A SMALLER CITY MOVES AHEAD

July 1961
A Smaller City Moves Ahead

By ELDREDGE LOVELACE, St. Louis, Mo.

The wide publicity given to the problems of the big city—and the spectacular proposals made to solve them—serves to obscure the steady progress being made by our smaller communities in planning and directing their future growth. The first city to obtain approval of its "workable program" under the Housing Act of 1954 had a population of less than 20,000 persons. The total population of cities of 10,000 to 50,000 was 20,226,000 in 1950—greater than the 17,404,000 in cities of 1,000,000 or more. Activities of the smaller cities warrant more than local attention.

Hutchinson, Kansas presents an example of the type of progress being made by the smaller cities. Located close to the center of Kansas, Hutchinson has a current population in the vicinity of 36,000—it was 33,600 in 1950. It is a trade center, had war-time industrial expansion, and for many years has been known for its salt mines and refineries. Hutchinson prepared a comprehensive city plan in 1920. Unfortunately, this activity was in advance of State legislative authority and the plan was not officially adopted or published. The major accomplishment under this plan was the adoption—and fairly consistent enforcement—of a zoning ordinance.

Two major problems have always plagued the physical development of Hutchinson. The city is bisected by the main line of the Sante Fe Railroad which acts as a barrier between the main residential areas and the central business district. The 1920 plan was based upon the expectation that the future growth of the city would be large enough to justify elevation of the railroad. However, changes in the expected amounts of growth and in the railroad traffic have made this solution impracticable.

The second problem has to do with the site of the city itself. It is flat, in the flood plain of the Arkansas River, and further subject to flooding from the usually innocent appearing "Cow Creek" which traverses the heart of the city itself. This problem has been dealt with. The "Hutchinson Flood Control Project" was authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1936; construction was initiated in 1952 and is practically finished. This project consists of a leveed canal to permit flood waters on Cow Creek to bypass the city plus levees on both sides of the Arkansas River. The total cost of this project is about $6,856,000 with the City's portion coming to some $1,543,000.

In 1947, Hutchinson adopted the council-manager form of government and shortly thereafter—in 1948—decided to embark on a two-year program to revise and bring up-to-date the city plan of 1920. This revised city plan was officially adopted and published in August, 1951. A new zoning ordinance—a major feature of the plan—was enacted more than a year earlier—in March, of 1950. The official city plan is kept alive by an alert and active City Planning Com-
Planning and Civic Comment

mission and by citizens' organizations. It is kept up-to-date by the Planning Commission and the City staff and is in daily use by both officials and citizens in connection with municipal problems and current projects.

In the short span of four years there have been major accomplishments in carrying out the plan. In addition to the zoning ordinance, these include:

1. State legislation has been obtained permitting the city to control subdividing within three miles of the city limits. Subdivision regulations have been adopted pursuant to this authority.

2. State legislation has been secured permitting the County to zone areas adjacent to the City. A County Planning Commission has been appointed and plans are being prepared for the zoning of the unincorporated area within three miles of the City.

3. A Major Street Plan (part of the official plan) was carefully worked out with officials of the State Highway Commission. A new four-lane bridge over the Arkansas River (an important part of the plan) is under construction. A new Santa Fe station (under construction) will enable abandonment of the old station and the extension of Walnut Street (an important downtown street) across the tracks. East 4th Street, an important highway entrance, has been resurfaced; new street lights installed; curb restored and replaced; and encroachments in the right-of-way removed, completely transforming its appearance. Parts of Eleventh Avenue have been widened and paved by the City and parts of 17th Street paved by the County.

4. Through use of funds from parking meters the City has acquired the major part of the off-street parking lots for customers proposed in the city plan. Three lots with a capacity of 188 cars have been acquired.

5. Most of the city's park acreage is in one park in the south part of the community along the Arkansas River. Additional neighborhood parks in the residential areas to the north are badly needed and a series of these were proposed in the city plan. One seven acre park has been acquired; discussions are underway with the Board of the State Fair for joint park use of part of the Fairgrounds for another park; and an election will be held this Spring for a park bond issue to acquire and improve a third neighborhood park in the northwestern part of the city. In addition, a systematic program for improving Carey Park (the one large park) has been underway for four years. The flood control project necessitated many changes in this park.

6. In accordance with recommendations of the city plan the city government has taken over responsibility for planting, care and maintenance of street trees. An adequately staffed and equipped forestry crew is now in operation.

7. The School Board has acquired one high school site and one elementary school site and enlarged the site of one elementary school and one junior high school. Two new elementary schools have been built and two elementary schools and one junior high school enlarged.
Planning and Civic Comment

Of greater importance than the plan—or the improvements made—is the sustained civic interest that has been engendered by the planning program. The people of Hutchinson have become informed about civic problems and found the way to effective action. Among other things, this has resulted in an unusual "clean-up" campaign ("Operation Tidy") which has aroused much interest in other communities.*

As is true in most cities, Hutchinson has many ordinances "on the books" relating to keeping property in a safe and sanitary condition. These are usually enforced only when a complaint is made or when conditions have gotten completely out of hand. Then, too, most communities have an annual "clean-up, paint-up" campaign—usually consisting of publicity, a parade, and little else.

With the full and active support of such organizations as the Chamber of Commerce, the Real Estate Board, the Insurance Board, the Citizens’ Improvement Club and the Junior Chamber of Commerce, City officials of Hutchinson in the Spring of 1934 decided to undertake a real clean-up campaign.

An inspection team of three—the building inspector, the fire inspector and the sanitary inspector—were set to work inspecting every residential property in the city, checking it against violations of all city ordinances. Working two days a week, 9950 properties were inspected between March 23 and May 20. Only 2270 properties were found not to be in violation of one or more city ordinances. Those in violation were notified and requested to correct the violations. Follow-up inspections show that more than 90 percent corrected all their violations. To date, 72 cases have been taken to court; all were found guilty.

Here are some of the results:

191 residences connected to sewers.
1500 new patrons for the city's voluntary refuse and garbage disposal service.
40 percent decrease in fires set by burning trash.
66 of 68 junk yards removed; remainder fenced.
Insect control problem almost eliminated.

Only one case of polio—although incidence in Kansas was up 21 percent.

"Operation Tidy" is now being extended to commercial and industrial areas. It has been so successful that plans have been made to inspect every property in the city three times a year—a continuing, permanent campaign. As a result, many of the blighted areas of the city have been greatly improved.

The Hutchinson experience is not unique; many of the smaller cities can tell a similar story. Despite the many learned articles from the "ivory towers" of our universities, present-day city plans are not "gathering dust"—they are being carried out—and carried out quite rapidly. But even more important, they are encouraging a civic interest that points to even greater accomplishments in the future.

*See American City for March, 1935.