

Community control

PROVIDENCE — The problem of fire was very real to the early settlers of this country. For this reason, in 1626, it was decreed that thatched roofs on houses no longer would be allowed in the Plymouth Colony. Early New York, in 1648, stipulated that wooden chimneys no longer could be built on houses. These were early attempts at control over individuals by the community, in this case, for fire protection.

From these early measures came subsequent controls over sanitation. In 1652, Boston ruled that privies should be placed at least 12 feet from streets and houses. In Pennsylvania, minimum standards for housing were established in 1687 when residents were forced to move from their caves on the Delaware River so that these crude, earthen shelters could be destroyed.

Undoubtedly, there were complaints on the part of residents in these areas who felt that their individual rights were being abused and subjugated to that amorphous group called the community. If the community could restrict the type of materials that went into house construction, would it not be a matter of time before communities would determine where buildings could be located, the uses to which they could be put, the number of houses per acre, and the amount of space between buildings? Of course, all of these measures have now come to pass in the form of zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations which most communities have adopted and, whether we like them or not, which most of us have accepted because of the premise upon which they are based — the community good over individual good.

But what is the community? We have gone from individual house concern to that of neighborhood outlook, and now to town and city controls over land development and growth. Is the next step to be county or state controls?

In a recent column on the rights of community control, James J. Doyle, the editor of this page, in providing a comprehensive story on growth control in Petaluma, objected to the controls placed on communities by agencies larger than the local municipality when he said "... the growth of Big Brother, omniscient, powerful, throwing my dollars around with gay abandon, telling me what is best for me — and I am fed up. I know what is best for me, and to hell with the bureaucrats."

This view, undoubtedly, shared by many, points out the problems of growth and development which many communities are experiencing, but who will provide the solutions — local communities or some larger agency?

Steeped in the tradition of rugged individualism that is the hallmark of this country, many Americans find it anathema that communities are being urged, cajoled and coerced by larger agencies, be they state, regional or federal, to conform to a broader view of the total region. The problem is one of scale.

Try to imagine what would have happened if local communities in Tennessee and Alabama were able to prevent the federal government from constructing one of the most remarkable feats of American development in this century — the construction of a power generating and flood control system in seven states covering an area approximately 40 times

that of Rhode Island. Few could contest today the achievements of the Depression-built TVA which supplies cheap power, among other things, to the region and much of the eastern half of this country.

Another aspect of the problem is simply more people, currently increasing at the rate of two million a year over the past five years, and where they will live. There are other organizations which are looking at an entire region and, of necessity, taking a broader and longer range view than do local communities.

The New York State Urban Development Corporation, established during the Rockefeller administration, had the authority to place low and moderate income housing anywhere in the state of New York, thereby insuring that all communities accepted their "fair share" of this responsibility. Armed with the zoning override power, the UDC went to work and constructed some of the most architecturally inspired housing in the country. Subsequently, the UDC has fallen victim to the inflationary constraints of the present economy and has been forced to retrench because of these financial problems.

The Greater Hartford Process, a private regional planning agency working for the betterment of 29 communities in the Hartford region, is trying to provide some orderly arrangement of the growth taking place in that area. Because it has no statutory powers, it was unable to build a new town 15 miles east of Hartford because of local opposition. That community was thinking of what it meant to their local interests rather than looking at the planned, directional growth of the region.

In Rhode Island, the recently completed plan put together by the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program is an attempt to provide some semblance of direction and order in the development of this state over the next 15 years. It is only a guide; without some type of governmental clout to implement some of these changes, it will remain only an interesting and informative document.

Although we here are just reaching the stage where state government has placed some controls on development through regulations on wetlands, coastal zones and soil tests, the time will soon come when greater controls must come from someone larger than local communities to provide some sense of order on the development which is destined to take place.

I will not argue for the bureaucrats who, in some cases, have made horrendous errors regarding developmental growth and priorities. But there must be people and agencies taking the bigger view of our state rather than just that of local interests, and who have some sense of direction of where we should be moving. Together with strong citizen participation at all levels, these regionally oriented groups can determine what is best for the state and for the New England area.

It would be a mistake to espouse the philosophy of what is best for me — rather, we should be thinking in terms of what is best for us.

Chester Smolski is Director of Urban Studies at RIC.