LOCAL PUBLIC POLICY AS A CAUSATIVE FACTOR IN SUBURBAN BLIGHT

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It is recognized that public policies are often critical determinants of land use, and the widespread failure to learn from experience in public policy-making, emphasizes a need, as Dror has observed, for "an explicit audit of a policy's result."[1] This recommendation is most appropriate in an era of increasingly assertive governmental land use policies. In this paper, an "explicit policy audit" is undertaken to review the specific antecedents of a low-grade subdivision, and account for its evolutionary course towards blight. As an adjunct to this primary objective attention is directed to wider consideration of the suburban land conversion and blight formation process.

At the outset it is acknowledged that the term blight merits some reexamination; however, to avoid any unnecessarily protracted discussion, the operational definition provided by Chapin will be adhered to. Here Chapin identified two categories of blight, simple and complex, which are consistent with widely accepted and understood connotations.[2] Accordingly, blight in its simple form includes physical, economic, and social characteristics, such as structural deterioration, lack of maintenance, vacancies, lowered property values, and welfare enrollments. Complex forms, on the other hand, involve design and locational characteristics which reflect obsolescence, hazardous and unhealthy conditions. Residential land use quality may readily be evaluated and classified by applying such a rudimentary checklist of structural and environmental conditions.[3]

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Under what circumstances, then, may blight and public policies be related? A suburban setting provided an opportunity to examine the postulated relationship because of several factors. Firstly, suburban land conversion has generally been a recent occurrence in which the number of actors is often reduced to a landowner/developer and a public agency.[4] Such a limited number of participants enhances any analysis of the land conversion process. Secondly, extension of required services to peripheral areas under conversion cannot be attained without the overt support or capitulation of local government. Marginal public and commercial services, and a paucity of recreational amenities in suburban areas are hallmarks of essentially negative urban expansion policies. Where these policies are so demonstrably weak some evaluation is warranted. Lastly, blight in suburban areas has not been analyzed in any great detail. Nevertheless, suburban blight may be identified and even distinguished as to type: blight encompassing older settlements, formerly discontiguous, but now located on the periphery due to lateral expansion from an urban center; and, blight encountered in suburban areas of recent vintage. Deterioration in these latter areas cannot be explained solely by conventional attributes of age or obsolescense. In advancing the central argument of public policy-making as a blight causing mechanism, a case study of a Southern California subdivision is undertaken.

Thousand Oaks, California:
A case study of suburban blight

Thousand Oaks, in Ventura County California (Map 1) possesses housing characteristics which rendered it suitable for the analysis of housing decay and public policies. A new city, incorporated in 1964, Thousand Oaks is located 45 miles northwest of Los Angeles astride a major coastal transportation corridor. Although a settlement nucleus dates from the turn of the century, it has been only within the last 15 years that marked urban growth occurred. This recent urban expansion during the 1960's, a by-product of urban spill-over from adjacent Los Angeles County, was

