





FOSTER CHILDREN'S PLIGHT COMPLICATES FAMILY DEFINITION REVIEW

The situation of foster children and of pre-adoptive children conditionally placed in homes has become entwined with the proposed reform of the legal definition of "family" pondered by the Committee of the Whole of Council on September 26. This comes about from the approach taken by the legislation to resolve the "roomer permit" controversy. Presently, every household (if it has the space) may take in two roomers under a permit issued administratively by the Building Department. The demand of the City that apartment room-mates obtain such permits--with attendant registration of names and payment of fees--become a matter of controversy. More roomers are permitted only after a Zoning Board hearing.

The proposed approach eliminates the administrative permit and requires all households wishing to house roomers to appear before the Board; but it expands the definition of the family to include two additional unrelated persons over 21. The last condition catches foster children in a bind. Presently, a family need have willingness, enough space, approval by the County, and the administrative permit to accept up to two foster children. Under the proposed set-up, the intentional foster parents would have to go through a hearing of some stringency. The County already puts them through enough of an investigation that the prospect of further bureaucratic hassle is, in the opinion of the experts who testified September 26, a genuine barrier to recruitment of foster families.

Rationale for the over-21 condition lies in protection of minors and of the public school systems, and is hard to view as outrageously stringent. (Some question about 21 years vs. 18 years could be raised--and was raised by your correspondent--but that would not help the foster children in question.)

Obviously, I'd rather not see further delayed a liberalization I've advocated for three years. No less obviously, given the option of being an apartment room-mate suffering a bureaucratic hassle and being a foster child unable to find placement other than in an institution, I'd pick the former. The conflict exists because of the way the Law Department responded to a request, and not because of the request itself, but one doesn't want to see the response go to naught.

At the hearing, I proposed that the Law Department, having been clever once in pulling room-mates out of the "roomer" category, be clever twice and do the same for foster children and children placed pre-adoptively. (The old and new definitions include adopted children, but pre-adoptees need the ol' permit.) A member of the Law Department mused after the hearing that families with an intent to accept such children might apply for a special review by the City before approaching the County. The legislation goes next to the Planning Commission.

There was, interestingly enough, no uniform "establishment" view of proper composition of families and households. The visible diversity ran from the Mayor, who is uneasy about any expansion of permitted household size, to a member of the Planning Commission who feels on principle that any restrictive family definition is an affront.

We see here an exemplary operation of Murphy's Third Law: There is no problem so big or so complicated that it cannot, upon closer examination, become more so.

- Dave Burwasser

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Zipkin of Coventry: A Review

Lewis Zipkin did come to the September meeting of CNI as promised. Opening with a prepared statement, Mr. Zipkin gave a detailed history of his involvement in Coventryard. He also defended himself against charges that his rents were too high and that his buildings are mismanaged.

People who came to confront Mr. Zipkin seemed generally more interested in making statements than in asking probing questions. The tone of the meeting was polite, although it was clear that many Coventry residents present at the meeting were fearful of the "progress" typified by new development such as Coventryard. All questions were answered by Mr. Zipkin, who stayed after an hour and a half formal session for informal conversations.

Mr. Zipkin was quite impressive, and his articulate, intelligent discussion left its impact. "I have only one question," someone said to me after the meeting, "Have I been conned?" Hard to tell, I replied. This meeting could only open lines of communication and start a badly needed dialogue between developers and residents. It could hardly settle in two hours the continuing mystery of Zipkin of Coventryard.

- Alan Rapoport

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NEIGHBORS TOGETHER

The Heights Community Congress First Annual Neighborhoods Conference, "neighbors together," will be held on Sunday, October 9 at Beaumont School from 12:30 - 3:30 p.m. This conference will bring together representatives from all facets of our community.

Workshops will be held on such diverse subjects as commercial revitalization, code enforcement, child care, FHA and VA, the Municipal Court, and the schools.

There is a \$1 registration fee (\$3 if you can stay for dinner). Child care will be provided free of charge. For more information, contact the Heights Community Congress at 321-6775.

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