

General Planning, Urban Renewal, and Highways

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● THIS MEETING presents a fine opportunity for the author to talk with another group of co-workers, for we all are working together toward the achievement of something greater than the specific objectives of our respective programs. Urban renewal and highways are in themselves limited goals. The larger goal we recognize and work toward is better, more productive living.

In particular, it is desired to discuss planning growth and improvement of cities and of urban regions and metropolitan areas; but because this type of planning is influenced by highway planning, and vice versa, much of what is said is in terms of both. This is so although highways sometimes run for miles without touching a city, no city is untouched by highways.

It might be helpful to begin by mentioning the basic aids to urban renewal that are administered by the Housing and Home Finance Agency. The first is Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, which first authorized Federal financial assistance to communities for slum clearance and urban redevelopment. In 1954 Title I was broadened to include assistance for the prevention of slums and urban blight through the rehabilitation of blighted and deteriorating areas. Urban renewal, as understood and practiced today, is a combination of clearance and rehabilitation.

A community that qualifies for Federal assistance may obtain various technical and financial aids. Financial aids include advances, loans, grants, and certain types of mortgage insurance for private redevelopers, as well as public housing for displaced families.

How does a community qualify for these aids?

The basic prerequisite to eligibility for Federal aid is what is called a "workable program," certified by the Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency. A community's workable program is the community's own plan of organized, total action, based on the full use of local private and public resources, to eliminate slums, prevent blight, and protect sound neighborhoods. It consists of seven basic elements: sound housing and health codes, enforced; neighborhood analysis; effective administrative machinery; financial capacity to conduct a renewal program; feasibility of rehousing families displaced from slums; community-wide citizen participation and support and; a general plan for the community's development.

This last item, general planning, deserves elaboration. Emphasis here is on the word, "general." The plan must be comprehensive. It must be subject to constant reviews as local conditions change. It must provide for the community's future along broad lines, and may, therefore, never be considered complete. It must allow for growth and change and must provide not only for housing people in decent dwellings and healthful neighborhoods but also for moving people more efficiently to and from their places of work, to and from commercial centers, and to and from the great highways that connect their city with others and for the efficient movement of goods.

It is hardly remarkable that action should be preceded by a plan. Yet until very recently—and the sad evidence exists throughout the land—plans and their attendant actions, whether for land development or redevelopment or highways, were usually independent of and frequently largely unrelated to other plans and actions.

We are now moving in the direction of correcting the errors of our misguided or unguided past. A few figures provide some measure of the motion forward. At the end of last year workable programs had been certified for more than 700 American cities, large and small, and over 350 communities were actually engaged in conducting some 600 urban renewal projects.

Speaking of the workable program, Housing Administrator Albert M. Cole said:

"There are few concepts that have carried us so far at so little cost. The workable program idea that a community should analyze itself, assess its

faults and virtues, and plan comprehensively for the future, makes sense. It makes sense not only as a prerequisite to receiving Federal aid, but because it is a good thing in any event."

A community with a certified workable program is ready to make formal application for Federal funds to assist it in undertaking an urban renewal project. As a first step, the community applies for an advance of money to enable it to prepare its urban renewal plan. If the Urban Renewal Administration approves the advance—which is chargeable to gross project costs, when and if the community carries out the project—a capital grant reservation is also made. This is simply an earmarking of funds from the total amount authorized by Congress to assist local projects, not an actual transfer of funds.

Then comes actual preparation of the urban renewal plan; that is, the blueprinting of work to be undertaken in the project area. Here the community's general plan assumes a great significance. The urban renewal plan must conform to the general plan of the community as a whole.

Minimum requirements of the Urban Renewal Administration with respect to the general plan are:

1. A land use plan.
2. A thoroughfare plan.
3. A community facilities plan.
4. A public improvements program.
5. A zoning ordinance and zoning map.
6. Subdivision regulations.

Unless and until there is conformity to the general plan, the Federal Government will not enter into a loan-and-grant contract with the community. Through such a contract, the community obtains a temporary Federal loan to provide working capital and an outright grant to cover up to two-thirds of the net cost of carrying out an urban renewal project.

