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THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN URBAN LAND USE PLANNING

JOHN T. HOWARD*

Urban land use planning, as the phrase is used in this paper, refers to the planning of the entire urban physical environment in terms of the location (pattern, arrangement, interrelationships) and the quality (density, bulk, design) of all the land uses that comprise a "city." Such planning is comprehensive in coverage: all of a metropolitan area, or at least all of a single city or county's area of jurisdiction. Undertaken not only for, but also in behalf of, an entire urban community, it is almost by definition a governmental activity, since only a governmental unit is formally designated ("with the consent of the governed") to represent the totality of interests within its jurisdiction.¹

Urban land use planning is only one phase of the process through which our cities grow and change their shape and form. The role of the federal government can be effectively considered only against the background of the process as a whole.

The end of the process is, of course, the act of development (or redevelopment) of land for any of the many component urban land uses—residence, industry, stores, offices, schools, churches, playgrounds, and so forth. This act of development is preceded by a decision to develop—for the "private" uses of land, by a private person or enterprise; for the "public" uses, by some agency of government.

In the case of the governmental decision, it may or may not be influenced by urban land use planning, as performed by that or some other unit of government.

In the case of the private decision, it is almost surely influenced, either positively or negatively, by some one or more prior governmental policies, programs, or regulations—zoning, tax assessment methods, water line extensions, FHA mortgage terms. And again, each of these governmental determinations may or may not have been influenced by or related to formal urban land use planning.

Thus the tie through from the planning phase to its final objective, the actual development, is a tenuous one, varying in strength from place to place, from time to time, and from one kind or size of land use to another. But the planning itself is meaningless without that tie. Its effec-

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¹ The fact that "land use planning" is sometimes properly undertaken by such civic associations as the New York Regional Plan Association, Inc., is irrelevant. When such nongovernmental bodies plan, they do so to plug a gap in governmental structure or functions in order to "educate" the public or public officials.

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tiveness in actually influencing urban growth and change may be helped or hindered, on purpose or accidentally, by interventions at any point along the line between the planner's drafting board or computer, and the first shovelful of earth.

This article, then, will seek to appraise the role of the federal government, not merely in the making of urban land use plans, but also in the other governmental and private processes by which the plans are carried out, or distorted, or perverted.

THE FEDERAL ROLE IN THE NATIONAL URBAN PATTERN

Behind every local urban plan lies an appraisal of the growth and development prospects of the locality. Although perhaps peripheral to this article, the influence of federal decisions on the national pattern of distribution of urban population and economic activity is too significant to ignore. It is the more significant because it is officially ignored as a matter of understandable political realism. In the early years of the Nation, federal policies were explicitly framed in terms of their intended effect on regional growth and development—the Homestead Act,\(^2\) to name but a single example. In more recent years, as it has seemed that federal action to develop one region could only be taken at the expense of another, the idea of explicit national regional development policies has been soft-pedaled.

The federal action itself, however, has continued. Major national public works do influence the relative potential for growth and prosperity of different regions, and therefore of different cities. Power dams, flood control dams, irrigation projects, canals, seaways—these are obvious examples. They are approved or rejected through political pulling and hauling of affected special interests or areas. The antagonists fully recognize the developmental significance to the region, but their debate is wholly untouched and unilluminated by any attempt to frame a national policy, in terms of the aggregate of all national interests, as to the "best" disposition of our human and economic resources across the national landscape. The same can be said of federal action in control of rail and water freight rates: the impact upon regional development patterns is clear, but a national policy is absent.

There is another form of federal action, more openly aimed at influencing the location of economic activity, exemplified by a formally adopted policy which might have drastically affected the pattern of urban growth (but didn't). This, shortly after the invention of atomic weapons, was a tax concession in the form of accelerated amortization offered to defense

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plants if they would locate in "safe" areas. Rigorously applied, it would have resulted in a substantial part of the new post-war industrial plant that has been built in our biggest metropolitan areas (and helped their "population explosion") being built instead in isolated smaller cities, which would then have had more of the total population growth. The policy was abandoned in the face of the apparent economic reality of the efficiency of the very big city. This may or may not have been wise. In any case, this was an explicit policy of potentially far-reaching effect upon our national urban pattern, which however was first adopted and then abandoned without any apparent consideration of this aspect of its impact.

