

## Viewpoint

# Why Develop?

by Brad Garton

It seems that development is in the air again—the Master Plan is being revised and amended to allow even more residential development; the Borough Council is commissioning study after study to determine how to deal with the “underdeveloped” parts of the Borough; the Trust for Public Land is being turned into a tool for the construction of new luxury condos and townhouses. All that’s missing is the inevitable presentation from the 1990’s version of Switchel, Inc. and we’ll be happily eliminating those unsightly undeveloped areas surrounding our town.

But is residential development something good? Why should we push for it? Obviously, I don’t believe that further residential development is the sort of goal we should be pursuing. With one exception, the arguments for additional residential development fall far short of building any sort of case for the pro-developers. In fact, the reasons given for promoting development actually demonstrate that we should be doing everything in our power to limit residential growth. Some of the main arguments I have heard “supporting” development are:

## “Residential development will have economic benefits for Roosevelt”

This is the most pervasive and persuasive argument used by the pro-developers (especially if you buy into the pathetically dim view of humanity that “the only reality is cold, hard cash”). We are suffering from an enormous debt burden. It only makes sense that spreading the suffering over a larger number of people (increasing the ratables) will ease the individual pain, right? Wrong. What is left out of this equation is the increased cost of services a residential development brings with it. I remembered from my days as a staff member of the Indiana Association of Cities and Towns that municipalities look to industrial and commercial development to increase ratables, not to residential development. I wanted to confirm my recollection,

so I called up Kevin Dogan at IACT, a former colleague and the planning and zoning expert in Indiana. Here’s what Kevin said about Indiana: “There are almost always more direct costs than direct benefits associated with residential development”.

Realizing that there are very real interstate differences, I contacted the New Jersey League of Municipalities and got an even stronger statement from Bert Wolfe, their development expert: Development is *at best* a break-even proposition, “definitely in the case of residential development.” Most towns look for industrial/commercial development to increase ratables, but even that is now “questionable how much of a plus” it will be for contemporary New Jersey boroughs.

But hey, these guys are all basing their expertise on only assumptions and suppositions, right? Wrong. Cornell University did a recent study of the impact of residential development on two small towns in Dutchess County, New York. One town was slightly larger than Roosevelt, the other was very similar to Roosevelt. Increased residential development demanded \$1.12 of services for every \$1 generated for the slightly larger town, and required \$1.36 for every \$1 in the town similar to Roosevelt. The conclusion of this study was that “the residential sector is demanding more in services than it is contributing in revenues. This fact should caution communities to think twice about development proposals which will not only increase the demand for services, but which may remove valuable farmland as well.”

## 2. “Residential development will do wonders for the school”

The faulty equation here is that increased enrollment in the school will naturally improve the quality of education at RPS. If the municipal development experts and case studies of residential development are to be believed, then we will be paying more for the same level of service after further development. What does this

mean for the school? Well, if you don’t buy into the more-students-automatically-equals-better-education-idea, it means that we will be paying more *just to maintain the level of education we currently have*. My daughter will be entering RPS next fall, and I would rather spend money directly to improve the quality of education than spend money just to keep up with increasing enrollment. I think we have the potential to develop a terrific educational program here in Roosevelt, but we won’t be able to do this if our debt burden is increased by further residential development. It seems to me that the true “pro-school” stance should emphasize quality instead of quantity.

## 3. “Development is inevitable”

This statement, often accompanied by some sort of scare tactic (you know, the good old “a developer may sue us and bleed us dry with legal fees” school of Rational Thinking), may be true. But does this mean we must actively encourage development? We had a solid Master Plan in place which allowed for limited growth. Why shoot for more? Why spend even more money on silly studies designed to help a potential developer when we should be working to prevent residential development? If we cannot afford to support additional development, then I certainly don’t think that it is inevitable. Recent Council rhetoric and actions seem to suggest otherwise, however. Too bad, considering how much it will cost us.

Personally, this statement comes across to me the same way that assertions like “destruction of the rain forests is inevitable” and “depletion of the ozone layer is inevitable” do. And when this is coupled with incredible remarks such as “we must develop to preserve open space”, then I really have to sit back and ponder why “this sentence is false”. Geez, talk about your “peace-keeping missiles”...

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## **4. "Residential development is aesthetically pleasing"**

This is the single argument I cannot rebut. I also cannot imagine the mind of the person who believes that the beauty of a development outweighs the natural beauty of the land. I would like for this person to drive with me through the traffic in Plainsboro at 5 p.m. and explain why development is desirable. I would like for this person to read with me the police reports of vandalism and theft at Twin Rivers and explain why development is desirable. I would like for this person to explain the aesthetic appeal of a field full of cookie-cutter condos. No, I cannot argue the point with this person. We literally have no common ground.

Why did I write this article? Because through our own actions development is indeed beginning to appear inevitable. Sadly, it doesn't have to be; and tragically, it shouldn't be. I wanted to show that there are no good, sound reasons to actively pursue and encourage residential development. To be sure, those in favor of further residential development will trot out assumptions and projections showing how wonderful life in Roosevelt will be after 200 or 300 new "units" are added—some amazing spreadsheet program must give them omniscient powers and knowledge far beyond the overwhelming majority of planning and zoning experts. I can easily trot out assumptions and projections showing the opposite. When confronted by this mass of data, however, please gently remind yourself that this experiment has already been done all across America, and the results have been dismal. Case study after case study verifies this: Residential development simply does not pay.

Drive around New Jersey some day. How much open space can you find? Can you find the pastoral scenes which have inspired that American imagination for the past several centuries? Can you see the beauty of the land? Self-interested developers have been raping this land for the past decade. It is now time to stop.