



Mitt's Metropolis

*Diverse Cities Need Diverse Schools.
How Do We Get There?*

Story by **BEN ADLER**
Illustrations by **ALEX LUKAS**

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FOREFRONT



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You would never know it from the watching the presidential campaign, but Mitt Romney was once a leader in smart growth and a believer in the job-generating potential of the renewable energy sector.

As governor of Massachusetts from 2003 to 2007, he established an inter-agency Office of Commonwealth Development, similar in form and function to President Obama's [Partnership for Sustainable Communities](#). To run the office, Romney tapped Douglas Foy, an ardent environmentalist from the Conservation Law Foundation. During its heyday, the office succeeded in influencing various public policy decisions, such as putting the kibosh on a new highway interchange in Andover, Mass. that would have contributed to sprawl.

He supported a state-sponsored grant program that funded green start-ups including BigBelly Solar, which produces a trash can that reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills using a built-in solar-powered compactor. Green energy, Romney [said in 2003](#), could “become a major economic springboard for the commonwealth,” if the state focused on “job creation in the renewable energy sector.”

As Alec Macgillis [reported in *The New Republic*](#):

“Romney and Foy wasted little time in putting smart-growth policies to work. The state, they declared, would take a ‘fix-it-first’ approach to highway spending — repairing existing roads instead of building new ones... In addition, the state put out a new highway-design manual intended to make towns more pedestrian-friendly, with narrower streets designed for slower driving speeds... The biggest move came in 2004, when Romney signed legislation, dubbed Chapter 40R, providing funds to towns and cities that agreed to allow more high-density, multi-family housing.”

The state law described by Macgillis rewarded communities for zoning policies encouraging higher density near transit hubs and in town centers.

Talk to urbanists about the upcoming presidential election, and there is one hopeful sentiment you hear over and over again: That this Romney, the Romney who hired Foy and signed Chapter 40R, might govern the nation as he did Massachusetts.

“Romney supported smart growth when he was governor for economic reasons,” said Alex Dodds, online communications manager for [Smart Growth America](#). “If he was going to run the presidency from a fiscal, economic basis of making decisions on return on investment and helping communities, smart growth would be a good option for him.”

Would President Romney be “Mitt Romney the governor, or Mitt Romney the candidate?” wondered Bruce Katz, director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. “It’s a little tricky to know which Romney takes office,” mused

Xavier Briggs, a professor of urban planning at M.I.T. who served as associate director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Obama administration.

But perhaps these thought leaders are being unduly optimistic: The Romney who will take office is the same one who has been running for president since 2007.

It is telling that the pro-smart growth [Chapter 40R](#) legislation — the best-known Massachusetts smart growth policy enacted during Romney’s tenure — was not actually his initiative. Although Romney signed the bill, advocates say it was not particularly his doing. “I’m not sure I’d attribute it to [Romney’s] administration,” said André Leroux, executive director of the [Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance](#). “It was a group of housing advocates and developers that came together to pass it.”

Like much of his erstwhile moderation and pragmatism, Romney stopped promoting — or even tolerating — smart growth as soon as he set his sights on the Republican presidential nomination. He slashed funds for land preservation and withdrew from a regional greenhouse gas emissions reduction initiative that Foy devised. He let the environmentalist’s office wither until Foy quit. Smart growth is no longer a part of the Romney package and hasn’t been for nearly a decade.

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EXTREME CAMPAIGNING

These days, Romney’s answer to every domestic problem, urban or otherwise, comes off as a conservative talk radio sound bite: Devolve power to states and cut federal spending. Given the political pressures he faces within his own party, and the record he has amassed since first deciding he would run for president nearly seven years ago, it is safe to assume that Romney the candidate would be the Romney who takes office next year if he wins.

“If Mitt Romney — who has taken extreme positions in the primary — wins, it will embolden the extreme elements,” predicted Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), who represents Portland and is a leader in Congress on urban planning and transportation issues. “He was against the Recovery Act. It will be very unlikely that he embraces a forward-looking view.”

