**REMARKS OF SENATOR JOHN F. KENNEDY, AMERICAN MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION, DENVER, COLORADO, NOVEMBER 30, 1959**

THE GREAT UNSPOKEN ISSUE

We meet today on the eve of a great national campaign. The primaries, the conventions and the elections of the coming months will determine which parties and which leaders will sit in the seats of political power--in the Congress, in our statehouses, and in the White House.

I think it is fair to say--whatever we may read to the contrary--that the overall outcome of that election will be decided in our urban areas. In our cities and suburbs are to be found the majority of American voters--the majority of delegates to both political conventions--and the majority of Congressional Districts. The lessons of the 1952 and 1956 elections teach us that the decisive balance-of-power votes in both the conventions and the electoral college are likely to be case by men and women representing large, populous states or areas which are primarily urban in character. The real political battleground of 1960, in short, is sure to be urban America.

This is not to say that other areas and other groups will not be of prime importance. Obviously they will. The farm problem ranks high as one of the most complex, unsolved and dangerously growing problems of our time. Our national defense posture, our Federal budget, our schools, highways, interest rates, race relations, reclamation, juvenile delinquency and the steel strike will all be major issues in 1960 in one or more areas. But I would like to stress today that one of the great unspoken issues is the issue of our American cities.

I am concerned, very concerned, about what is happening to the 21 million Americans who live on the farm. But I am also concerned about what is happening to the 22 million Americans who live in slum dwellings, in disease, squalor and filth, in poverty and degradation. The farm issue is extremely urgent as is the growth of city slums.

I am concerned about the state of our defenses, declining in comparison with Soviet defenses. But I am also concerned about the urban blight and decay which are destroying whole commercial and residential areas more rapidly than Nazi bombs burned out London in World War II.

The staggering growth of Federal expenditures is obviously an issue no voter can ignore. But neither can we ignore the fact that, while the Federal Budget has increased some 13% over the last 5 years, city budgets have been forced up some 53%.

Overcrowding of our schools is a problem--but it is primarily an urban problem, for our cities and particularly our suburbs. Record high interest rates are an issue--but no one knows it better than any municipal government which has tried to borrow money in recent years. New reclamation policies are urgently needed here in the West--but wise land use policies are equally urgent around our cities, where mass-produced housing developments are spreading out in a helter-skelter fashion that is chewing up land at a rate of 3000 acres a day.

We will talk about the problems of race relations--but the restriction of minority groups to slum, or, at best, second-hand housing, with all of its consequences, is a growing national, not a sectional problem. We will talk about juvenile delinquency--but the harsh facts of the matter are that more than 6 million American children live today in miserably crowded, dilapidated, disease-ridden and crime-infested hovels.

The steel strike and its possible recurrence are hard facts to swallow--but equally hard to swallow is the fact that our steel industry in recent years only operated at 80% of capacity at the very time our cities were tragically short of schools, hospitals, homes, airports, recreation centers and other steel-using community facilities. And, while it is frustrating that the Interstate Highway Program has bogged down in many areas, it is not nearly as frustrating as spending as much time driving down-town during the rush-hour as you spend driving on the Interstate between two distant cities.

That is why the cities of America--their problems, their future, their financing--must rank at the top of any realistic list of 1960 campaign issues. This is the great unspoken, overlooked, underplayed problems of our time. It is brushed over lightly in the party platforms. Its impact is rarely analyzed by the columnists and the poolsters. But it deserved to be--in terms of its urgency, its importance and its direct impact on 80% of our population--the most decisive issue of the 1960 campaign.

And permit me to remind you of one other reason why 1960 is a most critical year for our cities. 1960 is the year of the decennial census--and the state legislatures elected in that year will have the responsibility of apportioning, fairly or unfairly, the legislative and Congressional seats which will determine for 10 more years whether our urban areas are to be given their just voice in the affairs of the state. So this election, from statehouse to courthouse, takes on special significance for our cities, our suburbs and their voters. It is up to all of us who lived in these urban areas to insist that these issues be discussed, debated and then promptly and favorably acted upon.

I have had an unusual privilege these last few years in the opportunity to address myself to these municipal problems. I have discussed these issues with mayors, municipal leagues and county officials in every part of the country. I have visited practically every major city. I have talked with you about the problems of urban renewal, airports, water pollution, underpaid personnel, inadequate revenues and all the other problems with which you are all familiar.

But I know that you do not simply want to hear about these problems. The great need is not an inventory of urban difficulties and urban requirements. Nor is it a lack of progressive, determined local leadership--for that you have so well provided. Nor is it a lack of solutions, new ideas, worthwhile proposals--for, on the great majority of these problems, we do know basically what must be done and what programs we need. New studies, new reorganizations and new commissions may all be helpful--but they do not meet the one basic crying need of almost every city--and that, let us face it frankly--is money.

