

LOCAL

In NJ, no development comes without controversy. These are the issues concerning residents

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Across North Jersey, the new prescription for struggling downtowns is to be all things to all people.

In Hackensack, the plan includes repurposing the city's tallest building, a 10-story former bank, into new apartments and a ground-floor restaurant with vaulted ceilings. A 170-year-old red Gothic church was recently transformed into a new Cultural Arts Center. A dozen other "mixed-use" projects have been built or are underway.

Towns from Ridgewood to Montclair, Glen Rock to Fort Lee and elsewhere are employing the same strategy, approving a new surge of housing, retail and cultural options to revive local business districts, meet state affordable-housing requirements and cater to changing consumer tastes.

Yet in crowded New Jersey, no development comes without controversy. Neighbors have pushed back, warning that a proliferation of new apartments, shops, hotels and parking decks will exacerbate traffic, strain local schools and change the character of suburban downtowns forever.

A half-century after malls began siphoning away business from Hackensack, the city is "creating a new type of downtown where people like to live," Mayor John Labrosse said. "We're trying to create an atmosphere where Hackensack has a good vibe and there's a lot to do."

American Dream: Complete guide to the mall's opening date, stores, water park, history

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Updating: \$10M Wayne intersection project calls for eminent domain, jughandles, traffic lights

Here's a look at some of the debates that the wave of mixed-use development has generated across the region:

Traffic and parking

In Ridgewood, residents and the Planning Board fretted about more congestion on Franklin Avenue from a five-story mixed-use development rising on the former site of Ken Smith Motors. Now under construction, the project is due to add new stores, 66 residential units and 150 parking spaces.

The board ultimately signed off in 2017 after determining that existing offsite traffic conditions were beyond its purview and not grounds for rejection. The approval was conditional, however: The developer will have to pay for improvements to multiple intersections, including the replacement of traffic lights, should it become necessary as construction progresses.

Despite the concerns, mixed-use developments usually cut down on the number of trips people take with cars, because they are designed with pedestrians in mind, said David Behrend, deputy executive director of the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, a state agency. Visitors to these projects tend to park and walk, he said.

The impact on parking is harder to gauge. Every town uses a different ratio to determine how much parking is required per development, and though the trend for years has been less car ownership, some towns can struggle, Behrend said.

"The busier a place is, the more popular it is, yeah, there are going to be some parking challenges, and especially in a region like ours: It's densely populated, heavily developed," he said.

In Montclair, residents have gone to court to block plans for a new supermarket, 154 apartments and new shops and office space at the century-old Lackawanna railroad station on Bloomfield Avenue. The project is short by 400 parking spaces, according to town regulations, although the developer says valet and shared parking will make up the shortfall.

Resident Priscilla Eshelman called the plan a "pedestrian hellscape," noting that two people were killed walking in Montclair last year. Lackawanna Station is part of a surge of

expected to add upward of a thousand units along a 2-mile stretch of Bloomfield in the coming years.

Behrend said driver behavior such as speeding poses the single largest risk to pedestrian safety.

"We have not seen anything connecting mixed-use developments to increased risks to pedestrians," he said. "It's usually the opposite because of the way they're designed."

Schools

Mixed-use projects are often touted for the minimal effect they're said to have on schools.

Millennials without children and empty-nesters make up the majority of residents drawn to the new developments, said James Hughes, a professor and former dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

"They would prefer environments that are walkable, that maybe have amenities, activities, coffee shops and the like and not be totally car-dependent, and that points to mixed-use developments," Hughes said.

Ridgewood Schools Superintendent Daniel Fishbein doubts the low enrollment numbers often cited by developers. He saw the discrepancy as superintendent in Glen Ridge 14 years ago, when two multifamily buildings expected to add two students actually generated 11, Fishbein said.

In 2012, the superintendent testified before the Ridgewood Planning Board as the village debated four mixed-use and residential developments now under construction. Projections showed seven students from a total of 400 new units.

"I remember clearly saying to the developers, 'Seven?' I just thought it was low," he said. "The developers are doing their thing and building, and that's their business, but in the end, they don't have much skin in the game in terms of what happens after the developments are done."

Downtown revitalization

For towns with empty storefronts, mixed-use development often provides a jolt of economic activity, proponents say.

Montclair had 35 empty storefronts in its business district three years ago, said Planning Board member Martin Schwartz, but they are now filling in anticipation of an influx of new customers and amenities.

“Downtowns died because of malls, but now people don’t want malls ... so having mixed-use buildings and a vibrant, walkable downtown, which Montclair has done and tried to do, has reenergized them,” he said.

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Changing downtowns: As chain stores move out, NJ downtowns have to reinvent themselves. Ridgewood is a prime example

Labrosse, the Hackensack mayor, said foot traffic has increased since the 2017 opening of the Hackensack Performing Arts Center. He expects new restaurants, office space, service retail such as dry cleaners and unique shops to draw even more visitors.

"One of our developers said, 'I'll bring them here, but you've got to keep them here,' " Labrosse said. "You've got to give them something to do, you've got to get them places to eat, pubs, stuff like that, and that's what we're doing."

'Smart' revenue

Towns that embrace mixed-use help preserve open space and promote healthier and greener living, said Peter Kasabach, executive director of New Jersey Future, a non-profit dedicated to smart growth principles. They also expand the tax base and are more cost-efficient, pooling taxpayers to fund roads and other infrastructure, he said.

“Having more people in a concentrated area means you can afford to have more amenities, a nice park, more public facilities,” Kasabach said. “What we’re learning about suburban sprawl is it was a very inefficient, very expensive way of doing development. All of these roads built out to nowhere all have to be maintained because we built a few houses at the end of them.”

Most of Hackensack’s upcoming mixed-use developments are under payment in lieu of taxes, or PILOT, agreements, allowing developers to make annual payments based on revenue instead of paying traditional property taxes. PILOT programs tend to encourage growth that might not otherwise be financially viable, but they can also shortchange school districts by

Labrosse said the city expects to pocket \$700,000 annually from The Current on River luxury apartment building once it opens in early 2020. The Camden Street property was previously paying \$56,000 in taxes, he said.