

Reforming the Charter: II

Some of the proposals for Charter changes in the planning process, as contained in Question Four on Tuesday's ballot, are essential reforms. Others are useful but not critical; a few are dubious. In sum, however, Question Four represents a consistent, rational improvement in the basic machinery of the planning and development process for New York.

Planning for the City

Practices that have been instituted unofficially in recent years, such as advance notice to community boards of public and private plans for city land, have been proved beneficial and should be made official procedure now. The corollary proposal, a uniform system for the review of all land use subject to city regulation, beginning at the community board level and ending at the Board of Estimate, is an overdue procedural reform based on desirable decentralization that could vastly expedite efficient and appropriate land-use planning.

The elimination of an unenforceable, unreal paper Master Plan as a Charter requirement in favor of a more feasible, dynamic planning process only recognizes the facts of planning as the city has learned them in the last ten years.

The Site Selection Board, a pointless administrative anomaly, should be abolished as soon as possible. The proposed reform of the Board of Standards and Appeals, which would admit the City Planning Commission as a party to the proceedings, is a badly needed change, essential to check zoning abuses. It would be still better, however, if nominations were made through screened listings from civic or professional groups rather than through City Hall's back door. The addition of a "professional planner" is also meaningless without any guarantee of qualifications beyond the label.

The same is true for making the members of the City Planning Commission representative of the five boroughs; this merely institutionalizes an existing political ritual, again, without promise of professional competence. At best it can do no harm, but it hardly rates as a reform.

Community Boards

Planning issues spill over into Question Six, which includes significantly expanded duties for community boards and the creation of borough boards. Borough boards promise few if any benefits at all. When planning problems or capital projects cross community lines, the City Planning Commission is qualified to do anything a borough board could do, without the addition of an extra layer of bureaucracy.

The new responsibilities of the community boards would range from the preparation of community development plans and involvement in local capital projects to the initial review of city land uses. Professional help will undoubtedly be needed for these large, specialized functions, and that, in turn, requires money. To make a good proposal a reality, the financing would have to be solved. At present, it is impractical for lack of funds.

In general, the planning proposals are sound, aimed at genuine improvement of the process, with greater community responsiveness and better use of the city's resources. Question Four deserves a Yes vote.