise of homogeneous government, lower community taxes, better public schools, privacy, perceived safety, and even abundant free parking.

The past few decades, however, have revealed limitations in that metropolitan vision. Metropolitan fragmentation and a reliance on private developer decision-making have been subsidized by public investments in transportation and infrastructure. These practices have led to new forms of racial, political, and economic disenfranchisement, social segregation, concentrated poverty, and lack of access to jobs for many left behind. They have led as well to the destruction of many downtowns, the near death experience of others, and economic and fiscal decline of hundreds of cities and older suburbs.

In addition, researchers have documented a range of public health and environmental problems that can be attributed to current metropolitan development patterns: respiratory diseases, asthma, obesity, and automobile accidents. They argue that there has been an over reliance on private developers in making land use decisions. In areas such as Atlanta, the metro region has grown from 65 miles north-south to a staggering 110 miles, four times the rate of population growth. A 1998 Rutgers University study reported that sprawl costs taxpayers more than 20 times what it provides in financial gain to speculators. Among many other problems, this sort of growth leads to loss of air quality, heat islands, and water quality degradation from excessive asphalt.

To be effective, progressive forces must focus on a challenge that is big enough to have an impact—and small enough to be within the reach of ordinary people to organize their efforts in a new way. This Regional Equity movement to rebuild our metropolitan regions could provide such a focus for both the short and longer term. The essays in this issue of *Race, Poverty and the Environment* provide recommendations for this direction. Building on two decades of work by community organizers, congregations, policy advocates, and labor leaders, the essays included here begin to lay out the possibility of large-scale mobilization needed to rebuild our cities, suburbs, and rural places.

Regional organizing efforts were initially modeled on neighborhood-scale, place-based strategies of the 1950s and 1960s. These grew out of struggles in the poorest communities. More recently, regional strategists have learned to confront structural problems of inner cities as well as older suburbs by challenging racial geography and jurisdictional fragmentation at the metropolitan scale. Building on the lessons of these efforts, President-elect Obama has demonstrated that organizing for change can be taken to scale, eventually reaching the middle class, and even the most privileged members of our communities.

Yes we can. ■

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