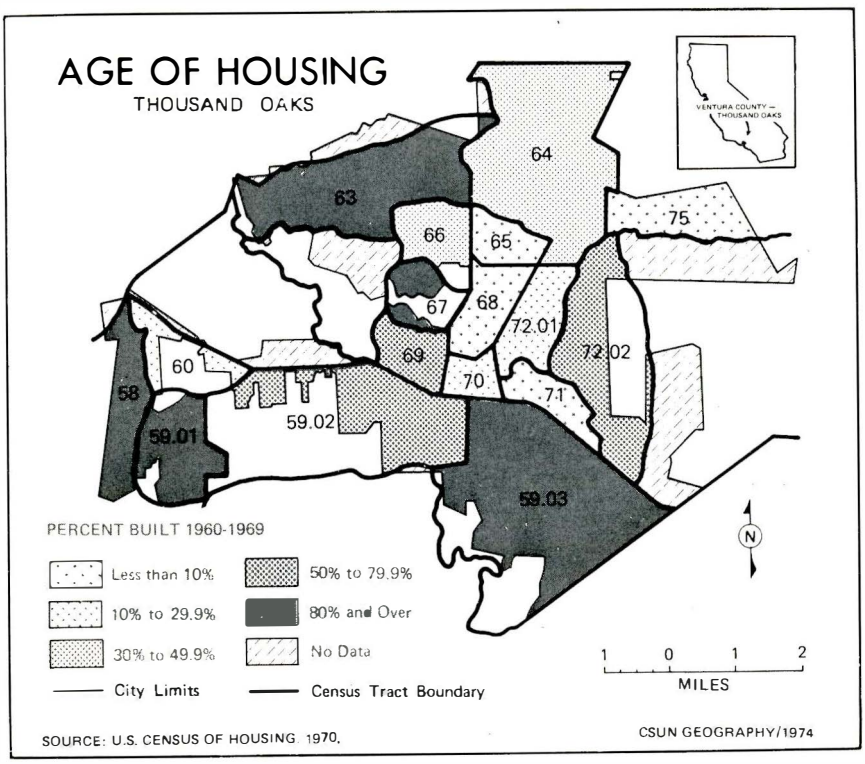

Figure 1. Age of Housing

witnessed in Ventura County's ranking as one of the nation's fastest growing Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

As indicated in Map 1, the bulk of the housing within the city is relatively new. With the exception of one tract (71--the settlement nucleus), virtually all housing was built after 1950. Furthermore, this map reveals that almost half of the tracts had at least 60 per cent of their housing built between 1960 and 1969. This new housing is predominantly single-family, of high-median values, and accompanied by high levels of owner occupancy (Maps 2, 3, and 4). In combination these city-wide characteristics make the presence of blight somewhat unexpected. Yet, by examining housing data, one may discern a departure from these general circumstances in a few tracts.

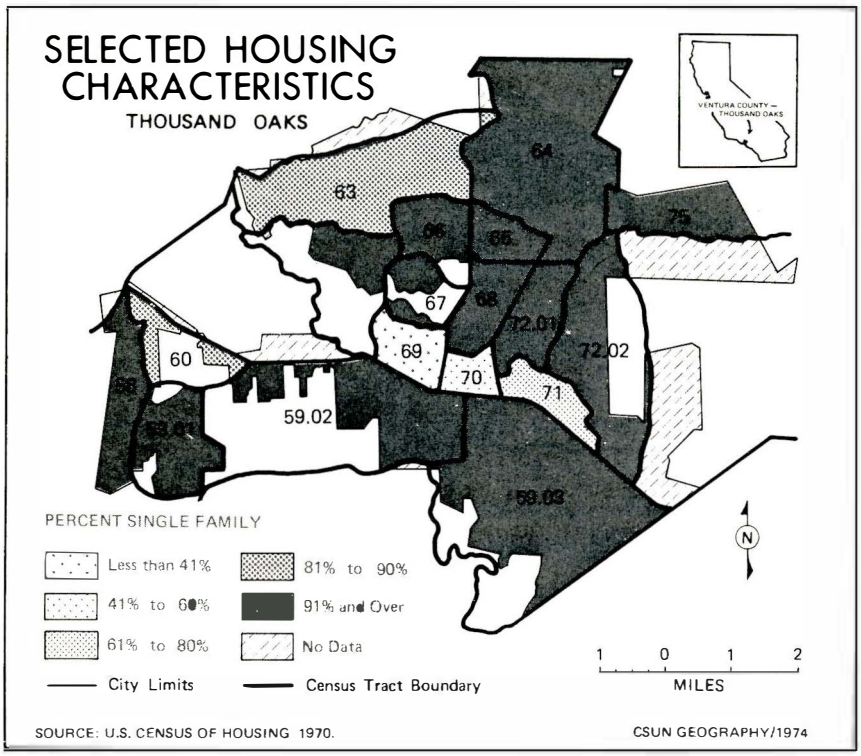

Figure 2. Percent Single Family Dwelling

Blight as it exists within the city, is concentrated in a single tract, number 65. Here housing, originally intended for the middle-income market ($15,450 in 1959) exhibited all of the simple forms of blight enumerated by Chapin; accumulation of trash, structural deterioration, vacancies, and social and economic problems. Complex forms of blight, related to incompatible land uses or poor design are not obvious, however, physical location and soil characteristics bear directly upon both forms of blight. Map 5 shows various units of the Park Oaks subdivision which generally conform to limits of census tract 65. Several types of housing features, units for sale, vacant units, and blighted units according to Chapin's definition, were recorded and mapped. Of the 1,063 dwelling units in the census tract, 1,001 were single family units. For the tract as a whole, a vacancy rate of

