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Have you ever visited the cities of north and central Italy? Florence with its magnificent bridges, palaces and galleries. You can see the magnificence and sense the Renaissance power of the Medicis even now in the midst of a teeming 20th century city. Or Sienna with its ochre towers and walls glistening in the Italian sun, with a city center like no other in the world revealing to all visitors a special past. These were powerful city-states five hundred years ago, and we seek them out today to see the accomplishments of their cultural, political, and economic greatness in that period long ago when they flourished.

Today in America I see a new version of the city-state. The renaissance of the Renaissance city-state. They are not independent political entities as in the 15th century, but they have an economic and cultural force. We have the makings of one right here in west Michigan. As the Citizens League looks to the future, it must search out those issues that will decide the success or failure of what I like to call our city-state. A city-state vision for west Michigan transcends municipal borders and overcomes provincialism. Precisely the issues the Citizens League addresses - child care, public transportation, literacy - are not concerns that end at the city limits of Grand Rapids.

East Grand Rapids has signs up reading, "You are now entering the home of President Gerald R. Ford." Does that mean the residents of Kentwood and Walker and Hudsonville don't have the right to walk
visitors through the Ford Museum on the Grand River and say proudly, "This fellow's our hometown boy!" Just like the fluoridated water Grand Rapids pioneered in, the pride of having a President of the United States flows right over civic boundaries as if they weren't there.

And you can chop Kent County up into 20 separate school districts and charge 20 different millage rates to property owners to run those schools, but true education doesn't work that way. My vision of education in a city-state is broad-based, not one that starts and stops when it crosses a school district's lines. City-state learning needs to forego separatism and instead emulate the brightness of the west Michigan sun that pays no attention to tax rates or governmental borders when it decides to shine.

As we approach the 21st century, we must understand - to paraphrase Lincoln - that when we divide our civic houses against each other, we cannot stand most effectively. By duplicating, we dilute. By competing, we compromise. One of the more tangible signs of the absurdity in narrow as opposed to regional -- separate suburban as opposed to city-state -- planning is a narrow strip of tarmac along the shores of Lake Michigan. Designed by a Grand Rapids firm, a peaceful bike path makes its way through pine trees and sand dunes northward out of Holland, weaving its way toward the natural destination of Grand Haven.

But then at Kirk Park, this scenic path comes to an abrupt, total, and complete halt. The contented biker finds himself stopped as if he had pedaled across half a draw bridge that ended in the
middle of a river. One small government said "yes" to the bike path, the neighboring government said "no." That means tourists to the area can ride to where the bike path dies out at Kirk Park, and then U-turn back.

This mentality of chop-block separatism - of inefficient and unnecessary borders - is reflected in a poem by Robert Frost. The "he" in "Mending Wall" represents the provincialism that prefers fixed boundaries to fluid cooperation. The poet -- the "I" -- on the other hand, questions the need for these two neighboring farmers to rebuild the stone fence between them every spring.

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple-orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
WHY do they make good neighbors?
Isn't it where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down! I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness, as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Frost's entrenched neighbor who "moves in darkness" carrying rocks to fix the fence like "an old-stone savage" is the image of reactionary traditionalism. The way we've always done things. If it was good enough for our ancestors, it's good enough for us. Even in the crops that are being separated by the fence, Frost reinforces the contrast between the creative poet who believes in elves and progress and the caveman who hasn't yet awakened to the reality of changing times. Once the stone fence between their pastures made sense because it kept their own cows home. But neither of them has cows anymore. Frost quips that his apple orchard -- planted and orderly, symbolizing the advancements of planned cultures -- won't eat the cones under his pines -- representing the primitive, uncultivated approach of fences whether we need them or not.

The Citizens League should keep us from building fences where they are not needed and help to tear down unnecessary ones. Since our city-state is not sovereign, the Citizens League must examine the ways all the political units, towns, counties, townships, and even cities within it can enhance its life rather than thwart it. This may be the League's most important function in the next decade. As the concept of metropolitan cooperation, like a premature infant, struggles to live, it must not be neglected.
And the cities themselves should not be robbed of their vitality by outlying districts, or in the years to come the thriving suburbs and rural areas will be tarnished by the rot at the core of the cities. We cannot afford to use them and leave them. Planning and the will to carry out good plans, private investment in public causes, and public investment to enhance private initiative -- these are broad issues that concern the Citizens League of the future, and are necessary for healthy cities and healthy suburbs together in our city-state.

Even before the 15th century there was a golden age that flourished in a city-state. From Athens in the 6th century B.C. flowed the ideas and ideals that shape our civilization to this day.

My idea of a city-state is just that - an idea. It transcends some boundaries and lives within others. Its territory is determined by the mind and will of the people who want the place where they live to be better, to be enlightened, to offer promise for the future, and to have good jobs, good health, good education, and good leisure. The Citizens League influences and even forms that mind and will. By so doing, it draws together the people of west Michigan in common cause to make for themselves an exemplary life; a life that will be viewed from an historical perspective as a shining light on the American landscape.