

# City land bank would promote industrial development

## Chester Smolski

On the 19th of May, in the city of Providence, 200 properties were offered for sale to the public. These were properties on which owners were in default of taxes and which the city hoped to sell in order to get them back on the tax rolls, as well as to collect back taxes. Only 21 of the properties were sold.

It was nearly two weeks earlier that the *Providence Sunday Journal*, in the lead story of the Business section, claimed that Providence had no land available for industrial development. As a result, new jobs could not be generated because existing industries could not expand nor could new plants, with their sizable land requirements, be built.

There is an obvious inconsistency here: on the one hand the city needs land for industrial development yet, on the other, cannot sell off available land and buildings scattered throughout the city. The solution would appear to be a simple one: have the city bank the land that becomes available and, over a period of time, assemble it into larger pieces suitable for industrial development. This assemblage process could utilize the city's power of eminent domain

to take those properties necessary to consolidate land holdings.

There is no question that land and property are becoming increasingly available in Providence as people continue to leave for the suburbs and more property owners continue to walk away from their holdings in declining neighborhoods. Consider the following: tax sale properties offered for sale have doubled over the past year; in a recent count it was estimated that there were more than 2000 vacant living units in the city, many of these already abandoned; and, finally, one has only to drive through some of the neighborhoods south of the city center to find vast blocks of vacant land gathering weeds and debris, scenes resembling Europe's bombed out wartime cities of a generation ago.

In the short term it may be expedient to get these properties back on the city tax rolls. This is especially true when considering Providence's present budgetary difficulties. But is this the best solution?

Considering the need for industrial land, would it not be far wiser to provide space for industrial opportunities, something that cities have traditionally done. The way to get cities, such as Providence, back on track is to create the right setting for industrial growth and development.

At a series of hearings held in April before the Subcommittee on the City of the

House Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs to determine national urban policy, this point was clearly stated by Rep. Henry S. Reuss, of Wisconsin, and Subcommittee Chairman, who said, "The most straightforward way to help cities is to provide jobs. . . . From a city's standpoint, jobless citizens make no contribution to a community's revenues. But they add greatly to its costs for welfare, crime, and assorted ills."

If it is true that jobs are the key to city revival then Providence should provide the best possible setting for jobs in those areas of the city where land is increasingly becoming available. Here is a possible course of action for the city to follow:

1. Retain tax-delinquent properties and continue to bank land as it becomes available. Why sell land at depressed prices now, and then buy it back later at inflated prices as demand increases?
2. Use eminent domain to buy land for the consolidation of larger blocks of land necessary for industrial development.
3. Rezone to industrial use the land taken from residential areas where this available land most often appears. There is nothing inherently wrong with mixed-use of land and, in fact, planners today are encouraging this form of development. Moreover, industrial plants constructed in residential areas allow people in the neighborhood to walk to their jobs, an

important consideration for low income, city dwellers.

4. Give tax concessions to firms moving into these areas to encourage job opportunities for these neighborhoods.

5. Provide work places that follow the existing pattern of industry and which remain in scale with the fabric of the city, i.e., in units employing 25 to 100 workers, and which are compatible with residential areas.

6. Begin this industrial development in the South Providence area where large blocks of vacant land currently exist; where there is a higher than normal rate of unemployment; and, finally, where the

## Urban environment offers unique opportunities

Opportunities Industrialization Center with its excellent job training programs is located, and which facilities will be housed in a new center.

At a time when environmentally concerned communities are saying "no" to industrial location because paved parking lots increase water run-off and create pollution problems in nearby water bodies (as in East Providence) cities such as Providence have much to offer because they have an already existing infrastructure of streets, water, sewerage, and utilities available and an urban setting that is focused on industrial activity.

Much work will be necessary to bring about such development. But with urban sprawl eating up valuable farm land, open space, and recreational areas, the already built urban environment of the city offers unique opportunities for development in a high density setting. Providence would be well advised to move toward the industrial development of its expanding amounts of vacant land and abandoned properties.

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