

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama

A Metropolitan Strategy for America's Future

U.S. Conference of Mayors

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This is something of a homecoming for me. Because while I stand here today as a candidate for President of the United States, I will never forget that the most important experience in my life came when I was doing what you do each day – working at the local level to bring about change in our communities.

As some of you may know, after college, I went to work with a group of churches as a community organizer in Chicago – so I could help lift up neighborhoods that were struggling after the local steel plants closed. And it taught me a fundamental truth that I carry with me to this day – that in this country, change comes not from the top-down, but from the bottom-up.

You see, back in those days, we weren't just focused on changing federal policies in Washington. And we weren't just focused on changing state policies in Springfield. No, we were focused on the place we knew could actually do the most, the fastest, to make a difference in our community – and that was the Mayor's Office.

It was the Mayor's Office we turned to when we wanted to open a job training center to put people back to work. It was the Mayor's Office we turned to when we wanted to make sure city housing was safe to live in. And it's the Mayor's Office that Americans across this country rely on every day.

You may get more than your fair share of the blame sometimes. You may not always be appreciated. But when a disaster strikes – a Katrina, a shooting, or a six-alarm blaze – it's City Hall we lean on, it's City Hall we call first, and City Hall we depend on to get us through tough times. Because whether it's a small town or a big city, the government that people count on most is the one that's closest to the people.

And it's precisely because you're on the front lines in our communities that you know what happens when Washington fails to do its job. It may be easy for some in Washington to remain out of touch with the consequences of the decisions that are made there – but not you.

You know what happens when Washington puts out economic policies that work for Wall Street but not Main Street – because it's your towns and cities that get hit when factories close their doors, and workers lose their jobs, and families lose their homes because of an unscrupulous lender. That's why you need a partner in the White House.

You know what happens when Washington makes promises it doesn't keep and fails to fully fund No Child Left Behind – because it's your teachers who are overburdened, your teachers who aren't getting the support they need, and your teachers who are forced to teach to the test, instead of giving students the skills to compete in our global economy. That's why you need a partner in the White House.

You know what happens when Washington succumbs to petty partisanship and fails to pass comprehensive immigration reform – because it’s your communities that are forced to take immigration enforcement into their own hands, your cities’ services that are stretched, and your neighborhoods that are seeing rising cultural and economic tensions. That’s why you need a partner in the White House.

You know what happens when Washington listens to big oil and gas companies and blocks real energy reform – because it’s your budgets that are being pinched by high energy costs, and your schools that are cutting back on textbooks to keep their buses running; it’s the lots in your towns and cities that are brownfields. That’s why you need a partner in the White House.

Now, despite the absence of leadership in Washington, we’re actually seeing a rebirth in many places. I’m thinking of my friend Rich Daley, who’s made a deep and lasting difference in the quality of life for millions of Chicagoans. I’m thinking of Mayor Cownie, who’s working to make his city green; Mayor Bloomberg, who’s fighting to turn around the nation’s largest school system; Mayor Rybak, who’s done an extraordinary job helping the Twin Cities recover from the bridge collapse last year; and so many other mayors across this country, who are finding new ways to lift up their communities.

But you shouldn’t be succeeding despite Washington – you should be succeeding with a hand from Washington. Neglect is not a policy for America’s metropolitan areas. It’s time City Hall had someone in the White House you could count on the way so many Americans count on you.

That’s what this election is all about – because while Senator McCain is a true patriot, he won’t be that partner. His priorities are very different from yours and mine. At a time when you’re facing budget deficits and looking to Washington for the support you need, he isn’t proposing a strategy for America’s cities. Instead, he’s calling for nearly \$2 trillion in tax breaks for big corporations and the wealthiest Americans – and yet he’s actually opposed more funding for the COPS program and the Community Development Block Grant program. That’s just more of the same in Washington. And few know better than you why Washington needs to change.

But the truth is, what our cities need isn’t just a partner. What you need is a partner who knows that the old ways of looking at our cities just won’t do; who knows that our nation and our cities are undergoing a historic transformation. The change that’s taking place today is as great as any we’ve seen in more than a century, since the time when cities grew upward and outward with immigrants escaping poverty, and tyranny, and misery abroad. Our population has grown by tens of millions in the past few decades, and it’s projected to grow nearly 50% more in the decades to come. And this growth isn’t just confined to our cities, it’s happening in our suburbs, exurbs, and throughout our metropolitan areas.

