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New England's Urban Environment and The National Program For the Cities



I am happy to send you this copy of a pamphlet which discusses New England's urban environment in the context of President Carter's national program for the cities. The President's program contains several unique and positive strategies, particularly for cities where a combination of environmental and economic problems require imaginative and coordinated solutions.

Two aspects of the program are particularly important from an environmental aspect and from my personal point of view. The first is the program's basic approach which mandates a strong and cooperative working relationship among governments at all levels, with the private sector, and with urban groupings to carry forward the program's several strategies. Having worked for both federal and state government, I can appreciate fully why the President has made this "New Partnership" the cornerstone of his program for the cities.

A second feature of note is that pollution control needs and the health of urban economies are collectively addressed for the first time in a single federal program. The environmental community in New England often finds itself contending with the charge that pollution control programs can only succeed at the sacrifice of economic productivity and community revitalization.

The comprehensive and interrelated nature of the President's program, however, is a clear demonstration that economic and environmental objectives are not mutually exclusive but in fact can complement one another.

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NEW ENGLAND'S URBAN TRADITION

President Carter's national urban program, which he sent to Congress in the spring, draws heavily upon New England's century and a half experiment with city living. This is a long period of time and makes our cities as much a New England tradition as other features of the area.

It seems almost unbelievable these days that as late as the 1920's, Lawrence, Somerville, Manchester and several other New England cities had more people than Miami or San Diego while New Haven, Worcester, and even Boston's Dorchester community supported larger populations than Houston or Dallas. Not only was Providence on a par with Atlanta and Denver, but Boston neighborhoods like South Boston, Charlestown, and Brighton were all ahead of Phoenix and San Jose in the population ratings. Some still refer to this period as the "gilded age" of New England's urban experience.

New Englanders know, of course, that the last several decades have been extremely tough and often turbulent times for many of their older cities. But while several critical economic and environmental problems remain, it is clear that many of the area's urban centers and neighborhoods are making strong comebacks. New England state and local governments and scores of community and neighborhood groups are beginning to solve several problems which newer urban areas are only beginning to recognize.

It's not surprising, therefore, that President Carter made a special effort to tap governmental and private sources in New England for assistance when he began to develop the national urban program.

ENVIRONMENTAL OVERTONES OF THE "NEW PARTNERSHIP"

First and foremost, these New Englanders concurred with a national consensus that the cornerstone of the urban program had to include a new cooperative partnership among governments at all levels and with private urban groups to carry forward the program's several proposed strategies. From an environmental perspective, this "New Partnership" is unique since pollution control needs and the health of urban economies are collectively addressed for the first time in a single federal program.

Economic Revitalization

Underlying the program's basic philosophy is the premise that older urban areas, including several in New England, simply can't make a full comeback without strong and sustained economic growth or revitalization. Local officials from these areas are almost unanimous in agreeing that their cities can't get very far without strengthened economies.

Specifics of the President's program include establishment of a National Development Bank to encourage businesses to locate or expand in distressed urban areas, and a program to make it easier for private industry to hire disadvantaged workers. A labor intensive public works program has also been proposed that will help to supplement these employment initiatives since many of the jobs will be geared for urban projects.

From an environmental perspective, eventual success of New England's urban revitalization objectives may ease some of the frustrations which result in a widely held belief that pollution control programs are largely responsible for New England's urban problems. All the evidence which can be mustered to argue the opposite isn't nearly as effective as initiatives which curb the economic problems themselves.

Parks, Bikeways and Waterfronts for People

The President has also proposed that cities be allowed to compete for federal monies to develop new and improved recreational resources in areas where they are critically short for community needs. The possibilities range from city parks to auto free bike paths and innovative uses of old buildings for public recreational purposes.

Recreational resources can work to complement a number of environmental objectives that include buffers against noise and air pollution provided by tree filled parks and auto free recreational spaces in densely populated areas. Bike paths are a recognized way to reduce automobile air pollution in cities and are encouraged as one part of comprehensive programs to control this problem in metropolitan areas.

Equally important, there's a unique opportunity to create waterfront parks in cities located near lakes, rivers and harbors to coincide with New England's continuing water cleanup program. Several New England cities already have pioneering programs around waterways where old buildings and other structures, which had been partially unused for decades, have been turned into recreational assets. These include Boston's Waterfront Park and nearby Quincy Market com-

plex, and Lowell's Heritage Park. The latter is fashioned around old mills and houses, many of which date from the 1830's when Lowell was the center of America's fledgling industrial movement. The Lowell plan and other preservation programs are part of a new recognition by New Englanders that the area's historical resources aren't limited to those from the Revolutionary War Period and that innovative ways can be found to promote environmental, economic and recreational objectives simultaneously along urban waterways.