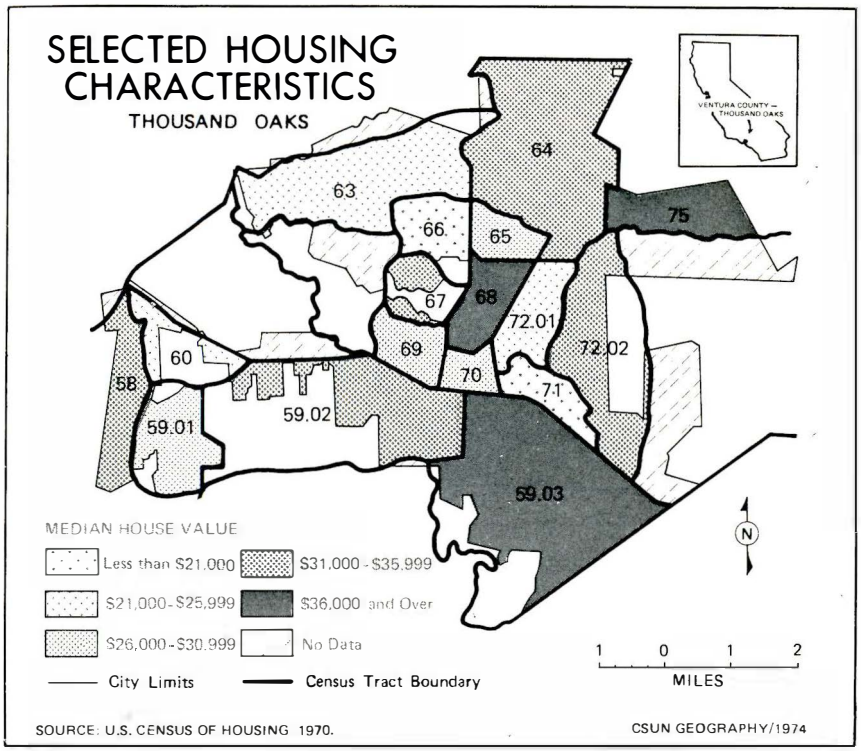

Figure 3. Median House Value

11.3 per cent was registered which, in keeping with generally accepted housing standards, is abnormally high.[5] Moreover, field observations showed that simple blight affected 7.2 per cent of these single-family units. As will be demonstrated subsequently, complex blight resulting from structurally unsound buildings affects a much higher percentage of the housing.

Causes of blight

The presence of blighted housing in Thousand Oaks is, on the surface, anomalous in view of housing age, city-wide housing values, tenure characteristics, and the predominance of single-family units. Nonetheless, blight encountered, vacancy rate, and number of units for sale (68), are directly related to public policy. Fundamentally, a housing problem arises in the failure

