Citizens and the Environment

Case Studies in Popular Action

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Quality of Urban Life

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Introduction

Although urban communities have existed for at least 5,500 years, it was not until the nineteenth century that they became the immediate environment for a significant fraction of the population of any nation. In the United States, the population was transformed from a predominantly rural one (60 percent in 1900) to a predominantly urban one (70 percent in 1970) in only seventy years.

By 1974, however, the trend toward urban living, which began in the first decade of the twentieth century in America, has suddenly reversed direction. For the first time (except for a brief period during the 1930s), the movement back to small cities and towns in the United States has overtaken the growth in metropolitan areas. Evidence of this dramatic turnabout emerged in a study conducted for the Census

agreement to put the freeway at grade level in front of Jackson Square. The remainder of the expressway was to be elevated, however, and the freeway opponents continued to object to what they called a "Russian compromise." Bridwell gave official approval to the new plan on January 17, 1969, just three days before the Nixon administration came into office.

Bridwell's approval was withdrawn by Nixon administration officials when expressway opponents pointed out that the approval violated a prior agreement between the federal government and the preservationists' lawyers. The approval also ignored section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which required that the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation comment on the project prior to final federal approval. The riverfront expressway proposal was consequently submitted to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which included seven cabinet officers and ten other prominent American citizens.

On March 3, 1968, the advisory council reviewed the evidence, made an on-site examination, and concluded that even a partially elevated expressway "would have a serious adverse effect upon that quality of the District (Vieux Carré) which had been described as the 'tout ensemble,' a quality of high importance." The advisory council recommended a comprehensive study of all alternatives to the expressway. This recommendation was considered a major victory for the anti-freeway forces.

Outcome

In spite of a massive counter-offensive by the highway proponents, on July 9, 1969, Secretary of Transportation John Volpe cancelled the Vieux Carré Riverfront Expressway, stating that the project "would have seriously impaired the historic quality of New Orleans' famed French Quarter." The twelve-year battle was over, marking the first time that any segment of the 42,500-mile interstate system had been rejected for purely environmental reasons.

CASE VI **Recreation versus Development: Seward Street Mini-Park, San Francisco, California**

The city of San Francisco is famous for its many hills. It is also a city where open space is at a premium because of the local geography:

located on a peninsula, San Francisco is very compact. One of the city's hills became the site of a ten-year battle to preserve open space on a block-long, weedy, uphill vacant lot. The lot was located in upper Eureka Valley, an area of mixed ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, and life styles. It was off one of the city's smallest streets, one-block long Seward Street, which is only twenty feet wide at its widest point. The battle began in 1963, when the neighborhood received word that developers planned to put an eighty-five unit apartment complex on the site. The residents believed such an apartment complex would destroy the family-oriented character of the neighborhood, and their sentiment touched off a struggle which has become one of the finest examples of community action to preserve open space in urban areas.

The Actors

Two groups of developers were involved in the Seward Street mini-park controversy. The initial group sold out quickly when confronted by citizen protest and financial difficulties, but the second group, Spartan Development Corporation, persevered until 1971, when they lost their building permit.

A number of city agencies had jurisidiction over the zoning of Seward Street and the eventual approval of the site as a mini-park. These were the city Planning Commission, which established the original zoning of the neighborhood as "family residence" (R–2) in April 1959 and, unknown to the residents, changed the zoning to "high density" (R–3) a month later at the request of one property owner in the neighborhood. The board of permit appeals became involved in the zoning struggle, as well as the board of supervisors. Later, when the mini-park idea was proposed, the city Parks and Recreation Department played the key role in determining the fate of the vacant lot.

Citizens' efforts were spearheaded by the Eureka Valley Promotion Association, led by Bert Schwarzschild, a neighborhood resident and electronic engineer. Schwarzschild found key people willing to commit themselves to the idea of a mini-park on Seward Street: local artist Ruth Asawa, League of Women Voters activist Audrey Rodgers, several landscape architects, two engineers, a city planner, and several politicians including State Assemblyman Willie Brown, State Senator Milton Marks, and City Attorney Caspar Weinberger (who later became the secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in the Nixon administration).

