

NEIGHBORHOOD FOUNDATION
MEMORANDUM #19

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SUBJECT: NEIGHBORHOOD CORPORATION AND POLITICAL
ENVIRONMENT: WHAT URBAN FACTORS FAVOR
NEIGHBORHOOD CORPORATION

Several community action organizations recently met to develop a neighborhood corporation. During the meeting the question was raised: "In what city should it be?" I suggested some factors to guide us to cities that would favor neighborhood corporation. These factors identify the political elements of urban environment which bear on the success of neighborhood corporation. Where present, the purpose and form of neighborhood corporation can be served. That purpose is to build territorially defined self-governing neighborhood communities within our cities. These communities must be incorporated on the basis of assembly, officials, and revenue, and be given sufficient public authority and resources to govern matters of essential local concern.

In discussing these factors, we should understand that the beginning of new political development is crucial. There are cities in which corporate neighborhood development can initially succeed because of a congenial environment and other cities less conducive to original development. Let us find the right city for a strong beginning. The understanding of that success will carry neighborhood corporation development into more difficult places.

Neighborhood governing authority is a general principle of municipal constitution, applying to all cities of the United States. Local differences of political environment may require variations in the basic structure of neighborhood self-governing authority, yet the practical question is where first to plant the new form which, in succeeding, will spread by example. Not all places are equally amenable to political innovation.

A caveat is warranted. Do not measure the concept of neighborhood corporation by the weight of New York or Chicago! The test of neighborhood authority is not whether it first can succeed in the most difficult places, but whether it can succeed at all. If so, that success will occur in simpler cities. There we can gain a basic understanding of the structure of neighborhood authority and invent the ingenuities necessary to confront New York and Chicago.

We begin now with some factors to guide us to a congenial environment for the development of self-governing neighborhood authority. A consideration of these factors does not imply that there is only one right city in which to begin, but rather points to political elements of any city which would affect neighborhood corporation development and must be weighed in its undertaking.

A. Council Government

A city with a strong mayor and city council elected at large is particularly favorable for developing independent neighborhood corporations. Since its city council is elected by, and represents, the majority middle-class electorate of the city, the poor areas obtain inadequate public service. These areas demand improved public service through community action. Because of the at-large system of council election, established political party organization provides no structure in these areas to express local needs and organize local action. As a result, in the poor areas there is a political vacuum which awaits new local authority. The territorially defined neighborhood corporation is suited to fill this vacuum. Its self-governing structure can express community needs and popularly decide appropriate programs of services and methods of management.

In such cities, neighborhood corporation will not be opposed by ward-based political party organizations, unlike Chicago and New York where ward districts elect the city councils. While the at-large council will ignore the neighborhood development, the mayor will quickly see the advantage of cooperating with the electorate of the neighborhood community which is collected and structured into corporate organization. Since that corporation is organized on a one-man, one-vote basis, it has organized electoral potential which he could use. A mayor who positively relates to the poor through their neighborhood government structure will realize a maximum return of good will on his minimal investment of meeting their demands for sharing authority over social services and resources.

In the absence of district representation on the council, the mayor will find in neighborhood corporation a stable structure for continuous relation to the poor areas. He will prefer to negotiate with the permanent legal structures of neighborhood territories than with the plethora of special interest and ad hoc protest organizations that presently exist with transient structures and leadership.

B. Bureaucratic Consciousness

The vital element of self-governing neighborhood community is its authority to decide and manage local programs of welfare and social service. Such local authority must be gained from the centralized authority structure of welfare and social service. This transfer

of authority will be resisted by the central authority. The measure of effective resistance will be a function of the independent political strength of welfare and social service administration in a city, as well as their consciousness of the intention of neighborhood corporation to claim a measure of central authority for local control. Thus neighborhood authority is favored in those cities where social administration is politically weak, or if strong, then still unconscious of the popular claim to a measure of their authority for local control. The former case is clear. The latter case typically exists where the city-wide structure of social administration is critically divided between its public and private sectors. This internal division within the establishment can work to the advantage of neighborhood self-governing authority. The neighborhood corporation can approach the private agencies for transferred authority and resources as the new way to retain the voluntarist principle of social welfare against the political management and bureaucratic control of public welfare. Conversely, the public service sector can be approached for the delegation of some of its authority to the neighborhood in return for a grateful constituency of political support. This course may be politically more attractive to politicians and bureaucrats than contracting their public authority to private agencies, which return no electoral payoff.

