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Revitalization

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Chester E. Smolski

Evening Bulletin

Revitalization

6 February
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PROVIDENCE — When he was campaigning for election to the presidency of this country, Abraham Lincoln made a rash promise. Detailing his ideas on giving freedom to black slaves to an unsympathetic audience, Lincoln was confronted by a white heckler from the rear who shouted "Yes, but what are you going to do for me?"

"I'll give you a farm," shot back Lincoln — and two years later he did! The Homestead Act of 1862 gave 160 acres of land to anyone settling and working that land.

This and similar programs were responsible for nearly two-thirds of federal lands passing into private ownership. Today, there is a great need for a similar program, not to expand our rural frontiers, but rather to revitalize our cities.

Houses are being abandoned in declining neighborhoods in shocking numbers. The city of Detroit today has more abandoned houses, owned by the federal government than all the houses currently standing in West Warwick. There are also many more vacant houses in Detroit, privately owned, abandoned by owners who have lost confidence in the neighborhoods in which these houses are located.

The problem of abandoned houses is very evident in Providence. Nearly every day, we read of these vandalized, burned, and abused houses; sitting targets for the criminal and an eyesore for the neighborhood.

Right now, the city has the means to help alleviate this problem. Funds should be directed to this area through the Community Development Act which will bring \$27 million to the city over the next three years. Right now is the time to implement an Urban Homesteading program.

Last year, the General Assembly, recognizing the problem, passed legislation to make this program possible, but Providence has yet to pick up this option. It would not cost a great deal of money, and with the infusion of new money, the city could readily make the program operative.

The pressure for money from the Community Development Act is great. By the end of January, more than 130 proposals, with an estimated money value more than three times the \$9.1 million the city will receive in the first year, have been submitted. Many are worthwhile, but some which suggest more parking areas need immediately to be eliminated.

Many of the proposals have come from

organizations which are concerned with the betterment of their neighborhoods and downtown, and these deserve high priority. But there must be a city-wide view of over-all needs rather than just looking to those areas which have asked for money. The Urban Homesteading program has this kind of focus.

Money could be allocated to determine the number of abandoned houses, their condition (some should come down), and the ownership. The city then would move in to take possession. At this stage, the city would give the house to any family willing and able to restore the house. The family, of course, would remain as owner-occupiers.

Frequently referred to as "sweat equity," this process allows the family to provide its own labor for the house restoration. In this manner, it also helps revitalize the neighborhood.

An important innovation to encourage this type of home and neighborhood improvement would be a provision that the city not assess the property for taxes for up to three years. It is essential that financial encouragements be given to those families selected. It is important that the best qualified families be chosen for this experience.

Not an easy solution to the uniquely American problem of housing abandonment, this technique, if closely monitored, can bring new lifeblood to run-down areas. It has proven to be a worthwhile venture in selected cities of Delaware and Maryland.

To those of you reading this who say you would not want to take advantage of this opportunity for home ownership because of the derelict neighborhoods in which these houses are generally found, remember that there are still many who want to own their homes, will work hard to achieve this goal, and are willing to take the chance. And this is especially true of those hard working recent arrivals to the state.

Although not designed especially for these new residents of the state, this program would be an opportune gesture on the part of the city to provide the means for home and land ownership that our forefathers had 100 years ago. It just might be the stimulus for the needed help in some of our less fortunate neighborhoods.

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