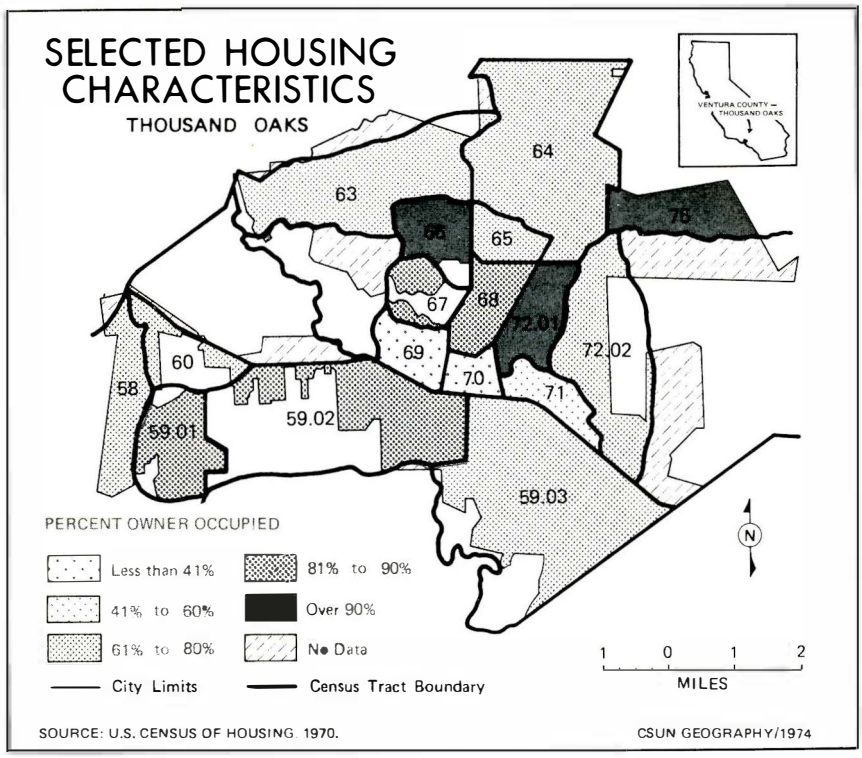

Figure 4. Percent Owner Occupied Homes

of local building and land development policies to recognize soil properties and mitigate inherent hazards in constructing housing.

As shown in Map 6, heavy and expansive soils cover the northwestern quadrant of the city. Tract 65 with 96 per cent of its housing constructed between 1950 and 1964 is located well within the zone of these clay soils.[6] Construction of housing in this tract was accompanied by a high rate of cracking in concrete slab floors resulting from moisture, contraction and expansion of the soil. Structural deterioration may ultimately be credited with forcing abandonment or rental of dwelling units at below market value since conventional resale financing was unobtainable and FHA or VA financing was not available unless the slabs were repaired.

