



[Back to: Guest Opinion » Opinion » Home](#)

Opinion :: Guest Opinion

A city divided

by John Keith
MySouthEnd.com Contributor
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I sometimes joke on my blog that we should break up the city of Boston - that the "Boston Proper" neighborhoods, including the South End, Back Bay, and Beacon Hill, should secede from the rest. It's not so much joking, though, as it is "wistful" thinking.

I think our city has slowly been dividing into parts. Equal, but competing parts, and not necessarily along the lines you might think - these lines weren't drawn due to race or income, although they certainly play a part in it. Our city is being divided by widely divergent needs, interests and desires based on geographic location as much as by anything else.

You need look no further than to City Hall to understand what I'm talking about.

The city's budget has rapidly increased over the past decade, courtesy of you, me and the Mayor. Citywide, the average Bostonian's property tax bill increased 69.5 percent between 2002 and 2008. The city spent over \$2.1 billion this past fiscal year. Where does that money come from? Well, more than two-thirds of the city's commercial and residential property taxes are collected in "Boston Proper" neighborhoods. You know, the ones filled with all the expensive "luxury" condo buildings and "soaring" office buildings.

And, where does all that money go?

Well, as you might suspect, a lot of it goes toward public schools. In 2002, the City of Boston's public school budget was \$654 million; in 2006, it was \$717 million. The proposed public school budget for next year is \$827 million. That's \$180 million more, a 30 percent increase in seven years. (FYI, public school enrollment has declined 10 percent since 2001, going from 63,000 to 56,000 students today.) Where the money comes from and where it goes in regard to the public school system will show you how completely perverse the situation has become.

In 2002, Back Bay and Beacon Hill homeowners contributed \$71 million in residential property taxes toward the city's budget (no doubt this has increased in the interceding six years), but only 182 children from those neighborhoods were enrolled in the city's public schools. Meanwhile, homeowners in Roxbury, with twice the population, contributed \$20 million, while more than 17,000 children were enrolled in the school system.

So, money comes in from some of Boston's neighborhoods and money goes out to completely different neighborhoods. What does it matter? Because it means there is no accountability for the people who probably need there to be the most.

Allow me to be cynical for a moment. I don't think your average "Boston Proper" couple cares too much about what happens in the public school system, since they either don't have any kids or can afford to put those kids they do have through private schools. The main concerns of these city-dwellers are: One, can I walk to the market without getting robbed? Two, will my streets be cleaned

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Quick Poll

Boston -- and the South End -- has been the site of several movie shoots lately. How do you feel about the new Bossywood?

- It's great -- I love celebrities!
- It's great -- I love the benefits for Boston and the neighborhood!
- We're all going to be famous!
- I just hope they put things back the way they found them
- It's an inconvenience
- I could care less

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this week? And, three, what time is the game on tonight? Meanwhile, in the outer boroughs, citizens are mostly thinking about: One, can I walk to the market without getting shot? Two, is it time to move the family out to the suburbs, to better schools? Three, man, these property taxes are killing me, why can't those rich people downtown pay more? And, four, what time is the game on tonight?

It's because of this disconnect that you have the public school system suffering. And hasn't it always been suffering? Let's review some examples: More than 9 percent of the student population drops out, every year, while fewer than 50 percent of male Hispanic and African-American students will graduate high school within four years. Eleven thousand students are in need of "special education" and more than 18 percent are what the system calls "English Language Learners." And while those city dwellers who might not care too much about the public education system continue to pay for it, those who use it the most continue to get shafted - because they're not the ones paying for it.

It's the dichotomy of the modern city - one that's being played out across the country right now. There are those who live "downtown" - mostly new arrivals, who drop their dollars into a city's coffers, and then ask for, or demand, very little in return. "Would you sweep my street," once in awhile, and "Could you empty my trash," if it's not too much trouble, and, "Thank you for plowing my car in, I don't deserve anything more," every now and then. Mostly ambivalent. Apathetic. Uninvolved. Or, in their words, "Sorry, too darn busy!"

Then there are the others, those who live further out (in Boston, in neighborhoods such as Hyde Park, Roslindale, and West Roxbury). Married folks. Lived here for generations or got pushed out of "Boston Proper" by rising housing costs. Raising the kids on a middle-class budget. Voters. Different set of priorities. Different outlook on things.

And then there's a third group, a voiceless group, of people who live in neighborhoods like Dorchester and Roxbury with high crime rates, faltering city services and an increasing sense of disenfranchisement.

To a certain extent, our local politicians play on these divisions. A couple months ago, a letter written by At-Large City Councilor Michael Flaherty appeared in the South End News. In it, he complained that the city was being too tough on people when it towed their cars, on street-sweeping days. Too tough? I'd say that the majority of South Enders think the fines should be doubled and that the towed cars should be melted into lumps of steel. My immediate response upon reading the letter was, "Guess Mike's running for Mayor next year." Anti-towing? That'll play well in Southie.

Then, in March, District 8 City Councilor Michael Ross proposed legislation making it illegal for more than four students to rent an apartment, regardless of the unit's size or the number of bedrooms. It was quickly approved by all 13 city councilors, then signed into law by the Mayor. This legislation will do nothing to bring down the cost of housing and it won't make any neighborhood suddenly appealing to families. But it doesn't have to. It was the intent of the law that mattered, not its actual usefulness. To the average homeowner in the outer-burbs, it was seen as being "family-friendly."

When I've written about seceding before, people jumped all over

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it, saying all I wanted was for the "rich" downtown people to get all the good stuff, leaving the other neighborhoods to fend for themselves. First off, they were taking me far too seriously. But they were also missing the point - the outer neighborhoods have a different set of priorities. I am not arguing that one set is better than the other, just that they exist. And not harmoniously, either.

John Keith is a South End resident and real estate agent. He blogs about Boston real estate at www.bostonreb.com.

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