

Slowdown to Fast Food

On Wednesday, the City Planning Commission will probably adopt a limited zoning change that would make it impossible to convert legal "nonconforming commercial uses" in residential neighborhoods to fast-food places. That technical mouthful means no take-out burgers or pizzas on streets like Park Avenue, but not much more. It would simply tighten existing regulations.

The basic problem of the fast-food operation in the city remains unsolved. Under existing law, these activities cannot be discriminated against in commercially zoned areas. The fact that a residential neighborhood may exist a few feet from a commercially zoned street, a characteristic of New York, means that all of the abuses of the high-volume, take-out, prepackaged food operation—litter, congestion, loitering, transient influx and turnover, car standing and double parking and, not least, offensive smells, sounds and sights—merely move down the block or turn the corner.

The City Planning Commission and local communities are seriously involved in trying to find answers as the chains begin their metropolitan invasion. In the right place fast-food outlets are fine; but New York does not offer many right places. Aside from nuisance value, they destroy the distinctiveness of the city's smaller, established neighborhoods; they can be the tipping point to universalized honky-tonk.

The potential solution, within the law, seems to be voluntary cooperation among the chains, the city and the local communities, particularly on site selection; but this would not affect the independent pizza and hot dog stands that disseminate block-long auras of debris and odor.

If New York is the pot of gold at the end of the fast-food rainbow, it need not also be a pot of litter. Somehow the city must be able to control this environmental nuisance.