Tracing back through St. Louis' history to find the roots of its triumphs—and failures

By Chris Naffziger, www.stlmag.com
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I head south on I-55 from the Arsenal Avenue entrance on a frequent basis. About a year ago, just as I was settling in to a travel lane of the interstate, around Gasconade Street I saw a disheartening sight. The large electronic message board that relays travel times or other emergencies displayed “9 minutes to 270.”

Nine minutes. A nine-minute drive to lower crime. A nine-minute drive to the Mehlville School District. A nine-minute drive to the still-healthy South County Center shopping mall.

That sobering message on that giant message board, which fittingly faces towards downtown St. Louis and City Hall, made me begin to think about how competitiveness and responses to challenges affect the lives of great cities. How does a city respond to failure? Will it be with admissions of culpability, or with excuses? I thought back through St. Louis history to see if I could find answers.

Perhaps the first major challenge St. Louis faced was its very location. Pierre Laclede and Auguste Chouteau chose an excellent location for a city to thrive commercially. It sits, as many other Native American settlements had for centuries before, at the crossroads of three major continental rivers: the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Illinois. Secondly, as I have written before, they built St. Louis on bluffs, overlooking the river. Think about how many millions of dollars have been saved over the last 253 years due to the City of St. Louis sitting mostly above the flood plain.

Or consider how St. Louis welcomed the steamboat to the city. St. Louis leaders expanded the wharf, allowing hundreds of steamboats to dock here. The City grew up along the river, carefully bending the street grid as the Mississippi curved inward north and south of downtown, allowing wagons, workers and anything else the shortest distance to the docks. Later, when the City faced a severe fire, leaders passed legislation to enforce a brick building code, allowing St. Louis to possess some of the most beautiful architecture in America.

But even in the 19th century, as St. Louis held its place as the fourth largest city in the country, cracks in leadership began to show. Chicago railroad interests beat St. Louis in building the first rail bridge over the Mississippi decades before the Eads Bridge. As living proof to this day that there is absolutely no margin for error in the battle for becoming a great city, Chicago still dominates the Midwest at the expense of St. Louis. Today, St. Louisans must ignominiously travel first to Chicago to head to most cities on the East Coast by rail. And this was after such a strong start with the Missouri Pacific Railroad.
Back to that message board on I-55. Perhaps the fatal mistake that still curses St. Louis to this day is the choice of crashing interstates right through the densest parts of the city. Many civic leaders in other cities (or at least their civically active citizens) fought back against the interstates. I had the opportunity to live in Washington, DC and Baltimore over a decade ago. Both of these cities feature incomplete interstate highway systems. I have pored over the maps of proposed interstates for the nation’s capital, and I quickly realized that all of the neighborhoods that I grew to love and live in would have been annihilated by concrete. They used to call it “white man’s roads through black man’s homes,” in Washington, DC. Are the traffic backups legendary in the DC region? Yes, but it also has a rate of growth that lags St. Louis. Likewise, in Baltimore, which is economically fragile like St. Louis, leaders made the decision of saving what were once “blighted neighborhoods” instead of completing its highway system. Those same neighborhoods today are the pride and joy (and major tax base) of Baltimore, like Fells Point.

As St. Louis leaders face the challenge of encouraging people to move back to the City, what are they doing to convince people to move back? Right now, hundreds of thousands of people live south of St. Louis, and commute up I-55, choosing to not live in the city because it’s only an extra ten minutes’ drive to accredited schools and low crime. In fact, many of their parents actually grew up in South St. Louis. Many city-bacters dismiss those people as simply racist out of hand, as if that helps solve the problem. Historians realize that all major cultural and historical movements are a complex mix of multiple factors.

St. Louis is facing two fatal challenges: quality of life and a shrinking tax base. First of all, I am not going to let one more leader use the excuse that St. Louis is only 61.9 square miles of land. San Francisco and Boston, at 47.9 and 48.42 square miles respectively occupy a fraction of land compared to St. Louis, but yet their economies thrive. Both, like St. Louis, are buffeted by water and other municipalities. Enough with the excuses. Downtown St. Louis is not competitive; it is truly disheartening how many abandoned skyscrapers fill the center of our city.

And the second issue, quality of life, is an issue that very few leaders are willing to tackle. Why would anyone, except out of principle, continue to live in a neighborhood where gunfire erupts every night? Why would anyone put up poor services when perfectly efficient services exist only nine minutes away? The response of St. Louis leadership is to raise taxes on those who can least afford it. There has always been a “gentleman’s agreement” in St. Louis over the last 50 years that citizens were willing to trade lower quality of life for lower taxes. Why would anyone pay higher taxes for the same lower quality of life? I predict now that the 2020 census will show St. Louis dropping below 300,000 people; whole neighborhoods of the Northside have been abandoned in the last seven years since the last census.

This city is facing a reckoning in the next decade, specifically the future of its financial situation. Will leaders accept responsibility or make excuses?

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