

Boomburb Politics and the Rise of Private Government

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Reno, NV, a smaller and more downscale version of Las Vegas, is famous for its slogan, “The biggest little city in the world.” This tag line conveys the image that while Reno may be small in scale, it features big-time attractions. Boomburbs, which are large, fast-growing suburban cities, offer an opposite reality—they may be the biggest small towns in the world. That is especially true of the way most of them are run. Despite having more than 100,000 residents, Boomburbs often maintain tiny governments that seem better suited to cities a tenth their size. This is possible largely because these governments manage only part of their city’s affairs. This article explores how governments suited to small towns can nonetheless run large and expanding cities.

There are 54 Boomburbs in the United States, and they are found mostly in the Sunbelt, especially the western part (Lang and LeFurgy 2007). The largest is Mesa, AZ, which approaches half a million residents and contains more people than such traditional big cities as Cleveland, Miami, Minneapolis, and St. Louis. Other Boomburbs include Plano, TX; Irvine, CA; Henderson, NV; Aurora, CO; and Coral Springs, FL. Since 1990, Boomburbs have captured more than half of all population growth in U.S. cities with 100,000 to 400,000 residents. More significant is the fact that from 1990 to 2000, 14 of the 25 fastest-growing of the 100 most populous cities were Boomburbs, including half of the top 10 (Lang and Simmons 2003). Most should continue to grow as the nation adds its next 100 million residents (Nelson and Lang 2007).

Boomburbs are accidental cities. This is not because they lack planning, for many are filled with master-planned communities (Lang 2007). But when one master-planned community abuts another, they may not add up to one well-planned city. It seems that few Boomburbs anticipated becoming big cities or have yet to fully absorb this identity. Part of the confusion may stem from the fact that the forces of metropolitan growth are now primar-

ily suburban (Lang and Knox 2007). In the past, the port, the factory, and the rail terminal fueled growth. Today, booms occur in places with multiple exchanges on new freeways, where new subdivisions, shopping strips, and office parks spring up. As Jacobs would have said, Boomburbs are developing mainly as a series of “micro-destinations” (e.g., scattered office parks) as opposed to “macro-destinations” (downtowns) (2004, 21).

The same accidental imagery applies to government: Boomburbs are big cities that are run like small towns. This big city/small town governance split is both a strength and a weakness. Boomburbs offer a surprising mix of government. Citizens tend to seek both more and less service than residents of suburbs around the big cities of the Northeast and Midwest. While the municipal governments of Boomburbs are usually smaller than in old-style big cities, gaps in service are often filled by private governments such as homeowners associations (HOAs) and various shadow governments such as special improvement districts.

Almost all Boomburbs have part-time mayors who work under a professional city manager–council system. This is not particularly shocking, considering that many Sunbelt core cities such as Dallas and San Diego use the same system. But most big Sunbelt cities with part-time mayors are debating the switch to full-time office holders or to the so-called “strong mayor system,” where a mayor serves as the elected chief executive and exercises broad powers (Southwick 1997). By the end of this decade, many big Sunbelt cities will be run by full-time mayors. However, although a similar debate is occurring in a few Boomburbs, they will likely continue to have part-time political leadership well into the future.

Boomburbs are inventive places that often devise numerous strategies to adapt governments intended for small towns to the realities of big cities. Boomburbs are fortunate in that their rise occurred at a time when multiple alternatives to traditional government also appeared. These accidental cities can be seen as testing labs for quasi-government instruments that complement municipal management. For now, the system is working, but the day of reckoning may not be far off in some of the largest Boomburbs. At some point, big Boomburbs may be forced to switch governance as increasing demands for service overwhelm their small staffs.

The city manager system and reform government

The city manager system dates to the Progressive Era in the early years of the 20th century (Knox and McCarthy 2005). Before that time, big city governments in the Northeast and Midwest were often corrupt and captured by

political machines that used public revenues for patronage or personal gain. As western and southern cities developed at the turn of the 20th century, they adopted reform governments that hired professional management to run city affairs and limited the political leadership to part-time (essentially volunteer) jobs. The reforms mostly worked. Sunbelt cities and later Boomburbs were typically not plagued by the type of corruption that was sometimes found in the Northeast and Midwest.

But the early-20th-century reform version of civic government may be outdated. First, Boomburbs are usually far more diverse than their mayors, who are typically white men. Second, these mayors are almost all affluent volunteers. Volunteering is certainly noble, but if Boomburbs paid their mayors a decent salary, people seeking office could be drawn from a wider income spectrum.

