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BACKGROUND REPORT FOR
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT POLICY COMMITTEE
MEETING - MARCH 14, 1976

S. E. Smigel

The 45th Annual Meeting of the National Housing Conference took place in Washington on February 29 - March 1 with principal speakers sharply critizing national policy and urging programs to raise current low - levels of production. Senator Hubert Humphrey, the keynote speaker, described the last two years of record low housing production as "an absolute disaster." He asked for the funding and revitalization of sound programs that were being discarded by an administration that has welched on a bi-partisan national commitment.

He charged, moreover, that "This Administration has turned its back on our Nation's cities." Too low a priority has been given to programs for the revitalization of neighborhoods. The Community Development program he identified as a good program but hardly enough. Housing rehabilitation, local economic development and replacement or repair of existing infrastructure were badly needed. "In short," he said, "we must arrest present policies which encourage the throw-away city and embark on a new conservation approach. Conservation of housing, conservation of neighborhoods, conservation of infrastructure, and conservation of cities must be the top priority."

The attack on the Administration's neglect of housing was bi-partisan. Senator Jacob K. Javits (R - NY) described administration housing programs as "bankrupt" of a national strategy and advocated measures to stimulate housing starts and rehabilitation and drastically lower the unemployment levels of construction workers. Among the measures proposed by Senator Javits was "a new program to provide for rehabilitation and refinancing of existing properties in transitional areas of major cities" and "a greater flow of mortgage money into housing market through the use of larger investments of pension funds and banks with federal guarantees to provide an additional attraction for investors." Like other speakers, he questioned the wisdom of the heavy reliance on the Section 8 program.

The Conference also heard from HUD Secretary Carla A. Hills. Combining humor with a serious appraisal of the problems, Secretary Hills committed HUD to an all out effort to meet assisted housing goals and to eliminate unnecessary red-tape. Following her speech, she headed a top-level HUD panel which fielded questions from an NHC panel and from an audience of more than a thousand listeners.

The National Housing Conference adopted a wide-ranging series of resolutions, urging, for example, improvement in HUD administration

of programs, orderly completion of urban renewal projects, greater emphasis on rural housing programs for the benefit of smaller communities and an ambitious overall target for four years of 1.2 million units annually of assisted housing. Since previous national goals for assisted housing (set by the Congress and the Executive Branch) were only 600,000 units per annum, this new proposed target appears optimistic in the extreme.

Congressman Brock Adams, Chairman of the House Budget Committee, helped provide some leaven and sobering perspective on the matter of Federal assistance to housing. He stated that the American people and the Congress alike must face reality - programs and expectations must be kept within revenue limitations. He did feel that assisted housing in the 500-600,000 unit range per annum was possible in the existing revenue framework and recommended a major effort to provide necessary authorizations and secure prompt implementation of programs to meet this goal.

Congressman Adams emphasized, moreover, that the major role in providing housing to Americans has always been that of the private sector and that this should continue to be the case. At the same time, he expressed serious concern with current circumstances, stating, "There is something seriously wrong with a system that permits the sale and construction of expensive condominiums and megalithic corporate monuments, but permits whole sections of cities to slide into slums, and has practically priced the middle income family out of the housing market."

A major luncheon address at the conference was given by Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., Executive Director of the National Urban League. His theme was the imperative need to develop order and action from the "chaotic" housing market which is "shot through with conflicts and with contradiction". He cited data to the effect that the bottom 50% of income recipients receive only 25% of all housing subsidies. In his concluding remarks, he pleaded that housing programs be part of a planned, positive national urban growth policy. As the alternative to a national policy, he saw continued chaos and possibly fatal societal imbalance.

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