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American Cities See Their Luck Turn With a Biden Administration.

Local government aid in Joe Biden's proposed stimulus bill is the latest bright spot for cities and states that were treated as adversaries during the Trump administration.

America's states and cities are emerging from political exile.

President-elect Joe Biden's proposed cabinet includes at least six officials who have led municipalities or states, like former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg and Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo. That's in sharp contrast to President Donald Trump, whose cabinet relied heavily on corporate and industry insiders.

On Thursday, state and local leaders got a glimpse of what an ally in the White House could mean. Biden outlined an economic stimulus package that would provide \$350 billion in aid to municipal governments. Such help was a major roadblock in stimulus negotiations in 2020, with Trump repeatedly characterizing it as a bailout for Democratic states like Illinois.

The sea change comes after four years of political attacks by the Trump administration on what he has called "Democrat-run cities" that have had real-world impacts, from Covid-19 aid to more regional issues like stalled funding of the Gateway rail tunnel to link New York and New Jersey. Mayors have spent years sparring with the White House over its immigration policies, and after protests over police brutality and racism in 2020, his administration labeled cities like New York City "anarchist jurisdictions" and threatened to withhold federal funding.

"It's no secret that the outgoing administration did not view cities, for the most part, favorably," said South Bend Mayor James Mueller. He said he hopes Biden's cabinet picks like Buttigieg, who Biden nominated to lead the Department of Transportation, are a signal that cities "will be treated better" under the new administration.

Covid Relief

The most immediate issue that mayors and governors are pressing is budgetary relief to ease the economic fallout from the pandemic, which has crimped local tax revenue while increasing costs for services. In a Jan. 13 letter to Congress, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and other groups pushed for the passage of \$1 trillion in emergency funding for states, cities, towns and schools.

Biden's plan would send \$350 billion to state and local governments, more than double the \$160 billion that a number of Republican members of Congress had backed late last year in a bipartisan compromise proposal.

Federal relief measures so far have supported municipal tax revenues indirectly by propping up consumer spending and small businesses, but local officials have warned that the outlook is uncertain as the pandemic continues to spread, signaling more shutdowns and economic pain to

come. Tax collections also tend to lag economic conditions.

Kathy Maness, president of the National League of Cities, said she was encouraged by Biden's choice of leaders who come with an understanding of state and local issues. "They get it," said Maness, a town council member for Lexington, South Carolina. "They get what it's like to run a city."

Roads and Bridges

Mayors and governors also are looking for the Biden administration to push forward a comprehensive federal infrastructure package, something that Trump promised during his first presidential campaign but failed to deliver.

"If you listen to localities you're going to learn things," said Henry Cisneros, a former mayor of San Antonio, Texas, and former secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "And I think this administration has put people in place, like Pete Buttigieg, who understand that."

Buttigieg has already said he'll bring a "mayor's perspective" to the job and touted his focus on infrastructure as a tool to revive South Bend after the 2008 recession.

Raimondo, who Biden is nominating to lead the Commerce Department, is also seen as an infrastructure advocate. As governor of Rhode Island, she spearheaded an infrastructure plan financed by tolling commercial trucks. Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, Biden's nominee for Labor Secretary, is the focus of a new 4.5-hour Frederick Wiseman documentary that puts a spotlight on the efficacy of local government. The cabinet nominations also include U.S. Representative Marcia Fudge, former mayor of Warrensville Heights, Ohio, Tom Vilsack, former governor of Iowa, and Jennifer Granholm, former governor of Michigan.

Adie Tomer, who leads the Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative at the Brookings Institution, said he expects that the Biden administration may foster an array of "pro-metropolitan" policies. That will also be a way for Biden to deliver benefits to his electoral base in big cities like Atlanta, he said.

It will help that Buttigieg and the other nominees with mayoral and gubernatorial experience may also have a strong network of local officials that they can draw on, Tomer said.

"There's not going to be an adversarial relationship," he said. "They're going to be really excited to work with the Biden administration."

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