

MHA Center city

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REBUTTAL **What's to be done for Downtown living?**

*A Letter to the Editor from Mr. Orelle Ledbetter,
Executive Director of the Memphis Housing*

Authority, in response to our interview with Mr. James E. McGehee, March 20, 1975.

We at Memphis Housing Authority read the referenced interview with a great deal of interest, and perhaps a bit of dismay. The remarks to follow are not intended to be criticism of Mr. McGehee, but rather are intended to clarify, hopefully.

The City of Memphis has no connection with the land pricing policies of MHA. These are controlled by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and our own Board of Commissioners. You see, MHA is not a city agency. Rather, we are a body corporate and politic, created by the State of Tennessee. In essence, our community development side (the other side is public housing) handles urban renewal for the City by contract. While the liaison between the City and MHA is very close, HUD regulations require a certain degree of autonomy in MHA operations.

For example, in the resale of land each parcel is appraised by at least two independent, qualified appraisers (usually MAI's). The resale price established for each parcel by our Board of Commissioners is based upon these appraisals. The value estimates submitted by the appraisers consider the projected use of the property under the urban renewal plan, the restrictions imposed on the land by the urban renewal plan, the process which must be followed to buy and redevelop the land, the prohibition of any speculation, and the amount of land to be offered, among other things.

MHA has only one undeveloped, purely residential tract near downtown. This is a 4-acre tract adjacent to Edison Park (Breakthrough) on Jefferson, east of Danny Thomas. The reuse value has been established at 85¢ a square foot, for

garden-type or townhouse apartments. The density is expected to be around 15-18 units per acre; however, design could alter this either way.

We have other residential areas in the Beale Street Urban Renewal Project, though these are for high-rise in conjunction with commercial on the first floor or two. Prices vary from \$2.00 to \$4.00 a square foot.

Is our pricing realistic? Our appraisers think so, and we agree. In numerous conferences and interviews with redevelopers of residential property, five things stand out as the main deterrents to residential development in the downtown area:

- 1) The general overbuilding of apartments in the City.
- 2) The cost of construction.
- 3) The lack of financing for the construction.
- 4) The apparent lack of a definitive market for downtown units, especially high-rise.
- 5) The trend of the downtown area, including activity, safety, living amenities, etc.

Notice that the price of the land is not listed. There is no question that land price must be considered, but what real difference does it make whether the unit land cost is \$1000 or \$2500, if the unit will cost too much to build, no money is available to build it and nobody will rent it when it is built?

No, MHA's pricing policies definitely have not retarded the residential development of downtown Memphis. On the contrary, through the efforts of MHA, some 900 units of housing have been built on MHA land in the last thirty-six months in the downtown area.

What can be done? Obviously, people are going to live where they want to, if they can, and people want to be in certain places for reasons far too numerous to list. It is a game of pros and cons. It would seem that the first step in attracting residential development to downtown would be to make downtown a very desirable place to live. The factors which would make downtown desirable could overcome the less desirable factors, such as lack of open space, probable increased cost, etc., including even the competition for tenants and residents from outlying residential areas. It is possible that the projected redevelopment of downtown, including the Mall, is a giant step in the direction for increasing the residential desirability of downtown. A turnaround upward in personal security, quality shopping, quality dining, quality entertainment, and aesthetically pleasing surroundings could go a long way in making downtown the "in" place to live. It is a big job to get there—far beyond the cost of the land available for residential building. But we can get there if we are honest enough to admit what must be done.

The MHA staff is not a novice in the real estate business. In the approximately last 36 months, over 1,350,000 square feet of MHA land in the

downtown area have been placed under contract and/or sold for other than residential reuse. In the same period, non-residential construction has been completed or started on over \$48,000,000 of improvements under MHA contracts.

A most important factor, the very crux of the redevelopment phase of urban renewal, has apparently been overlooked by Mr. McGehee. This is the planned, coordinated, systematic and compatible redevelopment of the area through the application of prescribed land use and construction controls, the review and approval of construction plans by MHA, the assurance of adequate financing to do the job, and the prevention of a land developer from buying the land and speculating on it. To go any other route would not only be a violation of state and federal law, but it would be a betrayal of the American tax payer.

