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Response to Gross and Lederach – Scranton, Pennsylvania: A Case Study in Resilience

As a community and a city, Scranton has always exhibited characteristics of resilience. Scranton was at its peak a city of 140,000 residents, many of whom were European immigrants who came to Northeastern Pennsylvania to work in the anthracite coal mines. Scranton was an industrial hub, boasting coal and iron industries that contributed to the growth of the rest of the nation. Immigrants to the region defined the character of Scranton's community. Neighborhoods began to develop around the distinct ethnicities: German, Irish, Italian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Greek. While these were discrete cultures, most shared Catholicism as a common faith tradition. There were permutations on the Catholic rite that varied from neighborhood to neighborhood; this was reflected in the wide array of churches built to reflect these differences. However, through religion, a shared immigrant experience, and a strong and successful labor movement a feisty and resilient population in Scranton was created.

When the mines began to close and the industrial boom faded, the city began to fall into disrepair and neglect. The population plunged, the downtown emptied, and the city's amenities—in particular its parks and recreation facilities—became areas of ill repute and crime. During this period, however, those who stayed became the backbone for the city's working class foundation. Scranton became a back office community for government, education, and medical institutions. We were not a location for headquarters but Scranton serves as the county seat, and site for state government satellite offices. Scranton is home to three institutions of higher education and three hospitals. Scrantonians either worked in these areas or developed businesses to support these institutions. Again, in the face of challenges, the community displayed resilient traits that enabled them to confront those challenges.

In large measure, this was the Scranton I inherited when I was elected mayor in 2001. In order to change this landscape, I needed to challenge a long-standing inferiority complex that many Scrantonians shared. I believed I needed to make an argument that

Scranton was worth it, that the downtown was a viable place to do business and to live, and that our amenities were worth returning to their former glory. In my examples below, I am responding to Gross and Lederach's articles from the perspective of an elected official, rather than as a citizen or participant in community organizations.

As mayor, I have operated using two seemingly contradictory approaches. The first connects well with Gross' three components of a resilient community (capacity to absorb, change and accommodate the unexpected). I invested heavily in entrepreneurs, especially those seeking to establish businesses in downtown Scranton. Although this is a plan, it is a hands-off approach to economic and community development that affords a large degree of government support with maximum degree of individual flexibility. I have refrained from developing a specific design or grand plan for the downtown and resisted selecting specific kinds of businesses to occupy downtown storefronts. The development in the downtown has thrived; by allowing individual entrepreneurs to identify and grow their businesses without interference from the city, the residents are able to craft their own vision of the city rather than me imposing my vision. Using community development block grants, I have invested over 10 million dollars in the downtown and over 100 new businesses have opened over the past seven years. This laissez-faire approach recently culminated in successfully locating the first new medical college in the Pennsylvania in 50 years in the downtown. This strategy has also provided the framework for rolling out a welcome mat to our newer immigrant population in Scranton- largely Hispanic but also Indian, Russian, and Afghan. By embracing our new immigrant population, we create more opportunities for change and growth, and we encourage the necessary capacities that Gross describes.

The second approach is an intentional one focused on establishing a sense of place, similar to Lederach's characteristics of resiliency. A community's amenities, particularly its parks, communicate to residents and visitors what we think of ourselves. If our parks are flourishing, so is our sense of who we are as community. As the mayor, I have the ability to designate and raise money to fund the redevelopment of our park system. To date, I have invested over 10 million in the city's parks. The largest park, Nay Aug, now boasts a handicapped accessible tree house, a new greenhouse in development, three lookouts over

the gorge and a foot bridge. In Scranton's south side we opened a dog park, recently dedicated a new pocket park, and planted over 1,000 trees on city tree lawns. For years, these parks were marred with crime, drugs, and homicides. Now they teem with community members from all walks: mothers with their children, families having picnics, and couples walking their dogs. These renovations reestablish pride in our city and give people a sense of place. I have not limited this effort to our parks but this effort has been the hallmark of my administration.

Public safety is a primary concern of any mayor. Scranton has one of the lowest crime rates in the state, just over 1 homicide on average a year. While there are several factors that contribute to the increased safety in the city, the best strategy has been to make our policing pro-active rather than reactive. I have done this largely through blight demolition throughout the city. Crime also needs a "sense of place" and dilapidated buildings and run down blocks in our neighborhoods attract crime and criminals. By demolishing these properties and rebuilding and/or greening these spaces, crime cannot take hold as easily.

Finally, in relation to Lederach's reflections about voice, Scranton has quickly become a focal point and sounding board as the political pulse of the nation. During the presidential campaign, Scranton was covered in more than 100 papers nationally and internationally and was visited by presidential candidates over 30 times. Of course there are multiple reasons for this attention. However, one can point to the population microcosm that Scranton represents. Our working class fabric with its older, European immigrant population coupled with our newer immigrant population is being mixed with a younger population migrating from our urban neighbors in Philadelphia and New York. We are exemplary of mid-size cities that are doing well but still struggle to pay the mortgage and send our children to college. Scranton's voice was magnified during this election cycle and our opinion on where the country should be headed was heavily solicited. We feel as if we are back on the map and included in a national conversation.

Scranton offers an interesting example of a resilient community. As Gross and Lederach indicate, this characteristic does not happen by chance or mistake. And it does

not happen solely through political leadership. But I am confident that government can be an active contributor to encouraging resilient communities through laissez-faire investments and intentional targeting of those areas that give communities their sense of place.