

...West of 98
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Last week, I set forth the importance and value of knowing a place. As I’ve been on this journey of describing my vision for prosperous local communities, it is clear that knowing the place is vital to shaping that place’s future. When you know a place, you know what fruit it can and will bear. You know what will not work. You know what actions will be constructive and what will be destructive.

There’s an infamous phrase that you should look up if you are unfamiliar: “rain follows the plow.” I won’t derail this entire essay, but in the late 19th century, leaders of westward expansion claimed that the semi-arid Great Plains would generate more rain if settlers merely plowed up the prairie and farmed it. The East was wet and the East was farmed, ergo

the two matters must be connected. This hare-brained idea would be comical if it hadn’t been enthusiastically adopted by politicians and promoters who caused untold human suffering and environmental destruction when it turned out that (spoiler alert!) rain didn’t actually follow the plow.

Over the last few months, I’ve written about the importance of healthy local economies as a central tenet of rural revitalization. Our communities will not survive if they depend on outside forces to supply prosperity. Be it outside job creation or government investment, outside forces can positively influence local prosperity. Outside forces alone cannot build local prosperity. Similarly, just as the grasslands of the Great Plains were built over thousands of years and destroyed in a single generation at the hands of self-serving

politicians and promoters, our communities will not survive if they are merely used to benefit others who have no commitment to local prosperity.

Which brings me to The Economy.

Over the years, Wendell Berry has captured some sad realities of American life by satirically phrasing The Economy as a proper noun. As he observes, our culture tends to use “economy” to describe only the monetary economy. This is fraught with incomplete and misleading assumptions because a monetary economy can only view success and goodness through the prism of monetary profits or losses. People are viewed and valued by how much (or little) they contribute in labor or capital. To be sure, none of these things are inherently bad. They can be informative. But what of the stay-at-home parent or other caregiver who does not

receive a wage for their vital work? What of the chores that we undertake to keep our households afloat? What of the trade in labor or tools between two homeowners or farmers (“neighboring,” they call it in old-timey agriculture terms)? Without a defined exchange suitable for a monetary economy, all of that is disregarded in the great descriptor of economic success—the Gross National Product. Thus, it is effectively worthless to The Economy.

When everyone and everything is valued in this way, it suggests that The Economy is a living, breathing entity that we all serve. In fact, economies are merely a relationship between one another and the limited resources within our control. I have written in the past about the dangers of creating false idols that prevent us from doing meaningful work. To be blunt, it is an idol to treat The Economy

as something we all serve. If we are not careful, then to that idol we can sacrifice the value of unique humans and their unique places.

Our communities should not merely serve The Economy and be valued on how much or little they “contribute.” Our communities should serve the people who have a stake in whether the community lives or dies. A healthy local economy should not serve outside forces or do the bidding of those who do not care whether it all dries up and blows away. A healthy local economy should serve its people, generate true local prosperity, and leave the place better off as a result.

James Decker is the Mayor of Stamford, Texas and the creator of the West of 98 website and podcast. Contact James and subscribe to these essays at westof98.substack.com and subscribe to West of 98 wherever podcasts are found.

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- ✓ Critical Race Theory uses skin color and gender to define and judge people by group. Dan Patrick believes this is prejudice and divisive, and he passed a bill to stop the use of Critical Race Theory in our public schools and he will stop it in our universities as well.
- ✓ Dan Patrick listened to families during COVID who were not allowed to see family members in nursing homes or hospitals, and Patrick passed a law guaranteeing families the right to see loved ones during a pandemic or public health emergency.
- ✓ After the 2021 winter freeze, Dan Patrick had every member of the Texas Public Utility Commission and the Electric Reliability Council of Texas replaced. And this new leadership is why Texas was able to keep power flowing during an extremely hot summer.

Election Day: Nov. 8 ★ Early Voting: Oct. 24 - Nov. 4

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