

Editorials

Smarter Growth

Comparisons between our county's two largest municipalities struck us in recent statistical reports.

- First, in populations. Census estimates show that Readington Township, despite being 26% larger in area (at 47.69 square miles) than second-biggest Raritan Township (37.84 square miles), has grown in recent years at a much slower rate.

That wasn't always the case. In fact, Readington, being bigger, had more population than Raritan in 1960 (6,147 to 4,545), in 1970 (7,688 to 6,934) and in 1980 (10,855 to 8,292). But then something happened. Readington's population slid under Raritan's by 1990 (13,400 to 15,616) and that new trend continued in 2000 (15,803 to 19,809). Census Bureau population estimates for 2006 are 16,295 for Readington and 22,720 for Raritan.

So, over 46 years Readington's population grew 165% and Raritan's 400%. In the last 26 years Readington's population grew 50% and Raritan's 174%. From 1980 to 2006, Raritan added 14,428 people to Readington's 5,440 — growing faster in percentage and total number.

- Second, in taxpayer-funded pension costs. Raritan's obligation for retirement benefits for township police and public employees will be more than \$1 million next year, while Readington's will be less than half that. We see this as a function of more employees to provide more services to more people.

What's the connection between all these statistics?

Open space.

Readington has been far more aggressive in saving farms and open space, and in boosting minimum lot sizes. Raritan, to a much greater degree, has zoned to attract or accommodate business, retail and housing developments — both townhouses/condos and single family homes.

In the 1970s, when Readington took its first major steps toward preservation, municipalities buying land to forestall development was a revolutionary idea. Those who advocated it were seen to have ulterior motives, usually to protect their corner of the world from bulldozers. But today's dominant argument — that less development means fewer services and thus fewer tax dollars — seems unassailable. These numbers are just the latest to support that wisdom.