

# Designating the Urban Interstates Our Cities Their Role in the National Economy

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## Designating the Urban Interstates

### Our Cities Their Role in the National Economy

*The following information is from W. Lee Mertz' "Origins of the Interstate System," which can be found elsewhere on this website. This excerpt describes the 1937 report Our Cities:*

In setting the background for the Interstate System, there was yet another activity going on in the thirties that needs to be documented because it had a significant effect on the ultimate establishment of the Interstate System. It is what I believe to be the beginning of formalized city planning at the National level. City planning is an old profession and one can find cases where roads and streets were used as elements of a city plan and, more specifically, as tools to implement a plan. But I know of no instances where city planning became a national issue and an instrument of policy until the Roosevelt Administration.

It began with the report *Our Cities* in 1937:

### Our Cities Their Role in the National Economy

This is a report to President Roosevelt by the Urbanism Committee, a subgroup of the National Resources Planning Committee, the forerunner of the National Resources Planning Board.

The parent committee was composed of Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and Chairman; Harry H. Woodring, Secretary of War; Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture; Daniel C. Roper, Secretary of Commerce; Francis Perkins, Secretary of Labor; Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator; Frederic A. Delano, relative of FDR; Beardslly Ruml, originator of income tax withholding; and others.

In previous reports of the National Resources Committee, much attention has been given to the problems of rural America. The report of the Urbanism Committee is the first major national study of cities in the United States where over half of our people live and where a large proportion of the Nation's wealth and the Nation's problems are concentrated.

The study was undertaken at the request of the U. S. Conference of Mayors, the American Municipal Association, the American Planning and Civic Association, and the American Society of Planning Officials.

In reviewing this report, several questions came to my mind:

1. Is this the beginning of the Federal preoccupation with direct aid to the cities?;
2. Was this the beginnings of the formal establishment of the role of professional planners in urban transportation planning?;
3. Was this the beginnings of the Urban Highway Program?; and
4. Was it the roots of the 3C Planning Process that became a statutory requirement in 1962?

### Review of our Cities

The Foreword lists four national trends that produced unplanned and unexpected changes in the patterns of national life:

1. The rapid shift of population from rural to urban. They were using 1930 census data, and by that time, the population was about half urban.
2. An unprecedented mobility, giving rise to metropolitan districts rather than distinct cities.
3. A concentration of enterprise in urban areas.
4. Urban areas had doubled and the populations had trebled since 1890 (40 years), requiring institutions and instruments of social change in order "...to keep the seething millions from trampling one another down in the workaday urban world."

Fourteen emerging problems were identified:

1. "The most drastic inequalities of income and wealth are found in the urban community.
2. "...the lack of articulation among the various industries within our urban communities." (This apparently means no governmental control over economic decisions.)
3. "Rapid obsolescence of physical plan and plant..."(This refers to everything, including housing stock.)
4. "Competing forms of transportation have left their disrupting imprint on the national urban pattern. Located originally on natural waterways, American cities found their sister towns rising up during the canal era on new water routes. With the coming of the railroads these canal cities met in their turn, a similarly disastrous fate. Then came competing railroads, and the cities again began to rival one another with excessive subsidies and cut throat competition for rate reduction. Nor have we yet reached the end of this process. The motor truck and the passenger bus have long since entered the field of competition, and now the airplane begins to affect the national distribution of our urban centers and even the local pattern of our cities."
5. "The unparalleled growth of cities has been accompanied by uncontrolled subdivision and speculative practices and by the most fantastic real estate booms which have meant dramatic profits to a few, but tragic personal losses to others and burdensome delinquent properties to the community; and this on a scale affecting the economic situation of the entire Nation..."
6. "Urban housing is one of the most burdensome problems the country now has to face and it calls for the Nation's most serious consideration..."
7. "Urban public health is endangered particularly in blighted areas and among low income groups..."
8. "The city with its diversity of ethnic, religious, and cultural strains is the haven par excellence of many widely varying types of personalities...how to weave these vivid and variegated cultures into a positive civic program of intercommunication and cooperation is one of the challenging problems of the coming decades."
9. "While free primary and secondary education is now widely available in urban areas, city youths in all too many cases are still barred from higher educational opportunities they might well utilize because they must all too frequently supplement the family income by going to work..."
10. "Juvenile delinquency, organized crime, and commercial rackets are among the vexations of the city..."
11. "Urban finance is another emerging problem...our larger cities...have larger budgets than the states that contain them...The problem of municipal finance is becoming even more complicated with the extension of Federal and State taxation to support the newer functions of government such as social security and extensive public works."
12. "Another of the city's wealthiest tasks is the adjustment of the traditional scope of urban powers...the American city is still the legal creature of higher authorities (States). The city is in many ways the ward of a guardian who refuses to function."
13. "Our overlapping medley of independent governmental units was intended for a rural and a manorial society...Twenty two of our 96 metropolitan districts containing...one fifth of all our inhabitants straddle state lines..."
14. "...we are still faced in some of our cities with systematic evasion of civil service laws, irresponsible political leadership, and official tolerance of discriminatory or questionable administrative practices."

