

New Chance for New York City's Slums

by ALBERT PLEYDELL

NEW YORK CITY has had slums for hundreds of years. Each succeeding wave of immigration—Irish, German, Italian, Negro and Puerto Rican—has focused popular attention on the terrible conditions under which so many of our fellow New Yorkers have to live.

The files are filled with reports of official and private agencies, attesting to the existence of slums and urging remedial action. Strangely, among the numerous documents about the slums, there is one report that proved—to its writer's satisfaction, at least—that New York City was entirely free of slums! This was a report by Acting Mayor Murray Hulbert, in 1924, written as the City's answer to an exhaustive report by a State Commission, which had made a block-by-block study of slum conditions on the Lower East Side. The City's case against slums was based on the claim that the people in the so-called slums were healthy, hence their housing could not have been very bad!

Back at the turn of the century, the multiple-dwelling law was adopted. Thereafter no apartments could be built with windowless rooms, and adequate fire-retarding construction was made mandatory.

We still have thousands of the "old-law" tenements, built before the new code. Recently a local law was passed requiring central heating. But common lavatory facilities, instead of private bathrooms still exist in many old buildings.

Overcrowding, caused either by too many persons in a regular apartment

or by illegal conversion of larger quarters into one-room cells, in which as many as 8 to 10 people live, is very much with us. Officials have identified some 750 buildings that are illegally overcrowded.

Why go on? Despite our great progress as one of the world's largest cities, New York's slums are a tragic blot on our record.

What causes slums? Frankly, I don't believe there is one single cause.

For example, we must remember that there are many people who take a perverse delight in destroying property. The records of the Housing Authority, and also those of large private developers of low-cost housing, are full of incidents of vandalism. You would be shocked if I were to tell you about some of the day-to-day problems caused by the destructively minded. Education is needed here.

Then there are the numerous landlords who "bleed" their properties. The only effective curb on such people is strict enforcement of the building code. The community has a right to protect itself from such tactics.

Zoning is another aspect of urban life which can help prevent slums. Good zoning, coupled with sound planning, acts as a positive force in upgrading neighborhoods. Conversely, weak zoning and poor planning lead to deterioration.

Given favorable factors—education of the misfits, code enforcement, good zoning and sound planning—will slums disappear? I'm afraid not.

To get rid of slums, the buildings must be either rehabilitated or de-

molished. The City has recently enacted laws designed to encourage rehabilitation, and has organized a Neighborhood Conservation program, headed by an Assistant to the Mayor, Mrs. Hortense Gabel. Four areas have been designated Conservation Districts by the City Planning Commission, and intensive, locally managed campaigns are under way. I am familiar with one district, in Chelsea, and I can report that much good work is being done. But the area consists of only four blocks! Covering New York City will be a stupendous task.

Turning from rehabilitation to demolition, in many situations, acres of slums must be torn down. Here private enterprise is stymied, because it is practically impossible to assemble large tracts of improved land. Hold-out owners make acquisition costs prohibitive, except possibly if the replacement is to consist of de luxe housing, where exorbitant land costs can easily be added to the rents.

Surely no one wants to see New York City's residential areas made up solely of luxury housing standing side by side with subsidized public housing. Yet these are the two classes of buildings for which, until recently, enough property could be assembled to warrant slum clearance.

Over the past 10 years, New York City has been slowly expanding a program of slum clearance for middle-income housing. This has been possible by using the power of condemnation, plus federal, state and city subsidies, in the form of "write-downs." Encumbered land is condemned, cleared, and sold to sponsors at its re-use value. This value is determined by impartial appraisal.

Now, I come to the new chance for slums. The Mayor has just created a Housing and Redevelopment Board, charged with responsibility for a dynamic expansion of urban renewal, including slum clearance, both by rehabilitation and by demolition.

For the first time in its history, the City has massed its powers in an all-out attack on slums. At long last, there is real hope that these human pig sties are going to disappear.

New York City is acting. We, too, have a task. Believing as we do that land-value taxation is a powerful deterrent to blight—although not a panacea—let us strive with renewed vigor to persuade the City to adopt a Graded Tax Plan, a plan that in a few years will lead to the freeing of improvements from taxation. By acting now, we can protect the benefits of urban renewal.

MICHIGAN ADOPTS RESOLUTION TO STUDY L.V.T.

A great step has been made toward a better understanding of land value taxation in Michigan. On April 5th, the Michigan House of Representatives adopted the resolution to "investigate the effects of a higher differential rate of taxation on land values as compared to improved values of real property." The reason given was that "The question has been raised that a higher tax on land values compared to a tax on improvements may stimulate production, increase employment and encourage productive investments, etc." The resolution provides for a five-member study committee of representatives appointed by the Speaker of the House, and appropriates \$500 for expenses. The committee will have the right to examine records and subpoena witnesses to its hearings. Representative S. James Clarkson has been appointed assistant chairman.