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Let citizens shape the city

PROVIDENCE — On November 22 in the Bishop McVinney Auditorium, approximately 225 residents of Providence assembled to suggest the means by which this city could become a better place in which to live.

Many suggestions, some read as prepared statements and others extemporaneously expressed, from individuals and organizations were recorded. After two and one-half hours, the meeting ended, as did the feeble attempt at public participation sponsored by the Provi-

dence Department of Planning and Urban Development (week) and the single public meeting, one wonders if the planning department really wants any kind of public input or whether the department is simply going through the motions.

It is essential that additional ideas from the public get to the planning department; first, because more needs to be heard from a greater range of neighborhoods and organizations, many of whom were unable to be at the meeting, and second, because it is necessary that adequate public participation guidelines for federal monies be met by providing more opportunities for people to be heard.

According to the chairman of the meeting, a Citizen's Advisory Committee will be chosen in the near future, and they will make recommendations for community development to the City Council. The method by which this committee would gather information was not made clear. The mayor, together with the council, by the latter part of January will make final decisions on which ideas and methods Providence will use in disbursing its \$9.1 million in 1975.

To illustrate what real public participation means, let me relate my experiences of two years ago in a community one-half the size of Providence, which was deciding on a planned expansion of the town.

Confronted with this problem, this community of Stevenage in England set up a timetable for public participation. Over a period of eight weeks, members of the staff conducted 27 public meetings at which the question and location of

planned expansion was discussed. In addition, 35,000 summary copies of the proposed expansion report and a questionnaire were distributed to every household in the town; poster displays were mounted in public places; advertisements were placed in the newspapers; a public exhibition was set up; the staff personally answered hundreds of letters; and finally, the results of over 5,000 returned questionnaires were tabulated.

The questionnaire asked the residents of the town which of the proposals for expansion they favored. Although most questions required only a single mark, the open-ended request for a general comment generated a multitude of answers, needing 300 coding heads to facilitate the study. The result was a 100-page report published at the end of the eight weeks. Two weeks later, another 100-page report appeared in which revised proposals, based upon the public meetings, were presented. Few residents could claim that the staff did not do all within its powers to generate and incorporate public views into its final proposal to the government.

Citizen participation is a relatively new idea, and not without problems; it creates extra work, it generates organizational difficulties, and it is perplexing to determine who speaks for the community. But eventually, some sense of direction from the community is obtained. This is the democratic process; difficult and time consuming but allowing all to be heard.

It is not too late. The planning

department should make the provisions of the Community Development Act available in neighborhoods and to organizations which wish a meeting, at least one week before any scheduled meeting, and then they should go out to the neighborhood schools and church halls to find out what the residents of those areas have to say. In this way the city agents will have a better idea of the needs and priorities of the people.

The prospect of having \$26 million come into Providence over the next three years for "providing decent housing and a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate income" represents both a challenge and an opportunity. One public meeting of 225 persons held in the downtown area, advertised on too short notice and without adequate prior information of the provisions of the act, does not ensure the necessary public participation for a city of 175,000 persons.

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dence Department of Planning and Urban Development.

Under the provisions of the recently enacted Housing and Community Development Act, the federal government stipulates that one of the requirements municipalities must meet in applying for monies is the provision of adequate citizen participation. This concept provides for any and all citizens the opportunity to make known their views; planners do not have all the answers when looking into the future.

In the newspaper advertisement calling attention to the public meeting, it was stated that "an opportunity will be provided to all to participate in the development of a three-year community development plan." But given the short notice of the meeting (approximately one

