



# Regional Plan Association

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

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## NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Attached is the statement that Dr. John P. Keith, President of Regional Plan Association, delivered at the 40th Anniversary Conference of the New York City Planning Department at Cooper Union, Thursday, January 18, 1979.

In his remarks Dr. Keith urged the City Planning Commission to provide "long-range and Citywide planning within a regional context," which he found generally absent from the first 40 years.

The remarks were given at a panel discussion in response to the keynote addresses of the opening session.

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Response of  
John P. Keith, President  
Regional Plan Association

to Keynote Speeches  
"Planning the Future of New York City"  
40th Anniversary Conference, New York City Planning Commission

Cooper Union, January 18, 1979

What I might say about New York City's future is not nearly as important as what the City Planning Commission might say. The CPC has as its charter shaping the City. As a representative of an organization that assisted in the birth of the Commission, I personally have watched your progress for exactly half of that life.

In this moment of celebration, I offer the heartiest congratulations, and I extend what is the greatest gift a civic group can bestow on a related government agency: public pressure to fulfill the promise of your role. Your role can be summarized neatly as "long-range and citywide planning within a regional context." We'll be talking about the regional context this afternoon, so for this morning let's concentrate on the "long-range" and "citywide" points.

Paramount is the need to establish long-range concepts--a set of policies--as guidelines for the work of the Commission. Over four decades, the Commission has yet to set forth its vision of the City's future.

When James Felt was Chairman, though, a most significant step was taken in the form of the new zoning ordinance, which lowered the potential population to be accommodated by the City to about 12 million from something like 50 million. Even that "corset" needs to have its strings pulled tighter with the City's population shrinking toward 7 million. Furthermore, the zoning districts established in recent years also call for a re-look at the zoning picture--within a set of policy guidelines.

During the Elliot administration, the Commission worked toward a "Comprehensive Plan." A most magnificent set of background documents defining the City's situation were published. Intermingled were the concepts the Commission had adopted to that date.

In the Zuccotti administration, that comprehensive planning effort was abandoned. That retreat leaves the City today without comprehensive policies for its future development. Under the duress of recessions and tidal changes in the City's employment and population, "incremental planning" has become the Department's by-word. In Midtown, we seem to have a zone for every building these days. The problem is that the "increments" may not add to an effective and socially satisfactory City.

For example, in the Comprehensive Plan, Jamaica was selected as one of three growth centers (Downtown Brooklyn and Fordham Road being the others). The transit planning for Queens involving hundreds of millions of dollars was directed by that decision. But while federal, New York State and City funds were being committed--albeit far too slowly--in conformance with those plans, Rego Park was emerging as the unplanned growth node in Queens. Under considerable pressure, the Commission reaffirmed its Jamaica concept. The point is that without a long-range view, deuces are wild: decisions are ad hoc.

Companion to that point is the need to think in Citywide terms. New York City is really a metropolitan region in scale. Concepts for its change have to be fashioned as regional plans. The City in land area is the size of the urbanized areas of Baltimore and of Miami, and four of our five boroughs are as large or larger in population. Manhattan, however, is such a magnet that it magnetizes even the City planners: witness the lack of a program for the Bronx when President Carter posed the opportunity. Conversely, the responsibilities of the Department are so local in application throughout the boroughs that its staff is consumed by them.

It is understandable in the flow of events to which the Department is pressed to respond that the long-term and comprehensive is driven out by the immediate--a sort of Gresham's law of planning that we all face. The Commission needs to offer the City some answers to these kinds of questions, building toward a comprehensive plan: (1) the

future of the City's waterfront, a priceless and largely wasted asset, (2) where parks should be located taking advantage of cleared and abandoned land uninhibited by the current worry of who will maintain and operate them, (3) the future of the manufacturing districts, for example, of the valley between Midtown and Downtown, (4) the desirable residential density pattern, i.e., where density should be reduced to remedy the mistakes of the turn of the century, where it should rise to relate to rapid transit and activity nodes, and (5) the economy of the City: the effect of communications, the non-profit sector, foreign business and the like.

It is important that the Commission's Chairman be a confidant of the Mayor, as he has been over the last several administrations. But the Chairman needs to bring to the political leadership the special competence of the Commission, viz., the long-range and Citywide perspective. Only the Commission has that unique role in the system. Its role is to represent those who cannot come to the table, and especially the unborn. That requires much more concentration on the formulation of long-range and Citywide guidelines.

Without such guidelines to provide it perspective, the Commission is constantly in danger of being caught up by what is politically convenient today. Armed with a longer and broader perspective, the Commission could act as a counterforce to the trends of the moment. In the 1960's, there was a development over-ebullience; in the 1970's, there has been a sense of the City's collapse. Neither has proven correct. It is the Commission's role to act as a balance. But without its own perspective, drawn from long-range, comprehensive thinking, it too tends to be caught up in the psychology of the moment.

When Dr. Raymond Vernon was conducting the New York Metropolitan Region Study for Regional Plan in the 1950's, he referred to New York City as a "nine-lived cat." Numerous times in its history New York has been seen as dying. The reports of its death in Mark Twain's words always "have been exaggerated." But without a long-range beacon from the City Planning Commission, decisions have swung from unwarranted optimism to unwarranted pessimism.

My birthday present then is to implore the City Planning Commission to tell us what its view of the City's future should be, and we pledge to support you in that process.