

THE FIRST SUBURBS CONSORTIUM OF NORTHEAST OHIO

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My presentation is really about how a group of diverse communities in a politically fragmented region have developed a common identity and are working together on common problems. And the story starts with Dr. Doom.

Dr. Doom is a mild-mannered guy named Tom Bier who does research on housing policy at Cleveland State University. For the past 20 years, he's tracked the process of outmigration in Northeast Ohio where a relatively stagnant population has moved from the urban core communities out to rapidly developing suburbs at the edges of the metro area. And Tom's been going around the region making presentations and writing op-eds pieces that say older communities face some pretty **tough challenges**:

- aging real estate that isn't competitive in today's market,
- big bills for repairing old infrastructure,
- lack of developable land,
- loss of wealthier residents to newer communities,
- increasing rates of poverty,
- higher social service burdens,
- and a shrinking tax base to pay for it all.

Basically, Tom told older communities that, if current trends continue, they face **inexorable decline**.

Now, this was not a welcome message to anyone struggling to hold these communities together — it was perceived as a public relations disaster — hence the name Dr. Doom. No community wants to admit that its fortunes may be declining because such an admission can just accelerate the process. It's safer to stick your head in the sand — especially if you're an elected official who has trouble seeing beyond one term of office.

But in the past 3-4 years, I'm happy to report that this attitude has changed in remarkable ways. We now have an organization called the First Suburbs Consortium, which is composed of more than a dozen of the inner-ring communities around Cleveland. They have formed a council of governments, and they are promoting themselves and dealing aggressively with regional development issues and the state policies the make life difficult for older communities.

I'd like to briefly suggest 3 reasons for this change, and then describe some of the projects that our First Suburbs has been working on:

1) I think the first thing that contributed to the organization of the First Suburbs is **leadership**. We have several communities, especially Shaker Heights and Cleveland Heights, with a long history of working proactively to maintain racial integration. They are accustomed to confronting tough issues and taking a long-term view of the future of their communities.

The person who convened the early meetings of First Suburbs and who is still the chair is Ken Montlack, the vice mayor of Cleveland Heights.

Dr. Doom has become a key advisor.

2) The second contributing factor was that these communities were able to forge a **common identity** that was greater than their differences. In our metro area, just our central county, Cuyahoga County, has more than 50 separate municipalities. They all compete with one another for jobs and tax base, and they all have independent land use authority. So it's extremely hard to cooperate across borders.

But the communities in First Suburbs have understood that they face a common set of problems related to unbalanced development patterns in the region and the lack of state support for maintenance and redevelopment of older communities. Their identity now is that of a mature, fully developed community, as opposed to a growing suburb. And, in many ways, they see that they have more in common with the central city of Cleveland than with other suburbs.

That represents a major shift in identity.

And they have realized that no single community can tackle these issues on its own. They have to work together — even though they are a diverse collection of cities — from white-collar to blue-collar, affluent to not-so-affluent.

And the level of cooperation has been amazing — mayors, councilpersons and economic development directors of the communities attend the monthly FSC meetings and all pitch in to help.

3) In addition to this common identity, there's another conceptual factor that has helped first Suburbs — they now have a **language** to talk about their issues. They used to feel -- or were made to feel — that decline was all their own fault. But now they are able to talk about how a whole host of state and federal policies — from highway investments to economic development incentives — creates an unbalanced playing field for development in the region.

The language comes from the larger Smart Growth movement. The First Suburbs members draw upon the arguments and the research from around the country — and all the organizations like CNU and the Growth Management Leadership Alliance, who have worked to make these issues real and politically acceptable to talk about.

In Cleveland, we have also been fortunate to have a Catholic Bishop, Bishop Pilla, has spoken out about sprawl and the region, and provided a moral context for talking about these issues.

But the First Suburbs are **not just talk**. Before I close, I'd like to mention some of the **projects** the group is working on. These projects are not only interesting in their own right, but they provide a focus and keep the group moving forward with a sense of accomplishment.

Home repair in older communities — First Suburbs worked the county treasurer to set up a linked deposit program by which the county deposits funds in local banks, and the banks provide low-interest loans for home repair in targeted communities.

Brownfield cleanup — The county set up a \$15 fund to assist with the cleanup of contaminated sites, and First Suburbs communities got first preference for the money.

Retail revitalization — First Suburbs raised \$250,000 from members and local foundations for a major study of how old commercial districts can be revamped to compete in today's marketplace.

Infrastructure — members are cooperating to get each other named to the boards of regional agencies dealing with infrastructure spending. And they are looking at issues of stormwater regulation and the new accounting standards that will require a community's infrastructure to be listed in its books as a depreciated asset for the purposes of setting bond ratings.

Lobbying — They all are pitching in to hire a part-time lobbyist to work on state policy.

In summary, these people in First Suburbs are serious. They're tired of public resources going to support new development in the region at the expense of older communities. They're tired of swimming hard against a tide that's dragging them down.

In response, they have forged a common identity and a common purpose — overcoming their differences to work together on the larger forces that threaten all.

Together, they are responding to the challenge of Dr. Doom.