More local governments have gone “into the red” than ever before. More cities are straining their financial resources to the limit. Municipal budgets have been forced up four times as fast as the Federal Budget. Local governmental payrolls have nearly tripled in the last 10 years alone. City and suburban taxes spiral up and up. But all this is still not enough. Services are cut back or inadequate. Pressures mount. Problems grow. Crises are postponed--and they cannot be postponed much longer.

In part this lack of money is rooted in our tax structure. Today, it is estimated, roughly 75% of every tax dollar goes to the federal government--another 15% goes to the states--and only the last thin dime goes to our municipalities. But our state legislatures, still rural-dominated in most states, will neither expand municipal taxing powers nor distribute to our cities and suburbs a fair share of the tax dollars collected within their boundaries.

In part, the fault lies with the attitude in Washington today--an attitude of veto and cut-back and postponement which has held back grants for urban renewal, water pollution, airports and other municipal problems that are actually national in scope. This attitude was symbolized by the recent address of the Housing and Home Finance Administrator--the single-most important man on whom the cities must depend in Washington--in which he complained that “too many local governments are grasping for more and more federal grants--more and more of the U.S. taxpayers’ dollars.”

In part, the fault also lies at the local level. Effective tax rates and assessment values in many areas have not kept pace with the growth in the property tax base and in our national wealth generally. Competing and conflicting jurisdictions of too many local governing units dissipate local tax dollars and distribute them without regard to need. High-income, low-population suburbs, with an ample tax base but a lesser demand, refuse to help wipe out the blight, crime and disease of the hard-pressed, low-income city--despite the lesson of history that these tides will eventually spread to their very doorsteps.

What can be done to obtain more funds for our municipalities? There are basically only two possible major sources: increased Federal grants and increased local revenues.

1. We can afford to increase our Federal-city grant programs. We cannot afford to do otherwise. Slums, for example, are presently increasing faster than our efforts to clear them. There are nearly 100,000 more slum dwellings in New York City today than there were in 1950 -- despite the fact that the city has the largest slum clearing program in the nation. A Federal urban renewal contribution of $600 million a year for 10 years could wipe out slums in the sixties--and that ought to be our goal. Federal grants for Water Pollution Control ought to at least match the efforts of states and cities. Our airport grant program ought to be geared to the Jet Age, not the Kitty Hawk era. Schools, hospitals, universities, and other community facilities are all in need of new or expanded Federal grant programs.

But it is not enough to merely call for more federal money, unless it is properly spent. Moneys turned over to the states ought to carry with them safeguards as to their proper distribution on the basis of population and need. Conditions should be attached to make certain that these Federal funds are not unduly delayed, diluted or denied by un-sympathetic or unrepresentative state officials. Local contributions should not be required which are incommensurate with the tax resources left to the local community.

And finally, all national and local programs must be integrated more closely. Of the nearly 500,000 people being required to move every year by our highway and slum clearance program, only a small minority are eligible for public housing. Little or nothing is done for the rest. Countless thousands of new homes are built with the inducement of V.A. and F.H.A. financing--but with not attention to intelligent zoning, local tax bases and comprehensive planning. There is no Federal research on urban problems, no attention to middle-income families, and very little expert advice to communities in need of technical assistance in planning and zoning. Federal tax dollars are too precious to be wasted on uncoordinated or unwise programs.

2. But secondly, what can be done about local tax revenues? The multiplicity of local taxing units must be reduced. The lack of cooperation between such units must be ended. The lagging efforts of outmoded tax structures of some local governments must be revitalized. But still more must be done. My best judgment is that many major communities will shortly reach the point of diminishing returns on their present tax structures. Businesses will leave, property owners will sell, services will suffer as the tax return on property steadily mounts. In my own city of Boston, it is over $100 per $1000, and in the surrounding communities, it is steadily rising to a comparable figure. Even if assessments do not equal real value, it still amounts to a capital levy. It is greater than most of our citizens can afford. What the answer is to this trend will continue through the next decade.

There are only two possible responses we can give. First, that the government must step up its grant and aid program to our cities; or second, the governments must consider some form of tax rebate on its Federal income tax return on the property tax payments to local governments.

There may be other proposals which your experience would indicate might be wiser, but it is my view that through the 1960’s the cities of America cannot continue to rely on the property tax for their major share of revenue and, at the same time, continue to develop adequate community services.

Alternative solutions must be discussed. The hard, cold facts must be faced. For it is here, in the city,--in the government closest to the people--in the problems of everyday living--that we are going to either succeed or fail in our effort to show our system works--and works better than anything the Communists can devise. Ours is overwhelmingly an urban civilization--and that civilization will survive only if our cities survive, only if we are able to cope with the complex problems thrust upon them.

In his address to the Mortgage Bankers Association to which I referred before, the Housing and Home Finance Administrator complained of America’s mayors “that too many see visions of dream cities.”

I, for one, hope that the Mayors of America never lose their visions of dream cities. For what America needs is not less vision, but more.

*Source*: Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Senate Files, Box 905, ["American Municipal Association, Denver, Colorado, 30 November 1959."](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKSEN/0905/JFKSEN-0905-019) John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.