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How Can We Keep Millennials in New Jersey? Give Them Great Places To Live and Work

By Tim Evans
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The Census Bureau's recently released 2017 county population estimates provide yet more evidence of the reversal in New Jersey's growth patterns in recent years.

For the half-century prior to 2008, New Jersey's development pattern was rapid population growth in car-oriented suburbs coupled with disinvestment and population decline in urban centers and in older, walkable suburban downtowns like Montclair or Red Bank or Collingswood. But in the post-Great Recession period, cities and mature suburbs have started growing again, while many formerly fast-growing exurban areas have lost population.

Heavily urbanized Hudson, Essex, Union, Bergen, and Passaic counties accounted for 71.1 percent of the state's growth between 2008 and 2017, compared to only 5.8 percent of total growth from 2000 to 2008. Meanwhile, seven of the nine counties losing population in the last year are those farthest away from New York or Philadelphia: Hunterdon, Warren, and Sussex in the northwest and Salem, Cumberland, Atlantic, and Cape May in the south. Many of these same counties led the list of the fastest-growing in prior decades.

What accounts for the shift? Evidence suggests the driving force is the [preference of the Millennial generation for "live-work-play" environments](#), with multiple types of destinations in close proximity. To stem the exodus of Millennials from the state, New Jersey municipalities should be seeking to create the types of places that enable young adults to live on their own in the kinds of compact, walkable neighborhoods towards which so many of their peers are gravitating. Here are a few strategies for towns.

Do More. Places like Long Branch and Freehold, which already offer the kinds of housing options in the kind of mixed-use, walkable environment that Millennials are seeking, should keep doing what they're doing: Providing new housing options in town. Preferably this should be accomplished – as much of it already has – via the re-use of vacant land and empty buildings, so as not to displace existing residents and businesses.

Make Room. Places possessing the right kind of built environment but which are *not* currently attracting Millennials may lack housing diversity or affordability. If a town has a great walkable downtown, and perhaps a transit station, but is dominated by large single-family-detached homes – e.g., Ridgewood, South Orange, Haddonfield – a lack of suitable housing options may be forcing young adults to look elsewhere. Making room for them can be accomplished via the same redevelopment and infill strategies that have been working in Millennial magnets in the northern part of the state, like Hoboken or Morristown, as long as the mix of new buildings includes a variety of housing types and prices.

Re-Purpose. Car-oriented suburbs with little developable land left, like Hazlet or Aberdeen or West Long Branch, will need to retrofit existing development. The good news is that these places have more redevelopable land – including in the form of surface parking lots and obsolete retail centers and office parks – than they realize. Some towns, such as [Somerdale](#), have experimented with adding a residential component to an existing retail center. Eatontown is contemplating an even more ambitious makeover for the Monmouth Mall, though the concept is meeting with stiff resistance from nearby residents, illustrating the difficulties inherent in any suburban retrofit.

Re-Think. There are smaller towns in outlying counties that have the kind of development patterns Millennials are looking for but that may be seen as too small or too distant from New York and Philadelphia. These towns can take advantage of what experts have labeled a trend toward “experiential retail,” and offer shoppers and diners something other than a predictable collection of chain restaurants and stores. In addition to promoting their walkability and housing diversity, these towns can inventory their unique cultural or economic assets and market those as well, positioning themselves with their own identities and drawing a niche group of new businesses and residents focused on similar cultural interests.

In short, towns that find their “center” and create authentic, walkable experiences for businesses and residents have a better chance to attract Millennials, not just from other parts of the state, but from other parts of the country as well.

Tim Evans is director of research for New Jersey Future, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that promotes policies for sustainable growth and development in New Jersey.