Romney’s recent campaign moves bear out Blumenauer’s prediction. In July, a campaign spokesman made front-page headlines when he [told the *Des Moines Register*](#) that Romney opposes a renewal of a tax credit for wind energy suppliers set to expire at the end of this year. An economic growth platform released earlier in the race derided what he called Obama’s “unhealthy ‘green’ jobs obsession” and pledged to cut spending in the sector. “These technologies,” Romney said, “make little sense

for the consuming public but great sense only for the companies reaping profits from taxpayer subsidies.”

What Romney does not say is that these technologies also make sense for cities. With large-scale manufacturing continuing to decline in most urban centers, the green energy sector is one of the few growing job generators outside of the service industry. A 2011 report by Econsult Corporation estimates that nearly half of the commercial buildings in the Greater Philadelphia region could be eligible for energy efficient retrofits, and that the undertaking could spur \$618 million in local spending and support 23,500 jobs.

For urban thinkers such as Bruce Katz at Brookings, the biggest challenge facing metropolitan areas is simply the same one facing the country: Reviving the economy and building an economic model of production and middle-class job creation, not

a stratified service economy. That means removing the incentives for consumption — chiefly the favorable tax treatment of home buying—and instead encouraging research, manufacturing and workforce development, whether in the green energy industry or, as Romney would have it, not.

It’s also important to remember that the president does not legislate by fiat. Congress will write the laws and appropriate the funds to enforce them, meaning

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that whoever controls Congress will determine whether programs benefiting cities will continue, and at what level. Just as green energy, smart growth and health care reform in Massachusetts happened because of the Democratic state legislature, a Republican Congress would set the agenda for Romney on urban issues.

Most analysts give Republicans about a two-thirds chance of retaining their majority in the House of Representatives. This year, Democrats have 21 Senate seats up for election (including two held by independents who caucus with the Democrats) versus 10 for Republicans, and the Senate could easily flip to Republican control. If Romney wins, it will have been a strong election for Republicans and their chances of having also won Congress will be even higher.

**ROMNEY'S
BALANCED
BUDGET =**



Taxes

+



Defense
Spending

+



Funding for Urban
Development

Among House Republicans, there is a strong element of staunchly anti-federal, small-government conservatives. Many of them are members of at least one of two overlapping factions that form the right-wing check on the party leadership — the large freshman class of 2010 and the Tea Party caucus. The 82 members who voted for an amendment to limit federal transportation investment strictly to gas tax revenues constitute the core of this group. “If Republicans were in the majority [of both Houses of Congress] they would gut all federal spending other than the military,” said Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-N.Y.), a prominent advocate of mass transit and urban issues. “They’d cut Section 8, Community Development Block Grants, anything that helps cities because their members mostly come from rural areas.”

But there are also some representatives of swing districts in suburbs of Northern cities who have, if not different values, at least a different set of political incentives. “What’s really clear in watching the transportation debate is there’s not a consensus among Republicans,” said David Goldberg, communications director for [Transportation for America](#). “Congressional Republicans are divided about how they feel about federal support for infrastructure. There are still a fair number of conventional conservatives and moderates who see federal role for making sure people can get to work and goods to market.”

Even so, the trend lines are discouraging. Adequate provisioning for transportation used to be a subject on which the two parties could compromise with relative ease. Everyone needs money for roads or transit in their district, and so as long as everyone got their share, no one objected. But the new breed of intensely ideological Republicans are opposed to many mainstream policies that previously enjoyed bipartisan agreement. Like the debt ceiling, transportation has now been politicized.

“The impulse [among Republicans] seems to be to roll back federal support for transportation,” said Goldberg.

Case in point: The House passed a stringent budget written by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), now Romney’s running mate. As part of that bill, gas tax revenue would be the only source of money to bankroll transportation spending. But with gas tax revenues declining, Congress has been forced to patch the gap between appropriated funding and gas tax receipts with general revenues. The Ryan budget, which Romney had enthusiastically pledged to support even before choosing the Congressman as his vice presidential pick, would mean cutting the transportation spending to eliminate the need for general revenue backfill.

