

SO THE HOUSE of Representatives has voted for more exploitation and destruction of the land. That is the import of the 211-204 vote Tuesday to reject consideration of the House Interior Committee's modest land-use planning bill. This irresponsible performance is deeply disheartening to those—including not only environmentalists, but many thoughtful state and local officials—who believe that cooperative federal-state efforts are required to save the nation's finite land resources from haphazard, ruinous development. The House vote should be equally discouraging for those who think that Congress can and should assert creative leadership in tackling the national problems which the executive branch has failed to meet.

The first serious blow to the committee's bill came last February when President Nixon, who had given top priority to strong land-use legislation for several years, suddenly switched his support to a weak substitute proffered by Rep. Sam Steiger (R-Ariz.). This move confounded advocates of the committee's measure, including many within the administration, and helped opponents on the Rules Committee hold up the legislation for two months. To their lasting credit, officials such as EPA Administrator Russell E. Train and Russell W. Peterson, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, refused to buckle. But others, such as Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton, proved much more pliable, and so one of the administration's most far-sighted domestic goals was sacrificed in a move which can only have the effect—however you may choose to perceive its intent—of shoring up support for the President among the conservative elements who will be crucial to his defense against impeachment.

The bill also fell victim to a harsh, sustained campaign of distortion and emotional attack by congressional opponents and lobbying groups including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Liberty Lobby, and special interests with a large stake in unrestrained building and land speculation. These forces stirred up great clouds of alarm that a strong land-use planning bill would inhibit economic growth, create a monstrous federal bureaucracy impinging on states' prerogatives, undermine property values and destroy landowners' rights. The exaggerations reached such a pitch on the House floor the other day that one opponent claimed that under the bill the farm-

ers of west central Missouri "would have to accept the decision of Washington on where every feed lot would be located."

In fact the bill would do nothing of the kind. It simply offered federal support to those states which chose to regulate the uses of areas of special environmental concern—endangered regions such as wetlands, floodplains, and sites with particular scenic, historic and environmental significance. The actual planning and control would be left to the states and local governments. But in the general atmosphere of suspicion and sensationalism which prevailed, Rep. Morris K. Udall (D-Ariz.) and other backers of the bill were unable to make their clarifying arguments effectively. In the end, what the dominant forces in the House wanted was no debate at all, and the Steiger substitute—which many opponents of the committee bill had ostensibly embraced—was revealed to be a sham when Rep. Steiger himself urged the House to abandon the whole subject and "go home early."

Thus a crucial resource protection bill has been shelved by a coalition of the profiteers, the primitives and the President. Sen. Henry Jackson, the leading Senate champion of effective land-use planning, may try to revive the bill, but its prospects this year seem extremely dim unless attitudes can be significantly altered in the House. Meanwhile, the pressures on the land continue to intensify. Rep. Udall estimates that every business day 10,000 more acres are consumed by subdivisions, parking lots and other development. Without any national program, the various states and localities will be left to deal with growth, speculation and suburban sprawl as best they can. Many irreplaceable areas have already been destroyed, and many communities have been driven to extreme—and, often, ultimately ineffective—efforts to control their future development. The absence of coherent land-use planning policies does not mean the absence of regulation; instead, it means continuing the present tangle of fragmented, often conflicting federal, state and local laws, which have already cost so much in litigation, uncertainty and ugliness.

This week the House had the best chance in many years to encourage rational decisions on how the nation's land will be preserved and used. Instead, 211 representatives decided to avoid the issue and go home early.