

A-8

Smothering the Boston Fire Hazard

Commissioner O'Hearn Now Anxious to Meet the Insurance Protest Without Hurting Real Estate

By Ralph Sadler

BOSTON'S Fire Hazard Elimination Campaign has received new impetus of late, and the need of the impetus is strikingly apparent when one considers the fire department figures recently published showing our fire losses and the expenses of our fire department for the last fiscal year. There were 4015 fires in the year ending June 30 last, entailing a loss of \$3,225,000, extinguished by a fire department which cost us over \$1,000,000 to maintain. This is the toll of fire in Boston, and it is needless to say that it is far too high. And not only the actual losses we have suffered but the potential dangers of scores of fire-traps and conflagration-breeders make the campaign an urgent need—one which cannot be too energetically pushed. As reported by the fire commissioner, 80 per cent of our losses are preventable. Compared with the losses of Glasgow, Scotland, a city of the same size as Boston, our losses are as nine to one. The present administration has been instrumental in the cause of fire hazard elimination, and the campaign now going on is a feature of the work. The health department, fire department and building department are working in active cooperation to discover the dangerous spots, but the brunt of the work falls on the building department. Building Commissioner O'Hearn is superintending the work.

The present campaign has been in active course of progress since the appointment of the middle of August by Commissioner O'Hearn of Mr. Edwin Kelley as special inspector. To him the fire department makes a daily report of the buildings which it considers require inspection, and at the inspector's discretion these are condemned and ordered demolished, or the owners are advised to make certain alterations. Strenuous efforts are being made to see that these recommendations are carefully carried out. It is manifest that the objective of the work in this campaign is not so much the minimization of fires and their speedy extinguishment as the elimination of the conditions which make these fires possible, and probable.

Fifty Buildings Razed

It is the commissioner's aim to accomplish his ends without incurring the antagonism of the real estate owners, whom he is not infrequently obliged to put to considerable expense. The buildings already demolished by orders have in every case been demolished by the owners thereof. It was anticipated that there would be considerable opposition to the movement on the part of the owners who were urged to destroy or alter their property, but on the contrary the department encountered little opposition; rather, good citizenship and hearty cooperation in its efforts. No doubt much of this cooperation may be attributed to the fact that in most cases the ques-

tion of public safety has been put up to the owner and his subsequent good intentions produced speedy results by means of an industrious "follow-up" system. This, the commissioner says, is a process much superior to lengthy litigation.

A Striking Illustration

One of the most striking illustrations of this fact was met with in the case of a building in the South End. This was a five-story structure of brick, housing sixty families. It was located in a court between four similar buildings and reached through but one passage-way, and that a boardwalk at street level through the building in front. This boardwalk after passing under the building in front extended along the side of another building to the door of the building in question, a veritable fire-trap should the boardwalk, the only means of egress, become obstructed or burned in case of fire.

The condition of the building was called to the attention of the owner, a man who by the way had never seen the building, and acting upon the suggestion of the Building Commissioner the structure was demolished. Since the property was assessed at \$30,000, the owner's action in complying so readily with the suggestion of the department was particularly gratifying as an example of cooperation, though it is by no means an isolated instance, being noteworthy only by reason of its magnitude.

In connection with the fact that this owner had never seen his building it is a curious fact that the same feature has been noted in a number of cases where it has been necessary to destroy buildings. It would appear that the buildings fall into the hands of negligent real estate agents, who have charge of them in the interests of the owners, many of whom live at some little distance from the city. The buildings subsequently fall into disrepair and fail to conform to new regulations and it is in these cases that action becomes imperative.

One Hundred Buildings Under Surveillance

There are a number of interesting facts that have developed in connection with the 50 (approximately) buildings which have already been demolished. In the first place, with the exception of five, they are wooden buildings. It is these of course that become so rapidly dilapidated, as a result of neglect. As mentioned before, many of the owners are not Bostonians. This is true in a majority of the cases. An instance is that of a man in Tallahassee, Florida. He is the owner of considerable property in the South End, and upon being apprised of its untenanted and dangerous condition, he gave orders regarding its disposition which resulted in the demolition of some buildings and careful attention to some others. The large majority of the aforementioned fifty cases and one hundred others under surveillance is found in the old tenement districts of South Boston, East Boston, Charlestown, Roxbury and the South End; also along the waterfront, abandoned coal-pockets, untenanted stables, barns, etc. Very little trouble is met with in the North and West Ends, as there the land in the main grew up to brick buildings some while ago. An occa-

sional isolated instance in these quarters may call for demolition, but it is followed by speedy rebuilding, for the land is valuable in these districts. This has been found to be true of much of the land inspected, though in many cases the property thereon was unoccupied.

