Planning the Physical Environment

LEONARD J. DUHL, Psychiatrist, National Institutes of Health,
U. S. Public Health Service

●I OFTEN remember the gang of my early adolescent years sitting around discussing a new hangout in the neighborhood. Our discussion explored every possible human variable that might be involved in this new venture. We tried to anticipate everything that could have turned our projected move into a misadventure. We talked about who would use the hangout, who would be excluded, what our relations would be with other clubs, how it would affect our neighborhood status, how adults and other neighborhood groups might react to it, and so forth. All the pros and cons were weighed.

A discussion I recently attended revolved around a similar kind of venture. It had, however, a much different tone and quality to it. Here were experts—administrators, planners, engineers, real estate people, and the like—trying to discuss the future of a city. All, as I said, were experts in their special fields. They knew all about concrete, bricks, steel, tensile strength, traffic patterns, work-home travel distances and similar things. As I heard the discussion go on I was excited, because these topics were relatively new to me. How conclusions were reached to plan a highway or clear a slum were somethings I closely followed. Suddenly, I hesitated and then asked a question. What happened to the needs and problems of people in this discussion. I asked about what would happen to people as certain changes were made? How are their needs and relationships affected by change? After I asked these questions, the group was willing and even eager to discuss them. As I thought about it later, I wondered why the questions were left out in the first place. This was certainly not a new way of looking at problems for this group. They were surely aware of the problems of people, in many different contexts, all their lives. But why was it left out in this context?

Today my topic is people—and how they are involved in community decision-making—and perhaps why certain concerns about them are usually left out by well-intentioned people. I can summarize my feeling in several simple statements:

1. Among those persons involved in community government there is all too often only a limited awareness of the potential psychological impact of community decisions on groups and persons. Only infrequently do the needs of the people take precedence over the "things that really matter"—bricks, buildings, roads, and, above all, money.

2. Plans that are developed by city planners, highway engineers, and the like, though meeting the standards of their own groups, are often not executed in the way they are expected to because they fail to meet adequately the needs of the people of the community.

3. Programs of highway construction and slum clearance produce beautiful new roads and buildings, but they often leave human rubble in their wake as well.

4. Decisions about such things as highways, rapid transit and sewer lines, for example, often predetermine patterns of living that markedly affect the population of a community.

5. Basic to any approach leading to change is awareness that communities can change and want changes. If permitted, communities can develop methods peculiar to their own situation to put a program into action. Such self-imposed change is longer lasting than an externally imposed program. People whose needs are met by involvement in planning and implementation of a program can give it various kinds of needed support.

6. The understanding gained from involvement in such activities of planning is often transferrable to new projects and proposals making the process of change easier in the future. Conversely, nonparticipation may create further unexpected road blocks interfering with implementing programs.

7. Any program that does not consider all aspects of the problem in its approach

suffers, since unidirectional action leaves important and related areas behind and hinders long-term solution.

Let me turn to a more complete discussion of these points. People in decision-making positions are most often trained in either the physical sciences or economics, and less often have a background or experience in understanding the needs and reactions of people. People deal with problems as they are used to. Nevertheless, when people are reminded of this dimension they can easily take these problems into account. It is easy because all of us have experience with understanding people, whether it is our wives, our children, our poker companions, or the boss. This experience, aided and abetted by what I call the mental health sciences, can be brought to bear on decision-making problems, with much to gain.

An engineer or planner responsible for laying out plans for highway construction is usually concerned with traffic flow, economic areas, work-home distances, locations of commercial and residential property, and so forth. There are other considerations which he rarely pauses to consider: congregational patterns of people; friendship networks; economically and socially segregated neighborhoods; human and animal ecology; and many others. These approaches to planning, reflecting a sociological or "mental health" concern with the people of the city, can easily be fed to the highway engineer or planner by social scientists, psychologists, and others who work in the "mental health" sciences. Most engineers, firmly fixed to their accustomed patterns of thinking in purely economic and material terms, could, if properly approached and educated, incorporate these many human concerns into their plans. Some people in city planning are attempting to do this very thing. Decision makers who consider all the implications of their decisions, human as well as economic, are likely to make the most successful decisions for their communities.

The problem of decision-making is, of course, complicated by the changing nature of our society. If anything can be said to typify the present, it is the state of constant change we see all about us. The changes in our society subject individuals, family groups, and even whole communities and nations to new crises. The atomic age, for instance, and man's first reachings out into space, put and will continue to put society under tremendous pressures. We feel, somehow, that we are far from being in control of the present situation, to say nothing of our ultimate destiny. The individual's ability to make decisions that will really make a difference to him and his family seems to be disappearing rapidly. National and international decisions which will affect all of us and, very likely, all our descendants, are made, and we, perforce, stand by and watch, impotent. Even on more local levels, the individual is being pushed further from the decision-making which profoundly affects him. I think it is up to local officials to try to reverse, or at least arrest, this trend.

