

Topics

Good Use of Bad Times

The mission of a fire department is easily defined: put out fires quickly, with least cost in suffering and money. It is therefore not astonishing that a much-heralded, little-understood fiscal crisis program to improve New York's municipal service — Management by Objective—should score its first success in the Fire Department.

We heartily applaud the city for pioneering a revolutionary strategy to encourage the 13 Fire Department officials who were judged responsible for the success. It rewarded the officials not with medals, permanent raises, new titles or prizes and scrolls, but with the same welcome commodity used by private enterprise for the same purpose: bonuses in cash averaging more than \$4,000 each.

The Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget made selection of the winners under previously agreed-on criteria. We applaud this step with equal fervor. It should prevent such a distribution from becoming an annual Christmas rite, attached more to the title of the official than his performance.

Fire fighting has become a sophisticated art. The major criterion of success in the new plan was achievement of the same response to fires with a force almost 17 percent smaller than last year's, despite a 13 percent rise in the number of responses—including false alarms. Intelligent disposition of equipment, sharp analysis of minimum manpower needs, training and communications improvements all contributed to the success.

If the basic mission of other city departments could be defined with similar precision, and if the city can find ways to encourage the develop-

ment of professional leadership that will remain in city service, the fiscal crisis will have helped to give the citizens full value for their taxes.

New York's building slump has its good as well as its bad points. There is no minimizing the fact that the city desperately needs construction, and that essential projects are being delayed or canceled. Nor is there any question about the serious effect this will have on the city's future economy and quality.

But at the same time the slump makes it possible to be more thoughtful about development. New York now has ample opportunity to consider the best future uses of its limited land.

The Penn Central 60th Street rail yards, for example, are a major potential resource. They cover almost 40 acres of waterfront land along the Hudson; the site actually extends from 58th to 72d Streets. Because rail operations are being phased out in Penn Central's bankruptcy, this land will inevitably be put to other uses.

Development of such a prime parcel in New York usually takes place by announcement of speculative plans by private interests, followed by anguished local outcry. Belated city studies do little to deflect the course of real estate as manifest destiny.

In this case, however, time and the building slowdown are on the city's side. Private plans are already being promoted, but investment money is scarce. Therefore the Department of City Planning has been able to produce a careful analysis of the impact of the future use of the yards on the affected area—the Lincoln Square

neighborhood and the waterfront. It has inventoried community needs and resources and studied the effects of alternative functions, as a series of development options.

The possibilities range from housing to open space, with a variety of residential and commercial combinations between. It is determined that a number of solutions could work, functionally and economically. What will not work is the conventional developer's formula: towers or slabs with unused fringe spaces, unconnected and out of scale with their surroundings, often overloading existing services.

The report comes to the obvious conclusion that the waterfront site is an unexcelled opportunity for a superb park, in whole or in part. It would not only extend Riverside Park, but it would parallel and augment the much-used, and abused, southern section of Central Park, relieving the pressure on it while serving the residential and cultural neighborhood between the two.

However the yards are to be used, it is clear that any development should be integrated with the surrounding areas, not separated from them. The study's emphasis is on the need to preserve access to the views of the water, and to provide public use of the waterfront.

The care with which this study deals with broadly defined, long-range development impact, on a local and citywide basis, is exemplary. It becomes quite clear that developer-generated plans are often insufficient, and can even cost the city more than is gained. This is the kind of thoughtful, professional analysis that should be brought to any major site in the future, when building activity resumes.