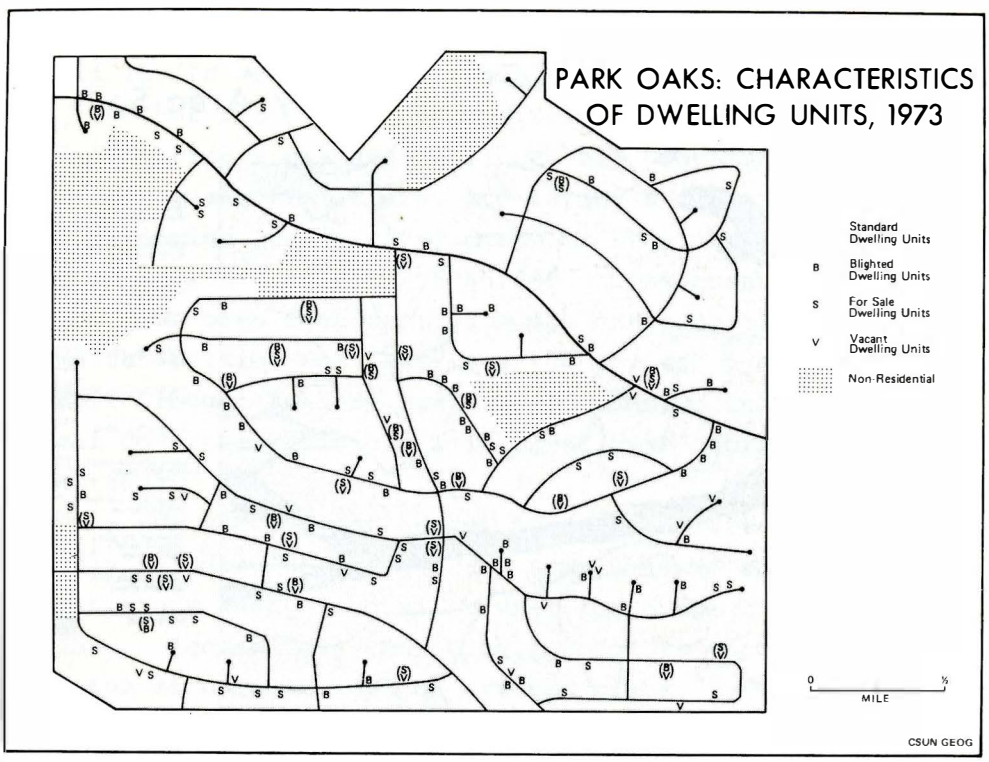

Figure 5. Characteristics of Dwelling Units

It is suggested here that public policies made development of housing under hazardous physical conditions possible and that ensuing structural damage was the inital stage in blight formation. Moreover, a continuum of neglectful local policies is confirmed in documentation from two separate State Agencies. Upon completion of the subdivision, the State Division of Real Estate admonished potential Park Oaks home buyers to "make further inquiry of the subdivider or local government," regarding soil properties.[7] In spite of this somewhat tenuous recognition of edaphic characteristics no action was undertaken by local government to develop or apply codes sufficiently stringent or comprehensive to deal with the problem. Even where applicable codes were later devised, dereliction in setting or administering local public policies was not uncommon as is noted in the Division of Mines', *Urban Geology*

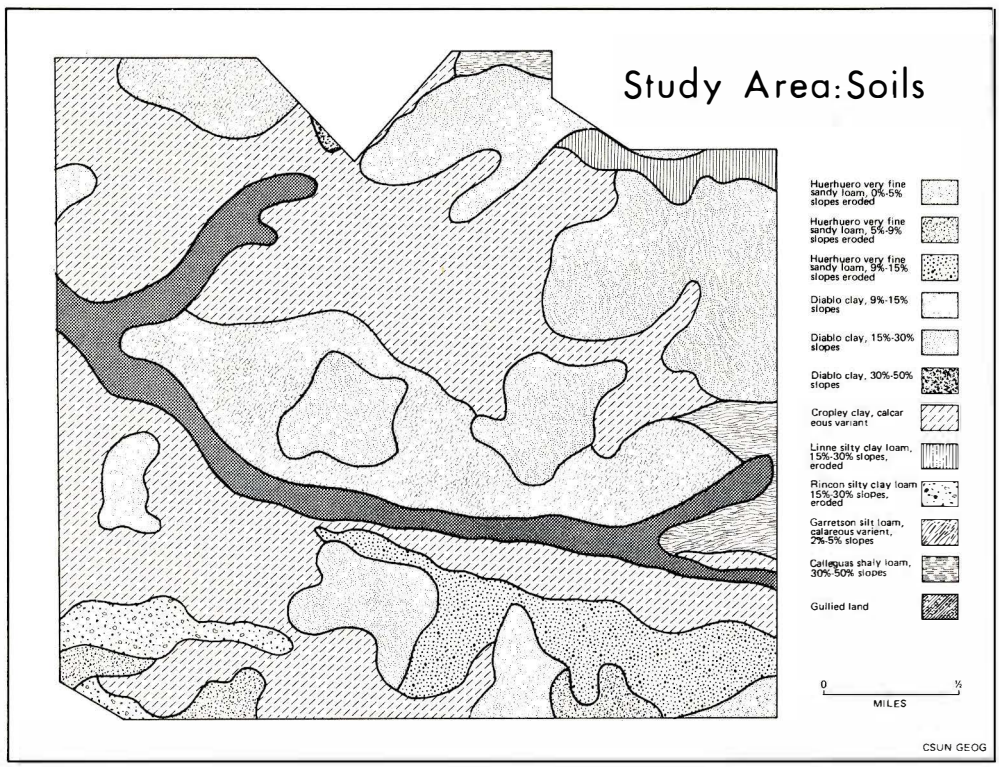

Figure 6. Area Soils

Master Plan for California:[8]

> The principal reason that newly built structures sustain damage attributable to expansive soils is that not all local governments apply existing codes and regulations effectively.

Some ten years after construction of the Park Oaks subdivision, structural damage to housing continues to be associated with soil conditions and ineffectual administration of building codes and subdivision laws throughout the state.

