

Rural Westchester Town Torn by Housing Plan

4,600-Unit Proposal Would Triple Its Size by 1982

By LINDA GREENHOUSE
Special to The New York Times

SOUTH SALEM, N. Y., Dec. 26—The rural northern Westchester County town of Lewisboro will end the year engaged in the painful process of planning for a future that may bring major changes in the size and composition of its population.

The year began with the State Urban Development Corporation planning to build 100 low-income and moderate-income apartment units in the town and in each of eight other Westchester towns. It is ending with the announcement that the Suburban Action Institute has acquired options on 600 acres here and has proposed to create a "new community" of 4,600 units that would triple the town's population in 10 years. This change would bring the number of residents to more than 20,000.

"The community has been besieged," said Wayne Van Tassel, president of the Three Lakes Council, a homeowners' group in the area of towns that include the Suburban Action Institute property. The institute seeks to open suburban housing to minorities and low-income groups. Mr. Van Tassel's comment, echoed by a number of other residents, was offered not so much in anger as in disbelief.

Collective Disbelief

If a town that includes only 6,700 people in nearly 30 square miles can be said to have a collective mood, it is one of disbelief in Lewisboro.

Like many other towns at the further reaches of the metropolitan area, Lewisboro has found itself transformed almost overnight from a little-noticed backwater of farms and summer cottages to a fashionable place in which to live and one where every acre is precious.

Alvin Jordan, the Town Supervisor, paid \$1,350 for his two acres in 1949—\$500 down and \$25 a month. Today his land alone, not including the house, would bring \$20,000. People who moved to Lewisboro because it was all they could afford now find that their children cannot afford to buy houses here.

Today, 57 per cent of the town's land is still vacant. Sometime in the first half of 1973, Lewisboro will adopt a master plan that will offer some guidance as to how the land should be developed.

Planner Hired in 1970

When the town hired Frederick P. Clark Associates two years ago to draw up the plan, most people thought the town had several years until decisions had to be made. Now they feel as if they have very little time.

The Urban Development Corporation's plan—which since September has been under a moratorium imposed by Governor Rockefeller—was unpopular here, but Lewisboro's response was considerably more muted than in most of the other towns.

Lewisboro did not join in the lawsuits that other towns brought against the state corporation. Surveys made by a housing committee of the Town Board showed that at least 100 families here would like to rent apartments, and U.D.C. officials felt they had a good chance of eventually reaching an agreement with Lewisboro.

The heat generated by the U.D.C. controversy had just begun to subside when the Suburban Action Institute announced its plans on Nov. 14. The institute has not yet filed its official application for the necessary zoning change. But so far, at least, not a voice in town has been raised on behalf of the organization.

'Horrifying,' 'a Disaster'

"There are no two sides," said Henry Hayden, chairman of the town's Housing Committee and one of the moderate voices on the U.D.C. question.

