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Our Opinions

Vision for Detroit

Corinne Gilb, new director of the City Department of Planning, has big — some might say grandiose — plans for Detroit.

The ideas of the former Wayne State professor of urban history (with a doctorate from Radcliffe-Harvard) are still too general for judgment, but it's exciting when someone has optimistic visions for this city.

Mrs. Gilb starts at the top of Detroit's priorities: jobs. Because of the auto industry's cyclical slumps in employment and because manufacturing jobs are not increasing at the same rate as those in other employment areas, Mrs. Gilb is searching for "hostages to fortune," industries to diversify and expand Detroit's job sources.

Statistics show that service industries, such as tourist services and financial institutions, are the present and future growth industries in employment. Thus, Mrs. Gilb wants the city to campaign to convince banks and insurance companies to establish their headquarters in Detroit.

And Detroit has another asset that could be exploited in the cause of diversified employment, an asset that most of us forget. Do you ever think of Detroit as an "international city"? Mrs. Gilb does, and she points to our port facilities, our proximity to Canada, and the auto companies, which are already among the world's biggest multinational corporations.

Mrs. Gilb emphasizes that it should then be

convention business and provide a great ride for visitors.

Although Mrs. Gilb has inherited most of the plans for Detroit's physical renaissance, she has a new emphasis and direction. Neighborhoods continue to come first, she stresses. However, she feels past housing and redevelopment projects have suffered from a failure to take into account the human side of the picture.

She has reorganized the Planning Department to make "people planning" a separate division to coordinate physical construction with neighborhood services, recreation, and the neighborhoods' specific housing needs. Mrs. Gilb is also considering how social data could help in sector planning and the use of block grants. These are changes we heartily approve.

We are also delighted to hear Mrs. Gilb insist that Detroit needs an overall esthetic design, that the appearance of this city is "not a dispensable frill" tacked onto economic usefulness.

Detroit has far too often thought about its renaissance efforts on a project by project basis. Those projects are all fine separately, but stitched together they create an uncoordinated jumble of styles. If Detroit developed a coherent and gracious physical appearance it would lift the spirits of residents, lure the suburbanites in to enjoy, and project a better image to prospective visitors.

Finally, Mrs. Gilb recognizes the important effects of the energy crisis. Expensive fuel is here to stay, and it will require changes for which we should plan now.

The expense of commuting will increase the affluent population living in the city, as is already happening in New York and Chicago. Mrs. Gilb foresees that young people without families will be especially drawn to the advantages of living close to activities. She predicts that cities will be used as "fun places" of restaurants, discos, and night club meeting places. Downtown apartments should be planned with that in mind.

Now that half the work force is female, Mrs. Gilb also predicts a changing attitude on the part of suburban mothers. When they had no jobs or only part-time work, there were advantages in suburban living. But as commuting costs increase and those women develop careers in the city, they are going to see city living from a new perspective and may look for something similar to Chicago's waterfront apartments. Detroit should be prepared to provide it for them.

So far we have just skimmed Mrs. Gilb's many ideas. All of them are "in the works" now at the Planning Department. We are impressed. But the real test is still to come. Can Mrs. Gilb bring any of her plans to fruition? Can she avoid the bureaucratic delays and incompetence that have stymied so many city development projects?

Success will require more of Mrs. Gilb than insightful ideas. But if she can realize even some of her vision, the benefits to Detroit will be large.



natural for international banking to nestle next to the international auto industry. In addition, foreign investment here is increasing and Mrs. Gilb would actively solicit it. When Volkswagen decides this November where it will build its new plant, she wants Detroit up in front with a tempting invitation.

Mrs. Gilb also wants to investigate making Detroit a free trade zone, lowering import duties so that it becomes more economic to use Detroit as a port of entry. Now imports used in the auto industry often come through Baltimore and must be shipped overland. Making use of customs economics could benefit both the auto companies and Detroit.

Emphasizing Detroit's connection with Windsor would be another way to boost an international image. Mrs. Gilb is looking into existing plans for a tramway from Windsor to Detroit. The tramway could add Windsor's hotel space to Detroit's for the tourist and