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Suburban Revitalization Through Transit Planning

In Solving Sprawl, the authors touch upon the negative impact that the automobile has had on the American landscape. Perhaps worse than the ex-urban homogeneity that has resulted in newer areas is what the automobile did to existing cities. Boston, for example was notoriously decimated by the intrusion of heavy auto traffic into a city built on the typology of pedestrian and even horse-drawn transportation. Obviously, exclusive auto mobility is a serious detriment. There are the cities of the northeast, which still offer a certain pedestrian lifestyle. And there are the Sunbelt cities, which practically forsake walking. But what of the rest of the country?

In chapter 3 of Solving Sprawl, several case studies are discussed in which communities or private interests began renewal efforts through investment in transit oriented development. The Pulaski Station case study focuses on a community in Chicago that had been declining for some time. When the Chicago Transit Authority threatened to stop service at the station, the West Garfield neighborhood became galvanized in the fight to preserve the asset. In order to do so, development opportunities were sought out which would increase ridership. By making the El stop a critical node, the neighborhood was able to dramatically improve upon its social and economic outlook.

This paper will use this small case study as a jumping off point to explore some of the issues regarding transit oriented development, in an older, declining New Jersey suburb. The links between land use effectiveness, parking, public/private investment, and economic success, result in the overall success or lack of success in suburban downtowns.

Rahway, NJ, has been experiencing a revival in its downtown after the extensive renovation of its train station and construction of a public parking deck. The municipality is an older, second-tier suburb of the New York City metropolitan area. Rahway is located within Union County, in central New Jersey. According to the 2000

Census, the city of Rahway has a population of 26,500 within its area of only 4.1 square miles. Much of the city's growth occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. Rahway has been dormant for decades, as its once industrial-based economy declined.

During the period of industrialization, Rahway was a manufacturing center for hats, carriages, shoes, and other consumer goods. In 1835 the railroad came to Rahway and connected it with mass transit to Philadelphia, Newark, and New York City. As the population grew, so did the already present industries. The city proclaimed itself "The Carriage City of the World" when there were over thirty-five associated factories. This was the city's dominant industry right up until they became obsolete with the emergence of the automobile.

Shortly after the construction of the new Penn Central Railroad station, in 1915, the Penn Central Railroad endeavored upon an enormous engineering project, which not only improved upon its service, but also to the quality of life for the public. It was billed as one of the "greatest engineering and constructive achievements"¹ in the history of New Jersey. Keystone State Construction Company of Philadelphia was contracted to raise the railroad tracks up along a six mile stretch (through Rahway & neighboring municipalities) in order to eliminate hazardous and nuisance grade crossings. The project took over three years and cost over three million dollars. Even today, much of the character of downtown Rahway is due to the railroad being above.

Despite past successes, however, nothing could prevent the eventual downturn of the city's prospects in the second half of the twentieth century. The manufacturing jobs left the area, mostly for overseas plants with lower labor costs. With citizens losing jobs, it did not take long for the once thriving downtown to begin losing businesses. Local tax revenues entered a period of decline that has only recently turned around. In the 1980s alone, the city experienced a loss of over \$150 million in tax ratables².

While once the primary asset, Rahway's location perhaps accelerated the decline. Located near several highways, the small businesses of downtown were easily passed by

¹ Marshall M. Alden, "New Jersey Trackage Pennsylvania Railroad Being Extensively Raised." Nation's Business. 23 September 1912 p5

² James Kennedy, "Kennedy Calls For Arts to Continue Downtown Revitalization." The Rahway Review Spring 2002. p1

in favor of the auto-friendly major shopping centers built during the 1960s and '70s in neighboring towns.

Exacerbating the problems of the commercial core was the decline of the railroad. As a result of disinvestment in mass transit at a larger scale, in 1974 the Penn Central demolished the rail station that had been built almost sixty years earlier. Rather than having a dignified railroad station like a small city, Rahway now had only dark stairs leading up to the platform. A single story retail building was constructed on the site, adding little to either the built environment or economy of the local community.

While its residential neighborhoods were maintained, the downtown was mostly vacant, with some struggling businesses left. Any commercial activity of any value was located along the main thoroughfares and highways which skirted along away from the downtown.

The revitalization of Rahway has to do with its renewed commitment to public transit. Since qualifying for the program in 2002³, the city has taken advantage of the New Jersey Transit Village Initiative. The initiative is a product of the larger effort on the state's part to promote smart growth within already developed areas.

The transit villages are named by the task force, which is comprised of the Department of Transportation, New Jersey Transit, and a collection of nine other state agencies. In order to qualify for the program, the municipality must have an existing transit facility, either a bus or rail station, or a ferry terminal. Furthermore, there must be at least one development project that is "compact, transit-supportive, mixed use" within walking distance of the transit resource⁴. While Rahway was one of the earlier transit villages, there are now sixteen within the state.

Although it was completed before Rahway's designation as a transit village, the project that really began the revitalization of downtown was the construction of a new \$16 million train station which anchors the downtown. Completed in 1999, the station's greatest improvement is its plaza, a site for civic events, car and motorcycle shows, and even a farmer's market during the summer months.

