

The Regional Planners at 50

New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 14, 1979; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 18

The Regional Planners at 50

The half-century mark has been hitting a lot of 20th-century institutions lately. Suddenly, such generators of progress as the Regional Plan Association are finding themselves in their 50th year. This private, volunteer group was established to promote the First Regional Plan in 1929. Since then, it has seen a remarkable number of its prophecies fulfilled and objectives achieved. But the belief in a perfectible world that spurred the association's founding and attracted its trend-setting talents is no longer with us. This is a time of considerably diminished optimism and vastly enlarged problems.

•
The First Regional Plan, underwritten by the Russell Sage Foundation and nurtured by Charles Dyer Norton, was a powerful and prescient document. It was instrumental in the development of the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut park and parkway systems and the location of the area's airports. It spearheaded an increasing concern for the decongestion of the crowded hearts of older cities. All its early programs were based on the conviction that planning was an instrument for the betterment of the human condition. But above all, it was the first organization to stress the need for concerned and coordinated tristate planning — long before any of the present local and regional bodies were established.

The Second Regional Plan, issued in 1960 under the

leadership of C. McKim Norton, son of the early chairman, addressed itself to a far less simple dream. Post-war change and growth had added four million people to the New York region and nearly doubled the outlying population. Decentralization had not turned out as envisioned; some of the first plan's aims had been thwarted or distorted by problems of expansion, desegregation and the dispersal of manufacturing. Suburban sprawl and "spread city" (a Regional Plan phrase) were compounded by inner-city decay. The second plan emphasized the rebuilding of older cities, the use of public transport and the strengthening of satellite commercial and residential centers.

The Regional Plan Association is now dealing with an area more populous, more troubled and more interdependent than ever before. The association, headed now by John Keith, with a continuing volunteer group of community leaders, addresses far more complex, intransigent human and economic factors than the original vision of orderly decentralization and planned parks.

Fifty years ago, the association pioneered the first modern, large-scale regional plan. But the real significance of this anniversary is that today the concept of regional planning is quite generally accepted as a metropolitan necessity. With so many laurels to rest on, the association will have little opportunity to do so; the second 50 years are the hardest.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.