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Love Your City Since we are all Pittsburghers, shouldn't we all chip in?

By Daniel Rothschild



Selling off city-owned parking garages to raise revenue is the latest attempt to correct a bigger issue in Pittsburgh: too few people paying taxes to our city.

Unlike cities like Phoenix, Nashville, Charlotte, San Antonio and Indianapolis, which have spent much of the past century expanding their borders and increasing the number of people paying taxes to their city, Pittsburgh was unable to do so. Our city has nearly the same borders that it had 100 years ago. If we had followed the lead of these other cities that expanded outward, the land mass

of Pittsburgh would likely equal the size of Allegheny County. We would have 1.2 million people paying into the system rather than 300,000.

While driving back from a family vacation last weekend, I had an idea that allows Pittsburgh to expand its borders, and to increase its tax base, without legislation. It allows Allegheny County residents to take personal responsibility for the success and growth of the city and it shows our legislators that we know where we live: We are all Pittsburghers. I propose a voluntary system in

which county residents who live outside the city's borders can elect to pay a portion of their income into a fund that would be directed to city operations.

Residents in Allegheny County who understand that the success of our region is based on the success of Pittsburgh would fund this system. I am one such resident. I began thinking about this idea after a recent visit by my mother-in-law from Akron, who was watching our kids while my wife and I were out of town. On our return, we wanted to thank her by taking her out to eat. It was a gorgeous sunny evening,

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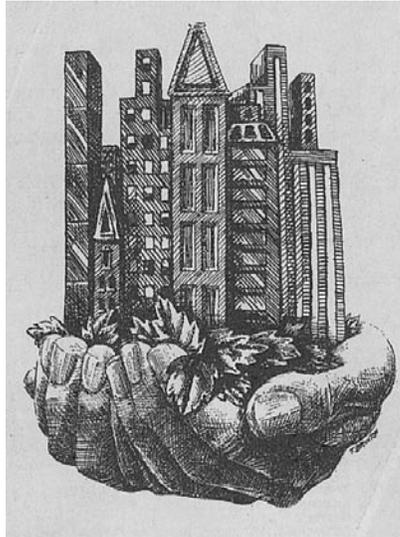
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and though there are plenty of eateries in my neighborhood, we chose to venture to Jerome Bettis Grille on the North Shore because of the ambience of the outdoor seating and beautiful park adjacent to the river.

After our meal, we strolled along the river to the cascading watersteps near PNC Park, one of our kids' favorite places, and took in the grand vistas. While driving home I was thinking of all the city services we just enjoyed and realized that my grand contribution to the city is a paltry \$52 per year that I pay in the Local Services Tax, previously known as the Occupation Privilege Tax. It is clear to me that there is an imbalance between the city services I use and the money I pay, on this and every other trip I take Downtown.

For comparison, I called a friend in St. Louis who works downtown but lives 15 minutes away, just as I do. He told me that he pays 1 percent of his income in an earnings tax to the city of St. Louis. To put that in perspective, if you use the Allegheny County median income of \$50,000, that would amount to \$500 a year, nearly 10 times the flat rate of \$52. What percentage should we pay?

The beauty in the math of this proposed voluntary system is that it would increase both the number of people who pay into the system



and the amount they pay, which certainly would be higher than \$52 a year. This group of people who live outside the city would combine with those moving back into our city to create new revenues that get Pittsburgh back on track as we grow our population again.

This voluntary payment would build solidarity between residents within and outside our city's borders. As time goes on, the number of people outside the city who participate could increase, and as the percentage of participating residents increases it would send a signal to legislators that it would be politically acceptable to legislate this type of change.

As these payments would be totally voluntary, naysayers can

simply exclude themselves by not participating. For those regional residents who feel guilt about getting something for nothing from a city they love, this system would be a way to offer some payback. Participation would revolve around optimism, connectivity, regionalism and civic-mindedness. This grassroots effort would show that many people working together can make a big impact. The goal would be to identify those residents who would be willing to pay a small fraction of their income to be part of a substantial group that cares passionately about our great city.

Our city is on the verge of its next era of greatness, and there are many positive signs around us. Various publications have deemed Pittsburgh as the best place in the country to live, Downtown residential development is booming and the vibrancy of our urban waterfronts and cultural district have never been better. For dwellers outside the city's borders, this voluntary payment would be a way for all of us to invest in Pittsburgh's bright future.

Daniel Rothschild is president of Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, an architecture and urban design firm in the Strip District. He lives in Mt. Lebanon.