What Is Wharf Property?

On one point, however, the department has met some little controversy, though it has been more for the sake of argument than with the hope of attaining any tangible results. This was the question of wharf property. The recently enacted ordinances extending the fire limits brought within the so-called "limits" much property that has been carelessly or improperly termed as a "wharf" or "wharf property." This includes property in the district of Charlestown, East Boston, Roxbury, South Boston, Dorchester and some of the South Bay. Much of this property was at one time legitimately enough called wharf property in the generally accepted sense of the word "wharf," but extensions of "made land" and other filling in have taken the wharf functions from some of the property, though it may still have been referred to, perhaps for many years, as a "wharf." The city ordinances permit the erection in any location that is within or without the fire limits of wooden buildings on "wharf property" providing they be not over twenty-seven feet high and covered with some non-combustible roofing material. It was considered by some owners that they could erect such buildings on the property described above, which had erroneously been referred to as "wharf property." A case in point has recently arisen regarding a piece of property in the South Bay. This had for years been known as a "wharf," and the owner was desirous of erecting upon the property a wooden building which would conform to the requirements of wooden buildings upon wharf property. Upon being denied a permit upon the grounds that his building was not to be upon a wharf, he advanced the argument that the piece of land had been known for years as a "wharf." Following investigation, the building department contended that since his structure was to be 600 feet from the actual wharf itself and about 1000 feet from water it did not come within the "wharf" classification and continued to withhold his permit to build.

In this contingency, and in order to enforce stringently the regulations which he had in mind, Commissioner O'Hearn sought the opinion of the law department on the meaning of the words "wharf" or "wharf property," and Corporation Counsel Sullivan rendered a decision defining a wharf as "a structure on piling, beneath which the tide ebbs and flows, used for purposes of loading and unloading vessels." This definition of course was sufficiently narrow to exclude from the "wharf" classification all properties which had ceased to retain their functions as wharves, and the condemnation of all buildings of wood on the so-called wharf properties which do not come within the scope of the definition may proceed forthwith.

Mr. O'Hearn is particularly desirous of carrying forward his work of fire hazard elimination on the waterfront, as he feels that it is potentially our most dangerous factor. That we have so far avoided a terrible conflagration seems to him a fortunate circumstance and he hopes that the step he is taking will effectually prevent the future probability of such an occurrence.

TRANSCRIPT - SEP. 1 - 1914

BOSTON CHARTER LAUDED

Curley Says City Affairs Should Be Standardized

Be Greatest Feat Since American Freedom

Corporation Counsel Would Exempt Boston

Dr. Prince Says City's Charter Best Yet

SEP 1 1914

All cities in Massachusetts should have charters similar to that in Boston, in the opinion of Mayor Curley, who appeared at a hearing at the State House today before the Recess Committee on City Charters. The mayor believed that municipal government should be standardized, saying that the man or group of men who could accomplish this would do more for the American people than has been done since their freedom was established.

Mayor Curley said that the Boston charter had been of great benefit to the city. He expressed the hope that he would be able to defeat at the coming State election the Lomasney bill passed by the last Legislature to increase the membership of the City Council.

Corporation Counsel John A. Sullivan said that Boston should be exempt from general charter legislation. He suggested a classification of cities in three groups. Dr. Morton Prince, chairman of the Boston Charter Association, was of the opinion that the Boston charter was the best form yet devised to meet the exigencies of large American cities.

"Under the present system," said Mayor Curley, "the affairs of the city of Boston are gradually reaching a business basis. It would be an utter impossibility properly to conduct the business with a large city council on account of log-rolling. Councilmen elected by districts know that their continuance in public office depends upon the amount of public funds they can divert to their district and do not serve the city as a whole.

"In spite of the burden placed upon the city by the enlarged State tax, county tax and increased expenses of the school department, over which the mayor has no control, the tax rate this year will be the second lowest in the Commonwealth. Health conditions are better here than in any other city the size of Boston in the United States. This has been done under the present charter. There still remains much to be done. The department of public works, for instance, is carrying an overhead charge that is sixty per cent too large. The clerks, foremen and high-class employees cannot be discharged, but I am transferring them to other departments whenever the opportunity presents itself, instead of making new appointments. In this way, in about two years, these charges should be reduced to the proper proportion.

"Within the six months prior to my coming into office, wholesale salary raises were made and a large amount of humanitarian legislation boosted the expenses of the city to an unreasonable figure. The only way I could prevent the tax rate from being prohibitive was to cut salaries and discharge many employees.

"I am in hopes we will win the charter fight next fall and retain the present charter."