Towns used to be relatively independent units, where decisions about roads, schools, housing and the like were purely local ones in which many could participate and see the impact of their work. Today more distant forces interact with local decision makers, and the power of making decisions is dispersed and distant. It is becoming increasingly difficult to make local plans, even in local institutions. In almost every field, national offices have set up total programs into which each locality must fit. School boards and state departments set up courses of study which, though subject to some individualization, must be adhered to in general. Whether, in the long run, this tendency is for good òr bad I cannot say. But I can say that it does leave the individual with feelings of helplessness and impotence.

Let me quote Professor Nisbet: "Release man from the context of the community and you get not freedom and rights but intolerable aloneness and subjection to demonic fears and passions."

Sometimes men who have had the opportunity to make decisions taken away from them are given the chance to be heard on a single specific problem. What happens? I think that they concentrate on this one opportunity to make their will known; all the fears and trepidations—real and unreal—which have been built up in them by having to remain quiet and accept the decisions of others so many other times. I have a theory that this is what happens when a community holds a referendum about an emotionally loaded decision—a new highway near a city, for instance. I think that when citizens are permitted

to speak out on the highway they sometimes use this as a chance to rebel, to fight. I also think that what most of them are fighting is not the highway at all, but rather a much more diffuse—and more disturbing—thing, their overwhelming impotence. Here is their chance, in other words, to make up for their enforced passive role and do some decision-making with a vengeance. And they do. The reason I think this is so is the great amount and violent kind of criticism that some plans get. In other communities, where the new highway is not offered for public decision, the furor frequently does not occur, and what fury might be directed at it is directed at some other isolated opportunity the citizens get for making a decision.

Now, my plea is not to avoid trouble by not offering a highway plan for public discussion. It is, rather, to avoid the build-up of feelings which explode on issues like that of a new highway or an air base by working out means for involving the people to a far greater degree in the day-to-day decision-making process of the community. Permitting them a voice, and an inadequate one at that, on some isolated issues is frequently simply an invitation for the expression of pent-up hostility and resentment.

Poston, at the University of Southern Illinois, is a major proponent of this concept, and one who has put it into action. A national magazine once described Poston as a "psychiatrist for sick communities." He, in common with groups like the American Friends Service Committee, envisions his role as one of helping people help themselves. Utilizing techniques of social science and community organization, he aids communities in doing a careful self-examination of their problems and their assets. His technique, political in effect, but based upon concepts developed in the university, is to allow a true cross-section of a community's population to particpate in the self-study and in making plans for their town. Needless to say, the cross-section he chooses is one not usually involved in community decision-making. Experts are available to advise, but not to plan for the people.

One important implication of Poston's work is that a community must be dealt with as an integrated whole rather than segment by segment. As another example of the need for an integrated approach to community problems we can consider delinquency. Delinquency involves individual psychopathology, community economics, social stratification, local business opportunities, education values, among others. The problem of delinquency cannot be attacked on any single front with any hope of success; every community phenomenon which is in any way related to the problem must be simultaneously studied and handled.

I mention delinquency here because an illustration that I have in this area has a direct relationship to highway construction.

In a town in the northeast, there was reported a sudden increase in juvenile delinquency. Police, judges, and parents reported excitedly and with some agitation on the increasing delinquency problem. All sorts of hypotheses were thrown into the hopper but the increase continued unabated. Quite parallel to this development was the planned construction of a new superhighway through the city. Some heated discussion was noted around town, but no reported contact could be made with the highway engineers to effect a change reflecting community wishes. The topic of the highway, like the topic of delinquency, was discussed in every household and at every gathering of but two people or more. The problem was simple, the highway would cut a town in two.

The limited access highway would cut neighbor from neighbor—children from schools previously attended, and friends from backyard gossip. Suddenly the decision was reversed; the highway plans were changed and the highway bypassed the city. Almost as if by magic the delinquency dropped off. I am not usually a believer in the thesis that if two things occur in the same period of time they are related as cause and effect. However, the evidence seems more than coincidence. The reason, as I see it, rests in the disruption of the human community's equilibrium. Communities, like people, tend to have an integrity. They have natural patterns of relationship, both social and economic, among others, which when disrupted cause increased symptoms of disorganization in the people directly concerned and in those in nearby areas.

Community self-study must treat every local problem in the same way. Problems of the school system cannot be solved by working alone with teachers, with administra-

tors, with school budgets, or with any other single factor. The schools of a community must be considered in the light of total community needs, values, and attitudes. If self-study shows that there are conflicts between these various needs, presenting them to public scrutiny can often lead to resolution. Incidentally, the longer and the less questioned any educational practices have been, the greater is the need for careful re-evaluation of them. Alfred North Whitehead wrote: "The doctrines which best repay critical examination are those which for the longest period have remained unquestioned." In community self-evaluations, neither education nor any other institution is a sacred cow—to remain untouched by progress or inquiry.