Currently the federal government is once again about to formally intervene in regional economic development, pursuant to "depressed areas" legislation. Even here, this is a "crisis" approach, not backed up by long-range national planning policy studies.

It may, of course, be wise to continue to leave federal decisions which have impact upon differential regional development to the present one-at-a-time methods of ad hoc competitive struggle. There is, however, a case to be made for setting up some machinery to keep track of what we are doing and to evaluate the consequences of alternative decisions in the light of their impact on regional and city growth and prosperity. This is the sort of mechanism for policy study that the National Resources Planning Board was developing into before it was killed in the early 1940's. If it had continued, some of our federal decisions might have been different; at least they would have been more knowledgeable.


5. The Board originated as the National Planning Board, a part of the Public Works Administration. It took its final name in 1939, when it was moved into the Executive Office of the President, and died in 1943 when Congress refused to vote appropriations for it. It was basically a reporting agency, concentrating first on national problems requiring long-range planning, including public works, power and transportation, land and water use, housing, the structure of the national economy, the development of the national resources, and urbanism. As the war approached it shifted its view to war purposes. But the short-range necessities of war production were a diversion from the Board's original long-range concepts, and the dominance of the War Production Board and the military services reduced the Board's role to a minor one. When it again became interested in long-range planning, looking forward to demobilization while the war was still on, Congress regarded it as visionary and abandoned it. For a full discussion of the Board by one of its members see Merriam, The National Resources Planning Board, 38 Am. Pol. Sci. Rev. 1078 (1944).
In the preparation of plans for urban land uses within a given locality, the federal government has of course no direct statutory authority or responsibility.\(^6\)

For some years, however, federal agencies have played a substantial role by stimulating such planning and affording it direct financial support. The stimulation itself has been financially oriented through the requirement of formal comprehensive plan preparation and adoption by a locality as a condition of eligibility for various kinds of federal aid, mainly urban renewal.\(^7\)

This requirement involved the Government in an awkward administrative position. It presented no serious problems in those relatively few cities that had already recognized the importance of a long-range and comprehensive approach to guiding their future development and had established well-staffed planning departments operating as integral elements of municipal government. The other cities, eager for the plums of federal aid (for urban redevelopment, primarily), hurried to get into the planning act, often without either understanding it or wanting it. The results were of two kinds. One group of these cities discovered that city planning was useful for itself, as well as being necessary to get the federal funds. Thus converted, they too made planning a continuing municipal function. The other group went through the motions only to earn eligibility. The "comprehensive plans" prepared were perfunctory, technically weak, and never intended to play any real part in the developmental process outlined in the early paragraphs of this article.

Nevertheless, all the cities got their federal money. Here lies the awkwardness. The federal agency shied away from evaluating the plans, both as a matter of principle (to refrain from federal dictation of local programs) and because it was not technically in a position to judge; its staff was too small and, except at the upper levels, ill-qualified. So inevitably there was some violation of the spirit of the law, which was that no city should receive federal funds in aid of urban redevelopment unless it knew enough about what it was doing, via sound land use planning, to use the money wisely and in the public interest.

On the whole, however, the net effect of this kind of requirement has been favorable. The amount of city planning that has been done in American cities is very much greater than before. Because of the sheer increase in quantity, there is also more "bad" planning. But in general the quality as well as the quantity has increased, and, perhaps more im-

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\(^6\) Two obvious kinds of exception, the National Capital and those military installations so large as to be cities in themselves, are omitted for the sake of relative simplicity.

important, the use of the planning by municipal government as an aid in arriving at developmental decisions has greatly expanded.

Direct financial assistance for urban land use planning is a similar, yet different, story. For several years federal funds have been available, on a matching basis, to help get started on urban land use planning and the other elements of long-range comprehensive city planning for two kinds of urban areas: small municipalities (at first under 25,000 population, now under 50,000) and metropolitan regions. This program is independent of urban renewal or other federal aids.

