

Even Bulletin 15 May '78

City need is jobs for young

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The federal Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 was a landmark piece of legislation which continues to benefit communities in need. Over the past three years Providence has received close to \$27 million which has been spent to improve housing, parks and historic buildings in addition to building and servicing community centers. The focus of this major legislation was on physical and social improvement of the community. The one unprovided area was economic development.

The principal need in our troubled cities today is jobs for the poor, the young, the blacks, and the underemployed; jobs to get people back on their feet and off the welfare rolls; and jobs to provide individuals with a sense of satisfaction and worth. Recognizing the merits of the 1974 Act and the need to broaden job opportunities, President Carter signed into law the Housing and Community Development Act of 1977 which continues to provide block grants to communities for an additional three years. But this Act adds economic development to the goals of physical and social improvement of communities.

Within certain federal guidelines, block grants allow each community to determine its own needs and then to fund those most deserving areas. In Providence the Citizens' Advisory Committee recommends money allocations to the Mayor who generally approves. Because of limited funds in the first year of the new Act and pressing needs in other areas, the Committee and the Mayor acted creditably by allocating \$100,000 for economic development.

Economic development necessarily is more than just a city effort; private interests and the state must help, too. The private sector, through the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, has given \$20,000 to this effort; the state, through use of Economic Development Administration funds, has contributed \$40,000; and the city has contributed \$40,000 of its economic development funding from Community Development. A subcommittee of the Chamber's Industrial Development Task Force, consisting of

representatives from the private, city and state sectors, will use some of these funds to select a consulting firm to determine potential sites within the city for industrial park development. The consultant's report should be ready by early fall.

Industrial park sites require large blocks of land on which to place buildings, roads, parking areas and space for expansion. In a city which averages 9,300 people per square mile, this task will not be easy. Yet, interestingly, more land is available as families continue to migrate to the suburbs, a trend going on since 1940 when population density averaged 14,000 per every square mile of city land.

This exodus of city residents has created a problem of abandoned, derelict properties which produce no tax revenues for the city. Approximately 600 parcels of property remain on the city books, properties which the city has been unable to sell at tax sale auctions. Thanks to imaginative thinking of the new City Treasurer, a new method of selling such properties will start in June. These "treasurer's sales" allow residents to buy an available undersized lot next to their property. Also, the new sales method will open the door for the city to start accumulating land for potential industrial sites.

Abandoned properties are usually difficult to sell but the treasurer's sale will make such properties more attractive to potential buyers by cutting costs, litigation and the time required to establish ownership.

Should all the 600 properties be sold, the tax revenue generated would amount only to \$31,000, but these properties would be back in use and providing tax revenue. The question is, what use and how much revenue?

Here we have a natural. On the one hand a city, state and private group is looking for land to create jobs for city residents and others, while the city is seeking to sell off land. The solution appears so simple: Have the city retain ownership of the land, assemble contiguous blocks of land by purchase or eminent domain where possible, and get the land ready for investment in job opportunities.

It would be a mistake to sell off all the properties now and later buy them back at inflated prices. And it would be a mistake to put the land into new residential development, which provides little tax revenue, and when older houses in the city cry out for rehabilitation.

At a time when too many litter-covered lots lie vacant in the city, when new jobs are desperately needed, and when tax revenues must be increased, it is imperative that choice vacant land for industrial development be "banked" by the city. In this effort, the city should work closely with the Chamber Committee to generate jobs, increase tax revenue and, in the process, bring valuable land back into productive use.

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