When asked whether he considered it advisable to place the administration of school affairs under the mayor, Mr. Curley said that he saw no reason why the school superintendent should receive a larger salary than the governor. He favored giving the mayor charge of the finances of this department. Senator Doyle asked the mayor if he considered it a good policy to give any man as much absolute power as is provided for the mayor under the Boston charter. Mayor Curley replied that he believed in having one man directly responsible. "Responsibility makes the man," he said.

"Municipal government must be standardized," continued the mayor. "It will be a hard task, but I believe the man or group of men who accomplish this will do more for the American people than has been done since their freedom was established. The trouble with present city governments is that they have no standard to follow. If a standard had been established, Boston would not have had to tear out seven miles of inadequate four-inch water mains in the Dorchester district, and would not waste a quarter of a million dollars annually on streets that are mudholes in summer and dusty in winter.

In conclusion, the mayor said that he favored non-partisan municipal elections and the Boston system of nomination for office. In regard to East Boston, he said that a few good streets in that district would be of more benefit than a dozen unnecessary municipal buildings.

Corporation Council Sullivan suggested classifying the cities into three classes as follows: Cities with less than 50,000 population, 50,000 to 100,000, and cities of more than 100,000. He said Boston should be exempted from general charter legislation, because it is in a class by itself. For the smaller cities, he suggested the commission form of government. For the second-class he suggested a mayor with a large council, and for the third class, a concentration of responsibility a small legislative body and absolute veto power for the mayor.

"City governments should be under the control of the Legislature," he said. "No city has the right to govern itself poorly, and neighboring cities and the entire State is affected." He opposed party designations in connection with municipal elections, also the initiative and referendum except on simple questions that could be easily understood by the voters.

Dr. Prince said that the Boston charter was in excellent form. "Almost all American cities at one time or another have suffered from incompetency and inefficiency of administration, wasteful expenditure—generally the result of log-rolling in the city council and incompetent officials—and too often growth," he declared. In other words, municipal administration in America has been on the whole a failure.

"The remedy seems to lie between the commission form of government and some such system as is provided by the Boston city charter, which is a model of its kind. Practical experience during the past five years has shown that the latter has worked well and has on the whole come up to expectations. This has been due chiefly to two provisions: first, that requiring appointments to head of departments to be certified by the Civil Service Commission. This has eliminated the appointment of incompetent hack politicians as a reward for political services.

"Second the small city council elected at large. This has largely prevented appropriations by log rolling and therefore wastefulness. It has saved the city hundreds of thousands of dollars and kept down taxes. It has secured a much higher type of councillor, one interested in the government of the city on a whole and not simply in the demand of his own locality. Figures show that discrimination of appropriations in favor of special localities has not occurred, or have the interests of unrepresented sections of the city been neglected. Even this has been the case in the past when the mayor of the city has not been in sympathy with the charter. In other words the charter by its checks tends to protect the city against an incompetent or reckless executive. Of course no charter can wholly do this.

"The small council means a short ballot. The only demand for a large council and district representation has come from disappointed petty local politicians and those who desire to be elected to the council but who cannot hope to be elected except by the votes of their districts. Such men cannot be elected at large because they are not wanted."

BILL DOES NOT BIND BOARD

Chairman McSweeney of Directors of the Port Replies to Assertion of Building Trades Council with Regard to Drydock Measure

Chairman McSweeney of the directors of the port today made the following statement in reply to the assertion by representatives of the Building Trades Council of Boston that the bill now before the Senate to authorize construction of a dry dock would make binding the contract made by the old board with Holbrook, Cabot and Rollins at cost to the State of between \$131,000 and \$180,000 more than if a new contract were made:

"The old Board of Port Directors awarded the contract to this firm by a vote of three to two. When we came into office, the governor and Council, to whom the contract had been submitted for approval, referred it back to us. Secretary of the Navy Daniels, at our request, assigned Lieutenant Harris, a navy engineer and drydock expert, to our board. After going through the contract carefully, he submitted a report in which he said that the contracting firm was a good, responsible one and that the prices were low. However, by the time the report was submitted, doubt had arisen as to our authority to go ahead and build without legislative enactment.

"The bill now pending in the Legislature is a result of that doubt. It grants nothing to Holbrook, Cabot & Rollins, and that concern will have no claim upon the board or the Commonwealth, except a moral, or perhaps I should say a sentimental one. A conscientious public official would require that the bid submitted by this concern be readjusted to present-day prices, and that is what I propose to do. For instance, in the matter of cement alone there is a difference of \$28,000 less in today's price than that when the contract was awarded. Steel also is cheaper. On the other hand, granite is now more expensive by reason of a readjustment of quarrymen's and granite workers' wages."