Approval of Neighborhood Unit Development Plan Advances Regional Program of Rehabilitation


A striking unanimity of opinion as to the desirability of the neighborhood unit plan of development was voiced by bankers, builders, governmental agencies, and civic organizations at the Planned Neighborhood Development Conference held at the New York Chamber of Commerce on March 28th. The Conference was held under the auspices of the Regional Plan Association, in cooperation with the New Jersey Federation of Official Planning Boards, the New York State Federation of Official Planning Boards and the Connecticut Development Commission.

Planning of mass building construction or reconstruction with the neighborhood as a unit has been the subject of much study and has been described in several Regional Plan publications. A number of activities of local, state and even national scope make it particularly appropriate to emphasize the neighborhood unit pattern at this time. Many civic associations in the City of New York have been active in arousing interest in neighborhood planning. A group of savings banks has organized the West Harlem and East Harlem sections of Manhattan into districts in which lending policies will be applied uniformly. In the most dilapidated district, for example, no new money will be invested in existing buildings. A map showing specific recommendations for lending policies in the East Harlem section is reproduced on page 2.

Legislation was attempted in the last Legislature of New York State in the form of the Urban Redevelopment Corporations bill which passed both branches of the Legislature and was vetoed by the Governor. The committee of the Merchants’ Association which prepared the bill will continue work on this legislation with a view toward its re-introduction at the coming session of the Legislature.

The Chamber of Commerce of the United States at its annual meeting of 1940 went on record urging the formation of well defined neighborhood units in newly developed areas and, for purposes of rehabilitation, in blighted areas.

The National Association of Real Estate Boards, which has been interested for several years in legislation which would facilitate the formation of neighborhood units, has recently sponsored a research and educational agency called the Urban Land Institute. It is concerned with planning, replanning, construction and reconstruction.

Neighborhood development requires the harmony and coordination of many diverse interests, some of which are purely local and some of which are more far-reaching. As in its present stage of development the broader aspects assume major importance the Associ-

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1 See Information Bulletin No. 47, “Community and Neighborhood Planning the Key to Progress in Urban Residential Areas,” November 6, 1939, page 2, footnotes.
atation sought to obtain the coordination of the broader phases by calling this regional conference.

As a result of the approval of the neighborhood plan by the industrial, financial and civic leaders the Board of Directors of the Association later authorized the appointment of a Joint Committee of representatives of the major interests concerned to promote, actively, neighborhood unit planning and development, with special emphasis on implementing suitable demonstration areas for redevelopment purposes.

**IMPORTANCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

While the need and value of the organization of urban areas into neighborhood units are brought out in statements scattered throughout the Conference proceedings, some of the preliminary speeches are significant in breadth of treatment and in indicating the general character of the Conference. Frederick Hasler, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York, in his address of welcome, mentioned the value of looking ahead to avoid repeating mistakes of the past:

"I think it is a perfectly splendid work that you are engaged in. We need more of that.

"I happen to be associated with Trinity Church which, as some of you know, has some real problems in real estate, many of which wouldn't exist today if years ago there had been a Regional Plan Association which could look forward and try in some way to see what the future held for their properties. And who knows that some of the properties, Stuy Harbor and Trinity Church and others on downtown, may not in the next twenty or twenty-five years be residential districts again.

"Now, all those things could happen and they could happen promptly if ladies and gentlemen such as are here today and many that are not here would take the trouble to give time and thought so that they can plan well ahead."

Mr. McAneny, who presided, spoke of the Conference as initiating a new and effective movement in planning. Following are excerpts from his opening address:

"A great many important things have originated in this room (the Great Hall of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York), a great many significant improvements, and I am
inclined to believe that this session today is about to usher in a new movement in concrete, crystallized shape that will bring great good ultimately to the City of New York, and not only to the City but to its surrounding counties which are so well represented in this audience.

"We are going to make a start today, and I want to assure you that we have every purpose in mind of making this a real start along lines some of which have as yet been unbroken, looking toward the proper development of the neighborhood planning idea, with all that it implies. I mean a start leading toward action, both through legislation and the consultation of financial sources; the consultation of municipal authorities, everything that is incidental and necessary to set a really great program in motion.

"When we specify neighborhood planning, we are talking about the reconstruction of old neighborhoods or the building up of new, along neighborhood lines, with groups of present blocks rehabilitated, adapted to new interior street and road systems of their own, protected by new changes in the zoning laws, with their community buildings, the schoolhouse, the library, and other things properly centered, with all of the concomitants of a healthy neighborhood life, with well built and well protected surroundings, that this plan has promised.

