

Hot Topics: Roger Federer | Macrobiotic menus | Ilyasova deal | Fate of ducks | Summerfest

Opinion

[Home](#) » [News](#) » [Opinion](#)

Milwaukee and Chicago need collaborative effort



Tim Sloan/AFP/Getty Images

Milwaukee and Chicago face similar challenges.

By Richard C.
longworth

July 7, 2012

[Tweet](#) 6

[Recommend](#) 14

[+1](#) 0

[EMAIL](#) [PRINT](#)

[\(43\) COMMENTS](#)

Seen from space at night, the southwestern coast of Lake Michigan shines in a blazing band of light that starts in Milwaukee and gutters out just south of Chicago. This uninterrupted glow must be one city, right? What else could it be?

In daylight, back on planet Earth, that one big city fragments into urban shards that are no longer the sum of their parts. Milwaukee anchors one end of this region, Chicago the other. The two cities have much in common - their lakeside geography, their rise in the industrial era, their decline as those industries vanished, their search for a role in the global economy.

It's hard to imagine two cities with more to talk about. And it's hard to imagine two cities that spend less time talking about their almost identical challenges. Instead, they seem happiest in competition, rooting for their Brewers or Cubs, poaching each other's businesses, content to let their state governments bash the other.

When both cities boomed with industry and jobs, this separation did little obvious harm. But we're in a global economy now. Size matters, and once-dominant American cities need to leverage all available assets just to compete. Chicago and Milwaukee don't compete anymore. Today, the competition is 10,000 miles away. And despite occasional triumphs such as Master Lock, which recently brought back about 100 jobs from overseas, Midwestern cities are losing the race.

Both Milwaukee and Chicago lost most of their heavy industry and haven't found enough service or information jobs to replace it. Both lost nearly a quarter of their populations since their postwar peaks. In both, revitalized cores are surrounded by blighted neighborhoods, where disgraceful dropout and unemployment rates long ago replaced any vestige of hope.

Big is better

In this global economy, size is crucial. Around the world, successful cities are getting bigger. Big cities are business centers. They pay higher salaries. They boast arts and entertainment. They have more diversified economies, with closer links with the rest of the world, where the action is. Big cities have more universities and college graduates: In the knowledge economy, this matters.

In short, big cities are the future. Even Chicago, which already is big, needs to get bigger to compete with other global cities. Milwaukee doesn't play in that league but, for smaller cities too, size counts. Cities that once dominated their states or regions find competition sweeping into their once-secure territory, eroding local sales and undercutting local wages. The job erosion at Master Lock over the

territory, eroding local sales and undercutting local wages. The job erosion at Master Lock over the years is an example. Flagship companies find themselves prey to bigger, globally oriented competitors: Caterpillar's purchase of Bucyrus is an example.

Global cities become ever more dominant centers of global business services, and so suck the life and skills - banking, legal, accounting, consulting - out of neighboring smaller cities. As these jobs go, so do the educated young people who fill them: Chicago clearly has had this effect on the rest of the Midwest. In this global era, there no longer is any such thing as a local market, secure from outside attack.

For these smaller cities, the choice is clear: become part of this global galaxy, even as a satellite, or shrivel into a backwater. To remain good places to live, all cities need a vibrant economy. For smaller cities, the price of vibrancy is the loss of some independence.

In this sense, the Chicago connection is a lifeline.

Both Milwaukee and Chicago have assets: fine universities, global corporations, world-class business services and beautiful lakefronts. Chicago ranks among the top 10 global cities. Milwaukee is becoming the freshwater capital of the world. But still, both bleed jobs and residents.

In an economy that rewards collaboration, Milwaukee and Chicago would rather compete than cooperate. But in China, there are more than 30 cities bigger than Chicago, more than 100 bigger than Milwaukee. In the global economy, the two lakeside metropolises risk irrelevance.

The Journal Sentinel and the Marquette University Law School are trying to start the conversation between the two cities. The kickoff is a conference called "[Milwaukee's Future in the Chicago Megacity](#)." This acknowledges that Milwaukee exists in Chicago's shadow. But to thrive in the 21st century, Chicago needs Milwaukee just as much.

A ready agenda

The agenda exists - a "territorial review" published recently by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, encompassing the Chicago tri-state area, a 21-county region stretching from Milwaukee through Chicago into northwestern Indiana.

The OECD said the world sees the Chicago region as a common economic area, among the top eight in the world in gross domestic product, third in the United States, behind the New York and Los Angeles regions. It is a transportation hub, relatively well-educated, using its manufacturing past to establish footholds in bioscience, information technology and green engineering.

