Community Council Arrives

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IF THEIR AVID ACCEPTANCE of the Community Council idea is a criterion, Germans are taking to democracy as a duck takes to water. That’s the opinion this consultant gleaned on a fact-finding mission to citizens’ community planning councils in Wuerttemberg-Baden and Bavaria during a two-week survey.

Germany is broken down into states, known as Laender, and the Office of the US High Commissioner for Germany operates from each state commissioner’s office with a “field staff” of Kreis (county) resident officers, aided by professional consultants in community activities and youth activities, directed by Lawrence E. Norrie, former National YMCA official; John C. Pixley, former Los Angeles Council attaché; and Austin Welch, American recreation authority and former Federal Public Housing Authority official.

Resident Officers interviewed agreed that Community Councils were the most encouraging democratic development seen, whether formed as a result of a “suggestion” or coming into being spontaneously through community interest — which, surprisingly, has often been the case.

FEW KILOMETERS from Stuttgart, in Wuerttemberg-Baden, we found the county of Waiblingen a hotbed of community council activity. Four communities, Schondorf, Fellbach, Waiblingen and Winnenden, all have active councils, all formed within the past two years. There, the initiative came from Resident Officer Hilton Rosner, who found that the mayor, Catholic and Evangelical clergy, union leaders and social workers were all eager to work together to face community problems.

Putting their problems under the spotlight through a militant press whose cooperation was enlisted early, they took definite action to improve conditions. Results included establishment of a community laundry to which townsfolk in Schondorf take their clothes each week; a community cooperative store where clothes from friends in the United States which do not fit may be swapped for some which do; a day nursery for working mothers in Waiblingen, as well as a library and adult education center in the same town.

In every instance, council action resulted in tax funds being allocated to carry on these services which are now permanent features under local auspices and not “American handouts.” These communities want to lift themselves up by the bootstraps and they feel that community councils and citizen participation are the way.

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HAVE THERE BEEN PROBLEMS? Surely. In the early stages of organization both city officials and industrialists cast cold eyes on these citizens groups. But they were sold on the merit of “teamwork in their towns” and some of the city officials now admit they have been assisted in getting welfare legislation passed by town councils because of backing from the community planning council.

The Germans have found that through citizen forums they have been able to sound out community thinking and through the council transmit plans into action on a cooperative basis.

A new development, councils in Germany haven’t given too much thought to structure, constitution and bylaws and other such refinements, but generally, their objectives are much the same as those of American councils. If any criticism is to be found it is that many of these embryo councils are over-ambitious. They try to reach out and solve problems not within the sphere of local competency — problems such as federal finance and interstate commerce — but they are ultimately able to transmit such local problems through the proper channels so that eventual action may result.

At any rate, most of these councils are the antithesis of our old version of “Councils of Social Agencies,” which were often limited to private social agencies.

Membership generally in the German council brings in every element of community leadership and schools of thought, churches, labor, city officials, industrialists and tourist promoters. Many tend toward a chamber of commerce complexion; others would resemble a combined chamber and council. Some call themselves “economic councils,” yet hasten to assure you that this means social welfare in a broad sense. Practically all are open to the public at large, and a few have official delegate bodies.
UNIQUE DEVELOPMENT — and one which may be the forerunner of state planning councils — exists in the so-called Grenzland (border land) area in Bavaria. As we drove from town to town near the Czech border, we talked with council people who pointed out that common problems as a result of the influx of refugees necessitated a federation of planning councils. So, a 14-county council exists, with delegates from each of the counties meeting regularly. Problems of transportation, tariffs, employment, etc. are discussed by the federated council, bringing into focus individual council problems as well.

While many councils have started on the county level, probably because of the stimulus of American Resident Officers, they are now developing on a more grass roots basis — on the neighborhood council idea. Counties with several towns, like Waiblingen, have found that local councils best serve the local needs, but yet through federation, allow for exchange of thought.

One could go on endlessly with examples of striking community council triumphs. The town of Pforzheim particularly stands out.

TANNHOFFER WEG was a section in Pforzheim which was used as the Siberia for the town's undesirables — prostitutes, opium addicts, homosexuals and other unfortunates. A watch manufacturing center, Pforzheim during the war switched to the manufacture of delicate aircraft instruments and was, accordingly, bombed to the ground. Decent home-owners crawled from the rubble to find their homes ruined, while Tannhofer Weg by some miracle had escaped the fury from the sky. But, because the section had never been considered as needing decent sewage, house toilet facilities and other amenities, it was not livable for those who now sought refuge there.

What to do? A community council was organized with clergy, officialdom and labor represented. Blueprints for making the area habitable were rushed. The citizen's council called on the officials for action and got it. Today Tannhofer Weg is a respectable residential section — a living tribute to what may well have been Germany's first community welfare council.

This community and many other German towns are anxious to use new-found democratic means, along with their native culture, to make community life better. When one considers that in four decades these people have lived under four different ideologies, it is gratifying to see how they accept democratic vehicles such as the welfare council for meeting their local problems. HICOG has truly brought a touch of American democracy to many German communities.

The word is spreading: Community Councils are here to stay!

HOMEMOBILE VISITS COUNTRY HOUSEWIVES

The modern kitchen is to be brought to the country housewife. As part of Hesse's rural education program, a "homemobile," complete with modern kitchen, laundry and inexpensive household gadgets, has begun the rounds of Hesse's rural communities.

The project is designed to introduce a more efficient, less expensive modern household to Hesse's farm wives, and will visit almost every hamlet of Hesse this year.