



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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New York, New York 10017

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NEWS RELEASE

No. 1274
October 30, 1975

For Information Call:

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FOR RELEASE:

Sunday, A.M.
November 2, 1975

REGIONAL PLAN OPPOSES CITY CHARTER CHANGES RELATED TO PLANNING

Regional Plan Association today announced opposition to all aspects of the proposed City charter revisions that deal with City planning, principally contained in Amendment 4 but interspersed also into Amendments 5, 6 and 9 and related to Amendment 1, which go beyond planning issues.

The Association is not commenting on the other amendment proposals but did state that today's fiscal situation is wrong for considering the kind of charter changes proposed. Furthermore, the Association observed, charter changes of this complexity should be considered publicly for at least a full year, not just during two months of the active civic season that begins with Labor Day.

Looking at the planning provisions, Regional Plan President John P. Keith noted:

"The changes aim at strengthening the planning role of community planning boards and borough presidents. That's fine. But local groups can plan effectively only if they have a Citywide framework of planning principles within which to look at their own part of the City. And the proposed charter revision specifically discourages such an overall set of principles.

"There is no question that some decisions should be made by local communities and boroughs, but that can be done under the present charter," Dr. Keith observed.

"At the same time, there is no question that some decisions affect the whole City and cannot be made by a local group on the basis of their own needs. Perhaps the best example of that was the scrapping of the plan for the Lower Manhattan Expressway because a small and rapidly dwindling neighborhood did not want it. Regional Plan pointed out at the time that some 250,000 blue collar jobs would be jeopardized. Sure enough, these jobs have been leaving the City rapidly, in part due to inadequate truck access.

"The complicated planning process outlined in the charter proposal could only work if there were a clear set of City planning principles alongside of which to test the numerous plans which could come from any number of sources," Dr. Keith continued.

"Further, the staff requirements would be increased, while the City is necessarily cutting back staff. And the increased staff would be required even though the issues to be dealt with may not justify the extensive notifications, hearings and approvals called for.

"Regional Plan proposes that the aim of decentralizing planning be carried out administratively or by ordinance under the present charter. Particularly since we are only experimenting with decentralization and it doesn't always work, we should have flexibility right now--not have to go back to the people to vote us out of administrative entanglements if decentralization proves ineffective or too costly."

The Association also opposed the idea of requiring by charter what already is done in practice--that the Planning Commission have a member from each borough. "This simply invites commissioners to look on themselves as delegates from their own borough rather than inviting them to take a Citywide point of view," Dr. Keith commented.

"Altogether, these charter changes do not get at--indeed in some ways make worse--at least two of the fundamental faults of today's charter:

1. It is not a basic document but a detailed set of rules that mix administrative regulations, ordinances and fundamental provisions in a complex document that is not drawn for the long term. That is why this time of great administrative flux resulting from the City's financial condition is inappropriate for the kind of provisions advocated in these amendments.

2. The legislative branch remains weak. Even under the proposed changes, a jumble of responsibilities would be shared by the Board of Estimate that does not represent one-person-one-vote and the City Council.

"In sum, the general thrust of these amendments--decentralization--is good in principle but not sufficiently worked out to go into the fundamental charter of the City. Nobody knows whether coterminality (Amendment 5) can work; nobody knows whether the City can afford to provide staff for all the Community Planning Boards to initiate plans; nobody knows whether the available staff can jump through the myriad procedural loops designed into the planning process. And there is no provision for an overall City view within which decentralized planning and administration can work.

"We propose that decentralization be kept as a theme for the administrative reorganization going on now as a result of the State's trusteeship but that it not be placed, inadequately tested, into the Charter."

Regional Plan Association is a civic organization that has worked for an improved urban, suburban and rural environment in the New York-Connecticut-New Jersey Urban Region since the 1920's.

Dr. Keith has served as a consultant on city charters and state constitutions and devised the shared powers home rule formulation adopted by Alaska at statehood and subsequently by a number of states and the Model State Constitution.

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