A DOOR FOR CITIES TO KNOCK ON

February 1962
A Door for Cities to Knock On

Defeated Urban Affairs Plan Was Inadequate, Says City Planner; Urges Broader Approach

Letter to the Post-Dispatch

Disapproval of the reorganization plan that would have created the Department of Urban Affairs is not the “all-around defeat” that you termed it. Rather, it is an indication that the proposal lacked substantial merit. It should be looked upon as a prelude to something much more worthwhile.

Changing the name of one federal bureau (really all that the Urban Affairs Department proposal did) is not going to go very far in solving the problems of our cities.

The Mirror of the essential problem here is to improve our urban environment. We cannot do this by edict from above. It has to be done locally by a local program. Urban environment is an intimate, indigenous problem.

Possibly Philadelphia is the only large American city that has made a really effective beginning with the type of approach that is needed. However, when we compare the plan of Philadelphia with the plan recently completed for Rome, we are dismayed at how far behind other countries we are in urban design and development.

Unquestionably the Federal Government could encourage sound solutions to urban problems. However, in dealing with urban affairs probably no record in the country is as dismal as that of the Federal Government.

One of the most important elements in any urban area is its highway system. This system is designed, built and financed by state and federal agencies who show little disposition to adjust it to the urban pattern.

A second example concerns a plan recently prepared for the central business district of one of our Midwestern cities. This was a part of the city’s comprehensive plan. A vital element in the plan was the proposed location of a large federal office building. The building was located solely to suit the whims of the federal bureaucracy.

The federal failure in dealing with whole nation to grow helter-skelter. Surely it would be to the national advantage to have a wider distribution of urban population and not to concentrate so much of it in so few localities. This can be brought about by federal influence on defense contracts, on depreciation schedules for industry, and by federal inducements such as are provided in the “depressed areas” legislation.

4. The federal highway and transportation programs must be integrated with urban planning and not considered as isolated activities.

5. There must be control over all federal activities affecting the physical structure of urban areas, to require them to conform with a comprehensive plan for the optimum development of the area. These would include projects of such agencies as the General Services Administration, Post Office, the Defense Department and others building within the urban area. Further, there should be some interrelationship with the Interstate Commerce Commission to bring about badly needed coordination of railroad facilities in urban areas, as well as similar action with the Federal Aviation Agency on the development of airports. If there is federal aid to education, school buildings receiving such aid should be required to be built in accordance with comprehensive plans also.

6. There should be a better operation and control of federal cities, wherever they are large such as Washington or quite small such as Las Alamos.

7. Finally, there is the need for a continuation on a systematic basis of the federal aid for housing, urban renewal and open space, but with greatly improved design and streamlined procedures.

To take the miscellaneous of activities currently under the Housing and Home Finance Agency and dignify them with a Cabinet post is not going to be of much help to our cities. It just paints the door they have to knock on a brighter color. However, if a Cabinet post is established and its activities are expanded, then such a proposal would really do something for our cities.

Eldridge H. Lovelace

March 16, 1962

Mr. Grady Clay
344 S. Peterson Avenue
Louisville 6, Kentucky

Dear Grady:

The Post-Dispatch cut down my original article rather severely; consequently, I am taking the liberty of sending the original text to you. It reads a bit more smoothly, I believe; however, this may be just the typical feeling of an author who doesn't like to see any editor cut anything.

Yours sincerely,

EML/df
Enc.
February 27, 1962

Editor
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
1133 Franklin Avenue
St. Louis 1, Missouri

Dear Sir:

Disapproval of the reorganization plan that would have created the Department of Urban Affairs is not the "all around defeat" that you termed it on February 23rd. Rather, it is an indication that the proposal lacked substantial merit. It should be looked upon as a prelude to something much more worthwhile.

No one disputes the essential facts: we are an urban nation; our cities are in trouble; the national interest is heavily involved in helping them. Like so many of our national problems, however, we seem first to try one of three things: (1) appoint a committee, (2) change the name of the problem, or (3) ignore it in the hope that it will go away. Changing the name of one Federal bureau (really all that the Urban Affairs Department proposal did), is not going to go very far in solving the problems of our cities.

The essential problem here is to improve our urban environment. We cannot do this by edict from above. It has to be done locally by a local program. Urban environment is an intimate, indigenous problem. Stereotyped answers almost always fail. Among the measures that are required are much more sophisticated and better local planning programs undertaken by teams of professionals representing not just city planning but landscape architecture, architecture, civil engineering, economics and sociology. Possibly Philadelphia is the only large American city that has made a really effective beginning with the type of approach that is needed. At least the results that are beginning to appear on the ground there would indicate this to be so. However, when we appraise our current planning and, for example, compare the plan of Philadelphia with the plan recently completed for Rome, we are dismayed at how far behind other countries we are in urban design and development.

