

In many parts of New Jersey, a desire to limit overall development has led to the use of large-lot zoning that yields only one type of housing: large, single-family homes. Concerns about the cost of educating school children have led to another type of uniformity as well: reliance on age-segregated housing as the chief, or even sole, form of new housing being developed in some communities.

While the fiscal and environmental concerns leading to the limited variety of suburban housing are very real, these housing trends have serious long-term implications for the quality of community life in places like the Route 57 corridor. They also have implications for the transportation system. The long-term consequences of reliance on large-lot zoning and age-segregated housing developments should be carefully examined as Route 57's municipalities plan for the future.



Typical view of large-lot suburban housing

DISADVANTAGES OF LARGE-LOT ZONING

Planners throughout the U.S. have increasingly come to recognize the limitations of large-lot zoning when it is applied across the landscape in a uniform manner. Many now view the checkerboard pattern of large lots spread over the countryside as an engine of suburban sprawl, rather than a cure. While large-lot zoning does restrict the total number of dwelling units constructed in a municipality, when enacted without an accompanying conservation or open space plan, it can consume all of the available open land that might otherwise help to preserve farming operations, support wildlife, or allow for the construction of parks and greenways. Uniform size large-lot zoning

fails to recognize the unique characteristics of each site, and may result in unnecessary—and unwanted—scenic and environmental degradation.

TRANSPORTATION CONSEQUENCES

From a transportation standpoint, large-lot zoning promotes almost total reliance on the automobile and results in longer trips than would occur in more compact, center-based communities. Virtually no household needs can be met by walking, and it is impractical to provide even minimal public transit service to these low density settlements. When development becomes spread out over such an expansive area, it also adds to the cost of local government, fire, emergency, and other basic community services.

In contrast, when municipalities plan for a variety of housing types surrounding mixed-use village centers, automobile trips are shorter, transit service may become feasible, and some needs can be met by walking or bicycling. The Design Guidelines included in this Toolkit provide more information on planning for villages and neighborhood centers.

HOUSING FOR LOCAL NEEDS

Large-lot and age-segregated homes generally cannot meet all of the housing needs of a community's residents as they move through the life cycle. Young people starting their own households and wishing to remain in the community where they were raised may find large-lot homes beyond their means. As their parents and other long-term residents approach retirement, some may wish to remain close to familiar surroundings and friends, with convenient access to local stores and services. For these seniors, a smaller home or apartment in town may be an ideal alternative to age-restricted developments, but smaller homes may not be an available option, especially if the issue has not been addressed in local master plans. Finally, many single people and smaller households whose members contribute to the civic life of a community do not need, or cannot afford, large-lot homes.

A policy of providing for a mix of housing types and sizes can allow young people, independent seniors, and moderate income professionals such as schoolteachers and law enforcement officers to move into or remain in the community. This can often be accomplished on a small scale, by identifying opportunities for infill development and for the redevelopment of vacant or underutilized buildings to provide for smaller homes, apartments or condominiums.

Local master plans can also encourage careful siting of those age-restricted communities that are built, so that future senior residents can live within walking distance of town centers. Developers of age-restricted communities may also be required to provide sidewalks and paths that connect these developments to surrounding land uses. Otherwise, many of these seniors will lose basic mobility once they are no longer comfortable driving.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND COAH OBLIGATIONS

Another critical reason to plan for a diverse range of housing types is to ensure that each municipality meets its fair share obligation under state Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) rules. The COAH methodology has changed and now requires one affordable unit for every 8 market-rate residential units plus one unit for every 25 jobs resulting from non-residential construction during the period 2004-2014. Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) projections indicate a total COAH

obligation of 170 affordable units for the seven Route 57 corridor communities. Up to 50 percent of these units may be age-restricted, and at least 25 percent must be addressed with rental housing.

Municipalities seeking COAH certification must incorporate housing projections into the Housing Element of their master plan, and describe the strategies that will be used to fulfill their obligations in a Fair Share Plan. In the Highlands region, the Highlands Council offers planning grants to assist municipalities with their fair share plans. The Council is also sponsoring grants for innovative design and rehabilitation projects for affordable housing in Highlands municipalities. For example, Greenwich Township is currently investigating the use of innovative green design for affordable housing as part of a Municipal Planning Partnership grant from the Council. The Highlands Regional Master Plan, currently in preparation, is expected to address the varied housing needs of the region. Once the plan is published, it is likely that many municipalities in the Highlands will then need to revise their Housing Elements (as well as their overall master plans) in order to conform with the Council's new Regional Master Plan.

Communities that meet their affordable housing obligations are in a far better position to implement their master plans, enforce their development regulations, and thus exercise control over the future of their communities than those that do not take this step. Only by meeting affordable housing obligations can a municipality achieve immunity from the "builder's remedy" that often results in a development of unwanted magnitude. By addressing affordable housing proactively, the Route 57 municipalities will be in a position to implement conservation zoning and other innovative approaches to protect open space, agriculture and scenic vistas. For example, East Amwell Township was able to successfully defend its agricultural district regulations, which include opportunities for lot averaging and cluster development, in part because the Township had satisfied its affordable housing obligation.

RESOURCES

Agricultural Smart Growth Plan for New Jersey,
New Jersey Department of Agriculture

<http://www.state.nj.us/agriculture/agmartgrowth.htm>

Council on Affordable Housing, New Jersey
Department of Community Affairs

<http://www.state.nj.us/dca/coah/>

New Jersey Highlands Council

<http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/>

Office of Smart Growth: Smart Future Planning
Grants,

New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

<http://www.state.nj.us/dca/osg/resources/grants/index.shtml>



Planning for housing diversity creates a vibrant community that meets the needs of all age groups