"We cannot expect that subsidizing is going to go on indefinitely or that it can go on a great deal longer, unless gradually it begins to disappear together. Therefore, there is greater reason for backing up a plan, a new plan, of development, based upon neighborhoods thrown together for this purpose, and upon all the rules that govern planning in the large. To present such a plan means as well a financial solution, not only a physical improvement but a financial improvement which up to the present time seems to have baffled those who have gone in for modern housing, and therefore for their main dependence upon various forms of subsidy.

"We do want to make this the beginning of something real and something effective . . . to launch what will amount to a new movement, I trust, in planning, and one of the most promising."

The importance of the neighborhood unit in stabilizing values and creating pleasant places in which to live on a sound economic basis, was stressed by Edward J. Mathews, Chairman of the Neighborhood Planning Committee of the Association. This committee cooperated with the staff of the Association in arranging the Conference. Among other things Mr. Mathews stated:

"Basically, the neighborhood unit is a concentration of a given population within an urban or suburban area for which home planning is executed, either by their own volition or legislation, with the idea of giving the residents within that population all the possible amenities that would be expected to occur within the life of the community.

"I think most of us will agree that the areas that are reconstructed along neighborhood lines will certainly be healthier and pleasanter places to live in. I am sure they would be healthier places for taxation, and I think property within such areas would be placed on a good deal sounder footing as far as the elimination of the possibility of deterioration within those sections is concerned."

Tri-state Interest

Speakers representing important planning and development agencies of the states of Connecticut, New Jersey and New York indicated a broad interest in the movement. Harry Hoskins, President of the New Jersey Federation of Official Planning Boards, pointed out that the group he represented had been promoting the formation of local civic associations which would be the means of implementing the neighborhood unit plan:

"The New Jersey Federation takes great pleasure in cooperating with the Regional Plan in the sponsoring of the neighborhood conference. We believe that there will be erected today a milestone in the progress of planning in this country.

"The planning board of one of our communities has gone so far as to anticipate the working out of the neighborhood unit principle on a broad basis and is sponsoring the creation of civic associations in various localities, which associations will eventually be the nuclei about which neighborhood unit organizations might be established."

J. Franklin Bonner, President of the New York Federation of Official Planning Boards, described the development named "Home Acres" in the Town of Brighton just outside of Rochester as a successful project which exemplified the practicability of the neighborhood unit arrangement. He pointed out that a high standard of home ownership has been maintained in this district and there have been no tax foreclosures.

"One of the most effective devices which has been developed for better community organization and operation is the neighborhood unit program.

"I believe that the idea of the neighborhood unit is practical and rationally applied will go far toward solving some of our social and economic problems."

Charles E. Rolfe, Chairman of the Connecticut Development Commission, in his message to the Conference indicated that his commission was primarily interested at the moment in the industrial welfare of the state. The members, however, were aware of the fact that the building of the community must proceed in an orderly fashion so that the manufacturer would not be handicapped by lack of public facilities:

"Coming back again to the value of the neighborhood unit, Governor Baldwin has urged the Fairfield County Planning Association to go more into financial planning with such in mind, and I have urged that industrialists give more thoughtful consideration to the planning and development of communities, pointing out that taxation studies made not only in Connecticut but elsewhere in the United States revealed that the bulk of local taxes fall directly on the manufacturer and that whereas a manufacturer strives for efficiency of his plant, rather, 100 per cent efficiency of his plant, he is often stalemated because the facilities of the town or city in which that plant is located have not been properly planned."

PRINCIPLES OF NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT

The definition and exposition of the principles governing general neighborhood design were presented by Clarence A. Perry, who has been working on the neighborhood concept for many years and is largely responsible for its formulation.

In introducing him, Mr. McNaney recalled that the Russell Sage Foundation had made, over a period of several years, an expenditure of something like $1,300,000 in the preparation of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs and has since been a consistent contributor to the financial support of the Regional Plan Association which later assumed the responsibility in promoting the realization of the Plan.

The financing of the Regional Plan represents an interpretation of the wishes of the late Mrs. Russell Sage who in establishing the Foundation through her will
provided that the annual income should be devoted to the improvement of living conditions, a large part of the same to be used in New York City.

Beyond the making of the Plan and support of the Association, the Foundation made possible additional study of the neighborhood planning idea and for a long time has had Mr. Perry engaged in its development, a recent evidence of his work being found in the publication of his book on "Housing for the Machine Age."

