OPINION

@ISSUE: Too late to reverse suburban sprawl?

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(Photo: Courtesy of Christopher Leinberger)

As most New Jerseyans could tell you, our state lacks walkable urban areas — thriving downtown areas at the heart of their communities. But we're not alone. All of the New York City metro area covering Connecticut, upstate New York and down as far as Trenton suffers from a shortage of these densely populated, pedestrian-friendly places that are increasingly popular among millennials and more plentiful in many other metro regions across the nation. We asked Christopher B. Leinberger, lead author of a new report, "The WalkUP Wake-up Call: New York City," (http://walkups.org/metrony/pdf/WalkUPWakeupNY.pdf) to answer some questions about New Jersey's challenges in meeting the growing demand and the impact it has on the state's economy.

We should begin with some basics. When you refer to walkable urban areas, or "walkable urbanism," what does that actually mean? What are the characteristics of such areas?

Walkable urban is one of two ways of developing within a metropolitan area. The other form is drivable suburban. Both walkable urban and drivable sub-urban can take place in the center city and the surrounding suburbs. Walkable urban is 5-40 times more dense than drivable suburban. Manhattan densities can be up to 250 times drivable suburban densities. Walkable urban only takes up 2.5 percent of metropolitan New York City, in spite of the image of New York as being intensely walkable urban. In fact, metro New York City is less dense than metro Los Angeles.

So within that metro area, can you provide a few examples in New Jersey specifically of communities that fit the "walkable urban" criteria? Are we talking primarily about smaller cities or areas with distinct downtown districts?

There are two economic types of walkable urban: (1) regionally significant which plays a role in the regional economy, we refer to these places as WalkUPs and (2) walkable urban neighborhoods, which are high-density walkable urban bedroom communities. WalkUPs include the downtowns of Princeton, New Brunswick, Jersey City and Newark. Most of New Jersey's walkable urban places are 18th-and 19th-century town centers. You are missing what we have seen in many other metro areas such as conversion of regional malls, greenfield walkable urban development and Innovation Districts. Northern New Jersey's largest economic opportunity is the urbanization of the suburbs, which will take less than 5 percent of your land but 80 to 90 percent of your future economic development and real estate growth.

Broad Street in Red Bank. *(Photo: Peter Ackerman/Staff Photographer)*

We often hear that millennials are increasingly attracted to these urban walkable areas. Is the trend largely limited to their generation, or does it extend beyond that?

Millennials certainly lead the way, as they have invented a new phase of life, not yet named. Just as the kids of the early to mid-20th century invented the teenage phase of life, this new 20s and early 30s phase has young adults in the beginning and middle of their careers with or without being married and without children enjoying an extended adolescence — with money. Baby boomers are also part of this equation, especially if they can sell their large drivable suburban house (there is a glut of McMansions — and mansions — which will prove hard to sell and yield disappointing sales prices).

This may be beyond the scope of your study, but Is it possible to isolate an historic tipping point when outward suburban sprawl started turning meaningfully inward back toward urban areas?

The major catalyst of the Great Recession was the decline of fringe drivable suburban housing values. Walkable urban housing prices in Manhattan, downtown Brooklyn and Jersey City, went down a little and then flattened out. Luxury single-family housing in Ridgewood, Somerville and Westfield went down as much as the region as a whole. Walkable urban housing in Hoboken, Lower Manhattan and Park Slope went down a little but then flattened out. The great expression that during a recession, as the water recedes you find out who has a bathing suit on, was particularly appropriate in 2007 to 2009. The recovery has almost entirely been about the rise in values of walkable urban housing, including the in-town attached housing and very close-in single-family housing near the great small downtowns in New Jersey mentioned above.

So let's say you were scouting out towns and neighborhoods that had the potential to become walkable urban areas. What existing characteristics would have to be in place already to make such a transformation viable?

Ideally, there would be existing rail transit and the station would become the equivalent of a fireplace in a living room; everything would revolve about it. There would be overlay zoning in place already that would encourage a mix of uses on each parcel and high density (at least three to four stories). The downtown would only be 100 to 300 acres in size and the rest of the jurisdiction would be what it is today, probably single-family housing. Parking requirements would be very low and possibly nonexistent — many residents will be "car-light" or car-free. There would be a management organization, generally a nonprofit, to manage the place 24/7, such as a Main Street organization or Business Improvement District. Finally, there would be a public intention to encourage the buildout of the place as a vital, walkable urban place, ideally with built-in plans for workforce and affordable housing so it would be for everyone, not just the wealthy few.

West Blackwell Street in Dover. *(Photo: Bob Karp/Staff Photographer)*

Let's talk about the transformation itself. How would a walkable urban area be created? Bike paths, mixed-use development — what are the keys?

It starts with the *intention.* Don't waste your time if you do not want to fundamentally change and/or improve your existing or potential walkable urban place. Craft a strategic plan that reflects your intentions and the reality of the market. Create an action plan for each element of the strategy for implementation. Have constant follow-up to make sure the plans are being implemented, using old-fashioned guilt and shame to ensure completion. Put in place the appropriate overlay zoning that allows that intentional vision to be built; in other words, *make the right thing easy*. Create a place management organization to take over the ongoing implementation. Recognize that the best models are private/public partnerships*,* this common term being intentionally inverted. The private sector will be investing $10 to $15 for every public dollar when successful so the private sector must lead. The role of the public sector is to "set the table" and then get out of the way.