This direct aid to metropolitan planning has been important and valuable. It prompted the establishment of a number of metropolitan planning agencies and speeded up the work of a number of others. Such agencies are usually orphans; they float unattached to any metropolitan governments (except Miami-Dade County), so they cannot be built into governmental decision-making processes as can municipal planning. Thus their work is even more advisory than usual—their effectiveness depends solely on their ability to exhort and educate a myriad public bodies to which they have little formal connection and less political significance, plus an indifferent public. Their advice will be heeded only if it is compelling in force and logic, which requires that it be based on sound and extensive technical work—which, in turn, their potential advisees have not been too eager to finance in advance of any demonstration of utility. In this situation the federal assistance program has enabled official metropolitan planning agencies to at least begin to put themselves in a position to earn the right to have their advice listened to.

The aid program to small municipalities had a similar noble aim. It was directed largely at suburban communities, which have undergone explosive growth all across the country, often if not usually of very poor quality. Urbanization proceeds quickly, even if piecemeal; but once a farm has been transformed into a neighborhood, people (and local government) will have to live with it for a century.

This program has been successful—too successful for its own good. The chance for some free money has alerted hundreds of cities and towns

9. After several earlier unsuccessful attempts, the voters of Dade County passed a “home rule” amendment, Fla. Const. art. 8, § 11, in the general election of 1956, and approved a charter for metropolitan government in May 1957. The charter establishes the Board of County Commissioners as the governing body of the county, and provides for area-wide administration of sewage collection and disposal, water supply and conservation, planning of arterial roads, bridges and tunnels, mass transportation, traffic control, urban renewal and other functions. But each municipality may exercise all powers relating to local affairs not inconsistent with the charter. Each municipality may provide for higher standards of zoning, service, and regulation than those provided for the entire area in order that its individual character and standards may be preserved.
to planning. Many of them have made good use of it, but many have wasted their (and our) money on good planning which was paid for and not used. And yet another many have been soured permanently on planning because what they got was incompetently performed.

There are a number of reasons for these failures. One serious one is that the sudden demand for planning service far exceeded the capacity of the small and young planning profession. This resulted in two kinds of incompetent planning: work done by trained but inexperienced planners thrust too soon (or thrusting themselves too soon) into positions of responsibility for which they had the knowledge but not the wisdom, and work done by architects, engineers, and others from related fields, enticed by a chance for new experience (or new money) but ignorant of the professional techniques of urban land use planning.

The other cause for failure is less excusable; it stems from the administration of the program. These funds are disbursed not directly to the municipalities but through state agencies, with only loose federal controls. There is a wide variety of administrative set-ups; in most states the planning service is provided through contracts with consultants chosen by the local planning agencies. Such a contract usually runs for a year or two and in return for a fixed sum calls for the delivery of a specified list of products, e.g., a land use survey, a population forecast, a master plan and a revised zoning ordinance.

Now this is the worst of a number of alternative ways to spend money on planning service if the objective is "effective" planning, that is, advice which actually influences the location and form of urban development. It is a little like signing up a doctor for a year's health services, specifying in advance a thorough diagnosis and an appendectomy regardless of what the diagnosis shows or of what diseases the patient catches during the year. Repeatedly, urgent current developmental problems arise in the middle of such a contract, unforeseen and unforeseeable; but the package-contract consultant cannot legally spend his efforts on these problems.

The obvious alternative to the package contract, if consultant firms must be used rather than a municipal professional staff, is a contract for a given number of man-days or months of professional time to be devoted to the locality's planning problems as they arise—perhaps a comprehen-

10. The Housing and Finance Administrator is authorized to make the planning grants to “State planning agencies, or (in States where no such planning agency exists) to agencies or instrumentalities of State government designated by the Governor of the State and acceptable to the Administrator as capable of carrying out the planning functions contemplated by this section. . . . In extending financial assistance under this section, the Administrator may require such assurances as he deems adequate that the appropriate State and local agencies are making reasonable progress in the development of the elements of comprehensive planning.” Housing Act of 1954, § 701, as amended, 73 Stat. 678, 40 U.S.C. § 461 (Supp. I, 1959).
sive land use survey, but instead perhaps a quick analysis of an unexpected application for a big shopping-center zone change. But a package contract is far easier to administer, especially for an accounting office (which seems to be the villain of this piece): “received, one zoning ordinance with map”—never mind whether it is a good or bad job, that part of the contract is fulfilled.

