

Our Cities: Controlling Boomers

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(The second section follows of Mr. Heydecker's interesting paper, "A Suggested Municipal Land Policy for the State of New York," publication of which began in the February issue. It is being presented serially to facilitate discussion; comment is welcomed. Mr. Heydecker's views are his own, and are not necessarily shared by the agencies, public and private, with which he is affiliated. It is presented here through the courtesy of William F. Capes, editor, "Proceedings of the New York State Conference of Mayors and Other Municipal Officials." The third section will appear in April.—The Editors.)

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Laws that have tried to prevent sales of urban land by metes and bounds (limitations based on area) have proven ineffective. The most promising method of subdivision control appears to be the legislation requiring the developer at his own expense to install or give bond to install necessary public improvements such as sewers, water mains, streets and sidewalks as a condition precedent to the approval of his plat (plan of development).

Because of present limitations and the failure of outlying suburban and rural towns to take forward steps under existing law, many municipalities seek extra-territorial power to control subdivisions in neighboring towns. This power, while used in other states and under special act by Syracuse, in general appears to lack effectiveness. It is therefore suggested that there be given to county and regional planning boards, as has been done in part or implied in the new Buckley and Desmond optional county government acts, clearly defined power to control subdivisions in unincorporated territory or at least in towns which have not used their own power.

Thousands upon thousands of parcels of land, subdivided and sold in expectation of the onward rush of population, are today tax delinquent. Their number and extent in several sample metropolitan areas will be shown in a report of the Division of State Planning.

So long as these tax delinquent lands are counted as part of the tax base, and uncollectable taxes are levied annually thereon, we shall be piling up deficits which will have to be met by those taxpayers who still

can pay. Common sense and sound economics suggest that these abandoned parcels should, as speedily as possible, be taken out of the underlying tax base through the process of tax foreclosure until such time as they can again be made productive.

Erie County has taken the lead in remedying this situation. Out of 83,276 vacant lots in arrears, that county had up to December 1, 1936, by tax foreclosure taken title to 11,877 lots grouped in subdivisions. Monroe County has followed suit, and Onondaga either has begun or is about to begin a similar program.

The present process of tax foreclosure is cumbersome, slow and costly. Often the cost is disproportionate to the value of the parcels so salvaged, but their present status as a kind of economic "no man's land" ought to be corrected. An economic way ought to be found to clear the tax base at least temporarily of these orphaned lots.

In this process the municipalities will acquire thousands of scattered lots and acreage parcels that have a future potential value. Consequently there should be provided, by proper enabling legislation, authority to the municipalities to exchange parcels so as to consolidate sites needed for school buildings, police and fire houses, local parks and playgrounds.

Planning for green belts, outlying wild parks, marginal highways and other large scale public improvements which, because of their nature can be located only in the outlying portions of the metropolitan areas, is made difficult because of the high price of the necessary outlying lands, which prices were generated by the subdivision boom itself. Much of the land necessary for these improvements may now be had for the cost of foreclosure.

The City of Yonkers by tax foreclosure has been notably successful in the past three years in acquiring lands which should provide all such local sites which that city should need for many years to come. Other cities have made equally notable progress.

What has been accomplished through the foresight of the planning boards of these cities can be duplicated in other jurisdictions and thus, out of the distress born of the depression, may come an ultimate saving to the public.

Titles to such lands, once vested in the municipality or county, should not again be alienated until the most careful study has demonstrated that greater public benefit will come from the sale of the fee than from the utilization of the land on a leasehold basis.

This would give time for the planning board in each city and county to discover the most practical use that can be made of such tax-foreclosed lands, and to determine how such use would harmonize with the community's master plan.

Since land in our cities is not scarce, but plentiful beyond the probability of utilization, then it must follow that there is no need to pay famine prices for urban land. The value of land is dependent upon the presence and productive power of an intelligent population. The areas actually devoted to industrial production and mercantile business in our cities are relatively small. What the people can afford to pay for home sites is determined by their earning capacity. Only a modest proportion of our population consist of well-to-do citizens. The potential value of our residential land must therefore be looked at from this realistic viewpoint.

What is urgently needed therefore is the reasonable devaluation of urban residential land so that those citizens who desire to build may either lease the building sites they need or

purchase them without paying prohibitive speculative prices. Idle lands like idle men are a liability, not an asset. Tax foreclosure proceedings should therefore be pushed as rapidly as possible and the land thus acquired either used for necessary public purposes or leased to those who can and

will make use of it, on terms that will repay the municipalities for the services they will render to the occupants of such lands.