**Characteristic Features**

The six characteristic features that a neighborhood should have were listed by Mr. Perry as follows:

1. **Size.**—Since the area of a unit varies with both the standards of the local school board and with the density of the population there is a considerable range in the sizes that are practicable. Neighborhood unit designs are suggested ranging from 14 to 160 acres. While a school is a necessary feature of a unit, it may be a private instead of a public school.

2. **Boundaries.**—The wide arterial streets make the limits of the neighborhood stand out distinctly and also facilitate the bypassing of the district by traffic that has no destination within it.

3. **Open Space.**—By laying out playgrounds and parks at the time the highways are being planned it is possible to gain ample open spaces with little or no cost to the development. Economies in street areas, when narrow internal highways are planned, will cover most of this cost while a few inches taken from each lot will easily cover the rest. The amount of open space that should be provided ranges from 10 per cent in single family developments to 20, 25 or even 30 per cent in high apartment house units.

4. **Institution Sites.**—Central locations should be reserved for only those institutions whose service areas coincide with the boundaries of the unit. A church whose parish extends into other neighborhoods may be allowed to locate in or near the periphery of the unit.

5. **Local Shops.**—Since the final total population of the unit will always be calculable, it becomes possible to zone the district accurately for retail business. Stores should not be allowed to locate in a central part of the unit. Such a course invites a lot of trucks into the unit with all the noise and peril to pedestrians. The best business locations are in the periphery, at the points where residents tend to leave and enter the unit; such a disposition often brings them across the street from similar shops in the adjacent neighborhood, which is a fortunate arrangement for shopper and storekeeper.

6. **Internal Streets.**—These should be functional in direction and proportioned in width according to prospective traffic loads. In general, the interior street systems should be such as to facilitate the circulation of residents and at the same time discourage the penetration of the district by foreign through traffic.

**The School District**

Mr. Perry made a strong case for having the neighborhood unit boundary coincide with that of a school district. It would be highly desirable for economic as well as social reasons:

"A business man with a home in the country and an apartment on Park Avenue may find it difficult to understand why a replanning formula requires the school district specification. Let me suggest an answer. Any such formula needs a basis for size. You cannot successfully plan service areas unless you are sure of having the area they need. The school is satisfactory from that standpoint and it is flexible, varying with density. Including it in our scheme ensures also that we are doing something to increase the safety of children upon the streets. But there is another important reason.

"The public school system is vast and costly. Every taxpayer is directly affected by the efficiency with which it is run. But I wonder how many of us ever think of the difficulties under which the board of education struggles in trying to locate schools. Let me quote a short paragraph from the 1934-1935 Report of the New York City Superintendent of Schools:

'We have had in our schools for some years more seats than children but the difficulty is that the children and the seats are not in the same place. Our population shifts from one locality to another in a manner that is little short of amazing to anyone who has not made a study of the figures, and while we have been abandoning schools in one part of the City for lack of pupils, we have had to erect many new schools in other parts of the City to accommodate newcomers to new communities. No matter how carefully we have planned for the future by buying school sites in anticipation of future need and taking other measures in advance to insure properly located school facilities, we have not been able to keep abreast of population changes.'

"Can any taxpayer take in the full economic significance of that statement without losing a beat in his pulse? See what it means to families which have children in the schools! When the newspaper tells of a near riot among parents because their children have been transferred to a more distant school, we can understand better what has been happening."

If the proposed neighborhood unit procedure were put into effect, each new school would be located and its service area demarcated by the City Planning Commission. Since the density of the district would be determined by the Commission, there would be no fear of burdening adjacent areas or of not having sufficient seats for the ultimate population of the district being opened up."

**Other Advantages**

Convenience would be one of the major gains of a neighborhood set up:

"Thus it is recognized that a piano store, grand opera house, stadium, museum, railway terminal, dock district—to mention only a few examples—all have a city-wide field of service. On the other hand, an elementary school, drug store, grocery, beauty shop, branch library, community church, small parks and children's playgrounds—all have a neighborhood service radius and these institutions should be easily accessible to all the residents of the district because they make a daily, or almost daily use of them."

Safety was stressed as another important contribution of the neighborhood. With the through traffic discouraged from using interior streets and provided for on the perimeter there would be a large measure of safety particularly for school children.

The formula proposed is merely a skeleton of a neighborhood which may be developed in many different ways to secure the variety that is desirable.