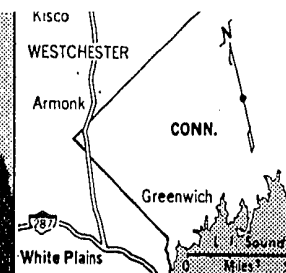
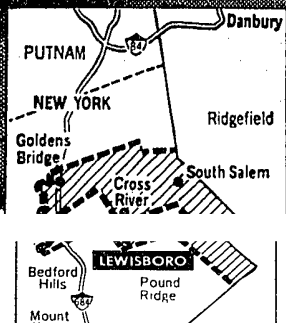
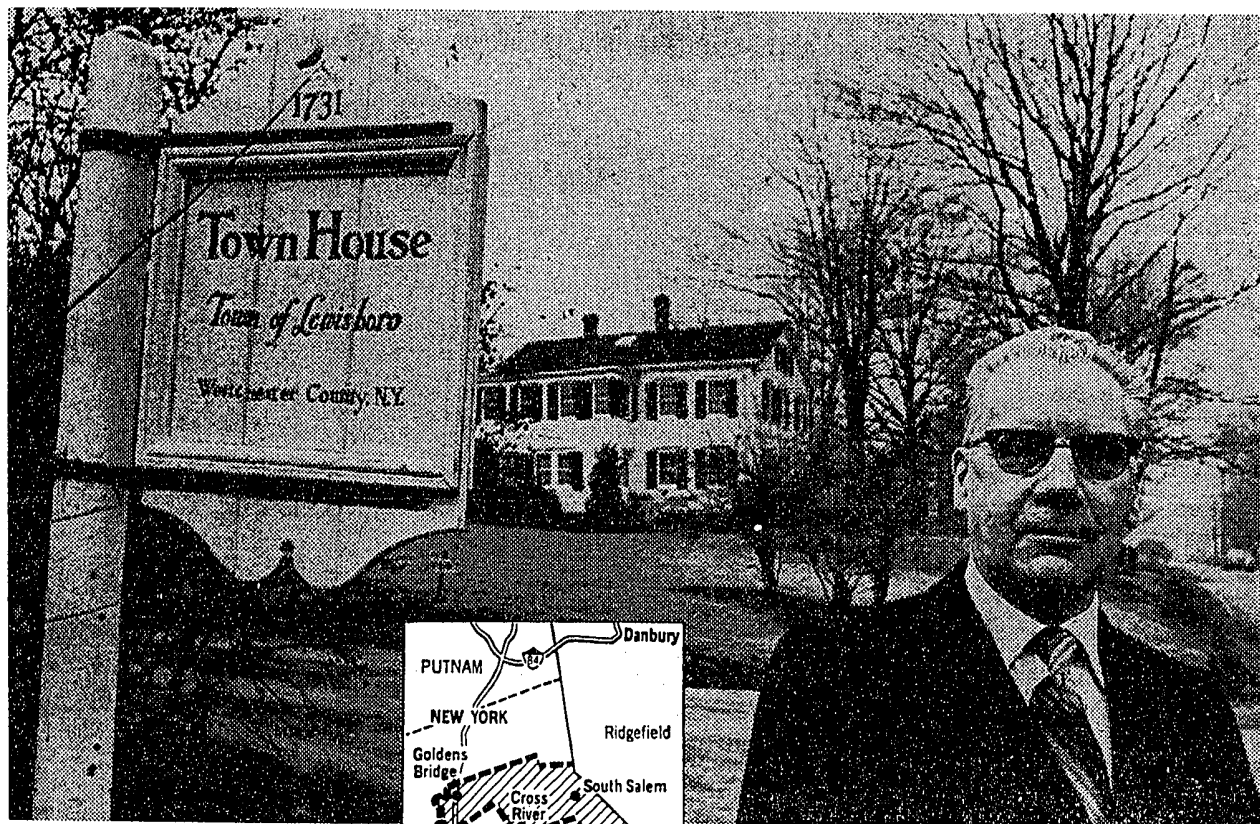
"Staggering," "horrifying," "traumatic" and "a disaster" are some of the descriptions offered again and again—by those who supported the U.D.C. as well as those who opposed it—of the impact that the 600-acre planned community and its 13,800 residents would have on the town.

The opposition has given unity to a town that stretches nearly 18 miles from east to west and that usually has to struggle to maintain any sense of identity. Most residents think of themselves as living not in Lewisboro, but in one of the town's hamlets, such as Goldens Bridge or Cross River. Some households have Connecticut telephone numbers.

'Everyone Feels the Same'

Most residents give the same reasons for opposing the Suburban Action project—that its size would overwhelm the town's services, that the new residents would dominate schools and politics and that Lewisboro had been unfairly singled out.

"You can't simply say



Photographs for The New York Times by EDWARD HAUSNER
Town Supervisor Alvin Jordan near town hall. Below: A view of part of 600-acre tract on which Suburban Action Institute has options.

there are X number of people in New York who need housing, so put them all in Lewisboro," said Lee Blum, one of the town's earlier supporters of the U.D.C.

"We hardly talk about the reasons," said Crys Cartner, an active member of the League of Women Voters. "You know everyone feels the same way, so what are you going to say? The only point for discussion is 'Will it or will it not ever be built?'"

Most people expect that if the Town Board turns down the request for a zoning change—as it almost certainly will, although officials have been careful not to say so—Suburban Action will take the town to court over its zoning ordinance on the ground that it is unconstitutionally exclusionary.

Jersey Suit Pending

Since present zoning, aside from a small commercial district, permits only single-family homes, mostly on two-acre lots, many residents acknowledged that such a suit would have an excellent chance. Last year, Suburban Action successfully challenged the zoning ordinance in Madison Township, N. J., in a case that is now being appealed.

While not everyone agrees with Mrs. Blum, who said, "U.D.C. smells like a rose in comparison to Suburban Action," 100 units are not 4,600, and a growing number of residents now believe that only the presence of a U.D.C. project or something like it could provide the town with a defense in such a suit.

"Before the year is over we will have not only a plan, but multifamily housing in progress," Supervisor Jordan said recently, but he did not go so far as to predict that the progress would be easy.