But the OECD said the region ranks only sixth in the U.S. in per-capita GDP. Worse, its growth rate is slipping, its working-age population aging. It has too many well-educated and poorly educated workers at the top and bottom and too few in the middle, where the jobs area.

Mostly, the OECD said, nobody in Chicago and Milwaukee talks to each other. Schools that train workers don't talk with governments that fund them or with businesses that hire their graduates. State and city governments spend money and time stealing businesses from each other. There's no regional transportation authority. Even universities and research institutions work in isolation.

What the Chicago region needs, the OECD said, is "a regional institution . . . to provide a convening role for key public and private-sector actors to make difficult decisions across state lines." Its local planning authorities - the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission - need to "discuss and collaborate" on transport, economic development and workforce development. They should mobilize chambers of commerce, business associations and governments to determine what the regional economy needs. And the region needs a "university-based research center" to collect accurate regional data: We have data on states and cities but little on the region itself.

Especially, the OECD condemned the rivalry between the states. This rivalry blocks any real cooperation between cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago. One OECD economist told me he had never seen the "hostility" toward neighbors displayed by the state governments. Little can be done by the cities unless they can neutralize this hostility.

That's the agenda. What now?

First, are we a "megacity," one big city? By population - nearly 12 million - we are. But that's a stretch. Any suggestion that Milwaukee is just a Chicago neighborhood raises political hackles that would doom any conversation.

So let's start small, with some building blocks, and work up from there.

Nurturing cooperation

First, let's agree with the OECD that anything left to state governments won't happen. The two cities have more in common with each other than either has with Madison or Springfield. Both cities pay more into state coffers than they get back. Both cities exist on the lakeside fringe of their states: state legislatures, dominated by rural interests, too often scorn cities.

Milwaukee and Chicago eventually need to loosen controls that state governments hold over urban zoning, taxation, education, transport and other vital functions. But for now, they should explore areas of cooperation that lie outside state meddling or where states might go along.

The quickest step to bring the cities closer would be a fast rail link, making it easier for Milwaukeeans to do business in Chicago, or vice versa, or enabling workers to work in one city and live in the other, enriching both. It's time for the two cities to pressure their states to endorse this link.

Several other projects suggest themselves:

Milwaukee needs to get Chicago's attention. Chicagoans are literally ignorant about Milwaukee. Even the Milwaukee Water Council is virtually unknown in Chicago. One cure is a round table of leaders meeting regularly, just to get acquainted and explore potential projects. Mayors and other city officials could join, but the real leadership should come from business groups, unions, universities or foundations, whose interests span political boundaries.

A good initial project could be Milwaukee's specialty: water. Like Milwaukee, Chicago should inventory its companies based on water solutions. From there, Chicago universities, such as the University of Illinois at Chicago, could link its researchers to the freshwater school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The goal is not to steal UWM's thunder. There's enough water to go around. In an increasingly arid world, anything the two cities do to establish themselves as a freshwater hub would benefit both.

University cooperation should go further. They should seize the OECD suggestion of a university-based

research unit providing accurate data on the region. UWM and UIC have strengths and ambitions in common. In addition, both cities house distinguished Catholic universities, such as Marquette, DePaul

and Loyola: Cooperation between them seems obvious.

Cooperative marketing could be carried out by, say, the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce and the Milwaukee 7 economic development group. Milwaukee already touts itself as part of the Chicago region: A less smug Chicago could brag about being next door to Milwaukee. Mitchell International Airport, for instance, is as big an asset to Chicago as it is to Milwaukee. Beyond that, the two cities should cooperate on tourism around Lake Michigan.

CMAP, M-7 and SEWPRC have equal stakes in a vibrant regional economy. Sometimes these organizations talk to each other; mostly they don't. As the OECD said, the organizations "have, by law, limited geographic mandates, but should nonetheless meet and collaborate regularly where possible."

What about a Milwaukee-Chicago congressional caucus? Even though the region's 14 representatives include both Democrats and Republicans, is cooperation on projects to benefit their constituents too much to ask?

Instead of bribing companies to move from one state to the other, the two cities should work to encourage homegrown start-ups, nurture existing firms and draw in global companies, including non-American ones. A good start would be a regional truce on company-poaching.

None of these steps is an end in itself. But they would get the two cities into the habit of working with each other.

The most important thing is to start the conversation. This means a group of Milwaukeeans and Chicagoans, probably self-selected, with the region's interest at heart and the clout to get results. From this meeting of minds, concrete projects would rise.

None will create a single city. OK, that's not what we want. Instead, they would enable the two cities to leverage their combined strengths, shrinking the miles between them, leaping an irrelevant state line, so they can thrive in the global economy that will define both their futures.