

TWO BEDROOMS, FEWER KIDS; TWO CARS BUT JUST ONE GARAGE.

A New Jersey town that until recently had a distinctly rural character and proved, as a result, attractive for new residential development has decided to try to limit the number of kids coming to the town. Why? Each one is a school bill the town would rather not pay. How to do this? A bit like Oregon that some years ago had a quasi official policy of “Visit, Don’t Stay,” towns of this variety are trying all sorts of techniques to keep down their school-age populations. One method that may be headed for tests in the courts is to pass zoning ordinances that permit new large-scale, multi-family development, but limit the number of bedrooms per unit to two. Mom and Dad in one, the kids (whatever number) in the other—or maybe on the sofa bed in the living room.

In some of the same locales and in others where automobile traffic is seen too close to being unmanageable, new development or redevelopment requirements limit the number of vehicles per unit to two—one in the garage and one in the driveway. No overnight street parking. Or if there is a second car, it requires a special, and in some places a costly, permit. In many urban and metropolitan suburban communities built decades or even centuries ago, the two-three-or-four car family simply wasn’t anticipated. Indeed many today can even remember when there were only one or two cars per block in some towns. Trolley and bus systems and subways moved most people who needed daily transportation beyond walking distance.

Now almost each day the property sections of our newspapers tell of individual initiatives of one kind or another that seek to slow down or prevent growth. Yet, growth in most of the locations where such initiatives are undertaken is inevitable. Population in the past 25 years or so has tended to accumulate around existing metro areas and along well-established transportation corridors. Demographers predict this will continue. Not only that, there will be more people than ever because we are staying healthy and living longer, men and women are living as much as 10-12 years longer on average. The long predicted (and by some, long hoped for) drop in live births has not happened. With immigration concentrating on young, child-bearing age couples, the rate is in all likelihood going to pick up. This is demonstrably the case of groups such as those to whom the label “Hispanic” has been so broadly defined and are now believed to have surpassed African Americans as the second largest US population segment.

All of this speaks to the evident need for more coherent policy on new town and new city development, on enlightened programs of high-speed transportation including new highway construction. It suggests that we may at long last have come to that point where we need to reconsider what has long been thought to be part of the rock bed of property rights management—municipal zoning. It may even be, as some suggest, that the time is coming or has come to rethink the role or even the need for municipal government in favor of larger jurisdictions. It has to be clear to any thinking person that like it or not, change is taking place and will take place. We do have the opportunity to make the changes be something we like and can live with happily. Perhaps gated communities, adult-only facilities and other techniques have a place in all of this.

Pandering of the kind one so often hears about affordable housing, may seem to be self-serving to those who have a home and can pay. In the long run it serves no one well as it will serve only to divide and to embitter. Owning one's home is the real American Dream. Trying to pay for it is for far too many the American nightmare.