Urban Renewal: People, Politics And Planning, III

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

As I said here on August 31, you can find here a sudden insight into why certain things have happened to your living space and your quality of life. And that unfavorable events happen for reasons quite different from the explanations provided by the daily media, or city bureau, or the public relations departments of the banking fraternity.

I would say that for a long time most African Americans regarded "white flight" (to the suburbs) as the fairly simple social phenomenon of 'them' getting away from us' -- headed for better schools, better housing (and cheaper) shopping. In his book, "The Geography Of Nowhere", James Kunstler tells us; "By the early 1950s, the government's strategy of subsidizing the building trades and promoting the auto industry and its dependencies as a way to drive the economy seemed to be paying off." A new suburban culture was created.

The great spurt of highway building, freeway construction and acquisition of urban properties (so often key black residential and business districts) was about to begin. The black areas were needed for the land-devouring access roads and cloverleafs--no amenities for the dispossessed, but billions in commercial sites reserved for wealthy investors in centrally located hotels, sports centers and entertainment facilities (sound familiar?). And, yet, they talk about "welfare-for blacks -- what fools do they suppose us to be?

Last week I promised to reveal the background of the allegedly-new "Light Rail" concept. I first wrote about the original 'scam' eight years ago, but I yield here to a very succinct statement from Mr. Kunstler's books "An irresistible coalition of lobbying interests--the combined might of the auto, trucking, oil, tire, asphalt, cement, steel, lumber, construction industries and their unions--got behind the idea" of the Interstate Highway System (and the 48-state supporting system of freeways and access structures). In 1956 Congress approved the "Interstate Highway Act." The largest Public Works (welfare) Project in history.

The chief justification was that "the new expressways will ease the evacuation of cities during a nuclear attack."

The new superhighways created tremendous opportunities for land development in the remote hinterlands of big cities. An unthinkably long commute on old country roads now seemed reasonable on the freeway. So up went more raised ranches and the new split-levels. Each of the thousands of new highway interchanges begged for commercial exploitation. Up went shopping strips and the new "convenience" stores. Businesses of all descriptions fled the decaying urban cores and relocated on the fringe, as close to the on/off ramps as they could get.

The cities, of course, went completely to hell. The superhighways not only drained them of their few remaining taxpaying residents, but in many cases the new beltways became physical barriers, "Chinese walls" sealing off the disintegrating cities from their dynamic outland. Those left behind inside the wall would develop, in their physical isolation from the suburban economy, a pathological ghetto culture.

Now, as any idiot could have foreseen, the volume of auto traffic has increased exponentially and so has the cost of acquiring land to build more freeways--so there is a great push for this supposedly new solution, "Light Rail". But the nation had wonderful, fast and dependable light Rail when I was a kid in the 1930s--and even before that. "In 1925, with the acquisition of the Yellow Coach Company, the General Motors Corporation undertook a systematic campaign to put electric street car lines out of business all over America.

I remember that in 1936 when I entered high school, the "St. Louis Car And Foundry Company" made beautiful "stream lined suburban electrics" that went from zero to seventy miles an hour in 6 seconds (they made many a believer at intersections). "In 1936 a combination of General Motors parts suppliers, standard Oil of California, and Firestone Tire And Rubber formed a company called National City Lines which began to put Light Rail out of business on the west coast. A federal grand jury indicted GM for conspiracy in Los Angeles in 1949, but only fined them $5000". (How much is Light Rail costing Portland, alone?)

1500 years ago, fierce Asian invaders drove some early Italians into a watery waste of swamps that became their home, the city of Venice. In their urban development program they banished all the Jews to one little suburban island called "Ghetto". Many of us are just finding out exactly how and why ghettoes are created, and why. More revelations next week.

Women Honored For Achievement

Oregon women honored by the Women's Foundation of Oregon for outstanding achievement include State Rep. Margaret Carter (from left), Anne Sweet, Jackie Gango, Clara Padilla Andrews, Lolita Darby, Dr. Phyllis Lee, Madelyn Wessel and Deputy Chief Roberta Webber.

A group of Oregon women will be honored for outstanding achievement by the Women's Foundation of Oregon during the third annual Celebrating Women breakfast Sept. 21 in Portland.