In studying a community we find, in addition to official structure and organizations, an unofficial structure and set of institutions which deserve equally thorough scrutiny. Official organizations do not always represent the true power structure of a community. Even the voluntary and unofficial organizations in a community frequently represent only segments of the total population, and not the many groups out of the mainstream of community life. Since very different mental health problems present themselves in different segments of a population, it is important to take cognizance of all groups and all people.

Just as there are in any community unofficial power structures which are able to bypass official functions, there are unofficial patterns of help for mental disturbances which have no contact with the community's more official mental health activities. I think it is important to understand that many decisions of the community in fact break up these unofficial channels, and either put tremendous burdens on the official agencies, or, perhaps more likely, leave problems unsolved.

One of the best examples of this is slums and slum clearance. Slums have long been recognized as sources of social ills and blights. Arguments for slum clearance claim that it will lead to delinquency prevention, lower costs for police, fire, and welfare services, and that it will permit a raising of the tax base and will beautify the community. All these are sound arguments. When slum clearance and redevelopment are final facts, after long and arduous work, a new so-called redeveloped area arises in the community. I wish the story could end here, but it does not. If we put aside for a moment the arguments in favor of slum clearance—valid arguments, I confess, but arguments concerned with money and material things—and look at the people, we see a long and sometimes unhappy conclusion to the story of slum clearance. First, we have no positive proof that slum clearance lowers crime and delinquency rates. But more important, we forget that to the people who live there, what we call slums is home. People find it hard to give up their homes. Contacts with familiar neighbors; chats through open windows in the summer; passing comments to the neighborhood grocer, cop, or bartender; are all part of a normal and comfortable day. Gangs in some places make up a world which is hard to give up. For what would the slum dwellers be giving up their way of life? For emotionally sterile, though clean, housing projects; for dispersion to the unfamiliar suburbs; for relocation in areas without friends and family? Dispersion can mean giving up the informal and unofficial supports vital to the preservation of life itself. Cold officialdom and sterile buildings are a poor substitute indeed for a known, warm, supportive environment. For many, you see, the slum has assets as well as liabilities. Loss of home can be as emotionally disturbing as loss of a member of the family. Relocated people can literally grieve and pine for the razed slum that was home.

As we have seen, the question of a highway going through the center of human habitation may have its human consequences. Erich Lindemann and his group of Harvard psychiatrists working at Massachusetts General Hospital have shown the importance to a community of the network of unofficial caretakers. Official agencies, swamped with work, are often unable to meet the somewhat intangible emotional needs of the people. It is amazing to me how frequently people are helped by these unofficial caretakers—the corner grocer, the undertaker, the bartender, the cop—without aid by a trained psychiatrist. Slum clearance frequently means the disintegration of a group of these caretakers, and loss by the people in the neighborhood of essential emotional supports. This, I think, is why, despite the best laid plans, so many slum clearance and redevelopment projects go awry. The people who have been relocated

often turn the new projects into slums, or move to other slums which have not yet been destroyed. Although the re-creation of the old environment may make some of the re-located people more comfortable, neither of these courses of action is really progressive or constructive in itself. Perhaps we may find our way out of this dilemma by working with people before important decisions are made, attempting to understand their needs, involving them in planning discussions, and making changes in official plans which allow for the preservation of the unofficial network of caretakers.

I am not against slum clearance nor am I against new much-needed highways. I am against slum clearance and highway construction that proceeds without attention to the social and emotional needs of the community, just as I am against any community planning project which disregards human needs. Zoning practices, school location plans, suburban development, and many more, too frequently proceed either in indifference or ignorance of the people who work, learn, and live in the community.

The tremendous growth of suburbs around every large city and along their major traffic arteries is a case in point. These bedroom communities—attracting people of a single socio-economic group, dictating uniform patterns of life and growth to their inhabitants—seem to me to lack some of the richness and variety of cultural and human resources which can be found in the city. Perhaps the answer is to concentrate, not on separate municipal and suburban planning or on highway construction alone, but on metropolitan planning, which will encompass the economic, cultural, education, and emotional needs of both the city, the suburbs, and the county at large.

The process of planning and the development of new programs bring many fears to the fore. People do not wish to be manipulated. A value system is involved in any program of change that recognizes needs, standards, culture, and ways of doing things of all segments of a community. True leadership involves motivating, guiding, and organizing activity without giving finite direction or setting the goals. True leadership gives people a change to practice democracy by allowing them to particpate in important decision-making. People, not things and money, should be the prime consideration in planning and in implementing programs.

I believe there is evidence of a relation between physical environment and mental health. Our understanding of this relationship can be an important factor in achieving our goals.