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New Jersey Suburb Plans a Housing Project It Hopes Is Unfriendly to Children

By IVER PETERSON

HAMILTON, N.J., May 29 - They are building the latest thing in urban design here in this old blue-collar suburb of Trenton, a project that combines housing, office space and mass transit in a single pedestrian-friendly system.

But none of those qualities would have passed political muster if Hamilton Township planners had not also built in one more important feature: a promise that hardly any children will move in.

Although opponents of the project deride the promise, Mayor Glen D. Gilmore and his staff convinced the Township Council and planners that even after 680 expensive condos and town houses have been built on the grounds of an old American Standard toilet factory here, only about 30 school-age children would live there.

"The fact that it will not attract a lot of kids certainly made it the way to go," said Hal English, the township's economic development director.

It may seem odd that a suburb that has incubated hordes of happy children should now be so bent on keeping them out. Actually, the no-more-kids sign has been hung in towns all over New Jersey - so often that New Jersey Future, a group that advocates measured development, says parts of the state are "anti-family."

"Too many New Jersey towns don't want kids, as evidenced in weekly town hearings and by growth that favors new commercial and senior development over family housing," the group reported in January. "This anti-family attitude, while tragic, is logical: the median property tax in New Jersey (\$4,047) doesn't begin to cover the median cost of educating even one child (\$10,652) who may live in that home."

New Jersey Future's solution is to shift school financing away from property taxes and onto a more broadly based tax, but that change, if it ever comes, is still far away. In the meantime, places like Hamilton balance the need for new development and the new taxes it brings with the need to keep school enrollment down.

"I've really held the line on projects that will have school kids, and the transit projects we've studied seem to bear out our prediction that people who live in them have far fewer school kids than other residential projects," Mayor Gilmore, a Democrat, said in an interview.

The mayor conceded that the prediction of only 30 children in 680 housing units might be low. His estimate, low or not, has not mollified the opponents living in Cornell Heights, an enclave of single-family homes next to the development.

"They're not age-restricted, they're not child-restricted, and they're not handing out birth-control pills at the preconstruction-sales trailer," said Dennis Pone, an optician who has lived in Cornell Heights for 18 years and is leading the opposition.

"We figure there will be 350 kids, and maybe 300 of those will be school-age children," he went on. "And, really, 10 more kids in our school system is too many, as far as I'm concerned."

The old American Standard toilet factory, beside New Jersey Transit's Hamilton train station straddling Amtrak's Northeast Corridor line, is being converted into a 450,000-square-foot office complex, and its tenants already include a law firm and several engineering firms. The original glazed-tile factory sign, Standard Sanitary Mfg. Co., has been preserved, and is visible from the station.

The new office development is called American Metro Center, and is being developed by Preferred Real Estate Investments Inc.

The area north of the new office space will hold the 680 rental apartments, condos and town houses, with a total of nearly 1,300 bedrooms, and many of the residences will have dens. They are intended to be within easy walking distance of the train station. In keeping with the child-unfriendly intention, there will be no playgrounds.

A similar second project is in the planning stage. On the east side of the tracks, where a parking lot now faces the station, the township envisions a project with a mixture of about 300 dwellings - no child count on them yet - plus office, retail and entertainment space close to the station. For this project, the township has applied for a state designation as a "transit village," which goes to projects that discourage sprawl and earns the municipality a few dollars in subsidies and some technical help.

The state's Department of Transportation has not yet awarded the transit village designation, but Marc LaVorgna, a spokesman for the department, called the Hamilton project "an outstanding application."

Mr. English, the economic development chief, said the proximity to the train would keep families with children away.

"In the old days, poor people lived by the tracks," he said, recalling his own Trenton childhood within earshot of the old Pennsylvania Railroad line. "Now the train is for high-end people. Those condos are going to sell for between \$300,000 and \$500,000, and those people know that railroad tracks are not good places to raise kids."

He added, "You're going to have to love trains, because you're going to hear train whistles all night long, and that's not the best way to get a baby to sleep."