Neighborhood Recognition

Another unique aspect of the national urban program is that it puts the federal government on record for the first time in support of voluntary action programs at the neighborhood level. These movements are especially well developed and advanced in the New England area.

Neighborhood Self-Help Programs: The President's proposals include a cooperative program with city governments to provide assistance to neighborhood groups for local self-help programs. These include initiatives that create jobs, cut down on crime, establish health centers, expand community development credit unions and broader programs which extend credit for housing rehabilitation.

Community Impact Analyses: Another initiative with implications for preserving and strengthening city neighborhoods is a "Community Impact Analysis" program which the President has already put in motion by executive authority. Under this program, all federal agencies will review the effects that their major policies and programs have on urban and regional areas as part of the legislative and budgetary processes. Much of the drive for this program has come from neighborhood groups including several in New England which are sensitive about the adverse impact of past federal projects (highways and other large building or renewal programs) on neighborhood cohesion and stability.

The West End's Belated Legacy: This sensitivity began to develop locally some two decades ago following an urban renewal program which wiped out Boston's large and historic West End community. Old timers still remember the West End as a vibrant area of narrow streets and compact row houses where politics was rough and tumble and family and neighborhood were established local institutions that bound the community together. What decision makers considered a slum in those days is recognized in retrospect as a lost resource for Boston. As government leaders and citizens

pondered over the rubble of the West End, a strong consensus emerged that old city neighborhoods should be saved and not destroyed.

This consensus prevailed in more recent times when a proposed super highway through Boston's Southwest Corridor was scrapped after intense citizen opposition. A substitute plan was subsequently developed for the area even though a large number of homes had already been removed for the highway path. This new plan, which the federal government has recently agreed to support as part of the urban program, will provide for multiple use of the cleared land for improved mass transit, recreational areas, and job creating industries. Like the Boston Waterfront development program and the Lowell Heritage Park, the revised program for the Southwest Corridor combines a number of environmental and economic objectives. But the latter is somewhat different in that neighborhoods were the key factor that shaped the eventual outcome.

From an environmental perspective, the actions of neighborhood groups can contribute directly and indirectly to the solving of several pollution problems. These include local programs to curb noise and solid waste, and street controls to ease pollution and congestion caused by the automobile. In a broader sense these and other pollution control programs can only be advanced if individual neighborhood groups rate them as a top priority and if these organizations perceive them as complementing their more immediate goals and priorities. Neighborhood groups which have successfully accomplished their own projects, moreover, almost always have the momentum and confidence that leads them to search for and demand environmentally responsible forms of development that provide needed employment and other urban improvements while protecting public health and neighborhood vitality.

POLLUTION CONTROL ASSISTANCE FOR NEW ENGLAND'S URBAN AREAS

The national urban program's New Partnership gives federal, state, and local authorities specific tools and resources to contend with several forms of pollution and their side effects. Specifically, the program includes initiatives for contending with:

The Price of Urban Sprawl

The President's program clarifies and extends several initiatives which are seeking to curb the contributions that some past federal programs have made to urban sprawl while recognizing that specific growth and development policies are the prerogative of state and local governments. One element related to this is a proposed state incentive grant program to encourage states to develop and implement growth strategies which aid declining cities, control sprawl, protect environmentally sensitive areas, and reform inequitable fiscal structures. As part of this effort, EPA has already issued guidelines to make certain that new and enlarged waste treatment plants are constructed only to take care of existing water problems and projected growth needs. Overdesigned treatment plants cost taxpayers more in terms of construction costs and subsequent user charges. They can also attract accelerated and uncoordinated growth and development which cities and towns can't contend with individually.

New England government officials and private citizens in the area are increasingly aware that traditional lifestyles, economic stability, and environmental quality are threatened by regional and urban sprawl. It often creates a vicious cycle that simultaneously draws resources and people from older city centers while destroying the unique characteristics of outlying communities. Unmanageable sprawl has developed into more than an aesthetic problem for some of New England's urban areas.

Economic Costs: Sprawl can affect consumer's pocket books by increasing taxes they pay for municipal services such as sewer charges, public transportation, road maintenance, snow removal and trash collection. Sprawl has also contributed to the loss of a large part of New England's already limited farming land.

Water Resources: Sprawl is also straining municipal water supplies in several areas, many of which are already overtaxed to accommodate increased water demands which this kind of rapid development generates.

Water Pollution: Sprawl also contributes in a unique way to water pollution in lakes, rivers and streams. Construction processes generate more polluting substances and development programs which haven't been totally thought through remove natural buffers between land and water (such as trees and other foliage) which work to hold pollutants and sediments from reaching the water.

Air Pollution: Sprawl has played a role in contributing to air pollution in several of New England's metropolitan areas as mass transit finds it hard to keep pace with growth and as more automobiles are pressed into service for ever longer trips between homes, work and shopping. And the damage this does to public health isn't the only problem these transportation trends pose for urban areas of the region. Costs for gasoline also multiply and the area's already vulnerable energy posture is made more vulnerable.

