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**Cities: We're Still Making Them**

*(This is the second in a series of articles on the changing relationship between city and suburb in the Tri-State Region.)*

The one feature that really gives a place that city feeling or that suburban vibe is the number of people living and working in a block, street or district - - in short, density. Streetscapes and retail outlets may appear the same in the city and some suburbs, and you might be able to find the same overpriced chai in both Cherry Hill and Manhattan. But it's the density - the crowds of people, the closeness of housing, the congestion on roads and rails - that really differentiates the city from the suburb. Like crime and, to some extent, racial and ethnic diversity, this is one characteristic that has historically stamped a place as more like a city or more like a suburb.

This region has a tremendous diversity of places in terms of density. On one hand it has Manhattan, one of the most densely populated places in the world with more than 66,000 people per square mile. The other boroughs of New York City, along with Hudson, Essex and Union counties in New Jersey, have a population density of about 15,000 people per square mile, just a little less dense than San Francisco. The inner suburban counties - places such as Nassau, Rockland and Bergen - have a population density of only 2,000 people per square mile, and the outer suburbs have fewer than 600 people per square mile.

With an overall population density of only 2,000 people per square mile, it is remarkable how many places in the inner suburbs reach the 10,000 people per square mile mark, and how many places are getting there. Drawing the line at 10,000 is somewhat arbitrary, but it can be informative to identify some places in the region that have become considerably denser over the last ten years, and that are now dense enough to be compared with the region's cities. Fort Lee, for example, has 12,000 people per square mile; Hempstead in Nassau and Mount Vernon in Westchester each has over 15,000.

High density suburbs are particularly prevalent in this region, and they are becoming more prevalent. California and Illinois, for example, have 9% and 3% of their population living in high density suburbs, respectively, not counting LA, San Francisco and Chicago; in this region, 24% of the population live in high density suburbs, not counting New York. In fact, most of the dense-ification in this region has been in the suburbs. Of the 25-odd places in the region that added more than 1,000 people per square mile during the 1990s and/or moved into the ranks of places with more than 10,000 people per square mile, 20 of them are in the inner suburbs, including places such as New Brunswick, Hackensack, Lodi, Fort Lee, Valley Stream, Port Chester, and Hempstead.

Some of these places always felt like cities. New Brunswick, for example, is a good example of a regional center that has seen a rebirth of population and employment in the last ten years. In other places, however, the change in density is visible. Lodi, New Jersey has increased its housing production by a factor of four over the last seven years. In Port Chester village, New York, multi-family housing used to account for about half the production; in the last several years, it's accounting for nearly 90%

of all housing production.

The form of the added density can be just as important to the feel of a place as the density itself. Some places are adding high rise multi-unit buildings, often filled with luxury apartments – small copies of city buildings but often without the pedestrian-filled streets around them. Other places are adding contextual multi-family housing, such as older large houses split into two duplexes, or townhouses. Both make the suburbs feel like the city in different ways, but density, regardless of its design, remains the defining characteristic of an urban environment.

As noted in the first article of this series, the suburbs and the cities are starting to have more in common, however the merging is not a linear event. Suburbs may be starting to feel like cities, while other factors are making cities seem more suburban: less crime and more homeownership families, for example. There are also other indicators that rise and fall in different ways. People are getting accustomed to living and working in new ways in this region. And it is clear that once again this region is unique in its blending and breaking of the traditional suburban/urban divide. It is up to policy makers and developers to be creative, and encourage communities to take what has been considered the best characteristics of the city and the best of the suburbs to help make something new.

– Alexis Perrotta, RPA Senior Policy Analyst

### **Reviving the Empire: Why Upstate's Future Matters to New York**

When Governor DeWitt Clinton poured a ceremonial bucket of Lake Erie water into New York Harbor in 1825, he did more than signal the completion of the era's greatest engineering feat. With the opening of the Erie Canal, the mass settlement and development of the nation's vast interior commenced with New York as its undisputed economic nerve center. Almost immediately, the riches of the Midwest came trickling across the Great Lakes, through the Erie Canal, and down the Hudson River to feed New York's ascendancy.

Besides spawning a continent-wide trading empire for New York, the Erie Canal launched an urban empire closer to home: a vast network of cities and villages stretching for hundreds of miles along the route of the Erie and numerous feeder canals across Upstate New York. Nourished by raw materials bound for the City and finished products destined for western markets, the towns quickly became important trading and manufacturing hubs in their own right.

Though the early growth of Upstate cities depended on Downstate taxpayers who shouldered debt to build the canals, the cities soon became vital contributors to the public and private investments that would continue to expand the entire state's infrastructure and economy. By 1880, ten of the nation's 100 largest cities were located in New York north of Putnam County. The largest of them, Buffalo, would grow to be the nation's eighth largest city by 1900, dwarfing the likes of San Francisco and Pittsburgh in both size and wealth. It and others, including Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Troy, and Binghamton became leading centers of industrial innovation, providing fertile ground for such 20th century behemoths as IBM, Kodak, Xerox, and General Electric.

