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## Nothing to fear in West Windsor but fear itself

### GUEST OPINION

#### Dianne Brake

Is a municipality courting disaster if it tries to turn its strip commercial development and parking lots into a transit village like the one proposed in West Windsor? Not if you consider the facts.

The Regional Planning Partnership has spent almost 40 years working on land use issues, and we have found that a well-planned Town Center or Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) provides a better overall quality of life than the current pattern of separate, low-density developments—the sprawl you see all over New Jersey.

The facts are quite clear: center-based or TOD development is far more functional in terms of traffic, fiscal efficiency, environmental protection and in the increase in housing and transportation options.

Consider this: some years ago RPP conducted a federally-sponsored study that found that if towns in the Route 1 Corridor built Town Centers or TODs, instead of the kind of development their current zoning would allow, there would be as much as a 60 percent reduction in the growth of automobile trips.

In addition, our zoning model shows that center-based development reduces the loss of open space and increases water protection significantly, something especially important to a state like New Jersey, which is so close to being built out. We have also found that Town Centers and TODs are far more efficient for infrastructure investment. Not usually cheaper, but always providing far more benefits per dollar.

The reported experience of the half-built Town Center in Washington Township and the public controversy over the proposed development at the Hamilton Train Station have been invoked as cautionary tales for West Windsor. As they proceed with the plan for a redevelopment area around Princeton Junction Train Station, West Windsor officials have been peppered with concerns, particularly from nearby neighbors of the site.

But what happened in Washington Township and Hamilton is different enough from the situation in West Windsor as to be irrelevant.

First, Washington's still-unfinished Town Center was begun at least ten years ago as an overlay to its Master Plan, not as a redevelopment zone, as in the case of West Windsor. This means West Windsor will have more control over the developers of the site. In recent years, negotiations between Washington Township and some individual developers with constantly changing plans have held up the final decision-making for the bypass and other infrastructure for so long that State agencies have withdrawn the commitments that they made years ago—the money has been used elsewhere.

Fears over losing State funds for the infrastructure needed in West Windsor's redevelopment plan are overblown: the Department of Transportation already has in its budget some of the infrastructure money proposed for West Windsor's center. Trouble can be kept at bay if West Windsor maintains its diligence in keeping the State's attention and continues to focus on implementing its plan.

Second, the Town Center is not to blame for the fact that Washington Township has had to build a high school. In fact, independent studies largely confirm that Town Centers and TODs produce fewer school children than ordinary subdivisions.

Third, Hamilton's experience has been rocky, in part, because the public outreach was not quite as extensive as in West Windsor, although both communities have been exceedingly careful about ensuring a transparent, step-by-step public involvement process.

In West Windsor, before a redevelopment consultant was even sought, Mayor Shing-fu Hsueh had already spent several years in the community consultation process. The proposal went to the Planning Board, had many public discussions, and involved a number of other officials before the Mayor proceeded. In addition, West Windsor has made it clear that the Township is the leader in the redevelopment process, not the consultant.

Transforming West Windsor's Princeton Junction into a place that residents can be proud of—with contaminated sites cleaned up, an amphitheater built for the farmers market and other amenities added—has been a goal sought by a majority of the Township's residents for many years. But today, a vocal minority poses a threat to the project. It is RPP's hope that the majority of West Windsor's residents can see beyond the controversy and realize that they have a unique opportunity to provide NJ with a statewide model for how sound land use planning can improve the quality of life for everyone.

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