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Regional

Theising tries to find ways to make cities better

There is little question that many American cities are seen as in decline on many fronts. East St. Louis is usually mentioned as a prime example, but rarely are solutions put forward. But what can be done about urban decline? Someone who tries to answer that question is Andrew Theising, an associate professor in the department of political science and director of the Institute for Urban Research at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A lifelong resident of St. Louis, Theising obtained his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in political science from the University of Missouri in St. Louis.

Given all of the problems that cities face – and with the lack of much clear understanding of how to fix them – why study cities?

"I pay a lot of attention to East St. Louis and this is my personal fear that we will never fix the problems of places like East St. Louis if we don't pay attention to them," Theising said. "Somebody has to keep turning the discussion back to what can we do here. And I want to be one of those people."

He uses the term "failed cities" for those urban areas that were created for a particular purpose that doesn't exist anymore, and East St. Louis is one of them. At the other end of

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

the spectrum he finds Madison, Wis.

"In my opinion (Madison) shows everything that is right about cities," Theising said, pointing to areas like housing development. "They have a growing population despite really high tax rates and it is because the city delivers a lot for that price."

Cities cannot be seen as homogeneous units. The growth of the suburbs has led to self-segregation in metro areas based more today on economics than ethnicity. That is why the central areas of cities tend to concentrate people who are living in poverty. In the case of East St. Louis, Theising gives a historical perspective.

"Quite honestly East St. Louis hasn't changed that much over the last 150 years," he said. "If we look at East St. Louis in 1918, the census of government pointed out that East St. Louis was the second poorest city government in the United States. It had factories and jobs working around the clock, but it was the second poorest city. Why? Because even though it had assets it did not manage

them well and it chose not to tax its base. It thrived on an illegal underground economy of liquor, drugs, prostitution and gambling, and when the factories started shutting in the 1950s, we also saw a lot of the gambling and the prostitution leave.

"So here is a city now that doesn't have the underground support and it doesn't have much of a legitimate economy of support. So what does it do? It has made the illegal, legal. So gambling – which used to be carried out illegally in the back rooms of taverns – is now legalized and put on the riverfront."

Some cities have invested a lot of time, effort, and money trying to resurge but still they don't seem to take off. "I think a big challenge is the fact that the market is not brought in," Theising said. "We tend to go in to places, East St. Louis, Detroit, and we do a lot of public investment there, or non profit investment there, but we are not bringing in the entrepreneurs. I think that something that is going to come back and haunt the entire St. Louis region is the fact that we have lost a lot of our capital investors, our speculative investors, the people who would invest in start-ups. Those people are not investing in this region and those are

the folks we need."

Every time a non-profit or government building is constructed, Theising sees that is as piece of land going off the tax base. He said that he believes that the non-profits are the glue that is holding East St. Louis together, but they can't do it alone.

Theising is now working on a project that will allow for a better understanding of how cities have been managed.

"My next big project is a biography of mayor Raymond Tucker (former mayor of St. Louis from 1953 until 1965)," he said. "People who have lived in St. Louis who are my father's age will say, 'Oh I remember Mayor Tucker. He is the guy who cleaned the air, he got rid of the air pollution in St. Louis, he was the guy who built the Gateway Arch, and he was the guy who built the interstate highway system in St. Louis,' and no one has ever told his story, until now."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Andrew Theising