

Mrs. James Rowe, jr., studies the changing Washington skyline on a Southwest overpass.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HAROLD J. FLECKNOE



CITY PLANNER

Elizabeth Rowe, chairman of the National Capital Planning Commission, talks about the "mess" in Washington

By ORR KELLY

IN the strikingly modern lobby on the third floor of the new First National Bank Building at the corner of Seventeenth street and Pennsylvania avenue N.W., the lengthy names of three important agencies stretch, one on top of another, across one wall:

NATIONAL CAPITAL PLANNING COMMISSION
NATIONAL CAPITAL REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL
METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The names are symbolic of an organizational diversity that, according to a leading architectural magazine, has made a "mess" of planning in Washington.

But to the handsome blond woman in the handsome corner office with its impressive view of the Executive Office Building and the northwest approaches to the White House, the diversity in planning for the future of the Washington area has its merits.

"I don't think planning gets bogged down because there is a variety of agencies taking

a look at it," says Mrs. James H. Rowe, jr., chairman of the National Capital Planning Commission. "I think we can function . . . and it's just as well to have this diversity because the decisions are so important."

Of all the many agencies planning for the future of the Washington area or the various parts of the area, none is potentially as important as the commission Elizabeth (Libby) Rowe has headed since November, 1961.

When Congress established the commission in 1952, it handed out responsibility with a free hand, giving the commission the job of making plans that would "best promote public health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and the general welfare, as well as efficiency and economy in the process of development."

The commission has specific responsibility for planning for the District of Columbia and for Federal installations in the area surrounding the District. The National Capital Regional Planning Council, set up by the same act of Congress in 1952, has the job of co-ordinating the planning for the Metropolitan Area. In addition, there is hardly a Federal, District, State or local agency that doesn't also have some stake in future plans for the area.

In handing responsibility to the commis-

sion, Congress was equally liberal in handing out veto powers. Federal agencies which plan construction in the area are required to submit plans to the commission, but in each case, after "consultation and suitable consideration of the views of the commission the agency may proceed to take action in accordance with its legal responsibilities and authority."

(Some professional planners feel, however, that the commission, itself, has too great a veto power, and an effort is being made to deprive the commission of its veto in the field of urban renewal. In a recent issue devoted to Washington, Architectural Forum described the city as a place where everyone can say "no," but no one can say "yes.")

As chairman of the commission, Mrs. Rowe is thus like the skipper of a ship who has orders to go full speed ahead—but who doesn't dare to damn the torpedoes.

Mrs. Rowe, first woman member of the commission and first Kennedy appointee, has proved herself remarkably effective in one of her major torpedo-dodging duties—the job of presiding at commission meetings. On more than one occasion, her skillful chairmanship has kept the commission on an even keel and headed generally on course despite torpedoes and threats of mutiny.

The commission has frequently been the focus of controversy in such issues as highways versus rapid transit and renewal versus the status quo.

A major controversial issue that brought

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a sharp break between the majority of the commission and its executive director came early last year when the commission voted against a program for renewal of the Georgetown waterfront.

It was shortly afterward that William E. Finley, who had favored the program, quit his \$19,000-a-year post as executive director to take another job. It was widely speculated that one reason he went job hunting was a feeling that Mrs. Rowe was taking over many of his responsibilities and that she and some other members of the commission tended to go full speed ahead too slowly.

After Mr. Finley's departure, a search was begun throughout the Nation for a new executive director, a search complicated by the report (true) that the fine corner office intended for the new director had been taken over by Mrs. Rowe and the report (untrue, she says) that she had been in no hurry to find a new director because she wanted to run the commission herself.

Six months after Mr. Finley's departure, however, W. C. Dutton, jr., former executive director of the American Institute of Planners, was named director.

There is no difference of opinion among commission members about the importance of careful planning for the future growth of the Washington area.

"This is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the East," Mrs. Rowe says. "Our problems are similar to those faced by cities everywhere, but our solutions to these problems have to be uncommon. Washington is not just another city. It is a city of great natural beauty, a city with important historical value and, as the national capital, a symbol to the whole free world.

"Our problem is to permit the necessary development, but to keep the character of our city and the surrounding area."

In Lafayette Square, she says, there is a plan to preserve the historic old buildings



around the square while providing for needed office space in structures set back behind the colorful old buildings. The columnist who gave her the credit for a brilliant solution to a difficult problem was in error, she says. Actually, it was President Kennedy who suggested the plan, which has now been adopted.

"The President," she says, "took care of his own front yard. Unfortunately, we can't expect the President to solve all of our planning problems for us."

Mrs. Rowe, who is 51 and the mother of three children, is one of those in whom political liberalism is combined with a deeply

conservative concern for the preservation of physical ties with the past.

Her husband, a Washington attorney, was a White House aide to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and later an Assistant Attorney General. They were both active supporters of Adlai E. Stevenson and, in 1960, Mr. Rowe served as national chairman for the campaign of Senator Hubert Humphrey for the Democratic presidential nomination. After Senator Kennedy won the nomination, however, Mrs. Rowe helped set up the Women's Committee for the New Frontier. When he



won the presidency, she served as co-chairman for the Inaugural Parade.

Although she was born in Maryland, Mrs. Rowe has lived in Washington since she was 2 months old. "I love my city," she says.

Mrs. Rowe listed some of the projects with which the commission is currently concerned:

- A Subway System: "... tremendously important; the salvation of the center of the city."

- Pennsylvania Avenue Renewal: "A very exciting project—it can be a monument to the Kennedy administration."

- Landmark Commission: "We're studying, with the Fine Arts Commission, the establishment of a landmarks commission to make an inventory of our historical and architectural landmarks and to find some way of preserving them so that the best of our heritage will not be lost."

- Preservation of Parks: "To me, it's silly to talk piously about preserving open space outside the city if we let our parks inside the city be lost."

- Height Limitations: "With the Fine Arts Commission, we are studying the skyline, which is controlled by zoning. There is increasing pressure for spot zoning, which escalates into increased height."

Mrs. Rowe says she doesn't expect zoning changes that would permit any Monument-dwarfing skyscrapers in downtown Washington. But the height limitations, designed to preserve the monumental character of the downtown area, have created a problem of their own.

"The area here," she says, indicating the

downtown area, "is losing its quality because everything is built to maximum density. That's the way to make a profit, but it also makes a monotonous city. I am optimistic that we can have some architectural variety."

It is the National Capital Planning Commission which developed the "Year 2000 Plan" for the development of the Washington area to serve as a kind of skeleton to control the growth of the city and its suburbs. Now, the commission's 45-member staff is busy putting meat on the bones of the part of the plan which lies inside the District with a more detailed plan for the way the city will (they hope) look in 1985.

While the 11-member commission can plan for the future, the co-operation of a bewildering array of agencies is required to put any plan into effect. But it takes only one or two boat-rockers to upset everything.

One day recently, between a trip to the Hill to testify before an appropriations committee and an appointment with an applicant for the job of director of the commission, Mrs. Rowe sat on the new brown and yellow couch before the big picture window in her corner office and talked of the problems the agency faces.

"Our problem, obviously, is a regional planning problem," she said. "I think the solution depends less on the mechanism of planning than it does on the support it gets. The political jurisdictions in the region are simply not ready to give away their autonomy."

She paused and looked out the window at the late afternoon traffic beginning to build up on Pennsylvania avenue.

"I know our problems are big and they are there..."

Her voice trailed off and she remained silent for a moment as the sound of the traffic rifted up from the street below.*

