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Rules Alone Won't Clean the Air

By Richard M. Daley

CHICAGO— This week's announcement that the Environmental Protection Agency will move forward with recommendations for significantly tighter limits on air pollution is both encouraging and disappointing.

I am encouraged by President Clinton's assurances that the new regulations will be flexible and sensible and not single out large metropolitan areas for punishment.

But unfortunately, the new E.P.A. regulations include no new ideas. Everyone wants less soot and smog -- especially residents of large cities, where pollution is the biggest problem. But setting tougher pollution standards will not give us cleaner air.

Indeed, good standards, if carried out badly, can adversely affect public health and the environment. The major cause of smog and soot in cities is no longer industry, which has cleaned up its act, but automobile emissions. Yet the new clean air regulations could encourage suburban sprawl (and thus more cars), while hurting the development of industrial jobs in the cities.

That's what happened with the Government's Superfund program, which was supposed to speed the cleanup of polluted sites. But because of liability problems associated with the Superfund, contaminated property is almost certain to be abandoned. Industry won't invest in this property; neither will lenders.

This has happened thousands of times in cities across the country: jobs and capital are encouraged to flee to the suburbs and beyond. The result is more people in cars driving to and from work, and more air pollution.

The new clean air regulations could have an equally devastating effect. For instance, if a city is having trouble meeting the new standards, a moratorium could be placed on industrial development. Industry moves out, promoting more traffic and suburban sprawl.

Cities need real programs to clean up the air. For example, Chicago has a new program, Brownfields, aimed at correcting the failures of the Superfund. The city is reclaiming abandoned, polluted inner-city industrial property. This reclamation cleans the environment and brings jobs into the city. Congress is considering several bills that would help cities rebuild their industrial sites.

But the Government must do a better job of planning how cleaner air will be achieved. For instance, highway construction still takes first priority, while urban mass transit receives less and less Federal money. It is left to the cities and states to give mass transit more money in order to meet the new clean air standards.

This week at a meeting of the United States Conference of Mayors, many mayors, from Susan Savage of Tulsa, Okla., to Dennis Archer of Detroit, expressed concerns about the new E.P.A. standards. Together under the leadership of Mayor Paul Helmke of Fort Wayne, Ind., the conference will work toward a more flexible approach to this problem.

But serious questions have been raised about whether the E.P.A. has the legal authority to be flexible. Congress should act to insure that the new standards will be carried out with the common sense that has been promised. This may require rewriting the Clean Air Act to make it fairer to cities by making it less reliant on punitive sanctions and enforcement.

Action must match rhetoric. Without a real Federal plan to meet the new standards, taxpayers won't be getting the cleaner air they deserve.