WE DISSENT, MR. CLAWSON

1960
Mr. Eldridge Lovelace
Harland Bartholomew and Associates
317 North Eleventh Street
Saint Louis, Missouri

Dear Mr. Lovelace:

You and your daughter were very good to have written the comment on Marion Clawson’s article. We have decided, however, to forgo the opportunity you offer us to publish it in the Journal. I am therefore, returning it to you with genuine thanks.

I should think that Mr. Clawson would be interested in seeing it. Perhaps you would like to send it along to him. His address is:

Resources For The Future, Inc.
1775 Massachusetts Ave., N. W.
Washington 6, D. C.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Melvin M. Webber
Editor

MMW:alg

Enclosure
WE DISSENT, MR. CLAWSON

by

Jean and Eldridge Lovelace

In the May issue of the Journal of the American Institute of Planners, Marion Clawson suggests a novel and startling way to deal with what he calls the "problems of suburbanization". The salient features of Clawson's proposal for controlling heedless and headlong suburbanization can be summarized this way.

1. The solution to the problem of uncontrolled suburbanization, Clawson thinks, is the formation of special new forms of local government, "suburban development districts", which are to be liquidated after the suburb has reached a certain stage of development.

2. In general, the districts are to have "very broad powers for planning and for other action to carry out and to direct all parts of the development process for the suburbs". The specific powers of the development district include: taxation of property within their boundaries; acquisition of land from voluntary sellers; acquisition of land from the state, which can acquire it by the power of eminent domain; sale of land; performance of the usual functions of local government, e.g. water supply, sewage disposal, usually by contracting with the existing units of local government; creation of land use and development plans for the area within the district.

3. Membership in the suburban development district is to be open to those groups with a special interest in suburban development, which are, according to Mr. Clawson, future residents of the suburb; other citizens and governing bodies of all units of local government in the area within which the suburb lies; the federal government; the real estate developers and building contractors; the present landowners;
and the group of "leading citizens". The actual government is to rest on a small board of directors with a professional staff.

It is indeed unfortunate that this intriguing proposal is based on several major fallacies and numerous minor impossibilities. Clawson's major fallacy is his confusion between what he thinks of as "suburbanization" and what is in reality the normal expansion of the city. He does not see that "suburbanization" can best be understood as the natural process of urban growth. The suggestion that the control of urban expansion be parcellled out to special suburban districts indicates that Clawson has no concept of the economic, social, political, and cultural unity of a metropolitan complex. Although "suburbanites" have traditionally tried to ignore their close connections with the city by forming their own small and rather inefficient governments, typical urban problems of traffic and transportation, substandard housing, pollution, sewage disposal, water supply, and protection from crimes and accidents have pursued them in their flight from the city. Because of these common problems, which cannot be solved in isolation by a multiplicity of governmental units, and because of the economic and social interdependence of city and suburbs, it is evident that only the metropolitan area as a whole has the public interest. This Mr. Clawson fails to recognize. He is, like many suburban dwellers, indifferent to the metropolitan world around the suburb, on which it clearly depends, as Robert Wood has
pointed out. (Suburbia, Page 280.) By his willingness to deposit this problem of urban expansion on numerous small peripheral governments, whose view of over-all urban growth and the common needs of the entire metropolitan area would necessarily be quite narrow, Clawson aligns himself with suburban irresponsibility.

The gloomy but fallacious assumption underlying the Clawson proposal is that nothing can or ever will be done to improve metropolitan government in the United States. Forever and ever, he seems to think, there will be fragmentation of political authority within the urban area. Therefore, we might as well make it worse by creating a new brand of governmental units called "suburban development districts". Although progress is slow, such a pessimistic assumption is not justified.

In 1956 Houston and Dallas obtained the authority to annex large surrounding areas; the Dallas County League of Municipalities now forms a framework for approaching problems on an area-wide basis. In Philadelphia, city boundaries have been made coterminous with those of Philadelphia county, and there is a partial merger of city and county offices. There is also partial consolidation in Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Cleveland, and Louisville. A common alternative to the geographic merger is functional consolidation in which one governmental unit has jurisdiction throughout the region to meet a problem, such as water supply or sewage. Examples
of this are the St. Louis Sewer District and the Chicago Sanitary District. Authorities such as this can in time become multi-functional, as the Port of New York Authority and the Massachusetts Metropolitan District show. In other cases, functional consolidation takes place by joint arrangements and contracts between governmental units. The City of Los Angeles assesses property, collects taxes, performs health functions, provides library facilities and fire protection for many of its suburbs by the contract method.

