

The City Planning Lesson, Contd.

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There are painful, unpleasant lessons to be learned from New York City's current struggle with proposals to develop Times Square and the East River waterfront. Both provided bad examples of how to plan and how to build. And they opened the city to attacks on its competence and credibility, which can be even more damaging than a misjudged project. One bus shelter fiasco should be the limit in each generation.

In the cases of Times Square and the East River, what should have been routine city planning apparently broke down. The riverfront proposals, which would normally be weighed by the Planning Commission, were directed instead to the Department of Ports and Terminals. Sponsors were allowed to spend large sums on plans and presentations before they were sent back to the commission, where the matter belonged. Such costly confusions and delays benefit no one. They have in fact foreclosed any chance of getting the best possible plan for the development rights that will be handed over with the city-owned East River frontage. Not to hand them over now risks a new charge that developers can't do business in New York.

That is exactly what has been said for months now

by the sponsors of a proposal called The City at 42d Street, an idea for redeveloping Times Square. The city seems never to have committed itself to the proposal, which was privately formulated and promoted. But New York's failure to develop strong and accepted planning procedures exposed it to harmful, even if exaggerated, complaints of bad faith. If the city wasn't going to say yes to the Times Square ideas, then it should have said no, and sooner. There is no excuse for allowing sponsors to push their hopes and campaign so far.

With new leadership at the Planning Commission, this is the time to put matters right. In the case of Times Square, the city seems finally to be getting its act together. It has prepared its own guidelines — as it failed to do for the East River site — and will invite builders to work with city and state agencies on ideas that serve both public and private interests.

The moral should be obvious. Decisions need to be reached in reasonable lengths of time. And development needs procedures that are clearly established and understood so that no inflated expectations have either to be coddled or popped.

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