Moving briefly to a third matter, Center City asked Mr. McGehee: "In upgrading downtown, won't some improvements need to be made in the public housing projects?" Only one regular public housing project is downtown, Lauderdale Courts, and three high-rises for the elderly, Borda Tower, Venson Center, and Barry Homes. All are immaculately kept and well maintained.

From where I stand...

by David Bowman

A public hearing on the development of a Tri-State Mass Transit Authority was held at 9:30 A.M. on Friday, April 4, in the Quarterly Court Room. As important as the meeting was, most of us weren't able to attend: 9:30 simply isn't a "public" time. Impossible schedulings are just one of the many ways that citizen participation is discouraged in Memphis.

City Council meetings are still held on Tuesdays at 10 A.M. ("executive session") and 2:30 P.M. ("public session"). Now that the Sunshine Law is in force, the two sessions could be combined into one night session, as suggested recently, to encourage more citizen participation.

The first public hearing on the city's application for \$30 million in community development funds was held at 7 P.M., March 4, and attracted about 300 citizens; the second hearing (March 25) was held at 4 P.M. and drew about 75. Meetings held weekdays between 9 and 5 shouldn't be called "public."

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION?

Even if the city scheduled meetings at night, citizen participation still would be discouraged. Attendance at special hearings depends on people seeing legal notices (often in tiny type) run as many as thirty days ahead of time. Since it's expensive to put in larger notices (such as the transit authority's), why not start a Sunshine Board, a weekly schedule of all meetings and hearings printed together in local newspapers, as Atlanta and other cities do?

Another problem is the array of barriers between citizens and officials. When planners present their proposals, they talk about "cross impact matrices" and other esoterica which surpass all understanding, and they show slides and statistical tables which can't be read beyond the first two rows. When items come up on the Council agenda, they are referred to by ordinance numbers; no captions or explanations of what they involve are offered. "Item number twenty-three: ordinance fourteen eighty-one." What in the world does that tell us? How do we know if it affects us? Should we be down-front to speak on it?

Matters coming up for "first reading" and "second reading" are especially critical: it is too late to organize debate on them or speak on them by their third and final reading. Yet on many ordinances it is impossible to get copies in advance.

When citizens do speak at meetings or hearings, they are listened to politely, but only after several hours of talk-barrage by the experts, commission members, and councilmen. In the 4 P.M. community development hearing, the public was not allowed to speak until 6:30, at which time the official listeners were slipping out one by one for supper—careful only to keep a quorum there.

Every week the attitude expressed by some councilmen is to "suffer the little children to come" speak their little piece, and then disappear; officials register no comments, questions, or other signs that they have heard or heeded what was said. This can't be called communication.

Citizens may talk, and be questioned, but they may not talk back. Or at least that's what the chairman leads us to believe. I don't know any law barring citizens from asking questions of the council; this should be challenged. Unfortunately, the custom of the court becomes the law of the court.

A FAILING TO KEEP-THEM-HONEST?

Government planners themselves see they must get the consent of the neighborhoods before doing anything, so they have formulated the "citizen participation" concept and written it into their guidelines for urban grant—programs.

Memphis has recently gotten a good taste of the "citizen participation" idea, from the \$30 million promised by the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974.

At the first public hearing, held after the nine neighborhoods had already been selected for "treatment," as planners put it, residents of the New Chicago area spoke up for including their neighborhood in the application. Their proposal was voted down in a follow-up APAC meeting. At the second public hearing, they spoke again and their neighborhood was tentatively included.

But when the possibility of Memphis getting community development funds was announced back on August 24, 1974, no mention of any citizen participation requirement was made. Instead, the city chose to fulfill its CP requirement by a hand-picked committee of 31 people drawn from existing boards and commissions and from city officials. Every member of this "Action Program Advisory Committee" (APAC) was a known quantity, a predictable voting pattern, certain to travel along familiar paths to agreed-upon destinations. APAC was certainly within HUD's

guidelines, and Memphis has probably done no worse than other cities—but that is the other cities' problem, and no great cause for rejoicing here.