Unquestionably the Federal Government could encourage and stimulate sound solutions to urban problems. However, in dealing with urban affairs probably no record in the country is as dismal as that of the Federal Government. Let's take just a few examples.
One of the most important elements in any urban area is its highway system. This system is designed, built and financed by state and federal agencies who show quite little disposition to adjust it to other components of the urban pattern. Highways are run through parks, across college campuses; they blast neighborhoods apart; but most important of all they are designed as separate entities instead of as integral parts of the urban areas. Here the Federal Government bears a very heavy responsibility and shows little disposition to vigorously assist in bringing about an improved urban environment.

A second example concerns a plan recently prepared for the central business district of one of our midwestern cities. This was a part of the city's comprehensive plan. A vital element in the plan was the proper location of a large Federal office building. In making a decision on locating this building the General Services Administration completely ignored the city's plan. The building was located solely to suit the whims of the Federal bureaucracy; the problems of the local community and its comprehensive plan were ignored. The same thing has happened all too frequently in similar Federal installations such as post offices and, of course, the Defense Department, when it builds installations adjacent to a city, ignores local plans almost completely.

While some of the sharp criticism that has been leveled at the result of Federal Housing and Urban Renewal Programs may not be completely justified, there is certainly more than a grain of truth in what Jane Jacobs, for example, has to say. And, here again, we see the result of an institutionalized bureaucratic approach not based on an endeavor to solve the problem of the urban environment on the only level - the local level - on which it may be solved.

The Federal failure in dealing with cities is possibly most marked in connection with the cities over which is has had complete control. The District of Columbia is under complete Federal control. It should, and could, be a model for all American cities, yet it is vexed and plagued with similar and quite comparable problems.

It would seem that if the Federal Government is going to help cities there are a number of essential things that it should do, among which are:

1. It should insist on good, thorough local planning and not just give lip service to it as is the case in the current "Workable Program" requirements. This involves a recognition of the desperate need for additional trained personnel in this field and doing something about filling this need.

2. It should insist on good state legislation and state co-operation with cities. The inhibitions in many states on such measures as annexation, and consolidation, and on making radical
changes in local government structure and powers should be lifted. The Federal Government has secured great improvement in state welfare legislation by the power of persuasion backed up with availability of Federal money. Comparable progress could be made here but a really tough Federal policy will be required. To date the Federal policy seems more designed to entrap adherents or "constituents" of the housing program.

3. There should be a Federal policy (or plan) on the national distribution of urban population. We should not allow our whole nation to grow helter-skelter. Surely it would be to the national advantage to have a wider distribution of urban population and not to concentrate so much of it in so few localities. This can be brought about by Federal influence on defense contracts, on depreciation schedules for industry, and by Federal inducements such as are provided in the "depressed areas" legislation. Here again, Washington, D. C. provides a good example. Virtually all of Washington's problems come from the simple fact that it has been allowed to become too large. An easy and inexpensive solution would be massive decentralization of Federal employment which the Federal Government could do - if it wanted to.

4. The Federal highway and transportation programs must be integrated with urban planning and not considered as isolated activities.

5. There must be control over all Federal activities affecting the physical structure of urban areas, such control to require them to conform with a comprehensive plan for the optimum development of the area. These would include projects of such agencies as the General Services Administration, Post Office, the Defense Department and others building within the urban area. Further, there should be some interrelationship with the Interstate Commerce Commission to bring about badly needed simplification and coordination of railroad facilities in urban areas as well as similar action with the Federal Aviation Agency on the location and development of airports. If there is Federal aid to education, school buildings receiving such aid should be required to be built in accordance with comprehensive plans also.

6. There should be a better operation and control of Federal cities. These should be examples for other communities whether they are large such as Washington or quite small such as Las Alamos.

7. Finally, there is the need for a continuation on a systematic basis of the Federal Aid for Housing, Urban Renewal and Open Space, but with greatly improved design and streamlined procedures.

To take the miscellany of activities currently under the Housing and Home Finance Agency and dignify them with a Cabinet post and a little greater status isn't going to be of much help to our cities.
It just paints the door they have to knock on a brighter color. It does not constitute a single step toward a better urban environment. However, if a Cabinet post is established and the activities assigned to it are expanded to include the highway program, policy direction over economic activities that affect distribution of urban centers, if other Federal activities are required to conform to city plans approved by the Secretary of Urban Affairs, and if such a department is given the responsibility for Federal cities to develop as examples, then such a proposal would really do something for our cities and would attract sufficient support to bring it about.

I don't think that anything much was defeated when the present proposal went down. It was pitifully inadequate in relation to the job to be done.

Yours sincerely,

EHL/df