

Build in town — or in fields and forests

Northwest Michigan is the kind of place that trades in environmental quality. The clean water, forests, farmland and open space that make up our gorgeous scenery bring tourists, business, retirees and families. If our economy is going to continue to grow, we need to preserve and enhance the environment beneath us, around us, and above us.

But our economy also needs homes for families and individuals that work in the businesses our communities depend on — and those homes are in short supply. Most new housing is unaffordable even to middle-class residents, especially in places close to work, school, services, and shopping. When people can't find an affordable place to buy or rent, they

have only a few choices. For those that don't want to leave the area — a choice that many, unfortunately, have been forced to take. The only option seems to be to "drive til they qualify" — that is, to look for "affordable" homes long distances from employment.

This has been a go-to answer for many, much to the detriment of our scenic beauty and environmental quality. The new construction that it pushes into rural areas converts farm or forest land into "urbanized" places that need costly sewer and water extensions, new roads, and other services. And it results in more traffic and emissions as residents drive long distances to work, school and services — to say nothing of the increased transpor-

tation costs for individuals, which sometimes can rival the cost of housing. Transit, which can reduce transportation costs and traffic, is a less viable option in rural areas, because homes and riders are too spread out over large rural areas.

There are better ways to build, ways that can protect the environment we



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love and the economy we need. One key solution is redevelopment — replacing under-used buildings or parking lots with new homes or mixed-use developments. Another is to build in and around developed areas. Both strategies lessen the demand for rural development sites. And higher-density developments in employment centers create options for biking and walking, reduce long commutes, and create the "critical mass" that's needed for public transit to be effective.

It may be more expensive to build this way, but development costs — and home prices — often can be offset by brownfield incentives or other local programs. And in the long run, the development is far cheaper because it taps into existing services.

What's more, infrastructure costs for the community can actually go down, as more residents contribute to paying for them.

At first glance, proposals for big new developments might not look like a path to environmental quality. But it's important to consider them in the context of the alternatives — expensive, sprawling developments that increase service costs, emissions and traffic — while taking our landscape, piece by piece, out of agricultural production, forestland or the open spaces that are the foundation of our water quality and natural beauty.

We don't see this "death of a thousand cuts" until it's too late — and we often fail to recognize how our own actions drive it. When we make it hard for

developers to build in and near cities and villages by opposing new projects or limiting development, we're sending a clear message: Build far outside of town, in our fields and forests.

This is an almost literal case of not seeing the forest for the trees. Pushing developments one-by-one out of town ends up destroying the very thing we want to protect.

On the other hand, when we support the creation of needed new homes in urban areas, we're taking a stand in support of our region's natural beauty, rural character and environmental quality. We might lose a few trees along the way, but in the end we save the forest.

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