New Town: We Can Learn From This British Venture

Chester Smolski
New Town

We can learn from this British venture

By CHESTER B. SMUCKLER

February Sunday Journal

IN 1946 when Lewis Silkin, Minister of Housing, approached Stevenage, then a village of about 6,000 residents 33 miles north of London in the lovely rolling Hertfordshire countryside, he must have suspected that the villagers were not particularly anxious to hear him speak. The signs in the railway stations had been changed to Eldwick by some of the disgruntled villagers before he was to leave he found the tires of his car deflated and some mud in the gravel tank. Stevenage was the first "new town" designated under the New Towns Act of 1946 and the Minister was there to tell the villagers what this would mean for them.

The thought of having nearly 20,000 Londoners dropped into their town gardens did not go well with the Stevenage residents, for they had had a previous experience during the war when Londoners were evacuated and then settled in Stevenage. The villagers were happy when the Londoners returned home, but now London wishes them back!

The Minister made it very clear when he said: "Like it or not, the people of London need somewhere to live and work. We have decided that Stevenage will be the first New Town, and the first New Town it will be." Shouts of "Distractor" and "Getgo" from the crowd made it even more obvious that the residents were not at all happy at being on the beginning of what they knew was the biggest housing development movement of any country in the world; the wholesale building of complete new towns with their own schools, shops, homes, parks, etc., intended to take care of the nation's new population.

Today, more than 65,000 villagers of each year from around the world, 150,000 at this time, come to Stevenage to see, inspect, and take pictures of Britain's first new, purpose-built town.

It was our good fortune to live there last year. After a month of looking for housing in London, it became quite obvious why there were no about 10,000 families on the London Council housing list who are in need of homes. We were not in a position to wait eight to 10 years for a home in London, as some families do, because we were in England to work and not tourists, and the town brought us a very welcome news that the Stevenage Development Corporation, the government-established organization which builds and runs the town until the town is able to do so itself, had a house for us.

We drove north along the A-1 to Stevenage as the "bed and breakfast" Londoners did not, passed our Volkswagen through several of the more picturesque English villages and drove north along the A-1 to England's best known new towns, our London Volkswagen bus has 14 pieces of luggage, and for the first time in our "bed and breakfast" London, loaded our Volkswagen press on the last leg of our journey. It was a big house for us, and we thought a very comfortable one.

The building of new towns is one method used by the British to relieve the housing shortages and to provide adequate housing for lower-income and middle-income families. I am not referring to the type of new towns designed for upper-income families which has been built so far in this country, such as Rancho, Va., where the lowest price house available sells for more than $89,000. Rather, I mean a Stevenage style new town, whose families of all incomes can live and enjoy the amenities generally found only in the very best suburban communities in this country. For this to happen, it is necessary that there be an awareness of what a new town is, a commitment to do something about our own housing shortages, and an increased role of government in providing the money to foster this type of town development. Many of our traditions have come from Britain and it appears that we can learn from that country's experience, even in this, the richest country of the world.

Chester Smuckler is an associate professor of geography at Enloe School College.