

Seeing Philadelphia Through a Seattle-Colored Lens

Jeff Hornstein & Vanessa Briggs 06 November 2018

Last month an incredibly diverse group of 145 cross-sector Philadelphia leaders traveled to Seattle on the Economy League's Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange (aka "GPLEX"), to study how the Emerald City works, moves, lives, thrives -- and how it deals with major challenges. The GPLEX cohort included emerging and established leaders from the private, nonprofit, and public sectors -- including senior officials from the Philadelphia airport, SEPTA, and the Kenney administration.

Seattle has incredible wealth and a political system and culture conducive to collaborating to solve public problems. Because Seattle raises revenue primarily by special levies on property, which must be approved at the ballot box, policymakers must present coherent value propositions to the electorate. During a session on transportation, for example, we learned how a coalition of public and private actors made the case for a \$54 billion 10-year levy to fund a massive upgrading of transit infrastructure, winning 56 percent of the vote.

The "Seattle process" involves inclusive, consensus-

based decision-making, leading to maximum buy-in for tough policy choices like the imposition of a citywide \$15 an hour minimum wage. Labor leader David Rolf of SEIU and business leader Howard Wright of the Seattle Hospitality Group helped us understand how a very broad-based center coalesced around the wage increase, including the role played by well-organized forces at the extremes of the political spectrum in providing incentive for cooperation. In the end, consensus was achieved on the complex compromise that phases in \$15 an hour over a multi-year period, with different schedules according to industry and firm size. As Wright noted, he and Rolf didn't know each other when the process began, but soon realized they shared a fundamental conviction that America's greatest asset is its middle class and that this asset is under threat like never before, and this has formed the basis of an enduring relationship.

Seattle's innovative approach to philanthropy is embodied in Social Venture Partners (SVP). Seattle philanthropy encourages failing forward, risk-taking, and innovation. SVP connects private sector CEOs to nonprofits to help them achieve financial stability, develop active and engaged boards, and get them ready to scale. SVP's Solynn McCurdy was forthright, noting that most foundations were built on social inequality, on the backs of marginalized people, and operate from a position of noblesse oblige, "giving back a little to make themselves feel good," but the new model is built on ground-up

learning and co-creation of initiatives.

Seattle's problem-solving political and philanthropic culture are fortuitous, since the city faces some vexing issues. Gentrification is a problem with median housing prices hovering close to \$700,000 and a dearth of affordable housing for both low-income and working-class Seattleites. The housing crisis is exacerbated by inadequate transit infrastructure to move workers from where they can afford to live to where the jobs are; like European cities, the suburbs are becoming enclaves of the marginalized, but without European-style mass transit. Seattle has yawning inequality, especially racial inequality, as residents of marginalized communities fight to maintain identity and property in the face of gentrification. And Seattle's homelessness problems are well-known and particularly acute: the one-day count in 2017 was more than 8,500 in the City of Seattle, a per capita rate 3.5 times greater than Philadelphia's.

Yet Seattle has mobilized the political will to tackle big issues like \$15 minimum wage and \$54 billion in transit funding, and I left feeling like it would apply its can-do, engineering mentality to its housing crisis and closing opportunity gaps.

What about Greater Philadelphia? First and foremost, the challenges we face are equally daunting to those facing Seattle, but our processes for problem-solving are inadequate at best. In introducing a panel on

transportation, Jim Markham of Pennoni noted that in Pennsylvania, much of our transit funding comes from an annual payment from the PA Turnpike of \$450 million, but that in a few years, this sum drops to \$50 million -- that is, if a lawsuit filed by a truckers association arguing that toll revenues should be spent only on highways doesn't cut it off earlier. During a panel on innovation in philanthropy, United Way CEO Bill Golderer noted that of the top 50 metros, Philadelphia ranks 43rd in philanthropic giving, 45th in volunteer hours, and 48th in voter participation -- a statistical rendering of "the Philly Shrug," he said. Fortunately, Golderer aims to do his part, bringing a chapter of Social Venture Partners to Philadelphia to help him implement to United Way's mission to address our region's top challenge, intergenerational poverty.

At the Economy League, we are ready to get beyond the shrug, beyond "Nega-delphia," and build on our region's considerable assets, like our great eds-and-meds institutions, robust transit infrastructure, cultural diversity, relative affordability, emerging tech sector, burgeoning hospitality sector, vibrant downtown. For the first time in decades the City of Philadelphia is growing, schools are back in local control, we are growing jobs and the tax base. Yet we have formidable challenges.

Our cohort of nearly 1,000 emerging and established leaders assembled by the Economy League through GPLEX cuts across all of these sectors, and in the coming months we will be seeking interested partners to tackle

our toughest problems and build economic prosperity for all. Our leaders are ready to go.

