STATE PLANNING FOR LAND UTILIZATION

CHAPTER THREE

I wish to cite the example of an economic plan which has been put into effect and which is still in its experimental stages, yet is not only without detriment to any class of citizen or interest but is certainly and positively proving itself more and more valuable to a very considerable mass of the population in this country. Thirteen million men and women are involved in it and I feel sure great many millions more will be in the future. I refer to the state planning of the use of land for industry and agriculture in the State of New York, a plan which I confidently feel will prove practicable to the nation as a whole.

The problem arises out of the dislocation of a proper balance between urban and rural life. A phrase that covers all its aspects is "Land Utilization and State Planning."

Land utilization involves more than a mere determining of what each and every acre of land can be used for, or what crops it can best grow. That is the first step; but having made that determination, we arrive at once at the larger problem of getting men, women and children—in other words, population—to go along with a program and carry it out.

It is not enough to pass resolutions that land must, or should, be used for some specific purpose. Government itself must take steps with the approval of the governed to see that plans become realities.

This, it is true, involves such mighty factors as the supply and not the over-supply of agricultural products; it involves making farm life far more attractive both socially and economically than it is today; it involves the possibilities of creating a new classification of our population.

We know from figures of a century ago that seventy-five percent of the population lived on farms and twenty-five percent in cities. Today the figures are exactly reversed. A generation ago there was much talk of a back-to-the-farm movement. It is my thought that this slogan is outworn. Hitherto, we have spoken of two types of living and only two—urban and rural. I believe we can look forward to three rather than two types in the future, for there is a definite place or an intermediate type between the urban and the rural, namely, a rural-industrial group.

I can best illustrate the beginnings of the working out of the problem by reviewing briefly what has been begun in the State of New York during the past three years toward planning for a better use of our agricultural, industrial and human resources.

The State of New York has definitely undertaken this as a governmental responsibility. Realizing that the maladjustment of the relationship between rural and city life had reached alarming proportions, the State Administration undertook a study of the agricultural situation with the immediate purpose of relieving impossible and unfair economic conditions on the farms of the State. The broader ultimate purpose was to formulate a well thought out and scientific plan for developing a permanent agriculture.

The immediate situation was met by the enactment of several types of laws that resulted in the relief of farms from an uneven tax burden and made a net saving to agriculture of approximately twenty-four million dollars a year.

First, the State developed additional State aid for rural education, especially in the communities which are so sparsely settled that one-room schools predominate. This State aid gave the smaller rural schools the same advantages already enjoyed by the schools in the larger communities.

Second, a fair equalization of State aid to towns for the maintenance of dirt roads was accomplished by putting it on the basis of mileage rather than of assessed valuation.

Third, through a gasoline tax, additional aid was given to the counties for the development of a definite system of farm-to-market roads.

Fourth, the State embarked on a definite program of securing cheaper electricity for the agricultural communities. It proposes to harness the St. Lawrence River as part of this program, and the electricity developed is by the new law intended primarily for the farmer, the household user, and the small industrialist or store-keeper rather than for large industrial plants.

This was the program to relieve immediate needs.

In all this work, it is worth recording that not only the immediate program but also the longtime planning was worked out in a wholly nonpartisan manner. It received the benefits of study by the Legislature and legislative commissions. Much of the program was worked out by the Governor's Agricultural Advisory Commission. This Commission consisted of representatives of great farm organizations such as the Grange, the Farm and Home Bureau, Master Farmers, the Dairymen's League, the G.F.L., members of the Legislature, representatives of State Colleges and various departments of the State government. It received the hearty cooperation of the Mayors' Conference, and that of business men who were willing to give thought to the future of the State and the nation.

The program for the future was worked out upon that common sense basis which must be the core of every economic plan that will come up for consideration. Details cannot be brushed aside for they all dovetail into the larger ultimate picture.

We knew that out of the thirty million acres in the State, three million were in cities, villages, residential areas; five million were in mountains and forests, and by the way, of this five million r Ire State itself had about two million acres in the great Catskill and Adirondack preserves; four million acres were once farmed but now abandoned, leaving a total of eighteen million acres for agriculture, divided into one hundred and sixty thousand farms.

The first definite step was to start a survey of r Ire entire State. This involved a study of all the physical factors both above and below the surface of the soil, and a study of economic and social factors. The study was divided into six important sections. The soil was analyzed. The climate was determined—that is, the length of growing season between killing frosts, and the amount of annual rainfall. The present use of the land was surveyed —whether forest, swamp or improved, in pasture, in hay or in annual crops, and what crops. Those who lived on this land were investigated—who owned it and how he used it—that is, whether to make his livelihood out of it or to occupy it only as a house while working away from the farm in the city or elsewhere. A more specific census of those who lived on this land was made; whether they were old people who had always been there, or new people who had recently come; whether Americans or foreigners; whether the young people were staying on the land or leaving it; whether the cultivation of the farm was supporting the farmer in accordance with an American standard of living. Finally, the measure of the contribution that each farm was making to the food supply of the nation was gauged.

It seemed most desirable to make this survey so detailed that it would give separate data for each ten acre square. Already one county has thus been surveyed and we expect to cover the entire eighteen million acres within the next ten years or less.

The survey is being made on the assumption that good economics require the use of good materials. For example, fifty years ago, the State of New York every year mined thousands of tons of iron ore and turned it into iron and steel. The discovery and the development of the vast fields of a more economical grade of iron ore in Minnesota and the other sections of the country forced the closing of the New York State iron mines. The raw materials did not meet the economic standard. By the same token it may have been profitable when land was first cleared to farm this land, but today, with the tremendous competition of good land in this country and in other parts of the world it has become uneconomical to use land which does not produce good crops.

Therefore, we proposed to find out what every part of the State is capable of producing.

