



**Metropolitan Action** at Queens College of the City University of New York

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## 14 YEARS OF SUBURBAN AND METROPOLITAN ACTION

Metropolitan Action is a planning and civil rights group with a particular focus on issues of housing and regional development.

Metropolitan Action was founded in 1969 as Suburban Action Institute. It was established as a non-profit organization to apply planning, research and legal expertise to protect rights and expand opportunities for racial and economic minorities and, thereby, to break down exclusionary policies and practices in the suburbs. Ten years later, the agency broadened its focus to entire metropolitan areas and changed its name.

The expertise for Metropolitan Action's research and advocacy efforts comes from its own professional staff of planners, lawyers, educators, and community organizers. We are currently engaged in a combination of technical assistance, research, and advocacy to advance the broad goal of an inclusionary, open society. A few highlights of our work follow :

- Metropolitan Action is currently providing technical assistance to implement inclusionary revitalization programs in neighborhoods such as Park Slope in Brooklyn, the Lower East Side in Manhattan, and North Corona and Jamaica in the borough of Queens. Technical assistance efforts are aimed at the development of a revitalization program that reduces conditions of poverty in these communities, and that seeks to distribute the benefits of new developments to existing low income residents. The work we are doing on the Lower East Side is an excellent example of this. In this community, the displacement of low income residents has become a major social problem as privately owned residential buildings are renovated and their rents increased substantially. We have worked with neighborhood activists in drafting a series of zoning proposals that will guide the redevelopment process of the area. The goal is to ensure that reinvestment addresses the housing needs of this predominantly low income neighborhood .

- In a 1971 Syracuse Law Review article on conditions of exclusionary practice in suburban land development, we initiated the concept of inclusionary zoning as a broad ranging remedy for denial of housing opportunities to low income and minority citizens. Since then Metropolitan Action has advanced programs to monitor the performance of public agencies, regional and federal, in regard to their conformance to civil rights mandates requiring affirmative housing policies.
- More recently, Metropolitan Action was commissioned by the Department of Community Affairs in Pennsylvania and the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights Opportunities to prepare studies of existing local zoning in both states to determine whether it was exclusionary. These two separate studies were among the first attempts in the nation to clearly articulate on paper methods of analysis to evaluate the exclusionary effects of local zoning and land use ordinances.
- Metropolitan Action has helped rewrite suburban zoning law. As a result of our court challenges, exclusionary land use laws have been struck down throughout New York and New Jersey and housing rights have been greatly strengthened for classes of the population traditionally discriminated against. These decisions have set important precedents for courts throughout the nation. Most recently, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued a landmark opinion in Mount Laurel II, which required suburban municipalities to zone affirmatively to include a proportional share of regional low income housing.
- In 1980, Metropolitan Action published Housing Choice, a study prepared for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development describing the myriad of programs employed in the nation's suburbs to expand housing opportunities for lower income households. One chapter in the book describes the many examples of inclusionary controls to be found in the nation.
- This year, with funding from the New York Community Trust and the J.C. Penney Foundation, Metropolitan Action joined forces with the Pratt Center for Community & Environmental Development on a major study of the applicability of inclusionary zoning measures, such as a "housing trust fund," in New York City. The project has enlisted a broad-based advisory board from government, the private sector, and from the neighborhoods. The goal is to identify a system to generate low income housing units from market-rate development while remaining sensitive to key issues such as displacement, economic integration, and political accountability.

- Metropolitan Action has led in the formation and development of New Yorkers for Equitable Development, a city-wide coalition of individuals and institutions willing to work together in formation of new, more equitable city housing and development policies.
- Metropolitan Action has helped to organize support for modification of the J-51 tax abatement program, the "Artist Housing" Program and other housing initiatives with the intention of narrowing these programs so that they provide only legitimately needed incentives. We have also called for protection of important housing and economic resources, and a halt to landlord harassment.
- Metropolitan Action Director Paul Davidoff has acted as an expert witness in several exclusionary zoning and civil rights cases involving issues of housing and regional development, most recently in U.S. v. City of Yonkers, a joint housing and school desegregation case.
- Metropolitan Action has prepared numerous studies of federal housing policies, and low income and minority opportunity. In many cases, these studies have been relied on and implemented by federal and state agencies.
- With initial support from the Queens Borough President's Office, Metropolitan Action is organizing "Queens 2000", an effort to involve local Community Boards in a long range planning process for their neighborhoods and Borough. Queens 2000 will also involve educational programs in local schools and community organizations.
- Metropolitan Action is moving ahead with new plans for a major study of the prospect of an national infrastructure development policy, an analysis of the administration's anti-poverty policies, and continuing study and advocacy on behalf of inclusionary housing and zoning policies. If you are interested in working with Metropolitan Action, either on a volunteer or pro-bono basis, or through a graduate planning program, please give us a call at 544-6166.