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In Planning, Who's the Boss?

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By Mitchell Moss

Sooner or later, Mayor Dinkins will pick a new chairman of the City Planning Commission. Perhaps the extraordinary amount of time that the mayor has taken is a measure of how difficult it is to find a person with the right combination of qualities.

The next chairman of the City Planning Commission must be multi-lingual: he or she must be able to speak the language of developers, neighborhood groups and the newly empowered City Council. The chairman cannot be a one-dimensional technocrat, for the job will require sophisticated negotiating skills to resolve conflicts between community boards and developers; the political sensitivity to work with a City Council trying to establish its own authority in land-use matters; and the capacity to pull together a commission whose members, come July, will have been appointed by the mayor, the City Council president and the borough presidents, respectively. In short, politics is an essential part of planning.

The next commissioner can begin by reviving the Department of City Planning, the agency under the chairman's direction, which reached an organizational nadir under the last chairman. The department, which is administered by an executive director, actually consists of five borough offices plus about a dozen functional divisions that do city-wide technical work.

Unfortunately, they do so with little central direction or coordination.

During the economic recovery of the 1980s, the city's Public Development Corporation emerged instead as the primary vehicle for planning and implementing large-scale projects, while civic groups increasingly carried out the local planning functions neglected by the city. The Municipal Art Society established its highly respected Planning Center, Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer worked with the Regional Plan Association to develop the program, "New Directions for the Bronx," and local groups hired planners to fill the vacuum created by the demise of the Department of City Planning.

During Koch's second and third terms, many of the most talented and creative individuals in the department fled to other agencies. The department lost not only talent, it lost the capacity to establish priorities. It is today buried in paperwork generated by private-sector proposals, while conflicts over land use are battled out in the courts.

The present pause in development provides an extraordinary opportunity for long-range planning. The planning commission should take advantage of the momentary downturn in the regional economy to formulate a long-term strategy for land-use development in the five boroughs.

During the 1980s, the city emphasized the need to retain and attract offices and was remarkably successful in guiding office development from the East to the West Side of Manhattan and in fostering new development in downtown Brooklyn. The challenge in the years ahead is to make the city more livable, to preserve old neighborhoods and to create new ones. A streamlined process that fosters investment in housing rather than offices is essential.

What distinguishes New York from other large cities is that most of the people who work here also live here, and we need to reinforce that link. Given the shortage of public funds, planning and zoning should mobilize the private and non-profit sectors to create new residential and recreational areas in vacant industrial land and abandoned neighborhoods. Lower Manhattan needs new zoning so that narrow, technologically obsolete and increasingly vacant office buildings can be converted into housing, just as manufacturing lofts have been recycled in TriBeCa and SoHo. As the Report of the Commission on the Year 2000, headed by former Planning Commission Chairman Robert F. Wagner, Jr. wisely noted, "The

enormously detailed zoning code is often far behind the natural development of the city."

In 1978, at a meeting to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the City Planning Commission, Mayor Koch said, "If there is one capital project I want my administration to be involved with, it is that we brought the harbor back to the city of New York . . . that we opened the waters to the people of the city." This goal remains to be fulfilled. Since the beginning of the year, the Westside Waterfront Panel, the Parka Council, the state Urban Development Corporation and the city's Department of Parks and Recreation have issued plans for revitalizing the waterfront.

But the time for study is past. If the City Planning Commission harnessed the energies of private-sector and civic groups. New York City's waterfront could become an integral part of our urban life rather than a blight on our neighborhood.

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