Another drawback to the package-contract method is the distorted notion of “planning” which it conveys to the municipality, which to be eligible for this sort of aid must be inexperienced in the use of this governmental instrument. The delusion is fostered that, once a locality has bought a plan, it has planning. This is true only in the very simplest situations. A comprehensive plan is a guide to a series of developmental decisions, but not a substitute, years in advance, for those decisions. No planner is that prescient. The plan is merely a necessary background to the application of planning practices and principles to each such decision as it arises. And some of these occasions may call for revising the plan, rather than bending the decision to fit it. This is why the history of “package” planning, in the absence of continuous professional planning service to the purchaser after delivery, is a history of ineffectiveness, leaving libraries of handsome reports stacked in the basement and never looked at.

This evaluation of federal aid to small-city urban land use planning is harsh. It suggests that, as an offset to the clear benefits that have resulted in many states and to many localities, there has also been widespread waste of limited professional planning resources and a fostering of misuse of planning itself. Perhaps the program could not have been handled otherwise; perhaps it has done more good than harm. But a really full-scale examination, beyond this author’s scope, might develop the case for a contrary view.

**Direct Federal Urban Land Use Decisions**

The federal government, through the far-flung establishments of its many agencies which perform governmental functions all over the country, is itself a direct force in urban land development. (For example, the federal government is the largest single employer in New York City.) Federal office buildings, military airports, naval repair bases, and other installations require significant quantities of urban land in many metropolitan areas and smaller cities. Its establishments are often focal features of the urban landscape—monumental buildings, centers of large employment, generators of traffic.

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11. Statistic quoted by Luther Gulick, former City Administrator of New York, at a meeting attended by the author.
The nature of the impact of these local federal activities (or of their abandonment) upon urban land use and development is too various to summarize. What is important to local planning is that, because the "land developer" for these operations is a superior government, it is exempt from local legal controls and therefore from formal adherence to local land use planning.

Actual performance has varied widely. In some instances, federal agencies have cooperated with local planning, in effect voluntarily submitting to the same controls as would regulate a private developer. In others, the agencies have used their own urban planning facilities to arrive at decisions on location, density, design and the like; and these decisions, though "comprehensive" in terms of the federal establishment itself, may or may not jibe with the best land use planning practices from the point of view of the local community. In yet other cases, the federal agencies have bulled through without regard for long-term or large-scale land use relationships, either their own or the community's.

There is perhaps room for a formal federal policy in this area. It probably could not go so far as to require federal agencies to conform to local plans in all cases; there may well occur irreconcilable conflict between the interests of a locality and the requirements of the Nation. But such a policy could surely require attention to local plans prior to the making of a federal-agency decision, and perhaps set up some hurdle such as approval by a higher-level federal official for any departure from the local plans. The benefits would accrue not only to the urban community but very probably to the efficiency of the federal activity as well.

THE FEDERAL ROLE IN URBAN LAND USE DEVELOPMENT DECISIONS

Local land use planning is done in the light of the realities of land development prospects—or else, if done otherwise, it is brushed aside and the development occurs anyway. In either case, the impact must be recognized of a series of federal programs which, while perhaps not consciously aimed at influencing local land use patterns, have significantly affected them.

Some of these effects have been upon "patterns" in the large-scale sense, influencing the location of development within an urban area; others have been rather upon quality, in terms of standards and design, wherever the location.

