

# *The Record*

## **Poor land-use planning poses risk to our prosperity**

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**By DIANNE BRAKE**

NORTHEAST New Jersey has long been an economic engine for the Garden State, but could bad land-use planning put the brakes on future prosperity in the region?

Bergen, Hudson, Passaic, Essex and Union are the most densely populated counties in the state and are expected to remain so in 2030. While recent statistics show the state is beginning to lose population, these five counties are among the few that are expected to grow.

For example, over the next 20 years, Jersey City alone is projected to grow 23.6 percent, a rate that is faster than 17 of the state's 21 counties.

What is attracting people to the region? Good jobs, access to an international airport, the Northeast Corridor rail line and abundant local transit. Mountains, the seashore and hidden environmental treasures, such as the Meadowlands, which offer summertime "eco-cruises" to show off 260 species of birds. And last, but by no means least, location, location, location: proximity to New York City.

Growth in this region can bolster New Jersey's economy, reduce disparities, increase transit options, minimize the loss of open space and offset the cost of state and local government. But while the future of northeast New Jersey looks quite rosy, a number of issues threaten this promising picture, and they can all be traced back to poorly thought out or misguided land-use decisions.

Consider employment. The region has half of the transportation and warehousing jobs in the state, about 40 percent of all the finance, real estate and manufacturing employment in the state, and a third of the high-wage earning science and technology industry. Job growth in these areas could prove elusive if land and infrastructure are not made available through regulatory reform and public investment.

Those working in the transportation and warehousing industry, the most important sector to New Jersey's economy today, complain about ever-changing environmental regulations and a lack of state agency coordination, all of which make it difficult to get needed projects under construction.

Developers say it's not unusual for a project to take years to win the necessary approvals, whereas in neighboring states it may take only months. This raises costs in New Jersey so high that more and more builders are simply choosing to move to states with less red tape -- and taking with them the tax-paying and job-providing businesses that would occupy their buildings.

Delays in construction are delays in tax revenues.

Regulatory obstacles also delay or halt the cleanup of brownfield sites, allowing them to languish in our polluted state because the developer who had sought to clean up the hazard has been driven away.

### **'Eyes on the street'**

As for the finance industry, another sector that thrives in this region because of its proximity to New York: the scuttlebutt about some of the near-empty offices in Jersey City is that young financiers don't want to work in the Garden State, because they don't have anywhere to spend their money once they get off work late at night. This sector will not thrive without a more holistic approach to revitalization, one that strives to add the amenities that create "eyes on the street" and produce a vibrant night life.

New Jersey's manufacturing sector boasts 335,000 jobs (nearly 145,000 in this region), the largest number of jobs in any of the state's key sectors, save retail. Contrary to the proclamations of some government officials, manufacturing is not "dead." It remains a vital source of decent-paying jobs and boasts great long-term career potential for those without a college education.

In spite of a good future for high value-added manufacturing in New Jersey, particularly for small companies with fewer than 100 employees, little is being done to promote this industry.

In fact, many industrial areas are being wiped off the map as towns in this region seek to exploit their waterfronts and transit centers for high-end residential areas. Displaced companies are going out of business because there is no place else to go.

Of course, no matter where you work, you need a place to live. And sky-high housing costs in northeast New Jersey are another big threat. In Bergen County, the median price of a home is \$466,000, well above the state average, which already tops the nation's.

With New Jersey's affordable housing policies in disarray, overturned in court, and languishing without commitment at any level of government, there is little hope of improvement in the near-term. This is especially so since genuine property tax reform also appears to be off the table in Trenton.

Another long-term problem for the area is congestion, along with pollution.

We need to support more transit-oriented development across the region. It's the only way we can give people the opportunity to get where they need to go without harming New Jersey's air quality and dwindling open space.

*Dianne Brake is president of PlanSmart NJ, a Trenton-based land-use research and advocacy non-profit group.*