

The benefits reaped from block grant funding will increase

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The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 signed into law by former President Ford was a landmark piece of legislation. It provided federal money for communities in block grants, with each local community making its own decisions as to the distribution of these funds in such areas as housing, parks and community facilities.

This technique of allocating federal funds was different from the previous "categorical" grants in which federal money was given for specific uses, such as sewers, parks and housing, each of which required separate requests for funding. Block grant funding takes cognizance of the fact that local communities know their own needs best and can, therefore, establish their own priorities to solve community problems. Under the 1974 Act more than \$26 million has been granted to the city of Providence over the past three years.

The general success of this legislation influenced Congress to extend the community development block grant program for another three years, through fiscal year 1980. President Carter signed it into law in 1977. Although exact figures have not yet been determined, Providence should receive approximately the same level of funding over the next three years as it has over the first three years.

The Act of 1974 placed its greatest

emphasis on housing and neighborhood development, including community facilities and services, with little aid devoted to economic development and job generating activities. The new Act seeks to rectify this situation. Economic development will be spurred by the construction and rehabilitation of public, commercial and industrial facilities and, in addition, by providing help to non-profit organizations for capitalization, bonding assistance to minority contractors and a variety of other opportunities within the targeted low and moderate income areas of Providence. One of the most important provisions of the new Act is for land acquisition necessary for industrial park development, one of the greatest needs in Providence.

It was only through the federally aided urban renewal program that two industrial parks were built in our capital city. In 1960 West River opened with the first automated post office in the country, and in 1963 it was the 96-acre Huntington Expressway. Today, both these parks are fully occupied. They provide jobs for nearly 4000 employees, and generate taxes to the city eight times greater than these previously blighted areas contributed prior to development.

A critical need in this heavily industrialized state is available and buildable land on which to place modern plants, i.e., single story buildings with adequate parking space, and clustered together in a park-like setting. This need is especially acute in Providence.

With the exception of some limited waterfront land, there is no available open land in the city in the large tracts

necessary for industrial park development. And yet one can see the potential for such space if enough small lots, currently vacant and weed-covered, could be consolidated. Land banking can be an expensive and long term method to acquire such large tracts, a method which the city feels it is unable to do because of a lack of funds. But the 1977 Act provides the means.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development will not allow speculative ventures with industrial park development, so they require that there be prior commitments from firms intending to locate in the park. Such commitments should be readily available in Providence with its already in-place requisites for industrial sites, including accessibility, water, sewers and utilities. Most important, HUD requires that such efforts be directed to those designated lower income areas in which these investments will have the greatest impact.

South Providence looks like a natural for such an industrial park. Much vacant land is city owned, abandoned structures could be purchased cheaply and eminent domain could be used to buy structures to fill out blocks of space needed.

An industrial park located in this neighborhood would provide new jobs for the inordinately large number of unemployed persons located here. Several small firms located in such a park could provide a variety of opportunities to residents who would be able to walk to work. The location of the Opportunities Industrialization Center in the neighborhood guarantees a multiplicity of programs to train people in acquiring necessary skills.

With the nine social agencies located in the South Providence Neighborhood Center, with the Flynn School serving as a magnet to draw families into the area, and with the site of the new OIC complex in juxtaposition to these facilities, and with all of these facing new, suburban style Comstock housing development, there is a budding nucleus of community activity located here on Prairie Avenue. An industrial park would complement the already existing facilities and activities and help South Providence regain the vitality it once had.

It is to be hoped that the Mayor's Citizen's Advisory Committee will place its highest priority on this type of job generating activity now available under the 1977 Act. As Rep. Henry S. Reuss of Wisconsin has stated, "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."

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