In recent history the earliest such federal program was that of the FHA. In the 1930's, its most striking influence was a drastic improve-

12. The Federal Housing Administration was established pursuant to the National Housing Act § 1, 48 Stat. 1246 (1934), as amended, 12 U.S.C. § 1702 (1958), and was consolidated into the National Housing Agency by Exec. Order No. 9070, 7 Fed. Reg. 1529 (1942). The Housing and Home Finance Agency was established under Reorganization Plan No. 3 of 1947, 61 Stat. 954.
ment in the quality of local residential development. By offering the lollipop of advantageous mortgage terms through its insurance program, FHA persuaded developers all over the country to adopt new and better forms of design. Few remember how ghastly were the subdivisions of the 1920's. The sweeping innovations wrought by FHA brought new standards of street and lot layout far more livable, more economical, and more efficient. (They have now become the commonplace, and it is time for another design revolution.) In apartment development, also, FHA brought about great improvements in livability: lower densities, wider spaces between buildings, more landscaping—even an entirely new land-use form, the “garden apartment” for suburban locations. As with subdivisions, what was twenty years ago a new high ceiling has now become an old low floor; “FHA-type apartment design” now means routine, unimaginative architecture, aimed at minimal costs and maximum profits. But, in a historical view, FHA’s beneficial influence on the quality of urban land use should not be overlooked nor undervalued.

Another more widely noted influence of FHA’s policies has been the trend of urban populations to low-density, single-family-house living. Though now widely available without use of FHA’s services, the constant-payment long-term house mortgage, at a moderate interest rate and a moderate down payment, was another revolutionary innovation when FHA spread it across the country. It made independent home-ownership possible for a large new market which had before been too great a financial risk. (FHA, of course, removed the risk for the bank, not for the home-owner.) Coupled with the United States income-tax deduction allowed to home-owners for mortgage interest and real estate taxes, with no similar deduction allowed the tenant for the equivalent part of his rent, this program has surely played a major part in the touted flight to the suburbs.

This flight, of course, is now blamed for the horrendous “urban sprawl,” for the plight of urban transit systems, and other metropolitan ills. This author would blame these not upon FHA, but in part upon “progress.”

15. This combination of factors reduced the monthly payment on an owner-occupied single-family house well below the monthly rent for equivalent quality of housing of other types. In effect, this opened up a new lower-income market for such houses, for families which had previously occupied rental quarters—principally multi-family dwellings. Since vacant land cheap enough to be profitable for the lowest priced single houses was mainly in the suburbs, and the multi-family dwellings were mainly in central cities, this twist in the relative market induced a flow of population out of central cities into the suburbs. Similarly, newly-formed families which had traditionally started life in inner-city rental housing were able to start instead as suburban homeowners. This was especially true for veterans who could buy with little or no down payment.
and rather more upon the lack of good suburban land use planning, zoning, and subdivision control—which, indeed, FHA had done much to support and encourage well before the inauguration of the federal aid-to-planning programs earlier discussed.

It is also overlooked that, during much of its life-span, FHA has provided for intown apartment construction much the same encouragement and incentive as for suburban houses. Many thousands of such units were built, especially during and just after the War. FHA, however, was not set up in a way to allow it to subsidize housing; it operated under quite conservative principles of investment risk. The result was a refusal of mortgage insurance in “risky” areas, and therefore a further drying-up of investment funds in obsolete or obsolescent parts of central cities. This sin of omission might be claimed to have hastened the urgency of setting up other kinds of blight-correction and blight-prevention programs.

The FHA now also plays a role in these newer federal programs. Before discussing them, however, it may be appropriate to comment on another federal activity nearly as old as FHA: the provision of aid to localities for low-rent public housing for low-income families.

Just before World War II, federal funds for public housing provided the only practical approach for most cities to the clearance of slum areas—with, of course, the requirement that the slums be replaced by housing for low-income slum dwellers. This was an outright welfare program. It had the effect, however, of making a land use decision not related to the welfare aspects. In general this decision was that some one or more old areas, worn out and ready for change physically and economically, which had previously been lived in by low income families, would permanently be residential areas for low income families.

