

Implicit 178

The cities do need help

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The lead editorial in the Providence Sunday Journal of December 7, 1986 is completely off mark and deserves to be answered. The attitude expressed by the writer conveys the specious view that because our nation's cities are not being burned down or torn apart by race riots at the present time then things are not really all that bad in our urban centers.

Oh yes, the editorial notes, there is some crime on the streets, there is some homelessness, and drugs are a problem but the ills of American cities, while undeniably real, do not seem so daunting when considered in historical context." Further, cities "are exaggerating their woes and misdirecting their pleas" for federal help in solving their problems, vis-a-vis the request expressed at the recently concluded conference of the National League of Cities.

There is no question that the ills of our society are concentrated in our cities where poverty, crime, homelessness, substandard housing, inadequate public transportation, air pollution and a host of other social and physical problems are commonly found. Maybe not all in Providence but certainly throughout the country, our cities are saddled with a host of problems that the federal government can better address.

Considered in an historical context, the cities of this country have not received the help that European cities, for example, have received.

It is ironic that Americans return from a London, Paris, Vienna, Munich or Geneva and laud the beautiful cities of Europe, their culture, cleanliness, order and safety yet ex-

pect little of our government, as the Journal editorial suggests to improve our own cities to match those that they go to visit.

The public transit and metropolitan government of Toronto as models of efficiency; the sense of safety almost anywhere in London, a city one-half the area of Rhode Island; the majesty of a Paris reflecting a long history of architectural and cultural achievement; and the order, cleanliness and beauty of many German and Swiss cities are examples of good urban centers that work. And in other cities throughout the world national governments provide the financial help to make their cities viable and attractive.

But not here, the editorial states, better that cities do it on their own, be innovative and work with public-private partnerships or appeal to their state governments for help. State help? In this state we have the disgrace of the largest public library in Rhode Island located within view of the state capitol being closed three days each week, primarily because the state does not recognize that the Providence Public Library is a statewide facility rather than just a city service. So much for state help!

It is true that all of the above sources of help must be used but the federal government still must provide the leadership role. An urban enterprise zone program has been discussed ever since our President took office six years ago yet, to date, nothing has been done except that some states have implemented limited programs and have had a modicum of success.

The Urban Development Action Grant program has been most successful in providing federal money to stimulate private investment,

here used for a parking garage on Weybosset Street or requested for proposed development at the Foundry in Providence, yet the present administration wants to cut off this successful program.

Poverty is concentrated in cities and the number of Americans in poverty has increased in the past six years from 26 million to 33 million. Now we are besieged with reports of homelessness, a problem of cities that has reached crisis proportions. Nearly 1,000 families and individuals in Providence, between 5,000 and 7,000 in Atlanta and the thousands living in welfare hotels in New York City are harsh reminders of cities trying to cope but with little federal help.

Crime is still a serious problem in our cities — try walking the streets of Providence at night, for example, or as the Mayor of Cleveland said while in Israel on a visit, "I feel safer here than in some neighborhoods in my city."

It is unfortunate that the Journal is not sympathetic to cities getting federal funds to help solve their social ills yet the Capital Center, highly praised by this newspaper as the future hope of the Providence downtown, goes ahead with most of the \$100 million project costs being funded with federal money.

Lyndon B. Johnson said it well, "Our society will never be great unless our cities are great." And that requires a federal commitment and money. Too bad the Journal does not see it this way, or would it have us wait until the frustrated poor and minority again take to the streets in violent rage to call attention to their plight?

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