

Strong and inclusive mayors are filling the gaps in state and federal decision making



In an era of federal –and often state – legislative gridlock, the former Mayor of Salt Lake City, [Ralph Becker](#) writes that cities can be important for instituting positive change when other governments can no longer do so. Here he reflects on his own experience of revitalizing Salt Lake City's downtown, and on the leadership of cities in Kentucky, Indiana and Texas whose mayors have used principles of inclusivity and pragmatism to overcome challenges and to deliver positive change.

Dysfunction has become a byword for the federal government's lawmaking in recent years. The gap caused by Congress' gridlock is now often being filled by mayors who are energized and taking action on important matters that are facing the nation. Innovative, energetic initiatives happening in some cities are replacing the hyper partisan politics common at other levels of government.

For almost 20 years in elected office with my last eight years as Salt Lake City Mayor, I had the opportunity to pursue an aggressive agenda for my city. And, thanks to a fellowship with the [Open Society Foundation](#), I was able to reflect on my own experiences and distill the traits and characteristics of effective elected official governance.

Why are cities important in the United States for instituting change? Metropolitan areas are where most people live and work: United States and Utah metro areas comprise 80 percent of the population and 90 percent of the economy. If cities assert strong agendas, some of the paralysis that leads to voids in federal and some state governments can be overcome by local action.

I was particularly focused in my eight years as Salt Lake City Mayor on an aggressive agenda to help shape a new, "Great American City", with a theme around livability, which I considered a synonym for sustainability. I viewed my actions in the context of a comprehensive, holistic "Livability Agenda." These actions were multi-dimensional: from Utah's first nondiscrimination ordinance for the LGBTQ population, to measures across the board to achieve a net zero city, or revitalizing a downtown to create the gathering place for the metropolitan region.

How an innovative approach can revitalize a downtown

One example that took attention throughout my tenure as mayor illustrates this approach: the building of a new larger theater (the Eccles Theater) in the core of downtown Salt Lake City. Building a new theater in the downtown area may not seem to tie into a broader livability effort, so let me explain the thinking behind the new theater in this context: successful downtowns serve as gathering places for a region. And, via infrastructure investment for multi-modal transportation, housing and energy-use policies, local business recruitment and support, and governmental streamlining in areas like permitting, a city can play a critical role in downtowns serving as anchors for a region. When downtowns thrive, energy use is reduced for a region and climate reduction goals are also realized.

When I entered office, a proposal for a new, larger theater in a suburban city had been floated. A recent Downtown Plan identified that the regional theater should be located downtown. After five years of engagement with the business and arts community through the Great Recession, the Salt Lake City Council approved bonding for a new (Eccles) Theater that leveraged multiple funding sources with private funding for about a quarter of the Theater's cost. Two years (2016) later the Theater opened and has far exceeded goals for patronage. That project reached the highest energy-use standards, catalyzed over \$500 million of adjacent development, and helped re-energize the core of Salt Lake City. In the last 10 years, Salt Lake City's downtown has gone from a nighttime ghost town to a bustling downtown.



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Mayors across America are delivering strong results

My fellowship activities included reflections on my own experiences as a state legislator and Salt Lake City Mayor, as well as in-depth reviews of the leadership in three other US cities that are very different: Louisville, Kentucky; Gary, Indiana; and Austin, Texas. The mayors of these cities are respected in national governance circles as leaders who are delivering strong results in their communities, and finding success despite challenging odds.

For example, Mayor Greg Fischer of Louisville, a successful entrepreneur before becoming mayor, launched an “Office for Globalization” that addresses the city’s growing immigrant population. Innovative in its approach, it focuses on strategies to better engage and welcome the international community, and to help newcomers maximize their talents, start businesses and engage in Louisville’s transition into an internationally competitive city.

Louisville, like Salt Lake City, is a refugee resettlement community that hosts tens of thousands of refugees from around the world. The mayor’s initiative turns the challenge of assimilating refugees into an economic development opportunity, and it also reinforces his pledge to make Louisville a “compassionate city” that encourages people’s human potential.

In Gary, Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, a former State Attorney General, launched a program called “Gary for Life”, which is delivering results as an anti-crime, community restoration initiative. The program treats community violence as a public-health issue, and has attracted the attention of state and national governments as a model for reducing violent crime.

In Austin, Mayor Steve Adler skillfully navigated efforts by the Texas State Legislature and Governor to override a city policy to provide gender-neutral public accommodations. By enlisting the powerful Texas business community to lobby against the state’s position, and recognize the adverse economic impacts of a discriminatory ‘bathroom bill’, the mayor was able to ward off the state’s aggressive preemption efforts.

Elected leaders like these, who are delivering results and effecting positive change in their communities, share common traits and approaches. They stay focused on serving the public interest, and on solutions over partisanship and the narrow politics of the next election. Good elected leaders inherently collaborate in their pursuits. Other important qualities that good elected leaders exhibit include:

- A clear vision for their communities, and well-defined objectives
- Compelling, value-based rationales articulated for their proposals and decisions
- Prioritizing pursuits, choosing battles carefully, and acknowledging resource limitations
- Pragmatic assessments of what they can accomplish

- Willingness to take political risks
- Serving as conveners and engaging a full range of stakeholders, partners, and the public
- Transparency in their decision-making processes
- Seeking consensus (not unanimity), and listening to all views
- Getting buy-in of other affected decision makers
- Considering different alternatives and their consequences
- Anticipating and adapting to the implementation of actions
- Maintaining personal integrity
- Practicing civility and compassion

As is true in our personal lives, many of these traits and approaches to good elected leadership are aspirational. In this era of heightened distrust of government, it is clear to me that elected officials who genuinely embrace good governance attributes will help restore confidence in government and bring us a better future. Strong, inclusive elected leaders at the local can, and are, making a difference across the United States.

- *This article is based on the paper, '[Filling State and Federal Gaps with Local Solutions: One City Mayor's Perspective](#)', in *State and Local Government Review*.*

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About the author



Ralph Becker

Ralph Becker served two terms as mayor of Salt Lake City (2008-2015). He also served in the Utah State Legislature as a member of the House of Representatives for 11 years (1996-2007), including five years as House Minority Leader. In 2015, Ralph served as President of the National League of Cities. In his political career, Ralph focused attention on serving the public interest through solution-oriented, inclusive governance practices. He became known for his work improving conditions for the LGBT community around discrimination; sustainability practices in cities and protection of lands and resources; and changes to improve equity in education, access to the outdoors, and community development. In 2017, Ralph served as a Leadership in Government Fellowship with the Open Society Foundation. He speaks regularly around the world on governance and sustainability and has authored numerous publications.