This decision was made, whether rightly or wrongly, for many hundreds of acres of central-city land and many thousands of dwelling units. It was made, of course, by local agencies, not by the federal agency. The quality of the decision varied greatly. At that period, there was no federal requirement that a city’s housing program conform to a comprehensive plan; some cities used planning to locate their projects, and others did not.

The impact on urban land use had three other ramifications. Two deal with “quality.” Housing projects tended to be big—several hundred dwellings—partly for economy, but largely to create new neighborhood-scale conditions, cutting out through traffic and including play areas and

16. During and immediately after the war, the spur to rental housing was under National Housing Act § 608, added by 56 Stat. 303 (1942), as amended, 12 U.S.C. § 1743 (1958). Before and since, variations of provisions of the basic act setting up FHA have offered insurance for mortgages on rental housing varying up to 90% of appraised value.
even schools. This seemed like a good thing at the time to city planners and others; it is only recently that there has been recognition of the social viciousness of creating large segregated islands of charity cases. Also, for reasons of economy alone, the projects tended to monotony, with endless repetition of stereotyped buildings—handbook architecture out of the federal agency's rule book. In only a few cities were strong-minded local administrators able to win approval for spending extra on better design, more varied architecture, and lower density. These land use quality faults are not consequences of the fact that the financing of the program was largely federal; they are, however, in part attributable to the quality of federal administrative policy.

If these were positive sins, the third was negative. The federal aid went to local housing agencies, in whatever form the state enabling acts established them. With understandable political realism, the states made it impossible for central cities to rehouse their slum dwellers except within their own borders. The fact that the "housing problem" was, and is, metropolitan, was ignored.

It is easy to guess that, if the federal aid had been contingent on a metropolitan approach to the location of low-income housing, the total amount built would have been negligible. The point is not whether the policy in effect was wrong or right, but simply that it was a federal policy, and that it did affect urban land use by permanently crowding a lot of low-income families within the central cities of metropolitan areas.

After the War, the urgency of getting rid of slums was recognized as being related to, but not identical with, rehousing the occupants. Many planning studies showed that the best future land use for many blighted areas was industrial, or commercial, or housing for families with no or few children (which ruled out most of the low income families). The chance for cities to achieve these land use changes finally came with the availability of federal matching funds (two federal to one local) to help pay the difference between the price of the slums and the value of the cleared land for its new, planned use—in 1949, for "urban redevelopment," broadened in 1954 to "urban renewal."16

The side effects of these new programs have been more than merely to implement planned land use changes. As with the side effects of public housing, they are not caused by the fact that the program is federal, but

18. The loans, annual contributions, and capital grants are made to "public housing agencies," which the act defines as "any State, county, municipality, or other governmental entity or public body (excluding the Administration), which is authorized to engage in the development or administration of low-rent housing or slum clearance." Housing Act of 1937, § 2(11), 50 Stat. 889, as amended, 42 U.S.C. § 1402(11) (1958).

rather by the nature of the program and the manner of its federal administration, either in allowing the side effects to happen or by indirection to require them.

One is a sort of distortion of the housing supply, for projects destined for residential re-use. The cities have sought the best taxpayers; the federal agency, in order to stretch its funds as far as possible, has tended to insist on the highest price for the cleared land. The combined result is that almost every residential redevelopment project is luxury housing for the highest income families, except for the few that are minimum public housing for the lowest. It is this characteristic of redevelopment thus far that has led critics to fear that the middle-income sixty to seventy per cent of the population will ultimately be squeezed out of our central cities entirely.

There is, of course, another element of urban renewal, the conservation or rehabilitation of older areas not in such bad condition as to justify clearance and redevelopment. This could be identified as a program to stabilize land use, rather than to change it: a middle-aged residential area cannot be rehabilitated into an industrial area, nor vice versa. Federal funds are available to aid cities in this kind of program also—although limited to use in residential areas only. These include not only grants in aid of city public improvement activity, but also broadened availability of FHA mortgage insurance for home improvement and new construction in those blighted areas whose wholesome modernization is programmed as a renewal project. There is as yet very little experience with this kind of urban renewal. It holds great hope; indeed, it could be called essential, and was recognized to be so in 1954 when the broader federal aids to renewal were enacted. But it has also proved to be very difficult.