From the survey already made we have come to the belief that a certain percentage of the farm land in the State now under cultivation ought to be abandoned for agricultural purposes. It is possible that the percentage will run as high as somewhere between twenty and twenty-five percent.

We are faced with a situation of farmers attempting to farm under conditions where it is impossible to maintain an American standard of living. They are slowly breaking their hearts, their health and their pocketbooks against a stone wall of impossibilities and yet they produce enough farm products to add to the national surplus; furthermore their products are of such low quality that they injure the reputation and usefulness of the better class of farm products of the State which are produced, packed, and shipped along modern economic lines.

If this is true in the State of New York, it is, I am convinced, equally true of practically every other state east of the Mississippi and of at least some of the states west of the Mississippi.

What then are we to do with this sub-marginal land that exists in every state, which ought to be withdrawn from agriculture? Here we have a definite program. First, we are finding out what it can best be used for. At the present time it seems clear that the greater part of it can be put into a different type of crop—one which will take many years to harvest but one which, as the years go by, will, without question, be profitable and at the same time economically necessary—the growing of crops of trees.

This we are starting by a new law providing for the purchase and reforestation of these lands in a manner approved by the State, part of the cost being borne by the county and part by the State. Furthermore, a Constitutional Amendment was voted by the people of the State, providing for appropriations of twenty million dollars over an eleven-year period to make possible the purchase and reforestation of over one million acres of land, which is better suited for forestry than for agriculture.

We visualized also the very definite fact that the use of this sub-marginal agricultural land for forestry will, in the long run, pay for itself (we will get that twenty million dollars back many times over) and will, from the very start, begin to yield dividends in the form of savings from waste.

For instance, the farms to be abandoned will eliminate the necessity of maintaining thousands of miles of dirt roads leading to these farms, the maintenance cost of which averages one hundred dollars a mile a year. The reforestation of these farms will eliminate the need of providing thousands of miles of electric light and telephone lines caching out into uneconomical territory. The reforestation of these farms will eliminate upkeep of many small scattered one-room schools which cost approximately fourteen hundred dollars each per year to the State government.

This is why we are confident that over a period of years this State planning will more than pay for itself in a financial saving to the population as a whole.

Modern society moves at such an intense pace that greater recreation periods are necessary, and at the same time our efficiency, state and national, in production is such that more time can be used for recreation. That is increasingly evident this particular year. By reforestation the land can be turned into a great State resource which will yield dividends at once as one small detail of this plan, the Conservation Commissioner was able to throw open for hunting and fishing the twenty-five thousand acres recently purchased. He will do the same with additional reforestation areas when they are purchased.

These reforested areas are largely at the higher elevations at the headwaters of streams. Reforestation will regulate stream flow, aid in preventing floods and provide a more even supply of pure water for villages and cities.

What will be done for the population now residing on these sub-marginal lands? First, most of the comparatively small number of people on these farms which are to be abandoned will be absorbed into the better farming areas of the State. Second, we are continuing the idea of the State-wide plan by studying the whole future population trend; here is where there is a definite connection between the rural dweller and the population engaged in industry, between the rural dweller and the city dweller, between the farmer and the people engaged in industry.

Experiments have already been made -in some states looking to a closer relationship between industry and agriculture. These take two forms— first, what may be called the bringing of rural life to industry; second, the bringing of industry to agriculture by the establishment of small industrial plants in areas which are now wholly given over to farming.

In this particular connection the State of Vermont, through a splendid commission, seems to be faking the lead in seeking to bring industry to the agricultural regions.

For example, in a valley in Vermont a woodturning factory for the making of knobs for the lids of kettles has already been so successful that the trend of the rural population to the city has been definitely stopped and the population of the valley finds that it can profitably engage in culture during the summer with a definite wage-earning capacity in the local factory during the winter months.

Another example is that of one of the larger shoe manufacturers established in a New York village. Many of the workers live in this village and many others live in the open country within a radius of ten miles or more.

As a nation we have only begun to scratch the surface along these lines and the possibility of diversifying our industrial life by sending a fair proportion of it into the rural districts. Cheap electric power, good roads and automobiles make such a rural-industrial development possible. Without question there are many industries which can succeed just as well, if not better, by bringing them to rural communities. At the same time these communities will be given higher annual income capacity. We will be restoring the balance.

Through such state planning as I have just outlined many of the problems of transportation, of over-crowded cities, of high cost of living, of better health for the race, of a better balance for the population as a whole, can be solved by the states themselves during the coming generation.

These experiments should and will be worked out in accordance with conditions which vary greatly in different sections of the country. I have said "by the states themselves" because some of the state methods of approaching the problem may not be economically sound in the light of future experiences, whereas others may point the way toward a definite national solution of the problems.

I remember that many years ago when James Bryce was Ambassador from England in Washington he said: "The American form of government will go on and live long after most of the other forms of government have fallen or been changed, and the reason is this: In other nations of the world when a new problem comes up it must be tested in a national laboratory, and a solution of the problem must be worked out, and when it is worked out that solution must be applied to the nation as a whole. Sometimes it may be the correct solution and other times it may be the wrong solution. But you in the United States have forty-eight laboratories and when new problems arise you can work out forty-eight different solutions to meet the problem. Out of these forty-eight experimental laboratories, some of the solutions may not prove sound or acceptable, but out of this experimentation history shows you have found at least some remedies which can be made so successful that they will become national in their application.”

In state economic planning the state needs the sympathetic cooperation of the national government, if as only an information-gathering body. I he national government can and should act as a clearing-house for all of the Governors to work through. I am very confident that during the next few years state after state will realize, as has New York, that it is a definite responsibility of government to reach out for new solutions for the new problems. In the long run state and national planning is an essential to the future prosperity, happiness and the very existence of the American people.