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It's the Economy ... and Everything Else

by Scott Morgan

Forget what you think you know. The answer to what's wrong with the state's economy is simple: everything.

For Dianne Brake, president of the Trenton-based land use agency PlanSmart NJ, this is not a glib assessment. This is a sober acceptance of the fact that every problem area New Jersey faces is related to every other problem area New Jersey faces. You cannot solve the economy without solving the environment; you can't solve the environment without addressing growth; you can't address growth without transit, and so on.

This Chinese box of problems badly complicates potential solutions. Brake, a 25-year veteran of land use and smart growth, has spent much of her professional life in a state of frustration. She has witnessed good ideas — she is a big fan of West Windsor's stalled transit village plan — crumple neath the weight of political rancor. She has seen supposedly "green" thinking on intelligent growth evolve into large-acre development in towns like Upper Freehold, where individual houses consume enormous strips of land — an effective way to limit population density but also an effective way to squelch public transit and increase environmental impact.

The trouble, says Brake, is that the way we've been looking at solutions is outdated. What we need is a paradigm shift, a process she expects to meet with much resistance. Underlying people's actions are their beliefs in systems as a way of achieving their goals. But as more and more data gathers, it no longer fits with the status quo. In land use, for example, the idea that low-density growth is all good and any development automatically denigrates the environment is virtually tattooed onto our DNA. "We've been doing it that way for hundreds of years," Brake says. "But it doesn't hold up that less development is better."

This leads her to a provocative question: "What if growth could improve things for you?" Brake will lead a panel discussion, "Putting Growth to Work," as part of PlanSmart's "What No One Is Telling You About the Future of New Jersey" conference on Friday, June 13, at 8:30 a.m. at the Hyatt Regency in New Brunswick. Cost: \$125. Call 609-393-9434.

The event will also feature presentations by James Miller of the Union of Concerned Scientists, who will discuss the state's environmental future in the face of continuing unsustainable growth and high greenhouse gas output; Michael Gallis of North Carolina-based Gallis and Associates, who will use global maps to describe how New Jersey is perfectly situated to compete in the global economy; Roland Anglin of the Initiative for Regional and Community Transformation, who will describe how the concentration of poverty increases government costs and stifles economic growth; and Governor Jon Corzine, who will present "Breaking Through Government Paralysis," concentrating on stimulating growth through transportation investments.

Though a land use agency, Brake says PlanSmart is more than just a group looking at master plans and regulations. It also looks at infrastructure investment — how investing in highway and transportation, for example, is just as valuable as investing in stormwater management, or how concentrations of poverty eat the state budget. In other words, it looks at the state picture not just in terms of lot sizes but in its entirety. "There are a lot of dots we're missing in the state's planning

process," she says. "We're trying to connect the dots."

Dot, dot, dot. Connecting the dots involves recognizing that each dot connects with another to make a bigger picture. Take driving. Beyond exorbitant gas prices, there is still the matter of consumption. Saving fuel lowers out-of-pocket costs, but as more municipalities around the state downzone for new development — creating larger lots on which to put houses — the need to drive your car to work increases, thus limiting any hopes of realistically saving significant fuel. Large residential tracts cannot support public transportation, so more cars stay on the roads, increasing greenhouse emissions, inflating our carbon footprints, and whipping up dire predictions that New Jersey soon will become a dive spot off the coast of Ohio.

Congestion is an already-troublesome byproduct of having so many cars and so few buses and trains getting us where we need to go. "So long as there is congestion, New Jersey has no growth capacity," Brake says. And as long as congestion exists, fuel consumption will remain high.

A solution, one might say, would be to develop a better class of car — one with tremendous fuel efficiency, or even one that eliminates the need for gasoline. The solution works great for saving fuel, but as Brake points out, it doesn't solve the problem of congestion.

What can growth do for you? Despite the growth of outsourcing and the steady decline of manufacturing in New Jersey, manufacturing is still the state's largest job sector. But it is disappearing, and retail is closing in fast on the title. As bad as watching the manufacturing industry fritter away, says Brake, is the fear that no one has considered a replacement for eroding jobs. Fears that New Jersey, in spite of its enormous geographical advantages, could become a rust belt, she says, are not that far-fetched.

Typically, what fills the void is poverty. Where there are no jobs, there is no money for infrastructure investments, nor for economic growth. Housing spirals away from those who can no longer afford it and an area gets worse. Often cited as a reason many towns do not want to build densely, poverty drains local budgets as much as it drains a state's budget by driving skilled workers elsewhere and creating an environment in which bare survival trumps loftier goals.

But looking at growth as evil, says Brake, has kept us walking in this circle. Many areas — but not all, she emphasizes — would be ideal for transit villages and transit corridors. The state's ingrained viewpoint on transportation has noble overtones, based as they are in the idea that lots of broad highways and fewer traffic lights are the best ticket keeping the state moving. But such infrastructure does not allow for transit corridors and only serves to separate people from places where they could catch the train.

"We have great potential in New Jersey," Brake says. "But there is no plan. We really need to focus on what do we want growth to do for us. We've dismissed growth too quickly. Growth can improve things."

Politics is the enemy. More than anything, Brake says, progress and reason suffer at the hands of politics. She supports the idea behind West Windsor's contentious transit village issue, but is not optimistic about its chances. Too many have made it a political issue, and as animosity grows, hopes for a vibrant commuter village slink farther into the corner.

Brake herself has no use for political posturing. "I deal in reason," she says. "But I have no power." Before progress can be made, people need to put politics aside and see the picture the dots make up.

A 1968 graduate of Virginia's Hollins College, where she earned a bachelor's in sociology and Russian studies, Brake spent 1969 doing urban planning and design at Virginia Tech. In 1973 she earned an MFA in social design from the California Institute of the Arts. She then did three

years toward a Ph.D. in the sociology of planning at the University of Edinburgh.

A native of Massachusetts, Brake attended high school in Roanoke, Virginia. Her father, an electrical engineer, helped found one of the first community colleges in the commonwealth. Her mother taught elementary school. Brake moved to New Jersey in 1983 and was appointed president of PlanSmart, then known as MSM Regional Council, in 1990.

In looking at the future of New Jersey's economy, Brake says it is not just a matter of learning to rethink our positions, but of asking ourselves provocative questions and heeding the answers. "What do we need growth to do for us?" she asks. "What does it mean to be an economic engine? How do you manage growth if you don't know what is driving that engine?"

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