This is creating new pressures, but it’s also opening up new opportunities – because it’s not just our cities that are hotbeds of innovation anymore, it’s those growing metro areas. It’s not just Durham or Raleigh – it’s the entire Research Triangle. It’s not just Palo Alto, it’s cities up and down Silicon Valley. The top 100 metro areas generate two-thirds of our jobs, nearly 80% of patents, and handle 75% of all seaport tonnage through ports like the one here in Miami. In fact, 42 of our metro areas now rank among the world’s 100 largest economies.

To seize the possibility of this moment, we need to promote strong cities as the backbone of regional growth. And yet, Washington remains trapped in an earlier era, wedded to an outdated “urban” agenda that focuses exclusively on the problems in our cities, and ignores our growing metro areas; an agenda that confuses anti-

poverty policy with a metropolitan strategy, and ends up hurting both.

Now, let me be clear – we must help tackle areas of concentrated poverty. I say this not just as a former community organizer, but as someone who was shaped in part by the economic inequality I saw as a college student in cities like Los Angeles and New York.

That is why I've laid out an ambitious urban poverty plan that will help make sure no child begins the race of life behind the starting line; and create public-private business incubators to open up economic opportunity. That's why I'll fully fund the COPS program, restore funding for the Community Development Block Grant program, and recruit more teachers to our cities, and pay them more, and give them more support. And that's why I've proposed real relief for struggling homeowners and a trust fund to provide affordable housing. And let me say this – if George Bush carries out his threat to veto the housing bill – a bill that would provide critical resources to help you solve the foreclosure crisis in your towns and cities – I will fight to overturn his veto and make sure you have the support you need.

So, yes we need to fight poverty. Yes, we need to fight crime. Yes, we need to strengthen our cities. But we also need to stop seeing our cities as the problem and start seeing them as the solution. Because strong cities are the building blocks of strong regions, and strong regions are essential for a strong America. That is the new metropolitan reality and we need a new strategy that reflects it – a strategy that's about South Florida as much as Miami; that's about Mesa and Scottsdale as much as Phoenix; that's about Stamford and Northern New Jersey as much as New York City. As President, I'll work with you to develop this kind of strategy and I'll appoint the first White House Director of Urban Policy to help make it a reality.

The stakes could not be higher. Our children will grow up competing with children in Beijing and Bangalore and Berlin. And make no mistake – their governments are doing everything they can to give their countries an edge by investing in regional growth. As Bruce Katz of Brookings has pointed out, China is developing an advanced network of ports and freight hubs, and an advanced network of universities modeled after our own. And Germany has launched rail and telecom projects to bind its major metro areas more closely together. Other governments are aggressively pursuing strategies to unlock the potential of their metro areas. To compete and win in our global economy, we have to show the same kind of leadership.

There's no better place to start than by investing in the clusters of growth and innovation that are springing up across this country. Because what we've found time and time again is that when we take the different assets that are scattered throughout our communities – whether it's a skilled workforce or leading firms or institutions of higher education – and bring them all together so they can learn from one another and share ideas, you get the kind of creative thinking that doesn't come in isolation.

And that can lead to more innovation, and entrepreneurship, and real economic benefits like new jobs and higher wages. That's what happened Pennsylvania, where something called Keystone Innovation Zones have led to the formation of nearly 200 new companies. And that's why, in my administration, we'll offer \$200 million a year in competitive matching grants for state and local governments to plan and grow regional economies – because when it's working together, the sum of a metro area can be greater than its parts.

And we won't just unlock the potential of our individual regions; we'll unlock the potential of all our regions by connecting them with a 21st century infrastructure. You know why this is so important. You see the traffic along I-95 in Miami. You see the crumbling roads and bridges, the aging water and sewer pipes, the faltering electrical

grids that cost us billions in blackouts, repairs, and travel delays. It's gotten so bad that the American Society of Civil Engineers gave our national infrastructure a "D." And it's no wonder – because we're spending less on our infrastructure than at any time in the modern era.

This is putting enormous pressure on the Highway Trust Fund, which can no longer keep up with all the repairs that have to be made. Yet Senator McCain is actually proposing a gas tax gimmick that would take \$3 billion a month out of the Highway Trust Fund and hand it over to the oil companies. Well, at a time when the Highway Trust Fund is beginning to run a deficit for the first time in history, I think that's the last thing we can afford to do.

