

Making Plans Without a Planner

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The only professional architect and planner serving on New York City's Planning Commission left last December and has not been replaced. Now the commission's chairman, Robert Wagner Jr., is expected to leave soon to become a Deputy Mayor. Then the commission will have neither the leadership nor the expertise to deal as it should with the city's growing zoning and development problems.

The task of the commission is to encourage desirable patterns of development and investment. Its planning policies determine the density and the nature of buildings. It is responsible for the provision of public amenities and the well-being of neighborhoods. Planners have to recognize trends, good and bad, and know how to control them.

When development threatened Madison Avenue's unique small shops, and when office buildings were moving on the city's theaters, protective measures were devised through special zoning districts. Professionals understand such measures. They can read drawings and visualize three-dimensional structures. They understand how big a building will be, where its shadows will fall, how it will affect traffic and what it will do to the character of its setting. Without their strong voice, the Planning Commission will drift while

its members train on the job, and the city will suffer. The commission does not lack dedicated and able members; it lacks technical expertise.

The revised City Charter requires that planning commissioners be appointed by the Mayor from each borough through nominations by the local planning boards. There is nothing wrong with that system in principle; in fact, there are plenty of qualified candidates. What stands in the way of their being appointed is the fact that the local boards increasingly emphasize politics over planning, and this attitude has extended to City Hall.

At the moment, for example, it is Manhattan's turn to recommend someone for the long-vacant commissioner's seat. There are dozens of qualified possibilities. But the names that have been floated appear to fit various political formulas of color, sex and party loyalty. Finding a first-rate professional who fits such formulas has apparently proved impossible.

The new Charter also gives local planning boards a larger role than formerly, including the power to review all local land uses. But their function is only advisory. Every important project ends up at the Planning Commission. With one seat empty and with the chairman about to leave, it needs professional skills.

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