

# Success in City Planning

The State Charter Revision Commission report on planning in New York City includes a good deal of backing and filling and some carefully raised straw men. The main points attacked—independence vs. politicization, centralization vs. decentralization, fragmentation vs. consolidation, and attachment to the executive or legislative branch—are the conventional issues of the municipal planning process.

What the study fails to recognize is that in recent years a remarkable balance has been struck in all these matters; the planning function in New York City is working fairly well. There is a substantial record of achievement. Administrative or political tampering could do more harm than good.

This is not to say that the city's planning procedures are perfect or that no changes are desirable. But they would be changes to fortify or, at most, modify the present process, rather than to "reform" it.

The Planning Commission has maintained a surprising independence and integrity over the thirty-odd years since it was established. Legislative checks and balances with the Board of Estimate are subject to notable political seesawing, but the results have been generally good. Decentralization, through the local community boards established by the last charter revision, is increasingly successful.

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There are some notable weaknesses. One is the functioning of the Board of Standards and Appeals, which grants zoning variances with what appears to be a fair amount of real estate cronyism. Since an appeal mechanism is proper for zoning "hardships," it should not be abolished. But it should be staffed with legal experts capable of a legislative overview, as well as with building technicians, in order to deal with a kind of law that is writing entirely new rules for the building game based on an expanding interpretation of the public interest.

The special development offices that were set up by executive order in the last administration should be institutionalized by charter. Currently, they could be abolished by any new Mayor. On the record of their contributions—imaginative special planning districts, ability to deal constructively and interpretively with trends, and promotion of urban quality—they are indispensable.

One charter reform suggestion to be considered carefully is establishment of a Deputy Mayor for Planning and Budgeting. This could have the excellent effect of providing a direct and coordinated planning line to the Mayor's executive authority.

The ultimate success of the planning process depends on the quality and professionalism of the Mayor's appointments above and beyond any charter provisions. Any further politicization of the process through either administrative or elective procedures, a subject on which the report is both ambivalent and insensitive, would be a catastrophe.

The significant fact remains that there is in New York now a growing confidence in the planning process, and even a kind of constructive truce with the city's developers, which is the best testament to its effective operation.