And just the other day, Senator McCain traveled to Iowa to express his sympathies for the victims of the recent flooding. I'm sure they appreciated the sentiment, but they probably would have appreciated it more if he hadn't voted against funding for levees and flood control programs, which he seems to consider pork. Well, we do have to reform budget earmarks, cut genuine pork, and dispense with unnecessary spending, as we confront a budget crisis left by the most fiscally irresponsible administration in modern times.

But when it comes to rebuilding America's essential but crumbling infrastructure, we need to do more, not less. Cities across the Midwest are under water right now or courting disaster not just because of the weather, but because we've failed to protect them. Maintaining our levees and dams isn't pork barrel spending, it's an urgent priority, and that's what we'll do when I'm President. I'll also launch a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank that will invest \$60 billion over ten years, and create nearly two million new jobs. The work will be determined by what will maximize our safety, security, and shared prosperity. Instead of building bridges to nowhere, let's build communities that meet the needs and reflect the dreams of our families. That's what this bank will help us do.

And we will fund this bank as we bring the war in Iraq to a responsible close. It's time to stop fighting a war that's stretching our Guard, straining our Reserves, and leaving your police and fire stations understaffed; a war that hasn't made us safer, and should have never been authorized and never been waged. It's time to stop spending \$10 billion a month in Iraq and start investing that money in Phoenix, Nashville, Seattle, and metro areas across this country.

Let's invest that money in a world-class transit system. Let's re-commit federal dollars to strengthen mass transit and reform our tax code to give folks a reason to take the bus instead of driving to work – because investing in mass transit helps make metro areas more livable and can help our regional economies grow. And while we're at it, we'll partner with our mayors to invest in green energy technology and ensure that your buses and buildings are energy efficient. And we'll also invest in our ports, roads, and high-speed rails – because I don't want to see the fastest train in the world built halfway around the world in Shanghai, I want to see it built right here in the United States of America.

And let's also upgrade our digital superhighway. It is unacceptable that here, in the country that invented the Internet, we fell to 15th in the world in broadband deployment. When kids can't afford or access high-speed Internet, it sets back America's ability to compete. That's why as President, I will set a simple goal: every American should have broadband access – no matter where you live, or how much money you have. We'll connect our schools and libraries and hospitals. And we'll take on the special interests to realize the potential of wireless spectrum for our safety and connectivity.

Now is not the time for small plans. Now is the time for bold action to rebuild and renew America. We've done

this before. Two hundred years ago, in 1808, Thomas Jefferson oversaw an infrastructure plan that envisioned the Homestead Act, the transcontinental railroads, and the Erie Canal. One hundred years later, in 1908, Teddy Roosevelt called together leaders from business and government to develop a plan for a 20th century infrastructure. Today, in 2008, it falls on us to take up this call again – to re-imagine America's landscape and remake America's future. That is the cause of this campaign, and that will be the cause of my presidency.

But understand – while the change we seek will require major investments by a more accountable government, it will not come from government alone. Washington can't solve all our problems. The statehouse can't solve all our problems. City Hall can't solve all our problems. It goes back to what I learned as a community organizer all those years ago – that change in this country comes not from the top-down, but from the bottom up. Change starts at a level that's even closer to the people than our mayors – it starts in our homes. It starts in our families. It starts by raising our children right, by turning off the TV, and putting away the video games; by going to those parent-teacher conferences and helping our children with their homework, and setting a good example. It starts by being good neighbors and good citizens who are willing to volunteer in our communities – to keep them clean, to keep them safe, and to serve as mentors and teachers to all of our children.

That's where change begins. That's how we'll bring about change in our neighborhoods. And if change comes to our neighborhoods, then change will come to our cities. And if change comes to our cities, then change will come to our regions. And if change comes to our regions, then I truly believe change will come to every corner of this country we love.

Throughout our history, it's been our cities that have helped tell the American story. It was Boston that rose up against an Empire, and Philadelphia where liberty first rung out; it was St. Louis that opened a gateway west, and Houston that launched us to the stars; it was the Motor City that built the middle class; Miami that built a bridge to the Americas; and New York that showed the world one clear September morning that America stands together in times of trial.

That's the proud tradition our cities uphold. That's the story our cities have helped write. And if you're willing to work with me and fight with me and stand with me this fall, then I promise you this – we will not only rebuild and renew our American cities, north and south, east and west, but you and I – together – will rebuild and renew the promise of America. Thank you.