³ Anonymous. "Downtown Update". The Rahway Review Spring 2005 p9

⁴ Vincent Mangini "It Takes a Village" Railway Age September 2005. p74

The station is a multi-layered node within the transportation network, served by both Northeast Corridor Line and North Jersey Coast Line. Passengers may take the train north to Newark International Airport and Manhattan, or south toward Philadelphia, and the shore resort towns of New Jersey. In addition to train service, several bus routes and taxis further integrate the station with the transit network. The station complex is utilized by over three thousand commuters each workday⁵. The Rahway Recreation Department even sends a shuttle bus to the station in order to more fully capture the benefits of this resource.

Rahway's mayor, James Kennedy has been a tireless advocate for not only his municipality, but also on transit oriented development. Having spoken at conferences and regularly mentioning transit in his "Mayor's Message", Kennedy understands truly how important the concept is in the twenty-first century. He explains to his constituents that the station is one of the community's greatest resources and needs to function as a hub from which other uses radiate⁶.

Another instrumental project has been completed. The six storey parking deck, dubbed the "Rahway Transportation Center" was built on underutilized land along Main Street. Formerly, the land was the location of an eighty space surface parking lot, both metered and permitted. On that same parcel of land, the deck provides over five hundred parking spaces, doubling the capacity of the downtown while relieving the city streets of commuter parking.

Additionally, the town has removed many of the parking meters which once lined downtown. Instead, there are signs posted limiting cars to a maximum of two hour parking. This is a worthy strategy to encourage shoppers to come back to downtown. The existing street parking is being used to facilitate local economic activity, rather than a source of revenue itself.

The Rahway Redevelopment Agency was created in 2001 at the request of the mayor with the expressed purpose of fostering "lasting, sustainable economic development" within the downtown district⁷. Within the private sector, the Rahway

⁵ James Kennedy. "Mayor's Message" The Rahway Review. Fall 2004 p2

⁶ James Kennedy. "Mayor's Message" The Rahway Review. Fall 2004 p2

⁷ James Kennedy "2005 State of the City Address"

http://www.cityofrahway.com/pr/2005_state_of_city_address.htm

Center Partnership is a business association which also aims to revitalize the downtown. In addition to hanging banners proclaiming the merits of downtown business and culture, the partnership provides loans for façade improvements. Several of the existing businesses have taken advantage of the program and have enhanced their storefronts. The combined efforts toward redevelopment have received awards from various organizations. In 2002, Downtown New Jersey awarded the train station plaza the “Excellence in Downtown” award. New Jersey Future, a smart growth advocacy group named Rahway the “Smart Growth Community of the Year” for 2003. Also that year, the Regional Business Partnership recognized the city’s efforts in promoting mixed use development.

Even more encouraging is the fact that the downtown will soon be home to a critical mass of residents. A 136-unit market rate apartment complex was recently completed along the river and has proved to be a successful partnership between the city, the municipal parking authority, and developer. This was the first major residential construction downtown in over twenty-five years and is aimed at attracting young professionals to the area. An even more ambitious project will begin construction only a few blocks away. This new mixed-use project will become a landmark in the downtown, with its fifteen stories comprising ground level retail, restaurant, luxury condos, and a boutique hotel.

The added residential population has already begun changing the types of businesses downtown. While several storefronts had been underutilized as storage and 99 cent stores, more restaurants and consumer goods businesses have opened. Instead of businesses selling lottery tickets and newspapers to people coming only for the trains, businesses will begin providing more services at a higher level of economic benefit to the new local resident populations.

According to the last Census, the city of Rahway is doing well. Although the percentage of higher education is lower than the national average, the annual household income is approximately 20% higher than the national average. Additionally, the poverty rate in Rahway is over 5% less than the national average.

Rahway still emphasizes the importance of public investment as a generator of private investment. The citizens of Rahway have also been pleased with a newly built

community center and library. Both of these public goods, or civic amenities are now located next to city hall. The municipal complex is right in the downtown area and is easy to walk to.

Another victory in smart revitalization was the preservation of the Rahway Theater. While most theaters of its type were carved up into sub-par multiplexes, the theater was restored as the Union County Arts Center. The UCAC now hosts several notable comedians, playwrights, musicians, and performance groups. Adjacent to the arts center is the Arts Guild of Rahway, which presents visual arts exhibitions, readings, arts education programs, and small music performances. These two entities, along with a small corner park are what the city calls its arts district.

The reason why transit oriented development is so pressing is all too clear in Rahway, with its relatively small land area, built out for decades. While there are gracious parks and some open space, there are no more greenfield building sites. Any future development, and therefore any hope of increasing municipal tax revenues must be through redevelopment. According to the mayor's estimate in 2002, the cost of redeveloping a site in downtown Rahway is approximately \$500,000 per acre⁸. Since that time, costs have only risen, both in price of land as well as municipal fees for development.

Places like Rahway are the testing grounds for the types of development that will become more widespread in coming years. Perhaps towns like Rahway can even become a kind of foundation, encouraging development of other transit villages to be linked together.

The two greatest obstacles are within the realms of finance and politics. In a society that tends to favor low density development, NIMBY-ism comes into play. Also, having been untested in many areas, higher density residential projects fall victim to the reluctance of investors to finance them. Already Rahway has overcome some of those obstacles by building its first TOD projects. Hopefully more will follow.

⁸ James Kennedy "Mayor's Message". [The Rahway Review](#). Fall 2002 p2

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Selected Images



PRR Station, 1920s



Rahway Train Station Plaza



Renovated Storefront



Elevated Tracks



Rahway's Next Project