

Who Said New York Was Congested?

By LANCASTER M. GREENE

"THERE are 187,999 more [vacant] lots in the city," Andrew W. Mulrain, Commissioner of Sanitation was quoted as saying in the New York Herald Tribune; as he stood ankle deep in garbage in a vacant lot in Brooklyn. The term lots may well be defined for in Manhattan and the Bronx a lot is 25 x 100 feet and in other boroughs 20 x 100 feet, whereas a separately assessed parcel may be several acres in size or a sliver of 500 square feet. Why, asks the startled citizen.

Well, if you go to London or Paris you are likely to see old houses with big front window locations solidly filled in with stone or brick. Why?—because around the middle of the 19th century legislators passed a law placing a tax on windows. On the Isle of Sark there are said to be few chimneys, because, similarly, the government once placed a tax on them.

Thank goodness no one would be that silly in this country!

Oh no? It is true that we have not put taxes on windows or chimneys specifically, but instead we have put taxes on the whole building. As a result of this, owners in every big city have torn down innumerable buildings merely to escape taxes. That of course, explains Commissioner Mulrain's problem with filthy vacant lots. As a temporary solution the Department of Welfare is putting 2,000 of the 350,000 people on relief, to work cleaning up the dirtiest lots. This is part of a program designed to put 21,000 of these persons to work on city-sponsored jobs.

"Dirty lots are a special problem," said Mr. Mulrain. "It's the job of the property owner to maintain them, but many don't."

"Littered lots have a tendency to attract more and more litter . . . They have a bad effect on the whole neighborhood, then bad habits spread to the sidewalks, to the gutters."

The Department of Sanitation has about 2,600 men, and only 1,800 street sweepers can be spared to pick up litter.

"Are New Yorkers co-operating as you try to educate them?" Mr. Mulrain was asked.

"Where the streets, sidewalks and lots are clean people co-operate," he answered. "But where they are dirty, obviously they don't." The department gives out about 85,000 summonses a year in an attempt to "educate" people.

Apparently Commissioner Mulrain as well as most of the citizens, have never realized how many owners would find it worth while to improve their lots if there were no tax on the improvements. Who would keep his location, his opportunity, idle if he could keep the results of his labor and production there? We have a tax on the value of a site to encourage owners to put them to use instead of holding sites idle and preventing producers from opportunity. The tax on improvements, however, negates this encouragement, putting a severe brake on the best use of a location.

The problems in each borough differ. There are 2,935 vacant parcels in Manhattan and 41,455 in Richmond. The vacant land in Richmond in Ward 5 is suitable for market gardens and should be returned to this use. They will not be needed for residence for many years perhaps. Some of the larger parcels in Manhattan are highly desirable for hotels, office buildings or apartments.

The vacant lots cost our power and light companies enormous sums for carrying their lines past them, in order to serve those who

have had to build farther out. The last president of Detroit Edison, Mr. Willard, used to tell Detroiters they could have sharply reduced rates any time they became sensible enough to collect the full rental value of the vacant lots and stopped taxing people for improving their locations. Taking power and gas lines past vacant lots was the biggest item of inflated cost in the operation of this great utility, Mr. Willard told reporters, and could be easily eliminated by a simple change in tax policy.

Prompt and able enforcement of the tax on the value of sites would end the huge tax delinquency of lot owners, who sometimes let the taxes go, hoping the value may rise if a bridge, school or other improvement comes to the neighborhood. The owner may then get enough from a prospective user to pay the taxes and have a neat gain for himself without doing anything except to keep others from using what he is not using. The writer knows one local family who paid no taxes on their large farm in Long Island for about thirty years, except as they sold off lots. It was only recently that the officials enforced the tax law and took the remainder of the "farm."

The difficulty of bringing suits to clear titles that would make lots available to users is another factor in forcing people to go further out to poorer locations. An interesting example of this was afforded in Harrison, New York, when the Larkin Soap Company once bought a large tract and gave deeds to lots as premiums with boxes of soap. By the time the lots became valuable, the heirs of the original owners of the

deeds were hard to find. Suits to clear each separate title cost at least \$400, and took time. Buyers were often unwilling or unable to await the delays of the law; and city authorities did not wish to spend money to clear the titles unless they had a ready buyer.

As a substitute for this outworn conveyancing system, the late Walter Fairchild, a New York attorney and teacher in the Henry George School, organized a society to secure public registration of land titles. This was called the Torrens Society, because Sir Robert Richard Torrens sponsored the same land reform in Australia in 1858 where it was known as the Torrens Act. Walter Fairchild secured such an act for New York State and made it possible for Harrison and other cities to bring suit to clear titles to whole blocks in one suit. This was invaluable in bringing desirable sites into use and making them active on the tax rolls again.

New York has nearly fifty years of experience in taxing the values of sites separately from that of the buildings or improvements on them. This experience has come through the pioneering work of Lawson Purdy, president of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, who secured the passage of the assessing law and then set up the system when he was president of the Board of Taxes and Assessment of New York City. He also served as consultant to many other American cities where this system has been found useful and desirable. A simple step to end the vacant lot problem forever would be to abolish the taxes on improvements and collect the full "ground dues" (Danish term).