New Jersey municipalities are staring at looming mandates to provide more affordable housing. Walkable urban areas seem ripe for such housing, in part because of existing infrastructure, mass transit options and availability of services. Is that a fair assessment?

Walkable urban places are inherently more socially equitable. This is due to lower transportation costs for low-income households (close to transit, walking distance to many daily needs, etc.) and increased accessibility to jobs (walkable urban places offer more than 10 times the jobs to low-income households in metro New York City). But the rent is still too high. Affordable and workforce housing must be subsidized and locals should look at themselves for that subsidy, not new people who have not yet moved to town and are not voting today. Arlington County, Virginia, outside Washington. D.C., takes its responsibility to provide affordable housing seriously by investing $7 million to $15 million per year and making available county-owned land for mixed-income housing projects.

But if these walkable urban neighborhoods become more desirable, they'll also become less affordable. Is that a valid concern?

That is how capitalism works; high demand and a shortage of supply pushes up prices. It is the market saying, "build more of this stuff." The long-term answer is increased supply. The reason for the high prices for walkable urbanism is that metro New York City confines it to 2.5 percent of your land mass, artificially pushing up land prices. Make it 4 to 5 percent of your land and walkable urban property will be much less costly.

North Park Place in Morristown. *(Photo: Bob Karp/Staff Photographer)*

President Trump is talking about a massive infrastructure program, which would certainly have benefits but seems like more of a "suburban" initiative. Is there an urban version that you could envision that would help develop more walkable urbanism? Where would be financial investments best be directed?

There is overwhelming demand for more investment in transit across the country so the new administration should look at the huge passage rate of local bond measures for transit. There have been thousands of these bond measures throughout the country for transit in this anti-tax age; 72 percent have passed. In 2016 alone, $200 billion of new investment for transit was raised, compared to the federal government annual spending on all transportation of $60 billion. Metro Los Angeles is leading the way with $120 billion recently raised. It has five new rail projects underway. It has committed and funded plans for a "subway to the sea" and bus rapid transit and commuter rail lines. Metro New York City should learn from metro Los Angeles, as should the Trump administration.

Your study examines the New York City metropolitan area. How much ground does that cover?

Nearly 13,000 square miles, larger than the state of Maryland. Obviously, it is the largest metro in the country with 23 million people, stretching from Trenton to the south, Poughkeepsie to the north, Long Island to the east and Waterbury, Connecticut, to the northeast. For the first time in history, we counted all real estate in a metro area. Metro New York City has 19 billion square feet of all real estate (housing, ballparks, airports, universities, industrial, office, retail, etc.) that is worth $6 trillion, which is equal to 30 percent of the catalyzed value of all New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ companies. Metro New York City produces 7 percent of the U.S. GDP and a third of that is produced south of 59th Street in Manhattan — 2 percent of U.S. GDP.

Pedestrians walk through downtown Toms River. *(Photo: Doug Hood/Staff Photographer)*

Among your overall findings is that the New York City metro area lacks walkable urban areas outside the urban core, more so than the surrounding areas of other cities like Boston or Washington, D.C. Can you identify any causes for that?

Manhattan is the most intense walkable urban collection of places in the country, obviously the highest density and most intense walkable urbanism possible. The drivable suburban places assume, incorrectly, that Manhattan density and intensity is the only option if a town or neighborhood was considering walkable urbanism. Most walkable urban being developed in the suburbs of metro Washington and Los Angeles is generally 5 to 20 times more dense than subdivisions and strip malls. Yet residents of suburban town centers in New Jersey have visions of Manhattan being built when it is far less dense than that which is generally being proposed. The perception is "Mad Men" Manhattan when the reality to what is being proposed in suburban New Jersey is downtown Hill Valley in "Back to the Future." Many people in the metro New York City suburbs are afraid of something that is not being proposed, and losing huge economic and fiscal benefits as a result, which is reflected in their large property tax bills and public pension fund underfunding.

New Jersey's

walkable towns

Town Centers are the most common walkable places in New Jersey, downtown areas that typically date back into the 18th and 19th centuries and are now reversing decades of decline. These are the 32 New Jersey towns, or portions of towns, meeting the report's criteria for walkable.

Middlesex County

New Brunswick

Downtown Perth Amboy

Monmouth County

Asbury Park

Red Bank

Morris County

Dover

Mo

Oc

Downtown Toms River

Mercer County

Princeton

Union County

Elizabeth

North Plainfield

Downtown Linden

Downtown Summit

Cranford

Springfield

Downtown Union

Westfield

Bergen County

Rutherford

Fort Lee

Englewood

Downtown Teaneck

Downtown Ridgewood

Tenafly

Essex

Downtown East Orange

Bloomfield Avenue

South Orange

Newark

Nutley

Hudson County

Jersey City

West New York

North Union City

Sou

Do\

Passaic County

Downtown Passaic

Paterson

Clifton

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