Seattle has gone far beyond this stage in the development of a metropolitan government; its "Metro Plan" allows it and 175 other communities to work together as one unit on sewage, garbage disposal, water supply, mass transportation, parks, and planning. Miami and 25 other towns in Dade County, Florida, have an adaptation of the Toronto federal plan which gives the county government the power to provide sanitation, highways, water supply, and planning for the entire area.

Although Mr. Clawson seems to take an extraordinarily dim view of the efficacy of city planning in general, some political scientists and many city planners are hopeful that in the future city planning commissions, which are becoming increasingly common in American urban governments, and master plans can provide an instrument for establishing unity among
the many governments of an urban region. It is believed that city planning's comprehensive view of a metropolitan area—transportation, sewage, water, housing, zoning, urban renewal, parks, expansion, conservation, could make this one function the nucleus of a metropolitan government which can provide the effective guide for all urban growth (including "suburbanization"—whatever that is) that is essential. The Indianapolis experience indicates the practical possibilities along this line.

Current efforts at metropolitan government may be too rare and only partially successful. But in fighting the centrifugal pull of the suburbs, they are taking steps in the right direction. The Clawson proposal would be a step backward. Since it is generally agreed that most of the ills of local government come from the great number and variety of small governmental units, Clawson's suggestion that we create still another layer of governments is appalling. The present proliferation of small and overlapping governmental jurisdictions has resulted in incalculable waste, inefficiency, and confusion. The Clawson proposal would add to the existing division of the metropolitan area, increasing the multiplicity, complexity, and fragmentation, which already confuses the voter and prevents him from participating intelligently in the local affairs which are his concern.

Furthermore, the urban and rural "special districts" from which the "suburban development district" is descended
have been ineffective in many ways. A general result of the special district device is the divorce of political authority from public responsibility; governmental power tends to be exercised by a self-perpetuating elite of bureaucratic experts removed from contact with the public and unwilling to compromise with other specialists in other special districts, which are also narrowly pursuing their own particular concerns. The size of the special district also makes the performance of a function inefficient, expensive, and spotty. How could Clawson's scheme of suburban development districts possibly make the most effective use of the still limited supply of trained personnel? Is it not possible that this method of controlling urban expansion would have very uneven results? In areas in which the taxable property is less valuable, the development districts could be so weak financially as to be impractical; yet, these are the areas in which improvement is most badly needed.

The formation of the Clawson districts would prevent the citizen and the official from seeing urban expansion in its proper context as the normal growth of a metropolitan area and would make it impossible to subordinate the interests of a small section to that of the whole region. For example, Clawson even goes so far as to say that the suburban development districts should have the power to modify the master plan (if there is one). In concentrating all his attention on the particular trees, Mr. Clawson may very well ruin the forest.
What is to be gained by the creation of these transitory development districts is not as clear as what is to be lost. The powers of the development districts, taxation, planning, etc.—are all possessed by the presently existing governments. Why should these governments become the "hired help" of another governmental species whose powers do not exceed their own? The comings and goings of the suburban development district would undoubtedly cause considerable chaos in the internal affairs of local governments and in the relations between them. The temporary removal of the planning function and all others, although these are to be "given back" by contract, from the local government would disrupt operations and make it difficult for the government to effectively meet problems of urban expansion continuing after the liquidation of the suburban development district. The "interim" district device hardly seems the way to provide the comprehensive, integrated, and continuing planning necessary to control and to direct the growth of a city.

Another fallacy in the Clawson proposal is that it is based on an idea contrary to our whole tradition, i.e., the condemnation and acquisition of land for a private rather than a public purpose. Clawson wants the state to acquire land by eminent domain and then sell it to the development district, which will in turn sell it to a real estate developer for private housing. Mr. Clawson has apparently forgotten what eminent domain is. Eminent domain is the power of the government to take private property for public use. Because of this,
the constitutionality of the entire proposal is in doubt. Nor could this be brought under the Berman vs. Parker umbrella or that created by other urban renewal precedents for the simple reason that order in urban growth may be brought about without use of so extraordinary (and unconstitutional) a public power.

A minor error, compared with those discussed above, is Clawson's suggestion for the governmental structure of the special district. The harmful effects of adding another layer of government would not be mitigated by the decentralized responsibility in the "small board of directors" which he recommends. The result would probably be a "headless government" with all the ailments of the commission form of government. The small professional staff would be more likely to control the line, who would be amateurs, than to merely assist it.

Clawson thinks that if he puts all the special interests together in his development district, the public interest will somehow emerge from their conflicting forces. This has never worked at any other level of government, so it is odd to suppose that it would at the local level, where the public interest is clearly identified with the whole metropolitan area rather than the resultant of forces of interest groups in a tiny segment.

In summary, we find his suggestions totally without merit and hope that others will react likewise.