Transportation is hardly the only major mainstream urban program now in the crosshairs of the GOP. The Republican appointees on the Supreme Court have recently taken the historically unprecedented step of overturning two local gun control laws — one in Washington, D.C. and one in Chicago — on the grounds that they violate the Second Amendment. Less headline-grabbing has been the threat to a federal census program that plays a more bureaucratic, but no less critical, role in urban neighborhoods.

The **American Community Survey** (ACS), which many see as the heir to the defunct “long-form” census, is an annual survey sent to several million households. The survey provides crucial demographic information to governments, academics, non-profit organizations and businesses. Like the federal government itself, cities use



ACS data to get an accurate picture of populations and determine needs — and how to best serve them.

“Whenever you contemplate changes, knowing who is in those neighborhoods has to have a demographic backdrop,” said Joseph Salvo, director of the population division at the New York City Department of City Planning. “Our planners know who is in the neighborhoods where changes are being proposed. ACS is the only source of that data.”

But House Republicans have **declared the ACS an inappropriate governmental intrusion**. In May, they passed a bill to eliminate it. If they end up in control of the Senate and the White House as well, the ACS might actually face cancellation. Cities, and the people who study them, would lose their most important source of information.

Such an unwise move would not be unprecedented. After Republicans won control of Congress in 1994, they set about eliminating federal agencies that gather information, including the Bureau of Mines, the Office of Technology Assessment and the Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations. “As a result of those three actions, we know less than we used to about the total flow of materials in the U.S., how much is coming from mining versus recycling and use of existing materials,” said Scott Bernstein, president of the **Center for Neighborhood Technology** in Chicago. “Congress doesn’t have good information on technological choices like more power plants versus more recycling.”

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SHREDDING THE SAFETY NET

On a hot Iowa day in June, Romney stood in front of a cheering crowd and **delivered a message**. Obama “said we need more firemen, more policemen, more teachers,” declared Romney. “Did he not get the message of Wisconsin? The American people did. It’s time for us to cut back on government and help the American people.”

On the campaign trail, Romney has promised to balance the budget while cutting taxes by 20 percent and increasing defense spending. The only way to do this is massively cut discretionary domestic spending, which would require reduction or elimination of everything from food stamps and public housing to funds for, yes, emergency responders and teachers. The consequence for cities could be grave.

“These cuts could devastate low-income city neighborhoods,” said Joel Berg, executive director of the **New York City Coalition Against Hunger**.

After making oblique threats to abolish the Department of Education, Romney said he would rather keep it to act as a bulwark against teachers’ unions. In other

areas, he would join the agency-abolishing enthusiasts who dominated the Republican primaries. In April, reporters standing outside a closed-door fundraiser overheard the candidate hint to supporters that he would consider sending the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to the chopping block.

“I’m going to take a lot of departments in Washington, and agencies, and combine them. Some eliminate, but I’m probably not going to lay out just exactly which ones are going to go,” Romney said, [according to NBC](#). “Things like Housing and Urban Development, which my dad was head of, that might not be around later...”

Romney’s campaign did not respond to questions for this article, but it is reasonable to assume that he would eliminate the [Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities](#), Obama’s signature innovation within HUD. And Community Development Block grants, the flexible federal grants that cities use to finance everything from new parks to homeless shelters to economic development projects, could also go the way of the Dodo, although congressional pushback would be much fiercer to protect them.

Yet if Romney really wants to cut federal spending, the real money is not in HUD’s development programming or bureaucratic overhead, but in its housing assistance. In 2012, according to a [report from the National Housing Center](#), HUD used more than 80 percent of its funding to maintain public housing, build more housing and sustain its rental assistance program, known as Section 8.

“Eliminating the big programs on housing would be even harder than [eliminating] HUD itself,” said Briggs, the MIT professor.

