

Large Floor Area in Big Buildings Defeats Aim of Zoning Regulation

Edward M. Bassett Says Density of Lot Occupation Adds to Congestion and Mitigates Object-of Law Limiting Height of Skyscrapers—Pressure to Increase Limits Likely to Increase.

Prior to ten years ago skyscrapers could be built to any height desired. No roof setbacks were required. The zoning resolution, passed in 1916, placed a limit of height at two and one-half times the street width in the Wall Street district and along lower Broadway, two times the street width in the Grand Central and a few other intensive districts, and one and one-half times the street width in the rest of Manhattan and either one and one-half, one and one-quarter or one time the street width in the outlying boroughs. Roof setbacks above such limits were allowed in the intensive districts.

"Disappointment is frequently expressed," said Edward M. Bassett, "because new skyscrapers can still contain enormous floor space, producing great density of lot occupancy and thus increasing street congestion. Some say that the limit in every part of the city should be immediately reduced to one time the street width in order to prevent disastrous street congestion.

"Many causes other than high buildings affect street congestion. Probably Manhattan below Chambers Street was more congested with vehicular traffic thirty years ago than it is today. Boston, without high buildings, has greater street congestion than New York with its high buildings. A twenty-five-story life insurance building occupied by 5,000 employes will produce nowhere near the street congestion created by an equally large loft building employing 5,000 light industry workers—millinery, for instance. The light industry needs dozens of trucks.

Criticizes Retail District Amendment.

"The adoption of the retail district amendment now pending in the Board of Estimate would undoubtedly have a greater effect on street congestion in mid-Manhattan in the next ten years than a lower height limit.

"The officials who established the zoning plan ten years ago created the two and one-half times and two times districts because those districts were partly built up with skyscrapers of great height and it appeared discriminatory to impose a lower height limit on the rest of the same area. There is little doubt that a ten-story limit imposed forty years ago would have been best for the future city. The city would have benefited because the streets and buildings would be lighter and new business and trade centres would have been formed. There would have been distribution instead of concentration.

"Can more drastic height limits now be imposed in the central business districts? Probably not. The greatest mistake of the original height zoning was making the vast outlying areas of the city one time districts. They should have been three-quarter time districts.

City Height Percentages.

"The present percentages of the various height districts in relation to the entire city area are as follows: 1 time, 63.5; 1½ times, 12.4; 1½ times, 19.6; 2 times, 4; 2½ times, 0.5.

"This schedule shows that if the districts of great allowable heights cannot without discrimination be altered to lesser heights, nearly the same thing is accomplished if Boards of Estimate will rigorously refuse to increase the area of present intensive districts. This refusal can be adhered to without unfairness to any owner.

"The pressure to increase the height limits will be great because land owners will insist that land values have increased and that therefore they must be allowed a greater height. This is a false argument. Land values will take care of themselves if owners become convinced that Boards of Estimate will

not increase present height limits. If, however, such boards supinely increase the height limits, congestion of living and working conditions will surely increase along with street congestion and sooner or later it will be demonstrated that the city was unable to save itself."