"All in all there has been more widespread national neglect of our cities than any other major segment of our national existence...America must now set out to overcome the continual and cumulative disregard of urban policies and administration and to take into account the place of the urban community in the national economy."

## Recommendations

1. "...the United States both study and act upon the problems of chronically depressed urban areas...until the fundamental issue of adequate and secure income is met."
2. "The Federal Government should continue its policy of cooperation with and assistance to the social-welfare programs of urban communities...the Committee recommends the equalization between country and city of as many material and cultural opportunities as possible."
3. "A section for urban research should be set up in a Federal Agency...A clearing house of urban information should be set up in the Bureau of the Census...A...study should ...be undertaken...by BOB (the Bureau of the Budget)...to bring about closer coordination of Federal activities in urban communities."
4. "...creation of a Federal agency to make loans and grants to local governments for ...public works, housing, public utilities, land purchases and similar outlays."
5. "...establish a ...Federal public works Authority...responsible for...a specific and detailed nation-wide program of public works, and for the encouragement and cooperation in public works planning, between national, State, and local agencies."
6. "The Federal and State Governments should extend...financial assistance...for rehousing the low-income groups...to the end that the urban slum may be outlawed."
7. "A permanent national planning board should:
  - (a) extend encouragement, cooperation, and support to State, regional, and local planning agencies;
  - (b)...systematize, and improve the long range programming of public works in cooperation with State, regional and local planning agencies;
  - (c)...lend encouragement and cooperation to industrial communities...to review systematically and plan constructively...industrial structure; (d) to prepare, in collaboration with State planning boards and appropriate Federal agencies, the broad general plan of a coordinated transportation system directed toward an economically more effective and socially more desirable urban pattern and distribution of economic activities;
  - (e) 'To make further inquiry into the probable effect on urbanization of the wider distribution of electric power.' (apparently there was some belief that the provision of electric power to rural America might slow down urbanization.)
8. "...inquiry...of the entire subject of conflicting fiscal policies and taxation in local, State, and Federal Governments."
9. "The Congress should...give advance consent to ...interstate compacts enabling the several communities within the same metropolitan region, but in separate States to deal jointly with the regional aspects of health, sanitation, industrial-waste regulation, the control of public utilities, planning, public safety and welfare, education, recreation, and other governmental functions of regional scope."
10. "The Federal Government should cooperate in programs directed toward crime prevention."
11. (a) "States and urban communities availing themselves of Federal grants-in-aid should be expected...to conform to minimum personnel standards under the merit system...
  - (b) The Federal Government should extend...efforts in vocational training for public service occupations.
  - (c) The United States Civil Service Commission should furnish eligible lists to local authorities...and prepare model personnel standards...with a view to encourage exchange of personnel among...levels of government."

The following is a quote from the body of the report:

"The principal problem at present is how to control and manipulate the existing transportation network either to preserve or to reshape the existing national urban pattern and the urban community or region. Instead of utilizing the transport system and the rate structure to influence the flow of goods and people, and the distribution of economic activity and urbanization according to some previously conceived national plan of development, we have permitted our transport facilities and rate structure to accentuate existing advantages and disadvantages. A new policy must be adopted, designed to make our transport system and rate structure a flexible tool instead of a rigid cast for future urban development."

## Observations

1. This study does indeed seem to be an early, if not the earliest, comprehensive review of the urban problem.
2. There was a very strong belief that planning in and of itself could solve the urban problems.

3. The heavy role of the national planning societies in the study is interesting.
4. It is clear that the belief was that the States were unresponsive to the urban areas and the urban problems, and, therefore, it was up to the Federal Government to provide resources and to direct the efforts.
5. It is surprising the degree to which they felt that transportation was the lever to shape the future of urban areas.
6. The degree to which they felt that professionals and professionalism were required to do the job is fascinating.
7. The degree of advocacy of governmental intervention into such a wide variety of social, economic and physical functions is surprising.
8. This is perhaps the beginning of the wave of "urban planning fever" that swept the country in the late fifties and sixties.

Shortly after this report was published, a Federal urban renewal program was established.

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