"The coming together cements us, sharpens our ability to problem solve. The ROI is higher because we get to know Philly's leadership, our collective self-reliance increases because we know our context." – Beth Miller, Executive Director, Community Design Collaborative

"You know what's the most important thing to me? Data. Data I did not have before. I am more informed." – David Grasso, CEO Grasso Holdings

"I've walked away energized and determined to see how I can be part of the solutions that may enable us to apply some of the lessons observed into lessons learned and acted upon." – Michael Mittleman, President, Salus University

It's time to work together, like Seattle does, to develop a pragmatic center that can find points of common ground and leverage our assets. We need business, labor, philanthropy, and the social sector to build "a Philly process."

REGIONAL EXPLORATIONS -- THE HEART OF GPLEX

The GPLEX program is built around Regional Explorations, carefully curated deep dives into issues of significance to both Philadelphia and the host city. The Seattle Exchange

featured six RegExes: Arts & Community Preservation: the Battle for Seattle's Soul; Food Waste Innovations: Strengthening People & Preserving the Environment; the Economic & Social Impacts of Washington's Global Health Sector; South Lake Union: Tech Mecca; Moving Goods and People: SEA-TAC Airport; and Models for Inclusive Redevelopment. GPLEX participant and CEO of the Brandywine Health Foundation Vanessa Briggs reports below on her learnings from the Inclusive Redevelopment excursion.

Seattle's Models for Inclusive Redevelopment

Seattle's rapid population growth and runaway housing costs are pushing out long-term residents and communities particularly those that traditionally been home to immigrants and African Americans. In response, government, philanthropy, developers, and community organizations are working together to create affordable housing and preserve communities so that all residents can be part of the city's booming economy.

About a third of the 2018 cohort of the Economy League's Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange (GPLEX) got a first-hand look as they loaded the bus from the Westin Hotel in downtown Seattle to visit and tour Yesler, awaiting to learn how Seattle tackled redevelopment while minimizing re-gentrification. The transformation of Yesler from 2006 to present day is quite spectacular. Yesler is a

community comprised of more than 30 acres sitting atop a hill in close proximity to downtown Seattle, in the hub of the job market, public transportation, and beautiful views.

In order for GPLEXers to truly appreciate the modern designed urban community, Andrews Lofton, Executive Director of Seattle Housing Authority provided some context to how this public housing community will transform from 561 units to more than 5,000 attractive apartments, affordable to residents across a broad range of incomes. What was once the city's first publicly subsidized housing community is now a new vibrant mixed-income community that honors the neighborhood's history and cultural richness while meeting the growing needs of its residents.

Yesler's 1940s-era aging infrastructure is what ignited the SHA to begin conversations with residents, surrounding neighbors, city officials, key partners, and citizens of Seattle to imagine a new community while not displacing residents. The vision for a new Yesler community model was formed. Not only was Seattle able to replace the 561 subsidized public housing units, it doubled the number of units for families earning below 30 percent of the Area Median Income to ensure that all residents living at Yesler at the time redevelopment began have the opportunity to continue to live in their community. Instead of displacing or pushing low-income residents out of their community they gave them a choice to move out of the community or move into a new unit. All residents living at Yesler at the

time redevelopment began are covered for related relocation and moving cost and have first priority for apartments in the new housing.

To meet the growing demand for affordable housing in close proximity to downtown Seattle and to address the onerous land covenants that dictate the construction of single-family homes only, Yesler attempts to meet the needs for people with low and moderate incomes, as well as for those who pay market-rate rents in buildings developed by private partners.

Some of the amenities at in the community include Yesler Terrace Park currently under construction. It is a 1.8-acre park near the Yesler Community Center in the heart of the neighborhood. The park will have an outdoor fitness loop, community gardening spaces, play spaces for area community fairs and markets, soccer arena, paths and seating for strolling and community gathering. The Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation manages the planning designing, development and operation of the park and Community Center. Because the space is so inviting and adjacent to other communities, some of the challenges they face include scheduling special activities for Yesler resident's verses groups or organizations outside of the community requesting use.

Our last stop of the tour was Yesler Community Center where many of the GPLEXers were interested in learning about the many social service programs, youth focused

activities, cultural, and arts events and sports related activities available for all ages.

The Yesler community is a prime example of how a public-private partnership came together to address complex social and economic issues like affordable housing, economic development, and revitalization - along with the ongoing need for social services and community cohesion with the goal of minimizing the type of gentrification that leads to displacement. When comparing Seattle to Philadelphia there are stark differences in affordable housing, the magnitude of homelessness in Seattle, and the availability of jobs for highly skilled workers, yet Philadelphia can glean insight from how Seattle tackled community displacement while still growing the economy and transforming community living and recreation spaces in partnership with community.