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Fragmentation is holding St. Louis back

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4 hours ago • By David Nicklaus

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The Gateway Arch is lit up in this view from the east taken on Nov. 22, 2001. Photo by Andrew Cutraro of the Post-Dispatch

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St. Louis, most area residents would agree, has many elements of a great city. We have Forest Park, the Cardinals and world-class companies such as Express Scripts and Monsanto.

What we don't have is a governmental structure that makes sense. That makes a big difference, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development says.

The OECD, a think tank for 30 industrialized democracies, just issued a report called "The Metropolitan Century," which predicts that 85 percent of the world's population will live in cities by 2099.

It also attempts to describe what makes cities successful. Some results are intuitive: Bigger cities are more economically productive than small ones, and a highly educated citizenry is a plus.

Then there's governance, the Achilles' heel of St. Louis. When an area has what the OECD calls "a mismatch between functional boundaries and administrative boundaries," its

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economy suffers.

For a given population size, doubling the number of municipalities in a metropolitan area is associated with a 5 percent to 6 percent drop in labor productivity.

That may sound esoteric, but it's vital. Rising productivity allows wages to rise and wealth to be created. If our governmental structure is reducing productivity, we're entering the global economic wrestling match with one hand tied behind our back.

The finding doesn't surprise Tom Irwin, executive director of Civic Progress. "Every penny you spend on redundancy is a penny you can't spend on innovation," he said. "The world is changing fast, and we have to recognize we don't live in a sleepy old society anymore."

Irwin's corporate group has long argued that the St. Louis region needs to streamline its system of government. It supports Better Together, an organization that is publishing a series of studies about fragmentation.

St. Louis governments have taken baby steps: The city and county merged their economic development efforts in 2013. We also have long-standing regional bodies such as the Zoo-Museum District, Metro transit agency and Great Rivers

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On important issues such as land-use planning, though, St. Louis and 90 municipalities in St. Louis County all set their own policies.

When so many of us live in one community, work in a second and shop in a third, it's difficult to plan and fund the right level of infrastructure and services.

Even if you don't mind living in a slow-growing area, there are plenty of reasons to want more efficient and effective government. For one thing, it would be more just than the system we have.

Too many small municipalities in St. Louis County depend on traffic-ticket revenue to fund basic services, leading to a distrust of police that became apparent during last year's Ferguson protests.

"What we have here are the kinds of inequities and injustices that are perpetuated by a fragmented and segregated structure, and they can bring down the entire region," says Todd Swanstrom, a professor of public policy at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

A bill in the Missouri Legislature would tighten the rules on how much revenue a city can generate through traffic tickets. It could be the first step toward putting some municipalities, or at least their police departments, out of business.

It could also be a step toward remaking St. Louis, the region, into a truly great city — or at least giving us a chance to compete in the world economy.

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