APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

1952
Community Problems Require Long-Range Solution

The title assigned for this talk in itself demonstrates a basic obstacle in the way of our building better communities. The negative approach is clearly identified in the title. Apparently, we must first have problems and then seek to solve them. Basically this approach is wrong. By looking ahead and anticipating future conditions, we can prevent problems which is really simpler and cheaper than is the solving of problems after they have occurred.

It is not too difficult to look ahead and anticipate future community needs. For example, the number of automobiles is increasing each year. In the next two to three decades we will have many more on the streets than we have at the present time. Studies prepared by the State Highway Planning Survey indicate within reasonable limits the number of these that we will have to contend with. New streets and highways will be needed. Additional parking spaces will have to be provided. School facilities provide another example. Through studies of the fluctuation in the birth rate it is possible to anticipate future school enrollment, again within reasonable limits. It is possible to look ahead and
know what the need for schools is going to be. Similarly, anticipated future needs can be estimated, without too much difficulty, for other major community facilities such as fire protection, sewers, water, parks, etc. If these needs could just be estimated and adequate preparation made for them in advance, we could eliminate the "community problems" and as a by-product eliminate talks such as this on the subject of "Approaches to Community Problems".

Why don't we do these things as a matter of course? This question has puzzled many persons in the field of municipal development and city planning. One reason why we don't is because there are so many immediate problems, mostly inherited from past generations of expediency, immediate problems that take up all our time in providing for immediate solutions. During the past two years in which the comprehensive plan of Lincoln was being prepared, the City Council was confronted with a great number of immediate and difficult problems. These ranged from a very dramatic problem in connection with the cankerworms that were about to eat up all the trees one summer, to controversies over the regulation of dogs within the city limits, to very major problems caused by flash floods and breaking water mains during periods of heavy water usage. This situation is not at all unusual in Lincoln. Rather it is typical of virtually every city. These immediate problems require so much attention that no time is left on the part of city officials to look ahead, anticipate future needs, and eliminate possible future problems. This type of thinking - this type of handling of our municipal affairs based almost entirely upon expediency, has become an ingrained habit.
An analysis of these immediate problems that require so much of our attention indicates that virtually all of them result from the lack of a long-range approach. Almost all could have been prevented at a cost far lower than we pay for their solution. When this basic problem is analyzed further, we find that a major cause has been that an extremely low priority has been placed upon looking ahead in municipal affairs.

City Planning can Eliminate Community Problems

There is nothing particularly new or startling in the basic idea of long-range city planning. It has been carried on for many years in a great number of communities with varying degrees of success.

City planning must begin with a city plan - a carefully developed somewhat detailed picture or blueprint of the future city. A city plan serves as a guide for the direction of public improvements indicating their location and scale, as well as a guide for the coordination of private development usually accomplished by zoning, land subdivision control, housing ordinances, special building lines, etc.

To be of value the city plan must be realistic and practical based on facts and on careful estimates of future needs. A major part of a modern city plan consists of investigations of the economic background of the city, of careful estimates of population growth, and studies and plans showing the most desirable location of future population of the city. These studies in themselves give indications of width and location of major streets, trunk line sewers, storm drains, schools and parks. Based on these
studies it is possible to make overall general plans for these various facilities. Zoning, of course, is the major part of the city plan. With the use and intensity of private development directed in accordance with the plan, there is a definite basis for street plans, school plans, sewer plans, etc. In addition, zoning provides a major protection to the property values that form the tax base of the city and provides that guarantee of environment so essential to the encouragement of private investment in buildings.

While based on facts and logic, the city plan need not be an insipid and tiresome technical document. Good city plans point the way toward development of a better community at a lower cost. Good city plans show how the most desirable school, park and street systems may be attained. As such they have a definite inspirational value and may be of very considerable assistance in unifying a community around one generally accepted valid objective.

Two examples may help demonstrate the relation of a city plan to problems that are being given more than usual attention at this conference. The vision of satisfactory off-street parking space adjacent to the central business districts of our cities is a subject being given wide attention at the present time. In the studies that are made as a part of a city plan, estimates of future traffic flow within a central business district are customarily undertaken. These indicate the street space that will have to be reserved in the downtown area to move traffic. Any spaces not needed for this purpose can then be used for parking. It has been universally demonstrated that not enough street space remains to satisfy the parking needs. Off-street parking lots would be
required. If these are to be in a satisfactory location and to be permanent, they will have to be public in nature. Our central business districts usually pay a very large part of the total tax bill of the city. If they die on the vine because of lack of parking space, the entire community will suffer. Public residents should consequently be directed to provide for this parking space. The city plan will indicate to what extent and in what direction the business district should grow. These studies and the traffic estimates will indicate the number of spaces needed and the best location for the parking lots.

A second problem is the problem of financing. Here again this problem is solved on a year to year basis of expediency. With a city plan indicating the probable future growth of the community and its needs, it is possible to make estimates of financial requirements over a considerable period of time. Obviously the amount of money needed to do the job should be determined before financing methods are investigated. Studies indicate that comprehensive plans can be married out at a cost of between 4¢ and 6¢ per person per day. Basically the resources to do the job are available. In many cases we may complain of being hamstrung by obsolete and inadequate state legislation on financing community improvements. At the same time, however, is it not true that we have seldom make an adequate factual demonstration of our exact needs to our state legislators? We cannot blame them too much when they have never known exactly what was required.

Suburban Cities in Particular Demonstrate the Validity of the Planning Concept

City planning is not a new or untried theoretical concept. Cities such as Kansas City, Missouri; St. Louis, Minneapolis and Cincinnati demonstrate some of the advantages of city planning. The real
possibilities of the planning concept, however, are demonstrated more particularly by the suburban communities. Cities such as Winnetka, Illinois; Wyoming, Ohio; Webster Groves and University City, Missouri, for example. University City is at a 20-fold increase in population following a comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance.

The reason why the suburbs provide such a particularly fine demonstration of the value of a city plan is that the residents of a suburb have a unified concept of community objectives. They want and demand that their community be a good place in which to live and that their residential values be protected and enhanced. Usually with a relatively small population they are able to make their wishes known and their local governing bodies in no uncertain terms.

In central cities, however, we do not have this generally accepted unified objective. The central cities, even the smaller city, is divided into many groups with divergent interests and objectives often conflicting in nature. There are organizations for the promotion of commerce and industry which by their action indicate that they carry nothing of the residential amenities of a city so long as business and industry prospers and groups planning the interest of one section over and above the interests of the entire community. This lack of unity - this lack of a community accepted objective for the development of the city - is another obstacle in the path of our looking ahead in carrying out a comprehensive city plan.
Our basic need is a higher priority for long-range thinking for looking ahead. If we are to eliminate community problems we must make it more important to prevent these problems than it is to solve them. This we have not done. Long-range planning, the anticipation of needs, is the tail on the dog. It receives our attention only when we have nothing else to do. No wonder our communities are in trouble - no wonder our City Councils seem to be in "hot water" most of the time.

This higher priority for the long-range approach can only be brought about by a sustained demand on the part of the general citizenship of the community. Their interest and support must be aroused. Fortunately great progress is being made in programs to interest the citizen in local affairs. The most important place to start is in the high school. Only on this broad basis of sustained and educated citizen interest and support can we obtain the city government that will give us first priority to the long-range development of the city.