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REPORT TO THE PEOPLE
FROM YOUR CONGRESSWOMAN

FLORENCE P. DWYER - 6th District, New Jersey



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Thursday, June 29, 1961

With the possible exception of the education bills, I don't expect to be faced with a more difficult or frustrating decision to make than the voting which, as I write this report, has just concluded on the Housing Act of 1961.

There is much in this bill which is good, housing programs which I have consistently supported and which are vital to continued progress in assuring our fellow citizens an opportunity to provide decent homes for their families. Urban renewal, for instance, is important to Elizabeth, Plainfield, Rahway and Scotch Plains among other Union County communities. And programs like FHA mortgage insurance, college housing, housing for the elderly and others directly affect many of our people. Authorizations for these programs, most of which are for repayable loans rather than grants, are running out and their renewal, I believe, is essential.

Nevertheless, in other respects the bill is an example of the tendency I have noted previously -- the unfortunate readiness of the House leadership to add unasked-for and unnecessary new spending to controversial measures in order to assure enough support to pass the bills.

Substantially excessive

Both the liberal Washington Post and the New York Times called attention to the "sweeteners" in the housing bill especially designed to attract southern and rural support. Chief among them are an extra half billion dollars for small-town public works and \$407 million for farm home loans. In addition, authorizations for several other programs substantially exceed demonstrated needs and even President Kennedy's requests to Congress.

As you can appreciate, the situation presented something of a dilemma to those of us who feel about housing as I do. It was not enough simply to accept everything in the bill because it contained many desirable provisions. Nor was it justifiable to

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oppose the bill in its entirety because of the excessive authorizations it contained.

The most acceptable alternative, it seemed to me, was to support amendments aimed at restoring individual programs in the bill to more reasonable levels. Only one such amendment was successful, a move to require a minimum equity and sounder financing provisions in the new low and middle-income housing program. When the House majority failed to accept other amendments, I voted to send the bill back to our committee and substitute a new bill which would have extended existing housing programs for a single year. While the substitute bill did not include provisions I believe to be important, it was, nevertheless, superior to the bill under consideration. When it, too, was defeated, there was no alternative but to vote for final passage of the housing bill. Not only was it better than nothing, but the good in the bill, in my judgment, outweighed the bad.

Special efforts

In addition to the overall factors I have discussed, I made a special effort to obtain action on four points, all of which are important in Union County.

First, I proposed that a substantial portion of the public housing authorization be devoted on a priority basis to elderly persons with low incomes. Public housing rents, of course, are the lowest available, and no group in our society needs and deserves low-cost housing as much as our older people, many of whom live on social security and very little else.

Second, I urged that our committee begin a thorough review of our urban renewal program. Many of the strongest supporters of urban redevelopment, including myself, have grown increasingly concerned at an apparent trend in the direction of massive redevelopment marked by huge office buildings and luxury apartments and involving the elimination rather than the restoration of existing residential neighborhoods. Instead, urban renewal should concentrate on wiping out slums, eliminating conditions that breed crime and disease, and recreating attractive neighborhoods.

Third, I supported an amendment to require local referendums on urban renewal projects. Nothing is more intensely personal to people than their homes and neighborhoods. Methods should be devised, therefore, for consulting people, for considering their views, and for enlisting their participation in making urban renewal a truly cooperative community endeavor. A referendum would be a powerful incentive in this direction.

Fourth, I strongly backed an amendment to incorporate in the House bill the mass transportation provisions of the Senate housing bill. As I told the House, "the need to strengthen commuter transportation services by improving facilities, stabilizing fares, providing more convenient schedules, and attracting more satisfied customers is undoubtedly the most important single problem facing heavily-populated urban areas."

Partial success

Although the amendment was defeated, I think it helped persuade the House leadership to schedule hearings this week on the mass transportation bill. As a sponsor of the bill, I plan to take an active role in the fight to get some action this year.

Partially obscured by the multi-billion dollar price tag on the housing bill, two highly significant conclusions can be drawn from the debate on the bill. Once again, Southern Democrats showed that their "conservatism" is only skin deep by going along almost entirely with their northern colleagues on even the most excessive of the spending provisions. In return for this support, perhaps, the majority leadership revealed their own shallow attitude toward civil rights when they joined with their southern brethren to defeat an amendment offered by Congressman Lindsay to prohibit racial discrimination in public housing.

If one looks very closely, the real coalition in the House is not between Republicans and Southern Democrats but between both wings of the majority party.