In Boomburbs, virtually all city council members are elected “at-large” and therefore can live anywhere in the city. Boomburbs are not divided into roughly equal-sized wards, each of them home to a council member who represents their interests. Again, the at-large council structure comes from reforms in the early part of the 20th century. One problem with the ward system is that council members swap projects with each other (a new bridge in Ward 1 for a new park in Ward 2), thereby raising the cost of government. In an at-large system, the idea is that each member has the interests of the whole city at heart.

When Boomburbs were mostly small and socially homogeneous, the at-large council structure worked. But most are now big and diverse, and there is also a spatial dimension to their diversity. Although just about every Boomburb has rich and poor sections, at-large council members tend to be drawn predominantly from the wealthy sections. Discussions with people who live in Boomburbs suggest that there are even some cases where several council members live in the same upscale neighborhood. Thus, the interests of many lower-income and minority sections are often underrepresented. When this is the case, the risk of corruption and inefficiency may be less worrisome than the likelihood of alienating entire sections of the city. After much debate, Phoenix switched to a ward system during the 1990s in part because the continued disenfranchisement of the city’s south side became unacceptable. The result has been a greater focus on problems in the poorer wards. Some larger and more diverse Boomburbs such as Mesa (AZ) and Anaheim (CA) may soon follow the big Sunbelt cities in moving to the ward system.

Although this system may drive up the expense of local government as council members swap projects, there can be higher costs in the form of the

systematic disenfranchisement of diverse neighborhood interests (Southwick 1997). Several Boomburbs such as Fontana (CA) recently debated switching to a ward-based council, but ultimately decided to stay with an at-large system (Kresge 2004). This is one more hint that the part-time/volunteer management of Boomburbs is starting to break down. Given the rate at which populations and interests are diversifying at the neighborhood scale, it is likely that at least some Boomburbs will shift away from at-large city councils in the near future.

Boomburb HOAs

But for the invention of HOAs in the 1960s, Boomburbs almost certainly would be governed more like traditional cities of similar size. HOAs enabled Boomburbs to maintain their part-time mayors and small staffs by providing a free and highly effective private government in place of a costly and often less effective public one. How important are HOAs to Boomburb governance? The fact that some Boomburbs such as Coral Springs (FL), Henderson and North Las Vegas (NV), and Chandler and Gilbert (AZ) allow no new development outside of HOAs is quite indicative. Other Boomburbs are trying to retrofit an HOA structure over existing neighborhoods with fee simple land tenure.

Boomburbs do not push for HOAs because of some altruistic or fussy notion of community. Rather, most Boomburb governments recognize the efficacy and economy HOAs provide to local government and do everything in their power to promote them. In fact, some newer suburban cities that are competing with Boomburbs have even taken the process a step further by outsourcing the functions of city hall altogether. The new master-planned communities of Weston (FL), Sandy Springs (GA), and Centennial (CO) now form “contract cities” (Dorell 2006, A1). They hire private companies or county governments to run city services. So complete is the contracting of services that Weston (FL)—a city of nearly 70,000 people—has only three full-time employees.

A good example of how critical HOAs are to the basic functioning of Boomburbs is North Las Vegas (McKenzie 2006). The current mayor, Michael L. Montandon, even got his start in politics as the president of an HOA. As mayor, he aggressively promotes HOAs. While the city cannot mandate directly that all new development have an HOA, it does create code requirements to ensure that HOAs will form. For example, Montandon wrote a new code prohibiting a community from building a wall at the very edge of its property line. Not only did the code require a 10-foot setback between

the subdivision wall and city property, it also charged property owners in the subdivision with the responsibility of maintaining this perimeter space. Without mandating an HOA directly, the city code of North Las Vegas nonetheless strongly encouraged it. Individual property owners would be better off forming an organization to maintain this land than doing it themselves, and that organization is going to be an HOA.

North Las Vegas, like so many Boomburbs, has both rich and poor sections. The dividing line between them is Interstate 15, which runs north out of Las Vegas and splits the city in half. The largely built-out area east of the interstate is low income and comprises about a third of North Las Vegas. The still booming section west of the interstate is higher income and accounts for about two-thirds of the city. In a new twist on the old concept of the “wrong side of the tracks,” Boomburbs now often feature the “wrong side of the freeway.”

