

To the editor,

I enjoyed Mr. Donio's opinion piece in last week's Gazette. Like Mr. Donio, I am happy to see the new developments that are occurring in and around our downtown area. However, although I am all for this revitalization effort, I am not in favor of the haphazard nature in which it is occurring. While I understand the challenges involved in getting large tracts of adjacent parcels for redevelopment, I challenge our local leaders to seriously consider options that would lead to a systematic revitalization of Bellevue Ave, especially the downtown and areas close to the train station.

As Mr. Donio noted, Hammonton's location makes it an excellent venue for such development. A redevelopment plan that encompasses mixed uses e.g. offices, restaurants, banks and residences, all within walking distances from the train station and other public transportation nodes would go a long way in enhancing the attractiveness of our downtown area. This is especially true if this plan encompasses redeveloping and revitalizing unused and/or underutilized buildings (brownfields) in that area. Imagine a development in which you could park your car (or bike) at one place and walk to Trina's, browse through Kelly's, discuss your calling plans with John by the railroad tracks, stop by Baglianis and then proceed to La Fiesta Mexicana or Ilianos and then hit Casciano's on your way back to your car, bike or bus/train station.

Last weekend I had the privilege of accompanying a colleague on his Sustainable Communities field trip to North Jersey. Among others, we visited Washington Township (now Robbinsville), Belmar and Asbury Park. I was impressed by what I saw in Robbinsville. They have redeveloped a large area just outside their central business district and included mixed use businesses, professional offices, condominiums, and recreational areas. The changing household structure, more singles and empty nesters, is cleverly reflected in the diversity of housing options offered.

Their development could be thought of as high density. I know most people cringe when they hear the term high density, and for good reason. The type of high density development that has been done in the past generated problems because it created living space for low income residents in isolated places with little or no opportunity for employment and/or recreation. As a result, such high density development created an environment that fostered crime and otherwise stable communities suffered.

The high density mixed-use development that I saw in Robbinsville includes people of all income levels and clustered residences are within walking distances to shops, places of employment, public transit and recreation. Automobiles are not the main feature of these residential areas, with carports and roads neatly tucked away in the back. The streets leading up to the fronts of the houses are narrow and pedestrian friendly, allowing for space for children to play, and neighbors, young and old, to mingle.

I moved to Hammonton about two years ago and I love this town. However, I must admit I am not happy about the fact that I live in a sprawl development and I cannot walk anywhere and/or use public transportation unless I drive at least two miles to the train station. In fact, I cannot think of any place that I can visit in this town without getting into my car. The way my development is set up, I would have to drive just to visit someone on the cul-de-sac behind my house, unless I dare walk the dangerous two miles of asphalt that separate us (although our houses are much closer to each other than that). If downtown Hammonton had condominiums and more opportunities for food, entertainment, relaxation, clustered business within walking distance of each other and a place that would foster professional development I would happily move there. I have talked to many young professionals who feel the same way. Young professionals at my place of employment in Galloway do not even consider Hammonton a *cool* place to live because there is just nothing for them here. Hammonton just does not provide the type of accommodation and support functions of entertainment, food, and relaxation that help retain them here. I have tried to recruit a few to no avail.

I know our Mayor has signed the US Mayors Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement. This agreement encourages mayors to, among other things, "strive to meet Kyoto Protocol targets in their own communities, through actions ranging from anti-sprawl land-use policies to urban forest restoration projects to public information campaigns". One of the encouraging developments in our town has been the formation of the Green Committee. We have a dynamic and active Environmental Commission, MainStreet Hammonton and other civic groups that strive to make our town a safe, prosperous and livable community. I challenge everyone to work together to chart a new way forward.