

Georgetown Independence?

Why Some of Us Are Talking About Seceding from Seattle

Georgetown is a unique little neighborhood, filled with all the goodness of a small Pacific Northwest city – a vibrant arts scene, ethnic and cultural diversity, and economic prosperity. We care about social justice and love our slightly edgy, blue-collar, hard-working and progressive culture. Since 1910 when the City of Georgetown was annexed into the City of Seattle, it has contributed to the greater good of Seattle with its robust industrial and business tax revenue base. Georgetown embraces its intermixed business-residence urban landscape: in Northwest Georgetown, small 100-year-old farmhouses are proud neighbors to warehouses, light industry, restaurants and even freight rails.

When Georgetown was annexed to Seattle in 1910 after a public vote, insufficient services were available within the small city. Centralized, reliable water service and other amenities that the larger city to the north could offer were enticing reasons for annexation. Georgetown was a city with ample shipping access via the Duwamish waterway, booming businesses and the Seattle Malting and Brewing Company - brewing remains a mainstay of Georgetown's economy. Annexation was a win-win solution for Georgetown and Seattle, together. But that mutual benefit has unraveled over the last few years. The City of Seattle has not kept up its side of the bargain. Georgetown continues to pour business and property tax revenue into Seattle, but lately has received minimal benefit in return.

Due to numerous factors, city services are insufficient or unavailable to residents; lack of schools, grocery stores, and green space are sacrifices Georgetown residents have made in order to accommodate more industrial-friendly uses. And now, police force reductions, budget cuts and insufficient regional coverage for the South End means we are being neglected by law enforcement, denied city services that others take for granted such as street parking enforcement, road maintenance, garbage- and excrement-free sidewalks and safe open spaces. Georgetowners are tough and want to preserve our diversity, our gritty working-class culture, our history and our present stature as one of the highest-revenue generating neighborhoods in Seattle. And now we need help.

Residents have lived in balance with businesses for a century, but that balance has been disrupted by a recent and massive influx of criminal grifters. Visitors, transients, and unscrupulous inhabitants are exploiting Georgetown's humanist leanings by occupying public city-owned space, and even private property, to set up organized crime hubs that passers-by call "encampments." This issue is not about homelessness (of course that is also an issue, but a different one); Seattle's lack of affordable housing and the multivariate reasons for and consequences of impermanent shelter is beyond the scope of this piece. This is about rampant criminal activity that is acknowledged by but disregarded by the Seattle Police Department, ignored by the Seattle City Council, and unaddressed by the Mayor and elected officials who collect their salaries from our taxes. Residents and businesses are paying for services not rendered; what if our recourse was to terminate a contract that is no longer working for us? Georgetown property and business owner Gretchen Reimbold explains, "Northwest Georgetown has become a war zone. Businesses and residents are plagued with an increase in crime and illegally placed tents and RVs, and every morning greeted with rat-infested trash piles, used syringes, and fecal matter on our properties and public spaces. Non-resident street-dwellers are aggressive, threatening our employees and customers. The City Council will not respond, and the police have been instructed to stand down. It feels like a hopeless situation."

So what can we do? Continue to have ineffective conversations with city officials? Create a petition? How do we find a path forward? These are great questions, but past evidence would suggest that "raising awareness" of the gravity of the situation to public officials is not getting results. City officials are not only aware of the problem, they are actually enabling the erosion of Georgetown neighborhood safety and stability through inaction. Legislation is not the problem; non-enforcement of law is the problem. Citizens have the law behind them, but what happens when Seattle refuses to enforce the law? Anarchy happens, and that's what Northwest Georgetown is experiencing. Softer words are being used to portray anarchy as increases in "needy populations" or "vulnerable unhoused communities," but the people using those euphemisms are clearly not living and working in the areas they are describing. Unlike other neighborhoods that clearly have little infrastructure for independence (Laurelhurst or Leschi are purely residential, for example), Georgetown was formerly an independent city, and could be independent again, if that's what it takes to restore safety and order to the area.

Is it too extreme to suggest de-annexation? "Love it or leave it" might not be the best way to capture the sentiments of those in Northwest Georgetown, but many of us who have been working hard to be heard by the City of Seattle are frustrated by the sheer ineffectiveness of our elected officials. In RCW 35.10.217, the Washington State Legislature lays out a process for de-annexation: "A petition for an election to vote upon the annexation, which proposed annexation is approved by the legislative body of the city or town from which the territory will be taken, may be submitted to the legislative body of the city or town to which annexation is proposed." Other communities have looked to break away when alignment is unattainable. Franklin County may get to vote on seceding from Washington and joining a 51st state, as reported by the Tri-City Herald this past July. While statehood seems a bit extreme, might establishing a form of town government for Georgetown that works for Georgetown's industrial and residential needs be something to consider, given the neglect we experience from the City of Seattle?

The reality is that when collaborating, convening, sharing perspectives and raising issues by civil, conversational democratic means fails, money still speaks loud and clear. Georgetown has a large and powerful business community that has had it. They are angry, and they are starting to leave. So whether or not Georgetown itself "secedes," the businesses may just do that on their own by moving out of here if basic services, safety and law enforcement cannot be restored. Secession is a shout to say, 'We don't feel valued! Look what we bring to you!' For the past several years, our value, and that of other industrial areas, seems to be less about tax base and diversity of workforce, and more as a dumping ground to hide the reality of housing, mental health and drug addiction challenges from other more affluent parts of Seattle. Secession is certainly not endorsed nor advocated by civic organizations in Georgetown and would undoubtedly have many opponents and obstacles. But, it is time to move beyond talk when talk does not bring solutions to the rampant crime and lack of law enforcement, and ask, What is our next step?

Interested in learning more? Email georgetown.action@gmail.com