The Overdevelopment Debate

by {ga=jvitullomartin}
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A red Cape Cod house on Bentley Street in the Staten Island neighborhood of Tottenville once had a backyard, but no longer. Where once was a lawn there now are two new two-family homes, bringing four new families to the neighborhood.

This scene, reported by the Staten Island Advance is being repeated throughout Staten Island, and through the rest of the city, in places like Bayside in Queens and Throgs Neck in the Bronx, where residents believe that an explosion of poorly planned, badly constructed, ugly housing developments threaten their attractive neighborhoods.

Old single-family houses have been torn down to make way for rows of flat-roofed, wooden townhouses in Staten Island and bulky brick apartment buildings in Queens. Developers have demolished bungalows in Throgs Neck and replaced them with as many as six attached houses. Few of the new developments offer open space, parks or play areas. Some have no trees or landscaping.

All of this construction adds to the number of people in the neighborhood. But the city has not increased basic services enough to accommodate the new people. The result is new burdens on the old residents.

But now the city is offering some relief. At his State of the City speech at the Silvercup Studios in Queens last month, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged to help fight overdevelopment. "Physical improvements and development are part of our efforts to improve neighborhoods, but we'll also work to end overdevelopment where it has gotten out of hand," he said. After tremendous applause he smiled and said, "I thought you'd like that."

But what is overdevelopment, particularly in a city whose fame and fortune come from its skyscrapers and towers, people crowding onto sidewalks and into trains, its sheer human density and diversity? And how can the city balance the need to protect neighborhoods with the demand for affordable housing? The problems encapsulated by the term overdevelopment are real, but they are also complex, messy, and not easily resolved.

DEVELOPMENT VS. OVERDEVELOPMENT

Development in New York City is regulated by the zoning code of 1961 . Written at a time when officials believed planning should be centralized, the code assumed the city would have a population of some 12 million people and zoned accordingly. It allowed for denser construction than had existed previously in many residential neighborhoods that had predominantly single-family homes. Along with conditions that make building new single-family homes onerous

and expensive, the plan virtually required multiple units in many neighborhoods.

High market demand for the new housing accelerated the trend toward larger homes, townhouses and apartment buildings. Townhouses in Staten Island, for example, are priced between $250,000 and $500,000. Although loathed by longtime residents of the borough, they sell quickly, usually to New Yorkers moving in from other boroughs. (See related story .)

The reason is simple. As Alan Cappelli of the Building Industry Association points out, buyers get more house for their money in Staten Island than anywhere else in New York. The market demand is immense, and no amount of neighborhood protest is going to stem those forces.

Faced with the growing number of New Yorkers in search of housing, the city has two choices. It can adopt policies that would squeeze more families into existing units, producing the kind of crowding found in many parts of Queens where dozens of immigrants cram into housing designed for a single family. The second choice is to permit more construction.

New York City's well-being requires development â€“ particularly new housing to accommodate the hard-working people who want to live here and contribute to the economic and social life of the city. And it is certainly better for the city that home-owning, tax-paying New Yorkers move to Staten Island than to, say, New Jersey.

Yet Bloomberg, who generally supports economic development, has entered this war on the side of the anti-development forces, condemning "overdevelopment" and instructing the City Planning Commission to do something about it in the outer boroughs.

The mayor says he knows overdevelopment when he sees it. He describes "houses so poorly designed that they have front doors that open directly into the street and houses that have no front yards, that even lack sidewalks." The mayor went on to condemn developments "that seem, with little exaggeration, to pile homes, one right on top of one another."

The mayor's examples, however, are extreme and apply primarily to Staten Island. Indeed, the nature of the overdevelopment charge is generally that some new building is in the wrong place.

Sensible regulation can easily address the problem of the poorly designed houses or those without sidewalks. The dense development the mayor cites, on the other hand, describes the very essence of Manhattan.

Despite what might look like a rush to judgment, however, Bloomberg intends to put expert opinion between him and angry residents: He has instructed city planning to carry out studies on growth management in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens, similar to the study already conducted in Staten Island.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERNS

The features of overdevelopment most likely to rile neighbors are traffic and the disappearance of open space. "Overdevelopment is the No. 1 issue here," James Vacca, district manager of Community Board 10 in the Bronx, which covers Throgs Neck, Pelham Bay and City Island, told the Daily News (See related story). "Our open space is disappearing, blocks are becoming congested beyond belief and there's not a parking space to be found."

The vanishing open space is usually, of course, private property and therefore available for development. When it is city property, such as a community garden, community boards have an opportunity to weigh in.