Most projects approved in new parts of North Las Vegas are more upscale than in existing neighborhoods in the east. The mayor argues that the city needs to do this to balance its income, but the more pressing issue is that the eastern neighborhoods create enormous costs in code enforcement.¹ The problem is that the east side of the city has few HOAs to manage relations between feuding neighbors and local government must therefore settle disputes. This requires hiring municipal employees to do the settling and that ultimately raises taxes. The city is now experimenting with strategies to create neighborhood organizations that do their own code enforcement. But there remains such a strong ethos for unfettered land use that it has been a slow and difficult process.

It is interesting to note that HOAs did not dominate North Las Vegas even 10 years ago. In 1997, the city had 83,000 people, and at most 5 percent of them lived in areas with HOAs. The population now stands at 175,000, and 90 percent of post-1997 construction has been in developments with HOAs. North Las Vegas is rapidly approaching the point where at least half of its population lives in such areas, and the city’s build-out plans include the objective that all new residential developments form HOAs.

What is true for North Las Vegas also holds for the region’s other Boomburb—Henderson, NV, home to master-planned communities such as Green Valley. In their book on Las Vegas, Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens (1999) note that HOAs do more than provide for nice lawns and shared amenities:

¹This is based on a conversation between Robert Lang and Mayor Montandon on March 12, 2004, in North Las Vegas.

[M]any homebuyers are attracted to the master-planned communities of Green Valley and Summerlin, not just for their beautifully landscaped parks and walking trails but because they want protection from neighbors who might disassemble a car in their driveway or pile junk around their house. These “neighborhood nightmares,” featured regularly in the Las Vegas Sun, can go on for years, even decades, because of slow-moving city or county code enforcement. In short, they seek services and protection they can no longer expect from municipal government. (153)

HOAs also figure prominently in the governance of Boomburbs in the Phoenix area, especially Chandler and Gilbert (AZ). In Chandler, Mayor Boyd Dunn (2004) sees HOAs as very important because they relieve much of the cost burden on the city. The gated communities with HOAs even have private streets that they maintain. According to Dunn (2004), if HOAs went away, “it would be disastrous for the city.” HOAs are so important that Chandler, like North Las Vegas, is trying to get fee simple neighborhoods to adopt HOAs. The city even supports HOAs directly by giving them small grants for improvements and uses these grants as an inducement to start new HOAs in fee simple neighborhoods.

Again, one key benefit that HOAs provide is code enforcement. Like other Boomburbs, Chandler has a big problem with settling disputes in fee simple neighborhoods that lack private government. HOAs, because of their enforceable covenants, take care of such disputes directly. In addition, HOAs have strict codes and tighter neighborhood restrictions than the city does (or ever could), so there is much less concern on the part of city officials that real estate in areas with HOAs will lose value.

Gilbert (AZ) also relies heavily on HOAs. According to Mayor Steven Berman (2004), Gilbert used to be famous for its single-family homes on one-acre lots. But those days are gone. Gilbert requires an HOA for new residential developments that have any commonly owned area, but not for new fee simple one-acre lots. That would seem to be a loophole except that, according to Mayor Berman (2004), no stand-alone fee simple homes have been built since 2001. Gilbert is now effectively an HOA-only community, and there is nothing on the horizon that should change that pattern as the city builds out over the next 20 years. In the end, Mayor Berman (2004) wants 80 percent of the city in HOAs.

The mayors of Boomburbs find that by performing labor-intensive, neighborhood-level management, HOAs free cities to concentrate on providing big infrastructure, economic development, and long-range master planning.

If HOAs were to suddenly lose their enforcement capacity, many Boomburbs could descend into political chaos. At the very least, they would need to hire more employees and increase taxes to pay for expanded government. HOAs do have some lobbying power in the form of the Community Association Institute, but perhaps their biggest local advocates are Boomburb mayors.

Accidental politics?

Boomburbs may have reached their quasi-big city status accidentally, but there is not much left to chance in their governance. They have highly targeted politics; they are governed lightly in the public realm and precisely in the private sphere. The mix allows Boomburbs to offer cost-effective government, where volunteers (from the mayor's office to the HOA boards) do most of the difficult work of managing neighborhoods. So far, the blend of private and public is working, but there are clouds on the horizon.

One looming issue is equity. Boomburb governance assumes a basic commonality of interest among residents. But as Boomburbs increasingly turn into big cities, this assumption is no longer valid. They need to adjust to new realities, but at the same time retain the elements that have made them so attractive for so many years. Perhaps Boomburbs will lead the nation in a new round of civic reform that will enable them to broaden enfranchisement without inviting corruption. Boomburbs that fail to recognize their growing diversity through the political process risk alienating the residents who will constitute a majority in the future.

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