Ironically, Section 8 — which gives low-income families a voucher they can use in private housing — uses a market-oriented approach favored by Republicans. But, it runs afoul of the party’s current orthodoxy that everything is best done at the state level. Starting in 2003 with the efforts of the Bush administration, Republicans have tried to transform the housing assistance program into a state block grant program, with few federal regulations and little to no affordability protections for public housing tenants. By turning the now open-ended entitlement into a fixed annual grant while giving states the freedom to write their regulations, the programs would be shrunk and, ultimately, fewer households would receive its assistance. “The Bush administration wanted to restructure Section 8 in many problematic ways,” Briggs said.

Turning every federal anti-poverty program into a state block grant formula with little federal oversight is a fashionable idea in Republican circles. Romney, as well as other prominent Republicans — including his former rivals Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich — have spoken at length about a need to relinquish to state control federal programs such as food stamps, Medicaid and the housing vouchers.

If states only receive a set amount of money regardless of economic conditions, what happens during a recession when poverty rates go up? States would have to either reduce eligibility for the programs, or the size of benefits, or both. Such a move would, of course, fall hardest on poor urban communities, which — already suffering from rampant food insecurity and epidemics of illnesses such as diabetes and AIDS — would wind up decimated. It is also likely that the same Republicans who support turning federal anti-poverty programs over to the states would simply gut these programs.

In April, the House GOP voted to save \$33.2 billion in spending on the supplemental nutritional assistance program (SNAP, also known as food stamps) over 10 years by cutting benefits an average of 11 percent and denying them to anyone with more than \$2,000 in assets. In the Senate, Rand Paul (R-Ky.) made an even more drastic proposal to cut \$37 billion, or 45 percent, from the projected funds for next year, about twice as much as the House's reduction. Thirteen Senate Republicans joined Democrats in **rejecting Paul's amendment**, but most voted for it.

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The underlying goal is to finish the work that Republicans started when they passed welfare reform in 1996, with the aim of preventing anyone from relying on long-term government assistance. As veteran congressional reporter David Rogers **writes in *Politico***, “driving the latest cuts is a newer narrative, voiced by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), that the social safety net is at risk of becoming a ‘hammock.’”

While some liberals would agree that it makes sense to impose some time limits on welfare to prevent discouraging work, many Republicans subscribe to a more radical proposition: That even the working poor should not be allowed to depend



on government assistance for housing or food as more than an emergency stopgap. The underlying assumption is a total faith in the free market. Yet a [recent National Employment Law Project study](#) found that in 2011, one in four private sector jobs paid less than \$10 an hour, meaning that at least 25 percent of employed people working 40 hours a week are earning less than \$21,000 a year. (The 2012 federal poverty rate is \$11,170 a year for a single person, or \$23,050 for a family of four.)

If Republicans win in November, the result would be a shift in emergency anti-poverty spending from the federal to local governments. If poor people are starving or living in the streets thanks to cutbacks in federal food stamps or housing assistance, cities may take it upon themselves to expand homeless shelters and soup kitchens. “Local dollars would go to plugging the [housing and food] dike and not other things,” Briggs said. At a time of tightly constrained budgets, that money will have to come from somewhere else. Whether it is policing, public schools, sanitation or public parks that get the short end of the stick, cities may see a return to the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s, when dirty streets, decrepit public infrastructure and high crime reduced urbanites’ quality of life.

There is also the risk that cuts to anti-poverty programs will wreck the local economies of poor urban communities. “Here in New York City, one in every 10 dollars in the food economy are SNAP benefits,” Berg said. “In some neighborhoods it’s considerably more than that.”

“These are jobs in bodegas, supermarkets and farmers markets that could go away,” he said.

Anti-poverty programs are not the only threatened social services in cities. Congressional Republican visions for transportation would, if enacted, dramatically shift federal resources away from mass transit and toward new road construction in the suburbs. This in spite of the fact that in recent years, Americans have been driving less, and driving more fuel efficient cars, thanks to demographic changes — more elderly people, more people who **want an urban lifestyle** — and the rising price of gasoline.