One only has to drive through some of the communities to understand the concerns about traffic. At its best, New York's planning has encouraged high-density development at places where subway and bus lines converge -- the West Side of Manhattan, downtown Brooklyn, Jamaica Center -- and low-density development far from transportation. Most of the neighborhoods reeling from overdevelopment are indeed badly served by public transportation. Thus more development and more people mean more cars and the parking woes, slow travel times, noise and pollution that they bring.

But a number of experts argue that choking off development is not the solution. Some say the focus should be on improving mass transit to serve the newly developed areas better. And others argue that what is needed is a judicious combination of allowing for more density in some areas â€“- or upzoning -- and downzoning, or permitting less density, in others.

Mobilizing the Region , a transportation advocacy group, points out that Staten Island's

proposed huge downzoning -- which would make attached homes illegal and detached homes the norm -- is "a Band-aid solution for a larger problem," which "is too much unplanned, medium-density development. A better solution is to create growth centers with increased housing density and commercial areas." This, it says, would focus the island's economic development where it makes most sense.

On the other hand, simply downzoning will freeze things as they are now and leave the traffic nightmare in place. While Staten Island needs more and better mass transit, Mobilizing the Region argues, its "de-centered nature does not lend itself to intensive transit investment. Without any centers, a good mass transit system is simply not feasible."

Some of the objections to overdevelopment focus on aesthetics and will not be addressed by changes in zoning. "The word overdevelopment doesn't quite describe the concern in Bayside and Bay Ridge, which largely has to do with the replacement of big old houses with rental units that are much less charming but that conform to the use and bulk restrictions of the zoning code," says Norman Marcus, former general counsel of the City Planning Commission and now a lawyer with Swidler Berlin.

Such changes are taking place in other attractive neighborhoods as well. As Brendan Sexton, who owns a house in Staten Island's historic St. George district , says a bit sadly, "the day of the detached single family home is probably over. They're just too expensive to build. The two- or three-family home is more realistic."

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

Some problems can be solved by the kind of sensible rezoning that the current city planning director, Amanda Burden, prefers. (See Embracing Growth, Preserving Neighborhoods by Richard Barth.) In Staten Island, for example, the commission proposes that new one-family homes have two on-site parking spaces rather than one, and two-family homes have three spaces rather than two. The commission is also sensitive to the many ugly unintended consequences of earlier zoning restrictions and is proposing new homes that feature traditional pitched roofs rather than the flat roofs now encouraged.

City planning has also intervened piecemeal with some special district zoning, such as in Bay Ridge (see related story). While special districts allow planners to avoid having to overhaul the entire code, they only provide a stopgap.

But beyond zoning, the basic problem in many growing areas is that the city has been derelict in providing the new services needed by new residents. The city knew that the opening of the Verrazano Bridge in 1964 would set off a great migration to once unsettled Staten Island. But government never provided the necessary public transportation or roads to carry people to jobs and services. Nor is the government seriously contemplating further transportation investment in the near future.

In the end, the city is going to need to zone to increase density in some areas, particularly in desirable sections near both public transportation and the waterfront, and to downzone areas that truly cannot accommodate more people.

The city is proposing to do this in some neighborhoods. It hopes, for example, to convert large swaths of manufacturing areas to residential use. On part of the Brooklyn waterfront, this would allow for the building of apartment towers as high as 35 stories. In other neighborhoods, such as East Harlem and Park Slope, the city has rezoned to allow high-rise housing to go up on some avenues, while preserving lower density on side streets.

Although acknowledging that it is usually easier to change the zoning to decrease density than to increase it, Michael Schill, director of the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at the NYU School of Law, says he would like to see the city allow for increased density in some areas. “The city is doing all this good stuff in Williamsburg and Greenpoint , but why not comprehensively look at the entire city? Where is transportation strong? What neighborhoods have the infrastructure to add people?" he says.

Schill notes that when the city rebuilt certain neighborhoods over the last two decades, it deliberately focused on low-density housing. Now those neighborhoods could sustain higher density. "The city did such a good job that it created a market for those areas that can now be developed more intensively,” he says. “The Bronx has great transportation. It was built for a lot of people, then it emptied out, then the city rebuilt the Bronx but with fairly low density. We now need to recognize there is a market for density along with a scarcity of vacant land. We need to increase density when areas can support it."

Despite the attention paid to overdevelopment, Norman Marcus points out that overall, the outer boroughs may have suffered until recently from a "dearth of construction." The new

development, particularly in the Bronx, he says, represents "a vote of confidence in the city, a sign that the problem all along hasn't been the zoning but the market's unwillingness to go into some of these areas."

But the political fallout for any mayoral administration proposing denser zoning could be immense. The solution is probably that time-honored device of all well-intentioned but uneasy elected officials: a commission to look at the proposal, with a report due at a date well into the future.

Julia Vitullo-Martin, former executive director of the Citizens Housing & Planning Council, is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.