

The time is right for new towns

PROVIDENCE — Recent applications to the Department of Housing and Urban Development for the funding of four new towns have been suspended. HUD has further notified developers that it will no longer accept applications for federal guarantees on the construction of these large scale developments.

It was only six years ago that the National Committee on Urban Growth Policy, composed of members of Congress, governors, mayors, and county officials, recommended the construction of 100 new towns of 100,000 and 10 centers of one million persons be completed by the end of the century. Title VII of the 1970 Housing

towns are dead in this country for the foreseeable future."

A spokesman for the Greater Hartford Process, privately funded but using some foundation and federal funds, claims that new towns must be a combined private and government operation. Yet problems of land assembly, together with an approximately nine-year period before a positive annual cash flow is obtained, make it most difficult even for the large private developer to handle this aspect of new town construction.

With a current 8.2 percent unemployment rate which some labor leaders say will exceed 10 percent by July, there is a great need to provide jobs for some of the 7.5 million unemployed. Within this depressed economic situation lies a possible solution to the problem of new town construction.

Forty years ago, the federal government, faced with somewhat similar conditions,

By Chester E. Smolski

Act was a step toward achieving this aim with the provision of federal loan guarantees and grants to developers who undertook their construction.

Today, there is considerable financial trouble with the 15 federally assisted new towns, with several on the verge of bankruptcy. Privately developed new towns, such as Columbia, Maryland, also are having similar problems in today's very tight housing and construction market.

The current economic squeeze has caused the Greater Hartford Process, the unique private catalyst for regional development in the Hartford region to abandon its plans for a new town in Coventry; a move, they feel, which may set the new towns movement in Connecticut back by 20 years.

The only state agency of its kind in the country, the New York Urban Development Corporation, is in bankruptcy, is being investigated, and its new towns of Audubon, Radisson, and Roosevelt Island are in limbo with their future very much in doubt.

Are new towns not a viable option to land development? The British, French, Germans, Swedes, Israelis, Japanese, and many other nations have had considerable success with this venture. Are we, in this country, not capable or willing to build these model communities that would have absorbed 20 million people by the end of the century?

There is no doubt that efficient and large scale development of the land is a necessity; planners, builders, ecologists, and many of the public are aware of this. Yet, under present market conditions, the private developer cannot do it. James Rouse, successful builder of Columbia, claims that "privately developed new

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launched a program which provided jobs for thousands through the construction of new towns. These so-called greenbelt towns eventually were sold off to private interests so that their early origins have become obscured as post-war development has engulfed them. But based upon that experience, there is good reason for the federal government again to provide jobs and better living conditions by doing the job itself, as is done in most countries of the world.

As part of the New Deal, the Resettlement Administration bought land, drew innovative plans, employed thousands, and provided decent homes for hundreds of working families of modest means in three new towns located in Maryland, Ohio, and Wisconsin. By 1954, the government sold off the last of these properties and withdrew from its new towns efforts.

The failure of the greenbelt towns was that they were never completed and their full impact was never realized. Yet more than 13,000 worked on the new town of Greenbelt, Maryland, making it one of the largest single projects of the New Deal. And living conditions within the three towns have remained pleasant for the residents up to the present.

With the economy continuing its downward trend, the time is again right for Washington to set up the machinery for the construction of new towns. Today, private interests cannot do it; private interests with federal help cannot do it; state governments cannot do it; but the federal government can do it. It can provide jobs for the unemployed, it can incorporate new design and planning ideas, use innovative transportation systems, employ new technology in house construction, use energy saving building techniques and, most important, it can provide "a decent home and a suitable living environment" for people, a goal set out in the 1949 Housing Act but still to be realized.

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Today we offer columns by Brian Dickinson, assistant chief editorial writer for the *Journal-Bulletin* editorial pages; Chester E. Smolski, associate professor of geography and director of urban studies, Rhode Island College; and Joseph Kraft, author of *Profiles in Power* and other books. The book review is by Mr. Dickinson.