They are Jackie Gango, the founder of Gango Gallery; Rep. Margaret Carter, the first African American woman in the Oregon House of Representatives; Clara Padilla Andrews, who works on housing issues and programs for the Hispanic community; Madelyn Wessel, the driving force behind a Regional Disparity Study; Lolita Darby, a local educator who started the African American Hero program; Anne Sweet, who has helped families and children involved in violent crimes; Deputy Chief Roberta Webber, who has been involved in community neighborhood support; and Dr. Phyllis Lee, who works with communities in Corvallis polarized by racial issues.

The Women's Foundation is a non-profit organization that raises money for programs that benefit women and girls. Organizations receiving money in 1993 include the Association for Children for Enforcement Support, Centro Cultural, Mien America, Oregon Human Rights Coalition, Project DOVE (Domestic Violence Eliminated), Sabin Community Development Corp., Tahana Whitecrow Foundation and Woodburn Area Crisis Center.

New Patrol Boat For Portland Police

The Multnomah County Sheriff's Office is proud to announce the christening and launch of the River Patrol's ninth patrol boat, the "Fred B. Pearce".

The boat is named in honor of Sheriff Fred B. Pearce. Preace was assigned to the newly formed River Patrol Unit in 1960. As a Sergeant, he served as the River Patrol Commander until 1971. He was responsible for the formation of the River Patrol Unit and for building it into the successful operation that it is today.

Fred Pearce rose through the ranks of the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, was appointed Sheriff in 1982, and reelected to that office in 1986. In 1989, Fred Pearce was appointed Director of the Oregon Department of Corrections by Governor Neil Goldschmidt. He retired from that position in 1992.

The "Fred B. Pearce" was built by Osprey Boats in Burlington, Wash. The 22 foot MerCruiser powered boat, costing $39,995 was purchased for Multnomah County by the Oregon State Marine Board.

You Want Us to Do What?

Employers Nervous Over Clinton Budget Provision

(NU) - According to the American Payroll Association, there is angst out there in Employer Land regarding a little-noticed provision of the President's 1993 budget bill.

The provision is a fine example of the legislative process gone awry. It requires all U.S. employers with a group health plan to report, among other information, the health-care benefit status and Social Security numbers of all their employees, as well as spouses and dependents to the federal Health Care Financing Administration beginning Feb. 28, 1995.

In addition, no money was give to the Health Care Financing Ad ministration to analyze the data, s once employers submit the infor mation, it will be useless.

Finally, U.S. employers have no been told how to report the infor mation. No form or data specifica tions have been provided to U.S businesses, which, incidentally, ca be penalized up to $250,000 pe company for not reporting the information the provision requires.

The resulting confusion has employers wondering anew if their time and money could be better spent.

Profits Go Up When Workers Are Happy

Businesses can improve productivity by 25 percent to 40 percent by investing in programs to attract and keep good workers, according to University of Oregon management specialist James Terborg.

"Managers rarely invest capital in one of their most critical resources--the worker," say Terborg, who is director of the Institute of Industrial Relations and professor of management in the university's Charles H. Lundquist College of Business..

Terborg says a common corporate strategy is to invest capital in equipment, in the hope that technological improvements will increase profits. He says companies then cut costs by laying off workers. He says recent research in personnel and human resource management, however, shows that the development of human resource programs can also increase profits.

"The key is to recruit and keep skilled and knowledgeable workers who are motivated to do well," says Terborg. He cites recent studies which indicate that programs to identify and hire these workers can lead to better job performance.

The most recent studies indicate that screening job applicants on job-related skills can help employers find workers with above-average abilities. Terborg says these workers are more likely to be conscientious and more willing to learn the skills needed for the job.

"To fully realize the potential for productivity and economic growth, managers must also restructure the organization to empower workers and allow them to use those new skills," he says.

In addition, Terborg says companies that provide employee-assistance plans, which typically provide drug and alcohol screening for workers, find they can recruit higher quality employees and can reduce absentee rates and employee turnover.

Terborg says companies which adopt some or all of these strategies can expect to see measurable improvement in productivity.