Bruce Katz Addresses Y-PLAN National Summit

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The world is changing in such a way that cities are the center of everything. About five years ago, a majority of the world’s population lived in cities for the first time in human history. We have become an urban age. The United States is a very urban country because about 85% of our population lives in cities and the suburbs that surround them. The rest of the world is becoming like us. China, India, and Latin America all are urbanizing.

When countries urbanize, their people are able to realize their full potential. In our country, even though some still think about large portions of America as rural and non-metropolitan, 84% of the population live in cities, about 90% of our domestic economy is driven by cities, and every single issue that we face as a country: Whether it’s how we deal with the aging of our population; how are we going to assimilate tens of millions of immigrants into our society, into the mainstream; how are we going to educate our kids; How are we going to grow in a more sustainable way to deal with climate change; any issue that matters to this country is happening in the cities.

The other thing happening is that power is shifting in our country. Washington isn’t as partisan, and Republicans fight with Democrats. Also when the economy is so concentrated in cities, and when talented and educated people want to live in cities that are livable and walkable and served by transit, clean air, and clean water, power begins to move down in the system. And power begins to rest not just in mayors or city council people, but it begins to rest in a broad network of people: in the private sector companies, in universities, in health care systems, unions, and philanthropies. Cities are networks, and when people and institutions work together, great things happen.

What I do at The Brookings Institution is work with of people in dozens of cities here and around the world. We work together to find answers to tough questions: How to have schools and community colleges educate kids with the skills they need to succeed in a technologically-driven economy? How do you change the sourcing of your energy from dirty coal to cleaner energy? And particularly how do you change how you distribute energy, so more energy can be generated within districts of your city as opposed to a larger city, metropolitan, or regional grid? How do you change the mix of your economy? Because some cities have an economy that may have worked for them in the 1970s or 1980s, but as we restructure our economy and China and India and other places grow, we need to think about how to prepare certain industries for a globally competitive world.

At The Brookings Institution, we go to the cities, the suburban communities and the metropolitan areas, and help them grow their economies, and in more sustainable ways. Most importantly, we prepare for an economy that is changing very fast, in very volatile ways. It used to be when I was in high school, the education and skills I received was adequate for 20 years. It was a more stable environment. This is a rapidly changing economy. What we need is a different model of how our country governs itself.

Whether you know it or not, what you’re doing through the Y-PLAN process is solve problems and challenges that come to ground in real ways in real places. You’re really trying to grapple with these issues, whether its transit, or jobs, or education. You’re grappling with these issues right where they not only come to crown, but where they come to face with real people, and real communities. That is how
this country is going to move forward. Eventually Washington state capitols will have to do something if we’re really going to deal with some of our supersized challenges that we have. But frankly, most of our ideas for how we resolve these challenges will germinate at the local level.

What Dr. Deborah McKoy and others at the Center have done is create a frame for bringing high schools right into the midst of dealing with some of the biggest challenges we face, and having solutions designed not by experts. Because experts can be highly bureaucratic, highly technocratic, and highly siloed in how they think about things. There’s something about this model which I think is very smart, but also very disruptive.

Whether you know it or not, you’re at the vanguard of an urban age, and of a metropolitan century. You’re living in cities that are globally significant, and your innovations may be replicated across this country, scaled elsewhere in a New York City, or a Dallas or a Detroit or a Richmond or an Oakland. Know that this is something that is completely aligned with how this country operates and how we actually move forward, and congratulations for making it this far.