

The Dilemma of Change

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Note: The viewpoints in this article are solely my own and do not represent the opinions of either the Planning Board or the Master Plan Committee.



What Suburban Sprawl Looks Like

Most people don't like change. Change brings with it the anxiety that we're no longer in control of what happens to us and are being thrust unwillingly into a future whose impact on us we can't imagine.

That's especially true for the many people in Long Hill Township who want this town to "stay the way it's always been." The problem: change happens, on a global scale, and doesn't ask our permission.

I'm old enough to remember New Jersey before Suburban Sprawl changed everything about how we live our daily lives. I remember a time when as kids we walked or rode our bikes everywhere, (including to school) when you were a 10-minute walk away from a pharmacy, ice cream store, hardware store, neighborhood-sized grocery store, barber shop/hair dresser, drycleaner, (and for my parents) liquor store, and train station. When we went shopping, my parents would drive into town (we could walk there in 20 minutes) park the car, and do all their shopping from several large department stores and dozens of smaller retailers. Route 22 was for the most part a tree-lined highway. (The only vestige of that time now is the small section of Route 22 in Mountainside.)

If you had described the world of Suburban Sprawl we now take for granted to people living then, it's easy to imagine people saying "That will never happen — and who would want it, anyway? Why would I want to live in a world without close neighbors in which I have to drive a car to do any of the tasks of normal living?" (For a rigorously-researched discussion, see "Suburban Sprawl – Not Just an Environmental Issue" at <http://www.longhillnj.gov/PB/MPC.html> under "Resources.")

We've been living for so long in the world of Suburban Sprawl — most people in New Jersey under 50 have never known anything but that world — that it's easy to assume that its dynamics of social organization and its inherent lifestyle constraints are permanent – "It's just the way things are."

History should remind us that's not true. There was a world before electricity, affordable automobiles, airplane travel, mass-produced factory food, TV, the internet, e-commerce, social

media, international terrorism, and (sorry, brothers Koch), global warming (whatever its cause). There was a time when America was the leading industrial nation in the world — we actually made things instead of just buying them from China or Bangladesh— a time when working and middle class Americans could live comfortably and have their kids graduate from college without crippling debt. There was even a time when the people whose candidate got elected president actually liked the person they voted for.

Change happens whether we want or like it. For Long Hill Township, that means we have a choice as we think about the township's future in crafting a new Master Plan. We can decide to keep things the way they are, for now at least, and defer decisions about the future. We're an isolated town with our own insular culture. Right now there are few opportunities for significant additional development as we currently exist. It's hard to imagine any immediate harm from NOT changing. Right now.

Or we can look at the world around us and the implications for our continued sustainability as a community. We can collectively grapple with the question "How do we evolve in a changing world to continue to be a wonderful town for people to live in?"

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