

# Accepting the townhouse idea requires new attitudes

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To change actions is easy; to change attitudes is more difficult. This is a truism that one finds whether one deals with race relations, sexual equality or ethnic stereotypes. It is also true in housing.

Traditionally, the American dream includes the detached, single family house set on a sizable plot of land with grass completely surrounding the unit. Somehow, this type of real estate is supposed to bring comfort and happiness to the family occupying it. The attitude toward such property still persists, but the harsh realities of average house prices exceeding \$88,000 and interest rates at 17 percent limit this type of housing to only 10 percent of American families. Of necessity, house buyers are turning to other options.

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condominiums. Not a new idea, the Romans introduced it, this form of ownership allows one to purchase his own unit in a multifamily setting, with common space ownership shared by all residents. Condominium refers only to a type of ownership, not a building form, as many mistakenly believe, although attached housing commonly comprises condominium developments.

Called the row house in the Baltimore and Philadelphia area, the terrace house in England and euphemistically called the townhouse in these parts, this housing unit, with its two or three outside walls, is far more energy efficient than the detached house. And with decreasing size of households, this normally smaller unit also better serves the needs of today's market. The townhouse condominium, attached to other units to provide more open space and usually less expensive than the detached house, is a viable option for many consumers, yet too many town councils have turned them down by failing to make required zoning changes.

Most recently, the Westerly town council voted down a proposed luxury townhouse development even though their planning board had recommended approval. Other towns, including North Kingstown and Glocester, have also voted down similar proposals. Why the objections? The principal criticism is density, that is, the number of housing units per acre, an old-fashioned idea that is locked into a system of zoning that stretches back nearly 60 years in Rhode Island.

There is a mistaken idea that multifam-

ily condominium housing attracts more people, places greater demands on public schools and services and increases community costs. This is not the case, a fact borne out by a recent survey done by a private planning firm to determine characteristics of single family and townhouse condominium residents.

The housing survey was done in July on 185 single family, detached houses and 85 higher density, townhouse condominiums in North Kingstown, South Kingstown, Narragansett and Cumberland. Results show that residents were similar in that they were permanent residents, planned on staying indefinitely, moved from other communities in Rhode Island and had a high rate of home ownership.

The differences between residents were manifest in size of units and population. The detached house averaged 6.9 rooms, 3.5 bedrooms and 3.42 residents, including 1.19 children, while the townhouse figures were 5.5 rooms, 2.3 bedrooms and 2.09 residents, including .15 children. Additionally, townhouse residents had fewer cars, higher incomes and nearly five times the number of retired persons than in detached houses. And townhouses were valued at nearly \$8,000 more than the \$65,000 average for the detached house, a result primarily of age, with townhouses newer and more expensive.

These characteristics are important because they illustrate a significant fact: more townhouse condominiums per acre can be sited to achieve the same number of bedrooms and population as single family units. Additionally, townhouses have fewer children and thus place lessened demands on schools. For example, a current proposal for 360 townhouses in a suburban community, with plans for 80 percent of the 217 acre site to be left in open space, projects the same number of bedrooms and population, but with fewer children than the 185 detached houses for which the land is currently zoned. The resulting lowered demand for schooling means the town would gain \$658,000 in revenue annually rather than lose \$328,000 if the 185 detached houses were built. Sobering thoughts to consider for communities experiencing growth and wanting to maintain a high quality of life with a stable tax base.

Demographic characteristics and changing life styles are opening up new housing options, while high house prices and interest rates are pricing the single family, detached house out of the market. It is incumbent, then, that consumers change their attitudes about that detached dream house and, more importantly, that local officials change their attitudes and practices toward the measure of housing density so as not to prevent townhouse construction.

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