The point I wish to make is that Federal financial aid for urban renewal provides, in addition to certain clearly visible and tangible project benefits, a strong incentive to general planning. In the following generation there is little of higher importance than general planning in solving the tremendous problems of housing people and moving them from place to place decently, efficiently, safely, and comfortably.

The Housing Act of 1954 provides another important form of aid. Section 701 makes it possible for state planning agencies to obtain grants, up to 50 percent of the cost of the work, to help them give planning assistance to communities of less than 25,000 population. Similar grants are available to official state, metropolitan, and regional planning agencies for work in metropolitan areas and urban regions.

Although this program has been in operation just a little more than four years, it has already been of great service. Equally important are the facts that many communities lacking the financial resources to support permanent agencies have been enabled to carry out the work of general planning and that metropolitan planning has been greatly stimulated and accelerated. At the end of the year more than 800 small communities and about 55 metropolitan areas and urban regions in nearly 30 states were engaged in planning activities under the urban planning assistance program.

Not all of those 800-odd small communities—and the additional hundreds that may be expected to receive aid under the program in the years just ahead—are likely to undertake urban renewal projects. Nevertheless, all of them should be able to build a solid foundation for over-all civic improvement as a result of their general planning. All of them, along with the urban regions and metropolitan areas taking advantage of the benefits of the program, will be increasingly aware of the enormous impact that urban renewal and highways have on each other.

At the Federal level the need for close relationship between urban renewal planning and highway planning has for a number of years been recognized by the Urban Renewal Administration and the Bureau of Public Roads, and there is increasing coordination of policies and procedures. For example, applications for Federal aid to carry out

urban renewal projects must include maps showing the location of major highways—including, of course, federally assisted highways—that are under construction, being planned, or contemplated. In turn, copies of these maps, with urban renewal areas indicated, are forwarded to the appropriate Bureau of Public Roads division offices.

State and local authorities have been advised of the need for coordination and of procedures to be followed. It is important to mention that there are coordination problems besides that of physical relationship of urban renewal and highways. The matter of timing urban renewal activities and highway activities must be given very careful consideration, in order to assure that the improvements created by one of those activities will not needlessly raise land values—and thus land acquisition costs—for the other.

It is also important—indeed, imperative—that urban renewal and highway activities be coordinated so as to minimize the problems of relocating displaced families. The relocation problem is a large one. During the period covering fiscal years 1958, 1959, and 1960, it is expected that urban renewal will dislocate 83,000 families; highway construction, 75,000 families; other government activities, 89,000 families—a total of nearly a quarter of a million households. Certainly every community involved must plan and program its relocation requirements carefully if it is to avoid undue strain on its housing resources and public resistance to the programs in which all are interested.

The basic responsibility for community planning and coordinating urban renewal and highway planning lies with the communities themselves, and no amount of Federal requirements and directives can substitute for this local responsibility. Among the communities that have met this responsibility and done effective jobs of coordinating their urban renewal and highway programs are Norfolk, Virginia; New Haven, Connecticut; Nashville, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; and Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio.

In conclusion these points should be emphasized:

1. The Housing Act of 1954 has been extremely effective in advancing general planning in individual communities.
2. More thorough and widespread metropolitan planning should be advocated. This is necessary not only for urban renewal purposes but perhaps even more so for better highway planning in urban areas.
3. Although policies and procedures can be coordinated at the national level, specific urban renewal and highway projects must be coordinated at the local level.
4. There must be close working relationships between local urban renewal people and highway officials at state and city level, all in concert with sound city and metropolitan planning.

An era of unprecedented urban growth and change has been entered. Superhighways will contribute to both urban sprawl and greater concentrations in central areas, and we shall witness the painful process of natural selection in central area functions.

But what of the vast area in between—the aging obsolescent area?

Here the urban renewal planners and planners of inner circumferentials get all tangled up with each other and some say these vast areas will be dismal economic wastelands. Who says the pattern of circumferentials and radials is right, anyway? One of Europe's greatest planner-doers recently advocated the super-grid as a better alternative because it permits greater flexibility for future growth.

We must be increasingly unwilling to proceed under established concepts. Faster rates of growth and change demand more frequent challenge. In any event, let us hope that working together we can plan and build cities better suited to future needs than did our forefathers. It will not be easy.