This is all good news for the environment, but it does create a problem for the federal government: If cars consume less gas, then revenues from the gasoline tax decline. This creates a shortfall in the Highway Trust Fund. But both parties refuse to throw their weight behind a solution such as raising the gas tax. This summer, lawmakers in the House and Senate approved the first multi-year transportation bill in seven years. Transportation advocates had worked for months to shepherd it into law and prevent transportation funds from expiring, but they were **severely disappointed** by many provisions, taken from a radical wish list of House Republicans. In a **statement released in June**, Smart Growth America said that the bill “fails to provide the kind of visionary, game-changing transportation reform America deserves.”

“It compromises safety, it is a step backwards in how we take care of and repair our roads and bridges, and it bypasses the kinds of innovative transportation solutions that we should expect out of a new transportation reauthorization,” said Anderson.

All funding for transportation enhancements, such as sidewalks and bike lanes, will now be in the hands of state transportation departments, which may neglect to use them. “At exactly the time when the population is both growing and aging, the federal government, which made a big difference on transportation under Republican presidents like Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt [and] Eisenhower, is retreating from addressing those challenges,” said Blumenauer, the Portland Congressman.

Transportation policy is not the only area where Republicans have attempted to curtail federal efforts to promote smart growth. The House Appropriations Committee voted in June to eliminate funding for the Environmental Protection Agency’s **Office of Smart Growth**. In addition to the office’s work itself, it is a key player in Obama’s **most important urban policy initiative**: The Partnership for Sustainable Communities, an inter-agency effort between HUD, DOT and the EPA. “Defunding the EPA smart growth program would detract significantly from one of the core three aspects of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities,” said Tom Madrecki, a spokesman for Smart Growth America. “A weakened partnership is not nearly as effective at doing

Senate Seats For Grabs

Most analysts give Republicans about a two-thirds chance of retaining their majority in the House of Representatives. If Romney wins, it will have been a strong election for Republicans and their chances of having also won Congress will be even higher.

Here is a breakdown of how many Senate Seats each party has to lose on Capital Hill this election cycle:

Democrats*



Republicans



*including two held by independents who caucus with the Democrats

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what it was created to do: Streamline decision-making, coordinate across agencies and develop solutions that take into account housing, transportation and environmental issues simultaneously.

The most optimistic spin that advocates can muster about the prospect of total Republican control is to argue that smart growth principles are consistent with abstract conservative values. After all, smart growth policies would mean that the government stops distorting the market by favoring suburban sprawl over more environmentally efficient development in the inner-core, or more economically efficient allocation of investment.

But conservative free market ideology is not the guiding principle for many Republicans or their supporters when it comes to transportation policy and land use planning. Rather, as the Tea Party's **conspiratorial reaction** to smart growth efforts at the local level demonstrates, their views are determined mostly by suburban white cultural identity politics. Even conservative think tanks that are supposed to prioritize

economic liberty, such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, defend the status quo of subsidizing driving with public investment in roads, while opposing an equal footing for other modes of travel.

Some social conservatives, such as the late Paul Weyrich, came to realize that dense, walkable communities with a vibrant street life and mass transit foster the kind of strong social networks that they fondly remember from 1950s America. But this is of little interest to the current crop of Republicans. “There’s just a clear lack of understanding about the positive economic, social and environmental impacts that can come from having a program that simply encourages communities to think about how they build and grow,” said Smart Growth America President and CEO Geoffrey Anderson in a [statement](#) on the House Appropriations bill. “The Smart Growth Program helps to create communities with better economic development prospects and great neighborhoods to live, play and raise a family in.” Meanwhile, the EPA’s brownfields program, essential to city’s efforts to reclaim vacant land, would receive \$2 million less than Obama requested.

