



Staten Island housing: Is density a bad thing?

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By **Staten Island Advance**

American Institute of Architects/Staten Island chapter

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- A popular quip in the livable communities debate goes, "people hate two things: sprawl and density."

Local and national public opinion polls consistently show high concern about sprawling land-use patterns and their attendant ills — i.e., traffic congestion, less open space, reduced sense of community — and high-density projects often encounter vociferous objections at public hearings. Staten Island has been through the debate, resulting in numerous down-zonings.

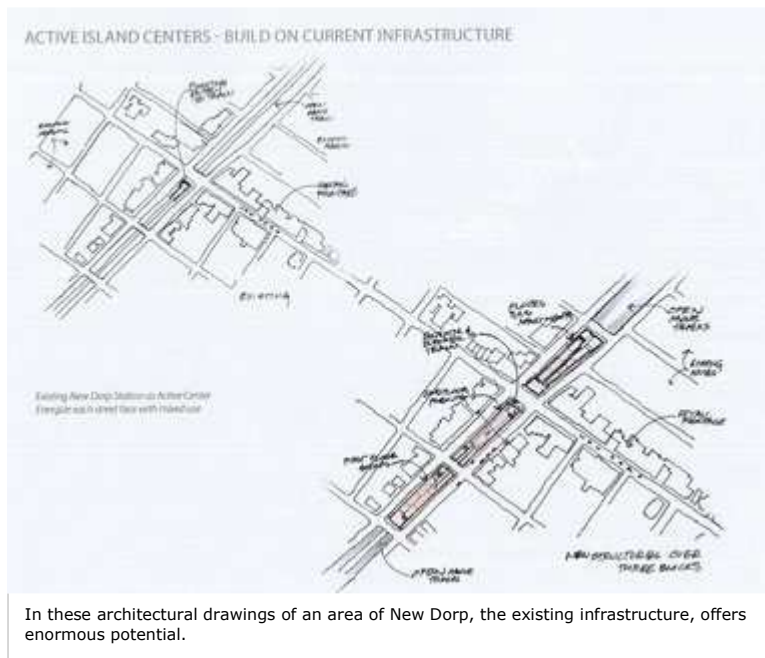
Many people interpret "density" to mean more traffic, crowded schools and unattractive new buildings shoehorned together. Yet, when presented with illustrations of dense communities that feature beautiful architecture and protected open space, where people can walk along shady sidewalks and feel safe letting their kids play in the front yard, opposition often evaporates.

Certainly, Staten Island has experienced tremendous growth. The market responded to what many buyers wanted: a single or two-family detached home. Many old homes on large lots were torn down, the lots subdivided and several houses built. Some were replaced by townhomes. This resulted in a reaction against higher density in many neighborhoods. □

NOT A BAD THING

But density is not always a bad thing. Certainly, the market rewards high density as well as low density; well-designed, dense housing sells as well as, and sometimes better than, widely spaced homes. The top consumers of compact, auto-independent housing — empty nesters, childless couples, and singles — will make up the majority of American households for the foreseeable future.

Compact developments offer higher tax revenues with lower per-unit infrastructure costs and fit more easily into infill parcels, increasing housing stock without reducing green space. Dense developments feel more like the "traditional" neighborhoods many people admire, with a clear identity, amenities such as shops and recreational facilities within easy reach, and a sense of community.





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Many people interpret density to mean more traffic, crowded schools and unattractive new buildings shoehorned together. But dense developments can be designed to be more appealing and to feel less-crowded.

There are many such areas on Staten Island, such as New Dorp, Pleasant Plains and Stapleton, but there can be more. Upzoning areas near SIRT stations for mixed use development should be explored. Children and the elderly can be more independent in a community where they can walk to visit their friends or to a community center, rather than having to wait for a ride. Commuters can walk to the train station as opposed to driving to a park-and-ride lot.

As research begins to illuminate the ways in which the built environment can affect public health, personal wellbeing becomes a persuasive argument for dense development. As Staten Island grows, using land as efficiently as possible preserves open space for recreation, of which we have the most in the city, while protecting the environment, as in the Bluebelt system.

Compact, attractively designed neighborhoods that offer a variety of amenities encourage people to walk, bike, or take public transit rather than drive when possible and convenient. □

AIA ACTION

Of course, architects can design dense developments to be more appealing and to feel less crowded. Perhaps as important, however, they can overcome community resistance by illustrating various options to make a dense development attractive.

People who react negatively to the word "density," envisioning the worst sort of crammed, chaotic, urban environment, often change their minds when they see a rendering of a compact development that arranges the structures in response to their concerns, to maximize privacy, green space, or communal areas. □

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