The Policy Process

In November 1959, only six months after the Planning Commission's private decision to rezone Seward Street, the first three-unit apartment building went up on the property of the owner who had secured the zoning change. Less than a year later, another six-unit apartment building was constructed by the same owner. Residents were concerned but not alarmed until news of the proposed construction of an eighty-five-unit structure reached them. So in early January 1963, three Seward Street neighborhood residents applied to rezone the disputed area back to its former R–2 status. Two months later, a petition by 103 of the 152 known property owners in the area was submitted to the Planning Commission in support of rezoning the area.

The signature-gathering process for the petition had given rise to the first Seward Street block party, where neighborhood residents met together for the first time and expressed their mutual concerns. In spite of their efforts, however, the commission turned down the residents' rezoning request in May 1963. The issue had been debated at several hearings of the Planning Commission and focused considerable public attention on the plight of tiny Seward Street. The neighborhood leaders, still pursuing their goal, decided to confront Mayor John Shelley with their problem in March 1964. Meanwhile, the Spartan Development Corporation had reduced the number of projected units from eighty-five to sixty-nine as required by the commission. The week after the Seward Street group's meeting with Mayor Shelley, the board of supervisors met to reconsider R–3 zoning in the city generally. The board decided to rezone the adjacent slope of the hill on Seward Street to R–2 but declined to rezone Spartan's property to R–2.

The neighbors waited until Spartan received its building permits, and in early March 1965, the neighbors passed the hat among themselves to raise the forty dollars necessary to appeal the four permits. Less than a week before the board of permit appeals hearing, the Seward Street residents, as a second part of their strategy, staged a test run of hook-and-ladder fire fighting equipment to see if it could move in tiny Seward Street. As the residents suspected, it could not, and the story appeared with photographs in all of the San Francisco newspapers. When the five members of the board of permit appeals met on March 25, 1965, they convened at the site of the proposed apartment building. The story was again covered by the media. In spite of the evidence of fire prevention difficulties, increased traffic congestion, and community

opposition, the board decided to uphold the developer's right to erect the sixty-nine-unit building.

The Seward Street residents were not easily discouraged, however, and when bulldozers showed up later that year, the residents chased them off the site, creating another favorable newspaper story. The residents then appealed to the city, charging that the builder had not made a "continuous and diligent" construction effort, and the city decided to revoke Spartan's building permit. On March 6, 1966, the second Seward Street block party was held to celebrate the victory over the development company. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors added to the neighborhood's satisfaction by sending residents a unanimous resolution congratulating them on their victory.

The "Battle of Seward Street" was only half over, however. In the spring of 1969, the neighborhood learned that the city intended to develop a mini-park in Eureka Valley, but not at the Seward Street site. The Seward Street Neighborhood Task Force submitted a proposal to the mayor's office, outlining their reasons for supporting the Seward Street mini-park. The group's proposal stated:

> We have a unique idea: a neighborhood mini-park which will be the vehicle for developing and nourishing a healthy, involved and cohesive community. A neighborhood becomes "community" when people develop a sense of mutual trust. We believe that a self-help project where the neighbors plan, develop, and maintain their own park could achieve the above.

A year later, after much correspondence, officials from the city Parks and Recreation Department finally came to inspect the site and begrudgingly expressed their approval of a Seward Street mini-park.

The Seward Street neighborhood, believing victory was at hand, celebrated at its third Seward Street block party on May 24, 1970. The party raised $600. The park site was "dedicated" by the Eureka Valley Promotion Association. The following month, the mini-park committee held a "Design a Park" contest for local children in an all-day carnival held at the park site. At the same time, over 200 families in the immediate neighborhood signed a petition and statement of support for the proposed park.

It became apparent in early 1971, however, that the Parks and Recreation commissioners did not really favor the Seward Street site after all. The commissioners had met privately in April and rejected the proposal on the grounds that the Seward Street land was too ex-

pensive to buy and develop. The fact that the commissioners had made a behind-closed-doors decision created a stir in the local press, and the Seward Street neighborhood took the issue to Mayor Joseph Alioto, who then called on the parks commission to reconsider the matter. The commission agreed, and on May 13, 1971, this time with full press and TV coverage, the commission gave qualified approval to the park plans. The citizens' group's leader, Bert Schwarzschild, attributed the Seward Street neighborhood's success to group solidarity and press coverage. According to Schwarzschild: "I've learned that decision makers are most vulnerable to public exposure, and I have to admit that I've learned to use it very well. The press helped us a lot in getting over the top."

