

City vs. Suburbs

The growing confrontation of cities and their suburbs is spotlighted dramatically by Hartford's unusual lawsuit to block seven suburbs from receiving Federal HUD grants—an action, if successful, that would force a radical reordering of government policies and priorities.

In its suit against the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the city of Hartford charges that the suburbs have failed to provide or plan for the low income housing and economically viable communities that were the intent of HUD's legislation, and that the urgent needs of the city, such as shelter for the poor and elderly, should have priority over suburban roads, parks and sewers. The suburbs have struck back by calling Hartford's stand a raid on their treasuries.

The point that Hartford is making, beyond the question of open housing, is that Federal practice, based on present grant procedures, is exacerbating the decline of the city by strengthening and enhancing the suburbs at the city's expense. When, for example, funds go to the suburbs for industrial development that will help destroy the city's economic base while no suburban housing is built for the workers—thus leaving the city with the housing load—Federal aid becomes more than counterproductive. It hastens the deterioration of the city and deepens its financial and social plight.

Questioning this kind of policy is both legitimate and necessary. In a situation comparable to other older metropolitan centers, Hartford contains 90 percent of the region's poor, provides more jobs for commuters than for residents and bears crushing welfare, hospital and educational costs. It continues to service the needs of the suburbs while its assets are drained by new, Federally assisted roads leading to Federally assisted developments in outlying districts. Also drained are its leadership, brains and tax base, as the exodus is actively encouraged. Only the burdens are left behind.

Although Hartford and its surrounding towns have been working together on regional plans for common problems—an effort that will inevitably, and unfortunately, be ruptured by this confrontation—it is increasingly clear that voluntary regional cooperation can surmount neither strong local self-interest nor policies out of Washington.

Nor does Hartford's action do anything to help the aging suburbs that are already suffering some of the same problems of deterioration as the city's core. What it does do is to raise very serious and unavoidable considerations of intense concern to the older city's survival—chiefly whether current Federal practice must be revised to give the cities the real aid, or hope, that is currently in tragically short supply.

Win or lose, Hartford's suit forces an issue of the utmost significance to this country's future. Federal assistance programs must be keyed to the overall needs of a metropolitan region. If national policy not only worsens the plight of the cities but adds fuel to the struggle between the city and its surroundings, examination of such policy is clearly overdue.