

RELOCATION PROBLEMS VIEWED FROM THE AFFECTED CITIZENS' POINT OF VIEW

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The development of public roads to facilitate circulation is as vital to our country as arteries and veins are to the human body. Why, then, is there so much controversy as to whether or not new roads should be built and old roads expanded? Obviously, citizens affected by relocation consider relocation a serious liability. It is not difficult to understand why relocated persons have this attitude.

When freeways were extended to connect cities with fast growing suburbs and when the 42,000-mile system of Interstate Highways began in 1956, there were little or no services or payments to thousands of households displaced or otherwise affected until the 1968 Federal-Aid Highway Act. Actually, prior to the enactment of the 1968 Act, states were allowed to pay certain moving costs for families and businesses and be reimbursed by the federal government, but, as late as 1966, 17 states planning to displace 26,000 people had chosen not to make such payments.

The situation was equally severe in terms of urban renewal. The 1949 Housing Act contained no provision for relocation services and payments to families being displaced through urban renewal. Not until the Housing Act of 1956—7 years later—was there congressional recognition of the need for relocation services and payments.

The lack of ability to provide relocation services and payments did not in any way hinder the forward thrust of highway or renewal programs. In fact, many officials recognized that this program moved more quickly without providing any services and payments. Consequently, one understands the desire of some states to continue that practice of providing no payments and services even after payments were made possible.

In New York City, for example, a practice developed in which the developer of huge urban renewal sites was given the responsibility for vacating the occupants of the site. Developers utilize different techniques to achieve this goal; the most successful is that of giving the occupant a bonus in return for his vacating the site within a 30-to-90-day period. This seemed to work well in vacating a site expeditiously. Various social agencies in the city began to complain, however, that this practice seemed to produce a "zombie" population—a group of several thousand individuals and families who seemed to get caught in every renewal program. The reason this practice was discontinued, I am told, was not so much that the zombie population existed and presented problems but that several developers delayed new construction for a period of years while collecting rents on the occupied properties.

I think it is a fair statement to make that in the past most officials in renewal and in highway programs did not consider relocation to be a serious matter and expected people to be able to solve their own problems related to it. In fact, I think it can be said that most middle- and upper-income families generally end up in better housing and in better residential environments. Also, one recognizes that we have a fairly mobile society anyway, and people are constantly moving from one address to another without being forced to do so. For example, a study in Boston in 1966 revealed a turnover in housing of about 44,000 units. During that same period of time, fewer than 1,000 households were being displaced. For these and many other reasons, officials in the past have not understood to any real degree the problems of relocation from the citizens' point of view.

Let me state emphatically what should be the obvious: The effect of relocation on the citizen greatly depends on his status in life, i. e., his income, the kind of job he has, and his ego strengths. For families with middle to upper incomes, relocation is more a chore than a problem. Any shortage of housing in any locality may tend to limit the

broad choices available to middle- and upper-income families; it produces severe crises and traumatic situations for low-income families. Yet, displacement affects both groups, and for our purposes here I will discuss these groups separately.

MIDDLE- AND UPPER-INCOME FAMILIES

Members of this group are more likely to react with hostility toward a proposed program that would cause their displacement merely because of the inconvenience of moving. Reaction will be particularly strong to a highway, for example, going through a prime residential community. Further, citizens in general feel that highway engineers know only one rule: The shortest distance between 2 points is a straight line. As a consequence, they feel that highway engineers will destroy buildings of historical value, playgrounds, and parks of great community interest with great abandon. They will frequently mobilize tremendous pressure to force highway engineers to modify the route of the highway.

In addition, the people to be displaced and the community generally need answers to the hundreds of questions they have, such as the date their property will be acquired, the length of time they can remain prior to vacating, the amount of money they will receive, and the method used to determine the amount of money they will receive. Many of these problems can be handled by an effective information program and involvement in it of those persons who are affected by the proposed action, not just those who are being displaced. Families living on either side of the right-of-way are also affected. Therefore, agencies that develop highway programs should have a section staffed with people skilled in developing informational programs and assigned the responsibility to work with organized groups within the communities that the highway will traverse.

