

# Pro

By PAUL DAVIDOFF

It's zoning hearing night in suburbia, and in hundreds of town halls you will hear a murmur building into a gusty version of the old World War I song, "Over There." Though the verses differ in particulars from town hall to town hall, the essential chorus is the same:

"The site is inaccessible." "There's no demand for labor in the area." "The development will be too crowded." "The site is not well suited for development." "Water and sewer facilities are inadequate."

So goes the inevitable rhetoric against any development proposed for any suburban community. Of course, the speaker at the local zoning hearing will agree in principle that there is a need for decent new housing for low-income and middle-income families. The key point, the crucial point, is that our community is simply the wrong place. Somewhere—anywhere—else is the right place. Over there.

And if the proposed community is to be racially or economically mixed, the typical zoning proceeding is treated to additional cries of anguish:

"We have worked hard to build this type of community." "Why should outsiders tell us how we should live?" "You know what happens when you let 'them' in." "They prefer to live with their own."

The opposition to residential development increases geometrically with the rise in the percentage of nonwhite and poorer families the proposed project would house. And such opposition cannot even be tempered by keeping the project small. The New York State Urban Development Corporation's minimal plan for 100 units in each of nine Westchester towns caused such an uproar as to lead one to believe that the Bronx was to be relocated to Chappaqua.

In 1949, Congress established a national goal of "a decent home in a suitable living environment for every American family." Probably a poll of Americans would show agreement with the national goal, so long as part of it were not to be achieved in the respondents' hometowns.

Assuming general agreement that all families and individuals should live



The song is always "Over There"

in decent housing and a good environment, the question is where that goal is to be met. What locations are the appropriate ones for solving the problem of substandard housing and environment?

Suburban Action Institute was formed in 1969 to advance the urban growth policy of locational choice. Its purpose is to open the suburbs for

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# Pro: The Davidoff View

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all, in particular for the non-affluent and non-white. This purpose is in direct opposition to the public policy of restricting the choice of minorities to rebuilt ghettos. We believe that such a policy perpetuates social and economic segregation and incidentally forces the adoption of busing as the only means of overcoming the constitutionally inadmissible "separate but equal" doctrine in education.

Our contention is that this approach represents the narrowest possible definition of decent housing: that in addition to shelter, decent housing means reasonable access to employment, good education, recreation and environment, and that the key to this is locational choice. We believe that public policy is illegitimate when it constrains particular classes of people to restricted and environmentally unsound areas.

We are neutral as to whether people should live in cities or in suburbs, but the choice should not be made for them through the local zoning process. The dream of America is built on the experience of those who sought a better life by moving to a new location.

Today the nation's suburbs are the preferred place of residence for the great majority of people free to choose where to live in metropolitan regions. In many of these regions, the suburbs are already dominant in the total number of jobs.

It is because the suburbs—that is, the outer, relatively undeveloped suburbs—contain such a vast quantity of land suitable for residential development, because of the immense number of new jobs and because the cities are scarce in land and job opportunities that we have created a nonprofit public-interest agency to promote the use of the suburbs to help the cities find some solutions to the "urban" problem.

A segregated society is emerging on the fringe of metropolitan development. Public laws are having the effect of raising land and housing costs so high that the result is *de jure* class and race segregation, segregation by public, not private, means. Rather than expending private funds to acquire land or

even voting taxes to acquire land through condemnation and keep it out of development, suburban residents have employed land-use regulation to guarantee the level of amenity they desire.

The means employed to drive up the price of land and housing and to assure a high tax yield include require-

ment now so as to make certain that the development will serve everyone.

Here is the occasion for strong land banking and development planning by institutions seeking to build a more open society. Aware of this need, the founders of Suburban Action have organized a separate nonprofit de-

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## The designers "have produced an exciting plan that is conscious of both the environmental opportunities and constraints of the site"

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ments that houses be of the single-family detached variety, that they be large and that they be constructed on plots of one, two, four or five acres. The result is that the overwhelming majority of citizens are zoned out of these communities. If there be any doubt about the effectiveness of such controls, the reader can check to see how many homes are advertised in the outer suburbs today for less than \$40,000. The family with an average income can hardly afford a house selling for \$30,000.

There is a special irony in the fact that the suburbanite has practically become a socialist in his zeal to prevent unwanted development. He grasps at forms of government regulation and expropriation that would have him screaming in outrage if similar controls were exercised against his business activity.

In the name of community betterment, suburban localities are enforcing a set of restrictions against development that are directly linked to the exacerbation of the social and economic poverty of our urban societies and to the enlargement of environmental pollution. The costs to the region are so great that within the decade the courts or the legislatures will prohibit exclusionary practices.

If the result of a changed outlook about zoning is to assure the ability to develop environmentally sound new communities open to all of the population, then it is necessary to commence that

development entity, Garden Cities Development Corporation. Garden Cities has begun a program of acquiring land, primarily in the New York metropolitan region, with a view toward creating new communities that would encourage the highest standards of architectural planning and environmental design.

Garden Cities' plans call for the rezoning of land now restricted to single-family homes on one-acre or two-acre lots to allow the planned development of townhouses and garden apartments at densities of six to ten units an acre—modest ones for such housing types.

In each community where it has made these proposals, Garden Cities has run into the "over there" philosophy.

Rather than working with Garden Cities to assure an effective plan, the community involved has invariably attempted to delay the hearing process and finally reject the application for an open development.

One of the sites selected by Garden Cities for a new community is in the towns of New Fairfield and Sherman, Conn., on Candlewood Lake. The shores of Candlewood Lake offer some of the most beautiful and desirable living areas in the metropolitan region. The gentle rolling land is lovely, and it has the added quality of not being remote from the considerable economic development that is taking place throughout the Danbury-Waterbury area. It is land

that inevitably will see residential development, but for whom?

Its two-acre zoning now assures that the land will be used only by upper-income families. It will fail to provide for the conservation of open space, a benefit that can result from cluster development. Its single-family detached homes will be heavy consumers of energy, and it will, by denying access to groups in need of good environment and shelter, perpetuate and enlarge the segregated and polluted conditions of the cities and industrial suburbs.

The plan for the Garden Cities development, to be known as WatersEdge, has been prepared by Callister, Payne and Bischoff, the designers of Heritage Village, which has won many awards. They have produced an exciting plan that is conscious of both the environmental opportunities and constraints on the site.

The plan embraces six essential objectives:

- A community open to families of every income and background.

- A community of a size suitable for meeting the needs and interests of all those who reside in it.

- A community designed for all age groups.

- A community that provides a wide range of activities, mixed in some areas and isolated in others, that seeks to provide an alternative to suburban residential and shopping center sprawl.

- A community that is environmentally sound, one that will enhance the natural beauty of the site and make it more usable by a larger portion of the public.

- A community that will be a good neighbor to surrounding populations and to its region by invigorating the activities and the economy of its region.

Precisely because it is seeking to create a model of good community development for the entire population, Garden Cities believes, it has an obligation greater than that of most developers to produce a community of the highest quality. Yet rather than working with Garden Cities to improve the plan and make it work, New Fairfield has rejected it.

The problems of decent housing and environment will not be solved by New Fairfield. We need suburban communities whose residents are far-sighted enough to say, "Over here!"