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### **Amenity-Supported Migration and Sustainability: Ending the Daniel Boone Syndrome**

Over the last forty years the non-coastal Mountain West States, stretching from Montana and Idaho to New Mexico and Arizona, have led the nation in terms of the rate of growth in population, jobs, and aggregate income.<sup>1</sup> This rapid growth has been somewhat of an economic puzzle since measured by average pay and income, the Mountain West states contain the largest concentration of “poor states” outside of the Deep South. Montana, Idaho, Utah, and New Mexico have regularly been in the bottom ten states while Arizona has regularly been in the bottom third of the states and often close to joining the elite group of the ten “poorest” states. Meanwhile, the states with the highest average pay and income, states like Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and California regularly have had net out-migration of residents.

When people vote with their feet to leave high pay and income states and move to “poorer” states, it suggests that there is something wrong with the measures of economic well-being we are using. In particular what is missing is an accounting for the large differences in the cost of housing and, therefore, the cost of living among states. In addition to that particular economically important site-specific characteristic, there are other differences, namely in the value of local social and natural amenities or local “qualities of life” that make living in some areas more attractive than living in others. Differences in climate, congestion, and crime rates, along with differences in the quality

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<sup>1</sup> The 1980s were the exception in which the Mountain West was second or third in terms of growth rates due to the difficulties in all of the traditional land-based economic activities supporting rural areas: forest products, mining and metal processing, farming, and ranching.

and convenience of outdoor recreation opportunities, air and water pollution, and the sense of community and neighborliness also help explain peoples' willingness to choose areas with low pay and income over those with high pay and income.

The in-migration to areas with higher amenities and lower housing costs explains much of the economic growth in the Mountain West. Places like Western Montana, northern and southern Idaho, the Las Vegas and Reno areas, the Sun Corridor in Arizona stretching from Phoenix to Tucson, the Greater Albuquerque area of New Mexico, the Wasatch Front as well as southern Utah, all saw rapid growth in population and economic activity despite low average pay and income.

Of course many of these areas are now among the areas hit hardest by the bursting of the housing bubble and the Great Recession. The boom in speculative construction activity, largely based on the belief that the housing bubble could expand forever, in the end overtook actual population and real economic growth, and burst.

Even without those speculative excesses and the peddling of sub-prime mortgages to families that could not afford them, amenity-supported in-migration and economic development, unless carefully managed, tend to have an unsustainable characteristic. As population grows, pressure is put on housing prices and the cost of living rises. The larger population and expanded economy tend to undermine the very qualities of life that drew people to that location. The influx of workers also puts downward pressure on wages. The in-migrants, in the end, tend to "love the place to death." Smart growth" policies can seek to minimize these costs and protect local quality of life, but that is a difficult battle in the Mountain West, a region that is often hostile to government planning activities.

Amenity-supported migration can be costly in other ways. Often it is not just or primarily the unique attributes of a new location that draws people, but the negative qualities of the large urban area from which they are fleeing. That is, people may be pushed to smaller cities and ex-urban areas by the failure of larger cities to protect the quality of life there. As those cities lose population, their economies decline, they have a harder time funding public services, and their urban centers tend to be hollowed out, creating urban decay that is costly and difficult to reverse. Some of the pulses of growth in the Mountain West states were tied to California residents moving away from what they periodically perceived to be the collapse of the “California Dream.” If our larger urban areas and urbanized states could maintain or recreate residual natural systems within urban areas and those larger urban areas could maintain or recreate compact neighborhoods with a sense of community and high quality public services, the pressure on smaller high amenity and low cost cities would be reduced and quality of life could be better protected in both large and small urban areas.

There is another aspect of amenity migration that is not entirely attractive even if it enhances the local economic vitality many smaller cities seek. Put in somewhat cynical terms, we flee areas where we and many others have fouled the nest and move into other areas, helping foul the nest there, only to move on again to a temporarily cleaner nest.

This might be called the Daniel Boone Syndrome. An apocryphal quote attributed to that famous American frontiersman was that “when you can see or hear your neighbors, it is time to move on.” And move on Boone did. Boone moved his family from Pennsylvania south along barrier of the Appalachian Mountains to extreme

southwestern Virginia where he built a circuitous wilderness road looping south into Tennessee through the Cumberland Gap and then north into Kentucky, effectively opening that area up to European-American settlement. He speculated in land there, making and losing a fortune, and then moved on to the new wilderness portal to the trans-Mississippi frontier, the Missouri River. There he again promoted settlement while exploring the Great Plains out to the Rocky Mountains.

In the twenty-first century, the least cost and most sustainable solution to degraded urban quality of life across our continental nation may be to turn away from this wandering on to get away from what we have helped damage and, instead, settle down to work with our neighbors to stem the deterioration of local social and natural amenities and rebuild the qualities of local living that we treasure. It may be time to stop running away from problems and, instead, being working on solutions where we live.