

7. Dislocation without Relocation

Harold Norris

Harold Norris, attorney, professor, and longtime activist in civil right causes, delivered a speech in the fifties that summarized the failure of the city to come to grips with the problem of relocating the people who lived in the Gratiot Redevelopment Area.

The Cobo Administration is proceeding to evict some 6000 people from the Gratiot-Orleans area. The ostensible purpose for this removal program is to clear the land and permit the private development of housing. Mayor Cobo states that some of the housing to be built will be available at rents that some of the displaced people can afford. We must remember that these 6000 people are being added to some 17,000 people being displaced by the expressways. We have seen very little done to assist the relocation of the people displaced by the expressways. If past is prologue, it can be reasonably predicted that very little will be done to assist the relocation of the 6000 people in the Gratiot-Orleans

Harold Norris, "Dislocation without Relocation, Excerpts from Talk Opposing Mayor Cobo's Urban Renewal Policy; to the Greater Detroit Public Housing Tenants Council, 1952," in *Some Reflections on Law, Lawyers, and the Bill of Rights: A Collection of Writings, 1944 to 1984* (Detroit: Michigan Law Book Society, 1983), 813-15.

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area. What is really happening is that poor people, mostly Negro people, are being removed from what little housing they have. This really amounts to Negro removal, not urban renewal. . . .

I have been representing many of the evicted families in proceeding before the Wayne County Circuit Court Commissioners. This is the court with jurisdiction over landlord-tenant matters; this court is the forum for non-payment of rent and eviction cases. I have been able to get some additional time for many of those being evicted. We've held up the city's ill-designed plan for some months now. But the tragic and pervasive impact of this inhuman policy of what I call "dislocation without relocation" is overwhelming. Mothers testify in court, in response to my questioning, that faced with eviction and dislocation their families are being split up. "I've had to send my son to live with my sister in Alabama, and my daughter to my mother in Chicago. . . . I don't have any place to move to now. . . ."

I believe this policy of "dislocation without relocation" is terribly wrong and ought to be opposed, opposed vigorously. . . . it is a policy that is wrong, wrong legally, wrong pragmatically, and it is dangerous. There must be a price to pay down the line sometime in some way for something that is so wrong.

Dislocation without relocation is wrong legally. I submit that the Federal Housing Act of 1948 squarely places a duty upon the city to find accommodations for renters before evicting them. The city is just going through the motions of complying with this law. After our protests the city has established a store front office and placed one brand new lawyer in that office . . . to get some qualifying displaced renters into limited public housing. But this is no remedy for the great mass of displaced people. And most of this audience knows of all the income-determination problems associated with public housing. The city is just not making a good faith effort to comply with the relocation requirements of the Housing Act of 1948. The city's policy is plainly illegal.

Second, . . . [it] is clearly immoral. It places the prodigious burden of change in our city disproportionately upon the backs of those people least able to bear it. . . . What is really being done is kicking people out. The city is creating refugees. Mayor Cobo has been quoted as saying to those protesting these evictions. . . "we don't want them here." This crude, heartless, and inequitable policy is just plain wrong, just plain immoral.

Third, this policy of dislocation without relocation is pragmatically wrong. It simply won't work. The city will either meet the problem now with a plan, or meet a crisis later without a plan. . . . There will be a price to pay. For every choice there is a price. And for every bad choice there will be a bad price. Where are the 17,000 people displaced by the expressways to go without adequate assistance? Where are the 6000 people displaced by "urban renewal" in the Gratiot-Orleans area to go without adequate assistance? They must live, they must survive. They will split-up and double-up. They will find attics and basements. They will move in with others—relatives and friends. There will be increased density of use elsewhere. And any housing, no matter how good, will deteriorate with density of use. Hence, all that will be accomplished will be the transfer of one area of relatively poor housing to the making of another area of relatively poor housing. This is not slum clearance. This is slum creation. I do not want to be misunderstood. I do not disparage the people forced out. I am merely saying this, that no matter how good the housing, if you put a lot more people in that good housing than that housing can accommodate, the good housing becomes bad housing. The costs of maintenance go up and revenues are not proportionate. Needed repairs will not be made. Bad housing will breed other problems. There is the danger of unrest. The situation has the potential for strife and combustibility. Prediction is not desire. But danger can be predicted. There will be a price for this inhumane eviction policy.

In short, Mayor Cobo's policy of dislocation without relocation, of urban renewal, of what is factually Negro removal should be opposed and changed. That policy is illegal, immoral and dangerous. . . .