

Porter and Rouse — believers in cities and opportunities

Chester Smolski

CLEVELAND — His name may not be familiar, but it should be. He helped originate and implement the Marshall Plan, this nation's effort to help European recovery in the post-war years. Throughout his long and distinguished career he touched many bases as editor and publisher of a trade newspaper, U.S. diplomat in several European cities and successful businessman and president of his own firm. Upon retirement several years ago, he developed an interest in cities, wrote a book about them, and four years ago at an age when many have packed it in, became director of the Urban Recovery Project at the College of Urban Affairs of Cleveland State University. Living in the new town of Reston, Va., and working in Cleveland does not appear to affect the work habits or creative thinking of this energetic man of 74 — Paul R. Porter.

It was Porter's idea to bring together representatives of cities that have recorded successes in various areas of revitalization, such as housing, neighborhoods and economic development, to share their ideas. It seemed like a simple idea for a conference, but it was unique, in that cities do not know, surprisingly, about the successes of other cities. They all know the problems, but few are aware of the variety of accomplishments achieved elsewhere. With sponsorship by the city of Cleveland, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and Cleveland State University, Porter brought 16 cities together to present their stories at the Cities' Congress on Roads to Recovery.

The 300 attending the congress were an unusual mix. There were mayors from several of the 49 cities represented, architects, developers, bankers, academicians, government officials, merchants, hospital officials, newspaper publishers, neighborhood organizers and utility company presidents, among others. It was the coming together of this

healthy variety of people that made the meeting interesting and productive.

The communities invited to the meeting were those 54 major cities that lost population over the past decade: Providence was one of them. In fact, from the data provided, Providence, at 38.1 percent, had the third largest decline from its peak population of all these cities, after St. Louis and Buffalo. It was unfortunate that no representative from Providence was there to learn what other cities have accomplished — or, better, to share some of its own successes. This was a fine opportunity for some national public exposure but, typically, we did not, nor do not, do a good job of boosting and selling ourselves. Yet some people at the meeting are aware of this city's potential. James Rouse is one of them.

Rouse, builder of the new town of Columbia, Maryland, Harborplace in Baltimore, Faneuil Hall Marketplace and other developments, gave the keynote address

for the three-day congress. The ideas expressed are too numerous to mention here and necessitate a separate discussion. Needless to say, his remarks drew a rousing response from what could have been a jaded audience that had been exposed many times to others and their analyses of cities. Appropriate here are Rouse's comments on Providence that were garnered from a brief interview with him after his talk.

James Rouse was in Providence a few years ago to talk to some local business people and, while here, was given a quick tour of downtown and some neighborhoods. He was impressed with the good stock of housing in the city and the lack of slums, as he knows them from other cities. And he remembers Providence.

The future soft spot in real estate will be in the suburbs, according to Rouse, and the dynamic real estate market will be in the center city. When I asked him about Providence, he said that our capital city,

with its good housing, will grow faster than the suburbs, and that if he were to invest, he would rather have 20 acres within five minutes of downtown than 20 acres 30 minutes from the city. When Rouse left the interview session at which others had also queried him, he came over to me and shook hands. His parting words were: "Providence is a great city."

In our youth-oriented society, we sometimes forget the wisdom gathered through long years of experience by older citizens — older people whose years belie their youthful approach to problems. It is the wisdom of such people as Paul Porter and James Rouse, movers in our society, that help us to believe in cities and make us aware of their opportunities. This hope for the future of our cities is the message they conveyed to a younger generation at the congress.

•••
Chester E. Smolski is Director of Geography and Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.