For more than a century, Upstate and Downstate were linked by strong physical ties – canals, later eclipsed by railroads – and by close commercial ties. After World War II, however, these ties began to weaken. The steady decline of manufacturing undermined the economies of cities both Upstate and Downstate, while advances in transportation technology – namely the evolution of highways and trucking – diluted the geographic advantage of the Erie Canal corridor. The completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, while making the transport of goods from the Great Lakes to the City cheaper, hit the Canal corridor hard by rendering its transshipment function obsolete.

When New York City began to rebound in the 1980s as the hub of a rapidly globalizing service economy, it made sense to expect a similar rebound Upstate. Blessed with the nation's largest public university system, several prestigious private universities, and a legacy of industrial innovation, Upstate was primed to emerge from its manufacturing slump as a key player in the knowledge-based economy.

But halfway through the first decade of the new millennium, Upstate New York has yet to recover its economic strength. And rather than contributing to the well being of the entire state, it is in danger of becoming a serious burden on those further down the Hudson.

As the Brookings Institution outlined in a recent series pinpointing the maladies affecting Upstate's metropolitan areas ([http://www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/200308\\_pendall.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/200308_pendall.htm)), the region lags far behind most of the country on a number of growth indicators. During the 1990s,

Upstate's population grew more slowly than all states except North Dakota and West Virginia; personal income grew at less than half the national rate; and poverty – particularly concentrated poverty in urban areas – increased despite falling Downstate and nationwide. In addition, the Brookings series and a report from the New York Fed's Buffalo Branch have revealed a range of troublesome demographic trends, particularly the aging of the region's residents. The population of young adults Upstate declined by over 20 percent during the 1990s while the population of senior citizens grew by almost 5 percent. As a result, the region's population now has a smaller share of young adults than the rest of the country and a larger share of seniors, posing dilemmas to the Upstate labor market and the state's social services infrastructure.

How is it that, despite the growth enjoyed by much of the nation and Downstate during the 1990s, Upstate managed to remain in a decades-long slump? A number of factors have been held responsible, including Upstate's over-reliance on an ever-declining manufacturing sector; state and local taxes that far exceed those of Upstate's closest economic competitors – places like Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania; and competition for increasingly footloose residents and businesses from places perceived as having greater amenities, such as the Sun Belt and cities like New York.

Whatever the reasons for Upstate stagnation, it is a matter that must be taken seriously by the Tri-State Region. Though the sprawling expanse from Lake Champlain to Lake Erie may appear to mean less to the health of today's globally-oriented New York City than it did fifty or one hundred years ago, the region cannot be regarded as a vestigial limb: atrophied and benign. In the coming years Upstate will either be a burden or an asset to Downstate.

It will be a burden if the region's economy continues to perform well-below that of its Northeastern and Midwestern neighbors and its seven million residents continue to experience lower income growth and higher poverty than the nation as a whole. The cost of keeping the increasingly poor and elderly region above water will certainly strain the state's ability to invest in necessary infrastructure and other improvements Downstate.

The region will not be a burden if it is recognized and utilized as a long-term strategic asset. As RPA and Lincoln Institute for Land Policy have observed, mega-regions like the Northeast are expected to drive the nation's growth over the next several decades and will continue to grow themselves, posing challenges to their ability to accommodate growth without sacrificing quality of life.

As these challenges confront the New York region, Upstate New York should be seen as a growth stabilizer: a place where development can be strategically funneled in a way that accommodates growth, adds to the fiscal well-being of New York State, and avoids overburdening Downstate and tri-state infrastructure while simultaneously generating the tax revenues to invest further in that infrastructure. Just as the Erie Canal spawned an empire of Upstate cities that ultimately strengthened the economic position of New York, efforts to revive that empire could do much the same in the 21st century.

Recent efforts to boost Upstate's economic prospects and its ties to New York have included the State-led development of high-tech research centers – such as photonics in Rochester and bioinformatics in Buffalo – and the introduction of low-cost flights between major Upstate airports and New York via JetBlue. While this is a start, Upstate revitalization will take much more in the way of resources and policy innovations from Albany to restore the region's competitiveness. And that will require a strong commitment from Downstate leaders, for whom there is much to be gained – or lost – in the future of Upstate.

– *Peter A. Lombardi, Regional Plan Association. Lombardi, an intern at RPA, is completing his master's degree in city planning at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.*

**Questions Or Comments On What's In This Issue?** Send them to the Editor of Spotlight on the Region, Alex Marshall At [alex@rpa.org](mailto:alex@rpa.org)

## Calendar

### September 12, 8:00 - 9:30 am

Commissioner Iris Weinshall will share her views regarding critical issues facing the New York City Department of Transportation. The event is open to the public and free of charge. Registration is

required. Please r.s.v.p. by September 6th online at [wagner.nyu.edu/events/](http://wagner.nyu.edu/events/). For more information, email [mnn2@nyu.edu](mailto:mnn2@nyu.edu) or call (212) 998-7545.

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