Urban/Suburban Impacts: One of the problems with gaining support for an urban initiative that concentrates on older cities is a feeling by outlying communities that there's little in it to benefit them. The sprawl issue, however, only underscores how interdependent whole metropolitan areas are with regard to natural resources and with pollution problems. Sooner or later, many of the problems that older cities experience initially, begin to appear in outlying communities as well.

New England's Leadership Role: The decision to factor growth and development problems into the President's urban program supports growth policy statements formulated by several state and local governments in New England. The policy growth report entitled *City and Town Centers* developed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was, in fact, a principle model used by the federal government in articulating its own growth policy. It stresses the need for responsible and coordinated growth programs that address the needs of individual cities and towns while complementing broader economic, environmental, and social priorities.

Air Pollution Control—Making the “New Partnership” Work

The urban program includes specific initiatives which should help New England's cities come to grips with its economic development needs while carrying out its obligation to reduce health debilitating air pollution. Specifically, there would be federal air planning grants to help localities accommodate both objectives. Another formula in the President's program is a strategy that would enable localities to “bank pollutants” from indus-

tries that reduce their air pollution. These reserves could then be used as credits of sort to support new industry and other development as long as the overall trend in the affected area was toward cleaner air.

The "New Partnership" between federal, state, and local authorities is especially critical in this area. Many of New England's older industrial cities have developed growth policies providing for expanded industrial development because of long-standing economic problems that have resulted in chronic high levels of unemployment. But many of these cities have severe air pollution problems. The urban planning and banking programs offer new opportunities to meet these economic and environmental challenges.

Moving People and Removing Pollution

New England city dwellers (and suburban residents as well) continue to suffer through several days of very unhealthy air pollution each year and the automobile is primarily responsible for the problem. It remains the number one air polluter in most of New England's cities. Neither EPA nor state and local environmental agencies can solve this problem alone.

The urban program proposes cooperative arrangements among several federal agencies to create improved transportation programs that will move people more efficiently, cut down on air pollution from automobiles, and encourage economic development and improved transit stations in urban corridors where transportation systems can be linked to help reduce reliance on the automobile. EPA and the Department of Transportation are already at work on this joint effort.

Implied in this coordinated approach is a recognition that specific programs for reducing automotive air pollution (car pools, bus lanes, van pools, and the vitally important automotive inspection and maintenance program) are best accomplished if they complement several other objectives in urban areas.

Picking up the Trash

Finally, the President's program recognizes that solid waste disposal is a growing problem in many areas including some New England cities which face a shortage of landfill sites. It also recognizes that it's time for America's cities to take advantage of several promising techniques for recovering valuable resources including energy supplements from solid waste.

Under the President's program, New England's cities will have the opportunity to compete with other parts of the country for grants to study the

feasibility of several solid waste recovery systems through a program administered by EPA.

Trash and garbage contribute as much to neighborhood blight in some New England communities as housing deterioration and crime. Local officials consistently rate it as a major and chronic headache. As the mayor of one city recently lamented, "Everyone wants me to pick up the trash but nobody wants me to put it down." There's reason to hope as a result of this program and other innovative approaches to dealing with trash and garbage that the city or town dump will one day go the way of the horse and buggy in New England.

NEW ENGLAND'S PRESERVATION-IST PHILOSOPHY

In a very basic sense, the President's urban program has the potential to advance several economic and environmental goals that have often been viewed as incompatible with one another and the source for bitter debate and acrimony. The program is collectively both a resource and strategy for bringing together several diverse constituencies that include business and industry, organized labor, the environmental community and all kinds of urban residents.

The environmental community in New England is often accused of being insensitive to urban needs. But this charge overlooks the urge to preserve and improve on existing things that is a natural inclination for a New Englander.

Most New Englanders who are concerned about preserving a wildlife refuge in a wetlands area will appreciate the several ethnic and racial heritages that enrich New England's city neighborhoods and the combination of resources required to sustain these "urban villages."

The President's recognition of voluntary action programs to preserve and restore city neighborhoods has an environmental ring to it also. Many neighborhood groups in New England have programs underway to deal with local pollution problems. And the spirit of voluntarism and self-help action programs which spark the neighborhood movements are essentially the same characteristics that have made the environmental coalitions so resourceful in New England.

The President has been the first to stress that the national program for the cities isn't a cure-all for every urban ill and that it will take a long time before several of the program's goals and objec-

tives are recognized. The important and positive thing at this stage, however, is that it has provided a new direction in which the federal government stands ready with resources that will help and not hurt city economies and neighborhoods. National thinking has come a long way from the time when bulldozers levelled the old West End.

This is a key factor that should unite environmentalists and urban constituencies behind the national urban program. The support from both is crucial to making the effort work.