From a technical standpoint, housing in Park Oaks was substandard to begin with, nonetheless, houses were sold and occupied. The cracking and splitting of slabs noted by new home-owners was further exacerbated by grading techniques involving fill and compaction. In all units of the subdivision, fill depth

was confined to a range of 9 to 15 feet.[9] Yet, interviews with builders familiar with the tract during construction confirmed that fill limits were often exceeded by as much as 15 feet.

Another factor which contributed to housing decay was the cost of repairing a cracked slab. Repair procedures, consisting of removing houses from slabs, and laying a six inch sand moisture barrier, and nine inches of concrete on steel reinforcing rods, amounted to costs in excess of $5,000. Consequently, few homes in Park Oaks have been restored, although creation of a similarly blighted subdivision was later averted through a class action civil suit brought against builders, financial institutions, and the local government officials involved with approval and construction.[10]

As for the current number of unsound structures in Park Oaks, only building department and sample-based estimates are available since entry into all houses for inspection purposes was unfeasible. Accordingly, building inspectors report that 85 per cent of the structures rest on cracked slabs.[11] Where entry into houses repossessed by the Federal Housing Administration was practical, all units examined (20) were found to have split or cracked slabs. Given the presence of these structural deficiencies, housing values recorced on Map 4 are not surprising. Lower than average market values associated with Park Oaks are consistently witnessed in local real estate advertisements such as the following:[12]

> Fixer-upper. This fine three bedroom, two bath house with a repairable cracked slab offers a lot of comfort for a very *low price*. Has a beautifully planted yard with covered patio . . . . Where can you beat it?

At this juncture blight information may be summarized in the following steps: (1) a failure on the part of private entrepreneurs and public officials to recognize a basic environmental hazard; (2) local governmental permission to build, and actual construction of, housing under hazardous conditions; (3) structrual failure of the housing; (4) a general failure to repair structural damage associated with financial hardship; (5) abandonment, sale at

lower than market values, or free-occupancy of housing; (6) low levels of maintenance which may be linked to tenure characteristics and unwillingness or inability to make capital improvements. Explicitness encountered in the process described here does not stem from any oversimplification, but rather, from those temporal and spatial qualities bearing on recentness of construction, peripheral location, and concern with the terminal stage of land conversion involving developer/builders and public officials. While the process described appears to be relatively clear-cut, a number of theoretical or interpretive considerations arise.

Implications of public policy as a blight-causing mechanism

Firstly, the creation of blighted housing from the outset, through the vehicle of low-grade or substandard subdivisions, indicates that developer/builders exert a great influence on the quality of suburban land conversion. By the same token, public officials or local government has not assumed a reciprocal role but merely a responsive one. In the instance of Thousand Oaks, character of land use and its inherent quality may be seen as a by-product of a select group of private actors who influence public policy.

Secondly, patterns of profitability ensuing from low-grade subdivisions denote other theoretical implications affecting the direction and form of urban growth. Costs incurred by local government through its participation in the land conversion process can be measured in terms of remedial actions, lowered tax bases, and disincentives to investment. Here only the latter cost warrants elaboration since it may be linked to later development in the environs of Park Oaks.

Substandard housing definitely constitutes an anti-growth pole within the structure of urban places. Under most circumstances rents are depressed or there is a reticence to make substantial capital improvements in blighted or contiguous areas. In commenting on substandard housing and its effect on continued

investments Rothenberg notes:[13]

> The existence of spots of low-quality occupancy in an otherwise higher-quality neighborhood is more likely to depress occupancy levels downward than is the existence of high-quality occupancy spots in an otherwise low-quality area to raise levels. This is because the minority spots are a nuisance calling for majority adjustment in the former but not in the latter.

Implications observed here are witnessed in the immediate area of Park Oaks where the only major investment to date has been the construction of a low- to moderate-income housing project (Section 236). By itself, the presence of a housing project in Park Oaks suggests a compliance, on the part of local decision-makers, with a nation-wide tendency to locate such housing in declining or decay-prone areas.