Strong and self-conscious social administration will be a formidable obstacle to the development of neighborhood authority. In several cities, social administration is well organized and has already struck against incursions upon its authority and powers. New York has experienced several paralyzing strikes by social workers. Out of such union experience it is reasonable to assume that the administrative class will organize to resist the transfer of authority, labeling it a menace to nonpartisan control and professional standards. In cities where there are large numbers of welfare dependents, such strikes could carry great sudden force and prevent enlightened political interests from supporting the transfer of authority to neighborhood localities. Even where the social service bureaucracy is neither politically strong nor self-conscious, they will resist giving neighborhoods authority over social benefits. That encounter, however, can be won.

The foundation of resistance is twofold: 1) The diminution of central authority over welfare and social service benefits means less resources are available to the bureaucracy to devote to its benefit. The less money they control, the less they charge for control. 2) The transfer of authority to neighborhood control permits the localities to develop their own standards for community service occupations. This challenges the power of professional control over the personnel of social administration.

Both fears are only partly justified. In the first case, central administration will still be required to coordinate the diverse claims of local neighborhood authorities, and to adjust them within a given city budget. To the extent that this task will yield benefit to the neighborhood corporations, professional administration will find popular political support for its continued security and prosperity. In the second case, it can be argued that local neighborhood organization will hire capable professionals, and not the mere pretenders. For the capable professional, confident of being hired by the local structure, prospects for effective work will be greater than ever. He will have thousands of people backing his creative efforts and no longer be crippled by bureaucratic rigidities. With these arguments, a healthy debate within the local social administration can occupy their hours and dilute their opposition to transferred authority.

C. Civic Distemper

In the initial development of neighborhood corporation it is wise to avoid cities that have experienced severe riots and now suffer civic distemper. In such cities, established political and civic power is too distraught to reason together with leaders of poor communities who seek corporate development and local authority. It will be hard to discuss the genuine issue of self-governing authority and gain the support of established power to effectively counter lower-level political and bureaucratic opposition.

In cities where severe riots have occurred, wealth and political power is too confused to realize the value of self-governing authority for social peace. Their admixture of power and frustration about social improvement leads them to the despairing view that the welfare and social work bureaucracy must be reinforced to control the poor. Hypnotized by disorder, they collapse into a false view of conflict and prefer to commit the poor areas to the 'military' management of social workers, educators and policemen. Initial neighborhood corporation development should wisely turn to calm cities which have not experienced the explosions of Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. Yet these cities should be large enough to have some pretense to being major cities. That pretense will lead them to fear the same fate of civil explosions which certain major cities have suffered. Being apprehensive, these cities will be open to new ideas to prevent that disorder. Without the brutalization of thought which riots produce, they will be able to understand the value and necessity of transferred authority. In such places the traditional rhetoric of self-help may win their support for neighborhood authority against the baleful forewarnings of the bureaucracy.

D. Authority to Govern

Transfer of governing power is preferred for several reasons:

1) In a poor community it is easier to gain resources by supplanting authorities that currently administer programs in the community than compete nationally for new allocations. 2) Where social programs already exist, the neighborhood can better visualize what it aims to govern. Thus, transfer of authority is a more meaningful idea if the resources are already evident in the community. Where no programs exist, the people simply want more service -- meeting an urgent unanswered need is more important to them than the question of who administers the help. Thus, who governs, neighborhood authority or outsiders, is obscured by the simpler, more immediate, demand for more service. Moreover, where neighborhood social programs sponsored by private agencies already exist, the people involved already have some experience and training in self-government and social administration of the resources available. In essence, those involved have served an apprenticeship and have a sounder consciousness of the principle of self governing authority. Thus, prior experience makes them more effective users of transferred resources and authority. 3) Existing service programs in the community can less easily resist the organized claim of the community for transferred authority than established authority can resist awarding new authority and resources to neighborhood corporations.

