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Overdevelopment: Planning, Not Rezoning, Is The Answer

by Tom Angotti

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In New York City's quiet suburban-like neighborhoods far from Times Square and Wall Street, there's lots of buzz these days about "overdevelopment." Homeowners in these low-density enclaves are worried developers will start building to the maximum allowed by zoning, which in some cases can mean two houses in the place of one or even an apartment building here and there. The Bloomberg administration has responded by downzoning "to preserve neighborhood character" in some 42 areas of the city. Downzoning reduces the potential for development while upzoning allows more development.

New York Times correspondent Janny Scott [recently repeated the common orthodoxy](#) about what's behind the downzonings. She said it was: "A swelling population, an overheated real estate market and the biggest building boom in 30 years." This is how it's perceived by many out in the neighborhoods. But growth pressures are only part of the picture.

According to New York City Councilmember Tony Avella, chair of the Zoning and Franchises Committee and a long-time critic of "overdevelopment," while the current zoning in many low density neighborhoods is "totally inappropriate and hasn't been changed in years, there is a correlation between overdevelopment and lack of planning. We need to totally revamp the way the City of New York does planning." Avella is a supporter of the [Campaign for Community-based Planning](#) and is working on legislation that would change the way planning is done.

Community Planning Not Rezoning

The real problem with downzoning to stop overdevelopment, or upzoning to encourage development, is that they both avoid any serious planning, both in each neighborhood and in the city as a whole. They don't allow local residents and businesses to address serious concerns they have with everything from housing needs to traffic, because zoning regulations are limited to use and density controls.

Imagine if the city were to take seriously the question of building housing to meet the present and future needs of New Yorkers. The city's planners might do some projections and then work with every neighborhood in the city to see how they could accommodate their fair share of the need. This is exactly what was done in Seattle during the four-year term of Mayor Norman Rice. The State of Washington mandated a city-wide growth management plan, and the mayor then organized a team of planners to work with 38 neighborhoods, each of which developed its own plans. Every one of the neighborhood plans accommodated their share of the city-wide growth needs, and none refused to do so, mainly because they were empowered to determine how and where the growth would occur. Overdevelopment wasn't a problem because every neighborhood had its proportionate share in development.

But it remains to be seen how many of the same neighborhoods in New York City complaining about overdevelopment are willing to support planning. For example, do the Staten Islanders who backed recent downzonings there recall that there was once a sensible plan for Staten Island that would have concentrated growth on the island, preserved open space, and prevented the inefficient low-density sprawl that has multiplied traffic and McMansions everywhere? The South Richmond Plan was introduced in 1971 by then State Senator John Marchi, but got beaten back by those who cried – yes, you got it – "overdevelopment."

The South Richmond Plan was an early version of what the American Planning Association has popularized as "[Smart Growth](#)" – concentrating development around existing areas with density and infrastructure. While the term can be interpreted to mean many different things, it's a concept that could be applied in New York if indeed there were the will to plan. Growth could be allocated in places around the city where it made good sense – building on existing densities and using infrastructure that's already in place.

How Smart is Downzoning?

But is the downzoning in low-density neighborhoods part of Smart Growth? Or is it just adding pressure to other neighborhoods that are reeling from intense development pressures and facing huge affordable housing and service shortages? In fact, the biggest development pressures in the city aren't in Bayside and Riverdale but in neighborhoods closer to the overheated downtown real estate markets -- Chelsea, Greenpoint/Williamsburg, Long Island City, and Harlem, for example, where single-family homes are already rare.

If overdevelopment brings excessive densities, the real issue is what constitutes "excessive?" It's all relative. If there is any place in the city where densities might be considered too high it's the centrally-located neighborhoods where upzonings are now concentrating more development. There is no magic formula for balancing growth and open space, but New York City is widely known to have one of the lowest ratios of open space per capita, especially in the more developed parts of Manhattan and the outer boroughs.

If our city planners were really concerned about excessive density and an overloaded infrastructure they wouldn't be upzoning these areas so that more high-rises can be stuffed onto blocks that already have little "light and air" – features that zoning was supposed to safeguard. These are the neighborhoods that lack open space, have the worst air quality and noise, and have to deal with overcrowded subway platforms and buses.

It's not just a matter of taking advantage of existing infrastructure but abusing the infrastructure. A blind fixation with development at all costs has produced a void in the public discussion about the problems faced by the city's infrastructure – for example, [solid waste](#) and [public transportation](#) systems. It's automatically assumed these systems will handle new growth because they're so large, but every one of them is stretched and the costs of expanding these systems are high. Contrary to development advocates, high density isn't necessarily any more efficient than low density. Economies of scale that come with higher densities can actually change to diseconomies of scale, and lead to a deterioration of the environment and the health prospects of residents.

Overdevelopment, An Election-Year Code Word?

Isn't what the Bloomberg administration doing "Smart Growth?" Perhaps lurking in the far reaches of City Hall there lies such a rational motivation. But those who follow the poll numbers might wonder if the strategy has more to do with gaining support for Manhattan Mike in the outer borough homeowner neighborhoods with high voter turnouts. Could the pre-election tax rebate to homeowners and continuing favorable property assessment be part of a bigger strategy along with downzoning?

A statement by City Planning Commission chair Amanda M. Burden may give us a clue. Burden was quoted in the October 10 New York Times: "If you allow the character of a neighborhood to be eroded, the people who live in that neighborhood will leave the city." Here we have a new version of the "white flight" thesis that contributed to the post-war ideology of suburban development in the U.S. The myth then was that central cities deteriorated mainly because whites left for the suburbs. But white flight was more an effect than a cause – the interstate highway system (the largest public works project in the world) and federal mortgage insurance (which prohibited loans in non-white neighborhoods) were the triggers to suburbanization and the ensuing racial apartheid.

Today the suburbs aren't exploding as they were then, and New York City is awash in new investment. In the last few decades whites have continued to move out of the city but their neighborhoods have remained intact. They have been largely occupied by working families of diverse ethnicities. In some neighborhoods, however, there have been widespread abuses of zoning and building codes as housing has been illegally subdivided to accommodate new immigrant populations. But the problem isn't flight to the suburbs, it's how to re-make New York City's homeowner neighborhoods so they can provide more safe and affordable housing for New Yorkers. If white flight changes voting patterns, that's another matter.

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