

Xlv

Ben Rosenthal

February 16, 1972

Re: Forest Hills housing project.

"Seventy-five per cent of the people could have been held in line if you gave them a chance to tell their side of the story. The people in that area are willing to do their share. They are willing to pay their dues--more than most other people in America. But they aren't willing to pay the dues of the liberals in Manhattan.... Lindsay's trouble is that he never played stick ball in the streets. He doesn't understand the ordinary man in the street. And he doesn't want to listen to them. It's not his fault; it's his upbringing. You can't go to Saint Paul's and Yale and live in Georgetown and Gracie Mansion and know anything about the average citizen. Sixty-five to seventy-five per cent of the people in my district will support some low income housing. They have a conscience. But they have a threshold. Lindsay doesn't understand the people in Queens. Just like the time he didn't plow the snow in Bayside. I predicted the opposition from the very beginning." He said he knows district as well as anyone and trusts his own judgment on these matters.

He said he was "politically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually involved" in the Forest Hills problem. "Much more involved" than in Corona problem. Two thousand "stimulated" letters came to him on the subject saying that since Federal funds were involved, he should do something. "And they were right." That's when he asked for a GAO

investigation. They found nothing really amiss.

Ben supported it early and supports the principle of scattersight housing, but this was not that. He called it "warehousing poverty." Said he wrote to Aurelio warning him, "I want you to know that the community opposition to this project is growing with deep intensity. Please consider this letter a serious warning signa." MARCH 30, 1971.

✓ "When I saw the kind of project it was, I said 'Count me out.' And I opposed the project in its proposed form."

"It was an arrogant bureaucracy. The only hearings they had were one hour before the _____ and two hours before the _____. It was arrogance. You have to sit and listen to people and it takes a lot of patience. Bureaucracy isn't like that. The way Lindsay tells it, once the file gets so thick on a project, there's no way to stop it. The bureaucracy is stoppable. Lindsay's attention span is 5 minutes. He won't listen to people. Well, he's listening now. When he went to Miami, the Rabbis of Miami refused to meet with him. They said "Go meet with the Rabbis of Forest Hills first. So it's gotten tangled up in his presidential campaign."

✓ "Lindsay doesn't understand Queens. He wouldn't have carried Queens without my help. That's not boasting. I gave him credibility there. And it almost cost me party support in the primary. They held over my endorsement. I never asked Lindsay for any personal favors-- Shirley Chisholm got sixty jobs. I only wanted to use my IOU's for the

community. And on every community issue, he was against me--on Corona, Forest Hills and the Flushing Airport. So what good did it do me."

He started the interview by telling story about Larry O'Brien going out to Omaha, Nebraska on behalf of RFK to tell the NFU what RFK's farm policy was. "You know, Ben, I don't know anything about farm policy." Ten NFU guys come in--each one of em talks in turn and when they finish, they say "We're with you." O'Brien had not said one word! Point is that people want to be listened to. And he noted that Bob Wagner "whom you political scientists didn't think was very good, because he lacked charisma" was good at this. Lindsay is not. "His attention span is five minutes. He's not interested in managing the city. I wouldn't be either. My attention span would be twenty minutes."

When I asked him what people he talked to about Forest Hills business, he said "Good people, sensible people--what else can I say."

"I'm in the position now where both sides are mad at me--at least the extremes. Jerry Birbach, the head of the picketers and his group consider me a turncoat. I've never been with them. And my liberal friends on the other side--well, you're either with them or you're against them. So they aren't happy with me.... Both sides want me out on the barricades. I've straddled the issue, really--a little this way or a little that way--by opposing it in its present form. But I support low income housing but not that kind of a project that is wrong from every standpoint. And I oppose an arrogant bureaucracy. I think I've come out all right politically."

"The Forest Hills Residents Association has become a political force. They're talking about running a primary against me and everyone else. But I think I'm in good shape."

Court had just sent the project back to Board of Estimates when I arrived--much relief. "That will kill it. They'll never bring it up again."

Redistricting. "It looks like I'm in beautiful shape. I'm the innocent beneficiary of everyone else's machinations."

"At one time they had me moved into the Bronx. That would have been horrible. It wouldn't be bad politically, but just psychologically. I don't know the Bronx. And I wouldn't have enjoyed it."

Repubs wanted to save Delaney so gave him Glendale and Ridgewood and took Ben's worst areas away. Also he lost College Point to Braggin¹⁹⁹⁹ or Delaney. Halpern and Wolff put together to destroy Halpern--who is opposed by Queens' Repubs.

Re Forest Hills, Ben noted that Matt Troy, Queens leader and Borough President took same position as he did. So did N. Y. Times. "The Times adopted my position."

Re his new subcommittee. He said the chairmanship hadn't changed his life pattern much. "The hearings on Soviet Jewry have helped some politically."

Cliff said he wanted the consumer subcommittee. But that he and Ben's wife wanted him to take Foreign Affairs, one of Cliff's reasons was-- "if you have any idea of running for higher office." Also to broaden his interests.