

thought  
leader

## The Mega Cities

**A** mega city is an urban area of 10 million population or more. *The Economist* "Pocket World in Figures" 2016 Edition lists 33 mega cities of the world from Bangalore, India at 10.1 million, thirty-third on the list, to number one Tokyo, Japan at 38.0 million. Two American cities are included on the list: New York, number 11 at 18.6 million and Los Angeles, number 23 at 12.3 million.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that in 2014 54% of the world's people lived in urban areas, up from 34% in 1960. The tipping point, according to most authorities, occurred in 2007 when there were more urban dwellers than rural residents in the world: the so-called "urban millennium." The United Nations organization, DESA, predicts that by 2050 66% of the world's population will live in urban areas.

Some sociologists see this trend to the cities negatively for its concentration of the huddled masses and slum conditions and its effect on the environment with more air and water pollution. But there is another, more positive take on the situation.

Edward Glaeser, in *Triumph of the City* claims that cities are the healthiest and richest places to live. New Yorkers live longer and have a lower incidence of heart disease and cancer than other Americans for instance. "Urban growth is a great way to reduce rural poverty," he says and "cities aren't full of poor people because cities make people poor, but because cities attract poor people with the prospect of improving their lot in life." Cities have been "the engines of innovation since Plato and Socrates," he argues and points to Florence, the site of the Renaissance and Birmingham that "gave us the industrial revolution."

The World Bank Land and Poverty Conference held in New York in April, 2016 addressed the issue. Paul Romer an NYU professor and keynote speaker at the conference, offered his views on the role and future of the expanding cities. His main thesis was that land must be set aside for arterial work—roads, grid, infrastructure—before the expansion of the city. That land should be held until roads must be built. In other words, as he said, "Let them come and they will build it." In the early years it will be messy, until water and sewer systems are built, but let people build. If corridors are protected, even bad use of the adjoining land can be retrofitted, but you can't retrofit roads over built-up areas.

Romer is especially irked by what he calls an artificial scarcity of land due to over-regulation, inflated land values and political barriers. (He doesn't like zoning.) Scarcity creates hoarding of land and inflated costs. The solution is to make land available without limit. People will not squat if they have opportunity of access to land. Containment, i.e., artificial barriers to growth, is wrong.

People should be attracted to the city, says Romer. There is more potential wealth for city dwellers than in rural areas. If people leave the farm and move to the city there will be fewer people doing the farming and the income of those left behind will be greater. It's win/win according to Romer.

It should be noted that both Paul Romer and Edward Glaeser are economists, not social scientists, environmentalists, planners or politicians. Their views on the management of city growth may not be widely accepted. But their ideas are intriguing and worth thinking about as the world turns inexorably to the cities. And, by the way, how might their ideas affect the surveying profession and how might our educators prepare future surveyors for the growth of the mega cities? ■

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