Outcome

From the summer of 1971 to the fall of 1972, the final plans for the park were worked out between the city and the Eureka Valley Promotion Association. The mini-park cost the city $37,000 for the lot and $42,000 to build the park. The basic design of the park had been conceived by the children in the "Design a Park" contest, with a forty-foot double slide as the highlight. On May 21, 1973, with all the fanfare that might be expected from a neighborhood which had fought for ten years to save a tiny bit of open space, the Seward Street mini-park was officially dedicated by the city of San Francisco.

Conclusion

The problems of urban areas discussed in this chapter emanate from a maze of political, technical, geographic, social, and ecological interrelationships which together determine the quality of life in American cities. Many of the policy issues discussed throughout this book have, in fact, been problems stemming from what some have called "the urban crisis" in America. This chapter has concentrated on several specific concerns of urban policy which will be most critical in determining the fate of the nation's metropolitan regions: growth, solid waste, housing, transportation, and the preservation of open space and historic character in American cities. The six case studies delineate five sets of circumstances that have proved critical in the resolution of environmental policy issues:

1. The difficulty for both the citizen and decision maker to comprehend and act on fundamental policy issues with consideration for their interrelations and consequences;
2. The erosion of competence and responsibility at the local level of government in dealing with problems of the urban environment;
3. The failure of federal and state programs to meet the needs of metropolitan areas;
4. The effectiveness and perseverance of intelligently organized citizens' groups in overcoming the indifference and intransigence of local and state officials on environmental issues;
5. The critical role of volunteer civic leaders in confronting or persuading decision makers in government and business.

In all but one of the case studies (Boulder), the fundamental policy issue was avoided by treating a symptom rather than the basic problem. In Louisville, air pollution rather than the disposal of solid waste became the issue. In New York, lead poisoning became the focus of action rather than dilapidated housing. In New Orleans, businessmen and city officials were most concerned with the decline of the central city, while the more basic issues of the nature of urban transportation and the diminishing of America's cultural heritage were left in the background. This is not to say that the problems of air pollution, lead poisoning, and the decline of the central cities are not extremely important, but rather that lasting solutions to these problems will come only with more effective policies for dealing with basic issues: solid waste management (in areas where solid waste incineration is a major cause of air pollution), improved housing, and more balanced transportation systems.

Focusing public and official attention on the more basic policy issues of a controversy is no easy task, nor does such attention necessarily guarantee the development of solutions. Although citizen activists in these cases were, for the most part, aware of the basic issues they were confronting, the general public was not especially interested or receptive to the position of the core groups, except in the case of Boulder. Yet, in order to win official recognition of, and support for, their goals, the citizen activists in all but the San Diego case found it necessary first to gain the support of the public. Because the public tended to be apathetic about issues such as solid waste disposal, housing (usually a problem of the poor), and historic preservation, the tactics of the activists in Louisville, New York, and New Orleans were to avoid fundamental

issues and stress the apparent problem—the symptom—which was likely to gain public attention and concern. While such tactics proved more or less effective in the short run, public and official interest in the more apparent problem waned in all cases with the lessening of pressure from citizen activists and the fundamental issues were left unresolved.

Even though this pattern tends to be typical of similar cases throughout the United States, there have been a few instances where a broader perspective on the same types of policy issues has been employed. In the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of New York City, two corporations founded in 1967 have imaginatively and successfully attacked the problem of poor housing in the sprawling 563 square block area that constitutes New York's largest black community. The key to the corporations' success has been involving local residents in the rehabilitation of their own community.

Another good example of effectively channeled community involvement in fundamental issues confronting urban areas was the controversy over the proposed Inner Belt-Southwest Expressway in Boston. Initially, antifreeway forces hoped only to halt the construction of the highway, but they eventually generated enough interest in the problem of regional transportation to gain the attention of the governor. The governor decided to appoint a task force in 1968 to study the Boston area's particular transportation needs. As a result of the first task force study, Governor Sargent decided to reverse the past transportation policies of the state of Massachusetts from building highways to considering all possible alternatives and their effects. Additional task forces have since been formed to continue the reorientation of the state's policy.

