



Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols
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City Planning

City Planning is based on love, ambition and profit. If a man loves his family and his business, whether it may pay or not, he plans for the future in his care and regard for them. If you are ambitious for the growth of your business, your institution or your city, if you believe in its future growth, you plan for healthful expansion. If you wish to make money in your business or in your institution or in your city, you plan it on the most efficient lines possible, eliminating waste, and if possible, avoiding duplication and overlapping.

If the men in this room were given the commission today of becoming a continuous board of directors for directing the growth of Kansas City, not for two year periods, from election to election, or not as an administrative commission, but in directing the policy, in planning the physical sites and the future growth of Kansas City – they would work out a good, practical plan to provide for the city as it will probably be in years to come, when it has a million population, for I believe that every man in this room feels that, ultimately, the three great cities of the United States will be New York, Chicago and Kansas City.

Assuming that we are the board of directors today, given the job of planning the future expansion of this city on the most practical lines, believing in its growth, ambitious for its development along the best lines, for our families or our business, what would be the first thing we would do?

In our own business, we would make a most careful survey of the conditions as we found them as to the possible future of that business, and in the same way I believe that such a board, selected from this body, would recommend a survey of this city. If you made such a survey, what would you see? You would see the same things in Kansas City that you see in every large city – immense areas of abandoned, blighted sections where residences and property sell for only a mere fraction of their former value or of their original cost. You would find in this city as you find in other cities, great sections of business property where values are far below what they were five, ten or fifteen years ago. You would find real estate, the admitted foundation of all wealth, the very basis of the great proportion of the loans of this country, and the credit of this country to be one of the most unstable or insecure commodities known. The shifting of population creates a big loss yearly. If you would go to New York you would find that from 1900 to 1910 the most valuable real estate had declined more than fifty per cent in value. Mr. Stabler, of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, that makes more loans on more real estate probably than any other company, told me last summer that in his opinion there was a loss of more than one half billion dollars per year in shifting and declining residential property. I can say these things because I am in the real estate business. There is not a

man in this room who can disassociate himself from real estate value. There is not a municipality in this country which can disassociate their growth and stability from the permanency or stability of the real estate in that city.

In this survey, we would find that within the last ten or fifteen years, cities have changed more than in fifty years previous, and that in the next fifty years will change more than in the previous two thousand years. Take the transportation problem on the streets in this city today – perhaps it has increased ten times in as many years, thereby causing heavy hauls over paving that was designed to handle the former smaller loads, but the same width streets and the same paving today is required to handle this increased traffic.

The advent of the automobile is bringing congestion undreamed of in all down town business streets. In American cities today all this has happened within the last fifteen or twenty years. We must admit that every delay in movement of traffic caused by congestion on the streets is an economic loss and is a toll upon business, and the city, which does not begin making a study of these traffic conditions, – that city in the long run will inevitably lose out in the race for supremacy in trade. It has been demonstrated over and over again by traffic engineers, that traffic increases with the scale of population. When Kansas City is four times as large as it is today, we will have sixteen times as much street traffic. Are we looking ahead and planning for the growth of our community? Chicago today is widening eighty five miles of its streets. Between 1900 and 1910 Chicago spent more than four hundred million dollars in street widening. New York City spent more than six hundred dollars in the same period. London has spent over a billion dollars in street widening in the same period. This is the experience of older cities, and if we are ambitious of the future growth of our city, if we believe it has a true value, are we not concerned with the scientific study of the steady planned growth of our city?

Pennsylvania has passed a law giving cities of first class and second class control of all the property – that is, layout of the streets and establishing of the grades within twenty five miles of the city limits. Any growing city should be just as much concerned with the character of development that will be permitted just beyond its present city limits as that within the city limits, because sooner or later, the city will be extended. Where property has already been developed, it is very expensive to change the streets, and in years to come, real estate must pay the toll of such changes.

The decentralization of downtown business, and creation of outlying business centers, bring up a problem of greatest concern. All cities when they get up to half a million people, or more, have a tendency to develop these outlying business centers, which accentuates traffic problems. The picture show perhaps has been a factor in the changes in some large cities. For instance, the night life of St. Louis has almost entirely left the down town section. I am not arguing for this, one way or the other, I am simply pointing out to you that there are movements which go on in the growth of all large cities which should be a lesson to all of us.

In studying our city plan, we should take into consideration the recent good roads movement throughout the country. A wise City Planning should link city traffic lanes

with state highways. In making plans for the future, these highways make it easy for great traffic to extend into the surrounding cities.

Then again, one of the most important things that this Board of directors would consider would be a careful analysis of the greatest responsibility we have in the upkeep and care of our streets. The blind standardization of sidewalks and streets is one of the sources of greatest loss to the modern city. There is nothing in the world which we accept so blindly as we do the laying out of our streets. It is just as important to study the comparative width of the streets as it is to study the layout of the sewer, gas mains or electric light lines in the city. You don't make your sewers all the same size. You don't make your gas mains all the same size. City Planning brings a very careful study of the distribution of traffic to the laying out of street plans. We have an ordinance that the paving of our streets shall be 26 feet and our side walks four feet wide, regardless of how many people are going to use the sidewalk. Among other important changes of value to the city would be longer blocks and narrower sidewalks. Since the automobile has come in, people do not walk as much as they used to. In different parts of your city where they do not interfere with the flow of traffic, you can make your blocks twice as wide.

