

Editorial [I-40] CA, Feb. 15, 1980
Climate Lessons In Frayser

CA, Feb. 15, 1980

IT APPEARS that no one knows yet what is loose in the Steele Street area of Frayser. It appears also that everyone is doing everything they can to find out. Things are reaching a crisis pitch in which wholesale public-sponsored evacuations are discussed, or demanded. Serious charges are flying in many directions, and demagogues are drawn like moths to a flame. It need not have come to this.

Like other crises this one might have been avoided if officials had responded to the interests and concerns of citizens like Mrs. Evonda Pounds. Would the Overton Park expressway case have dragged on 20 years if officials had sought an accommodation with Midtown residents? Would there have been a sanitation strike in 1968 if officials had been more sympathetic to workers' legitimate grievances?

It was 3 1/2 years ago that Mrs. Pounds first feared that something in the ground or the air was causing unusual symptoms in her children and in her dogs. Routine soil samples were taken by local health officials in August, 1976. Mrs. Pounds was told to clean up around the place and not to worry. But the problems persisted.

There were more tests in May, 1977, and the results. In June of that year

Mrs. Pounds complained to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Its agents made a search for pesticide contamination but found no "significant health hazard." In August, 1979, EPA said it had found traces of organic phosphorous in the blood of Mrs. Pounds' three children and suggested a storm sewer which occasionally backed up into her back yard was the "likely source" of the chemical. The Memphis-Shelby County Health Department discounted the sewer problem, and Mrs. Pounds was beginning to feel she was getting a runaround.

By January, 1980, others in the neighborhood were reporting like maladies and the wheels started turning at something closer to full speed. Federal officials from EPA and the Center for Disease Control visited the local health department and learned that the Steele Street area might be the site of an old chemical dump. Suddenly mayors, council members, congressmen and community opportunists were around and EPA ordered what was called "a broad scan toxics analysis" of the soil, sediment, water, drinking water and available groundwater. Reports yesterday indicated the EPA's latest test of soil samples showed no "significant health hazard" to residents.

Why did this kind of an effort have to wait for the arrival in this case of local political figures? Why wasn't Mrs. Pounds' continual and worsening plight urgent enough?

Reporters for The Commercial Appeal who have followed the Pounds story closely say health authorities often only went through the motions of a real investigation because after their initial *pro forma* attempts to find the source of the trouble they considered the whole thing little more than a nuisance.

We don't know yet what's wrong in Frayser or who, if anyone, can be blamed or what public obligations to aggrieved parties there may or may not be. But we do know that public officials and public employees are paid to work for one citizen as well as a thousand, and taxpayers shouldn't have to make nuisances of themselves just

CA, Feb. 22, 1980
Chance To Excel

WHEN 70 acres of vacant Midtown land is freed from the fading shadow of the Overton Park expressway this city will have a rare opportunity to turn a negative experience into a positive experiment. Those prime residential sites will present Memphis with a chance to lead and excel in urban redevelopment issues critical to the times.

It would be tempting to view the worth of the land between the stubs of Interstate 40 in terms of money alone; millions of new dollars on the tax rolls as a result of building again on nonproductive cleared lots.

But what is built is equally as important. A string of monotonous "modern" homes or new imitations of "old" houses or instant garden apartments or high-rise buildings would violate the character of the neighborhood and contribute nothing to the city but additional money.

We don't sneeze at new tax revenues. The city needs them now. But thoughtful, quality projects produce tax dollars, too, and pay other dividends in other ways. The city shouldn't be after a fast buck here. Instead, it should see that this relatively small but highly significant part of Memphis is replanned in keeping with the urban development trends of the '80s: denser living, energy efficiency, neighborhood spirit, mass transit as a necessity. The area should serve as a model or laboratory of better urban living and sounder urban policy, and potential redevelopers should have to present firm and detailed plans meeting these sort of specifications as a condition of bidding on any of the property in question.

THIS DOESN'T CALL for a large prefabricated, plasticized "new town" approach by a single developer. On the contrary, it calls for creativity and innovation at

sidewalk and human scale. In current jargon, small Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) in which higher densities and greater economies can be effected to accommodate a new society in which the typical family unit has changed and without sacrificing single-family life style.

The need to seize this opportunity is rooted in the facts of this "age of limits." According to the Urban Land Institute higher density city living represents a 40 per cent savings in energy for the average American family by reducing the heating and cooling losses in detached buildings and shorter travel distances between home, work and public facilities. The National League of Cities says better use of this kind of land, when compared to typical suburban developments, results in 43 per cent less energy consumption, 50 per cent less auto emissions and 35 per cent less water consumption. And a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development study indicates there is a 70 per cent savings in tax costs to fund such public services as roads, sewers, lights, police and fire protection.

Memphis has been given an extraordinary asset. What we don't want to do is make ordinary use of it.