The other source of hope is that once Republicans are settled into office, they will moderate their positions upon hearing from local elected officials back home. In the 2012 fiscal year, for example, House Republicans eliminated grants for the Sustainable Communities program in HUD and proposed rule changes to kneecap its remaining efforts. In fiscal year 2013 they showed no such antipathy, perhaps because the communities they represent convinced them of its benefits. Urban advocates also argue that the power of big business will be a moderating influence on the GOP.

“As local governments begin to understand what’s in the transportation bill, what’s proposed in Appropriations, you’re going to hear from mayors, ‘Wait Congressman, you don’t understand how I’m using this in my city,’” predicted John Robert Smith, CEO of [Reconnecting America](#) and the former Republican mayor of Meridian, Miss. “The downtown business community is going to say, ‘You don’t understand how this affects my business.’”

That’s probably true. The question is whether these Republicans care. Hearing from business about the importance of the Troubled Asset Relief Program did not prevent House Republicans from voting against it. Knowing that a failure to raise the debt ceiling would wreak havoc on the bond markets did not prevent them from threatening to do so.

“Republicans will face a political risk for being too extreme on transportation issues,” said Bernstein, president of the Center for Neighborhood Technology in Chicago.

As an example, Bernstein points to business leaders in New Orleans and Baton Rouge pushing back against Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal for rejecting federal high-speed rail dollars. But Bernstein himself can recall instances of Republicans following their ideology over the interests of business. “[Abolishing the Bureau of Mines] didn’t make sense for businesses that were dependent on Bureau of Mines data,” he said. “But it went through anyway.”

That is the kind of ideologically blinkered policymaking that pervades the current crop of Republican domestic policy proposals, from the Romney campaign down to state legislatures. While Republican mayors such as Mick Cornett in Oklahoma City have governed in a more technocratic, investment-oriented manner, no one should expect that to trickle up to the federal level. (A spokesperson from Cornett’s office declined to comment for this story, saying that at this point in time, any discussion about what a Romney win would mean for cities is hypothetical.)

There is a tendency to think of urban issues as non-partisan. New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia famously said how there is no Republican or Democratic way to pick up garbage. At the municipal level, this remains somewhat true: Current Mayor Mike Bloomberg went from being a Democrat to a Republican to an Independent while hardly changing his policy positions. Rahm Emanuel, an intensely partisan Democrat in national politics, has **won praise** from conservative columnist George Will for his education reform initiatives as mayor of Chicago.

But federal urban policy is different. The two parties and their candidates present wildly divergent visions of the federal role in housing, transportation, environmental regulation and poverty alleviation. This November, the stakes for cities will be very high.▶



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Adler is Next American City's federal policy correspondent, writing the *Urban Nation* column. He also reports on national politics and media for *The Nation* as a contributing writer. He previously covered politics and public policy as national editor of *Newsweek.com* and a reporter for *Newsweek*. He covered the 2008 presidential election, with a focus on voting rights and youth issues, as a staff writer at *Politico*. Prior to that he was editor of *CampusProgress.org*, a daily online political and cultural magazine, at the Center for American Progress. Ben has also been a columnist and blogger for *The American Prospect* and a reporter-researcher at *The New Republic*.

His freelance writing has appeared in *Architect*, *Architectural Record*, *The Atlantic*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *The Daily Beast*, *Good*, *Grist*, *The Guardian*, *In These Times*, *New York*, *The Progressive*, *Reuters*, *Salon*, *The Washington Examiner* and *The Washington Monthly* and has been printed in several books including *Clued Into Politics* and *The Contemporary Reader*.

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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Alex Lukas was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1981 and raised in nearby Cambridge. With a wide range of artistic influences, Lukas creates both highly detailed drawings and intricate Xeroxed 'zines. His drawings have been exhibited in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Stockholm and Copenhagen as well as in the pages of *Megawords*, *Swindle Quarterly*, *Proximity Magazine*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Village Voice*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, *Dwell*, *Juxtapoz*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Boston Phoenix*, *Art New England* and *The New York Times Book Review*. Lukas is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design and now lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.