What is strange about all this is that Clay Huddleston's office in general, and his Policy Planning & Analysis staff in particular, have easily the best record in working with the public. They, above all other administrative units at City Hall, have gotten out into the community, worked with citizen groups, involved people in significant ways (particularly with the revitalization of Downtown Memphis), and have been accessible to the just-plain-folks coming into their offices. So why did APAC happen?

Maybe responsive hands are being tied by bureaucrats elsewhere in City Hall. I assume this is quite possible. Or maybe the failing is simply the citizens' failing: we have not kept-them-honest by showing up at the APAC meetings ourselves.

Fortunately, the APAC show is just beginning. The small victory of New Chicago residents may lead to a sustained "citizens participation" movement. Or is the whole idea naive and incapable of being implemented? Let's try it, anyway.

THE DOWNTOWN MARKET IS BACK

The Front Street Market Crafts Fair, downtown's first major street event of the year, will be held April 15 and 16 from 10:00 A.M. until 5:30 P.M. in Confederate Park.

The fair is being sponsored by the Memphis Artists and Craftsmen's Association. Twenty-five craftsmen from the area will display their works for sale under the colorful canopies.

"To keep the work of top-notch quality there will be only one outdoor crafts sale downtown this year," Phillip Maybee, vice-president of the association, said. "We feel by having only the one show we can be fair to the craftsmen, but more importantly we can satisfy the customers."

The market structure is a familiar sight to downtowners. This year, however, due to mall construction the booths have been moved to Confederate Park overlooking the Mississippi River. With the change came the more appropriate name, "Front Street Market."

The Dixie Bluegrass Boys from the Lucy Opry will entertain during the noon hour each day of the crafts market. Food will be for sale.

Other markets planned include a greenery market, April 23, sponsored by City Beautiful Commission in connection with "I Care Week" and "All About Bikes" on May 15 and 16 during National Bicycle Month.

earthly delights

DOWNTOWN ART EXHIBITS

Sterick Building (Lobby)

April – Paintings by Ms. Dorothy Smartt*
National Bank of Commerce (Lobby)

April – Bert Wade's Rare Collection of
Photographs of early Memphis

FILM

Jewish Community Center

April 15 – "Juliet of the Spirits"

Southwestern

April 16 – "Rebel Without a Cause"

MSU

April 16 – "Paper Moon"

UT-Student Alumni Center

April 18 – "Invasion of the Body Snatchers"
and "The Innocents"

Peabody Library

April 18 – "Grierson," & "Song of Ceylon"*

MUSIC

Harris Music Auditorium (MSU)

April 13 – MSU Orchestra – Kurt Klippstatter
conductor*

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

April 15 – Southwestern Singers Spring
Concert*

Harris Music Auditorium

April 15 – MSU String Quartet – Guest Artist,
James Gholson, clarinet*

DOWNTOWN OPEN-AIR MARKET *

*Free

Center City

First Presbyterian Church
166 Poplar Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee 38103

Announcements

MARCH OF DIMES SUPERWALK

The fourth annual WHBQ Superwalk for the March of Dimes, will be held on April 20, 1975. As in the past, the Walk will begin and end at the Coliseum with registration starting at 8:00 A.M. Walkers will cover a 20 mile route and after the walk, they will collect pledges from their sponsors based on the number of miles they walked. Walkers who "poop out" on the route will be taken back to the Mid-South Coliseum by the Memphis Police Community Service Squad members.

For information about the Walk, please call the March of Dimes Headquarters at 452-2123. Thank you.

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

*First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue
PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink*

MENU FOR APRIL 10 – APRIL 18

THURSDAY, APRIL 10

Ham, Sweet Potatoes, Green Beans, Rolls

FRIDAY, APRIL 11

Turkey & Dressing, English Peas, Cranberry Sauce, Rolls

MONDAY, APRIL 14

Salmon Croquettes, Hash Browned Potatoes, Tossed Salad, Rolls

TUESDAY, APRIL 15

Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, English Peas, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread

THURSDAY, APRIL 17

Fried Chicken, Rice & Gravy, Squash, Rolls

FRIDAY, APRIL 18

Meat Loaf, Potatoes Au Gratin, Lima Beans, Rolls

*Second-class
postage paid at
Memphis, Tennessee*