Salin Geevarghese Address at Y-PLAN National Summit

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I have to thank you for the work that you are doing. I’ve had the privilege in the Obama administration of being part of a team that birthed a large planning initiative, the Sustainable Communities Initiative, which made investments in over 140 cities and regions in the country, and represented one of the largest investments in planning in a generation. Secretary Donovan, was as responsible as anyone else to say that even at the height of a challenge for the country from 2008 to 2009, we should plan while moving from economic recession to signs of growth.

It was that work on innovation where Secretary Donovan came to me and said, “I want you to lead this work on innovation,” which gives us the opportunity to look internationally and domestically for many of the best practices that we’re seeing from around the country. To work across sectors: non-profit, philanthropic, private sector, and public sector, and align our efforts so we can improve this country. That’s my charge in this new role, and I’ve been humbled by the chance to serve this president and to lead. I’ll start by saying, that I think of young people not as next-gen, but now-gen. You are not leaders in preparation, you are leaders now and that work that you have shown forth is evidence of that. We need you young people now, and with that in mind I have two calls to action: a call to lead and a call to innovate.

Growing up in the South, there were a number of things that became obvious early in life. One was that there were not a lot of my folk around, but I was very comfortable in my skin as an Indian-American, and I was very comfortable with my voice. Two things that for a young person are not given. I was a child of immigrants, first generation American living in an environment again not always hospitable to the newcomer. I wanted, like many young people have said, to make a difference.

I took cues from the civil and human rights leaders internationally and domestically. I knew early on that everyone didn’t get a fair shot, and I saw how kids from certain neighborhoods got certain things, and certain kids from other neighborhoods got less of those things. In fact, in the place where I grew up, it played out by topography. My city had mountains and a valley and a river, and literally those who had more lived on the mountain, and those who had fewer lived in the valley. And I saw how that played out in terms of the quality of schools, quality of homes, quality of playgrounds, jobs and other necessities of children and family. Not again something that is unfamiliar.

So I became a fan of the built environment. Looking at how we construct the physical landscape often in ways that connect, or disconnect to opportunity. In fact, like many young people here, I had the chance to be a part of fundamentally reshaping my hometown, and like you I was a civic leader. There was no Y-PLAN back then. That early work of community and civic engagement was when the bug in me on visioning, on planning, on changing the physical and social and economic landscape started to grow. It made me realize that engaging anyone, much less young people, should be meaningful and consequential.
It should matter as a young person to be treated seriously. I thought of myself seriously, and wanted to be treated seriously. I also realized that knowledge, authentic knowledge from community is not only about experience, but it is expertise to be leveraged. We often yield to experts, to the educated or our definitions of them. To those who possess knowledge, who’ve been through school on any given topic being discussed. In the process we give more power to some communities over others.

Thinking about the call to lead, let me offer up three A’s. As for the young people, but also for all of us older folks: be authentic, and be real. Young people have a huge B.S. barometer when it comes to all of us. They sense it immediately. They know when you’re treating them seriously, and they want to be treated authentically. I would say as a second A: seize your authority. Young people have a point of view. Cultivate your knowledge and skills, and bring your experience and voice. You all have come up here, and you’ve talked about that already. Authority is derived from many places, and many sources. And as we’ve had countless numbers of individuals say before, you have the authority to lead and create now. We need it. Lastly, lead with accountability for results. Be impatient about the results you want to see. Don’t be afraid of results, but be relentless about the conditions that have to be better in your communities, and hold figures of authority accountable.

Next: the call to innovate. It’s a critical time in the country. We’re coming out of the economic recession, and not all places are enjoying the recovery. Income inequality is growing, and there are structural issues that must be confronted. Our challenges are interconnected puzzles, and they have required us to have comprehensive solutions. Some folks in this country have not been good about comprehensiveness. People have made mention of the siloes. We like to talk about schools as separate from community development issues. We like to think about health, housing, community development, or transportation as not being related to schools. It’s not the reality, and I implore you that we need all hands on deck, all eyes on the prize, all voices engaged, now including your own.

The truth of the matter is the world is not waiting, this new role has given me an even more recent opportunity to travel. Just last week I was in Germany. We’ve paired up cities from the United States with cities from Germany and other places. I took a train from Berlin to Leipzig, Germany. I saw the investment in infrastructure. I saw the investment in housing and community development, despite its difficult past.

The young among us are often the ones who ask, “why not?” They will look at the challenges we have and say, “it doesn’t have to be that way,” and they’ll figure out a solution to it. They will invent new solutions as all of them have in their Y-PLAN projects. And there will be new manifestations of problems, and you’re going to figure out solutions to those as well. So I remind you about the call to lead, about the call to innovate. You are leading, you are innovating, and I look forward to our conversation in stepping forward as we keep going.