

Planning Commission Vacancy

In a climate of growing community concern, the impending appointment to the City Planning Commission is arousing more than routine interest. It would be pleasant, but naive, to think that the days when these appointments were used as handy political payoffs to maintain a neat ethnic, religious and borough balance were over.

There are hints that the Lindsay administration's choice for this appointment may be made for purely political reasons rather than for the desperately needed professionalism with which the planner's job must be filled. If this is the outcome, it would be particularly unfortunate because the Planning Commission was set up by the City Charter to be free of political influence.

If the administration is, as charged, now "figuring the angles" in terms of voter blocs, it is figuring the wrong ones. The reason the incumbent, Mrs. Beverly Spatt, has been able to rally widespread support for her reappointment is that she has been available to the public, accustomed as it is to the bureaucratic runaround. In these days of deepening neighborhood trouble, people are convinced she cares.

But more is involved than the desirability or necessity of continuing Mrs. Spatt's role as "people's advocate," a role she has played with conscientious intelligence. Her dissents have raised important issues, but they have turned into a nonproductive controversy with the commission. Whatever the Mayor's decision on her reappointment, she has demonstrated that the commission and its staff cannot shut themselves up in a hermetically sealed compartment. Review and criticism are quite properly being undertaken by the local community planning boards, where they have the greatest constructive value. These local boards should be able to be heard without the need of a go-between, Mrs. Spatt or anyone else.

What the Planning Commissioner's job requires, more than ever, is the highest standard of expertise, urban concern and objectivity. What the commission needs is to keep its lines open. Its growing solidarity of planning purpose must not be achieved at the risk of exclusivity of viewpoint. A political appointment will gain nothing at this time except the resentment of an increasingly knowledgeable public. New York doesn't need tokenism; it needs planning.