

Save Our Cities! The Problem

By Wayne D. Heydecker
Director of State Planning
State of New York

At the outset let me make general acknowledgment to the Urban Land Policy committee of the American City Planning Institute, the subcommittee on Urban Land Policies of the Research on Urbanism conducted by the National Resources Committee, to Harold S. Bутtenheim, chairman of both study committees, to L. D. Segoe, Director of the Urbanism Study, and to Philip H. Cornick, consultant to the Division of State Planning, from all of whom I have drawn liberally, sometimes without specific quotation marks.

In this paper an attempt has been made to gather together in composite form some of the suggestions that have been considered by these competent authorities and study committees on these complex questions of land policies. If the statement of those suggested policies appears at times too dogmatic or positive, it is because of the necessity for great condensation in this text. The suggestions are all offered for further discussion as tentative remedies or policies on which the State Planning Council has not as yet taken any stand, and upon which the author, on further study, may wish to suggest modifications.

I.

In the short space of a century America has changed from a primitive frontier society to an industrialized urban concentration. Since 1790 our cities have increased in population 300-fold, while rural population has increased but 15-fold.

Population growth is slowing down.

Present indications are that metropolitan areas will continue to draw population from rural areas and small urban cities, although central cities may decline in population.

L. D. Segoe, Director of the Urbanism Study, in a paper before the National Planning Conference in Detroit in May, 1937, described them thus:

"Concentration and congestion of every sort—population, buildings and traffic—and inadequate public facilities in the center; haphazard dispersion, unnecessary or premature subdivisions and superfluous public facilities in the outskirts. Over-intensive land uses in small central areas; under-use and deterioration in large sections. Indiscriminate intermingling of incompatible uses everywhere, save the more recently built up areas. Lack of public spaces for recreation and other socially desirable purposes, and an excess of unproductive privately owned land. Lag in needed public improvements. Despoiled water fronts, unattractive general appearance, obsolescence, inconveniences, inefficiencies, and waste of material resources and human effort, public and private. Such is a more or less representative partial list of the most prevalent evidences of our failures in city building."

We have submarginal cities and villages just as we have submarginal rural areas. Both are sick. Left alone, they will either grow sicker and be abandoned by their remaining occupants or they will ask to be treated to get back their health. Fortunately there are 144 definitely planned new communities in this country which, largely as a result of such plannings, were found by the Urbanism Study to be comparatively free from the physical defects and deficiencies common to unplanned communities.

Except for these encouraging examples of what can be done let us admit that we have made rather a bad job in the building of our cities and try to find out why it happened thus.

The first cause is the amazingly rapid rate of growth that has characterized our urban development in the last century and a quarter.

During this period of boisterous adolescence our nation as a whole came to worship bigness rather than

quality. Cities vied with each other for rank in the census volumes. They annexed outlying territory, they built competing railroads, they hopefully financed ill-assorted industries, they gauged everything by size and are now learning that debtridden public treasuries, heavy tax burdens and low standards of urban living are the fruits of our past folly in this respect.

Coincident with these excesses there occurred an orgy of land speculation never before equalled in the history of the world. The State of New York sold off its vast land holdings. Cities that were fortunate enough to own much of their land originally, sold their holdings in haste at ridiculously low prices often to finance public improvements and services to keep pace with rising demands. The fever of land speculation was rampant everywhere. Land prices rose by leaps and bounds. Land that was sold by our cities for trifling sums has been bought back at staggering figures because it was later needed for public purposes.

Curiously enough there also arose the fiction that in this great country good land was scarce. A hundred years ago throughout this State, in New York City, in Auburn, and in Buffalo, according to historic records, we passed through just the same kind of feverish cycle of artificial scarcity, land boom, crash, depression and tax delinquency as we have had within recent memory.

If a city is circular in shape with a radius of one mile from the center to rim at all points, an extension of only four-tenths of a mile of radius will double the city's area. If subdividers in their enthusiasm push out the boundaries as much as one mile in all directions the area of the city will have been multiplied by four. And that means corresponding outlays for pavements, sewers, sidewalks, water mains, etc. Meanwhile unless population growth has been phenomenal the supply of vacant lots will have exceeded many times the demand for building sites, or even the speculative demand predicted on resale at a profit.



The areas in which these premature subdivisions occur most frequently are in the outskirts of the larger cities and in the suburban towns immediately adjacent. High governmental cost payments per capita and high debts per capita appear to be definitely related to these epidemics of land subdivision.

There never was, there is not now and there is not likely to be any real scarcity of urban land in this great country of ours. All the area of all the municipalities of the country

scarcely exceeds one per cent of the total area. And of the area within the average municipality approximately forty per cent lies vacant. The sixty per cent that is used includes all the area devoted to streets, parks and other public uses as well as the area occupied by privately owned structures. There is no need to crowd. There is no lack of room for growth. There is already available in our cities far more land than is likely to be used for decades to come.

(Mr. Heydecker's valuable paper, which he entitled "A Suggested Municipal Land Policy for the State of New York," is being presented serially to facilitate discussion by The Freeman's readers. The opinions expressed in it are his own and are not necessarily shared by the several bodies, public and private, which enjoy his affiliation. Section II will appear in the March issue. It is presented here through the courtesy of William P. Capes, editor of the Proceedings of the New York State Conference of Mayors and Other Municipal Officials, Saratoga Springs, N. Y., June 28-30, 1937.—The Editors.)

See: "Social Problems," pp. 234-240; see also "The Crime of Poverty," "Teachers Manual" (P. & P.), LV. Q. 22, 23, 24; "Progress and Poverty," pp. 256-258.