I Have a Dream
Fueling the Economic Renaissance of 2013-2032
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In my dream, it is a beautiful spring day in 2032. Graduation ceremonies are taking place at colleges, trade and secondary schools across the country. Commencement speakers are presenting laudatory reviews of the economic miracle that the urban places of America had wrung from the opportunities of the economic outfall of the worldwide recession that stared early in the 21st century. The speakers reminded audiences, which included many who were too young to remember those grim days, that the great recession of 2007 was caused by urban land and building price escalations in the fastest-growing regions of the country, which were exacerbated and spread across the country by nationwide imprudent lending policies.

The struggle to recover from the recession occurred at a time when it also became evident that a new economic world had been created. The multiple big bangs of tectonic changes in transportation, communication, production and medical technologies revolutionized sociopolitical organizations and behavior. A game-changing economic result was that local and national markets for goods and services were replaced with global markets. As the United States sought to restart the growth of its gross national product (GDP) and employment base, many in all levels of government came to realize that success depended on the ability of cities and towns to reinvent themselves as fertile places for the growth of globally competitive businesses. As a result, federal and state legislators passed laws that facilitated such local reinventions. In the years that followed the election of 2012, the changes in state laws governing zoning and the use of condemnation, which will be described below, were particularly helpful to the counties, parishes and municipalities of regions that retuned their local economies to align with the competitive needs of a new world economy.

Those local urban places that got the word about the existence of a new economic world undertook the hard-headed, objective research required to realistically identify the economic roles businesses within their regions could play in the tough world of international competition. Once the scale and types of economic roles local and regional businesses could be expected to play were identified, counties, cities and towns tailored the planning of their communities to fit within and leverage the strength of those economic roles. In some cases, this meant entitling and supporting significant growth, and in others, shrinking the community down to an efficiently sustainable size. The communities that succeeded in suiting up as players in the new world economy did so by:

- Keeping the lid on housing prices and rents by facilitating increases in the supply of new market-rate housing at rates that equaled or somewhat exceeded the increase in demand, enabling residents to maintain high qualities of life at globally competitive wages and salaries. One reason these efforts worked well is that in 2013, Congress and the Administration finally saw the light and eliminated mortgage-related credit default swaps and other banking and security activities that encouraged real estate financing that could only be repaid if prices and rents rose.

- Encouraging the development of workplace clusters with workers rich in the knowledge and experience that could push hard and soft technologies to new plateaus. These mixed use, 24/7 activity centers or agglomerations also included residences, entertainment, shopping and experiential opportunities.

- Supporting the leasing of foreclosed single family-homes at affordable rents to low- and moderate-income families who were granted options to purchase those homes in the future at current prices in return for maintenance-preserving stewardship, and by placing employment opportunity information centers near these homes to facilitate job placements for the new residents.

- Using the information gleaned in the process of identifying the types of locally produced goods and services that could compete in global markets to work with local businesses and educational institutions at all levels, in a collaborative effort to offer training in the skills and concepts demanded by the local labor market.

- Phasing out counter-productive and inequitable local regulations such as rent control and inclusionary zoning or housing set asides, as increased competition from new housing production kept the lid on prices and worked to increase the chain of moves by opening up more opportunities in the stock of previously owned housing.

In accomplishing the above steps to put their local economies on steroids as they entered global markets, planning and regulatory strategists were particularly helped by two highly innovative but much needed new laws. State planning laws were changed to disallow large lot zoning in the suburbs and other places where new greenfield developments were being mapped by mandating minimum densities. Thus, for example, land could not be subdivided into fewer than 12 units to the acre. Individual home site buyers were allowed to purchase more than one lot, but the default mandate of no less than 12 units per acre used greenfield land more efficiently, thereby eliminating one of the main reasons suburban development had been labeled "sprawl." This law has also eliminated the once common zoning of many large lots relative to the demand for such lots, while zoning fewer small lots relative to demand so that the rich were given a bargain price per square foot for land, while the less affluent paid more per square foot for less land.

After hard fought legislative battles, the power of eminent domain was extended to provide private sector competition with public urban redevelopment. The condemnation power provided to private developers differed from the eminent domain powers of governmental entities in two important respects. First, the power to "take" property was only granted to allow redevelopment projects to complete the assemblage of a redevelopment site if the private redeveloping entity already owned at least 80 percent of the properties included in the proposed assemblage. Secondly, the condemner would have to pay the fair market value of the property at its preredevelopment or project value when it was taken; however, at the completion of the project, the owner or owners of the privately condemned land would be paid their portion of the value added by the project.

In my dream, the commencement orators encouraged their young audiences to continue the "can do" type of positive problem solving when dealing with the challenges of a changing world that had been shown by the generation of urban dwellers and their elected leaders in the twenty years just passed. The audiences were reminded, too, that the strategic developmental adaptations to the new global economic world had increased the U.S. GDP so that they were no longer saddled with unsustainable public debt or balance of payment trade deficits.

But then I woke up. In my morning newspaper -- yes, in 2012 we still have newspapers -- I read that the U.S. current account trade deficit rose by $124.1 billion or 15.3% in the final quarter of 2011, the highest level in three years. The economic reality I woke up to seemed more like a nightmare when contrasted to the happy future of my dream. But there is hope, because my dream need not be a fantasy. Local collaboration and legislative courage can make it a reality.

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