AT THE CROSSROADS

A New Policy Proposed for Metropolitan Development
INTRODUCTION

On May 18, 1948, I had the pleasure of introducing Paul Windels as principal speaker at the Mayors Luncheon session of the National Citizens Conference on Planning sponsored by the American Planning and Civic Association. Mr. Windels’ address is of historic importance because of its far-reaching implications and forthright presentation of a policy for practical solution of serious problems of congestion confronting metropolitan areas of the nation.

As a means of handling the new growth coming to our particular metropolitan area, Mr. Windels urges the careful expansion of small communities, the development of new centers and the redevelopment of old centers.

Newark, dating from 1666, is an old center. Its land areas are practically all developed. From now on Newark must grow in quality rather than in mere quantity of development. The question which Mr. Windels puts squarely before all central metropolitan cities is where does desirable concentration of development end and over-congestion begin? What is quality and what mere quantity?

Our Central Planning Board is prepared to answer that question for Newark. We have a master plan of development and redevelopment for our business, industrial and residential areas. Every community, large or small, in the metropolitan region of which Newark is the hub on the west and New York City the center on the east should look to its future in the light of Mr. Windels’ remarks. For, if we do not decide what our municipal future is to be, the future will take that decision into its own hands.

I recommend careful reading of Mr. Windels’ important statement by all who have a stake in the future of the community in which they live.

VINCENT J. MURPHY
Mayor of Newark

June 1, 1948.
THE METROPOLITAN REGION AT THE CROSSROADS

By PAUL WINDELS
President, Regional Plan Association

(An address at the National Citizens Conference on Planning, Newark, N. J., May 18, 1948)

The New York Metropolitan Region includes the five counties of New York City and the 17 counties which surround it — of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut — in all, about 7,500 square miles. Contained within it are over 500 separate units of local government serving a population of 13,500,000 persons of whom approximately 7,800,000 live in New York City and 5,700,000 in the 17 adjoining counties.

New People — New Growth

We estimate that by 1970 there will be an increase in population of the entire region of some 2,000,000 people.

Because of the decreasing size of the average family, it requires more housing units than heretofore to accommodate a given number of people.

To provide for the expected increase in number of family units, we shall need by 1970 a total of 1,100,000 additional living units in the City and the 17 counties surrounding it.

This population increase with its 1,100,000 additional living units and related business, industrial, recreational and institutional facilities, will be equivalent to the creation, within this metropolitan region, of 80 new municipalities of the present size of Stamford, Conn., White Plains, N. Y., or Montclair, N. J., — more than 500 square miles of new development, all within the next 25 years.

This will give you a picture of the magnitude of the problems of expansion with which we are confronted here in the New York region, and what I shall say will have application to other metropolitan areas throughout the nation. In them now live almost half of the nation’s population. They have increased two and one-half times in population since the turn of the century.

Are We Prepared?

Recently Mr. F. J. Osborn of England, a very distinguished friend and an international leader in the field of regional and city planning, came to visit us and to see what was going on in this country. On the eve of his return to his home he addressed the members of the Regional Plan Association. He made some informal but very interesting observations on the state of urban and regional planning in this country, pointing out that sometimes in the field of human endeavor such as the one we are interested in, advocates of progress have to go along for many years with apparently little to show for their efforts. Then, for one reason or another, the political or social climate changes and by a combination of circumstances or events, the door of opportunity is suddenly opened and it becomes possible to make notable progress.

Mr. Osborn said that had been the experience of city and regional planners in England and he wondered, if the same situation were to arise in this country, whether we would be ready for it. It was his observation that the public’s interest in abstract ideas is limited and to be ready to seize opportunities if and when they come, our thinking must be advanced to the point where we know what we are aiming at and have fairly definite ideas to propose.

Must we not confess that there is a good deal of truth in this comment. Let us consider it in its application to this area and ask ourselves what we would do if there were suddenly placed at our disposal the means to effectuate comprehensive regional planning here. What are the conditions with which we are here confronted?

The process of urban growth continues. How long and how far it will grow and spread, we do not know, but we believe our estimate of a total increase of 2,000,000 persons in this region in the next quarter century is reasonable.

Today’s Trends

What are the dominant characteristics of this growth? We have first, the centers or cores of the area: New York City, Newark and a half dozen smaller but substantial municipalities. In them all we find a trend from the center of the city either toward its periphery or out of the city. People are steadily moving farther away from the central places of employment. A striking illustration of this is the fact that whereas in the 15 year period (1925–1940) population in the area increased 26%, the built up area increased 56%.

1,100,000 ADDITIONAL FAMILIES
MUST BE ACCOMMODATED IN THE NEW YORK REGION BY 1970

REGIONAL PLAN ASSOCIATION, INC. NEW JERSEY—NEW YORK—CONNECTICUT METROPOLITAN REGION
want more residential space to move around in.

The simple truth is the centers of cities are becoming outmoded for residential purposes. It is not yet economically practicable to modernize them without vast public subsidies and the population simply drifts away, but the major part of it comes back to the centers for employment.

