

# NJPA REAL ESTATE JOURNAL

Friday, April 14, 2006

COVERING THE STATES OF NEW JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA AND DELAWARE

## By David L. Church, Reilly Mortgage Southern New Jersey growth in the 21st century

**S**outhern New Jersey has come a long way in 10 years with the move toward new urbanism, neo-traditional planning, conservation subdivisions and other elements of what many refer to as Smart Growth.

It is unfortunate that the primary legacy left by planners of the 1950s and the 1960s consists of universal reliance on the automobile, highways transformed into parking lots, residential roads built to highway specifications, dismantled communities, and the elimination of diversity in the landscape and the built environment. A professional land-planner could generate a far longer list but I believe that the point has been made.

Most of Southern New Jersey was agricultural throughout the 1950s. The region contained one major city, Camden, and a number of small town centers — Burlington, Medford, Moorestown, Collingswood, Merchantville, Haddonfield, Woodbury, Riverside, Pemberton, Swedesboro, Bridgeton, Woodstown, Mount Holly and Marlton for example. Reflect on the fact essentially all houses in Cherry Hill (formerly Delaware Township), Voorhees, Mount Laurel, Evesham, Burlington Township, Willingboro, Lumberton and all of Gloucester



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County simply did not exist in 1955. Although the region was settled in the late 1600s, the Southern New Jersey known to current residents did not exist until less than 50 years ago!

By 1955 it became clear to many New Jersey farmers that

the only way to make a good living with their land was to sell it to developers. These developers were poised to build single-family houses for the parents of the Baby Boom generation who yearned for a slice of the American Dream in the newly emerging

suburbs. The excellent highway system that New Jersey developed in the first 50 years of the 20th Century provided easy access to that American Dream. Southern New Jersey offered Routes 38, 70, 73 and 130, all of which made commuting from the suburbs to Camden or Philadelphia a breeze – not to mention the NJ Turnpike with interchanges at Burlington/Mount Holly and Moorestown/Mount Laurel. And, post-WWII zoning encouraged low-density residential and commercial development throughout the region.

As a result of low-density commercial zoning for essentially all ground bordering State Highways, office and retail development filled the roadsides between major intersections. Each project had its own curb-cuts, which eventually made high-speed travel on major routes unsafe or impossible. This set of circumstances encouraged impatient drivers to speed through residential subdivisions - speeding that was guaranteed by the construction of residential streets to specifications similar to those used for County roads.

The overall result was “suburban sprawl” which planners have now come to realize is unsustainable and often

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unattractive. This is not a condemnation of planners and municipal officials who surely must have thought that they were doing the best thing based on what they knew at the time. The point is to underscore where most of Southern New Jersey came from and illustrate how different future development can be.

New Jersey is on the cutting edge of "Smart Growth" by necessity – the State is running out of never developed "greenfields" on which to build. If the State runs out of buildable land it will stagnate – there will be no place for new businesses or new residents. However, New Jersey has an abundance of "greyfields" (underutilized sites) and "brownfields" (contaminated sites) with infrastructure in-place that can be redeveloped. This availability stands in sharp contrast to the dwindling supply of "greenfields". For instance, the Garden State Race Track site is being redeveloped to combine elements of traditional highway retail with office space, multifamily (for sale and rental), a new town center and dedicated open space. As an added bonus to developers, it is usually much easier to redevelop "greyfields" and "brownfields" than to obtain approvals to build in a "greenfield". The redevelop-

ment and retransformation of underutilized or contaminated sites is typically considered a plus to a community whereas a "greenfield" project is often perceived as more sprawl and more congestion – rightly or wrongly.

The River Line is increasing its ridership steadily and has spurred millions of dollars in new development from Camden to Trenton. Look no further than new commercial and residential development in Cinnaminson and Riverside that is within walking distance of a River Line Station – including the "transit village" planned for downtown Riverside on an underutilized site. In tandem with The River Line, the State and Burlington County have focused efforts on the revitalization of the Route 130 Corridor, with dramatic success. New development in the Corridor has come in the form of industrial, retail, office and residential projects. And although critics point out that the taxpayers of New Jersey subsidize every ticket on The River Line, I am willing to wager that the construction, resurfacing and general maintenance of State Highways also costs the taxpayers a significant amount of money – in short, investment in the future is expensive and there is no free lunch.

These and similar initiatives must continue if New Jersey is going to remain viable through the 21st Century. At the same time, the traditional town centers that are not benefiting from The River Line or the High Speed Line must be revitalized. These town centers include many from the list provided above. Probably all of the downtowns need to revamp their town center zoning to permit multiple uses, such as apartments and condominiums over retail and office. It is likely that many of the mixed-use projects in the region's downtowns are legal, non-conforming uses for a myriad of reasons related to parking ratios, coverage ratios and set-backs, and could not be rebuilt to their current configurations. High density downtowns are walkable environments that encourage social interaction, fellowship and community in a way that low density suburbs can not. They need to be encouraged just as new high-density transit villages are being created to mimic traditional downtown environments.

In order to accomplish rezoning and encourage new development, municipalities must become proactive agents for change. It will not be sufficient to wait for the private sector to "discover" a

downtown or to react negatively to developers' plans because they fail to meet an unarticulated vision. Places that people cherish today like Palmer Square in Princeton, Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia and certain portions of the Main Line did not "just happen" - they were planned and nurtured. The rewards are immense: attractive areas with a "sense of place", increased real estate values, an expanded tax base, diversity of landscape and the built environment, and tourism to name but a few.

We can not turn back the clock and pretend that "suburban sprawl" does not exist in Southern New Jersey but we can take immediate action to support the redevelopment of older areas of the State, encourage the development of transit villages and the revitalization of existing town centers, and advocate zoning changes that will produce highly livable communities for the 21st Century. Combined with new "greenfield" development, these initiatives will provide a strong foundation for future generations of New Jerseyans.

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