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"Keep Housing Door Open" and "The Housing Answer"

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Saturday, July 5, 1980

*Public housing sites
and Memphis needs.*

Keep Housing Door Open

AT THE END of this month the City Council will face a difficult decision concerning four proposed sites for 176 public housing units. The council members will be under pressure from the local chapter of the NAACP, the federal government and probably some of the residents in the site areas. As with similar decisions in the past, everyone isn't going to be satisfied.

But there are federal guidelines for the council to go by. And whether it follows them will affect \$15 million in community development funds — plus the opportunity of hundreds of Memphians to have better places in which to live.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development has told the city it must provide 600 new public housing units over the next three years, with building permits issued for 99 units and sites approved for 100 others by Oct. 31. Otherwise, HUD says, it will withhold the development funds.

The proposed sites the council will consider July 29 are in Frayser, the Kansas Street urban renewal area, Southwest Memphis near Shelby Drive and Horn Lake and off Shelby Drive southeast of Memphis International Airport.

Although the sites have received preliminary approval from federal officials, the local NAACP chapter has charged that they are in predominantly black areas and that, therefore, they would help to maintain segregated housing patterns. The chapter specifically wants some units built in East Memphis, which is the only broad section of the city without public housing.

Fred DeBruhl, manager of HUD's area office in Knoxville, said his office is seeking added information because of the complaint. "On balance," he said, "if all the locations are in predominantly black areas, we'll be looking at it further."

DISPERSAL OF PUBLIC housing became a policy of the federal government in 1971 during President Nixon's administration. At the time, Nixon said he would not force economic integration on local communities. But he said the government would apply economic leverage to persuade communities to accept low and moderate-income housing.

Whether a community would accept such housing was to determine its "qualification" for urban renewal and water and sewer grants as well as housing subsidies. Housing projects were to be rated as superior, adequate or poor, depending on how far away they were from "areas of minority concentration."

In 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled without dissent that federal courts had the power to make up for segregated public housing in Chicago by ordering low-income housing in the suburbs. To remedy the wrong of segregating public housing tenants in the central city, the court said, "the relevant geographic area for purposes of . . . housing options is the Chicago housing market, not the Chicago city limits." The court said, however, that the decision wasn't "coercive" in that it wouldn't force unwilling suburbs to apply for housing assistance.

Similarly, Memphis doesn't have to follow HUD's guidelines. But failure to do so would cost the city federal funds.

As a matter of principle, dispersal of public housing is a worthwhile national goal. Early attempts to create large housing projects in central cities generally resulted in the creation of new slums. The massive Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis was the most tragic example. The whole project had to be torn down because vandalism and crime drove tenants away.

Opponents of dispersal argue that public housing would have the same effect in residential areas. Land values would plummet, they say, and neighborhoods would be ruined. The deterioration of the Parkway Airways Apartments in Memphis, 124 units of leased public housing, is another example of what can go wrong. But that doesn't have to happen.

Pruitt-Igoe was too big. Its tenants received inadequate social services. The crime that enveloped it came from the streets around it more than from the project itself. The Parkway apartments are owned by private managers who haven't maintained them. Memphis Housing Authority plans to buy and renovate the apartments, and HUD is phasing out the whole leased-housing program.

New public housing projects are supposed to be relatively small — 100 units or less. With effective maintenance and social-services programs, they can be attractive and they can give the families who move there a chance to improve the quality of their lives. And both the public and local governments have a right to demand that such programs are made an essential part of every new project, wherever it may be placed, and that tenants are required to comply with maintenance rules. Substandard housing is part of the poverty cycle. Decent housing can help to break it. But no purpose is served if the decent housing is allowed to deteriorate.

WHETHER THE FOUR proposed sites for Memphis meet the federal guidelines as a package is up to federal officials to determine. Two of the sites — in Frayser and near the airport — would seem to be fairly far away from "areas of minority concentration." The site in Southwest Memphis is at least not close to the central city.

Another factor is that dispersal has limits. Low-income families need housing that's served by public transportation and that's not too far from where they work or from where they go to receive such services as medical care. There are also federal restrictions on how much a housing authority can spend on land and construction. In some areas of the city — and much of East Memphis probably would be included — land prices may be too high for public housing. Lawrence Wade, executive director of MHA, which recommended the four sites, commented, "These are things people never consider."

But the City Council's obligation doesn't begin and end with the guidelines. The council has an even greater responsibility to the citizens of Memphis who don't have decent places to live. The council must do whatever it can to give those citizens more and better housing opportunities. To fulfill that responsibility, it must cooperate with HUD.

City Government ✓

THE COMMERCIAL

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Saturday, November 8, 1980

The Housing

Continued

Answer

MAYOR WYETH CHANDLER'S call for a new U.S. housing and urban development secretary with "local government" experience has the virtue of impeccable logic. Though it may have been greeted with bemusement by outgoing HUD Secretary Moon Landrieu, who was, after all, mayor of New Orleans, Chandler's basic message is sound.

But it isn't complete.

Chandler has written President-elect Ronald Reagan that HUD needs someone "familiar with the trials and tribulations of dealing with bureaucracy" and prepared to "enter into a partnership" with the nation's cities. Chandler recommended for the post two fellow mayors, Richard Carver of Peoria, Ill., and Thomas Moody of Columbus, Ohio.

President Carter had much the same thing in mind when he tapped Landrieu for HUD and Portland Mayor Neil Goldschmidt for the Department of Transportation. Both were urban men, remarkably successful in overcoming the "trials and tribulations" of government and building enviable records of accomplishment for their cities. Landrieu, in fact, was famous for being so "familiar" with the federal bureaucracy that New Orleans practically owned it during his mayoral years. The city drew down far more than its proportionate share of federal aid while Landrieu was there.

But Landrieu and Goldschmidt worked no magic in Washington. That is due, in part, to the fact that both arrived just as President Carter's re-election campaign was cranking up and they had to spend a lot more time on the hustings than in the office. They failed to make a mark, also, because the national government just doesn't

react quickly to the helm. Landrieu's "local experience" could not turn HUD's 19,263 employees and \$8.9-billion machinery upside down in 14 months.

THAT DOESN'T MEAN that mayors shouldn't be appointed to cabinet jobs or that they can't make a difference. They should and they can. But miracles will take time.

Indeed, Chandler's advice to Reagan to "change policy" on housing seemed to ignore reports just a week ago that HUD, after years of controversy, was finally considering a policy change which would reduce the emphasis on desegregation in locating new public housing construction. To the extent that was Landrieu's work, it serves the point to note that his real effect in Washington won't be felt until he is gone.

Another mayor at HUD might well be expected to be sympathetic to the changes Landrieu had begun, but Chandler shouldn't be entertaining any notions that such an appointment would give him an overnight solution to the housing problem here.

The new HUD secretary couldn't rewrite all the rules and regulations if he wanted to. There are just too many laws, congressional mandates and court decisions involved — the real "trials and tribulations" of which the Memphis mayor speaks. Much of that isn't going to change, at least not for a long time, no matter the new policies of a new national administration.

If Memphis is going to break its nine-year stalemate on public housing, it still is going to have to do it with policy decisions — and changes — of its own.