

Opinion: Make central N.J. home to mixed-use centers

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By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

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Last month, the West Windsor Township Council voted at long last to approve the proposed transit village at Princeton Junction, ending years of litigation and setting the stage for this smart-growth redevelopment project to move forward.

It is a model that other communities along the Route 1 corridor should take a hard look at and one that PlanSmart NJ and other smart-growth advocates have long been promoting.



Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Novo Nordisk, located in Plainsboro, in a 2010 photo.

This mixed-use retail and residential transit village development will include 800 units of market-rate and affordable housing, 100,000 square feet of retail space, a parking deck, and a public gathering space near the Princeton Junction train station.

It will create a true downtown for West Windsor residents and serve as a shopping and dining destination for those from surrounding municipalities.

It will generate new demand for passenger rail service along the Northeast Corridor and make it possible for people to get out of their cars and walk, bike and take the train to their destinations.

What would West Windsor's future have looked like without the new transit center?

Last year, PlanSmart NJ co-authored a study sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, titled the "Route 1 Regional Growth Strategy: Vision for a Prosperous and Sustainable Future."

The study shows the costs of continuing along our current sprawling development patterns.

It points out that failure to zone for mixed-use, compact development doesn't mean that we will stop growth or prevent congestion from getting worse in the future.

In fact, quite the opposite. Failing to plan for more compact communities and failing to zone for sufficient housing near jobs will have disastrous consequences for central New Jersey's economic competitiveness and for the quality of life in our communities.

In the 15 towns along the Route 1 corridor, zoning is now permitted for 480,000 jobs and only 37,000 new housing units.

According to the study, if we were to reach full build-out, or even partial build-out, massive congestion would result.

Right now, our regional roads, including Route 1, are congested 13 percent of the time at peak times.

If we continue our current sprawling development patterns and keep separating housing from business locations, 36 percent of our roads will be congested by 2025.

And at full build-out, a mind-boggling 93 percent of our roads will be congested. As the report notes, this would "essentially place the region's roadway network in 'gridlock.'"

So what is the alternative?

It turns out that imposing large-lot zoning, such as one- or two-acre zoning, as a way to manage growth, is not the solution. Rather, it is part of the problem.

According to U.S. Census projections, New Jersey will experience an increase of 1 million people by 2030. Growth in many parts of New Jersey has been restricted through environmental laws and regulations such as those adopted to protect the Highlands and the Pinelands.

So we can expect, based on these facts, that central New Jersey will experience a substantial portion of this growth.

As a matter of fact, central New Jersey has many areas identified for growth and is well-positioned for economic prosperity in the years ahead.

Our region is home to 73,620 companies. Higher education has a strong presence here.

We have new investment along Route 1 — the new University Medical Center at Princeton (in Plainsboro) and Novo Nordisk's expansion are just two examples.

But unless we start getting it right by encouraging smart growth, compact development and sufficient new housing at a variety of income levels near jobs, we will face challenges in the years ahead.

We will experience difficulties attracting and retaining businesses, increased congestion as residents travel ever longer distances to get to work or to shopping, a shortage of housing that is affordable to the middle class and a declining quality of life.

We need more communities along the Route 1 corridor to zone and plan for center-based development now.

In our current economic slowdown, it's actually a great time to plan for our region's future.

Planning boards and city councils up and down the Route 1 corridor should take this opportunity to reconsider their zoning ordinances and master plans to facilitate compact, mixed-use development.

This is the time to look at those ailing strip malls and vacant industrial spaces and envision vibrant, mixed-use residential and retail centers in their place.

And we shouldn't forget the incredible asset that is the Northeast rail corridor.

More than 259,000 people ride the Northeast corridor each day, and that ridership is poised to expand further with appropriate land-use policies and incentives.

The question is not whether we allow growth to occur.

It is whether we encourage it to occur in a way that eases congestion on our roadways, promotes our public health and fosters more cohesive communities.

Consider this quotation by Francis Bacon: "Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly."

We urge our planning boards, city councils and mayoral leadership to start planning today for sustainable growth tomorrow.

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