From the urban land use planning point of view, the over-all effect of these various federal programs that directly or indirectly affect local developmental decisions by local government and by entrepreneurs has certainly been favorable. They have placed in the hands of local government and of business the opportunity to accomplish planned and desirable land use changes that would not otherwise have been possible.

If there is a failing, it could be called a lack of balance. The less important imbalance is a concentration on residential land use (housing), which makes it easier for cities to improve that aspect of their land area and thus relatively harder to improve central business, shopping, and industrial districts. This is not said critically; the urgent social need has clearly been in the housing field. There may in the future evolve an effective

The other imbalance, more significant from the point of view of social as well as economic objectives, is within the housing field itself. Federal aid goes directly only to low-income housing; aid via urban redevelopment has seemed to promote only high-income housing. Middle-income housing has been helped significantly only in the suburbs, as single-family development. Middle-income housing in central cities has thus suffered in relative advantage, with the resulting trend toward unbalanced social composition of central cities that has been referred to. This distorted and unintended consequence of the federal programs surely invites their comprehensive review—if not to add a new program, then to revise the existing ones to modify their side effects.

**The Federal Role in Indirect Influence on Urban Land Use**

A city’s circulation system, its streets, highways, and transit, has almost a controlling influence upon urban land use: its general form and density pattern, and its detailed location, kind, and intensity. In comprehensive city planning, land use and transportation are both integral elements. Transportation planning affects land use planning (and vice versa), and transportation development affects land development, as the recent location trends of major suburban shopping centers and industrial parks make abundantly clear.

In this picture, the role of the federal highway aid program23 has been very important and somewhat misunderstood. Vast federal funds have been poured into highway construction, much of which has been in cities and their metropolitan areas. This has hastened and intensified the impact of the automobile and truck on urban form and density. The consequence of the latter has been urban sprawl, disorder, ugliness often—but the highways did not cause this, they merely permitted it. They also permitted many families to achieve a kind of living which a majority of Americans obviously prefer to what was available when urban form took its structure from the transportation technology of the street-car.

One main effect of the auto has been to reduce density of land use—be it residence, business, or industry. This has meant that a given quantity of growth occupies a far greater land area than formerly—hence “urban sprawl.”

The other main effect has been upon pattern, or urban form. Interestingly, this has been largely a negative effect. By increasing the range of choice for each trip, the auto has eliminated the strong “structuring” influence that transportation lines used to have. Big concentrations of

trip destinations, like regional shopping centers, do tend to locate at points of maximum accessibility, so express highways do tend to establish a structure or skeleton for land use patterns. But, except as express highways channel general accessibility into one suburban region or another, the effect of the network of feeder and secondary highways is to spread opportunities for residential development over a far greater land area than there is immediate market for—hence “scatteration,” or disorderly development.

These adverse influences upon land use patterns are largely beyond the power of highway planning decisions to control. “Order” can be imposed upon this kind of land development only through direct controls like zoning, or the taking of land out of the market by public purchase, both of which are responsibilities of city, county, or perhaps state government. Yet sprawl and scatteration have been blamed on highway building programs, and indirectly on the federal program.

It is, of course, true that many federally aided express highways have been built in metropolitan areas without regard for their land use implications—the limited effect upon regional patterns of location and concentration referred to above—and without cross-reference to local urban land use planning studies. It is also true that the detailed location and design of major highways have strong localized effects upon land use quality and kind (a highway splitting a neighborhood, for example). These failings of the highway building activity devolve, however, upon the state highway agencies, not the federal aid programs, since all federal funds are spent through and by the states.

It has been suggested that, as with urban renewal, federal aid to highways in urban areas could have been made contingent on conformity to a comprehensive urban land use plan. But this poses the same policy problem that has been mentioned in connection with other federal programs: a reluctance to impose substance or procedures upon the local agencies being aided, under the sound philosophy that governmental decisions should be pushed or held down to the “lowest” level possible. It is difficult to refute the claim that, if it is necessary to modify the pattern of powers and duties of state highway planning and city and metropolitan planning agencies to achieve sounder correlation between highway program and land use planning, it is up to the states to do it.

