

*The following essay is excerpted from the book **1924-2024: A Century of Strengthening Cities**, which chronicles the founding of the National League of Cities (NLC) and its historic impact on behalf of local governments over the last 100 years. For more information about NLC and its centennial celebration, please visit [NLC100.org](https://nlc100.org).*

A Century of Progress Made Possible by America's Cities, Towns, and Villages

As we unite to celebrate NLC's centennial, it's a safe bet that we share a deep and abiding love for cities and municipal governments of all shapes and sizes, and an appreciation of how essential our hometowns have been in transforming the United States of America into the greatest, most influential nation in world history.

From the very first New World settlements in the early 1600s, to today's dynamic network of 35,923 cities, towns, townships, villages and boroughs, local governments have been at the center of our country's success. Our hometowns built the U.S. ecosystem that has generated unrivaled economic growth and prosperity, delivered world-changing innovation in science and technology, forged the best public education system on the planet, and inspired international culture in media, music, literature, film, and art.

From our smallest villages to our largest cities, we see American values in action: a deep desire for freedom, individual liberty, self-reliance, and self-rule, blended with an innate love of place, family, and neighbor. These are the values that built our first settlements, led to a revolution against a far-off monarchy, and produced the longest-running democracy in history.

Local governments are nothing less than the bedrock of American democracy, providing 341 million residents with the most accountable, responsive, inclusive, ethical, and transparent

government on the planet. Our democratic traditions were founded in tiny villages and settlements. Shaped by local residents, these traditions are constantly evolving to better reflect who we are and who we want to be. Through it all, one fundamental principle has remained constant – the people are the government, and the people decide our future.

Each year, tens of thousands of Americans step forward to serve as local leaders, winning election or appointment as mayors, councilors, board members, and commissioners. The vast majority of communities are governed by these part-time volunteers who meet in settings open to the public to make difficult choices and forge a path forward, providing direction and resources to the daytime professional managers and staffs who implement these policies and deliver essential services to the people.

And these services are breathtaking in scope. Municipalities have built and maintain nearly 4 million miles of local roads to move people and products in every corner of the nation, and own 7.5 million miles of pipes to deliver drinking water, treat our sewage, and manage stormwater. Local officials have permitted more than 20 million miles of underground utility conduits, wires, and cables along our public rights of way, and nearly ten times that in the electricity, broadband, and telephone lines strung on poles across America, making the Information Age possible.

Local public schools educate 50 million children each year. Local law enforcement and firefighting forces, nearly 2 million strong, protect our people, homes, and businesses and keep us safe in times of emergency. We open the doors to 17 thousand libraries across the nation, and provide nearly 11 acres of municipal parks, playgrounds, and open space for every thousand U.S. residents.

Municipalities approve the licenses and permits that allow 33 million small businesses to operate, employing 61 million people and accounting for 44% of the U.S. economy. As stewards of the environment, local conservation commissions, planning boards, and inspectors ensure sustainable development, balancing the preservation of our tender natural resources with the urgent need to build homes, businesses, and industries. Local public health agencies provide life-saving services to our most vulnerable and struggling residents and are on the front lines battling substance use disorder, COVID, homelessness, and countless individual crises.

Every day, everyone, everywhere, is touched by local government in a way that makes their lives better, stronger, healthier.

And here's a fun fact: of the three levels of government, municipalities spend the smallest amount, yet our communities employ the largest public workforce. 15 million municipal workers deliver direct services to people, compared to just 5 million employed by states, and 4 million at the federal level. Sixty percent of the Americans who devote their careers to public service do so in our cities and towns.

The reality is that essential public services in the U.S. are overwhelmingly delivered by municipalities, and it is these services that have enabled our nation to grow, compete, and deliver an unprecedented quality of life for our people.

Even more, local governments bring us together and fulfill our human need for connection and belonging. Intentionally created by city, town, and village leaders, it is in our public squares where we meet our neighbors, share in celebrations and milestones, and stand together in times of grief and dismay. What is more American than parades on the 4th of July, high school football games, youth sports leagues, community forums and neighborhood

festivals, local “shop the block” nights, public art displays, community hikes, and even citizen comment time during public meetings?

Municipal governments are magnets that draw us toward each other, creating shared experiences to let us know that we belong, and that our neighbors belong, too. These connections make us resilient, allow us to navigate change and uncertainty with greater confidence and ability, and help us understand that we all want what’s best for our community and country, even when we disagree on how to achieve our lofty aspirations.

It's hard for us to imagine what life was like back in 1924, as NLC was taking shape. Only 5% of homes had a radio. Television didn’t exist. Movies were still silent. Only 50% of homes had electricity and even fewer had a telephone. Just 17,616 cars and trucks were on the road. Computers were science fiction.

During the past 100 years, our population tripled, our racial diversity quadrupled, and generations of immigrants planted deep roots in their new home. America’s Real Domestic Product increased by 2700%, worker productivity grew by 900%, and the United States built the most powerful economy the world has ever seen. Life expectancy increased by 20 years, reflecting advances in medicine, public health, and our social safety net. Americans moved from rural locales to larger cities and suburbs and migrated from the northeast to the south and west, creating huge demographic shifts in political power and demand for services. We added 296 million motor vehicles to our roads, and we have 310 million supercomputers (smartphones) in our pockets. We are universally connected.

Without strong municipalities, these achievements would have been slower and smaller, and America would be less than it is today. That is why NLC and our state leagues have been so vital to our nation’s progress.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, as our society and economy became increasingly complex, those who would profit by circumventing municipalities began to press state legislatures and the federal government to preempt local authority. This gave birth to state municipal associations, as local leaders reached across their boundaries to support each other, recognizing the need to collaborate, coordinate, and unite in common cause.

These are the folks who founded the Association of American Municipal Organizations in 1924. Led by John Stutz, the Kansas municipal league director, and many of his colleagues, these visionaries planted the seeds that would grow into today's NLC.

And we are grateful for their foresight and timing. Without NLC, our municipalities and state leagues would have been adrift during times of extraordinary change, our communities would have been outmatched and overrun, and the ecosystem that spurred America's growth would have been weaker.

As we applaud NLC's 100-year role in strengthening local government through public policy advocacy, membership education, best practice insights, and leading-edge innovation, we can't forget to celebrate that NLC also provides local officials across America with a place to call home. NLC draws local officials toward each other in common cause, making local leaders more resilient and able to navigate change and uncertainty with greater confidence and ability. The thousands of municipal officials who participate in NLC recognize that they are not alone, and gain strength and renewed vigor from this common bond.

There's a lot to celebrate on this anniversary. We honor the role of cities, towns, townships, villages, and boroughs in building our nation. We praise the extraordinary contributions of America's municipal officials to our democracy and quality of life. And we

commend NLC for bringing us together and making our leaders, communities, and America stronger.

Geoffrey C. Beckwith is a Senior Fellow at the National Academy of Public Administration and holds an appointment as a Lecturer/Mentor for Executive MBA students at MIT's Sloan School of Management. He was the Executive Director & CEO of the Massachusetts Municipal Association from 1992-2023 and served three terms on NLC's Board of Directors during his tenure at MMA.