

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## You can't build a city on pity

On Tuesday, Pottstown superintendent Stephen Rodriguez conducted a forum at Pottstown High School decrying Pennsylvania's school funding system, which shortchanges urban schools.

There is no question the system is unfair. It's been unfair ever since the middle class moved out of our cities — and towns like Pottstown — after World War II. Today, the Pennsylvania legislature is overwhelmingly controlled by rural and suburban interests, and they will ensure their school districts are first in line for state funding.

I applaud efforts — through the courts and the democratic process — to improve the state aid structure.

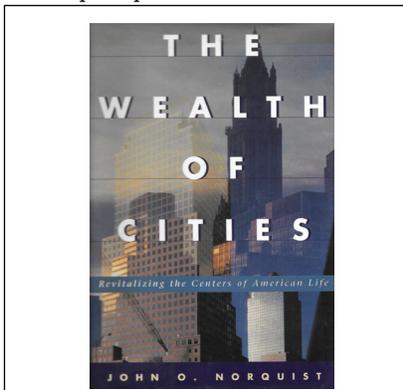
But unfair funding cannot be an excuse for the Pottstown School District not to run the most efficient, cost-effective system it can.

John Norquist, former 16-year mayor of Milwaukee and longtime advocate for cities, has published a compelling book about the natural advantages of cities (and towns like Pottstown).

"Cities form as people gather together. Large numbers of people living close together communicate, work, trade, sell, buy, and specialize easily and thus to a greater degree than do people who live far apart from one another," Norquist writes.

"The efficient proximity of people in cities and the consequent ease of interaction unleash processes that build civilization."

Norquist points out that as Ameri-



can cities began their decline in the 1950s, they were still awash in federal funding. Between 1960 and 1974, federal grants to the states and local governments rose from \$7 billion to nearly \$45 billion. Then President Richard Nixon started federal revenue sharing, and huge amounts of "no strings attached" federal dollars were given to local communities which continue to this day (in greatly reduced amounts) as Community Development Block Grants.

To a large degree, cities used this money for ill-considered urban renewal projects that demolished hundreds of viable neighborhoods across the country and replaced them with massive federal housing projects that soon became synonymous with welfare, crime, and blight.

Massive highway projects not only emptied out our cities and towns, they helped destroy existing neighborhoods. Philadelphia lost its waterfront to Interstate 95. In Pottstown, four-lane Route 100 severed the west end of the borough from the rest of town.

At the same time, a culture evolved of dependency on the state and federal governments to solve our problems locally.

As Norquist writes, "You can't build a city on fear, and you can't build a city on pity. Appealing to these emotions might generate a few dollars at first, but fear soon turns to hatred and pity to contempt. No one, particularly no one with money — whether the federal government or private investors — likes to be around a loser."

Instead of constantly wringing our hands about the need for more state aid, we should be looking for ways to do better with the resources we already have. In the school district, we must innovate. Teachers and administrators will need to rethink how we educate our young people.

Next week, I'll talk about tapping local resources.

*Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.*



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton



**John Norquist**