Thirdly, while the causes of blight are certainly varied in origin and spatial attributes, the case study undertaken confirms a negative governmental role in land conversion. Local government in Thousand Oaks has assumed a role closely resembling that of the federal government in abetting central city ghetto formation.[14] Coupled with a failure to prevent further deterioration of dwellings in Park Oaks was local government's participation in the allocation of scarce federal housing resources to an area already containing a disproportionate share of bad housing.

Lastly, as Yearwood notes, low grade subdivisions resulting from substandard construction serve "invariably [as] a harbinger of future blight."[15] Disillusionment, inability to obtain conventional financing for repairs, and other reasons dictate blight formation in suburban areas. As a corollary, these pockets of blighted housing, with their commensurate inability to command higher rents, result in low-income occupancy in which minority groups are prominent. In the Thousand Oaks example, as demonstrated in 1970 Spanish-surname census data, a conspicuous enclave of Mexican-Americans exists in Park Oaks.[16]

Conclusion

Although specific antecedents of suburban blight have been recognized as inherent in local public policies, a final comment must be made regarding legitimacy of those policies, subsequent appraisal and formulation of new policies. Skepticism about the legitimacy of housing policies in Thousand Oaks is based on apparent failure to identify and consider on-site physical hazards to construction and to formulate remedial programs designed to inhibit housing decay and resultant concentration of an ethnic population. Likewise, legitimacy implies the digestion of information and the effective feedback of learning experience associated with unsatisfactory results of housing policies. Unfortunately, however, amplification of blight in the Park Oaks tract lends much credence to Jones' contention that public policy "evaluation processes in government today operate on relatively low levels of information."[17] Rather, it is suggested here that relevant modifications of building codes and subdivision ordinances originate in civil lawsuits.

NOTES

[1]Yehezkel Dror, *Public Policymaking Reexamined* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1968), p. 275.

[2]F. Stuart Chapin, *Urban Land Use Planning* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1965), pp. 310-12; for an earlier yet comprehensive definition of blight, see Mable Walker, *Urban Blight and Slums* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1938), pp. 36-67, and James Ford, *Slums and Housing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 443-47.

[3]For a quantitative approach to the measurement of residential land use quality see U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Measuring the Quality of Housing: An Appraisal of Census Statistics and Methods, Working Paper No. 25* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967).

[4]See Weiss, Shirley F. et al., *Residential Developer Decisions: A Focused View of the Urban Growth Process* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Carolina, Center for Urban and Regional Studies, Institute for Research in Social Studies, April, 1966).

[5]Glenn H. Beyer, *Housing and Society* (London: The MacMillan Co., 1965), pp. 488-89.

[6]U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey: Ventura Area, California* (April, 1970), pp. 23-25 and plates 43-44.

[7]California, Division of Real Estate, Final Subdivision Reports, Park Oaks Units (195901965).

[8]California, Division of Mines and Geology, *Urban Geology: Master Plan for California* (Sacramento: 1973), p. 10; to gauge the extent of local policy inadequacies, see Testimony of Cordell Durell in State of California, *Public Hearing of Joint Senate Local Government Committee and Senate Select Committee on Urban Affairs, California Legislature, Premature Subdivisions* (Sacramento: December 7 and 8, 1970), pp. 137-38.

[9]*Ibid.*

[10]Raymond E. Connors v. Conejo Valley Development Co., et al., Superior Court of State of California for the County of Ventura (December 7, 1962).

[11]City of Thousand Oaks, Building Department.

[12]*News Chronicle* (Thousand Oaks), July 6, 1973.

[13]Jerome Rothenberg, *Economic Evaluation of Urban Renewal* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1967), p. 47.

[14]George C. Grier, "The Negro Ghettos and Federal Housing Policy," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 32 (Summer, 1967), 550-60.

[15]Richard M. Yearwood, *Land Subdivision Regulation: Policy and Legal Considerations for Urban Planning* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 66.

[16]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts, Final Report PHC (1)-155, Oxnard-Ventura, California* SMSA, p. 52.

[17]Charles O. Jones, *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 110.