



Regional Plan Association

... a research and planning agency supported by voluntary membership to promote the coordinated development of the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Metropolitan Region.

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REGIONAL PLANNER URGES BANKERS: ADOPT A CITY

Following is a summary of a speech to be delivered by William B. Shore, Vice-President, Public Affairs, Regional Plan Association, to the Urban Affairs Conference of the New York State Bankers Association, Tuesday morning, April 16, 1974 in Syracuse, New York

In urban areas all over New York State--indeed, all over the nation-- we are meeting ourselves coming around the corner:

- millions for renewal, but not one other policy to support it;
- no to more expressways, but more cars being driven;
- yes to transit, but everything is too far apart to ride together;
- a howl about welfare rolls, but hundreds of thousands who would work but can't find any;
- a desperate shortage of adequate housing but our own governments tell builders they cannot supply the only kind more people can afford;
- no to electric plants, but constant rise in per capita electric use;
- clinging to home rule, though it no longer means each community planning for itself but rather communities planning for each other.

Regional Plan Association confronted the 20 million people of the New York Urban Region with these contradictions in CHOICES FOR '76 last spring.

We gave them the information needed to wrestle with the options presented on every TV station--five one-hour shows carried over a Saturday-Sunday-Monday period. Average of 600,000 households saw each one. All newspapers publicized CHOICES. Discussion groups were organized--more than 20,000 took part in them. Ballots came from 26,500, on the average, each week-end.

Those who took part called for a different kind of Region than we are building--anywhere in the State or nation. For the past quarter century, we have been building spread city. Spread city is a new urban pattern, born of widespread auto ownership, greatly stimulated by in-migration of unskilled into the cities. The pattern turns our urban areas inside out--scattering the major facilities around the edges instead of concentrating them in the centers. Housing is spread all around; the central cities slowly decline in population and in jobs and rapidly decline in income. The spread city pattern is comfortable--everything is built to the automobile; no one is thrown together with others. It is quick to build--little coordination is needed; it is quick to renew--little is built to last, anyhow.

Nevertheless, CHOICES respondents--like others who have discussed these issues with Regional Plan over the past decade--called for a return to centers and communities:

For social reasons--to keep educational and job opportunities within reach of lower-income families confined to the cities (more households had no autos in 1970 than in 1960); to keep the best services and shopping near not only the poor but the old who also are confined to cities because only in a downtown can one travel in every direction by transit. Also, to keep society together, at least eight hours a day.

For efficiency reasons in an energy-short world--centers of activity result in shorter average trips to work and many more of those trips via transit and walking. Face-to-face relations throughout the day are more efficient.

For more urbanity--people tend to do more when activities are at their doorstep, particularly continuing education and the arts.

For better ecology and higher aesthetics--because spread city is inherently ugly and wasteful of land. Though corporate headquarters on suburban campuses are handsome, the smaller shops and services that must line the highway, because it's the only place we come together in spread city, must shout their wares so we see them at 50 miles per hour. Furthermore, much more open land is urbanized than is necessary--so saving the cities will save the countryside.

For real community--created by focusing activities people do together in the center of population. People have a place they share in common; by contrast, spread city is just a piece of real estate.

But if centers-and-communities is such a good pattern and most people prefer it to spread city, why aren't we building that way? Because each individual government agency, corporation and individual, looking only at his own immediate needs, inevitably chooses spread city. You know why: poverty and crime in the older cities, a less-educated work force for a white collar economy, poor environmental quality, poor transportation. And every decline in the cities' attractiveness means more outmovement of just the people and activities the cities need to remain magnets. Is it impossible to reverse the cycle? It must not be--consider the alternative.

In the New York Region, some steps back to centers-and-communities are being made. Downtown Brooklyn, Jamaica, White Plains, Poughkeepsie (in the New York State sector) are rebuilding, adding to their magnetism. (In the other states of the Region, Stamford, Bridgeport and New Haven, Paterson and Trenton

also are making some progress.) But it is not enough. One firm--like GTE choosing downtown Stamford instead of an office campus for its headquarters--cannot turn the trend around. Only many firms acting together can--along with new policies by the states and federal government. The states can do a great deal--but they are offering no leadership.

The energy shortage may help. Cities use much less energy, mainly because of less mechanical travel. More important, the new fear of some employers that they will be caught in a gasoline shortage on an isolated campus 15 miles from the nearest housing their employees can afford may provide the kind of limits on options that will guide everyone to act together to locate downtown. It may make us do what we would prefer doing but can only do successfully if we act together.

Even if helped by adversity, we need a more formal effort. Our chairman, Morris D. Crawford, Jr., Chairman of The Bowery Savings Bank, called such an effort: "Adopt a City." He called recently for a half-dozen corporations to adopt each of the Region's older cities, put their back-office personnel there, invest there, work with the local government and civic groups to improve social, educational and physical conditions there. And use their political clout to turn state and federal policies in support.

Bankers are economic leaders. They are the links that hold the whole economy together. They tend to look at the community much more than do other businessmen. They are the natural leaders to launch an "adopt a city" program throughout this State.