So that the chief characteristic of our present day trend is the constantly increasing distance between places of residence and places of employment and recreation. This means an enormous amount of travel for this single reason, congesting our railroads and our city transportation systems, increasing tremendously the number of bus lines and making travel on our arterial vehicular highways at times almost an impossibility. Within this region our combined means of transportation bring daily more than four million people from outlying areas to central points for work or recreation.

**Increasing Commutation**

We estimate an increase in our commuter population to and from New York City, if present trends continue, of 70,000 additional daily travelers by 1970 which means approximately 70 more commuter trains twice a day. How they can be provided for in view of existing congestion, nobody yet knows. It is also estimated that by 1960 our automobile traffic may be double that of today and nobody knows where the money is coming from to double our highway and parking facilities.

Obviously this increase in daily travel cannot go on forever at the accelerating rates of the past years. We cannot keep on forever creating more and more facilities for the mounting tidal wave of population surging toward the few regional centers in the morning and out again at night. There must be some limit to the financial ability of states and municipalities to increase transportation and vehicular facilities to meet the needs not only of more people, but of longer journeys by people as a daily routine. As a matter of sheer physical and financial necessity, part of the solution of our traffic and transportation problem will have to be found in avoiding much of the increase of travel by better organization of the region.

The problem is not necessarily one of mere numbers of people. It is primarily due to the basically wrong design of our metropolitan area and the way in which the comings and goings of the population are organized.

**Urban Sprawl**

What happens when cities grow? Invariably their population spreads out over the surrounding terrain like a solid flow of lava. They are mere formless sprawls. There is no direction to their growth. They simply spread in every direction and, in their progress, overwhelm everything that lies in their paths with a type of intensive and continuous development basically resembling the older parts of the city.

In the areas surrounding such cities are found many small, attractive towns and villages, each with its own
clearly defined boundaries, traditions and interests where at least some degree of local, intimate community life is maintained.

As the overwhelming mass of city population moves toward each of these and over it, it is enveloped and absorbed and ultimately becomes another indistinguishable part of the great metropolitan sprawl. Soon its attractive old homes become rooming houses and funeral parlors, its streets gasoline alleys for through traffic. The old city pattern is perpetuated and extended creating an increasing number of urban wanderers, on the move, seeking places less obsolete, but ever more remote, in which to live. Every person here can recall in his own metropolitan area, small communities which have had that fate.

With that type of urban sprawl and the disappearance of these smaller distinctive communities into the conglomerate urban mass, come the problems, human, political, social and financial, which plague us today and will press on us with increasing weight unless we control and correct them. In these surroundings of the formless mass development of metropolitan regions arise the anti-social mass emotions which sweep such areas. There is little in them of human scale and participation that people can cling to and build their lives on. They need living conditions based less on anonymity and more on intimate community life and association to rekindle a sense of individual dignity and significance and social responsibility.

Basic Alternatives

Now it is evident that provision will have to be made for the growth which we face. What shall it be? Shall we let population continue to spread aimlessly as it has, repeating in new areas all of the mistakes of the past, letting congestion pile on congestion and confusion on confusion, until the whole system breaks down, either through impossible crowding or municipal bankruptcy? Or shall we try to channel this growth of population into a more human and better coordinated pattern?

The New York metropolitan area is today at the crossroads. This may be the best, it may also be the last opportunity for an effective decision as to our future. Building, held back for years because of depression, war and inflation, is now under way. New development will either help to achieve the better metropolitan region, or it will make it more difficult, even impossible to attain.

Is this metropolitan region to become finally and permanently a massive and monolithic structure keyed largely to a few centers with a daily ebb and flow of millions of people to those relatively small areas? Or is it to develop as a metropolitan region of many centers of housing, trade, industry and recreation, each clearly defined with its own distinctive identity with people living closer to places of work and possessing greater opportunities for intimate participation in home community life?
Surely, if we allow the growth of the next quarter century to directly attach itself to the huge agglomeration we now have, our problems of congestion, traffic, parking, transportation, municipal services and recreational facilities will be intensified beyond our ability to solve—at least at any cost we would be able or willing to meet.

We Must Choose

In sheer financial self-defense, and even more important, for more desirable living conditions, we must channel and guide this new growth in such a manner that we create many new regional centers instead of piling up our growth around a few centers.

From all our study of this problem, we in the Regional Plan Association know that the additional growth takes place continually on the outskirts of previously built-up areas. The continuation of this trend is actually in force in the building now under way.

This continuous spread and sprawl of the city over the countryside should not be accepted as inevitable—it is not inevitable unless we will it or by our default, tolerate it.

In the London metropolitan area they propose to meet this threat but by methods which to us seem arbitrary. Certainly we would not be prepared in this country, to favor the execution of metropolitan planning by having government appropriate all development rights in all land. We still believe in private initiative and the free enterprise system.

What we can do is to agree on some fundamental principles and broad objectives and then use such public and private instrumentalities as are available to us or within the reasonable range of governmental authority and move toward the achievement of those ends.

