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From *The Economist* print edition

How mayors of American cities are coping with suburban growth



JERRY ABRAMSON'S domain is six times bigger and contains twice as many people as it did in 1985, when he first claimed his city's top office. The longest-serving mayor in Louisville's history now oversees not just urban areas, from the old rubber plants to the newly hip Butchertown, but suburban subdivisions and farms. And still Mr Abramson's influence grows. It now extends almost as far as it is possible to see from downtown's National City Tower; it even reaches across the Ohio river into southern Indiana.

Until recently Louisville seemed to be following the path of many industrial cities. Its factories were shedding workers. Middle-class whites were drifting to the suburbs and beyond. Between 1960 and 2000 the city's population dropped from 391,000 to 256,000. For the city to prosper, Mr Abramson realised, it must work with its neighbours. Ever since he took office the relationship has become closer.

In 2003 Louisville joined forces with surrounding Jefferson county in the biggest such merger since the 1970s (Indianapolis and Nashville, for example, also have consolidated city-county governments). Mr Abramson, who had served his three terms as city mayor, easily won the top job in the new "Louisville Metro". Since then he has streamlined public services and accelerated the redevelopment of downtown Louisville. The city's core is dotted with new museums. A planned cluster of towers designed by OMA, a fashionable architectural practice, will be Kentucky's tallest. In a forthcoming report for the Brookings Institution, a Washington, DC, think-tank, Carolyn Gatz and Edward Bennett commend it as a model for other recovering cities.

Most striking is the development of a shared economic fate. Greater Louisville Inc, the metropolitan chamber of commerce, has helped companies like Geek Squad, a computer-service outfit, move beyond the city's borders. "It's better that a company locate in the next county over," Mr Abramson says, "than we lose it to Chicago or Atlanta, Nashville or Cincinnati."

Increasingly, co-operation extends across the Ohio river. At present Louisville and Indiana are linked by two ageing, congested bridges—a big problem for a city that claims to be a logistics hub. Greater Louisville Inc has joined with its equivalent in southern Indiana to promote plans for two new bridges, and is considering whether, and how, to share revenue from a new industrial park in southern Indiana.

Mr Abramson is not the only regional power-broker to emerge from America's cities in the past few years. Richard Daley of Chicago and John Hickenlooper of Denver have both cultivated their fellow mayors in neighbouring suburban towns. Mr Hickenlooper secured their support for a big extension of commuter railway lines, which local voters (generally a tax-averse bunch) duly approved in 2004.

Mayors are forming alliances with nearby settlements mostly because they have to.

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Few cities can now expect to dominate their hinterlands simply by virtue of being big. Across America suburbs are strongly competing for people, offices and cultural centres. Many mayors quietly worry that their cities will turn into nightmarish Detroits, with a rotten core and a choice collection of the region's most troubled residents. The mayor of Tucson, in Arizona, has openly said so.

Trouble in paradise

Tucson is one of the sunbelt's rustiest cities. Its population is growing much more slowly than that of Phoenix, to the north, or Albuquerque to the east. It is poorer and more Hispanic than its surroundings. Tucson accounts for just over half the population of 9,000-square-mile Pima county. But probably not for long: between 2000 and 2006 some 71% of the county's population growth and more than half of its job growth took place outside the city. "We get all the negative externalities and none of the positive ones, except for sales taxes," complains Mike Hein, the city manager.



Pima county's enormous size means a Louisville-style merger is out of the question. And suburbs have become wary of "annexation"—the legal incorporation of adjoining areas which is the traditional western method of coping with growth beyond city borders. Which leaves co-operation the only option. Bob Walkup, Tucson's mayor, has helped end a long struggle between the city and county governments. They now work closely to attract new businesses and write transport policy. In Arizona and elsewhere, suburbs may be unusually susceptible to courtship just now. Some are beginning to acquire urban traits: more Latinos now live in Chicago's suburbs than in the city proper. The

foreclosure crisis has hit expanding suburbs hardest, wrecking their budgets. Meanwhile, cities have cleaned themselves up and cut crime. In Tucson, burglaries fell by a quarter between 2001 and 2006. In the surrounding suburbs of Oro Valley and Marana they more than doubled, though admittedly from a low base.

Like Mr Abramson, Mr Walkup is now focused on downtown. Tucson's core is singularly bleak and unimpressive. But the city has extracted tax concessions from the state that will help it to build a hotel and an arena, and expand its convention centre. Expect more of that, if Mr Walkup gets his way. City mayors have proved they can work with suburbanites to solve common problems. Their next challenge is to convince them that both will be stronger with a beating heart.

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