In disposing of solid waste, a few metropolitan regions have begun to see the problem from a regional perspective. The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) in San Francisco has adopted a twofold plan to create a multijurisdictional solid waste management system with emphasis on resource recovery. The project has to be approved by the federal EPA and will require $3 million, with federal, state, and local governments contributing equal shares.

While perception of local and regional issues varies considerably from city to city, no metropolitan community's problems in the areas of solid waste, transportation, water pollution, or open space will be resolved satisfactorily until the problem of growth is confronted. This

area of policy, however, is beset with legal, political, economic, and emotional entanglements. The Boulder case study, while not typical in the amount of community concern shown for the growth issue, is exemplary of the types of problems facing decision makers who attempt to limit population growth in their communities. Other cities which have tried to come to terms with the problem in their areas have also met with considerable difficulties. Both Petaluma, California (see Chapter 1, Land Use) and Boca Raton, Florida, have had their efforts to limit growth challenged in court. Petaluma experienced conflicting decisions in the courts, while the outcome of the suit against the city of Boca Raton is uncertain. The city of Ramapo, New York, which adopted a plan that regulates the timing of developments over the next eighteen years, has been more successful. The plan was upheld in the New York State Supreme Court in November 1972.

These initial attempts by communities throughout the United States to develop policies to control growth, however, reveal the inability of many local governments to cope with problems brought on by a rapidly expanding population. In many regions across the country, the available public services and means of protection are no longer adequate to meet demands. Ensuring sufficient water supplies, for example, is a serious problem in the majority of urban areas. Yet, arriving at a consensus on a growth limitation policy is practically impossible in most metropolitan areas, where each local government jealously guards its jurisdictional powers (as in San Diego, for example).

With local governments often unwilling or unable to meet metropolitan needs, the federal and state governments have taken increasing responsibility for metropolitan welfare. A typical example of the state role in urban affairs was seen in the New Orleans case study, where the state highway agency was actively supporting the construction of an interstate highway through the Jackson Square area. (See also the Overton Park case, Chapter 1, Land Use.) State approval and funding for urban highway systems has tremendously influenced the direction of metropolitan growth, yet the state highway agency is usually the only state agency with operating responsibilities in urban areas. For example, states usually authorize urban renewal legislation for their cities, but nothing in the state legislation provides guidance for the character, pace, and direction of the slum clearance efforts. It is also illogical for states to authorize the revitalization of the central cities on the one hand and to encourage the flight away from the cities on

the other hand, by constructing more freeways and failing to control development on the urban periphery. For the most part, states have exercised little or no control over such important areas of environmental policy as land use, extension of local government units, public transportation, or historic site preservation. But there are indications that this situation is beginning to change.

Federal involvement in urban affairs consists mainly of financial assistance for programs administered by the state or local government. This type of aid was provided in three of the case studies: Boulder, San Diego, and New Orleans. Because the number of federal aid programs for metropolitan areas has increased considerably in recent years, the cities have largely been bypassing the state government when attempting to secure financial aid. Yet, as the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations points out in its report on metropolitan America, without active state participation in urban policy, it is doubtful whether local government can be reorganized to perform more effectively in metropolitan areas. Local governments derive their powers from the states, and they need state authorization for structural reforms. Coordinating the efforts of all levels of government appears to be essential if government action in metropolitan areas is to be effective.

Basically then, the question raised in the introduction to this chapter of the best institutional arrangement to serve the needs of urban residents is paramount, even though the answer is not readily apparent. Judging from the six case studies of this chapter, current institutional arrangements are not the best solution to today's urban area problems. Nor is relying upon citizens' actions or even citizens' interest going to be able to keep up with the burgeoning needs of America's metropolitan areas. The difficulty of passing the bond issues required to supply these areas with necessary public services was discussed in the San Diego and Louisville case studies. While citizen involvement is the key to effective government, the quality of urban life in the United States appears certain to decline unless local, state, and federal agencies are reoriented so that policy becomes more responsive to the public welfare.

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