Policy Recommendation

The specific point I am making is that as against disorganized sprawl of the City of New York, the City of Newark, Paterson, Stamford, White Plains, or any other municipality within this region as a method of accommodating its growth, overwhelming and absorbing the small towns in their orbit, first, that we deliberately set about to preserve the essential identity and character of these small towns. Second: that we channel a major part of the region's growth toward a much larger number of centers. Third: that we deliberately design and create entirely new and distinctive self-sufficient communities for the purpose of accommodating a substantial part of our regional growth.

This last may sound like a radical proposal, impossible of accomplishment but there is nothing radical or impossible about it. It has heretofore been done and is being done now by the development of large scale private residential projects, by building up residential areas around great industries and by relating new industrial plants or business enterprises to new communities.

New Centers

This is not decentralization. It is creating new centers to provide for our future growth. There will always be a tremendous number of people who will want to live in the great cities which will have their purposes and serve particular needs.

But what we must do, instead of concentrating all of the employment of our increased population on, perhaps, only a half dozen centers, is to spread it out and let the increase find its residence and employment in 50 or more intelligently planned and developed centers throughout the region—some of them new towns. This will make for efficiency, economy in operation, reduction of congestion and infinitely pleasant lives for the people.

Old Centers

And we have the problem of our great cities. In New York City alone, 161 1/2 square miles of blighted areas. In the region, a total of 25 square miles of blight. What are we to do with them? Of course we must rebuild them, but today it costs approximately $10,000 a unit and if we were to provide modernized housing for all of the people presently living in these areas, the total cost would be five billion dollars, a substantial part of it an outright subsidy. With land and building costs as they are today, we simply cannot rebuild blighted areas exclusively with private capital and barely with public capital, unless with such concentr-
tions of population per acre in the new housing as to threaten the creation of new blighted areas.

**Neighborhoods**

What we shall have to aim for in the rebuilding of our urban centers, just as in the building of new towns, is clearly defined neighborhood units. Decades ago New York City consisted of many such neighborhood communities with their separate village and town origins.

Our redevelopment has heretofore been entirely by individual projects not yet big enough, except perhaps in one or two cases, to create distinctive neighborhood patterns.

We have been shortsighted in placing all our reliance on housing. People do not live in housing alone. To live normal, wholesome lives they should also live in communities. We have made noticable progress in the development of modernized housing but from now on we must build communities with all the features that make possible a well rounded community life.

**How Can We Do It?**

You may well ask, "assuming we decided to build our new areas and rebuild our older areas along the lines you have suggested, how can we do it? How can we achieve balanced metropolitan development without a drastic curtailment of local municipal autonomy and free enterprise, such as is today being experimented with in England?"

Well, we shall have to work it out in the American way under our American system of government and constitutional powers. We need first a policy and a purpose. To date, there has been no policy of metropolitan development behind state or federal housing and redevelopment legislation.

**Federal Aid**

Every Federal law affecting urban development, and every state housing and redevelopment corporation law, must be tested for its application to orderly metropolitan growth. Statutory policies and aids are required for the encouragement of public and private capital in this field. In this region it is primarily the problem of the States of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

**State Leadership**

I believe the next major development in the field of planning in this metropolitan region will be when the governing authorities in each of our three states have the courage, imagination and foresight to apply, on a larger scale, to the creation of entire towns and communities the procedures we are learning to use in urban redevelopment projects under statutes expressly designed for the wholesale redevelopment of blighted areas within cities. This is a field which calls for state leadership.

We shall have to approach this problem of sane and better organized living in metropolitan areas on a much larger and more comprehensive scale than heretofore. We must raise our sights and make bold and courageous plans for the deliberate and designed creation of well organized, self-sufficient, independent communities providing in them not only for residential needs but all the requirements of a rounded community life including employment.

As a next step I should like to see one of our great insurance companies lend its aid to an enterprise of that size in cooperation with one of the states and one or more industries seeking more favorable location and modernized design and setting within the region.

**Citizen Support**

Unofficial citizens' organizations, such as the Regional Plan Association, have an important role to play in acting as an impartial neutral ground where federal, state, county, local and private representatives meet and work out matters of joint interest affecting regional development.

We must have in the development of our metropolitan areas the kindred and supremely important objectives of the reestablishment of neighborhood life in our cities, the creation of new towns, the preservation of our smaller regional communities and the wider distribution of employment throughout the region.

Along this path lies the hope of a wholesome development of all metropolitan areas.
HOW the Regional Plan Association
CAN HELP YOUR COMMUNITY

THROUGH —

1. Furnishing EXPERIENCE of other communities which have faced similar problems.
2. Supplying FACTS on trends which will affect your community’s development.
3. Suggesting EFFECTIVE PROCEDURES for organizing practical planning in your community.

MEMBERSHIP in the Regional Plan Association gives you the opportunity to secure these services which are based upon 25 years experience in helping communities in the New York — New Jersey — Connecticut Metropolitan Region.

A LETTER will bring further details on general information and specific assistance available through the RPA.

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