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"Priorities For Memphis"

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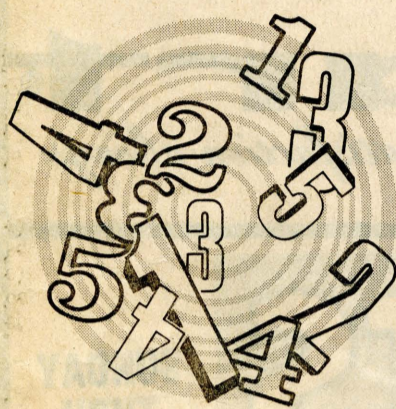
Priorities For Memphis

TWICE in the last week Memphis citizens have come together to discuss the future of this community and to try to figure out the order in which things should be done.

Both meetings used as the basis for their discussions and evaluations a report which had been prepared by Future Memphis, Inc.

And the citizens attending both meetings took sharp issue with the priorities which had been selected by the Future Memphis metropolitan committee.

The first meeting at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral was a "town meeting" which was intended only as a sounding



board. It did indeed result in the "discussion, debates, disagreements" which Frank Holloman, executive director of Future Memphis, said he hoped it would produce.

The second meeting was a workshop conducted by the Urban Policy Institute and the Center for the Study of Alternative Futures at Southwestern at Memphis. It was more structured than the first and out of what was an amazing performance of quick learning of rather sophisticated methods of analysis came a solid new listing.

In ranking 15 proposals for action which required investment of money, Future Memphis gave top-five priority to (1) Volunteer Park; (2) Interstate I-40 completion; (3) construction of downtown hotels and motels; (4) a sufficiency of energy at favorable prices, and (5) downtown housing.

After considering each of the 15 proposals in relation to all the others, the Urban Policy session gave its top-five ranking to (1) tax incentives for redevelopment primarily downtown but not excluding other areas of the city or county which could be classified as depressed or distressed; (2) mass transit; (3) energy; (4) Mississippi River harbor development, and (5) Beale Street development.

It should be noted that only one of Future Memphis' top-five ranking projects made the Urban Policy top-five list — the need for an energy program.

Downtown tax incentives had been ranked 9th by Future Memphis. Mass transit had been ranked 11th, harbor expansion 6th, tied with Beale Street.

The mere listing of these priorities really is not as significant as the thinking which went on in the workshop sessions where those priorities were developed through scorecard methods. It was evident that this new listing resulted from citizen concern about the lack of a downtown area which serves as a unifying nucleus for the entire community. The thinking was heavily in terms of people living in the city — how they can be brought back into the central city to live and to work, how the city can continue to develop without the excessive costs that result from sprawl.

FUTURE MEMPHIS also had provided a list of 15 proposed items which do not require capital expenditures.

The Future Memphis list gave top-five priority to (1) crime control and citizen involvement; (2) black-white relations and fiscal responsibility; (3) public education and long-range urban planning; (4) human services and equalization of taxes, and (5) support for the University of Tennessee Center for the Health Sciences and Memphis State University.

The Urban Policy session gave its priorities to (1) citizen involvement; (2) black-white relations, tied with (3) consolidation of governments; (4) long-range urban planning, and (5) public education.

The marked difference on these two

lists was the sharp downgrading of the item listed as "crime control" in the new set of priorities. The feeling expressed by some members of this group, and apparently persuasively, was that if the other factors became realities there would be less need for crime control. Also, there was some fear that Future Memphis' emphasis on crime control could be interpreted as strong-arm police tactics rather than crime prevention, and that approach was not regarded as leading to a better city and county.

THESE ANALYSES of the priorities must be regarded as only a beginning. A fuller evaluation would be obtained if the so-called capital projects were weighed against the proposals for action which do not require adequate spending.

It does appear, however, that when the Urban Policy session's first priority for non-capital action is put into effect, as in fact it was being put into effect at the Southwestern meeting, there develops a clearer call in this community for more effective leadership than the community has had in the past.

There also is a call for longer range thinking about the community rather than stop-gap projects or show pieces that might attract tourists but do little for better community relations.

When Future Memphis first presented its priority list about two months ago, The Commercial Appeal questioned that listing, saying it tended to "think too much in terms of bricks and mortar." The new set of priorities drawn up by the Urban Policy session does not get away from that approach as much as it might have. But by implications it does move in the right direction. It tends to seek priorities that provide the means for creating a better community, rather than the projects. The de-emphasis of Volunteer Park and the I-40 completion surely were clear evidence of this.

In this respect, the policy group comes close to what William M. Matthews, president of Union Planters Corp., told the Rotary Club recently about the future of Memphis. He said a study made for his bank shows Memphis can become a national business center within the next 15 years if it will "cast aside some of the more traditional views of success and concentrate on some relatively new directions." He noted the need for better utilization of the community's now underemployed minorities and called for the city to "raise our expectations of what Memphis is and can be."

This trend also was noted in the policy group's high rating for long-range urban planning, an item that should be taken seriously by the Memphis and Shelby County Planning Commission which so often in the past has been concerned with exceptions to planning rather than with actually plotting city development for the future.

WARREN ZIEGLER, the Syracuse University policy research specialist who led the citizens group in its re-evaluation process, stated the need for Memphis clearly when he wound up the workshop session with the observation that in his many visits to Memphis he felt the city "has been on the verge of doing some exciting things, but there has been no one to kick you over the edge."

Future Memphis has done a useful service in drafting its list of priorities and then offering them to the entire community for evaluation. It is to be hoped Future Memphis now will take its project back to the drawing board and submit its revisions to the community again.

But something more is needed — that evidence of leadership to "kick us over the edge" which Ziegler says is so badly needed here. Once the priorities have been determined and the means for achieving them agreed upon, somebody must come forward to make that priority list a reality.

SESSIONS such as those last week are encouraging. They express openly the concern about the fundamental stumbling blocks to progress in Memphis such as lack of citizen participation in community and governmental affairs and the lack of good racial relationships. Such open expressions of concern are the first real step toward progress. Let us build upon them as swiftly as we can.