**ENDORSEMENT OF PROPERTY AND FINANCIAL INTERESTS**

The Conference committee representing property and financial interests, endorsed through their spokesman, Henry Bruère, the planned neighborhood as a means of creating, protecting and maintaining property values in the central areas of cities. Mr. Bruère stated that economic development of small plots in already

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1 Henry Bruère, Spokesman, President, Bowery Savings Bank; Robert H. Armstrong, President, New York Chamber, National Association of Real Estate Boards; J. Kingsley Powell, former Chairman, New Jersey Mortgage Conference; and Fred G. Stickel, Jr., former President, New Jersey Building and Loan League.
blighted areas is not generally feasible, making large-scale rehabilitation such as is involved in the neighborhood unit plan the only way out.

Since the neighborhood unit provides safety of investment and adequate return, stability of economic and social values and the amenities for pleasant and profitable living, it should be considered a public improvement. With adequate safeguards the power of eminent domain should be made available in site assembly.

The speaker indicated further that the plan would stimulate property ownership and increase the income of the city through the tax levy. The greatest opportunity, he felt, was the possibility of coordination of efforts and resources through a practical method of procedure for a comprehensive long time program of protection and development. Before lending institutions could tell how far they would go in support of the plan he was of the opinion that it should be developed further, preferably in connection with an actual demonstration project.

Demonstration Project

Under the heading of suggestions for further procedure Mr. Bruère stated:

"An actual experiment in working out reconstruction according to the neighborhood unit plan is much needed before the subject can be realistically developed. We urge that one or more 'demonstration areas' be selected as soon as possible for the technical study which is so needed. The selection of a blighted area where important public funds have recently been expended may be most advisable, as it will be in such areas that local government may be most interested to cooperate with private enterprise in order that taxpayers' funds may serve to stimulate taxpaying developments.

"As a new form of cooperation is needed between private enterprise and local governmental agencies, particularly city planning and tax offices, we believe that a joint working committee should be formed locally. This committee would supervise the planning of 'demonstration areas' and develop standards of design and procedure which would be acceptable to governmental as well as private enterprise groups. Composing such a committee would be representatives of tax and city planning offices, other public agencies interested locally, as well as representatives of institutions and private initiative groups.'

CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The committee representing the construction industry was particularly concerned with how the neighborhood unit method of development could be utilized by the construction industry to provide a continuing market for large-scale construction. Harvey Wiley Corbett reported for this committee at the Conference.

"Accepting the principles of the neighborhood unit this committee believes that the method given opens up a large and permanent market for all the elements in the construction industry.

"It would bring the building progress in this country nearer the record that has been made in England, where it is said that 'Britain has built herself out of the depression.' One Englishman, Sir Harold Bellman of the English Building Society, said, 'I wonder when the American genius for mass production is going to start in the housing field. There is no reason why you should not achieve in this country a success even greater than our own.'

"It is important that building laws and codes be modified and remodeled in keeping with neighborhood unit ideas in order that the building industry may function effectively and profitably in its realization of this plan, particularly as it affects the use of new forms of material. This requires the wise handling of the manufacturers, dealers, political and labor interests in order that they may appreciate the advantages that would accrue to them from this method of development, considered from the viewpoint of an enlightened selfish interest.'

Further Procedure

The committee suggested that the following activities be undertaken in order that the construction industry may reap the largest possible benefits from the neighborhood unit plan of development:

1. Define the principles and methods necessary in implementing a neighborhood unit development for legal and financing purposes.
2. Support the Urban Redevelopment Corporations bill and appoint a special committee to study this and other legislation necessary for the advancement of the neighborhood unit plan.
3. Determine how far special government offices will go in making concessions to private enterprise for neighborhood unit development in such matters as street closing, playgrounds, etc.
4. Provide a clear statement of the cooperation of the various agencies within the building industry and the unification of these agencies, and provide the facilities whereby the building industry can cooperate with the other agencies interested in the neighborhood unit plan.
5. Bring about cooperation between private enterprise and the government in the construction field.
6. Arrange for further meetings, educational and publicity programs and printed material to inform the agencies particularly interested and the public at large about the advantages and opportunities of this method of development.
7. Support local planning and zoning boards and ordinances.
8. Encourage local building interests to work for the neighborhood unit plan of development.
9. Assist in the selection of areas for carrying on sample demonstrations of the neighborhood unit plan.
10. Endorse the use of the power of eminent domain for implementing a neighborhood unit plan because it constitutes a public improvement.

GOVERNMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Wayne D. Heydecker, reporting for the group considering governmental relationships, presented the following conclusions:

1. The neighborhood unit idea, put forward originally in the publications of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environments, has had wide acceptance among those in the planning and housing field, who have had the opportunity to study it.
2. The neighborhood unit principle is capable of application in two principal fields, namely: in open relatively undeveloped territory, and in developed territory where obsolescence or blight makes reconstruction, in whole or in part, imperative.
3. With respect to the open areas, it is clear that the governmental relationship involved is with the planning board because in the New York and New Jersey statutes planning boards, in passing upon subdivision plats and in making zoning changes simultaneously with the approval of such plats, may give direction and encouragement to the development.

1 Harvey Wiley Corbett, Spokesman, Architect; Roland J. Hamilton, Secretary and Treasurer, American Radiator & Standard Sanitary Corporation; Thomas S. Helden, President, New York Building Congress.

2 Wayne D. Heydecker, Spokesman, Regional Representative, Council of State Governments; Charles P. Merriick, Chairman, New Jersey State Planning Board; Lawrence M. Orten, New York City Planning Commission.
processes. Now that may be so. That sounds good. In other words, they would rather ride in automobiles than get their heads under the hood, to see what was the matter, why they didn't go.

"But when you get down to the neighborhood you get down to people's own interest, and we will be very much more likely to arouse people to get some fervor in them, some enthusiasm in them, some response in them, some willingness to cooperate, if we talk about their street, their neighborhood, things that happen all around them."

Legislation

Any further program that expects concrete results must include promotion of legislation that will facilitate planned neighborhood developments. At the Conference the Urban Redevelopment Corporations bill was described by Thomas S. Holden which would provide an economic method of site assembly through the powers of condemnation. In vetoing it subsequent to the Conference the Governor, who approved its general purpose, felt that it had certain imperfections which should be corrected.

This proposed legislation was drafted by the Slum Redevelopment Committee of the Merchants' Association of New York, of which Mr. Holden is chairman. The report of that committee described the basic principles of the bill as follows:

"The underlying philosophy of the bill is the creation of business opportunities in a field where they do not now exist, by setting up a limited partnership between a redevelopment corporation and the municipality, by extending special privileges and providing compensation therefor, by stimulating redevelopments sufficiently large in scale to permit economic management and reconstruction, by giving a majority of those at present interested as owners or mortgagees a chance to improve the value of their holdings, by encouraging long-term investment with the prospect of operating profits and a reasonable chance of equity appreciation as the incentives, rather than quick speculative profits, and by assisting the city toward achievement of replanning with neighborhood replanning as the unit operation."

In addition to perfecting this legislation in New York State the continuing program could include similar laws for New Jersey and perhaps Connecticut. A strong case can be made for the neighborhood unit as a public improvement and therefore justifying the use of eminent domain. By incorporating in the state legislation requirements which would guarantee that residential developments would take the form of neighborhood units, much of the objection to the previously attempted legislation would be met. This would necessitate the definition of neighborhood design standards.

Standards of Design

While the principles of the neighborhood unit concept are well defined and generally accepted the method of implementing them requires further study. Some of them, such as minimum area to be considered and minimum public neighborhood facilities to be included, might be incorporated in the state legislation. Others, such as maximum densities and zoning, might be incorporated in municipal ordinances or implemented through city planning commissions. Both legislation and standards of design would be organized on a sounder basis if, at the same time and in connection with their formulation, one or more demonstration projects could be planned and built.

Demonstration Areas

Financing neighborhood redevelopments on a scale commensurate with the need and sufficient to make possible effective large scale production will not be feasible until at least one project has been carried through to a successful end. Some of the design features of public housing projects have pointed in the right direction. An idea of the economics may be gained from private ventures, particularly the Parkchester development of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in The Bronx. But the average loan institution requires more concrete evidence of the practicability of the neighborhood unit. Great importance is therefore attached to the planning and construction of a demonstration neighborhood in the program for the future.

Looking toward the realization of a demonstration project, the immediate program of the Association includes working with the Joint Committee and also separate studies by the staff. In addition to arranging for publicity and possible meetings, suggestions would be made to the Joint Committee for a review of the Urban Redevelopment Corporations bill, now being revised by the Merchants' Association's Committee for submission to next year's Legislature, study of any related legislation and the selection of demonstration areas for application of the bill and of neighborhood unit principles.

The staff would make a study of standards of design and methods of implementing them, as described above. The program also includes the preparation of a sectional plan showing how a district of Manhattan, such as the East Harlem area, may be divided into neighborhood units.