The federal government has nevertheless played a strong and useful role in progress toward this objective, through education, persuasion, and stimulation. Federal highway funds are available for “research,” and their use has been encouraged for collaborative state-local comprehensive planning studies to be used as guides to highway planning decisions. Under this spur, and with further push from the American Association of State Highway Officials, the American Municipal Association, and the

planning profession, many states have made great strides in establishing collaborative planning programs. There has also been recent progress toward coordination of the federal programs themselves, at the level of the federal agencies dispensing highway, renewal, and planning assistance funds, with the direct objective of improving the quality of effective planning at the state and local levels. Any observable effect upon local land use forms or patterns, or upon local land use controls, is still some distance in the future, but a groundwork has been laid.

Is there nevertheless a possibility for criticism? If so, it would seem to be the same kind of charge of lack of balance that was leveled at the housing and renewal programs. By concentrating financial aid upon highways, the federal program has vastly increased the relative difficulty of modernizing and extending the other elements of urban circulation systems: mass transit and commuter railroads. For all of the older and most of the newer major metropolitan areas these elements are essential to the efficient working of the city—to the optimum functioning of central business district land uses and the stabilization of the inner high density areas which we cannot afford to scrap, but which are galloping into blight and deterioration.

There have been recent legislative proposals to extend the federal concern with urban transportation to include aids for mass transit and commuter railroads. This may well be the road to a redressing of the balance of the present program.

There is one further innovation in federal aid policy of potential influence upon urban land use; this is the proposal to assist in financing the acquisition of land for permanent open space in metropolitan areas. The problem is surely acute. Most planners agree that a balance is necessary between urban land uses and natural “breathing space” areas for recreation, conservation, insulation between developed areas, and plain visual amenity. It was also suggested above that establishment of a network of permanent open spaces may be one essential means of giving form, structure, and order to future patterns of urban land development—of combatting urban sprawl and scattering.

25. There have been no statutory changes; an inter-agency program between the Department of Commerce (which includes the Bureau of Public Roads) and the HHFA (which administers renewal and planning assistance funds) has recently been announced.


The nature of any federal program to aid localities and cities in this effort, or indeed the question of whether there should be such a federal program at all, has not been settled. It is, however, a potentiality that requires mention.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to identify and appraise the many federal programs which during the last few decades have influenced urban land use planning and development. There may be others than the ones discussed; these are the most significant. Two conclusions seem to emerge.

One is that the federal role in this area has been far more influential than one might have suspected. Sometimes direct but more often indirect, the impact of federal programs has been felt in almost every component of the urban physical environment, either positively or negatively, and in almost every step, from land use planning itself through local and other governmental decisions affecting land use to the ultimate land development actions taken by private individuals and firms.

The second conclusion is that many of the impacts of federal programs on urban land use have been unintentional or accidental, and at least some of them have been either contrary to the objectives of the federal policy-makers (congressional and administrative), or at least unexpectedly negative.

These conclusions seem to this author to point strongly to a need for coordination of federal policy toward cities and urban development. This is not necessarily a plea for strongly centralized administrative control, though the supporters of a Department of Housing and Urban Affairs have drawn their argument from similar observations. It is at least a plea for some centralized policy review and planning operation so that the impacts and interrelations of present programs may be studied and evaluated, and the probable consequences of any future change of a program, or of a new program, may be projected and appraised.

Federal policy must become more comprehensive, not in the sense of including everything, but in the sense of comprehending everything that it does include—and also what its programs omit. We can no longer afford to back into policy decisions by setting up independent programs in fields which are really interdependent without regard to their interactions and unforeseen side effects.

It is not the province of this article to document the fact that the United States is now an urban, indeed a metropolitan, nation, and will become even more so. It has, however, sought to identify the extent to which the federal government has become entangled in urban and metropolitan problems of land development. Whether wisely or unwisely (this author believes wisely) this involvement is probably irrevocable, and further involvement is probably inevitable.