

WINNING REGIONAL EQUITY:

Strategy Statement of the
American Metropolitan Equity Network (AMEN)
of the Gamaliel Foundation

Urban sprawl removes people, tax base, school funding, municipal resources for streets, sewers and water lines from older cities and suburbs. As a consequence, sprawl depletes the value of homeownership for residents of core communities. This deprives them of wealth accumulation and the opportunity to finance a small business or the college education of their children. Sprawl moves employment opportunities away from inner-city and inner-suburban neighborhoods. Ironically, sprawl is financed by taxpayers from the very communities it is destroying: Subsidies from federal and state government pay for new roads, highways, sewers and water lines for subdivisions built in corn fields far from the urban core.

In sum, sprawl removes opportunity from urban ghettos and leaves concentrated poverty in its wake. Sprawl is driving the racial and economic segregation of Urban America. Spatial barriers have replaced Jim Crow laws (in the South) and Jim Crow practices (in the North) in denying low-income African Americans and Hispanics access to quality employment and educational opportunities. As Rochester Mayor William Johnson has said, reflecting on his decades as an Urban League executive, "We prepared ourselves for opportunity without realizing that opportunity was being relentlessly relocated beyond our reach."

The faith-based leaders of the AMEN (the Gamaliel Foundation) regard the racial and economic barriers erected by sprawl as a profound moral challenge for America. AMEN is committed to tearing down spatial barriers. Our coalitions will mobilize people of all faiths - Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims - and of all racial and ethnic groups and economic classes, from city and suburban congregations alike, to create powerful, region-wide reform movements. We will form alliances with environmental groups that understand that Smart Growth must also be Fair Growth; with business organizations that recognize that a fair society, developing the skills of all its citizens, is an economically efficient society; with political leaders whose communities are victimized by sprawl and abandonment; and with labor unions committed to opening the doors to opportunity for all.

Our goals are to secure anti-sprawl, regional land use and transportation planning; regional fair share housing; balanced fiscal policies; genuine educational opportunity; and effective representation of our communities in regional bodies.

Anti-sprawl, regional land use and transportation planning: We will work to secure passage of strong, anti-sprawl state laws a) that require local governments to plan together, and b) that require zoning to conform to plans. We will work to ensure that federal and state transportation investments are the servants of - not the masters of - land use plans. Transportation allocations should "fix it first" (improve existing roads and highways) and expand public transportation rather than build new highways.

Regional fair share housing: We strongly advocate "opportunity-based housing" on a regional, fair share basis. Affordable housing must be built where job opportunities are

expanding. Our motto must be "anyone who is good enough to work in a community is good enough to live in that community." We seek racial and economic diversity and balance in newer suburban developments and gentrifying older neighborhoods alike. We will work for community-by-community adoption of inclusionary zoning laws, including direct acquisition of affordable units by public housing authorities in order to aid very low-income families. We will seek state laws to mandate mixed-income housing policies on a metropolitan-wide basis.

Balanced fiscal policies: Giving low-income families a genuine choice to move into communities of expanding employment and educational opportunity is more effective than just moving more tax money into high-poverty ghettos and barrios of declining employment and educational opportunities. However, fiscal fairness within our regions is important. We support reforming state educational finance formulas to provide more funds for inner-city and inner-suburban school districts; reforming state municipal aid formulas to increase funds for poverty-impacted municipalities; and enacting state laws establishing regional tax-base sharing programs.

Genuine educational opportunity: We owe every child a safe school environment; well prepared teachers; essential school books and other curriculum materials; class sizes in which individual attention can be provided; and a school environment that encourages parental involvement in each child's education. Thus, we support educational finance reforms. We also recognize, however, that, very importantly, children learn from their classmates, and that low-income children learn best in middle-class schools that are environments rich in opportunity. Housing policy is school policy. Mixed-income neighborhoods support mixed-income neighborhood schools.

Effective representation in regional bodies: Blacks and Hispanics have fought long and hard to secure political power. Too often, successfully electing blacks and Hispanics to public office must still depend on majority minority electorates. As significant local decisions move beyond city limits to a regional level, minorities have a legitimate fear that for a vision of expanded opportunity, they are being asked, in reality, to sacrifice their political voice. We will work to assure effective minority representation in regional decision-making bodies. Above all, we will target the Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) that allocate federal and state transportation investments. Many MPOs violate "one person-one vote" rule, over-representing outer suburban jurisdictions to the detriment of support for core community needs. We shall work to reform MPO membership, including intervention in re-certification proceedings of MPOs by the US Department of Transportation.

We know that these regional reforms will meet determined resistance by those who benefit from the current "rules of the game" - both from long-term opponents and occasionally from traditional allies. We do not seek to alienate unnecessarily any who may be opponents today but potential allies tomorrow. However, fundamentally transforming opportunities for low-income families (of whatever race and ethnicity) in Urban American will not come from voluntary, consensual processes but from building powerful coalitions of like-minded allies to succeed through the political process.