This obviously will require substantial money and time, but I doubt if it will involve additional delays. This effort could be made concurrently with other activities. Most of the facts on which professional judgments are arrived at by the public decision-makers can be understood by citizens if the opportunity for that kind of discussion and interchange is made possible. Once decisions are made, required hearings are over, and relocation begins, there is a continuing need to keep the citizens involved and informed, especially those to be displaced.

LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Severe problems are created among families with low incomes when they are faced with forced relocation. Viewpoints on these problems differ depending on the individual's relationship to the problem. For example, officials in urban renewal or highway development look at the slums and deteriorated structures that are to be taken and say that people in such neighborhoods cannot help being better off by being displaced. Many sociologists and other social scientists, on the other hand, look at the situation and say that this particular structure and this particular environmental situation are so important to the stability of the individual that nothing should be done to destroy it. Between both views is the affected family who really would not mind leaving the slum conditions if there were some place else to move. This is a difficult situation for many to understand because, in most instances, agencies can prove that there should be enough opportunity for housing if one considers the turnover rate for housing in a particular city. Those being displaced have an opportunity to secure these units as they appear momentarily on the market. However, the cumulative effect of massive demolition programs related not only to highways but also to urban renewal, concentrated code enforcement programs, emergency demolition programs, and the like have resulted in a net reduction of houses available for low-income families. It serves no one's purpose to argue that these destroyed units were unfit for human habitation if the choice becomes either housing unfit for human habitation or no housing at all.

Officials in highway construction could maintain that their job is to develop highways and other agencies have responsibility to create housing and that a close working relationship between these two efforts is not necessary. Such a position might be sustained had not the severe crises in the construction of new housing units become so acute.

We must all recognize that, as society grows larger and larger, the concern for the individual grows smaller. Social scientists and statisticians may assert that housing in general has improved for the majority of the inhabitants of this nation, but that small percentage who are not housed properly represents a very large number of families in absolute terms.

Choices available to the poor are often nonexistent. Frequently they must accept quarters that are physically better but socially worse. For example, poor families may have to accept housing in a public housing development that is notorious for its social problems. Families that move into this kind of housing recognize that the environment will be detrimental to their children but that their lack of income gives them no other choice. In addition, almost every major city in the United States still has certain neighborhoods that are restricted to certain racial and ethnic groups. The existence of fair housing legislation and agencies prepared to aid families in this regard still does not make all areas generally available to minority groups. There are still the difficulties of filing a suit and going through the unpleasant process of gaining constitutional rights. Of course, individual efforts made occasionally have long-term positive effects. Even the problems of segregation and discrimination are exacerbated by an extreme shortage of housing available to low-income families.

Poor families suffer in other ways. The smaller the income the more likely the family is disorganized and the more likely it depends on small unobservable systems within the community in which it resides. We speak of these as the kinship system and the neighborhood system. In both instances, families utilize these systems in their efforts to handle stress. Although relocation is one of many situations that bring stress to the family, the nature of relocation in itself can create additional stress by moving the family to locations where these systems are less effective. Obviously, it is extremely important for the displacing agency to be both knowledgeable and sensitive to these problems. All displacement programs must have a concern for the overall community impact of these programs. Those persons being displaced and particularly those with low incomes, however, are much more concerned about what happens to them than they are with the plans and proposals of various governmental agencies to implement renewal or highway programs.

The suggestion that the public works agencies be required to add as many housing units to the market as it destroys is well worth considering. There is a body of interest and influence in this nation concerned about the construction of highways, and that concern could be directed to the construction of new housing units if that is the only way highways can be constructed. The time is past for major problems such as housing for low-income people to be the sole province of a few social workers, ministers, and other do-gooders. The time has arrived when we must put our talents to the test and determine whether or not we can proceed as we must with rebuilding cities and expanding highways in a manner that is beneficial to our total society.