We must always keep in mind the growth of our city. The time has come when the individual in the city may not continue to use property just as he pleases, but there is a higher interest in each city today, which is the interest of business as a whole.

One of the fundamental things in studying the growth of a city that comes before any city planning board is to know where industry is today or here it will continue to be – what is the probable expansion of industry in your city – how much land will be needed for industrial development – how much the tributary of Kansas City is going to support the industrial sections of Kansas City. In making the zoning map of the city, you should have before you a clear view of the future growth of your city – not of the city alone, but all the territory surrounding the city.

This same city planning commission should know how much the retail section of the city should expand and how much territory should be given over to one story homes and fifty foot lots, etc. You should know what per cent will want to live in four story apartment buildings and family hotels; how much property will be used for factories, etc. There are many classes of business which can be immeasurably injured by too close proximity to another kind of business. Our municipality should give protection to the home builders. I am not saying that the city should not have all the room necessary for the expansion of industrial activities. But every one should realize and every city plan commission know that every step should be studied out in advance and in certain sections of your city you should offer security of value and permanent neighborhood.

Zoning is one of the most important phases of city planning. New York City recently unanimously approved and endorsed a zoning plan. When I say that the City of New York has said that an individual owner of property can continue to use his property as he pleases, don't you feel that zoning becomes a vital problem when it is brought to the people of Kansas City?

We must prepare for changing conditions in the community. Take for instance the location of public schools – as a member of the Board of Education, I can say that we are expending almost a million dollars in purchasing property and think, of the immense

advantage it would be if we had something definite before us by which we could determine the probable trend of population.

Let's go back to the question of street widening and the control of down town properties. In planning ahead for the city, we should take into consideration the height of the buildings, and still give a reasonable size that will insure against fire in the down town section. Zoning, after all, is simply the demand of business, and the practical development of our city, relating every part of the city to every other part of the city.

When we speak of zoning, we refer to a sane distribution of various activities of a city and we would bring about exactly the same distribution that you bring about in your own business or your own institutions; and in laying out a city, we would plan the things ahead just as every man is planning in his business.

Mr. Hoover has recently said he regards zoning as one of the most important things in connection with the development of any city. Kansas City, as Mr. Kessler has pointed out, has largely natural zoning. We practically have one north and south and east and west outlet for our population. It is just as important not to use for homes, property that should be used for industrial purposes as it is to use industry property that should be used for homes.

City planning has nothing to do with the character of buildings, nothing to do with the design of the City Hall, nothing to do with the designing of a fire station, nothing to do with the character of paving. It is simply the study and working out of a practical policy and plan which you can lay down and adopt. Since Chicago adopted her city plan in the last ten years, there has never been an ordinance passed contrary to this plan and the book of this city planning commission is used as a text book in the public schools, and is doing more to develop a pride of citizenship than anyone movement that the City of Chicago has ever undertaken.

In studying the distribution problems of your city, one of the most important things of city planning is the study of streets, street location and the proper width of streets.

City planning as related to distribution is getting the maximum of distribution for your city at the minimum cost. Distribution is directly related to the cost of future supplies. We should find out what is the comparative cost of bringing raw food into our cities, and its distribution. One phase of city planning, Kansas City has done well – our parks and boulevards are most equitably distributed throughout our city. We have a great framework to start with. A good city plan worked out, increases the individual character of a city.

Our planning commission is doing great work. They have prepared a plat that deserves careful consideration. The first thing that is submitted to you is zoning, and it is our duty to help them. They don't want to make any mistakes. They want to do everything they can to increase the desirability and efficiency of our city. Let's get behind, not only this zoning plan, but the whole city planning commission. Let us give them time to prepare this complete zoning map and then let them come before us with a plan, studied and worked out for every part of Kansas City.

Once we have a plan, let's get back of it and support it in a way that no city council will even desire to against, the plan that Kansas City has adopted and approved for the future growth of the city that, as I said in the beginning, we love, we are ambitious for and we want to make money in.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN006

Arguably Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) was the single most influential individual to the development of metropolitan Kansas City. Moreover his work, ideas, and philosophy of city planning and development had far-reaching impact nationally – so much so that the Urban Land Institute has established the J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionary Urban Development to recognize a person or a person representing an institution whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development.

Nichols' objective was to “develop whole residential neighborhoods that would attract an element of people who desired a better way of life, a nicer place to live and would be willing to work in order to keep it better.” The Company under Nichols and his son, Miller Nichols (1911-), undertook such ventures as rental housing, industrial parks, hotels, and shopping centers. Perhaps the most widely recognized Nichols Company developments are the Country Club District and the Country Club Plaza Shopping Center, reportedly the first shopping area in the United States planned to serve those arriving by automobile rather than trolley car.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) contains both personal and business files concerning J.C. Nichols' private and business life. Included are personal correspondence, family related material, and speeches and articles written by him. Business and financial files pertain to actions of the Company, including information about different developments and the securing of art objects; and printed materials produced by and about the Company.