For these reasons corporation neighborhood development is most favored in those cities which have many private agencies of community social service in poor neighborhoods. Boston is a good example. Conditions for transfer are most favored where the existing private agencies are in spiritual decline and confused about their agency role in the modern world. While private agencies were the focus of social service 50 years ago, they are now generally undistinguished and play a minor role in view of new government programs of welfare. Their trustees may be open to the argument of transfer as a modern effort to maintain the voluntarist approach to community service. Further, in view of the political unrest in poverty areas of the city, agency trustees may view transfer as a legitimate way for them to exit from ghettos they no longer understand.

Once again, New York and Chicago, with their prosperous settlements like Hull House and Henry Street Settlement, show too much new inspiration and pretended renewal of the private agency role to favor the transfer of agencies to neighborhood control. Their house and staff have enough distinction to convince their boards of a new life for philanthropic control. A city of undistinguished and spiritually declining social agencies will offer less resistance to the justice and inevitability of transferring resources to neighborhood control as the basis of neighborhood self-government.

E. Traditional Imperative

At the heart of self-governing neighborhood corporation is the recovery of direct democracy. The neighborhood is a community of adequate scale for the direct deliberation and decision of citizens through an assembly structure.

The value of such a democratic recovery is clear. Late in Thomas Jefferson's life, he acknowledged the value of New England town meeting government and called for the division of counties into republics of direct assembly. He recognized that representative government requires as its principal virtue a wise electorate. But people can only elect representatives with judgment if they have direct political practice in local assembly. In the absence of such local units, or schools of political practice, people will elect representatives by standards which only pretend to be political. Only assembly government with authority over essential local concerns can train popular judgment for wise election. In our urban society, this function is the political contribution of neighborhood corporation.

Historically, only New England developed this assembly structure, which continues today in its villages and small towns. This fact establishes New England's traditional wisdom. Accordingly, a good rule for community development is to favor New England cities for a revival in urban society of its own early experience in rural areas. In that region, the political value of neighborhood self-government will be more clearly recognized.

Other traditions of New England reinforce the case for neighborhood self-government. Congregationalism had its beginnings there, as a defense of local integrity. Local integrity is the very principle upon which independent neighborhood corporation is based. In addition, New England was the seat of national independence, and today can inspire the argument for local self-governing authority. The New England epic of decolonization is peculiarly appropriate to the necessity of self-governing authority in the local neighborhoods of our cities. New England has the historic consciousness, or at least collective unconsciousness, to be open to the development of independent neighborhood authority in its cities.

F. Territorial Identity

For neighborhood self-government, old cities are preferred to new ones. The older a city, the greater its need and openness to renewal. The newer it is, the more intolerant of change. Old cities have long memories of successfully surviving much historic change.

The development of neighborhood authority is more favored in a city which contains clearly defined territories within its boundaries. This is more likely to be an old city with strong ethnic traditions. The territorial identity of neighborhoods is the strongest resource for renewing cities with new local units of self-governing decision.

These factors do not tell us which neighborhood communities within a given city should be developed for local self-government. Which neighborhood and how large it should be for effective development are further questions. The foregoing factors have only indicated the political elements of an urban environment which favors or discourages the development of neighborhood self-governing authority. They are like the weather and soil are to agriculture. But even with a good climate and excellent soil, we should stake out a farm no larger than we can work. Bad judgment and excessive ambition can undo the good favors of nature.

The Urban Yearning Center for Christian Ministry

- 1. Liturgical Calendar white pages
- 2. Cycles for Daily Morning Prayers yellow pages
 Week days and Festival Seasons blue pages
 Festivals and Fast Seasons
- 3. Eucharistic Prayers deep yellow pages
- 4. Liturgies and Introductions blue pages
- 5. Rituals white pages