

Landless Cities, Breeders of Slums

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Back in 1932 the late Robert Whitten, my predecessor as Director of State Planning, then President of the American City Planning Institute, urged American cities to take advantage of the exceptional opportunities then existing to add to their land holdings and to establish reasonable areas of municipal land reserves.

"The wisdom of his sound advice," says the Institute's Committee on Urban Land Policies, "apparently little followed in the interval, has become more and more evident with the passage of the years. With various modifications as to aims and procedure the acquisition of land reserves by governmental units is being increasingly urged."

Many authorities agree with Dr. Whitten upon the desirability of having the public acquire not only by tax foreclosure but also by direct purchase, and eminent domain when necessary, such lands as may be needed for public purposes or to prevent the unwarranted increase of land prices for speculative purposes.

"What is more significant," said L. D. Segoe at Detroit in June, 1937, "is that the report of the Urbanism Committee soon to be published agrees with the principle that increased land ownership by our cities would be beneficial." * * * and "accordingly recommends the liberalizing of the fundamental laws of the states in order to permit urban authorities to acquire, hold and dispose of land with greater freedom and to allow a wider interpretation of the term 'public use.'"

Cities at present can acquire land for municipal purposes only. This applies to all methods of acquisition. Moreover the eminent domain statutes quite generally prescribe procedure which is highly technical, expensive and dilatory, and the awards are often excessive. Only a few cities are at present equipped with the

(The third section follows of the valuable paper, "A Suggested Municipal Land Policy for the State of New York," a summary of personal views. Publication began in the February issue. It is presented here through the courtesy of William P. Capes, editor, "Proceedings of the New York State Conference of Mayors and Other Municipal Officials." The fourth section will appear in May. Comment and criticism is welcomed.—The Editors.)

powers, the personnel and the procedure customarily employed by private real estate organizations.

In a two-volume study of "Slums and Housing," published June, 1936, by the Harvard University Press, Dr. James Ford said:

"Extension of public ownership of land is necessary to avoid recurrence of the evils of exploitation of land against the public interest and to give the government a firm control of the housing situation. Land is a proper field for public ownership. Management of land is chiefly a legal rather than a business problem. It is a type of business that government could handle efficiently. Accounting is simple. Public interest is paramount. * * *

"Ownership of land by the city or state is advocated here as a means to make slum land available to lease to private capital for the construction and management of approved housing developments under governmental supervision. Without it the process of slum elimination and rebuilding may be seriously delayed."

And in a tentative program for Federal cooperation with local governments and private enterprises in meeting the housing needs of the lower income groups, Mr. Frederic A. Delano, chairman of the Central Housing Committee and vice chairman of the National Resources Committee, said:

"It would be only reasonable for the Federal Government to assist

local governments to purchase land for two purposes: First, to help municipalities provide low-rent housing for families unable to afford shelter of minimum standards; and second, to stabilize the value of low-cost residential neighborhoods wherever protection by zoning regulations is incomplete, thus promoting simultaneously the home-building industry and sound community planning. With these ends in mind, the following policy is suggested:

"The Federal Government might properly offer to pay a certain percentage of the cost of acquisition of land by municipalities, on the condition that the municipality, in using such land, should take suitable precautions to insure the sound development of the neighborhood. The Federal Government should be careful not to subsidize the development of neighborhoods of jerry-built houses nor of surplus residential sections, nor of poorly planned communities. It should offer financial assistance only when municipalities follow a proper and well-considered housing and land-use policy."

In line with Mr. Delano's suggestions the Urbanism Committee, according to Mr. Segoe, says in its report:

"The Committee further recommends legislation creating a Federal credit agency authorized to make loans and grants under adequate legislative safeguards to state and local governments for the purposes of public works construction, acquisition or construction of public utilities, land purchases, and similar capital outlays, and for extending credit to these governments in periods of economic stress. At the same time, the Committee believes that direct Federal expenditures in cities should be reduced to a minimum."

Admitting the need for such a new land policy, how much land should a city acquire to make its program effective? In the built-up area the land required for needed public facilities for twenty to twenty-five years in advance should be determined from the master plan.

In the blighted areas and in the outlying areas the acquisition of a relatively limited number of carefully selected properties for current demands and those of the near future would probably prove effective in



holding down land prices for both public and private housing developments, without the necessity of accumulating many large holdings.

To preserve the land value increments within the city a ring of municipal land reserves or a green belt might be secured if not too costly. Stockholm owns key tracts totaling

20,000 acres within nine miles of its center and these are developed by the city as occasion requires. Manchester, England, has developed Wythenshawe, covering 3,500 acres; London has developed Beacontree; Hamburg, Diesselldorf and Ulm in Germany have developed extensive holdings. Therefore in addition to acquiring through tax foreclosure

those lots which have been deserted by their owners, the municipalities of the State should seek enabling legislation to simplify public land purchases and should acquire over a period of years for city planning purposes and for the prevention of speculation as much land as may be required to give them effective control of their destinies.